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Was Phoebe A Deacon, A Servant, Or A Minister?

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April 25, 2010

Was Phoebe A Deacon, A Servant, Or A Minister?



It depends what translation you read.

In [Romans 16:1](#), Paul begins a long series of greetings to people he knows in or near Rome. The first person he mentions is a woman, Phoebe, “who is a *diakonon* of the church which is at Cenchrea.” This [Greek word](#) used by Paul to refer to Phoebe is a familiar word in the Greek world. It’s the word we translate as “deacon.”

A *diakonos* in the first century was a household servant, whose duties were those of administration and service for a master (see [Matt 22:13](#); [John 2:5](#)). In the secular world, the term rarely implied selfless service. But in the New Testament, the term became associated with voluntary and selfless service to God ([Rom 13:4](#)), being a servant of Christ ([John 12:26](#)), or of one another ([Matt 23:11](#)). Hence the group of seven men selected in Acts 6 are said to “[serve tables](#)” and the qualification for deacons in 1 Timothy include the ability to rule or manage well their own households ([3:12](#)). These uses of the

word *diakonos* conform to the common usage in the first century.

Translating *diakonos*

But there’s something strange about the history of the translation of this word. In most Bible translations, *diakonos* is translated as “deacon” only in 1 Timothy 3 (vs. [8](#), [10](#), [12](#)) and [Philippians 1:1](#). All other occurrences of this word are translated either “servant” or “minister.” The verb form of the word, *diakoneo*, is translated most often as “to serve” or “to minister.” The same goes for the word *diakonia* translated as “service” or “ministry.”

I have found that every time the words *diakonos*, *diakoneo* or *diakonia* are used in connection to a male person in the writings of Paul, the major English translations have either translated them as “minister” or “servant.”

- In [1 Corinthians 3:5](#), **Paul** and **Apollos** are “ministers” (King James Version, New King James Version) or “servants” (English Standard Version, New Living Translation, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version). In [Ephesians 3:7](#), **Paul** is a “minister” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV) or a “servant” (NRSV, NIV, NLT). In [Colossians 1:23 and 1:25](#), **Paul** serves also a “minister” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV) or a “servant” (NRSV, NIV, NLT).
- In [Ephesians 6:21](#), **Tychicus** is a “minister” (KJV, NKJV, NRSV, NASB, ESV) or a “servant” (NIV). In [Colossians 4:7](#), he is referred to as a “minister” (KJV, NKJV, NRSV, NIV, ESV) or a “servant” (NASB).
- In [Colossians 1:7](#), **Epaphras** is a “minister” (KJV, NKJV, NIV, NRSV, ESV) or a “servant” (NASB, NLT).
- In [Colossians 4:17](#), **Archippus** is active in “ministry” (*diakonia*) (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV).
- In [Philemon 13](#), **Onesimus** is doing “ministry” (*diakoneo*) (KJV, NKJV, NASB) or “service” (NRSV, ESV) for Paul.

Most of these English translations tend to be consistent. The KJV and NKJV always translate the word *diakonos* as “minister,” the NASB and ESV do the same most of the time, and the NIV translates the word as “servant” most of the time. However, the NRSV is not consistent and fluctuates between the two words, while the NLT varies between “servant” or “helper.”

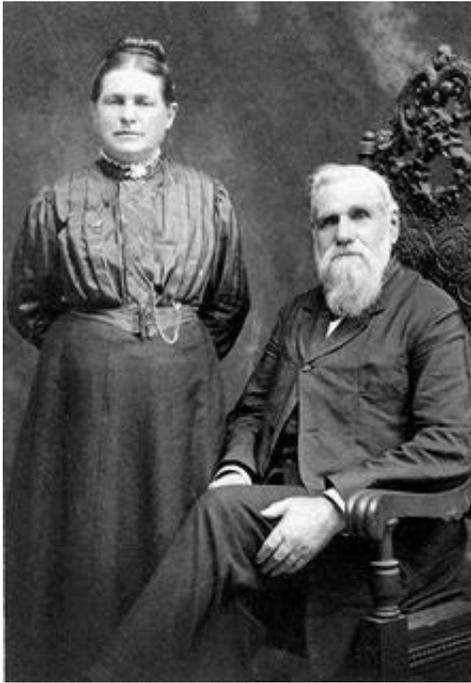
Gender Bias In English Translations

But what is most intriguing is that when it comes to the *only* reference where the word *diakonos* is used in connection with a female person in Paul's writings, the word is *never* translated "minister" in our current English translations.

Phoebe (Rom 16:1) is a "servant" (KJV, NKJV, NIV, NASB, ESV) or a "deacon" (NRSV, NLT). But in none of the translations is she described as a "minister!"

The KJV, NKJV, NASB and ESV consistently translate *diakonos* as "minister" when the word is used in connection to a male person, but not so when it comes to Phoebe. I think this shows a strange bias against women in ministry.

Since through the centuries the King James Version has had such an important impact on our understanding of the doctrine of the church (at least in the English-speaking world), could it be that our modern attitudes toward women in ministry have been shaped by biased translators? In contrast, however, William Tyndale's New Testament (published in 1534) consistently referred to Phoebe and all of Paul's co-workers as "ministers" – no distinction between them! The same happens in the Geneva Bible (1560). If these translations had been followed for this verse when the King James Version was produced in 1611, may be we would be less resistant toward women in ministry today.



Women In Ministry Today

We believe we should let the Scripture guide our reflection on the future of ministry in our church.

If men and women could be *diakonos* in the New Testament, why couldn't men and women serve in the same capacity today? This is not about whether women should be ordained or not. It is about allowing women to fully participate in the life and ministry of the church, as was happening in the New Testament church.

Phoebe served the church at Cenchrea in the same capacity that Paul, Apollos, Tychicus, Epaphras, Archippus, and Onesimus did elsewhere. It is possible that not all churches had women *diakonos*, but some churches like Cenchrea did. 1 Timothy 3:11 seems to imply that Timothy also had women diakonos in his churches.

Adventist patterns of ministry are similar but not quite identical to what we see in the New Testament. In our churches today, deacons tend to take care for the physical needs of the church building and congregation. In the New Testament, deacons like Stephen and Philip also preached the gospel and even baptized new converts (Acts 6:8; 8:5, 38). I think we can confidently say that their *diakonos* ministry empowered them to do a similar ministry to that of the apostles. That's what I conclude from this study of the word *diakonos* in regards to Paul's ministry and that of his co-workers.

Early in our Adventist history, our pioneers realized that the complexity of ministry demanded that we create, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, new structures and patterns of ministry in order to fulfill the mission God had given us. I think the same continues to happen today. Hence, I believe our church should invite women with gifts of pastoral ministry, administration and leadership to serve at all levels. The New Testament certainly shows this pattern of service for both men and women in the ministry of *diakonos*.



Denis Fortin is dean and professor of theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Prior to coming to Andrews, Fortin served as a pastor in the Quebec Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He earned a doctorate in theology from the Université Laval, Quebec, in 1995. His dissertation was titled: "Adventism in the Eastern Townships of Quebec: Implantation and Institutionalization in the 19th Century."

Denis Fortin has previously written for Memory, Meaning & Faith on the question, What Did The Adventist Pioneers Think About Women In Ministry?

Posted by Denis Fortin on April 25, 2010 in Biblical Backgrounds, History of Interpretation | Permalink

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Comments

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Thank you so much for this article! I found it very helpful. I did not know that the Greek word for deacon also meant minister. What a fascinating detail that we cannot overlook as we discuss the issue of women in ministry!

Posted by: Sarah Gane | April 26, 2010 at 05:51 PM

Another point we ought not overlook is the fact that in the book of Acts there does not seem to be a distinction between deacons and elders. In Acts, those who do the work of "diakonion" appear to be doing essentially the same thing as Paul commissions the elders to do in Acts 20. The noun, "diakonos," does not occur in Acts, though, of course, Paul does use it in his early writings.

So the evidence suggests that the earliest church had one church office, the elder-deacon, with Luke preferring one terms and Paul the others. That hierarchical distinction appears to have occurred later, by the time the pastoral epistles were written to Titus and Timothy, in response to the growing size of the church. Perhaps it was a necessitated by there not being enough apostles to go around.

Seminary professor Robert Johnston has written about this in a recent (though not available online) issue of the Journal of the Adventist Theological Society. Van Campenhausen has also written about this in his *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, though coming from a historical critical perspective, he thinks the pastoral epistles were written after Paul's death.

Posted by: David Hamstra | April 26, 2010 at 09:11 PM

I find the etymology compelling for another reason, too. In our discussions of women in ministry, we spend much of our time discussing what kind of authority ministers (/pastors/elders/ordained persons) ought to be allowed to exercise. How different would the discussion be if we saw the issue of ministry as a race to the bottom, as the freedom to serve, as the humbling of oneself to diakoneo?

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | April 27, 2010 at 12:28 AM

What a beautiful thought Kessia.

Posted by: David de la Vega | April 27, 2010 at 08:48 PM

I appreciate the way Dr. Fortin's study shows a broader biblical purpose for diakonos which is contrasted between it's gender-biased use in some translations and it's gender-neutral function in Scripture.

While the legitimacy of female deacons is accepted in our church, I've sometimes wondered if those who oppose female pastors from a literal reading of Scripture should also be challenged to abolish their deaconess board (deacons must be "husband of one wife" 1 Tim 3:12)? This would point out the limitations in a purely literal reading. And yet it is a literal word study which shows that the ministry of deacon started out gender-neutral and included similar ministry tasks as the apostles.

Articles like this give reasons to advocate for greater female involvement from a biblical, rather than cultural basis.

Posted by: Anthony WagenerSmith | May 02, 2010 at 10:24 PM

Thank you, Dean Fortin, for this thoughtful study of Phoebe in Romans 16. It was well expressed and will be shared.

However all the information in your article has been in the literature on women for over a hundred years. I found this exact information in the early 70's with very little effort.

So - with this knowledge - what are you doing to educate the seminarians there at Andrews?

Having just graduated from the seminary - I found both male and female students sadly lacking in all areas regarding issues relating to women. And by in large the professors who have a captive audience of our future pastors were in many cases perpetuating the traditional views on women role in the church.

Most of the women I spoke to there - looked at me with blank faces when I attempted conversations on any of the current issues. As Dean of the Seminary - you have your work cut out.

I am taking advantage of the site to speak openly - and I trust my remarks will be in confidence. I mean no disrespect to you, Dean Fortin. I only share to express my deep concern.

Posted by: Donna Haerich | [May 07, 2010 at 05:52 PM](#)

Hi Donna,

I suspect the dean will want to respond to your comment himself, but he is in Jordan on a dig presently, and will be unable to post for some time. In the meantime, let me offer a few thoughts.

Your comments on life at the seminary are interesting considering that you did most of your study off-site in a distance degree program. I don't mean this to disparage your observations, just to suggest that they are likely not based on meaningful long-term contact with the Seminary environment. Having been around the Seminary for a number of years now, I find that its professors on the whole represent a spectrum of moderate Adventism.

This means that some advocate a more "traditional" view, but many, in my experience it is most, representing a view calling for a much more active and prominent role for women in ministry than we have had as a church over the last half century. This is not to say they all take the same side on the question of ordination. But I find it true that irrespective of their position on ordination, they almost all support an expansive and active role for women in ministry.

In any event, Donna, congrats on your recent graduation. We are thankful that we have another female seminary graduate ready to expand and invigorate the role of women in ministry! Blessing.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [May 09, 2010 at 07:21 AM](#)

Donna,

As a man in the predominantly male Adventist Theological Seminary, I miss a lot of the things going on that my female colleagues report to me. But, based on what they say, we have quite a way to go in gender relations at our seminary.

That being said, the vast majority of the professors I have encountered there support women in ministry at all levels. I can think of less than a handful who I have heard oppose women pastors, and as far as I can tell, all the department chairs support equality of men and women in ministry. I don't know what happens in the distance learning classes, but we seem to have had very opposite experiences of seminary teaching on the role of women in ministry.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [May 09, 2010 at 10:40 AM](#)

It should be clear that the New Testament does not have in mind what we have made today the role of "Deacon" or "Deaconess." It seems we have been unfaithful in many ways with God's intentions, including His intention that men and women both serve in this role.

Posted by: [Monte Sahlin](#) | [May 10, 2010 at 11:09 AM](#)

In the conservative public school I used to work in, it seemed I had to be 10 times better than the men to be heard. One day as I was grumbling about it, one of my sons said, "That's ok mom. It will force you to be the best and do you really want to be anything else?" The first, tho unofficial, missionary to Europe could not get the SDA church to sponsor him so he got someone else to. The Stahls were told they were too old to do what they felt called to do and so was Abram LaRue. If the church keeps insisting on refusing to even consider that God at times provides for their needs in the forms of women, do like Paul did when the church sent him from Jerusalem, work where you are at. Of course it would be better if the church supported the ministry that its members are called to do and it would increase the effectiveness of the church and the individual, but if God calls you to work, call on HIM to provide your venue. The church is made of people and people make mistakes. Remember our call to service is not from church organizations but from God.

Posted by: DeeDee Bindernagel | [May 10, 2010 at 08:40 PM](#)

We need to be careful as we use the term "ministry" in English that we don't read into it things that were not implied in the Greek word diakonia (likewise also for "minister" and diakonos or diakonon). Diakonia/diakonos did not refer to gospel proclamation but to the service rendered to people. The term is widely used in the sense of serving or helping people. To minister to others was to render acts of helpful service. Only once, in Rom 11:13, is there a connection made between apostleship or gospel proclamation and diakonia. Paul saw

his apostleship as a form of diakonia, in that it was humble service to others, so he felt that he should honor, glorify, and exalt it. Diakonia would not normally be considered an honored activity but a humbling one in that society, but to the extent that it was done in service for Jesus Christ and for the gospel, it could be viewed as an exalted form of ministry. Jesus practiced diakonia and encouraged his followers to do the same. See Matt 20:25-28; 23:11 and parallels.

Posted by: Edwin Reynolds | [May 11, 2010 at 04:04 PM](#)

That's a good point, Dr. Reynolds (I can't seem to address you as Edwin). I'm going to be thinking a little more diligently about what "ministry" is and how gender relates to it.

How do we modern people define ministry? --Something you do from the church platform? No, that's not it exactly. --Something you do for free for the church? No, there is such a thing as paid ministry. --Something you do publicly or privately, for free or with a salary in the name of Jesus and in service to His kingdom? That's sounds more like it. Yet when put that way, arguing about women in ministry seems inconsequential: ministry is what all believers should do.

How is ministry defined in the Bible? Well, I think a case could be made that it was along the lines of something you do publicly or privately, for free or with a salary in the name of the Lord and in service to His people and His cause. There again arguing about gender qualifications for ministry seems outside of the issue: ministry is what all believers should do.

Do you think that perhaps there are some ministry tasks that have gender qualifications attached? Which ones should women abstain from?

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [May 12, 2010 at 04:52 AM](#)

Answering ones' own question seems somehow uncouth, but Dr. Reynolds' comment really did set me to thinking about this issue. Regarding ministry tasks that have gender qualification, it seems to me that we can rule out doing good and helping the poor (Acts 9:36); offering hospitality (Acts 16:15); public prayer and prophesying (1 Cor 11:5, also Acts 21:9); instruction in the Christian faith, at least in private (Acts 18:26); and hosting house churches (Col 4:15).

And then we have the more imprecise "working for the Lord." Priscilla is a fellow worker with Paul (Rom 16:3). We cannot assume that this means she and Aquila were involved in work of the exact nature as Paul, but interestingly, fellow worker [sunergos] is the same term Paul uses to describe Timothy in verse 21. Also, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are hard workers in the Lord (v12). Perhaps giving us some insight into the activities of these fellow workers, Timothy's work as a fellow worker was to spread the gospel of Christ and to strengthen and encourage believers (1 Thess 3:2). Also, there are the women who, Paul said, "have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Phil 4:3). Of course, there is also the somewhat ambiguous reference to the apostle Junia(s) in Romans 16:7.

If the New Testament does keep some ministry tasks off limits for women, which ones? Perhaps public preaching, administration tasks, or tasks such as baptisms?

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [May 12, 2010 at 05:10 AM](#)

Thank you, Dr. Miller, for your response and your blessing. I did appreciate the history and background regarding religious liberty that you share with our class.

There is a point of clarification I would like to make as to my student status. While I did take half of my class work away from the Andrews campus, these distant classes were taken at three different geographic locations, Florida, Texas and Washington. There were women in all of these classes and I took time to question each of them regarding their information and knowledge about church history and current currents regarding women in the church.

I took two classes at Andrews last summer and while there and again at my recent graduation, I took time to meet and question female faculty, staff and women in other course tracks at the seminary as to their knowledge of women's issues and the support systems available on campus. This was obviously not a scientific survey. It was only done out of my own interest and curiosity.

I do affirm that all of my seminary professors were personally supportive of me and my studies. They were all positive in their comments regarding the good work women were doing in ministry. This encouragement however does not translate into their knowledge and awareness of the status of women in today's church or of the biblical studies that support full inclusion of women into the church body.

Currently women are not represented in the administration or policy making boards of our church. While it is major, ordination is but one of the road blocks. Teachings, such as headship of all men, are subtly woven into theological presentations and the seminary is

training a whole new generation pastors to accept the second class status of women in our church. These pastors are then the front line of educating laity.

I stand by my previous statement to Dean Fortin.

Posted by: Donna Haerich | [May 14, 2010 at 09:28 AM](#)

Thanks for the very interesting article, and helpful study of terminology of minister/deacon in different translations. Your article brought joy to my heart.

Posted by: Priscilla Philips Walters | [May 27, 2010 at 12:59 AM](#)

Denis,

There is absolutely no Biblical information available that proves Phoebe was anything but a servant of the church. To suggest and say that she was a deacon or a minister like Paul is very wrong theology. The word used for "servant" in the KJV is:

G1249

διάκονος

diakonos

dee-ak'-on-os

Probably from διάκω diakō (obsolete, to run on errands; compare G1377); an attendant, that is, (generally) a waiter (at table or in other menial duties); specifically a Christian teacher and pastor (technically a deacon or deaconess): - deacon, minister, servant.

The word use for deacon in 1Tim 3:10 is:

G1247

διακονέω

diakoneō

dee-ak-on-eh'-o

From G1249; to be an attendant, that is, wait upon (menially or as a host, friend or [figuratively] teacher); technically to act as a Christian deacon: - (ad-) minister (unto), serve, use the office of a deacon.

Which as we can see is not the same word used for "servant" in Romans 16:1. While the KJV is not perfect in a few other interpretations, there is no doubt that it correctly gave the meanings here for "servant" and deacon.

While the Greek word here could be used for deacon or minister, the Bible evidence taken altogether shows that she was not a deacon nor a minister. There is not one shred of Bible evidence anywhere in the OT or the NT that suggests any woman was ever ordained for any leadership position,

It is important to use the KJV or one of its variants, because when using a NT text from the Hort-Westcott manuscripts one is sure to run into many faulty interpretations as they both were into the occult and received their information for manuscript changes from demons. So when one uses the NIV or other liberal translation, then it is the creation of the enemy of souls that they are using.

1Ti 3:12 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.

Paul instructions for the office of deacon was for men only, Women were never mentioned anywhere in the New Testament for the ordained office of bishop, pastor, elder or deacon.

God has set in His Word the order for the family and church, so to try and usurp this order is simply fighting against God Himself.

The LORD's prophet Ellen White says here:

Eve had been perfectly happy by her husband's side in her Eden home; but, like restless modern Eves, she was flattered with the hope of entering a higher sphere than that which God had assigned her. In attempting to rise above her original position, she fell far below it. A similar result will be reached by all who are unwilling to take up cheerfully their life duties in accordance with God's plan. In their efforts to reach positions for which He has not fitted them, many are leaving vacant the place where they might be a blessing. In their desire for a higher sphere, many have sacrificed true womanly dignity and nobility of character, and have left undone the very work that Heaven appointed them. Patriarchs and Prophets, page 59

Please also see my article here:

God Bless! Steve

Posted by: Steve Billiter | [July 06, 2010 at 02:04 PM](#)

Many arguments made in response to my blog miss the point that Paul in writing about himself and his colleagues referred to all of them as diakonos. (The last comment by Steve Billiter ignores a proper understanding of Greek grammar and that nouns have different endings depending on their locations in a sentence. Nouns and verbs that have the same roots have cognate meanings.) The word diakonos may be translated servant (like the NIV does consistently) or minister (like the KJV), but whatever the translation a diakonos was a servant or minister of the church, of the gospel, or of Christ. The fact that Paul used that same word to refer to Phoebe in Romans 16:1 indicates that this form of service/ministry was gender inclusive, that both males and females could be a diakonos, that being a diakonos was not a function limited only to men. What has influenced our understanding of this function or ministry through the centuries has been the many translations we have used. Some people talk of gender exclusive ministry for males only and for females only. I don't see this in the ministry and services done by Paul's associates in the New Testament, and certainly not when it comes to diakonos. Denis

Posted by: Denis Fortin | [July 06, 2010 at 04:42 PM](#)

One needs to read the full context of what Paul says about Phoebe in verses 1 and 2 to get a better sense of his regard for her and her role within the NT church. The second verse includes another more significant descriptive title that is more obscurely translated as "succourer" in the KJV. The Greek word is prostatis and it means "a woman set over others", "governess" "patroness". It is a title that indicates the high esteem with which she was regarded. The word is a derivative of the Greek word proistemi which means "to rule or preside over." Lest there be any doubt that Phoebe was entitled to be regarded as such, Paul indicates that he sees her as such in relationship to himself and instructs the Roman believers that they should assist her with whatever she asks of them. Paul is directing them to regard her as someone who is in charge, a leader, someone that they should help.

Posted by: Tom Wetmore | [February 21, 2012 at 05:42 PM](#)

When we want to understand Scripture, we must first accept the underlying Biblical principle that Scripture does not contradict itself. When it appears to, we need to do further study. I have most often found that when one comes bearing the Greek and Hebrew, they most often have no other recourse to prove their point.

The Bible was given to us in a manner that the common man may understand without learning both Greek and Hebrew. There is consistency from Genesis to Revelation. Many want to separate from the world church's decision to maintain role distinction in the home and the church. When they come face to face with Scripture that refutes their desire, they reinterpret it to be in harmony with their wishes. This is done with the verses that express a clear teaching on the headship of man in both the home and the church. Let's take a look.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing." Ephesians 5:22-24.

This is a revelation of the underlying principle that modern society hates. This hate has come into God's church. Let us continue.

"But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." 1 Tim. 2:12.

This is in contradiction to what Dennis Fortin is teaching. So, he will have to make of no effect these verses that place men in authority in both the home and the church. How does he do it? The argument is often made that Paul is speaking only of his "culture". That this is no longer applicable today. Only at the expense of truth can one make this argument. Spiritual discernment is required to understand the Spiritual truths entrusted to us as a people. How do we respond to those who are separating from the world church? We do so from Scripture. Let us undo the lie that Paul was only expressing this because of "his" culture at that time. When Scripture is twisted and taken out of context, most often by reading the verse in context the error will be seen. So it is with this verse.

*"But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. **For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.** Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." 1 Tim 2:12-15.*

It does not take a theologian to understand the truth of what inspiration is teaching. Paul first sets the principle of headship down, then explains why it is so. It is not for us to reason why, but to accept the plain simple Bible statement of truth. It has nothing to do with culture. It is just simple Bible truth that began at the fall and extends until Jesus returns.

Women have most important duties in the home and in the church. But, in the world they want to take over the position assigned to men. And soon, they will be drafted to fight on the front lines of battle. Then, the restless Eve's of our day will see what they have done by fighting against God and His truth. I have a wife and daughters and want the very best for them. This will be found when they are in submission to God and His Word. If you want to see something very beautiful, look upon the countenance of a women who is in entire submission to God.

May the separation now taking place be seen for what it is and unity be restored to God's church. Let the teachers of the teachers return to their Bibles and the Protestant principle of sola Scriptura.

Posted by: [Richard Myers](#) | [March 19, 2012 at 12:54 AM](#)

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