The Christian Woman: 
What Is Her Role?

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Thesis: This paper will examine Genesis and the New Testament passages concerning the role of women, and as a result of the biblical evidence attempt to determine the proper role of women in church and society.

Introduction: Purpose of paper

I. Old Testament passages in reference to women
   A. Genesis 1:26-28
      1. Male and female in God’s image
      2. Two distinct sexes
      3. A joint commission
   B. Genesis 2:18-24
      1. Eve-helpmate
      2. Eve-equal to Adam
   C. Genesis 3:6-19
      1. The fall of woman and man
      2. God describes resulting conditions

II. New Testament passages that substantiate inequality of women
   A. I Corinthians 11:3
      1. Head of woman is man
      2. God as Christ rules and submits
   B. I Corinthians 11:7
      1. Woman is glory of man
      2. Woman and man created equally
   C. I Corinthians 11:8
      1. Woman is of man
      2. Eve of Adam’s rib
   D. I Corinthians 14:34-35
      1. Women be silent in church
      2. Services must be orderly
3. Christ supercedes

E. Ephesians 5:22-24 and Colossians 3:18
   1. Submit to husband — so avoid dispute
   2. Submission to be voluntary
   3. God — source of subjection

F. 1 Timothy 2:11-14
   1. Woman — not to teach man
   2. Woman — sinned first
   3. Woman — created second
   4. Paul — “all new creatures”

G. Titus 2:5
   1. Woman — not to rebel
   2. Older women — teach younger

H. 1 Peter 3:1
   1. Subject to husbands
   2. Win husband to Christ

III. New Testament passages that substantiate equality of women

A. I Corinthians 11:5
   1. Women — prayed and prophesied
   2. Women removed veils

B. I Corinthians 11:11-12
   1. Woman from Adam
   2. Man born of woman
   3. All things of God

C. Galatians 3:26-28
   1. All — children of God
   2. Barriers broken
   3. To be what intended

D. Ephesians 5:21,25 and Colossians 3:19
   1. Submit — because of God
   2. Husbands — unconditional love for wives

E. Titus 2:3-4, 6-8
   1. Aged women teach young women
   2. Husbands likewise do good

F. 1 Peter 3:7-8
   1. Man honor wife
   2. Both are heirs of God’s grace
The Asbury Seminarian

IV. Supports for equality of women in church and society
   A. A higher principle
   B. Christ abolished distinctions
   C. Scripture passages
   D. Paul and women
   E. Christ and women
   F. God as authority

V. Conclusion
   A. Prayer and guidance of Holy Spirit
   B. Submission to God
   C. Be not a stumbling block

VI. Appendixes
   A. Old Testament and New Testament passages concerning women (referred to in paper)
   B. History of women
   C. Issues concerning women (hair, dress, childbearing)

The purpose of this paper is to examine the biblical passages concerning the role of women in church and society. The present writer will attempt to determine the meaning of the Genesis account of creation of man and woman and the New Testament passages concerning women. After this objective presentation of the Scriptures, this writer will support the side of the equality of women in church and society and will defend that position therein with biblical evidences.

Creation Accounts — Substantiate Equality of Women and Men

Genesis 1:26-28

In this reference to the first creation story, God created male and female in His own image. Among other meanings it denotes an image in which man and woman is thought of as "in the image of God," in the sense in which a statue can represent an absent ruler. Therefore, as God's representatives, male and female acquire dignity and authority.¹

It must be said that God did create both male and female (Hebrew — ish and ishshah).² They are two distinct words denoting two sexes of mankind. In New Testament usage "aner" is the Greek word for man and "gune" is the Greek word for woman.³
The Christian Woman: What Is Her Role?

In Genesis 1:28 God gave both male and female a joint commission to subdue the earth and rule over every living thing.

Genesis 2:18-24

In this passage woman is made from the rib of man, to be a help­mate for Adam. Adam regarded the help-mate as equal by his statement, "This is the bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." The name, Eve, for the woman, meant to come to one's aid and provide relief. The word "Eva" (Greek for Eve) is referred to in the Bible sixteen times as a superior, five times as an equal, but never as an inferior.

Creation Account — Substantiates Inequality of Women and Men

Genesis 3:6-19 (The Fall)

In the biblical account of man's fall, Eve ate first of the forbidden fruit, and then Adam ate likewise. As a result of this sin, their dominion over the earth was altered. B.R. Hicks describes this change of dominion as Adam being reduced to ruling over an imperfect sinful kingdom called Adam female. Mr. Hicks fails to consider the fact that Adam, too, sinned.

As a result of this fall and sin, God cursed the serpent and the ground, but he did not curse Adam and Eve. God described to them the unpleasant conditions that had been brought to them because of their sin. The conditions included pain in childbirth, Eve's desire for Adam, Adam's rule over Eve, ground is cursed, thorns and thistles in earth, sweat will occur, humans return to dust. These conditions are not prescriptions for mankind, but descriptions of what will happen to mankind because of sin.

New Testament Passages

Substantiate Inequality of Women and Men

1 Corinthians 11:3

This passage indicates that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.

In biblical times it was not known that the head made the decisions and gave orders to the nervous system; the decision-making was made in the heart. The word "head" is derived from "kephale" which means source or origin of authority.

One view, held by Walter Kaiser, is that a hierarchy exists, God — Christ — man — woman. Man is the source of authority for woman, because woman originated from man in the creation account. Kaiser
does indicate that such a ranking speaks not of their dignity or worth, but of job relationships and responsibilities to each other. The writer must say that Paul's definition of head means source or origin — not in a slave-like manner. As Christ was sent by God and is equal to Him, so was woman made from Adam's rib. Thus headship implies not ruling authority, but a source of origin.

Another view held on this passage is: just because Christ's source of origin is God, this fact doesn't make Christ a second-class person, and thus a woman is not a second-class person because the man is her source of origin.

In reference to the head of Christ as God, Christ says in John 14:28 that "that Father is greater than I," but in John 10:29 Jesus says, "the Father and I are one." Therefore, Christ as God both rules and submits. This writer thinks this statement could also be true of woman in relation to man!

1 Corinthians 11:7

This passage points out that man is in the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man. The word "glory" is derived from the Hebrew "kabhodh" which means the reflection or source. Therefore, man is the reflection or comes from God, and woman reflects or comes from man.

Wayne Mack interprets the above to imply that man as God's representative is to rule and glorify God in a very direct fashion, but the woman, being the glory of man, is to glorify God by fulfilling the desires of man. This writer disagrees with Mack's conclusion. Glory in the above passage refers to source. Thus man was created by God, and woman was created out of Adam's rib. One may see that in Genesis 1:26-27 it is made clear that both man and woman were made by God in His image. Adam had nothing to do with Eve's creation; God accomplished it. Therefore, both male and female are in the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 11:8

This passage says that the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. The passage refers to Genesis 1:22 where Eve was made from Adam's rib. Charles Ryrie states that woman's position is secondary, because she was created out of the man. Nevertheless, Genesis 1:26-27 says God created both male and female, and Adam in Genesis 2:23 denotes Eve as being equal to him because she was his bone and flesh.
The Christian Woman: What Is Her Role?

I Corinthians 11:9

The passage points out that man was not created for the woman, but the woman was created for the man. This passage refers to Genesis 1:20 where God made Eve as a help-mate for Adam.

I Corinthians 14:34-35

The Scripture recommends that women keep silence in the churches, and they are not permitted to speak in the church. If they need to learn, let the women ask their husbands at home.

Speak (Greek “laleo”) means chattering, arguing, confusion, and questioning. The word “speak” is sometimes associated with the word “glossai” (speaking in tongues). Silence (Greek “hesuchia”) means quietness, tranquility, and the absence of disturbance.

Since I Corinthians 14:27-29 and I Corinthians 14:39 warn the followers about speaking in tongues, one may assume that Paul is warning women not to speak in tongues, and thus cause confusion and disturbance in the church.

Scanzoni and Hardesty state that Paul is not simply telling women to be totally silent, but rather he is asking all Christians to defer to each other in order that the church services might be orderly and edifying. This argument seems appropriate in the light of the disruption caused by tongues at the time (I Corinthians 14:28,39), and by the fact that confusion seemed to be a problem in the Corinthian church. The silencing of women here would bring peace (I Corinthians 14:33).

Wayne Mack says women should not speak in the church, because it is against God’s law (given to us by Paul), and women speaking in the church displeases God. Mollenkott points out, that while in I Corinthians 14 Paul bases his arguments on “the law,” in Galatians 3:11-12 Paul makes clear that the law was a temporary measure to be superseded by Christ. This writer must question the statement made by Mack that women speaking in the church displeased God. One reason is I Corinthians 11:5 which says women were praying and prophesying, plus Paul’s accounts of women being active in the early church (Romans 16).

Ephesians 5:22-24 and Colossians 3:18

In Ephesians 5:22-24 Paul instructs the women followers at Ephesus to submit to their husbands, as unto the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is head of church. Paul points out as the church is subject to Christ so let wives be to their husbands. In Colossians 3:18, wives are instructed by Paul to submit
to husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.

The word “submit” is from the Greek “hupotasso” which means to subject and submit yourself, not to be a slave, but to try to please each other as far as possible, avoiding disputes, contentions, and divisions. Another passage where Paul refers to submission/subjection conveys a meaning of following, faithfulness, and serving. This passage is in Titus 3:1-2 where Paul instructs Titus to be subject to principalities and powers, to speak no evil, be gentle and ready to do every good work.

Submission is the opposite of self-assertion or of an independent, autocratic spirit. Submission is the desire to get along with one another, being satisfied with less than one’s due, and should be the voluntary attitude of all Christians. Colossians 3:18 points to wives’ submission as something that is pleasing to the Lord.

One writer believes, that under the sinful nature of the fall, the woman fights back and resists subjection to her husband, and God is the only one who can form true, inner subjection in her heart. This writer must say that subjection in Christ (to please others) should be the goal of all Christians (not only women), and that its absence in any person (male or female) is sin.

Wayne Mack presents the opinion that if a woman can’t submit herself wholly to a man — as instructed in Ephesians 5:22 — she should not marry. Mack believes that it is improper for a woman to exercise dominion over her husband both in privacy and in the church. Mr. Mack fails to understand that the lack of submission and love from a husband to a wife is just as wrong (Ephesians 5:21,25). In Christian love, submission must be a two-way street.

I Timothy 2:11-14

In I Timothy 2:11-14 Paul instructs the church at Ephesus to let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. She is not to teach or usurp authority over man. The reason for this subjection being that Adam was made first, then Eve. Adam was not deceived, but Eve was deceived and she sinned.

The word “teach” comes from the Greek word “didaskein,” which means a title of respect and is found coupled with “lord” and “king.” This word for teacher was used to describe Jesus, John the Baptist, and leaders of the early church. The teacher’s office was an authoritative one of high honor. His task was to address the church and engage in pedagogical instruction and theological discussion. This work consumed all his time, so the local congregation usually
supported him. 26

"Usurp" means to take or assume, hold by force or without right. 27 Authority (Greek verb "authentein") means to be master of, have dominion over. 28

Several writers (Ryrie and Knight) advocate a legalistic interpretation of I Timothy 2:11-15. They say that the woman must not teach or have dominion over a man, because man was created first and Eve was the first to sin in the fall of mankind. Ryrie explains that subordination, dependence, and difference of nature are the three reasons the early church assigned for the non-participation of women in the public vocal ministry. The regulation of silence was not grounded in special and temporary conditions in the church, but was related to a far more basic and fundamental reason, that is, the difference in position and nature (from second creation account) of male and female. Ryrie believes a woman may teach, if a man is not available. 29

Knight points out that what is prohibited is women teaching men. He believes that woman's function is teaching children and women, and in a diaconal task. 30

This writer would have to disagree with Ryrie and Knight. There were women teachers in the early church, for example, Priscilla (Romans 16) and Anna (Luke 2:37-38). The teaching we have today is very different from the authoritative teaching of biblical times. Today, teachers simply pass on knowledge already given by the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. 31

One must consider why Paul imposed silence on women because of Eve, when he himself taught that in Christ, women as well as men become "new creatures" (II Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 3:29). 32 The present writer believes that Paul did not contradict himself, but the situations of I Timothy 2 and I Corinthians 14 were different. There Paul wanted to keep peace in the church, and not have disruptions from false teaching or chattering.

Scanzoni and Hardesty object to Paul's reference to Adam being created first, because Genesis 1 points out that male and female are created simultaneously by God as a culmination of His work. Also, Adam did sin, too — not Eve only. 33 This writer believes Adam was created first in order, but both Adam and Eve were created by God in His image.

One writer interprets the passage as emphasizing "teach" rather than woman. The problem was the possibility of false teaching and
confusion in doctrinal matters. Any woman who possessed full knowledge could teach.\textsuperscript{34} The writer agrees with this since many women in that day were uneducated and often immoral.

Don Williams says that in Greek, I Timothy 2:12 — "I suffer a woman not to teach" — is a present active indicative verb which can be translated, "I am not presently permitting a woman to teach or to have authority over men."\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Titus 2:5}

In this passage Paul instructs that aged women should teach the younger women to be chaste, keepers at home, and obedient to their husbands, so that God's word will not be cursed. John Rice says when a Christian woman's influence leads another woman to be rebellious and disobedient at home in her attitude toward her husband, she sins against God. Any kind of Christianity that does not make a woman into a good wife brings reproach on the cause of Christ.\textsuperscript{36} This writer believes that rebellion against any of one's brothers or sisters is displeasing to God. Rice's statement should be applied to all Christians, women and men (Ephesians 5:21).

\textit{I Peter 3:1}

Here Peter, like Paul, instructs the women to be in subjection to their husbands (for the reason that unbelieving husbands may be won to the Lord). The writer believes that subjection to each other in order to win persons to the Lord is the call of all Christians (Ephesians 5:21 and I Peter 3:7-8).

\textbf{New Testament Passages}

\textbf{Substantiate Equality of Women and Men}

\textit{I Corinthians 11:5}

This passage says that every woman that prayed or prophesied with an uncovered head dishonored her head.

The word "prophesy" used in I Corinthians 11:5 indicates intelligible preaching that builds up the church in faith and imparts knowledge.\textsuperscript{37} Among the Greeks it was a custom for the women to appear in public with a head covering or veil. This veil was a sign of modesty, hiddenness, surrender to selflessness — not a personal, individual fulfillment — but a genetic fulfillment in the role which man had allotted to them as women. The removal of the cover lowered woman's dignity and respect.\textsuperscript{38}

I Corinthians 11:5 does show that women were praying and prophesying in the Corinthian church. Paul Jewett states that these
The Christian Woman: What Is Her Role?

women were seeking to express the equality of the sexes by laying aside their veils during the worship service. He believes that the women's praying and prophesying wasn't the problem, but the removal of their veils.39 Ryrie believes that this permission to pray and prophesy was later withdrawn (he points to I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2). He says that the fact that women prayed and prophesied was extraordinary and probably limited to the Corinthian congregation.40 The writer wonders why Ryrie does not account for the leadership of women during Jesus' day and the women leaders in other Old Testament and New Testament situations (Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Deborah — Judges 4,5, Phoebe and Priscilla — Romans 16).

I Corinthians 11:11-12

In this passage Paul instructs that neither is the man without the woman, and neither is the woman without the man in the Lord. He says the woman is of the man, and the man is also by the woman, but all things are of God.

This passage indicates equality by placing dependence for Eve upon Adam's rib, and by pointing to the fact that all humans must be born of woman. The most important statement here is that all things are of God, both men and women.

Galatians 3:26-28

In Galatians 3:26-28 Paul declares that all are children of God by faith in Christ, and that all who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. He states that there are neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ.

This passage breaks down racial, social, and sexual barriers and goes a step beyond the law with a new order. In Christ the man and woman are redeemed from false stereotypes and enabled to become what God intended them to be when He created man and woman. Galatians 3:26-28 rises above a man-to-man relationship to a man-to-God relationship.41 Ryrie concludes that Galatians 3:26-28 indicates that spiritual privileges in the body of Christ come equally to men and women. Nevertheless, he says these words include nothing that is inconsistent with the idea of a difference in position and function of men and women.42 This writer has to disagree with Ryrie, because spiritual equality through Christ indicates that male and female are all children of God and one in Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28). Christ opens the door for every person to do what he or she has been called to do by Christ, regardless of sex.
Ephesians 5:21, 25 and Colossians 3:19

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul instructs the followers to submit themselves one to another in the fear of the Lord. Here Paul states that subjection and submission (to please each other) should be done by all followers because of God. There is no mention of man or woman.

In both Ephesians 5:25 and Colossians 3:19 Paul instructs the men to love their wives. In Ephesians 5:25 Paul instructs the men to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it. Here Paul emphasizes husbands loving wives, using Christ’s unconditional love and not culture as a standard.\(^{43}\)

Titus 2:3-4, 6-8

Here Paul instructs the aged women to teach good things to the young women (to obey and love husbands, be discreet, chaste, good, etc.). Yet, in Titus 2:6-8 Paul instructs Titus to exhort young men to be soberminded, showing a pattern of good works.

I Peter 3:7-8

In this passage Peter instructs the husbands to give honor unto the wife, the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life. Peter tells the followers to be of one mind, having compassion for each other, love as brethren, and be pitiful and courteous.

The Greek translation of honor means a place of preference, greatness, or dignity.\(^{44}\) The weaker vessel refers to the size and strength of the female body.\(^{45}\) The grace of life refers to the grace of God.\(^{46}\)

Peter’s words instruct that the man give honor to the wife, and he indicates that both man and wife are heirs of God’s grace. Peter urges the followers to be of one mind or in one spirit of likemindedness, and to exhibit love, mercy, and courteousness.\(^{47}\)

George Knight states that Peter affirms spiritual equality in the midst of a passage which speaks of a distinct role relationship of wives and husbands. Thus both equality and difference are equally the result of God’s order and activity.\(^{48}\) This writer would have to agree with Knight to some extent. Man and woman are spiritually equal (in position and function) in God’s eyes, yet the sexes are distinctly different in physical abilities and personality.

In Defense of Equality of Women in Church and Society

The writer agrees with the equality of women in church and society, because of a higher principle that Christ and His teachings
emphasized. This teaching can be summarized in Galatians 3:26-28 where Paul teaches all are children of God by faith in Jesus; those baptized in Christ have put on Christ; and there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus. In this doctrinal statement, one sees the ordinary distinctions and divisions of life are swallowed up in this relationship with Christ. God did create two distinct sexes, yet all are one in Christ. Paul in Ephesians 2:15 teaches that Christ has abolished in His flesh the hostility, even the law of commandments contained in the ordinances, for there is one new man (anthropos — humankind) in Him.

Another biblical passage that supports the view in Galatians 3:26-28 occurs in I Corinthians 14:31 where Paul says, “For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.” In Mark 3:35 Jesus teaches that whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother. In Acts 8:12 both men and women were baptized.

Paul had a positive and cordial relationship with many women who were early church leaders. In Romans 16:1 Paul commends Phoebe unto the church and refers to her as diakonos or deacon and helper of many. Paul requests that the church assist her. In Romans 16:3 Paul sends greetings to Priscilla and Aquilla who were both teachers in the church. He salutes Tryphena, Tryphosa, Mary, and Persis. Even in Philippians 4:3 Paul urges the followers to help those women who helped him in the gospel.

Yet one must also remember that in Paul’s time, women were illiterate, and many of doubtful morals. It would seem unlikely that many men would be drawn to Christianity in that culture, if women were in the majority positions of leadership, and Paul’s major concern was for the spread of the Gospel of Christ.

The Old Testament clearly assumed female submission, but contained no law to command it, whereas rabbinic Judaism was full of traditional laws and customs which required the subservience of women.

Most Christians do not feel they are breaking a divine command by not following the “letter of the law” in regard to some areas believed to be culturally conditioned. For example, churches do not require men to lift their hands while praying (I Timothy 2:8), and modern translators have changed the “holy kiss” of I Corinthians 16:20 into a handshake.

In Matthew 19:3-9 when the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by pitting His view of divorce against Mosaic law, Jesus pointed out that the
law did not represent God's original intention for men and women. Rather, the law given in Deuteronomy 24:1-3 was permitted to a patriarchal culture because their hearts were hard. Yet it was not this way from the beginning. By His own practice, Jesus showed us that sacred Scripture concerning man's behavior toward woman does not always reflect God's highest intention for the human race.⁵⁴

One may see that Christ's teachings contain an element which could be classed as sexless. Christ did not give instructions to women as women, or that were applicable to women only. Christ did not tell Martha and Mary they ought to be married, and He did not send Mary into the kitchen away from His teachings (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus did not rebuke the mothers present at the feeding of the 5,000 for being away from home three days (Matthew 14:15-21). Jesus did not give directions about housekeeping or about women's place in the synagogue. Christ said those who claim Him as Lord will finally be judged on feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and prisoners, and these are things which mostly can and should be done equally by men and women (Matthew 25:31-46). One must remember that Jesus teaches that in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matthew 22:30).⁵⁵

Mary Magdalene had the special distinction of being the last at the cross (Mark 15:47) and the first at Jesus' tomb (John 20:1). Anna was the first to proclaim Christ to the Jews (Luke 2:37-38). Jesus spoke with the woman at the well in public, which in that day was inappropriate conduct (John 4:1-42). Jesus' relationships with women were revolutionary for His time.⁵⁶

One must look at Romans 12:1 which states that "you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God." In I Corinthians 11:12 one sees, "all things are of God" and in Galatians 3:26, "you are all children of God." The present writer believes these passages speak that all Christ's followers, both male and female, must be subject first to Him and not His creatures. This subjection to Christ and His power will transform each man and woman so they will submit to each other in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:21). This submission implies a new way Christ wants His followers to relate — not out of fear or grudging duty to each other — but "as to the Lord."

In conclusion, this writer has the opinion that the equality of women in the church and society is biblically-based. The revolutionary teachings and message of Christ uplift each human, male or female, to equality as each lives in Him. Each must follow Him and
The Christian Woman: What Is Her Role?

the Holy Spirit as the authority for his life. Each must also remember
that no man or woman should give occasion for his brother or sister
to stumble (Romans 14:13). So there are some aspects of the feminist
movement that must be considered in prayer and judgment of the
situation and circumstances at hand. "Favor is deceitful, and beauty
is vain, but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised"
(Proverbs 31:30).

Footnotes

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31
The Asbury Seminarian

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54 Mollenkott, op. cit., p. 119.