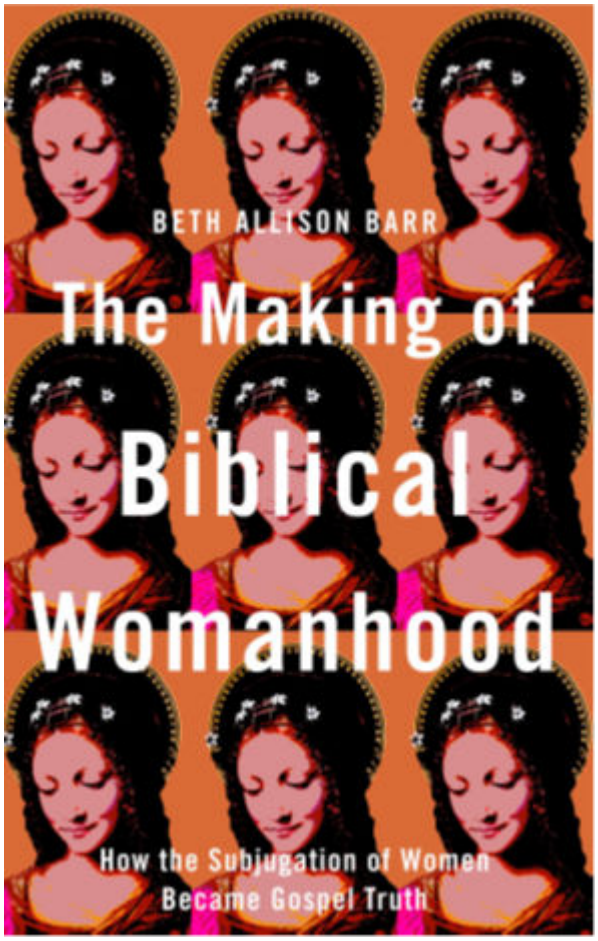
The Making of Biblical Womanhood

How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth

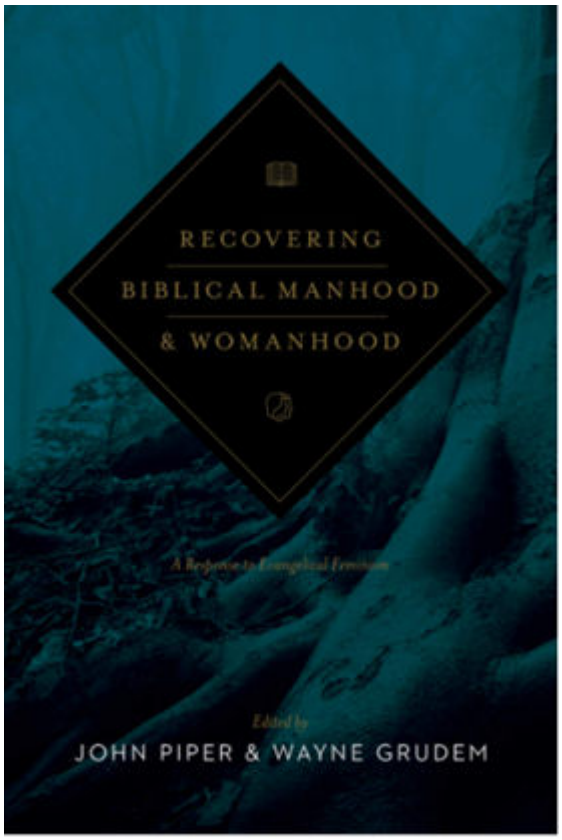
Author: Beth Allison Barr, Professor of History (specializing in the Middle Ages) at Baylor University

Beth Allison Barr · introduced by Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf · April 2021 · revised October 2026

This book is one of the responses to the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, published in the USA in 1991. That book advocates an explicitly hierarchical understanding of the roles of men and women in marriage, church, and society. Its authors and editors are Wayne Grudem (known for his *Systematic Theology*) and the well-known theologian John Piper.



It is a response to this book:



Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

1. The Beginning of Patriarchy
2. What If Biblical Womanhood Doesn't Come from Paul?
3. Our Selective Medieval Memory
4. The Cost of the Reformation for Evangelical Women
5. Writing Women Out of the English Bible
6. Sanctifying Subordination
7. Making Biblical Womanhood Gospel Truth
8. Isn't It Time to Set Women Free?

Excerpt from: Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), chapter 2, pp. 39–70. Reproduced without the notes.

Chapter 2: What If Biblical Womanhood Doesn't Come from Paul?

"I HATE PAUL!"

I can't tell you how many times I have heard that from my students, mostly young women scarred by how Paul has been used against them as they have been told to be silent (1 Corinthians 14), to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5), not to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Timothy 2), and to be workers at home (Titus 2). They have been taught that God designed women to follow male headship (1 Corinthians 11), focusing on family and home (Colossians 3; 1 Peter 3), and that occupations other than family should be secondary for women, mostly undertaken out of necessity or after their children have left the house.

A few years ago, a student came to my office ostensibly to discuss her class paper, but it soon became clear that what she really wanted to discuss was her vocation. She asked me: Did God call you to be a professor as well as a mom and a pastor's wife? Was it hard? Did you feel guilty about working outside the home? Was your husband supportive? What did people in your church think? She shared her frustrations as a career-minded Christian woman from a conservative background who was trying to reconcile church and family expectations with her vocational calling. A recent conversation with her father had exasperated her. Anxious about her major, she had asked him for advice. He tried to soothe her fears, suggesting her major didn't matter that much since she would just get married and not work anyway. Shocked, she retorted, "Dad, are you really sending me to four years of college for me to never use my degree?"

The father's attitude toward women working outside the home isn't anomalous. As we have seen, a 2017 Barna study found that while Americans in general are becoming more comfortable with women in leadership roles and more understanding of the significant obstacles women face in the workplace, evangelical Christians lag behind. Perhaps the most startling gap in evangelical attitudes concerns women in specific leadership roles. I commented in 2016 that Wayne Grudem's attitude toward women—that they should never be in authority over men—made it impossible for him to support a female candidate for president. The Barna study suggests I was right about this. The white evangelical leaders like Grudem who rallied to support Donald Trump's bid for the presidency correspond to the lowest levels of comfort with a female president. For at least some evangelical and Republican voters (27–35 percent), the problem with Hillary Clinton wasn't just that she is a Democrat; it was also that she is a woman (27 percent of evangelical voters and 35 percent of Republican voters said they were uncomfortable with a female president). Three years later I wasn't surprised to see Elizabeth Warren's bid for presidency fall beneath the same gendered hatchet.

Ideas matter. These evangelical beliefs—why they argue for the immutability of female submission—are rooted in how they interpret Paul. The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood may start with Genesis 2 in their overview of complementarianism, but their reading of this creation narrative stems from 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2. Paul frames every aspect of complementarian teachings. Evangelicals read Pauline texts as designating permanent and divinely ordained role distinctions between the sexes. Men wield authority that women cannot.

Men lead, women follow. Paul tells us so.

Is it any wonder my students hate Paul?

But what if we have been reading Paul wrong? Early during our youth ministry years, my husband and I took a group of kids to a weekend evangelism conference. One of the speakers revealed his secret evangelism weapon—the question "What if you're wrong?" I don't remember much from that conference, but this question has stuck with me. I have found it useful in my work as a historian—what if I

am wrong about my conclusions? Am I willing to reconsider the evidence? I have found it useful as a teacher, especially when a student presents me with a different idea. The question "What if I'm wrong?" helps me listen to others better. It keeps me humble. It makes me a better scholar.

So here is my question for complementarian evangelicals: What if you are wrong? What if evangelicals have been understanding Paul through the lens of modern culture instead of the way Paul intended to be understood? The evangelical church fears that recognizing women's leadership will mean bowing to cultural peer pressure. But what if the church is bowing to cultural peer pressure by denying women's leadership? What if, instead of a "plain and natural" reading, our interpretation of Paul—and subsequent exclusion of women from leadership roles—results from succumbing to the attitudes and patterns of thinking around us? Christians in the past may have used Paul to exclude women from leadership, but this doesn't mean that the subjugation of women is biblical. It just means that Christians today are repeating the same mistake of Christians in the past—modeling our treatment of women after the world around us instead of the world Jesus shows us is possible.

So when my students exclaim that they "hate Paul," I counter: it isn't Paul they hate; rather, they hate how Paul's letters have become foundational to an understanding of biblical gender roles that oppress women. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, a leading Pauline scholar, laments that evangelicals have spent so much time "parsing the lines of Paul's letters for theological propositions and ethical guidelines that must be replicated narrowly" that we have missed Paul's bigger purpose. We have reduced his call for oneness into patrolling borders for uniformity; we have traded the "radical character" of Christ's body for a rigid hierarchy of gender and power. Instead of "thinking along *with* Paul," as Gaventa appeals, evangelicals have turned Paul into a weapon for our own culture wars. New Testament scholar Boykin Sanders proclaims that it is time to get Paul right when it comes to women. In bold type under the heading "Neither Male nor Female," he argues, "The lesson for the black church here is that gender discrimination in the work of the church is unacceptable." Paul shows us that gender discrimination is "a return to the ways of the world," and we are called into the "new world of the Christ-crucified gospel."

The truth—the evangelical reality—is that we have focused so much on adapting Paul to be like us that we have forgotten to adapt ourselves to what Paul is calling us to be: one in Christ. Instead of choosing the better part and embracing the "new world of the Christ-crucified gospel," we have chosen to keep doing what humans have always done: building our own tower of hierarchy and power.

Because We Can Read Paul Differently

A medieval priest penned my favorite marriage sermon. Not many people know his name, although Dorothy L. Sayers stole my heart by quoting him in her classic murder mystery *The Nine Tailors* (another favorite of mine). His name was John Mirk, and he lived in West England during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. His sermon collection, *Festial*, became popular in England—so popular, in fact, that the first set of official Protestant homilies in 1547 was written, in part, to counter its influence. We have evidence that *Festial* sermons were printed until the eve of the Reformation and that, despite its Catholic doctrine, *Festial* continued to be preached throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

Listen to how this *Festial* sermon describes the marriage relationship between husband and wife: "Thus, by God's command, a man shall take on a wife of like age, like condition, and like birth." The text continues, "For this a man shall leave father and mother and draw to her as a part of himself, and

she shall love him and he her, truly together, and they shall be two in one flesh." Rather than hierarchy, the sermon stresses how the man and woman shall love "truly together" and become "one flesh." When the priest blesses the woman's ring, he declares that it "represents God who has neither a beginning nor ending, and puts it on her finger that has a vein running to her heart, showing that she shall love God over all things and then her husband." The ring proclaims that a wife's allegiance belongs first to God and second to her husband. Although the sermon is filled with Scripture, quoting liberally from Genesis 1–3 as well as from Matthew 22 and John 2, it does not quote Paul. It contains no reference to Ephesians, Colossians, Titus, or even 1 Peter—the New Testament books that famously contain the call for wives to submit to their husbands. These New Testament passages, known as the "household codes" (Ephesians 5:21–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1; 1 Peter 2:18–3:7; Titus 2:1–10), dominate modern discussions about gender roles and laid the foundation for the change in the 1998 amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message" that wives should "graciously submit" to the authority of their husbands. But Mirk's medieval sermon "places very little stress on female subjection as the basis for living well in marriage," historian Christine Peters observes. Mirk does not declare that the wife should obey her husband. In fact, his sermon emphasizes that what got Eve into trouble was loving her husband too much, and so the wedding ring isn't a symbol of the wife belonging to her husband—it is a reminder for wives to *put God first*.

In my research, I have found that sermons in late medieval England rarely preach the Pauline passages that my students react against. This is shockingly different from sermons in the modern evangelical world—and rather surprising, given that the medieval world was just as prone to patriarchy as was the ancient world and as is our modern world (more about this in the next chapter). It is also shockingly different from what we have been taught about Paul's writings about women—that they have been used throughout Christian history in a continuous, unbroken thread to uphold God's design for men to lead and women to follow.

This simply isn't true. Take, for example, Catholicism. Evangelicals seem to think that because the Catholic tradition does not ordain women, the Catholic tradition must also use Paul to support male headship in marriage. Not so, or at least not consistently so. Religion scholar Daniel Cere explains, "There has never been a tradition of formal doctrinal teaching endorsing [marital] subordination within the Catholic tradition." Medieval historian Alcuin Blamires describes "nagging paradoxes" (both practical and scriptural) that haunted medieval Catholic teachings about gender, authority, and the body of Christ. For example, because husbands sinned, they often proved poor leaders for their wives—blurring for medieval preachers the "bottom line" of male authority. As one early fifteenth-century text argued, a wife should not blindly follow her husband, because—just as Mirk's marriage sermon stated—she owed allegiance first to Jesus as her "principal husband." For medieval women, Jesus as head could trump husbandly authority; sometimes women could even take the lead. Peter Abelard, a famous twelfth-century scholastic, discusses the scriptural story of a woman anointing Jesus with oil (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:37–50). Abelard writes that when "woman and not man is linked with Christ's headship," she "indeed institutes him *as* 'Christ.'" By allowing a woman to anoint him with oil, Jesus overturns male headship—allowing a woman to do what only men had been able to do until that moment: anoint the king. Blamires describes Abelard's argument as "a stunning dislocation of the conventional gendering of body as feminine and head as masculine." The woman's anointing of Jesus is a "naming action" for Abelard, writes Blamires. "It is this woman who anoints the saint of saints to be Christ."

I could say a lot more, but this is the point: despite the evangelical obsession with male headship, Christians past and present have been less sure. Pope John Paul II's stance in his 1988 apostolic letter serves as a good case in point. He suggests that using Paul's writings in Ephesians 5 to justify male headship and female subordination in marriage would be the equivalent of using those passages to justify slavery.

Because Paul's Purpose Wasn't to Emphasize Wifely Submission

So let's talk about the submission of wives, an idea that evangelicals pull from the New Testament household codes. As we've seen, historical context suggests that wifely submission was *not the point* of Paul's writings, including in the household codes. Rather than including the household codes to dictate how Christians should follow the gender hierarchy of the Roman Empire, what if Paul was teaching Christians to live differently within their Roman context? Rather than New Testament "texts of terror" for women, what if the household codes can be read as resistance narratives to Roman patriarchy?

Taken at face value (a "plain and literal interpretation"), the household codes seem to sanctify the Roman patriarchal structure: the authority of the paterfamilias (husband/father) over women, children, and slaves. The text in Colossians 3 shows this well: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord" (vv. 18–22). In case you don't know much about Roman patriarchy, male guardianship was Roman law. Wives legally had to submit to the authority of their husbands; unmarried women had to submit to the authority of their fathers or nearest male relatives; women could not own property or run businesses in their own right; women could not conduct legal or financial transactions without a man acting on their behalf. From this historical perspective, it is not surprising to find discussions about wives in first-century Roman texts (the New Testament) reflecting the reality of life for wives in the first-century Roman world. Paul's inclusion of a statement for women to be subject to their husbands is exactly what the Roman world would have expected.

We just don't get this as modern evangelicals.

Paul wasn't telling the early Christians to look like everyone else; he was telling them that, as Christians, they had to be different. Rachel Held Evans explains the Christian household codes as a "Jesus remix" of Roman patriarchy. Scholarship suggests that the term *remix* provides a good description. New Testament scholars Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald, for example, argue that the ethical teachings embedded in the Ephesian household code are so "oppositional" to the Greco-Roman world that, rather than a sign of accommodation "the household code is presented as that which ultimately sets believers apart." When read rightly, the household codes not only set women free, as Shi-Min Lu writes, but they set all the members of the household free from the "oppressive elements" of the Roman world. Paul wasn't imposing Roman patriarchy on Christians; Paul was using a Jesus remix to tell Christians how the gospel set them free.

So let's look at the Jesus remix of two similar household-code passages in Paul.

Colossians 3:18–19: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly."

Ephesians 5:21–22, 25, 28, 33: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husband as you are to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. . . . Each of you . . . should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband."

As modern Christians, we immediately hear masculine authority. *Wives, be subject to your husband*. Yet as first-century Christians, Paul's original audience would have immediately heard the opposite. *Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*. The focus of the Christian household codes isn't the same today as it was in the Roman world.

Take the fourth-century philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle wrote in *Politics* what would become one of the most influential household code texts in Western culture. Listen to what he said:

> *Of household management we have seen that there are three parts—one is the rule of a master over slaves . . . , another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female. . . . The inequality [between male and female] is permanent. . . . The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. . . . All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women, "Silence is a woman's glory but this is not equally the glory of man."*

Do you hear the differences? Aristotle is writing specifically to men about how they should rule and why they have the right to rule. He does not include inferiors within the conversation. Household governance is the domain of the Roman man—as master, father, and husband. The conversation is directed to men alone.

By contrast, the Christian household codes address all the people in the house church—men, women, children, and slaves. Everyone is included in the conversation. Theologian Lucy Peppiatt writes that this is "key" to the Christian subversion of Roman patriarchy. Because the Christian household codes are directed to all members of the Roman household, instead of presuming the guardianship of the male head, they "contain within them the overturning of accepted positions accorded to men, women, slaves, and children, and the expectations placed upon them." Instead of endowing authority to a man who speaks and acts for those within his household, the Christian household codes offer each member of the shared community—knit together by their faith in Christ—the right to hear and act for themselves. This is radically different from the Roman patriarchal structure. The Christian structure of the house church *resists* the patriarchal world of the Roman Empire.

Because Paul's Purpose Wasn't to Emphasize Male Authority

How the Christian household codes frame masculine authority can also be read as a resistance narrative to Roman patriarchy. Aristotle wrote to justify masculine authority. He emphasized the permanent inequality between men and women: the nature of man is to command, while the nature of woman is to obey. The Christian household codes do something different. In Colossians 3, Paul opens his discussion of the household with a call to *wives first*—not to the man presumably in charge (as Aristotle does). Both Peppiatt and Scot McKnight highlight Paul's lack of emphasis on the power and authority of the husband. Instead, Paul emphasizes that wives should be subject *as fitting in the Lord* (not be-

cause they are inferior) and that husbands should love their wives and not treat them harshly. “Instead of grounding the instruction to the wife in her husband’s authority, power, leadership or status in a hierarchy,” McKnight writes, “the grounding is radically otherwise: it is grounded in the Lord’s way of life.” Jesus, not the Roman paterfamilias, is in charge of the Christian household.

Likewise, Ephesians 5 can be read as a resistance narrative to Roman patriarchy. Many scholars argue that Paul subordinates his entire discussion of the household codes under verse 21: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” When this verse is read at the beginning of the Ephesians household codes, it changes everything. Yes, wives are to submit, but so are husbands. Instead of underscoring the inferiority of women, Ephesians 5 underscores the equality of women—they are called to submit in verse 22, just like their husbands are called to submit in verse 21. Instead of making Christians just another part of the Roman crowd (emphasizing female submission), the mutual submission in verse 21 “is characteristic of a way of life that sets believers apart from the nonbelieving world.” Because of its radical implications, verse 21 must be distanced from verse 22 in Bible translations that wish to uphold complementarian views. The English Standard Version (ESV) includes verse 21 at the end of the section the translators have titled “Walk in Love.” This separates verse 21 from the beginning of the next section, titled “Wives and Husbands,” which then begins with verse 22: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” In this way, the ESV chooses to highlight female submission in verse 22, literally separating it from Paul’s subversion of Roman patriarchy in verse 21.

What the ESV translators have done in Ephesians 5 reminds me of a critique made by archaeologist Ian Morris about Athenian men in classical Greece. It is not accidental, writes Morris, that archaeologists find little material evidence for women in ancient Athens. “Women and slaves remain invisible,” but this isn’t because of “methodological problems” or misattribution of evidence by scholars. The “unusually pervasive male citizen culture” of the Greek city-state not only subjugated women but so well controlled the spaces in which women lived that little evidence of them is left. Women remain invisible because “Athenian male citizens wanted it that way.” The subjection of women is highlighted in the ESV translation of Ephesians 5, and the call for husbands to submit is minimized—not because Paul meant it that way but because the complementarian translators of the ESV wanted it that way.

Ephesians 5:21 isn’t the only radical subversion of Roman patriarchy in the chapter. Paul also demands that men love their wives as they love their own bodies. Did you know that in the Greco-Roman world, female bodies were considered imperfect and deformed men? In his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle writes that “the female is as it were a deformed male” and that “because females are weaker and colder in their nature . . . we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity.” Women were literally monstrous. Of course, Aristotle did admit that the female deformity was a “regular” and useful occurrence. Galen, in the second century BC, likewise proclaimed women imperfect men who lacked the heat to expel their sex organs. But, like Aristotle, he conceded it was a good thing that deformed men existed because otherwise procreation would be impossible.

By contrast, Paul reflects none of this disdain for the female body. He proclaims that male bodies are not any more valuable or worthy than female bodies. Women, like men, can be “holy and without blemish,” and men are to love the female body just as they love their own male body (Ephesians 5:27–29). I tell my students how easily a study of Paul overturns John Piper’s claim that Christianity has a “masculine feel.” We might think that Paul would glory in his masculine authority, but he doesn’t. Seven times throughout his letters, as Beverly Roberts Gaventa has found, Paul uses maternal imagery to describe his ongoing relationship with the church congregations he helped found. “Statistically that

means that Paul uses maternal imagery more often than he does paternal imagery, a feature that is impressive, especially when we consider its virtual absence from most discussions of the Pauline letters." Paul describes himself—a male apostle—as a pregnant mother, a mother giving birth, and even a nursing mother.

Not only does Paul consider the female body valuable, but he is willing to "hand over the authority of a patriarch in favor of a role that will bring him shame, the shame of a female-identified male." How beautiful, how radical is Paul's message! I can't even imagine how welcome his words would have been to women in first-century churches. What made female bodies weak in the Roman world made them strong in the writings of Paul. By taking on the literary guise of a woman, Paul embodied the radical claim of his own words in Galatians 3:28 that, in Christ, "there is no longer male and female."

Medieval Christians picked up on Paul's maternal imagery in a way that modern Christians do not. Gaventa notes how few modern scholars have paid attention to Paul's startling maternal imagery. In contrast, historian Caroline Walker Bynum was so struck by the frequency of maternal imagery used by male clergy in the twelfth century that she wrote the ground-breaking study *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. "The question I would like to ask," she writes, "is why the use of explicit and elaborate maternal imagery to describe God and Christ, who are usually described as male, is so popular with twelfth-century Cistercian monks." She identifies Anselm of Canterbury, a Benedictine monk who is rather patriarchal in his attitudes toward women, as one of the first medieval clergy to pick up on Paul's maternal imagery. Clearly echoing Paul's writings in 1 Thessalonians 2:7 and Galatians 4:19, Anselm writes, "You [Paul] are among Christians like a nurse who not only cares for her children but also gives birth to them a second time by the solicitude of her marvelous love." Just because modern evangelicals overlook Paul's radical use of maternal imagery doesn't mean it isn't there. It just means that, once again, we have gotten Paul wrong.

Because Paul's Purpose Wasn't the Roman Gender Hierarchy

One more piece of evidence that convinces me that the household codes should be read as resistance narratives to Roman patriarchy is how early Christians were perceived by the Roman world: as "gender deviants." Osiek and MacDonald remind us that Pliny the Younger, after discussing the torture of two Christian women whom he called deacons, described Christianity as a "depraved and excessive superstition." As they write, "In drawing attention to some kind of female leadership in the group—to the exclusion of references to male leaders—Pliny was implying that the ideals of masculinity were being compromised. Women were in control." And this, in Roman terms, was shameful. Not only did early Christians place women in leadership roles; they met together on equal footing—men, women, children, and slaves—in the privacy of the home, a traditionally female space. Christianity was deviant and immoral because it was perceived as undermining ideals of Roman masculinity. Christianity was repugnant to Pliny because it didn't follow the Roman household codes—not because it followed them.

To many modern Christians, the household codes are what make us different from the world. While feminism rages chaotically around us, as many believe, the evangelical church stands like a well-groomed tree planted by streams of water—firm and serene with a hierarchy of branches. Indeed, this is how John Piper and Wayne Grudem frame it in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. As they write in the introduction, "We want to help Christians recover a noble vision of manhood and womanhood as God created them to be. . . . We hope that this new vision—a vision of Biblical 'complementarity'—will both correct the previous mistakes and avoid the opposite mistakes that come from

the feminist blurring of God-given sexual distinctions." Except that viewing the Roman gender hierarchy as a "new vision" isn't how Paul's first-century world would have seen it. The Roman patriarchal structure echoed by Paul's household codes was *not* the "new vision." Recognizing the power of the paterfamilias was what the Roman world already did. Patriarchy wasn't something that made Christians different; it was something that made them the same.

The New Testament household codes tell a story of how the early church was trying to live within a non-Christian, and increasingly hostile, world. They needed to fit in, but they also needed to uphold the gospel of Christ. They had to uphold the frame of Roman patriarchy as much as they could, but they also had to uphold the worth and dignity of each human being made in the image of God. Paul gave them the blueprints to remix Roman patriarchy. Instead of being directed toward men as the primary authority, the Christian household codes include everyone in the conversation. Instead of justifying male authority on account of female inferiority, the Christian household codes affirm women as having equal worth to men. Instead of focusing on wifely submission (everyone was doing that), the Christian household codes demand that the husband do exactly the opposite of what Roman law allowed: sacrificing his life for his wife instead of exercising power over her life. This, writes Peppiatt, is the "Christian revolution." This is what makes Christians *different* from the world around us.

Could we have gotten Paul exactly backward? What if his focus was never male headship and female submission? What if his vision was bigger than we have imagined? What if instead of replicating an ancient gender hierarchy, Paul was showing us how the Christian gospel sets even the Roman household free?

Because Paul Didn't Tell Women to Be Silent

A few years ago, my husband was out of town on a retreat with many of our high school youth. The man who normally taught youth Sunday school, which included all the kids who didn't go on the retreat that weekend, called in sick. I was the only available option. This was fine with me. I love teaching, and at this point, I was at the height of my game. Every week I taught not only six undergraduate class sessions at Baylor but also the high school girls on Wednesday night, as well as the graduate students, undergraduate students, and youth I met with to mentor. Teaching, even on the fly, was second nature.

But the leaders at our church had made it clear that women could not teach men, period. And they defined manhood as beginning at age thirteen. So I had to call the pastor. I had to explain the situation and ask for a special dispensation to be able to stand in for a male teacher in a classroom filled with teenage boys and girls. After a long pause, I was told it would be okay as long as I simply went through the sermon questions from the week before and acted as a facilitator—not as a teacher. It took everything in me to simply say thanks and hang up.

I am sure part of it was my pride. Here I was, a professor with a PhD from a major research university (my secondary field is religious studies), being told I couldn't teach high school Sunday school. Yes, it hurt my pride. But that wasn't the only reason I was upset. It was also because I believed the pastor was wrong. I could not teach because of his belief that Paul told women to be silent and not to exercise authority over men. What if Paul never said this? Just like with the household codes, what if we have simply misunderstood Paul because we have forgotten his Roman context? What if we have confused Paul's refutations of the pagan world around him with Paul's own words?

Because I am a historian, I know there is more to Paul's letters than what his words reveal. Paul was writing to churches with which he had intimate knowledge. He knew them. "These issues do not arise of out of thin air," Gaventa reminds us about 1 Corinthians. Paul knew the struggles, the people, the troublemakers. We don't need a deep historical dive to understand the basics of Paul's message. We can tell that competition had emerged within the Corinthian congregation over the value of different spiritual gifts (as one example). We may not know firsthand details—like who had become prideful and who was championing prophecy over speaking in tongues—but we know how Paul rebuked them: their gifts all come from the same Spirit, their gifts all function within the same body, and none of their gifts work independently. We hear Paul's message clearly: in the body of Christ we are all equally important. The distance of more than two thousand years doesn't obscure his meaning.

And yet, when we ignore the historical context of Paul's letters, we can disrupt his meaning and turn his molehills into mountains. First Corinthians 14:33–36 provides an excellent example: "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?" Paul declares that women are to be silent, subordinate, and reliant upon the spiritual authority of their husbands. Right? This passage has become a major mountain for modern evangelicals, emphasized more than I think Paul ever intended it to be. It has become a foundational verse for complementarian teachings. Let's look at how a better understanding of Roman history can change how we interpret this passage.

In 215 BC, a defeated and cash-strapped Rome passed a new law. The context was their greatest military defeat ever. The year prior, on August 2, the Carthaginian general Hannibal had destroyed their army at Cannae during the Second Punic War. Sources tell us that between fifty thousand and seventy thousand Roman soldiers died that day. That is more than some of the bloodiest battles in World War II. As the first-century Roman historian Livy cried, "Certainly there is no other nation that would not have succumbed beneath such a weight of calamity." Except Rome wasn't like other nations (which was Livy's point). Rome did not succumb. They tightened their belt, raised a new army, and kept going. Rome epitomized grit.

My students know I don't like straight military history. So when I start telling a story like this, they know that women will soon enter the picture. And indeed they do. Rome's belt-tightening led to a crackdown on a growing group of independently wealthy women—the wives and daughters who profited from the sudden reduction in male guardians. Rome did this for probably two reasons (historians still argue about it). One reason was certainly the war effort. Rome needed money from everyone. So they passed the Oppian Law. Women could no longer dress in luxurious clothes, ride in carriages (in Rome) except on special occasions, or possess more than half an ounce of gold. Some even had to turn over their wartime inheritances to the state. These women were encouraged to spend more money for Rome and less on themselves.

The second reason Rome likely passed the Oppian Law was to limit women's public displays of wealth. Rome was in mourning after the Battle of Cannae. It wasn't a time to have parties and wear fancy clothes. It was a time to batten down the hatches and fight to the death (which is pretty much what they did). It was especially not a time for women to have more money than men did. Rome was a patriarchal society, as we have already seen, and Roman matrons—safely married women under the

guardianship of their husbands—symbolized the success of Roman society. Independently wealthy women free from male leadership did not.

Rome won, by the way.

But when the crisis was over, the law restricting women's wealth continued, while laws restricting men's wealth did not. By 195 BC, women in Rome had had enough. They protested, blockading the streets and even the pathways to the Forum, demanding that the law be repealed.

One consul, Cato the Elder, opposed repealing the law. Listen to what he said, and remember that Livy is probably recording his speech during the reign of Caesar Augustus (approximately 30 BC to AD 17):

> *At home our freedom is conquered by female fury, here in the Forum it is bruised and trampled upon, and because we have not contained the individuals, we fear the lot. . . . Indeed, I blushed when, a short while ago, I walked through the midst of a band of women. . . . I should have said, "What kind of behavior is this? Running around in public, blocking streets, and speaking to other women's husbands! Could you not have asked your own husbands the same thing at home? Are you more charming in public with others' husbands than at home with your own? And yet, it is not fitting even at home . . . for you to concern yourselves with what laws are passed or repealed here." Our ancestors did not want women to conduct any—not even private—business without a guardian; they wanted them to be under the authority of parents, brothers, or husbands; we (the gods help us!) even now let them snatch at the government and meddle in the Forum and our assemblies. What are they doing now on the streets and crossroads, if they are not persuading the tribunes to vote for repeal? . . . If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors.*

Livy recorded this speech by Cato in his *History of Rome*. Pliny the Younger, writing toward the end of the first century, depicts Livy as a celebrity. Livy was a popular writer, and his *History* would have been well known.

So, as a historian, it doesn't surprise me that echoes of Livy ended up in the New Testament. Listen again to 1 Corinthians 14:34–35: "Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." No, it isn't word for word. But it is close. A definite echo. In other words, Paul's words are drawing from his Roman context.

Cato's speech isn't the only Roman text to convey this sentiment about women. New Testament scholar Charles Talbert reminds us that Juvenal (early second century AD), in *Satires* 6, also condemns women who run around publicly intruding on male governance instead of staying at home. The Roman world viewed women as subordinate to men. The Roman world declared that men should convey information to their wives at home instead of women going about in public. The Roman world told women to be silent in public forums.

Paul was an educated Roman citizen. He would have been familiar with contemporary rhetorical practices that corrected faulty understanding by quoting the faulty understanding and then refuting it. Paul does this in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 with his quotations "all things are lawful for me," "food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and "it is well for a man not to touch a woman." In these instances, Paul is quoting the faulty views of the Gentile world, such as "all things are lawful for me."

Paul then “strongly modifies” them. Paul would have been familiar with the contemporary views about women, including Livy’s, that women should be silent in public and gain information from their husbands at home. Isn’t it possible, as Peppiatt has argued, that Paul is doing the same thing in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 that he does in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7? Refuting bad practices by quoting those bad practices and then correcting them? As Peppiatt writes, “The prohibitions placed on women in the letter to the Corinthians are examples of how the Corinthians were treating women, in line with their own cultural expectations and values, against Paul’s teachings.”

What if Paul was so concerned that Christians in Corinth were imposing their own cultural restrictions on women that he called them on it? He quoted the bad practice, which Corinthian men were trying to drag from the Roman world into their Christian world, and then he countered it. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) lends support to the idea that this is what Paul was doing. Paul first lays out the cultural restrictions: “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:33–35). And then Paul intervenes: “What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order” (vv. 36–40).

I often do this as a classroom exercise. I have a student read from their own translation, usually the ESV or NIV. Then I will read from the RSV, inflecting the words appropriately. When I proclaim, “What! Did the word of God originate with you?” I can usually hear their gasp, their collective intake of breath. Once a student exclaimed out loud, “Dr. Barr! That changes it completely!” Yes, I told her, it does.

When 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 is read as a quotation representing a Corinthian practice (which D. W. Odell-Scott argued for in 1983, Charles Talbert argued for in 1987, and Peppiatt has argued for again more recently), Paul’s purpose seems clear: to distinguish what the Corinthians were doing (“women be silent”) and to clarify that Christians should not be following the Corinthian practice (“What!”). While I cannot guarantee this is what Paul was doing, it makes a lot of (historical) sense. First Corinthians includes several non-Pauline quotations already, and the wording of verses 34–35 is remarkably close to Roman sources. As Marg Mowczko observes, “The view that 14:34–35 is a non-Pauline quotation is one of the few that offers a plausible explanation for the jarring change of tone which verses 34–35 bring into the text, as well as the subsequent abrupt change of topic, tone, and gender in verse 36.” If Paul is indeed quoting the Roman worldview to counter it with the Christian worldview, then his meaning is the exact opposite of what evangelical women have been taught.

Could it be that, instead of telling women to be silent like the Roman world did, Paul was actually telling men that, in the world of Jesus, women were allowed to speak? Could we have missed Paul’s point (again)? Instead of heeding his rebuke and freeing women to speak, are we continuing the very patriarchal practices that Paul was condemning?

As a historian, I find it hard to ignore how similar Paul’s words are to the Greco-Roman world in which he lives. Yet, even if I am wrong and Paul is only drawing on Roman sources instead of intentionally quoting them for the purpose of refutation, I would still argue that the directives Paul gave to Corinthian women are limited to their historical context. Why? Because consistency is an interpretative virtue. Paul is not making a blanket decree for women to be silent; he allows women to speak through-

out his letters (1 Corinthians 11:1–6 is a case in point). Paul is not limiting women's leadership; he tells us with his own hand that women lead in the early church and that he supports their ministries (I will discuss Romans 16 in the next section). Maintaining a rigid gender hierarchy just isn't Paul's point. As Beverly Roberts Gaventa reminds us from earlier in 1 Corinthians (12:1–7), Paul's "calling to service is not restricted along gender lines so that arguments about complementarity find no grounding here." By insisting that Paul told women to be silent, evangelicals have capitulated to patriarchal culture once again. Instead of ditching Aristotle (as Rachel Held Evans once encouraged us to do), we have ditched the freedom in Christ that Paul was trying so hard to give us.

Because Paul's Biblical Women Don't Follow Biblical Womanhood

It was Paul's women in Romans 16 who finally changed my mind.

I still remember the Sunday it clicked. I was upset after the sermon. So upset that I was doing the dishes. The running water soothed my mind as I scrubbed lunch plates. My husband knew something was wrong (the dishes were a dead giveaway). He walked into the kitchen. He didn't say anything. Finally, I spoke. "I don't believe in male headship." He leaned against the counter. I couldn't look at him. More time passed, and then he asked, "You don't believe that men are called to be the spiritual leaders of the home?" I shook my head. "No." He stood there for another minute, and then he just said "okay" and walked away. I knew he didn't agree with me then—he had been raised in a complementarian church and attended a complementarian seminary. Yet he was willing to listen and consider a different theological perspective. I am forever grateful for the trust he showed me that day.

It wasn't actually the sermon that pushed me over the edge, although I do remember it had been about male leadership. What pushed me over the edge was a recent lecture I had given in my women's history class. We were talking about women in the early church, as we moved chronologically from the ancient world to the medieval world. On a whim, I asked one of the students to open their Bible and read Romans 16 out loud (at a Christian university I can always count on at least one student to have a Bible in hand). I asked the class to listen and to write down every female name they heard.

It was a powerful teaching moment—for the students and for me. I knew women filled those verses, but I had never listened to their names being read aloud, one after the other.

Phoebe, the deacon who carried the letter from Paul and read it aloud to her house church.

Prisca (Priscilla), whose name is mentioned before her husband's name (something rather notable in the Roman world) as a coworker with Paul.

Mary, a hard worker for the gospel in Asia.

Junia, prominent among the apostles.

Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Paul's fellow workers in the Lord.

The beloved Persis, who also worked hard for the Lord.

Rufus's mother, Julia, and Nereus's sister.

Ten women recognized by Paul.

Seven women are recognized by their ministry: Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis. One woman, Phoebe, is identified as a deacon. Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek write that

Phoebe “is the only deacon of a first-century church whose name we know.” Another woman, Junia, is identified not simply as an apostle but as one who was prominent among the apostles.

Did you know, I asked my students, that more women than men are identified by their ministry in Romans 16? We sat there, looking at the names of those women. “Why?” a student suddenly interjected, so involved in the lecture she didn’t even raise her hand. “Why have I not noticed this before?” Probably because the English Bible translation you use obscures women’s activity, I told her, launching into another explanation.

I listened to myself lecturing that day. I listened to myself laying out evidence for how English Bible translations obscure women’s leadership in the early church. I listened to myself as I talked the class through different translations of Romans 16.

Take, for example, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, published by Moody Press in 1986. My grandfather owned this Bible, and I have his copy on my shelf. Instead of recognizing Phoebe as a deacon, it translates her role as “servant.” Listen to the study note: “The word here translated ‘servant’ is often translated ‘deacon,’ which leads some to believe that Phoebe was a deaconess. However, the word is more likely used here in an unofficial sense of helper.” Did you catch that? I asked my students. No evidence is given for why Phoebe’s role should be translated as “servant” rather than as “deacon.” No evidence is given to explain why the word is more likely used in “an unofficial sense of helper.” We can guess the reason for the translation choice: it is because Phoebe was a woman, and so it is assumed that she could not have been a deacon. If the phrase “a deacon of the church in Cenchreae” had followed a masculine name, I seriously doubt that the meaning of “deacon” would ever have been questioned.

As I taught, I thought about my own church. About how women rarely appeared on stage other than to sing or play an instrument. I thought about how women ran our children’s ministry and men ran our adult ministry. I thought about the time I had been asked to teach an adult Sunday school class, and the pastor had come to look through my material. Since I was just teaching on church history, he let me do it. If I had been discussing the biblical text, though, it would have been a different story.

I remember feeling like such a hypocrite, standing before my college classroom.

Here I was, walking my students through compelling historical evidence that the problem with women in leadership wasn’t Paul; the problem was with how we misunderstood and obscured Paul. Here I was, showing my students how women really did lead and teach in the early church, even as deacons and apostles. Junia, I showed them, was accepted as an apostle until nearly modern times, when her name began to be translated as a man’s name: Junias. New Testament scholar Eldon Jay Epp compiled two tables surveying Greek New Testaments from Erasmus through the twentieth century. Together, the charts show that the Greek name *Junia* was almost universally translated in its female form until the twentieth century, when the name suddenly began to be translated as the masculine *Junias*. Why? Gaventa explains: “Epp makes it painfully, maddeningly clear that a major factor in twentieth-century treatments of Romans 16:7 was the assumption that a woman could not have been an apostle.” *Junia* became *Junias* because modern Christians assumed that only a man could be an apostle. As a historian, I knew why the women in Paul’s letters did not match the so-called limitations that contemporary church leaders place on women. I knew it was because we have read Paul wrong. Paul isn’t inconsistent in his approach to women; we have made him inconsistent through how we have interpreted him. As Romans 16 makes clear, the reality is that biblical women contradict modern ideas of biblical womanhood.

I knew all this. Yet I still allowed the leaders of my church to go uncontested in their claim that women could not teach boys older than thirteen at our church. I still remained silent.

I continued my lecture. The historical reality is the same for Phoebe, I told my students. Paul calls her a deacon. No one disputes the text—they can only dispute the meaning of the text. Phoebe was recognized as both a woman and a deacon by early church fathers. Origen, for example, wrote in the early third century that Phoebe's title demonstrates "by apostolic authority that women are also appointed in the ministry of the church, in which office Phoebe was placed at the church that is in Cenchreae. Paul with great praise and commendation even enumerates her splendid deeds." While we can certainly question what Origen meant by the "ministry of the church," it is clear that Origen accepted Phoebe's appointed role. A century later, John Chrysostom, the "golden-tongued" preacher, wrote of how great an honor it was for Phoebe to be mentioned "before all the others," called "sister," and distinguished as a "deacon." "Both men and women," concludes Chrysostom, should "imitate" Phoebe as a "holy one." In his homily on 1 Timothy 3:11, Chrysostom makes it clear that he understands women to serve as deacons just as men do. As he writes, "Likewise women must be modest, not slanderers, sober, faithful in everything. Some say that [Paul] is talking about women in general. But that cannot be. Why would he want to insert in the middle of what he is saying something about women? But rather he is speaking of those women who hold the rank of deacon. 'Deacons should be husbands of one wife.' This is also appropriate for women deacons, for it is necessary, good, and right, most especially in the church."

If this frank understanding of female leadership by a fourth-century presbyter and deacon surprises you, church historians Madigan and Osiek remind us that it shouldn't: "In John's churches in Antioch and Constantinople," they write, "female deacons or deaconesses were well known." Describing Phoebe as a deacon wasn't surprising to Chrysostom because some of his good fourth-century friends were female deacons. Indeed, Madigan and Osiek have uncovered 107 references (inscriptions and literary) to women deacons in the early church.

Of course, I told my students, not everyone in the early church supported women in leadership. The office of presbyter testifies loudly to how patriarchal prejudices of the ancient world had already crept into Christianity. Remember how Aristotle considered the female body to be monstrous and deformed? Ecclesiastical leaders imported these ideas into their council decisions, declaring as early as the fifth century that female bodies were unfit for leadership. As Madigan and Osiek write, "Cultic purity becomes associated with males, impurity with females. This was the biggest argument against women presbyters." By the sixth century, while the church was moving across the European landscape and replacing the old secular seats of Roman power with the sacred offices of bishop and priest, women were also on the move, back into their prior place under the authority of men.

"Dr. Barr, why don't they teach us this in church?"

I looked at the student, my heart twisting. Most people simply don't know, I said. Seminary textbooks are often written by pastors—not by historians (and especially not by women historians). Most people who attend complementarian churches don't realize that the ESV translation of Junia as "well known to the apostles" instead of "prominent among the apostles" was a deliberate move to keep women out of leadership (Romans 16:7). People believe that women were banned from leadership in the early church just as they are banned from leadership in the modern church. The church teaches what it believes to be true.

These were the things I said out loud.

What I didn't say—and what made the tears roll down my cheeks as I stood in front of my sink that day—was that I knew the truth. I knew the truth, and still I stayed silent at my church.

I stayed silent because I was afraid of my husband losing his job. I was afraid of losing our friends. I was afraid of losing our ministry.

Complementarianism rewards women who play by the rules. By staying silent, I helped ensure that my husband could remain a leader. By staying silent, I could exercise some influence. By staying silent, I kept the friendship and trust of the women around me. By staying silent, I maintained a comfortable life.

Except I knew the truth about Paul's women. I knew the reality that women who are praised in the Bible—like Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia—challenge the confines of modern biblical womanhood. As a historian, I knew that women were kept out of leadership roles in my own congregation because Roman patriarchy had seeped back into the early church. Instead of ditching pagan Rome and embracing Jesus, we had done the opposite—ditching the freedom of Christ and embracing the oppression of the ancient world.

I turned the water off in the sink and stacked the dishes.

It was time for me to stop being silent.