



(Book cover: “Frauen vergibt uns” [“Women, Forgive Us!”], 3rd edition, revised and expanded – What we men must make right. On the role of woman and man – Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf)

WOMEN, FORGIVE US! (FRAUEN, VERGEBT UNS!)

What We Men Must Make Right

On the Role of Woman and Man

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

Paperback available to order at www.frauen-vergebt-uns.de

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3rd expanded edition, November 2021

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For my beloved wife,

for my wonderful daughters,

for my esteemed mother,

for my grandmothers,

for my sister,

for my sisters

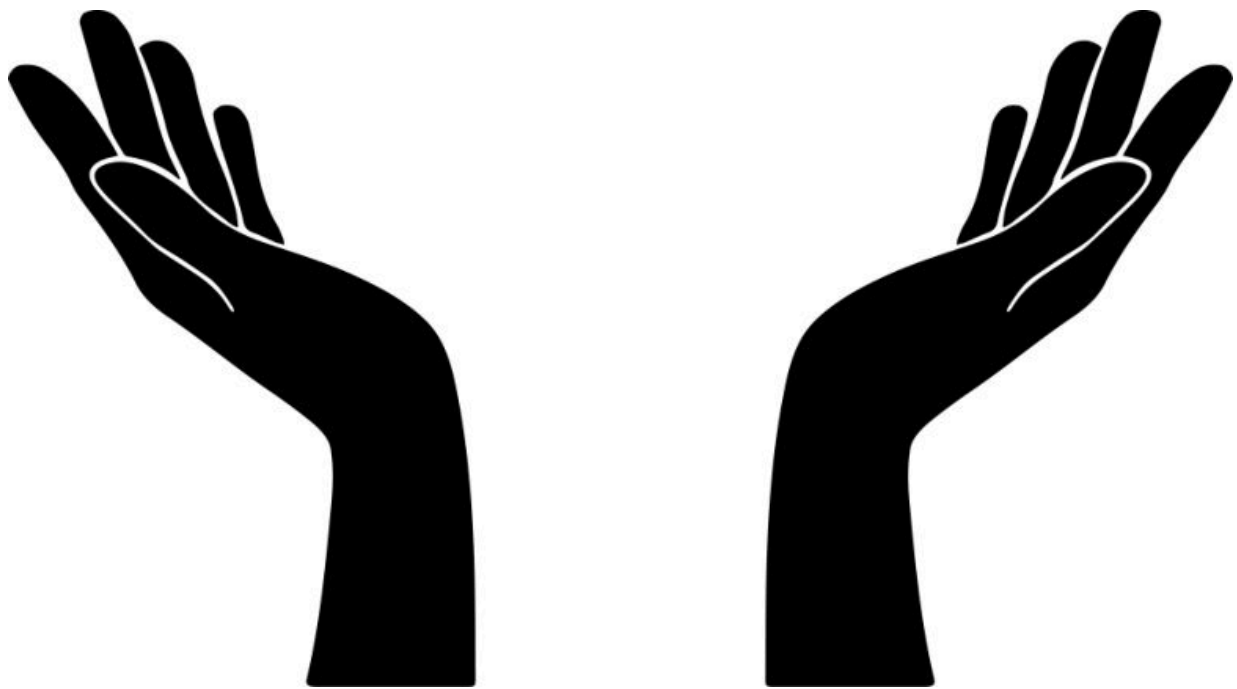
and friends in Christ,

all daughters of Eve,

with whom I have worked

together for God's kingdom

and will yet serve.



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1 PREFACE

Another book on this perennial issue? Hasn't everything already been said and written about it? Arguing again, or arguing on? Wouldn't an apologetic subject be more important, to defend the faith? It became clear to me that this subject, too, belongs to apologetics. It is the defense of universal ethical norms in a postmodern secular society, but also within a conservative and biblicist Christianity. I will make clear why the latter is the case as well.

The petty war, the struggle, and the strain over these questions go on even without this book. They still split churches. Some already over the question of whether women's voices may be heard in the worship service at all. Others over the question of whether they may have women deacons or women elders¹. Or whether women may hold leadership functions and preach.

There are positions that sit in our heads like impregnable fortresses: that the word of God must be taken literally, against every spirit of the age. And there are those who have questions and doubts about whether it is to be followed literally like this by us today.

In this book I summarize my study of the subject. Whoever knows the literature on this subject can hardly expect new insights. Nor a review of all the positions that exist, from the most conservative to the most progressive. This book is *not* an open-ended study—it is a clear position, one that took me decades to find and to substantiate. It differs from what I learned and held earlier.

Does it take a whole book to explain this? Is it that complicated? Yes and no. If you follow the history of miscarriages of justice, as can be observed with death-row inmates in the USA, an immense effort of argument and gathering of evidence is often required to prove innocence. Sometimes, though, a DNA test is enough. However much effort it may take, look into the faces of such death-row inmates who are released after 30, 40, or 50 years! In the same way you will find simple thoughts in this book, and sometimes somewhat more complex ones. The Bible is not always easy to understand. To think so would be a fallacy. Even the fisherman and apostle Peter notes this when he speaks of letters of Paul (2 Peter 3:15) that are not easy to understand.

If this book is read, rebuttals, refutations, and outrage will not be long in coming. I know these mechanisms and was once part of them myself. Even if there is no change of mind, at least the subject will be brought up.

Right now, as I write these lines, it is once again being hotly debated in the evangelical world of the USA. I cannot claim to have written this book without emotion. Nevertheless, I have tried to remain objective. May the reader be the judge of that.

And: There are, of course, points on which one can quite legitimately hold a different opinion. There I make my decisions in such a way that, as I understand it, they fit into the big biblical picture.

My heart goes out to the many women and the men affected who follow Jesus and find this subject of gender roles, and the prohibitions on speaking, teaching, and leading, questionable and a burden. Because on the one hand they want to take the Bible seriously, but on the other hand they cannot put this into practice. In addition—and this is not insignificant—there is the question of how we are perceived by the world in this matter. The world to which we bring the gospel.

Has God made it so hard for us? Is it his intention that millions of hours of study, prayer, and discussion be invested in these questions? That divisions be accepted and unity sacrificed?

I am convinced—and this book is my plea for it—that these questions are highly relevant. For if women stand hierarchically beneath men, and their ministry in church and congregation is therefore restricted (despite every assurance that there are countless other, non-public ministries), then God have mercy on us if we are wrong.

It is a question of obedience. For both sexes. Not of a legalistic, slavish, and fearful obedience.

This book is a summary of my studies and of countless conversations and discussions in internet forums over the last 40 years or so. I have been able to learn a great deal from others.

I try to show a biblical way. I explain it as simply as possible. At times it may become too complex for one reader or another. In that case I recommend setting it aside and reading the next chapter. I do not write as a theologian, nor for theologians or those who think they are. I have in mind those with whom I traveled together for a long time, and those who are new to the faith, whom I am to serve in teaching. I hope and pray that this book will be a help for men and women alike.

Some words of the Bible need to be thought through afresh. It is not the first time this has happened. For some, a new interpretation of biblical texts is presumptuous and suspect. Boundaries would be shifted, they say. But ***“for a theology that sees itself in the tradition of the Reformation, it is part of its very nature that habits are questioned and biblical texts are read anew.”***²

You will find many quotations in this book. I often found these valuable thoughts in the English-speaking world and would like to make them accessible to German-speaking readers.

Finally: ***Our theology is not inerrant. Never.*** However much we may wish it were. Like all books, this book has its mistakes, weaknesses, and strengths. This book, too, is one that others could have written better. I thank all the sisters and brothers involved for their thoughts, corrections, suggestions, and afterwords. I especially thank Conny Endrös (Lauben near Kempten in the Allgäu) and Bernd Hüskens (Schwelm) for editing the manuscript. It delights me and reminds me of my youth in Schwelm, where I grew up and received a good spiritual formation.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

Sulzberg in the Allgäu, November 2020

I delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

Your precepts are my delight, they are my counselors.

I run in the path of your commands, for you enlarge my heart.

Psalm 119:16, 24, 32 (Zürcher Bibel, a German Bible translation)

1.1 PREFACE TO THE SECOND, EXPANDED EDITION

For the second edition I decided on a light revision and some additions. I had felt that a few corrections were necessary, but even more so additions and stylistic improvements.

Essentially, I reworked the chapters on the three core texts on this subject, expanding them but also shortening them where possible. This applies especially to the chapter on head, hair, and veil.

After the first edition was published, I looked through even more material and also produced some of my own. It can be downloaded free of charge from my homepage www.frauen-vergebt-uns.de.

In the USA a new book on this subject appears almost every month. Most of them are of high theological quality and work closely with the texts of the New Testament. They shed light on the subject in a way that confirms what I want to say in this book. More than ever I am certain that the full equality in rank of men and women in every area of life is willed by God.

I hope and pray that this biblical truth will bring healing to marriages, families, and churches. Perhaps only now is the book the way it should be. But it is still fallible—not the truth, but my interpretation.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Sulzberg, July 2021

The third edition became necessary because of increased demand. At the same time I used the opportunity to make further minor corrections and additions. This does not change the message of this book. I am glad that this subject is being discussed more and more and that sisters in the Lord are increasingly grasping what their calling is.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Augsburg, November 2021

1.2 WHO IS WRITING THIS BOOK

Usually the content of a book is more important than its author. In this case, with a subject so sensitive among conservative Christians, I would like to inform the reader about who is writing this book—and how he came to the positions described here.

Until I was thirty-six, my wife, our five children, and I were part of a (closed, exclusive) Brethren assembly, also known as the “Old Assembly” (*Alte Versammlung*). They do not call themselves that, since they reject any “denominational name.” In these assemblies or worship services the women are silent. They do not take part. Almost always men and women sit separately. Women do not wear trousers in the worship service. Women cover their heads.

Then we became part of a church (movement) in the Allgäu that traced its origins to a work of God in the 1980s. There, in some of the churches, women were allowed to pray aloud, to give a testimony, or to suggest a song. Because of my background I struggled with this, since 1 Corinthians 14 commands women to be silent.

After a few years I faced this question again and examined Scripture intensively. It actually became clear to me that this practice—women praying aloud, giving testimony, and suggesting songs—is thoroughly biblical. My reasons can be found in the following chapters.

I came to see their participation more and more positively. One could object right away that my study of Scripture was therefore already influenced in this direction by this positive attitude. Unconsciously that may have been the case. Consciously it was not. I will show exactly why my conviction changed.

Now in this church women did not preach, and they were not allowed to be deacons or elders. That was, and still is, the case in befriended churches as well. In some of them the sisters are even silent, which can be explained by the influence of, or closeness to, the open Brethren assemblies in Germany and a church movement in the Salzburg region.

A few years ago I left this church, for reasons that contribute nothing to the subject here. This led to an experience that others have had too. Distance in space and time opens up for me a new, analytical view of what one belonged to for many years. I was an elder there for seven years, and I myself held, defended, and applied this view of the role of women. But the distance made it possible to think about this question anew. Without the outward pressure of a community, I came over time to different insights. Probably that would not have been possible without the distance.

This process of changing my mind, which I do not hide from the reader, can be deliberately interpreted in a negative way—as decline, apostasy, worldliness. I have known these patterns of thought and judgments of motive, in almost “prophetic” proportions, since my youth. They are strong and run deep. It is hard to break free of them. I myself was an active part of it.

That is my church or ecclesiastical situation and background. The Bible grants great freedom in church life. How we arrange our gatherings is not prescribed. There is no single right way. Even if there are Christians who believe there is. The form of the worship service—and there are many—is free! The role of women in it is the subject of this book.

The most important thing about me is still missing. Or better, the most important person in my life: my wife, Christine. For her I left father and mother, to share my life with her. We have five grown children. My wife is a strong personality. A lioness of a mother who can fight. A wise woman. For whom I am thankful above all else, just as many of my brothers in the Lord are thankful for their wives. She is part of my personal journey of discovery in matters of gender. Without her I would not be where I stand today. I am and remain a learner—and also someone who errs.

We both grew up in a free and democratic country, with the law of equal rights for men and women, even though women are still disadvantaged today. I am speaking of Germany and the Western cultural sphere. We have never yet experienced war. Never yet a famine. This year we are experiencing the first pandemic of our generation. For the first time, the feeling of eternal and untouchable security and growth is being shaken.

These life experiences, which so far have been overwhelmingly positive, shape our thinking and our view of other cultures. I consider equal rights to be a beneficial achievement of modern democracy—comparable to the abolition of slavery, which never corresponds to God’s will.

I mention this because our upbringing was shaped by the thinking of the (exclusive) Brethren movement. There men and women were and are regarded as being of equal worth, but the woman is excluded from participation in the church’s worship service. The woman is subordinate. She is the man’s helper (*Gehilfin*). The man is the head and has the leadership in marriage. In this way people believe they are being obedient to God’s Word. Faithful to the Bible.

One can hold this conviction. But it is fair to ask to what extent this corresponds—or can correspond at all—to the reality of life today. What did my marriage look like, and how have I experienced the marriages of parents, grandparents, and today of friends and acquaintances who, out of conviction, try to live out a difference in rank or authority between the sexes?

Although in the early years of our marriage I decided many things myself and without consulting my wife, today I hardly ever do that anymore. We have always functioned best when we decided and acted as a team. Respect and love are not a one-way street. Sharing with one another and living together, speaking and listening as equals—that is the ideal situation. Everyone has strong and weak phases. Complementing each other whenever it is necessary—and it is normal anyway. It is not always the man who goes first. It can also be the woman. Taking turns. Complementing. Coordinated. Open. Willing to be corrected. Listening. Praying together. That is what I experience as the reality of life. Anything else would be a step backward. I do not want to, and will not, conduct a marriage as in the ancient Near East, in the time of Abraham or David. Nor as in the time of Jesus, and just as little as in the time of the Reformation. Nor as my grandparents did. As far as that is concerned, I am thankful to live in the twenty-first century.

Now I notice that those who believe they live faithfully to the Bible in the question of men and women hardly live any differently in practice than we do. Their marriages, too, are marked by equal rights—not by one-sidedness, but by two-ness in unity. By this I mean that, apart from exceptions, I see nowhere Christian marriages as Paul and Peter describe them (these texts will be discussed in detail). On the contrary, these wives walk alongside their husbands as equals. Most of the time they are a team. The sweeping insinuation that women want to manipulate or control their husbands is unfair. Even if that does happen. Sin remains a small or large source of fire in every marriage. But where there is good partnership, it is usually put out.

When in this book I advocate and give reasons for the view of marriage just described and a different role of women in the church, this will provoke incomprehension, rejection, alarm, and dismay in some. It always costs something to stand up for one's convictions—especially when one argues against the position of one's own church or friends. I do so with respect for the old, conservative positions, even though I consider them wrong. They dampen the Spirit of God and resist him. I wish every reader the perseverance to read through to the end of the book. I will gladly have a conversation about the content of my book once it has been read in full.

You are welcome to write to me, as long as the arguments are objective and free of insinuations. I know this business, in which things often get heated and unobjective—and sometimes personal and hurtful—precisely on these questions.

Let each person examine himself before God and recognize that our knowledge comes piece by piece and step by step, and is strongly shaped by our surroundings and their time.

From my youth on I was encouraged to read Scripture. Daily. And to study it. I did that. I am thankful for the good biblical foundation that was passed on to me in the "Assembly." This book is not an accusation or a reckoning with my past, in case anyone wants to read it that way. In any case, studying the Bible became my hobby from my early youth, and more than that. And it has remained so to this day. Back then I wanted to become a respected teacher of Scripture too, like my role models, some of whom are still living today. That motive disappeared long ago. Now if someone studies Scripture so much and so intensively, what do we think—what insights will come out of it? The same thing over and over again?

Sometimes studying Scripture is like Israel, which has a veil over its eyes (2 Corinthians 3:15). Often, despite the presence of the Holy Spirit, we see the same thing over and over. But whoever studies Scripture again and again should not be surprised if this Spirit suddenly shows something new

(Matthew 13:52), even after almost 2,000 years. Is God's Word not inexhaustible? Also with the help of theologians and biblical scholarship. With the help of Bible schools and seminaries that also study Scripture. When, in this complex of questions about men and women in the church, in marriage, and in the kingdom of God, new or different insights emerge than those believed for centuries to be the only correct ones, they should not be rejected for that reason alone. This subject is not decisive for salvation, and we should not act as if it were! It is simply not a touchstone of faithfulness to the Bible.

I know from experience what it means to have to question truths one has cherished for several decades, because the evidence of Scripture is not as unambiguous and clear after all as one always thought or was taught. Processes of rethinking are painful; they do something to us. They show how fallible we are, helpless and simply dependent on God. We can bring our complaint to him, bring him our ignorance and questions and also our doubts. And our "blind spots," which crept in unnoticed where one is at home only in one's own church milieu and perceives one's own world as the only legitimate or Bible-faithful one.

For a few years I took part in a Biblical Greek forum. Many things were discussed, and discussed constructively. The subject of this book was also discussed. I collected a great deal back then and have now reread it. From a distance of several years it strikes me that the lines of argument were rarely if ever open-ended. No matter how high the linguistic competence, the prior decision and conditioning in favor of one position was decisive for the arguments pro or contra. In this case: whether women may say anything at all in the worship service, whether they should cover their heads today—quite apart from teaching or leading. Can one really prove or disprove anything with the Bible?

I never intended to write about this subject. It is controversial and fiercely contested. A minefield. There are no laurels to be won here. I could easily have used my time for other things in the kingdom of God. But I knew I was personally called to do it. People will accuse me of adapting to the spirit of the age. There is nothing I can do about that. I am not defending an emancipatory standpoint that the world is fighting for; my path is meant to be what the Bible teaches me.

Your word shines for me where I walk; it is a light on my path.

Full of wonders is what you testify in your word; therefore I hold to it with all my heart.

Psalm 119:105, 129 (Neue Genfer Übersetzung NGÜ, German Bible translation)

End of the Excerpt

The complete book—about 300 pages—is available as a paperback directly from the author and as a Kindle eBook on Amazon.

www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de

Notes

1. In most places I use this feminine form of the term for clarity (German *Ältestinnen*, "women elders"). In common use today, and also in the original biblical languages, is the generic masculine, which includes the feminine form (see 6.4.1).
2. Wunderli, 53, "Ihm gegenüber": Geschlechter-Gleichberechtigung in der Kirche und was die Bibel dazu (nicht) sagt, 2020