

Female Pastors – When Context Becomes Pretext: A Review of The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood (Part 3)

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Philip Payne's exegetical defense of egalitarianism, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God's Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality*, reveals the instability of man-made doctrine. [In the first part of this review](#), we examined his Nietzschean definition of "equality," that value comes from access to power. [In the second part of this review](#), we saw how Payne appealed to his own, novel translations of biblical texts to justify his egalitarian interpretations, rather than letting God's Word correct his biases.

In this post, we will see how Payne attempts to argue for female pastors by using the ancient world around Scripture rather than Scripture plainly read and interpreted. Payne tells the story of his own transformation from complementarian to egalitarian, citing a Cambridge professor's lecture and his father's deadly hiking accident (p. 121-23). His experiences and encounters with new ideas led him away from submission to Scripture

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towards an ideological treatment of God's inspired text, forcing the text to bow to revisions of the historical context.

As countless churches have already discovered, substituting the wind and waves of cultural ideas for the solid rock of God's unchanging Word is an odyssey (Payne's word, p. xi) without end. Following a cultural compass, [female pastors have given way to lesbian pastors](#) which [have given way to drag queen preachers](#). Subtle twists of the text of Scripture eventually become an outright rejection of Scripture in Jesus' name.

How does the egalitarian odyssey toward cultural acceptance begin? In part, by asserting that the cultures of the biblical authors overrule the biblical text in interpretation.

Cultural Impositions

Payne argues against the plain sense of the text of Scripture by introducing spurious extrabiblical conjecture to buttress his egalitarian views. That is, one of Payne's frequent moves in defense of female pastors is to cite some fact (real or assumed) from the ancient world and then use that historical footnote to undo the force of a biblical passage.

Culture and Rabbis

For example, Payne writes, "It is generally agreed that disciples in Jesus's day were trained to carry on a rabbi's teachings, typically becoming teachers themselves. Other rabbis taught only male disciples, but Jesus teaches both men and women disciples. This implies that Jesus wants women as well as men to teach his message" (p. 29). To be clear, "teach his message" in this passage means "teach authoritatively to men and women as a pastor or elder." And what is Payne's basis for this assertion? That disciples in the ancient world were often expected to become teachers.

There are two problems with reasoning from the ancient disciple to rabbi pipeline to female pastors. First, it assumes that Jesus' ministry towards men and women necessarily followed the customs of the day (at least in part). While it certainly is the case that Jesus ministered as a Jewish rabbi in a first-century Jewish context, he regularly overturned the traditions of his contemporaries with his kingdom ethic (as Payne notes, in part). But if Jesus was beholden to the cultural customs of his day regarding disciples and rabbis, then the women that followed him would decidedly *not* become teachers or rabbis.

Female rabbis were universally unheard of in Jesus' day. The first female rabbi [is thought to have taught in the 17th century](#), not the first. And Jewish attitudes toward women in the time of Christ – and the centuries that followed – went in exactly the opposite direction. [Ancient rabbinic documents describe women](#) as brainless, equal to animals,

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and even like leeches. [While not all ancient rabbis were identical](#), the prevailing cultural norm certainly did not include women teachers. If Jesus was operating according to the social norms of his day with respect to his disciples, as Payne argues, absolutely none of the women would have become teachers.

Second, if it were the case that Jesus expected both his male and female disciples to become authoritative teachers in his church, then one would expect to see evidence of Jesus' commissioning a woman to such a task. Payne reflects on this conundrum, asking "Why does Jesus choose all men and no women for the original twelve apostles?" (p. 30). Payne's answer: "Jesus probably chooses men for two reasons: to avoid scandal and to symbolize the 'new Israel.'" Here, Payne seems to reverse course and argue that the cultural customs of the day *restricted* Jesus from choosing women to be a part of the Twelve, whereas before the culture *demand*ed that Jesus ordain women as authoritative teachers. In either case, Payne paints Jesus as a victim of the culture, bound in traditions and expectations to order his ministry by societal standards and for popular acceptance. While Payne himself may be captive to the culture, Jesus transcends every culture and orders his church to do the same.

Culture and Head Coverings

This same confusion ensues in Payne's dealing with the Pauline epistles. Turning to the issue of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11, Payne writes, "Could Paul be enforcing a social norm of the time?... Perhaps women in Corinth were just expected to wear head coverings? But Corinth was a big city with a very diverse population – there would not have been a single social norm" (p. 48). In summary, the historical data is *unclear* about the cultural expectations of head coverings in Paul's day. Then two pages later, Payne writes, "Furthermore, surviving documentation does not support that Hellenistic culture forbade men from covering their heads or required women to cover their heads" (p. 50). In summary, the historical data is *clear* about the cultural expectations of head coverings in Paul's day.

Do you see the problem? Payne tries to eat his cake and have it, too, in order to forward an interpretation that removes gender roles from the text. When it hurts his argument, he will dismiss the relevance of cultural data (again on p. 49). When it benefits his argument, he will lean on cultural data (again on p. 60, 61, 63, 72, 73, and so on). His conclusion about "head coverings" is that "The reason Paul prohibits praying or prophesying with these Dionysiac-inspired hairstyles is probably because of their cultural association with attracting illicit sexual liaisons" (p. 64). Payne appeals to extrabiblical historical evidence to suit his purposes with a text.

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At the end of his section on head coverings – or long effeminate hairdos – Payne actually does arrive at a sound conclusion about [1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#)^L, but he does it without the text. He writes, “Today, however, long hair on men is not regarded as shamefully effeminate, nor does it solicit immoral liaisons with other men. Nor is a woman’s hair draped over her shoulders regarded as shameful; it no longer symbolizes undisciplined sexuality, nor is it a valid basis for divorce. If Paul were writing today, he would not prohibit either, nor should we” (p. 73). I would agree with Payne that the specific application of head coverings is culturally conditioned, but why?

Think about it. If we were to simply wave the wand of “cultural differences” over just about any text in Scripture, we could take away its relevance for the church today. One could just as easily say that ancient attitudes toward homosexuality or transgenderism weren’t as progressive as many today, so Paul’s condemnations of homosexual behavior ([Rom 1:24-27](#); [1 Cor 6:9-10](#)) aren’t in force. In fact, our culture is rather allergic to the authoritative tone of so-called “Bible preaching,” so [we should ignore Paul’s mandate](#) to young pastor Timothy as well ([2 Tim 4:1-5](#)). If we don’t ground our reasoning in the text, it’s possible to abuse historical, and cultural data to turn the Bible into a wax nose to fit our culture.

So, why then do I agree with Payne’s conclusion (not his methodology) that women should not be required to wear head coverings in the church today? Because of the word “since.” Paul writes, “but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, *since* it is the same as if her head were shaven” ([1 Cor 11:5](#)^L). And again, “But *since* it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head” (11:6). Paul ties the particular cultural expression (the head covering) to the enduring biblical principle (God-given gender roles, see 11:3) with the word “since.” Since it was the case that, culturally speaking, a wife’s uncovered head (cranium) dishonored her head (husband), Paul then taught that it was prudent for women to wear head coverings. An analogy to today might be wearing a wedding ring for those who are married. It is critical, however, that we reasoned to that conclusion from the text itself, not from our own intuition about what Paul *would have written* if he were writing today. That slippery slope has no end.

Culture and Teaching

Payne likewise plays the culture card to circumvent the plain meaning of [1 Timothy 2:12](#) which reads, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet.” While there are a number of issues with Payne’s interpretation of this battleground text, we will limit our critique to his use of

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extrabiblical, historical data to manipulate the text into saying that women can teach and have authority over men.

As with many egalitarian exegetes, Payne argues that [1 Timothy 2:12](#) does not apply to all women in the church today because it was written by Paul to address a specific problem in Ephesus at the time when he was writing. According to Payne, that problem was “women spreading... false teachings” (p. 141). How does he know that was the problem Paul intended to address? Purportedly, the culture of Ephesus in Paul’s day.

5

After pointing out that Paul addresses false teaching throughout 1 Timothy (which he does), Payne then asserts, “But the rest of the first half of 1 Timothy deals with those who had been deceived by false teachers and were spreading those false teachings out of ignorance” (p. 137). Payne provides no evidence to support this claim but just assumes its veracity. He then goes on to argue from this assumption that heresy-spreading women were Paul’s particular concern because, “Many leaders of this cult [of Artemis in Ephesus] were women. Therefore, followers of Artemis who joined the church would expect that women could lead” (p. 139). Although Paul makes no mention of women as false teachers or the cult of Artemis, Payne’s exegesis depends largely on those assertions. He reasons from extrabiblical, historical conjecture to a controlling assumption both about Paul’s audience and Paul’s knowledge of his audience.

There are two problems with Payne’s reasoning at this point: First, responsible Bible reading lets the text control the interpretation. If we allow extrabiblical historical data to *control* our interpretation – that is, to be the deciding factor in choosing between two opposing conclusions – then the text no longer holds any authority over its own meaning. We could make the Bible say anything we wanted if we gave preference to related historical findings. Just look at the downgrades caused by historical-critical scholarship and classic Christian liberalism for the evidence. **When information outside the Bible determines your reading of the Bible, the Bible becomes a blank check for your biases.**

Second, the historical information that Payne (among others) relies on to undermine a plain reading of the text is, in fact, incorrect. S. M. Baugh pays careful attention to detail in his essay on the ancient Ephesian context titled “A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century” in *Women in the Church: An Interpretation & Application of [1 Timothy 2:9-15](#)*. Baugh responds to mistreatments of the ancient context with the following:

“The unwary who do not read these helpful treatments in conjunction with all the historical evidence might gain the impression that ancient Ephesus was something like a modern liberal democracy or some fanciful gynocracy, when, in fact, it was an ancient patriarchal, historic Hellenic city under growing Roman influence in the Pauline period... [Women] were indeed given high honors with their names inscribed for all to see, but

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positions open to ten- to fourteen-year-old girls (and boys) did not hold the same social and political authority as held by the Ephesian state council, Gerousia or Roman governor.” (p. 50)

Baugh also shows that the “cult of Artemis” was run like everything else in a typical Hellenic city, with patriarchal leadership. He writes, “What we find is something entirely expected for a Hellenic city of the imperial era: civil magistrates exercised supreme control over the Artemisium, while Roman governors actively meddled in their affairs” (p. 37). While priestesses in the temple of Artemis were given sacred roles in pagan religious practices, none of those roles would have constituted leadership of the institution, teaching, or exercising authority (p. 40-46). The notion that Paul’s command in 1 Timothy 2 was an attempt to quell encroaching Ephesian feminism – a holdover from female leadership in pagan institutions – is simply unfounded.

6

Here’s the point: Scripture is the ultimate authority, not the cultures that surrounded and shaped the authors of Scripture. God is perfectly capable of communicating his eternal truth through his chosen vessels without the correction of extrabiblical historical accounts. That Christians were able to read and understand the Bible for centuries without extensive access to modern historical records is a testimony to its sufficiency and clarity.

Whenever we begin to let the ancient culture dictate the Bible’s message, we’ve lost the message. Payne demonstrates the never-ending spiral of appealing to extra-biblical authority over and against God’s Word. In so doing, he reveals more about his attitude toward contemporary cultural influences than the actual meaning of the text of Scripture.

Undoubtedly, many like Payne have experienced the abuse of gender roles in the church and have followed in Payne’s footsteps. Our hearts break for those who have suffered under sinful, domineering patriarchy. God’s Word brings comfort to the hurting and calls for the church to protect the most vulnerable. And God’s Word speaks unequivocally that he has designed men and women with different roles and responsibilities in the church and in the home.

If we would receive the hope and healing that God offers in Scripture, then we must be willing to read it honestly and submissively, not imposing our cultural expectations or experiences on the text. We must let God define the meaning of his own words, not the ancient worlds that the authors inhabited. May we be careful historians, handling the past with care as we ascribe ultimate and full authority to God and his Word alone.

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