

A personal and challenging perspective on biblical gender roles



At one point in her life, author and cofounder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church Kathy Keller sought pastoral ordination. Yet she came to adopt the view that men and women have different roles in marriage and ministry, and that fulfilling such roles pleases God and leads to greater personal fulfillment.

In this unapologetic but nuanced piece, originally published as a short ebook, Keller presents a caring and careful case for biblical gender differences and the complementarian view of women in ministry. At the same time, she encourages women to teach and lead in the church in ways that may startle some complementarians. Readers on both sides of this hot-button topic will be challenged by her ministry-tested and thoroughly scriptural perspective.

KATHY KELLER is cofounder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and coauthor, with her husband, Timothy Keller, of *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*.

Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles

A Case for
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Kathy Keller

words of Article 20 of the Anglican Church's Thirty-Nine Articles, "neither may it [the Church] so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another." The corollary of this could be stated thus: What is clear in the Bible interprets what is cloudy.

How could it be otherwise, especially if One Mind was behind the revelation, the writing, and even the choice of the diverse recipients of God's Word? I am always amused, and occasionally annoyed, that common sense doesn't figure into the discussion of the understandability of Scripture. If you can accept the existence of a Being powerful enough to be called God—the Creator and Sustainer of the universe—why is it so difficult to believe that he would be capable of communicating authentically and clearly to his creatures?⁸ That seems a somewhat smaller matter than spinning all the electrons around all the nuclei of billions upon billions of worlds, never mind simultaneously attending to the broken hearts and crushed spirits of his sentient creatures.

Second, *every text must be understood in its context—historical, cultural, and social*. What was the author's intent in each book, passage, and sentence, and what did it mean to the original hearers? The corollary to this principle is: We must find a way to obey faithfully whatever we discover to be God's revealed will, even if our cultural situation has changed since it was first revealed.

Again, common sense should be an aid. God inspired human beings to write his revelation. The Bible is therefore a human book, using human language. Yet if God is immutable and in his providence assembled a book to guide his people in all times and places,⁹ then what he revealed yesterday about his character and his design for his creatures will not be changed today.¹⁰ God is not capable of "new and improved" anything, because his perfection is such that any change would be a step away from complete holiness, complete love, complete justice, and complete mercy. We may need to

practice obedience to his commands in creative ways, reflecting the changed contexts in which we find ourselves, but that rarely presents any real hurdle. God gives unalterable commands, but he also gives us freedom to obey them in culturally diverse ways.

Having established the hermeneutical ground rules, let us jump into the deep end of the pool and consider what some feminists call the "texts of terror":¹¹ 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12.

What 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38 Cannot Mean

First Corinthians 14:33b–38 reads as follows:

^{33b}As in all the congregations of the saints, ³⁴women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

³⁶Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. ³⁸If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.

This passage cannot mean that women may not in any way communicate orally in public gatherings of the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, just three chapters earlier, Paul writes that "every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head." The discussion regarding head coverings, including references to a woman being the glory of a man, hair being the glory of a woman, angels, and creation and the Trinity—though replete with significance—can obscure the central fact that women spoke

