

The Bible, InterVarsity and Women and Men in Equal Partnership

Section One: The Bible and InterVarsity

Introduction

Our goal in the pages below is to provide a robust biblical theology of God's invitation to women to become equal partners with men in leadership in InterVarsity. We trust this introduction, and the Bible studies that follow, will serve women and men in our movement. We believe the Scriptures, though written to an ancient people in very different cultural and historical moments, are adequate to guide us in the 21st Century.

Let's begin with a few guiding principles for our work:

- We are committed to a “generous orthodoxy”
 - We assume a posture of humility towards our sisters and brothers in Christ, recognizing that we all love God and God's Word and still come to different conclusions. Love and respect are essential as we interact around challenging passages
 - We assume a posture of humility towards Scripture itself – our goal is not to master Scripture but to allow the God whose story Scripture tells to master us as the Word shapes our hearts, minds and wills.
 - We are committed to letting all of Scripture speak to this issue. We'll start at the beginning, seeking to better understand God's purposes for women from Creation through the formation of the New Testament church.
 - The Gospel always comes first – there are cultural settings in our world today that require wisdom and sensitivity so that the gospel will not be hindered.
 - We must leave room for mystery and the role of the Holy Spirit – we will never plumb the depths of God's Word and the richness of its message as we, in our limited humanity, engage with the living Word of God.

Before we look at the actual biblical texts, we want to take a step back and consider what Scripture is and how we interpret it. To do this we will use InterVarsity's statement about the nature of Scripture to which all staff commit each year: *We believe in the unique divine inspiration, entire trustworthiness and authority of the Bible.* We'll look carefully at the parts of this statement, what they mean and how they guide our understanding of what Scripture is and how we interpret it. Then we will look at particular Biblical passages that help us understand God's call to women to serve with men as equal partners in leadership.

1) Unique Divine Inspiration

We believe the Bible is unlike any other book. Following are some of the features of its uniqueness.

- a) **One story** - The Bible is more like a library than a single book - it's a compilation of 66 books, written over the course of more than 3000 years by a variety of authors in a variety of times and places! And yet, if read in its entirety, it tells one unifying story. The Holy Spirit takes all the smaller parts and weaves them into one overarching story – the true story of God and God's world. If we were to diagram the plot of the story that Scripture tells it might look like this:

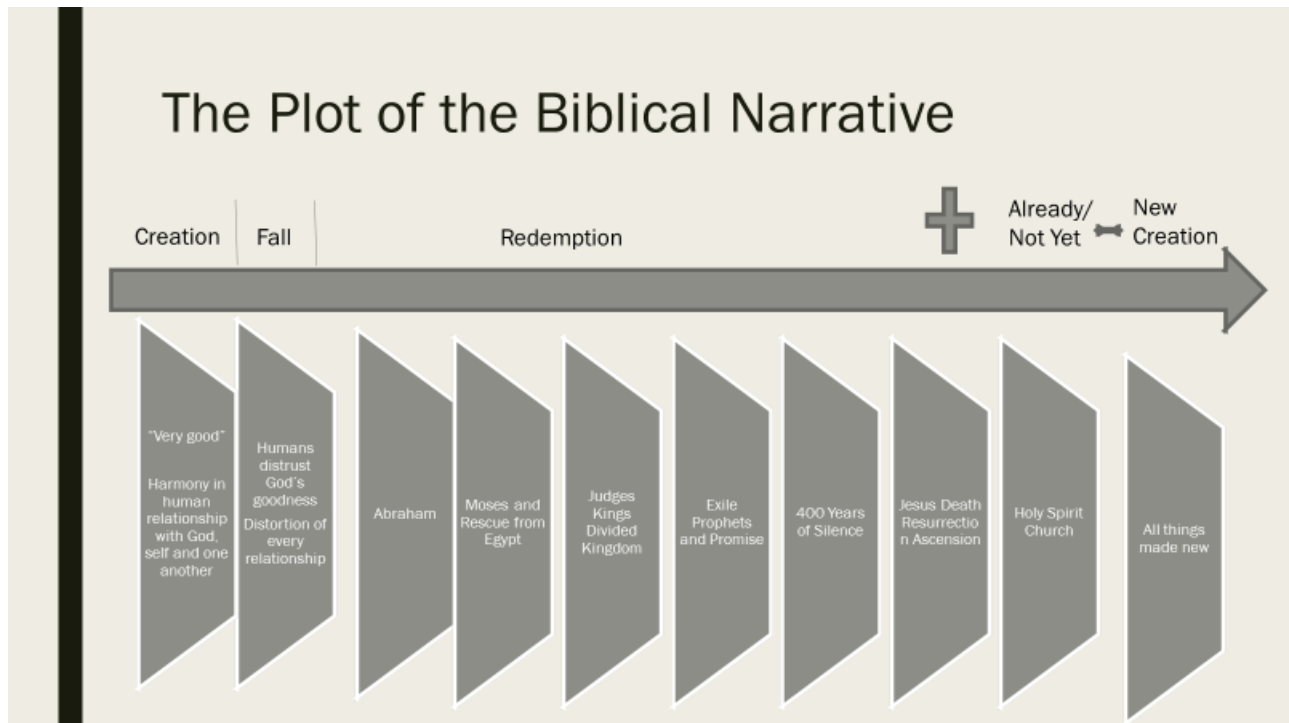


Diagram created by Nan Clarke

b. Mysterious Partnership

We also see the Bible's uniqueness in the mysterious partnership between God and the biblical authors. The reformers used a specific word for the way God accommodated himself to human language – condescension. It's an image of the all-knowing God stooping to communicate to humans through human authors who are themselves limited by their cultural and historical moments. God did not simply dictate the Bible. God was willing to allow human image bearers to communicate the story so that it was incarnate in human language that reflected their worldview at that time. But this also means that we have to work hard to understand their ancient culture and the ways in which God's Word spoke to them in their day so that we can understand how it continues to speak to us in our day.

Summary

We believe Scripture is inspired or God breathed so that it tells one overarching true story. This story is incarnated in human language, culture and history. So what we'll see is that any time we interpret a text we have to ask several questions:

- Where is this text located in the overarching story and how does that impact the way we interpret it?
- How did this text speak to the original audience to whom it was written? How is this text culturally, linguistically and historically shaped? How does genre influence our reading and understanding of a text?
- How does this text continue to speak to us in the 21st Century and guide us as participants in God's ongoing story?

2. Entire Trustworthiness

- a. There are several ways to think about the trustworthiness of the Bible
 - i. It is trustworthy in terms of textual reliability
 1. The Old Testament that we have today is the same collection of Scriptures Jesus would have read over 2000 years ago
 2. The gospels all depend on the testimony of eyewitnesses who were still alive at the time they were written
 3. If we compare the extant (still existing) texts for the Bible to the extant texts of other ancient texts whose reliability we don't question, there is no reason to judge the Bible to be unreliable. For example:
 - a. Caesar's Wars has 9 extant texts
 - b. The writings of Livy and Tacitus, Roman historians around the first century, have 20 extant texts
 - c. Greek NT has more than 5000 extant texts
 - d. Latin NT has more than 10,000 extant texts
 - ii. Postmodernism has helped us see that the modern assumption of an objective historian is false. Where the biblical authors are telling history it is helpful to remember they are doing so from a theological perspective.
- b. Perhaps a more practical way to think about the trustworthiness of the Bible is in terms of what it affirms. As we've seen, the Bible tells one overarching story about God, humans and the world. Each of the plot points answers one of the four basic questions about what it means to be human that we all ask at some point in our lives:
 - i. Who are we/why are we here?
 - ii. What went wrong?
 - iii. How is it going to get fixed?
 - iv. Where are we going?

We believe the Bible is trustworthy in the way it answers these questions. Creation tells us who we are and why we are here; the fall tells us what went wrong; the story of redemption, which covers the major part of the Bible, tells us how God is going to fix his broken creation; and the new creation shows us where we are going. These questions and their answers shape the story and guide us as we interpret Scripture so that it continues to teach us and guide us in the 21st Century (more on that later when we look at specific texts).

3. Authority

- a. What does it mean to say that the Bible is authoritative?
 1. For some it means they approach the Bible as a 'court of appeal'. When we disagree about something we look to the Bible as the final arbiter. But as we have seen, it's not that easy. There are many things to consider when we are trying to discern what the Bible says about any given topic, including its place in the biblical narrative as well as the language, culture and genre that shape what it is saying.
 2. Perhaps a better way to think about the Bible's authority is in the way that it functions as a controlling narrative. Stories have power to shape our lives, positively and negatively. If the biblical story provides the true answers to the basic human questions noted above, then its authority is located in its power to shape our hearts, minds and lives so that we respond to God's gracious invitation to live in God's story. How we live in that story will reflect both continuity with how God's people have lived for centuries in God's story, as well as discontinuity, because we live in a different time and culture.

Summary

Now that we understand what Scripture is – God's story incarnate in human words - let's move on to the hard work of looking at specific texts that teach us about the nature of God's vision for men and women in equal partnership as leaders. As we look at each text our goal is not to answer all of our questions. Some of those questions require deeper understanding of historical and cultural contexts, which you will find in many books and commentaries. Other questions will arise that are beyond the scope of this study but we encourage you to reflect on them in further study.

Section two: What does the Whole Bible Teach about Women in Equal Partnership with Men

We will look at several women in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and then address the challenging texts in Paul's letters. When we get to Paul's letter, we have incorporated more comments in these studies, to help us better understand their cultural and linguistic challenges. A new resource that helped us is *Gender Roles and the People of God*, by Alice Mathews, published in 2017. If you can only read one book on this topic, we would recommend this one! We have not used footnotes, but all of our resources are listed in the bibliography at the end. We have also provided a comprehensive list of the women in the Bible at the end of the study.

This study can be pursued individually, but our hope is that you will find at least one other person to work through it with you. As we share our insights, reflections and responses with others we catch a glimpse of the way God uses us to encourage and teach one another.

Genesis 1 & 2 – Eve before the Fall

Where are we in God's Story?

These chapters mark the beginning of God's story as he creates a world for humans to inhabit. They are written from a theological rather than a scientific perspective, and the author makes it clear that God is an intentional Creator who works with care and precision.

Reading God's Story - take time to read through Genesis 1 & 2, slowly and carefully.

1. Who is the central character in chapter one? What themes do you see here? What strikes you about these beginnings?
2. What differences do you see between the creation of humanity and the rest of creation?
3. What differences do you see between the male and female in chapter one?
4. What does the beginning of chapter two teach us about living as God's image bearers?
5. Chapter two provides a more detailed account of Adam & Eve's creation. Why might the author have provided this for us? What do you think it means that "it was not good for the man to be alone", especially in light of the reason God created humans?
6. The Hebrew word for "helper" is *ezer*. *Ezer* is a strong word, which occurs 21 times in the Old Testament, 16 times the verb is used of God "helping" Israel. It does not imply a "lesser" or "weaker" partner. What do you think it means that Eve is described as a "suitable helper" or "corresponding helper" for Adam?
7. The Hebrew word for "corresponding" is *kenegdo*. This word strongly implies partnership and equality, Adam couldn't fulfill his role in the cultural mandate, of Genesis 1:26-28, without Eve. How does this add to our understanding of God's desire for male and female partnership?
8. What is Adam's response when he first sees Eve? How would you describe their relationship at the end of chapter two?

Living in God's Story Today

1. What does the picture we have of partnership between Adam & Eve in these chapters teach us about God's creational purpose for partnership between women and men?
2. What does InterVarsity, and the church, lose when women and men don't work together as equal partners?

Genesis 3 – Eve after the Fall

Where are we in God's Story?

This chapter marks a dramatic shift in the harmony we saw in the relationships in Genesis 1 and 2 – between humans and God, between male and female and between humans and creation. This is the point in the story where everything goes wrong – for all of creation! The challenges we face today and the brokenness of our world all find their roots in the events described in Genesis 3.

Reading God's Story - take time to read through Genesis 3, slowly and carefully

1. How does the serpent's question in verse one, and its statements in verses 4-6 confirm it was "more crafty" than any other beast?
2. Look back at chapter 2:16-17 – What is God's command and who is present to hear it? Now look at Eve's response to the serpent in verses 2-3, what is different and what is the same?
3. According to verse 6, what was Eve's desire? Where was Adam in this process?
4. How are broken relationships highlighted in verses 7-13?
5. Look at verses 14-19. What are the consequences of the fall for the serpent, Eve and Adam? What are the similarities and differences between these? How is their calling impacted?
6. What do these consequences reveal to us about the Creator God? How do verses 20-24 add to our understanding of who God is?
7. What is the state of Adam & Eve's relationship at the end of chapter three? How is this different from the end of chapter two? Pay attention to the tone in chapter two and three. Which do you think reflects God's intention for relationships between men and women?

Living in God's Story Today

1. Where do you see the effects of the Fall in your own relationships and your own leadership?
2. Genesis 3 shows that the power struggle between men and women is a result of the Fall. How have you seen this reality impact women and men in ministry? How has this reality impacted your sense of calling? Is there anything in this chapter that gives you hope?

Sarah and Hagar

Where are we in God's story?

After God creates humans they reject God's role for them as stewards of his good creation. This rejection leads to a downward spiral away from goodness and shows how sin disrupts and corrupts our relationships with God, one another and creation. But God does not leave us alone in our sin. He begins his project of redemption when he calls Abram to follow him.

Read Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 13:14-18. God promises to give Abram heirs and land and to bless all the families of the earth through him. But there is a problem – Abram's wife, Sarai, is barren and well past her child bearing years. Like Adam, he cannot fulfill God's call and purposes alone. In Genesis 15 Abram comes up with a solution – he'll adopt Eleazar, his servant. But God says no, you will have your very own son. We're left wondering how Abram can ever have his own children.

Reading God's story - take time to read through Genesis 16 slowly and carefully.

1. What effects of the fall do you see in the relationships and behaviors of Abram, Sarai and Hagar?
2. Where do you see God's grace in this chapter?
 - a. How does God act on Hagar's behalf?
 - b. You might be surprised that God tells Hagar to go back and submit to her mistress. What is there in God's promise to Hagar that might give her the strength and courage to do this?
 - c. Where are the places in your life and/or ministry that feel unseen? How does Hagar's story encourage you?
3. Hagar gives God a name that describes the way he has met her and that is inscribed in Scripture for all future generations – how do you respond to that? What does this say about God's willingness to include women in the telling of his story?
4. Sarai – read on to chapter 17 through 18:15 – how does God fulfill his promise to Abram?
 - a. Notice in 17:16 that God promises to bless Sarai (He changes her name to Sarah to indicate that she will have an heir of her own) and that kings of peoples shall come from her. What does this say about her partnership with Abraham in the fulfillment of God's promise in 12:1? How does this demonstrate God's plan for men and women to partner together in fulfilling their creational purpose?

Finding our place in God's story

1. What does this text say about how God views women and their role in his redemptive story?
2. How does this text impact your own sense of call to ministry?

Miriam

Where are we in God's story?

Abraham's descendants had come to Egypt four hundred years ago at the invitation of the Pharaoh. They prospered and multiplied in Egypt but under a new Pharaoh the Egyptians grew to fear God's people so they made them their slaves. The Israelites cried out to God to deliver them. The story of how God delivers them begins in Exodus 2 with the birth of Moses. This is where we first meet Miriam. She is the older sister of baby Moses and because of her courage she manages to ensure that her mother is able to continue to care for her baby brother (and get paid for it). We see a young girl who is protective, courageous, quick-thinking and wise.

Many years pass and eventually God calls Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and into the land that God had promised to give to Abraham's descendants hundreds of years earlier. We meet Miriam again soon after God miraculously intervenes to let the Israelites cross the Red Sea and escape the Egyptian soldiers who are pursuing them. In Exodus 15 Miriam leads the women as they sing and dance in celebration of God's faithfulness to them. She is identified as a prophetess and seems to have an influential role amongst God's people.

Reading God's story – take time to read Numbers 12 slowly and carefully.

1. Why are Miriam and Aaron upset with Moses? What is the real issue that they have with Moses?
2. What might there be in Miriam's past that would account for her jealousy? (you may want to read Exodus 2: 1-10) Why might she think she deserved the same intimacy of God that Moses had?
3. Miriam was a strong woman and God had given her authority as a leader in Israel. The dramatic way God addresses the sin in her heart reflects the value he places on her as a leader in Israel. Where does the sin of envy tempt you in your ministry?
4. Miriam's leprosy meant exclusion from the community and eventual death. In what way is jealousy a "death sentence" in our lives and for our ministry?
5. Miriam spends seven days outside the camp and then is restored to the community. Spend time in reflection about the sin of jealousy in your own heart and invite God's Spirit to help you be honest and repentant about it.
6. This failure on the part of Miriam is not the last word on her ministry as a leader in Israel. Read Micah 6:4. How does the prophet affirm Miriam's leadership in Israel? Miriam is not remembered for a failure, but for her faithfulness as a leader.

Living in God's story today

1. What does this text teach us about how God views partnership between men and women in leadership?
2. Have you had a time when you have been corrected as a leader? How do you differentiate between taking correction personally and seeing it as an opportunity to become a better leader? Failing in some area does not make us failures, and learning from our mistakes can make us stronger leaders.

Deborah

Where are we in God's story?

After the Israelites finally settled in the promised land there was a time of relative peace under Joshua's leadership. However, after the death of Joshua the nation enters a dark time. The book of Judges tells a sad story of repeating cycles – the Israelites rebel against God, then suffer for their rebellion (plagues, famines and foreign invasions), then repent and cry out to God. God hears their cries and raises up a judge to deliver them and lead them in following in God's ways. The judges ruled over the nation of Israel as there was not king at that time. Deborah is one of these judges. She is also described as a prophetess, one who speaks God's word to God's people.

Reading God's story – take time to read Judges 4 and 5 slowly and carefully

1. Describe Deborah's role as a leader in Israel.
2. Why do you think Barak refused to go to battle without Deborah? What does that say about their relationship as leaders? What strikes you about the final outcome of the battle?
3. What personality traits do you see in Deborah?

How do courage, authority and strength fit with your image of a female leader in a church? (remember that the word used to describe Eve in Genesis that is translated as helper is *ezer*. *Ezer* in the Old Testament is mostly used to describe God as Israel's strong helper, primarily in a military context. Out of all the other creatures only Eve could be Adam's strongest ally as they together bore God's image and fulfilled their creational purpose.) Are these qualities you have or aspire to as a leader?

4. How do you respond to Deborah as a prophetess? As a judge over Israel? As a political and military leader? As a songwriter whose song is recorded in Scripture? How do these realities shape your perception about women leading God's people in the Old Testament?

Living in God's story today

1. Some argue that God only places women in leadership when a man can't be found. What insight does the partnership of Deborah and Barak provide about the way God uses men and women in partnership to lead his people?
2. Women – where do you feel constrained by traditional views of leadership, in InterVarsity or your church? Men – where might you be able to encourage a woman to use her gifts to lead? How do social constructs pressure women and men to limit the use of their gifts in ministry?

Huldah, the Prophetess

Where are we in God's Story?

The history books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings tell the story of the kings who ruled over the young nation of Israel. Sadly, after the highpoint of King David, most of these kings failed to walk in God's ways and lead Israel with wisdom and justice. God's story includes leadership from prophets, priests and kings. The king was to lead the people in following God. The prophets spoke for God and in the Scriptures we see them encouraging and rebuking the people and often confronting evil kings. The priests represented the people of Israel to God, accepting their sacrifices and interceding for them. In the histories of Samuel and Kings, we see all three (prophets, priests and kings) leading at various points. In general, these histories focus on men, but there are notable exceptions, such as Hannah (in 1 Samuel 1 & 2) and Abigail (in 1 Samuel 25). During the time of Huldah, the prophetess, we know that both Zechariah and Jeremiah were also serving as prophets.

Reading God's Story - take time to read 2 Kings 22, with a focus on verses 8-20, slowly and carefully

1. What do the opening verses of chapter 22 tell us about King Josiah and his priorities?
2. What would the temple being in ruins and the Book of God's Law being lost tell us about the state of Judah at this time?
3. How does King Josiah respond to the discovery of the Book of the Law? What does he understand about the consequences of its neglect?
4. King Josiah knew that Huldah was a prophetess who was known to speak for God. What clues are there from the text as to why King Josiah wanted the Law taken to Huldah? (Note she's present in Jerusalem where the Law has been found and provides immediate connection to the Lord, as a prophetess.)
5. What does Huldah declare on God's behalf in verses 15-17 regarding the posture of God's people and the consequences of their neglect? How does this declaration of hard truth show her strength and courage?
6. What is added in verses 18-20? How do these verses add to our understanding of King Josiah's character?
7. In what ways might King Josiah's posture of humility have been a factor in seeking God by reaching out to Huldah? How do we see the partnership of Prophet, Priest and King here?
8. What does this story teach us about the role of women in God's story? About the posture in partnership between women and men at this point in Israel's history?

Living in God's Story Today

1. How does this chapter challenge our posture as women and men in partnership in ministry? What aspects of Huldah's story give us hope?

Mary

Where are we in God's story?

Four hundred years! Four hundred years of waiting! Four hundred years of silence since the last prophets in Israel had spoken. Many Israelites have returned home following their exile to Assyria and Babylon, but they are still under the rule of the Romans, unwelcome pagan foreigners. Will God ever come and fulfill his promise to save Israel and establish his everlasting kingdom?

And then something surprising happens. An angel appears to an old priest on duty in the temple. He tells Zechariah that he and his wife will have a baby, even though they are well past the age of childbearing. Furthermore, this child will have a ministry like that of the prophet Elijah, turning the people back to God in preparation for God's coming to save his people. Just as the angel promised, Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, gets pregnant. Just a few months later the angel again appears, this time to a young girl living in Nazareth. The angel tells Mary that she too will have a child, but not in the normal way. Hers will be a miracle child and he will be the one to establish God's forever kingdom on earth. At last, God is on the move again and the time of fulfillment has come! Part of that fulfillment will include the restoration of women to full partnership in God's kingdom work as His kingdom comes on earth even as it is in heaven.

Reading God's story -take time to read Luke 1: 26-56 slowly and carefully

1. What connections do you see between the creation story in Genesis and this story of the birth of Jesus? Compare the activity of the Holy Spirit in each story and contrast the responses of Eve and Mary. What might Luke want us to see in this story as he makes these connections? (another interesting connection is in verse 37 – the words of the angel that nothing will be impossible with God echo the words God said to Sarah in Genesis 18: 9-15 when he told her she would bear a child even though she was in her 90's! Sarah's child also represented the beginning of God's redemptive work in the world.)
2. What might have been going through Mary's head as she accepted that she would be an unwed mother? Read Matthew 1: 18-25 to see Joseph's response. God's call is not without a cost – what are some of the costs you have paid to obey God's call on your life?
3. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who confirms what the angel has told Mary. Think about what this might imply for the role of community, as we seek to understand God's call on our lives.
4. After she hears Elizabeth's words, Mary prays one of the most famous prayers in Scripture, a prayer that has become part of the written Word of God. Describe Mary's relationship with God. What effects of the fall do you see in Mary's prayer? How is God beginning the work of undoing the fall?

Living in God's story today

1. Eve's decision to mistrust God's goodness led to death not only for herself but for all creation. Mary's decision to trust God's goodness opened the door for the beginning of God's new creation, of the restoration of life and blessing. Where do you see choices that you make leading to death or life?
2. What effects of the fall do you see in your own life and ministry? Mary and Joseph partnered together on this mystifying journey into marriage and parenting. How are you partnering with men and women in God's work of undoing the consequences of the fall in your life, in your ministry and in the world?

Women Disciples of Jesus

Where are we in God's story?

Jesus has begun his ministry of proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come. Luke describes how Jesus travels around Galilee (the northern part of Israel) teaching about the Kingdom and demonstrating through miracles of healing and deliverance that the Kingdom has indeed come. Luke wants us to see that Jesus is beginning the work of undoing the effects of sin and restoring creation to its intended purpose. Word spreads quickly about Jesus. Some people he specifically calls to follow him. These followers of Jesus are known as the twelve disciples. Others follow him because he has forgiven, healed or delivered them. Among these disciples are several women.

Reading God's story – take time to read Luke 8:1-3 and Luke 10: 38-42 slowly and carefully

1. In the first text Luke shows us a group of women whose lives have been touched by Jesus. In our day a group of women traveling with Jesus and the twelve might not raise eyebrows. But in the first century how might their fellow Israelites, and even the twelve disciples, view their behavior? Why are these women so willing to defy cultural expectations? What does Jesus' willingness to accept their presence and financial support say about his willingness to challenge the accepted boundaries for women? What might it have meant for them to be so welcomed and accepted by Jesus?
2. Luke's second story would also shock the sensibilities of first-century Jews. Mary defies the division of space in a typical Jewish home, moving out of the women's space and in to the men's space. She also defies the social convention that men learn from the rabbi while the women work in the kitchen and look after the children. What Mary is doing is scandalous. With this in mind, why is Martha so upset? Why is Jesus not upset? What does his attitude towards Mary's behavior suggest in the context of the widening role for women in God's Kingdom?
3. How do you respond to Martha's boldness in bringing her complaint to Jesus? What is Jesus doing in his response?
4. How do you see Jesus working in this text to undo the effects of the fall that set men and women against one another and beginning to restore a sense of equal partnership in ministry as followers of Christ?

Living in God's Story

1. Why are you following Jesus? What social conventions make it difficult for you to follow his call on your life? How might God be inviting you to be a Mary and live into Kingdom values that are undermining the effects of the fall? Is there a Mary in your life who you could affirm and encourage?
2. How do other people's expectations shape the way you approach partnership in your ministry?

Mary Magdalene

Where are we in God's story?

It is a dark day in Jerusalem for the followers of Jesus. They believed that he was the Messiah. His miracles of healing, deliverance and even raising the dead, his teaching about God's Kingdom, his power over the forces of nature, his love for the marginalized and unlovely, all confirmed their trust in him. But now the unimaginable has happened – their redeemer, their savior, their lord is dead, crucified as a common criminal by the Romans. Their world has been turned upside down: joy has turned to fear and confusion; hope has turned to disillusionment and sorrow. But just as the Spirit brought life and order out of the chaos and darkness in the original creation in Genesis, so the Spirit brings life and light out of the confusion and darkness of the Savior's death on the morning of the new creation. And it's probably no coincidence that just as sin entered the world through a man in a garden in Genesis, so the new creation life that will undo the effects of sin and death enters the world through another man in a garden. Be sure not to miss these echoes of the original creation in this story.

Reading the story – take time to read John 20: 1-18 slowly and carefully

1. Mary is grieving the death of Jesus. Authors often use repetition to make a point. What do you think John is trying to tell us by having Mary repeat the same words or a variation of them?
2. Contrast the actions of Mary Magdalene and the two disciples. Why do you think Mary does not follow them into the tomb? What evidence is there in the tomb that Jesus' body probably was not removed by grave robbers or the Romans? Note that in John 19:39-40 Joseph and Nicodemus used 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes as they wrapped his body. This mixture would have caused the clothes to stick to his body like glue.
3. After discovering the empty tomb, the disciples head home, but Mary stays. Why do you think she stays? Why does she assume that Jesus is the gardener? Are there times in your life where you have not seen what God was doing because it was not what you were expecting?
4. After the running to and fro of the first section of this text, notice how slow and tender this second section is. We see Mary's deep love for Jesus, but also Jesus' deep love for Mary. When Jesus calls her by name she recognizes him and immediately embraces him. The first person to see the resurrected Jesus is a woman! Resurrection is about transformation. How is Mary transformed by her realization that Jesus is alive? In a culture where women were not considered to be reliable witnesses, how significant is it that Jesus sends (the word apostle means one who is sent) Mary to tell the disciples that He is alive? Where do you see Jesus undoing the effects of the fall in this text?

Living in the story today

1. How would you describe your sense of God's call on your life to ministry? Where is He sending you?
2. How important is partnership with other believers, men and women, for the fruitfulness of your ministry? Spend time praising and thanking God for places where you've experienced equal partnership.

Paul and Women

Where are we in God's Story?

Jesus' resurrection ushers in the new creation. In Acts 1 Luke describes Jesus' ascension. Then in Acts 2 he describes the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy as the Holy Spirit falls in a dramatic way on both men and women in Jerusalem. As a result the early church begins to grow and become established. One of the primary leaders in the early church, a planter of many churches and author of much of the New Testament, is a man named Paul. The passages below show women putting their faith in Jesus and stepping into leadership roles, alongside Paul, as he helps to establish outposts of Christianity around the Mediterranean. In his context, as Paul partners with these women, he is broadening their leadership and influence in the early church as part of the new creation

Reading God's Story - take time to read through the following passages slowly and carefully: Acts 16:11-15; Acts 17:1-4 & 32-34; Acts 18:24-26; Romans 16:1-15; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15 (If possible, consider reading several different translations.) As you read, make a running list of the different women named and their roles in these passages.

1. What strikes you about the various women Paul met, worked with or wrote about?
2. In the wider Jewish and Roman cultures that Paul was part of, women would not be acknowledged or named in a letter. What does Paul's list show you about his value of women as partners in establishing the church?
3. Priscilla & Aquilla are ministry partners with Paul. How do Acts 18:24-26 and Romans 16:3-4 show us the depth of partnership they shared? (Note, Priscilla is teaching in Ephesus!)
4. In Romans 16:7 Paul greets Junia, who is "outstanding" among the apostles (NIV translation). This verse has long been a source of controversy in the church. The words of John Chrysostom, in the fourth century, demonstrate the historic understanding that Junia was a woman. Chrysostom wrote: "Indeed to be apostles at all is a great thing.... But to be even amongst these of note, just consider what an encomium [a speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly] this is! Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!" How do you respond to Paul's words and the quote above?
5. Although Philippians 4:2-3 begins with a disagreement, Paul goes on to commend the work of Euodia and Syntyche. Because these women are leaders, their disagreement matters, so Paul chooses to address this in a public letter. How have you seen leaders in the church or your chapter work out disagreements? Are there leaders you need to reconcile with in your ministry?

Living in God's Story Today

1. Many today view Paul as a misogynist whose writings limit the role of women in the church. What does the number of women Paul partnered with imply about his view of women? How does this reality impact your own call to ministry?
2. Belief and behavior matter for us to live as women and men of character. When we examine Paul's behaviors with women in Acts and the early church, we see a man who is actively partnering with women in a wide variety of settings. How does Paul's actual practice reflect his teaching in Gal. 3:27-29? How might these beliefs help us to interpret his letters?

Paul and the Church in Corinth

Where are we in God's Story?

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church on at least two separate occasions, after spending 18 months in their community. He seems to have spent the most time investing in the churches in Corinth and Ephesus. Corinth was a cosmopolitan seaport and a center for learning. Early believers there had much to learn about following Jesus. As we look at these sections, we have the challenge of only hearing one half of the "conversation" Paul was having with this young church. We know from Acts 18 that Priscilla and Aquila were partners with Paul in Corinth. 1 Corinthians 11-14 is a lengthy section focused on worship in the church. A strong theme in these chapters is order and propriety during worship.

Reading God's Story -take time to read these two passages, slowly and carefully. If you're able, consider skimming the chapters in between for the wider context. A great deal of 11:2-15 includes cultural references that are challenging for us to understand in our context today. Paul is addressing matters of style and dress that would be easily interpreted by those receiving this letter, but sound very foreign to us. Another challenge to our understanding is that the Greek words for man and woman are exactly the same as those for husband and wife. So it is not clear when Paul addresses husbands and wives and when he addresses women and men in general in this passage. Because of the length and complexity of these two sections, you may want to split this into two separate studies.

Focus on 1 Corinthians 11:2-15

1. What is Paul's overall theme in these verses? How might verse 3 relate to propriety in worship? In her book, Alice Mathews observes that Paul uses the term "head" literally and metaphorically in this passage. The word for "head" in Greek is "kephale" which can mean a literal head (v.5), "the source" (the "head" of a river), "authority" or "prominence" ("head of the jury). How might the order of the three pairs in verse 3 inform how we interpret "head" in this verse?

2. Paul's passion for the Gospel not being impeded is another theme in Corinthians, and Corinth was a shame verses honor culture. In chapters 8-11:1, Paul focuses on individual rights and then he transitions to the theme of worship in chapters 11-14. How might the lens of shame and honor help us here?

3. What are Paul's specific instructions for men and women in this section? Note the assumption that both men and women will pray and prophesy in worship, and the repetition of terms of dishonor and disgrace. Another note from Witherington is that the norm in Roman culture would be a woman covering her head during worship or religious sacrifice.

4. Considering the context of worship, what do you think is motivating Paul with these instructions and his concern regarding dishonor, disgrace and glory? In 1 Cor. 9, Paul speaks of surrendering his rights for the sake of others, his particular instructions for women and men in worship, in this chapter, may well be rooted in this posture. Paul declares in 1 Cor. 10:23 that, all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful, how might this give us insight into Paul's understanding of worship?

5. Note, a literal translation of the Greek in verses 10 would read, “For this reason a woman has authority on her head, because of the angels.” Most Bible translations add “ought to have a symbol/sign” (a woman “ought to have a sign of authority on her head”). The additions are an attempt to make Paul’s words more understandable for those of us who were not part of his original audience. They also show us how difficult this passage is for us to understand! Another note from Witherington, “the angels” reflects the idea that angels would be present in the midst of worship. (Paul has a previous reference to the presence of angels in 1 Corinthians 4:9.)

How do verses 8-9 and verses 11-12 inform one another and add to our understanding of Paul’s views of women and men?

6. What does verse 12 reveal about the source of all things? How should this reality shape relationships between men and women?

7. Witherington notes that Paul’s instructions in this section to both men and women indicate that both genders were causing disorder in worship. He writes on page 238, “Paul is setting up new customs for a new community, and these customs are deeply grounded in his theological understanding of creation, redemption, their interrelation and how they should be manifested in worship.” What evidence in favor of “new customs for a new community” do you see in this passage?

8. Why do you think Paul would instruct the Corinthians to maintain cultural norms in dress (women keeping their heads covered), but then call the Corinthians to interdependence between men and women, in the Lord? How does this teaching work against the ongoing effects of the Fall and show God’s desire for redemption between women and men? Remember how we’ve seen Paul work and minister in partnership with women and men.

Living in God’s Story Today

1. We see a strong concern for propriety in worship and glory going to God, not to the worshippers in these verses. Consider taking time to prayerfully evaluate what cultural norms might be influencing your worship.

2. In verses 11-12 Paul paints a clear picture of mutuality between women and men, who are “in the Lord.” Can you identify strong male/female partnerships with sisters and brothers, in the Lord, that are part of your life and ministry? If so, give thanks to God, if not, prayerfully seek his guidance regarding growth in this area.

Focus on I Corinthians 14:26-39 (If you are returning later to complete this study, please read through this section again, at least twice!)

1. According to verse 26, what is Paul addressing in this section, and what is his primary concern?

2. In verses 27-35, Paul addresses three groups of people. Who are they? What are the conditions necessary for speaking in tongues (that is, someone speaking in a language not their own)?

3. What are Paul's instructions regarding prophecy in worship?

4. What command is repeated to all three groups in verses 28, 30 & 34? Some Bible translations use different English words in these three verses, in the Greek, the same verb, "sigao" is used all three times. "Sigao" can be translated as "keep silent," "be still," or "stop speaking." Why do you think Paul is asking all three groups to "be silent" at various points in the worship service?

5. You'll remember in chapter 11 that Paul assumes women will pray and prophecy. Biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey, who spent much of his career in the Middle East, has noted that during the time Paul was writing most congregations would worship with the men separated from the women. (This is still the case in some Middle Eastern communities today, see more in N.T. Wright article linked in bibliography.) It is very possible that women might have been calling out questions to their husbands, who were some distance away, in the midst of a worship service. Why might he call for women to "be silent" in this section?

6. What does Paul propose, regarding a woman's questions, in verse 35? How does this verse support Bailey's assertion that women were calling out questions, being disruptive, and even shameful, during a worship service? Note, Paul does want to provide women the opportunity to learn, just not in the midst of public worship. Paul's consistent advocacy for women is countercultural.

7. We have noted that Paul's commands are for order in worship, which includes limits on praying in tongues, prophecy and women speaking up in a service. Why do you think that many have only focused on the final command, for women to be silent, and neglected the first two commands for silence?

8. What do verses 36-39 add to our understanding of Paul's desire for worship in the Corinthian church?

Living in God's Story Today

1. Have you experienced someone pulling verse 34 out of context and calling for the silence of women in the church? How has our study of I Corinthians 11 & 14 increased your understanding of Paul's teaching and his views of women and men both participating in worship?

2. How has the careful study of these chapters helped you to understand the importance of seeking to understand the context of a verse and the culture that was initially addressed in the passage? Another way to think about this is the concept that Scripture was written for us, not to us! Paul was writing to a particular group of believers in a particular time and setting. His instructions were given for their context and culture, but still have lessons for us today. How can you continue to develop your Bible study skills and grow your understanding of context and culture in a passage? What might this study mean for your work with students and faculty?

Paul and the church in Ephesus - I Timothy 2:11-15

Where are we in God's Story?

We've seen how Paul valued women in leadership and affirmed Priscilla's teaching of Apollos in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-26). Over half of the New Testament is made up of letters, many written by Paul, to various communities of believers and leaders in the early church. 1 & 2 Timothy are letters Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, whom he left to pastor the church in Ephesus. At this time, Timothy is leading a small congregation of young converts to Christianity. Ephesus was widely known as a center for the worship of Artemis (or Diana), a Greek fertility goddess. The temple dedicated to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The cult of Artemis was led by women priestesses. Some members of Timothy's congregation would have previously been connected to the cult of Artemis, and would now be very young in their faith. There were also some male elders in the church who teaching heresy. One of the unique challenges to reading any of Paul's letters, is that we only have half of the "conversation" Paul was having with Timothy. We don't know what Paul had heard, or what questions Timothy may have asked Paul, which caused Paul to write this letter. This section of I Timothy is one of the most controversial in all of Scripture. There is much that is hard to understand, but considering the surrounding culture, Paul's broader relationship with women and the trajectory of women in God's story can help us.

Reading God's Story - take time to read through I Timothy 2:11-15, slowly and carefully.

1. What are Paul's initial instructions to the women of Ephesus in verse 11? In a culture where women were rarely acknowledged, it is noteworthy that Paul is writing to women, another counter-cultural action, and insisting that they too should learn about their new faith in Christ.
2. Verse 12 is one of the most challenging verses in Scripture, and this study! [*It's striking to note that Paul begins with an "I statement."*] The word Paul uses for "authority" in this verse is unique to the entire New Testament. We know Paul had a reason for choosing this particular word for "authority," but his motivation is not completely clear. One possible scenario is that women who had great authority in the cult of Artemis were seeking to take on similar authority in the young church. These may well be the women Paul is exhorting to learn in verse 11. It is important to note that the particular authority this word describes has a negative connotation – the King James translation, "to usurp authority" is helpful because it makes the negative clear. (Later in I Timothy 5:13-14 Paul is concerned about women who are young in the faith being led away from the truth, so again he is urging these women to fully enter into the community of the church.) How do you respond to this verse? How does the background above help to understand that Paul most likely did not intend this to be an all time prohibition against women teaching or leading men? (Remember, Paul affirming Priscilla's teaching in Ephesus in Acts 18.)
3. Paul points the Ephesians to Adam & Eve in verses 13-14, perhaps to remind them of the beginnings of God's story. The cult of Artemis taught that Artemis, was the source of all life, the creator of all things. Her priestesses were against both marriage and childbearing. Paul is returning to the Bible's foundation of God, the Creator, who first made Adam and then Eve. (In contrast to the cult of

Artemis, where women are seen as primary.) Some argue that Adam being created first gives him authority over Eve, one weakness in this argument is that the animals were created before Adam! We know from Paul's partnership with women that he didn't see all women as being more easily deceived, but there has been a problem in Ephesus with women being deceived, as noted in I Timothy 5. How do our first studies in Genesis 1 & 2, and Paul's wider partnership with women, help to inform our understanding of these verses?

4. This brings us to the next verse in this section, which is another of the most challenging in the New Testament. Some important observations are that the verse begins addressing a particular woman (in the single tense) and then transitions to women, plural. One way to understand the first half of verse 15 is to link it with verses 13-14. The last woman Paul mentions is Eve – we know in Genesis 3:15 in the midst of the curse, there is a promise that a particular offspring of a particular woman, will crush the head of the serpent. So, we could read verse 15a as, “But the woman (Eve) will be saved through the childbirth (promised in Gen. 3:15.)” This is good news for women who have not had children! It is also helpful because we know that Paul preaches salvation in Christ alone, not in having children. The salvation that Paul wants the Ephesian women to learn is found in Jesus. Verse 15 ends with a plural exhortation, these women in Ephesus are called to continue in their new-found faith, seeking to love, to be holy and to grow in self-control. What are the particular challenges faced by women in Ephesus? How do we see Paul's desire for the Ephesian women to learn in these final verses?

Living in God's Story Today

1. Good and godly believers have come to different conclusions regarding this passage, but it is possible to hold a very high view of Scripture and not read Paul's prohibition in verse 11 as a once and for all declaration. It's very possible that Paul's desire was for the women of Ephesus to learn and become established as disciples of Jesus, and then they could consider teaching roles in the church. What is your response to the information above, how has it impacted your understanding of this passage?
2. Some would argue that Paul's use of Genesis is grounding the prohibitions of these verses in the creation story. It is also possible that Paul refers to Genesis in this setting because these are new believers who didn't know God's big story. In I Timothy 3:15 Paul's wider concern is that both women and men are learning how to live properly in the household of God. This shows that Paul's desire is that both women and men learn God's way to live in God's story. How does this help you to respond to those who would limit women's leadership? What does this say about the importance of women and men being rooted in God's word before beginning to lead?
3. Women – have you experienced painful challenges to your calling because of this passage? Men – how might you use your voice for redemption and healing for women who's gifts have been limited by a misleading reading of this passage? How does this study and understanding the context in Ephesus help you in the face of the way many use Scripture to limit the role of women in the church or InterVarsity?

Summary

Our goal in this study has been to encourage you to see women and men as equal partners in ministry. We've looked together at the story of Scripture from creation and fall to the way God is at work to redeem God's good but broken creation. We've seen that God's redemptive purposes include all the brokenness that came to characterize human relationships as a result of the fall. The biblical story shapes the way we understand the nature of the relationship between men and women as we seek to follow and serve Jesus in the 21st Century.

While we enjoy the blessing of redemption and the reality of God's kingdom, we also anticipate the fullness of God's kingdom that is yet to come when Jesus returns. Our hope as believers is not that we will escape this broken world when we go to heaven, but that when Jesus returns he will establish God's kingdom on earth even as it is in heaven. We get glimpses of what that future will look like in Jesus' and Paul's teaching and in books like Revelation: humans will bear the full image of the resurrected Christ in our resurrected bodies; we will rule God's good creation wisely for God's glory; we will live in the presence of the glory of God and the Lamb. This is our destination, and as men and women labor together in equal partnership in ministry we demonstrate the power of God's grace to transform broken relationships. We are like signposts that point the way to where God's story is ultimately going. Our future has the power to shape how we live in the present, so we encourage you to strive to build equal partnerships with the women and men on your staff teams. Building these sorts of partnerships will take work, but we don't work alone, we have the Spirit to equip and empower us as we labor and lead together. As you labor, may you know the joy of being a participant in God's great story of redemption and renewal of all things.

Women in the Bible – this is not a comprehensive list but it gives you a good sense of the presence of women throughout the story of Scripture. Think back to how our studies have highlighted equal partnership between many of these women and men.

Eve
Noah's Wife
Sarah
Lot's Wife
Hagar
Rebekah
Leah
Rachel
Tamar, Judah's Daughter-in-law
Moses' Mother
Miriam
Rahab
Deborah
Abigail
Bathsheba
Queen of Sheba
Jezebel
Widow of Zarephath
Athaliah
Woman of Shunem
The Shulammite Woman
Huldah
Gomer
Vashti
Esther
Elizabeth
Mary
Anna
Mary Magdalene
Mary of Bethany
Martha
Woman at the Well
Woman Caught in Adultery
Widow of Nain
Woman at Simon's House
Woman with the Issue of Blood
Crippled Woman
Syrophenician Woman

Mary, Mother of the Sons of Zebedee
Joanna
Sapphira
Susanna
Dorcas
Rhoda
Lydia
Priscilla
Lois
Eunice
Phoebe
Junia

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