

1-1-1996

Four Questions

Bill Love

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Love, Bill (2012) "Four Questions," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Four Questions

? ? ? ?

by Bill Love

The Editors asked me to present four questions I have heard in discussions about women's roles in the church, along with my answers. The questions are important. The answers are, as I have said, my own.



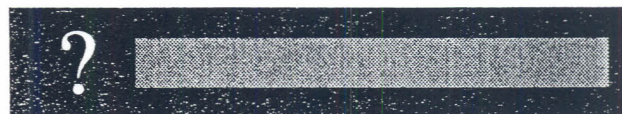
How is it that this generation of scholars and preachers knows more than all of those who have gone before? As I understand it, we have been studying the Bible seriously for almost two hundred years and have never come up with this!

We are not saying that we are smarter than those who have gone before. In terms of sheer intelligence, few of us would measure up to Augustine, Luther and Alexander Campbell. There is something true about what you are suggesting: we twentieth-century people are always tempted to worship the god Modernity. It is easy to believe that anything new is always better than anything old. But we treasure the writings of Christians over the centuries. In their walk with God they discovered profound insights into the Scripture.

While we are not smarter than those giants of the past, biblical research in the last two centuries has given us much more data vital to biblical interpretation. Scholars have more information in several important areas: the original settings of the

writings, religions of the first century, social customs of the times, New Testament backgrounds in Judaism, ancient languages, and the nature and meaning of the various literary forms found in the Bible. As a result, scholars have new insights into what was going on when the New Testament was written. For example, it has become clear that some statements were meant for Christians in all times and places (the commandment to love God and one's neighbor), while others are occasional pieces addressed only to particular situations back then and there ("Greet one another with a holy kiss"). It is probable that the passages which prohibit women speaking out in worship are occasional instructions intended to correct problems in local churches at Corinth and Ephesus.

We are not smarter than our predecessors. But additional information about the writings may lead us to different conclusions. The best part of our Restoration heritage, it seems to me, is that we continually study the Scripture in the best light we have and attempt to go where it leads us.



Why is this discussion about women's roles so important? Can't you see that this is causing disagreements among Christians? Surely the unity of the church is the first and most important priority!

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians in explanation of his own ministry. To the Ephesians he said that God’s grand purpose for all time and creation is “to unite all things in Christ.” God’s purpose and program are to bind up what is broken in creation in our relationships with him, with one another and within ourselves. It was to achieve this reconciliation that Jesus died. Reconciliation is the final goal.

But before reconciliation is achieved in a troubled marriage, both partners have to endure painful probing of their attitudes and actions. During that phase in their treatment, what is happening feels like anything but reconciliation and peace. The issue that tormented the early church was Jew/Gentile relations. More specifically, should we Gentiles be accepted into the faith community solely on the basis of our confession and baptism into Jesus? The Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 shows how divisive the issue was. Peter’s resistance to the vision calling him to the house of Cornelius shows how painful the idea was for him. At Antioch he caved in to sectarian pressures and withdrew fellowship from the Gentiles. It is possible that Jesus’ right-hand man never achieved complete comfort with the “outsiders” in the fellowship. Nevertheless, the Lord kept the pressure on. Peter’s discomfort was not decisive. We Gentiles are the beneficiaries. The point is, God does not hesitate to give us pain to achieve his ultimate purpose of an inclusive fellowship in Christ crucified.

Some scholars have observed that the three groupings mentioned in Galatians 3:28 have been the painful issues at different times in church history: Jews and Gentiles in the first two centuries, slaves and masters (in our American experience) in the nineteenth century, and male and female in the twentieth century. If that is true—if God intends full partnership for women in the church and if the time has come—there will be a painful period of adjustment just as in previous times. Nor is the pain only between Christians who differ on women’s roles. The discomfort is in each of our hearts. Even those who are most convinced about the expanded role of women in worship-leadership experience uneasiness when the changes are first introduced.



What’s the problem with all of this hand-wringing? If it is right, why not just announce the change next Sunday morning and let the church deal with it? If people cannot handle it they can leave.

God worked out the Jew/Gentile issue over a couple of centuries. Peter and the others were brought gradually (kicking and screaming) into an awareness that the gospel was for all. Before Jesus left his disciples he said, “I have more to say to you, but you cannot bear it now.” He promised the Spirit, who would lead them along gradually to a fuller knowledge of who he was and what his life really meant.

There is a mentality that says, “While you have the head off the motor, why not grind the valves, replace the rings and put in new rods. And if we’re going to make changes at church, let’s do it all at once and get it over with.” But this analogy is wrong for the church. The doctor never says, “Well, while we’re in there we might as well do the four bypasses, remove that diseased lung and remove the gall bladder.” Is the church a machine or an organism? If it is an organism, surgery must be done carefully and drugs prescribed only within the limits of what promotes survival and health for the patient.



What does it matter what others in the Church of Christ think? If the Lord wants women to know full dignity and to exercise their gifts fully why should church opinion be a consideration?

There are times when we should dismiss widely held opinion rather quickly. At Antioch Paul confronted Peter in front of the visiting delegation from Jerusalem. Their objections to table fellowship with the Gentiles could not be honored. To do so would have been to give up ground already gained for the gospel.

On the other hand, there is a difference between confronting willful pride like the Jerusalem leaders had and running over sincere brothers and sisters who have never considered the issue or who have a conscience against change. The church matters for the same reason that our families matter. On the one hand, individual family members must not dictate the beliefs and actions of the family as a whole. On the other hand, they are family and should be treated with respect and consideration. These are the people who gave us life, supported our existence, shared our experiences of joy and sorrow and, in many cases, introduced us to the Lord.

I have good friends who have left the Church of Christ for other traditions. I have stayed, not because I think we are the only church or because we have a corner on Christian truth and devotion, but for two reasons: First, the distinctives (believer

baptism, weekly communion, priesthood of believers, local church autonomy, etc.) seem to be more faithful to Scripture than the alternatives. Second, this is my family. I was born spiritually into this family. I know the family secrets; I speak the family language with the family accent. I feel called to make my contribution here. By “here” I do not mean the congregation where I live and worship, but the tradition of which I am a part. For these reasons, I think that any changes must be introduced with a willingness to hear the concerns of my family and with a sense of responsibility to give an account for my actions. Having done so, I must not allow the family to have the final say. There is something sacred about the individual human heart and about the sovereignty of

each congregation under its Lord. With due love and consideration for one another, each person and each church must meet God in the Holy of Holies and seek to follow his will.

Bill Love is director of development for the Churches of Christ Medical Center Chaplaincy in Houston, Texas.

Questions for Discussion

1. Explore each of the questions raised. What answers would you give?
2. How are your answers similar to and/or different from the author's?

Notes Continued From “Laborers in the Lord”

ding the discussion of leadership, although the six functions apparently did entail varying degrees of influence and authority.

⁵On letters of recommendation, see Stanley K. Stowers, **Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 153-65; and for additional examples, consult John L. White, **Light from Ancient Letters** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

⁶For a range of applications of these words in the NT, see Beyer, **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament** 2, 81-93, and on the functions of deacons in early Christianity, see E. Ferguson, “Deacon,” **Encyclopedia of Early Christianity** (New York: Garland, 1990) 257-58.

⁷Such was the understanding of Christians in later centuries as well. For dedicatory and funerary inscriptions which mention women deacons in the 4th-6th centuries, see Ross S. Kraemer, **Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics: A Sourcebook on Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) nos. 95-100; and for literary evidence concerning women deacons in early Christianity, see E. Ferguson, “Deaconess,” **Encyclopedia of Early Christianity**, 258-259.

⁸Walters, “Phoebe and Junia(s),” 169-180, explains well the nature of patron/client relationships.

⁹Hermas, Vision 2.4.3, “And you, read [this book] to this city along with the elders and patrons of the church.”

¹⁰In Romans 16:23, Gaius is the “host (*xenos*) of me and of the whole church.”

¹¹Wayne A. Meeks, **The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 75, suggests that the expression *kat' oikon* (Rom 16:5; Phlm 2; Col 4:15), here translated “affiliated with their house,” indicates a group built around a household unit rather than the fact that the group met in a house (*en oikoi*, 1 Cor 11:34; 14:35). On house churches, see Abraham J. Malherbe, **Social As-**

pects of Early Christianity (2nd ed., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), for detailed discussion, with particular attention to 3 John; L. Michael White, “Social Authority in the House Church Setting and Ephesians 4:1-16,” **Restoration Quarterly** 29.4 (1987) 209-28; and John McRay, “House Churches and the Lord's Supper,” **Leaven** 3.3 (1995) 13-16, 48-49.

¹²Lampe, “Roman Christians,” 222. In addition, verses 14 and 15 seem to describe a fourth and fifth house church, though the hosts are not designated. We could guess that Asyncritus and Philologus were the hosts of those house churches, since their names head the two lists, but that would be merely a plausible conjecture.

¹³Ignatius, **Smyrnaeans** 13.2, sends greetings to “the house of Gavia,” another female host of a house church in Asia. Acts 12:12 reports that a group met for prayer at the home of Mary the mother of John Mark, though that group is not called “the church affiliated with Mary's house.”

¹⁴Although Paul could use “labor” in its common sense of manual work (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8; 1 Cor 4:12), this is clearly not what he means by such expressions as “labor in the Lord.”

¹⁵Lampe, “Roman Christians,” 223-224. Richard S. Cervin, “A Note Regarding the Name ‘Junia(s)’ in Romans 16:7,” **New Testament Studies** 40 (1994) 464-470, independently confirms this conclusion while explaining Roman customs concerning male and female names.

¹⁶For the phrase *episemoi en tois...* with meaning (a), “see Psalm of Solomon 2.6, where Israelite captives are “a spectacle among the gentiles”; and Euripides, **Hippolytus** 103. For meaning (b), see Lucian, **On Salariated Posts in Great Houses** 28, where an employee must make himself “conspicuous among the claque” if he is to be noticed by his employer.

¹⁷Even if we omit Phoebe on the grounds that she was not a permanent resident in Rome, Paul still names more women performing more functions.