In *Paul and Gender*, Cynthia Long Westfall addresses classic Pauline and disputed Pauline passages that have been used as arguments to restrict women’s leadership in Christian churches. Methodologically, Westfall emphasizes the importance of situating these passages within the broader context of Paul’s message and theology, attending to Paul’s message about men as well as his message about women, and considering the historical context of Paul’s rhetoric. All of these goals are important, but the way that Westfall draws attention to Paul’s broader theological commitments is especially fruitful, and it is here that I see the greatest potential to move the conversation about these passages forward. I will briefly summarize the chapters of the book before turning to critical comments.

Chapter 1, “Culture,” describes Greco-Roman culture as a consistent set of social norms by which women were subjugated. Against this repressive background, Westfall interprets Paul as intervening in specific ways on behalf of women. For example, she argues that the women of Corinth probably wanted to wear veils and that Paul’s language in 1 Cor 11 allows all women (slave and free) to do so (33). She views the instructions about veiling as countercultural and as Paul’s attempt to protect and reinforce women’s status, which was symbolized through veiling (e.g., 37, 69, 70).
Chapter 2, “Stereotypes,” highlights the feminine imagery Paul applies to himself as well as the masculine imagery that he uses to describe all believers. Again, Westfall sees Paul’s rhetoric as countercultural. She argues that the rhetoric about husbands and wives in Eph 5 “recasts the man as the bride of Christ and the wife as the man’s male body” (56). The overlapping gendered imagery reinforces a call to mutual submission in marriage.

Chapters 3–7 follow a thematic theme through Paul’s letters and contrast that message with conventional teaching on Paul’s views of women. In chapter 3, “Creation,” Westfall argues that Paul sees both males and females as under the influence of sin and death. She contrasts this with interpretations of Paul’s letters that suggest that gender hierarchy is immutable because it is inherent in the created order. She argues that neither the reference to the creation of man first nor the Greek word kephalē (“head, source”) supports that conclusion:

There is no compelling reason to interpret Paul as contradicting, reinterpreting, or qualifying the authority of women in the creation account in Genesis 1:27–28 or in his use of the Greek idiom “head.” Both male and female were created in God’s image, and both were created for dominion that Paul indicates is exercised in terms of mutuality and reciprocity within appropriate cultural paradigms. (105)

Westfall wants readers of Paul’s letters to situate instructions to women within this larger paradigm that proceeds from Paul’s understanding of creation.

“The Fall” (ch. 4) addresses interpreters who use the language of 1 Tim 2:14 (“the woman was deceived”) as an ontological claim about women based on the created order. Westfall argues that Paul elsewhere asserts that all humans are deceived. Although Paul identifies Adam as the originator of sin and death, Paul never makes men more culpable than women for the consequences of Adam’s behavior. Therefore, it is unlikely that he means to do so with regard to women. Furthermore, Paul often identifies those who are weak as suited to be used by God. Westfall uses this exploration in an interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11–15, a subject to which she returns in the final chapter of the book.

Chapter 5, “Eschatology,” responds to interpreters who claim that Pauline gender norms transcend time and space. Westfall argues that Paul “includes men and women in humanity’s final destiny” (147); moreover, “men and women equally share the same resurrection body as Christ regardless of their gender” (149, emphasis original). Therefore, keeping women subordinate in the contemporary church reflects an underrealized eschatology and should be rejected.
In chapter 6, “The Body,” Westfall argues that readers should not attribute a mindset of Platonic dualism to Paul. This would lead to the separation of body and spirit, something she argues has contributed to the denigration of women. Instead, she asserts that Paul invites women to participate in the religious world, from which they were formally excluded through the practice of circumcision. She also sees Paul as rejecting purity language relating to sex and women as a source of contamination.

“Calling” (ch. 7) points out inconsistencies in interpretations that privilege the restrictive language of 1 Tim 2:12 over Paul’s instructions in Rom 12. Westfall argues that the dominance of 1 Tim 2:12 results in women’s experience regarding their gifts being questioned while male experiences are not. She asserts that interpreters should give preference to the longer and clearer passage, Rom 12.

With the previous chapters as a basis, Westfall concludes with an interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11–15. She reads this letter as Pauline and as a personal letter to Timothy. She posits a social context for the letter in which false teachings have become a problem. She does not read these verses in reference to a context of worship, as many interpreters do, but to the larger problem of false teachings. In this context she argues that women are instructed to learn from their husbands to correct false teachings. The passage is specific to that context and should not be used to make transcendent statements about women.

Westfall’s argument advances the discussion of these passages in evangelical circles, and commentators who share this perspective should attend to it closely. In particular, she makes a strong argument for considering as primary Paul’s theology of creation, eschatology, and calling. In my critical comments below, I have tried to steer away from arguments that question the framework of Westfall’s arguments. For example, many readers may not share her presumption of Pauline authorship, or they may long for a more socially constructed definition of “gender” (1). These are valid concerns, but they seem secondary to the goals Westfall has for her own work. I will instead try to critique Westfall’s argument from within.

A number of problems stem from Westfall’s assumptions about gender in the historical context of the first century. The cultural context sketched in chapter 1 has some inaccuracies. For example, Westfall asserts that the paterfamilias “had absolute power in the family” (15), a notion brought into question some time ago by Richard Saller (e.g., “Corporal Punishment, Authority, and Obedience in the Roman Household,” in Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome, ed. B. Rawson [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], 144–65). She also asserts that only firstborn sons were heirs (16), although she contradicts this with more accurate information in chapter 8, where she discusses women heirs (261). Judith Evans Grubbs’s work on Roman law would be helpful to clarify this
point, along with the notion that most women in this period were married *sine manu* and therefore never came under the legal authority of their husbands (see Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce, and Widowhood* [London: Routledge, 2002]).

This imprecision with the historical material is certainly not a criticism that I would direct to Westfall alone: her primary interlocutors share and reiterate similar notions of the cultural context. However, her book reinforces the problem. There is a good deal of recent work on the topic of women in the early Roman period that is methodologically nuanced and that also addresses a wider array of evidence than earlier interpreters had at their disposal. In addition to the sources mentioned above, I recommend the works of Emily Hemelrijk, Rosalyn Kearsley, Rebecca Langlands, Beth Severy, and Susan Treggiari. Attention to these sources would round out Westfall’s bibliography and prevent mistakes.

A second concern I had at a number of places in the work is that Westfall conveys a view of culture that is monolithic. She refers to “the Greco-Roman ideal” of gender (17, 246) as if there were only one. She contrasts Paul with Judaism in ways that suggest Judaism was a single practice or perspective, from which Paul defected. In the chapter on “The Body” this results in a mischaracterization of Jewish practices as overly restrictive of women and probably also underestimates Paul’s affinity to purity as a religious concept. In other chapters Westfall compares Greek practices of veiling to those of modern Islamic cultures. This argument suggests that veiling always serves the same cultural function in every place and time that it is practiced, which seems implausible. An approach that assumes cultures are manifold and conflicting would be welcome.

A less disruptive problem, but one that is common in New Testament studies, is the application of the modern terms *public* and *private* to the first century. Westfall alters the terms to *public* and *domestic* (22), but this does little to address the problem. Modern interpreters conceive of the public as a wide sphere of influence that includes political advocacy, business, and education, yet in the Roman world, public was narrowly defined as judicial and legislative functions. Westfall is correct in her assertion that Paul’s instructions about worship are not public, but it is not the location in the households that makes the label inappropriate. Political and business deals, as well as other civic and social negotiations, often took place within households. Westfall and those who follow in her footsteps would be better off avoiding the words public and private altogether and finding more precise terms to describe the social conventions through which women exerted civic and religious leadership.

I hope that these criticisms will not detract from Westfall’s accomplishments, which are many. Her interpretation breaks open a rigid and confining way of reading Paul’s views.
of women. This restrictive reading has had great staying power in many Christian communities, and a fresh approach like Westfall’s may help many readers to see familiar passages in fresh ways. The fact that Westfall shares a theology of scripture with many evangelical readers will make her interpretation more plausible to the target audience. This is a conversation that is still worth having, and Westfall provides a new array of constructive arguments for those who are willing to engage in it.