

READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH

The Equality and Diversity of the Genders No. 7

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We have been speaking these past Lord's Day evenings about the Bible's characteristically *dialectical* presentation of its teaching. By *dialectical* we mean that it juxtaposes and counterposes truths but does not harmonize them or mediate between them or their competing interests. We have divine sovereignty counterposed to human freedom and responsibility, but we do not have any sustained instruction as to how both doctrines are to be held true at one and the same time. They are both true, but how they are both true and how to harmonize them is not a subject the Bible teaches us. It leaves us with both doctrines and the requirement to believe them both, something, as church history demonstrates plainly, is not always an easy thing to do. And so with the tension produced by the twin biblical emphases on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers and the prospect of the judgment of our lives according to our deeds, or the promises of God's blessing made to believers and the candid acknowledgment of the Bible that frequently it will not appear that God *is* keeping his promises to his children. We have also, so far, in this series, considered as illustrations of this dialectical presentation of biblical truth 1) the twin emphases of the necessity to contend for the faith and, at the same time, to contend for the unity of the people of God in defiance of doctrinal differences; 2) the counter-poles of chastity and modesty, on the one hand, and the celebration of sexual desire and physical attractiveness, on the other; and 3) the priesthood of all believers at one end of the continuum of truths relating to the believer's relationship to God and salvation and, at the other, the dependence of the individual believer upon the church's ministry and eldership and the Christian's obligation of obedience and submission to those over him or her in the Lord.

Tonight I want to take another example of the Bible's dialectical pedagogy, this a matter of pressing concern in the church in our day. I am speaking of the biblical doctrine of gender. Obviously, this entire area of the Bible's teaching has become highly controversial. It surfaces especially in questions touching the place of women in the leadership of the church – whether they are permitted in the Bible to be elders and ministers, for example – and in the translation of Holy Scripture – whether the generic masculine, the rule in both the Hebrew OT and the Greek NT, should be retained in English translations.

These issues became urgent in the later 1960s, with the rise of feminism in the culture as a whole, and have dominated the evangelical landscape ever since. As feminism has redrawn the social map of the United States it has, at the same time, exercised a great influence in the church.

Now, churches like ours have maintained, both in teaching and in our church law, that the ancient, historic position of the Christian church, both in the translation of the Word of God and in the reservation of church office to men, is founded upon the clear teaching of the Word of God. The Bible, in what has become the modern parlance, teaches a patriarchal view of human society. God has assigned to the male a role of leadership in home, in church, and in society.

Battle after battle has been fought over texts such as 1 Timothy 2:12-15, 1 Corinthians 11:3-10, and Ephesians 5:21-33, texts that seem clearly to teach a discrimination between the genders and

male headship in the home and the church. Feminist exegesis of these texts over the past 20 years has endeavored to show that they should be read differently and that, in fact, contrary to the virtually unanimous tradition of the Christian church, they provide no argument against women elders or ministers or against an egalitarian home. However, battle after battle – about the meaning of Greek words and about the interpretation of these NT texts – has been won by the side maintaining the church’s historic position. And, after all, those explicit statements of gender discrimination in those NT texts are only applications of a much larger biblical sociology of gender. The Bible teaches a patriarchal view of human society. God, who is over all, represents himself with masculine names and titles, not feminine: Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus was himself a man. The priests of God were all male. The elders of Israel were all men. The twelve disciples and the seven deacons of Acts 6 were men. And in a thousand ways everywhere in the Bible the headship of the man is either asserted or assumed.

The war itself, to be sure, may very well be lost – there are few evangelical denominations that have held the gate against the battering ram of contemporary feminist ideology, but the exegetical battles have all been won. It is clearer now even than it was twenty years ago that the Bible does in fact teach the distinction of genders and male headship. And that in itself is an indication that the question before the church is not really about what the Bible says but about whether she is willing to obey the Lord in a way that would bring down upon her head the wrath of the world or willing to obey the Lord when his law forbids what she desires to be and do.

And so in our church, women are not permitted to hold church office and we teach and expect our men and women to practice the ethics of the home as they are taught in Holy Scripture, including male headship. Bizarre, Neanderthal as all of that sounds to modern American ears, it is the teaching of the Word of God and we should not be surprised that a culture such as ours, that has been for so long in open rebellion against God and his Law, should increasingly find biblical teaching incredible.

However, just as is to be expected, the distinction of genders and male headship are not the whole story in the Bible. There is, as we might have expected, a counter-pole. The feminists have their texts too. All heresies have their texts and most originate in a willingness, even a determination, to hear only part of what the Bible says on a given subject.

But, as loyal followers of Jesus Christ, we want to hear those texts, the texts the feminists cite, just as surely as the texts they have spent twenty years seeking to silence or subvert. And, fact is, there are a great many of them.

The feminist’s favorite text is, as you may know, Galatians 3:28:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Now, we are quick to point out, and rightly so, that in the context this verse does not in any way contradict or diminish the relevance of those other NT texts that teach male headship. Paul is talking about salvation and how it comes to all through faith in Christ, to all without distinction. But, the fact is the text does teach and others like it that, in the matters most precious and

eternally important to us, the Bible does not make a distinction between men and women. It never does. Virtually all the teaching on the Christian life that we get, for example, in the letters of Paul, is addressed to Christians generally without any reference to gender. Men and women are equally obliged, equally summoned to live worthy of the grace they have received, and equally responsible to keep the great many commandments that we find in that material. Only in that very specific area of authority in the life of home, church, and society does the Bible distinguish the genders in its teaching about the Christian life.

In our day, I suppose in an effort to defend the headship of the male, we have had prominent evangelical teachers argue that if under orders from their husband, women are not responsible for the sins that they commit. If her husband orders her to sin she is not guilty of sinning. That is, of course, complete rubbish. Just as all Christians, even under orders from the state, must obey God rather than men, so women are obliged to obey the Lord first and always, come wind, come weather. They are Christians, after all, Christians first and Christians last. Indeed, before that, they are human beings first and last, made in the image of God as any man, and, indeed, taken from the side of a man to be his equal and his partner, as Adam rejoices to say at his first sight of Eve: “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” It is no small thing that in Genesis 1 woman is created as equally the bearer of the divine image. In the Ancient Near Eastern world of Genesis that was a remarkable assertion and still more that to the woman, as to the man, was given the authority to subdue the creation and rule over it (Gen. 1:26-28).

An excellent example of the Bible’s emphasis on the full equality of the woman in the life of mankind before the face of God is furnished in Gen. 21:17. Hagar, having been driven from Sarah’s home, wandered in the desert until her water was gone. The Lord found her there in despair and said to her, “Hagar, what is the matter? Do not be afraid.” Dr. Waltke points out that a modern reader would miss the significance of this address. “This is the only instance in all of the many thousands of ancient Near Eastern texts where a deity, or his messenger, calls a woman by name and thereby invests her with exalted dignity. Hagar is the OT counterpart to the Samaritan woman.” [*The Role of Women in Worship in the Old Testament*, 7, lecture taken off the Web]

In a hundred ways, the impression of her dignity is confirmed in the Bible. The famous picture of her given in Proverbs 31, with all of that woman’s skill, her wisdom, her *savoir faire*, her accomplishment, her effective interaction with other people, including men, her goodness, is but one example. We are treated to elaborate descriptions of wise and effective women. Abigail the husband of Nabal is one we looked at relatively recently on a Sunday evening. But think of Deborah, of Naomi and Ruth, and of Esther. And on into the NT it is the same. Think of Mary herself, of Anna, of Priscilla, of Lydia, of Phoebe, and so on.

But there is more than that in the Bible that reminds us of the full and unqualified dignity of the female Christian life, no matter the specific limitations that may have been imposed at several points.

In the OT and in the NT women were *called and gifted to be prophetesses*, God’s spokesmen in the world. Miriam, Moses’ sister, was the first of such prophetesses to be named, and following her we have Deborah, Isaiah’s wife, and Huldah, who, as you may remember, was the wife of the

keeper of the royal wardrobe who declared the will of God to King Josiah after the discovery of the book of Deuteronomy in the temple (2 Kgs. 22:14). What is interesting in the last case is that the priests went to consult with her to find out what they should do. As one scholar sums up the situation:

“That officials from the royal court went to a prophetess relatively unknown with so important a matter is strong indication that in this period of Israel’s history there is little if any prejudice against a woman’s offering of prophecy. If she had received the gift of prophecy, her words were to be given the same Authority as those of men.” [Clarence Vos cited by Waltke, 7]

There were, as might be expected, also false prophetesses as there were false prophets. And we find the same in the NT. The prophecy of Joel that both sons and daughters would prophesy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, Philip, you remember, had four daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9), the gift of prophecy was exercised by men and women alike in the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:5). The Lord did not hesitate to speak his authoritative word and will as well through the mouths of women as men.

Here is the biblical dialectic in all its stark power: the Bible forbids women from being ministers of the Word, but records in many places women being prophets of God. And, in the same way, it warns against a false prophetess, given the nickname Jezebel in Rev. 2:20, just as it warns against male false prophets and other teachers.

Men and women were from the beginning equal in the life of prayer and in the freedom of their access to God. Rachel’s womb was opened when she prayed to God for children (Gen. 30:22-24). Hannah strikes us as much more a person of prayer than her kindly but ineffective husband, Elkanah. She named her son, Samuel, which means “Heard of God,” and it was Hannah who had done the asking! And it was the son born in answer to her prayer that turned around Israel’s spiritual situation.

Women sang and danced in Israelite worship. Miriam and Deborah composed the oldest songs preserved for us in Holy Scripture. Women also partook equally with men in the sacrificial worship, the Passover and the other feasts as well as the sacrifices of the temple, though they were not required to go as were their husbands and brothers. There were, indeed, certain sacrifices, just like those brought typically by men, that had to be brought by women themselves (Lev. 12:6). The laws of ritual cleanliness applied equally to one gender as to the other. Interestingly, I imagine somewhat surprisingly to many modern evangelical readers of the Bible, the Nazirite vow could be taken as well by a woman as by a man (Num. 6:2).

Women stood with men in the teaching and nurturing of their children. There is a patriarchal cast to the Book of Proverbs, to be sure, but it is clear that what is said of fathers teaching their sons applies, necessary changes being made, to mothers teaching their children. For example, in 31:26 we read of the virtuous woman that “she speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue.” In Prov. 1:8, at the outset, the father says to his boy, “do not forsake your mother’s teaching.” That seems unexceptional to us, but Dr. Waltke reminds us that “nowhere else in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, from the Euphrates to the Nile, is the mother

mentioned as a teacher.” [8] Of course, for her to teach, she herself had to be taught, indicating that “son” in Proverbs really means “child.”

And all of this comes over simply and uncontroversially into the New Testament. You can easily remember how naturally and unaffectedly the NT records the important contribution that women made to the advancement of the gospel, first in the ministry of the Lord Jesus himself and then in the ministry of the Apostles. Women accompanied and provided financial support for the Lord’s itinerant ministry. Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia pleading with him to come over to help him, but, when he got to Philippi, it was a woman he found at prayer who was his first convert. Paul greets Phoebe as a “servant” of the church in Cenchrea. The terms used of her in Rom. 16:1-2, suggest she may well have been a patron of Paul’s ministry, providing financial support in something like the same way the Countess of Huntingdon was a patron of the Great Awakening in the 18th century. Paul speaks of Priscilla as his “fellow-worker,” Tryphena and Tryphosa as “women who work hard in the Lord.” What is very interesting in Romans 16, for example, is that in that list of greetings, many of which are accompanied with comments about a particular Christian’s usefulness, men and women are mixed together in the list without any distinction. So are the gender mixed without qualifications in the list of the examples of true and preserving faith in Hebrews.

In a Christian worship service in apostolic times, women would pray as well as men, just as they might, in places where the gift had been given, prophesy. (1 Cor. 11). The New Testament shows no hesitation in ascribing important roles to women in the history of first century Christianity and its mission into the Gentile world. It shows no consciousness of a need to keep women in their place, apart from the specific prohibition it makes regarding rule and teaching in the church and the headship of the male in the home. Otherwise, men and women are, in every respect addressed in biblical teaching, on the same footing, sharing the same privileges and bound to the same obligations. What is more, our Savior made a point of saying that the relationship between men and women, as it has been established for the life of this world, would not continue in the world to come.

This too is the revelation of God’s Word. And those of us who have been put on the defensive by the onrush of feminist ideology and who have spent considerable energy defending the biblical discrimination of genders, need to be careful that we do not forget this other pole – the emphatic teaching of and assumption of full equality in the kingdom of God – while we defend that pole that the feminist church is seeking to subvert. We will not help the cause of truth if we do not give women their rightful place in the kingdom of God and celebrate their equality with men as heirs together of the gracious gift of life as we defend the limitation placed upon them as women in the Word of God.

I remember, several years ago, a young woman, just married was attending our church with her new husband. She came from a church background that had embraced the new feminist, egalitarian viewpoint and was observing us, she told me, to see if the women in a church like ours, were oppressed by their husbands or their elders, or were ignored or marginalized, or prevented from employing their gifts and contributing to the work. I am happy to say that she came to feel that our convictions had not soured the life of the women in the congregation or rendered them insignificant.

But, surely, that is a good test, is it not? That a church that maintains biblical male headship and reserves its offices to men, should also, at the same time, be a church in which, by and large, it should be obvious that there is no substantial difference between men and women in the matter of the life of faith, that there is no impression given that the masculine gender is more important than the other, or that a man has a greater obligation than a woman to live a holy and fruitful life. Rather, it should be obvious that by and large we are all a single brotherhood, men and women alike, and that, in Christ, there is neither male nor female.