
Outline the Biblical Teaching on the Relationship Between the Sexes

Name: Iain A. Emberson

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1. Introduction

This essay examines the various aspects of male/female relations, as presented in the scriptures. Beginning with the creation narrative in Genesis and continuing through the New Testament, with the teachings of Jesus and Paul, amongst others; we attempt to demonstrate that in scripture, Men and Women were created equal by God with differing, but complementary roles. We also examine the much debated issue of Women in ministry.

2. Beginnings: The Creation of Men and Women

The narrative in Genesis 1-2 indicates, as Stott points out, that the equality between men and women is based on creation itself.¹ In Genesis 1:27-28, we note that both men and women bear the image of God, are equally blessed by him and both are equally responsible for managing the earth's resources. Genesis 2:18 indicates a further aspect of men and women, i.e. their complementarity: both sexes, though different, are interdependent on each other. Without a helper and partner, man could not realise his full humanity. Taken together, these verses highlight the biblical teaching of equality of men and women, an equality which means not identity, rather complementarity.

However, as Stott further points out, sexual equality was distorted by the fall: "In place of the equality...and complementarity...there would come the rule of the one over the other. The domination of woman by man is due to the fall, not to the creation."²

Genesis 3:16 indicates that as a result of the fall, solidarity between husband and wife would now be replaced by an innate struggle between the two for domination and control, with men becoming dominant. This hierarchy would be reflected in the structure of nations and also in the family.

1. Stott, John, *Issues facing Christians Today*, p328
2. Ibid, p330

3. Christ's Teaching on Male/Female Relationships

There are a number of passages in the Gospels where Christ affirms the dignity and respect due to women. An example is the dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42, where despite the dual 'barriers' of sex and race between the two, Christ chooses to engage in theological discussion. Also notable is Christ's dealing with the adulterous woman in John 7:53-8:11, where rather than acting in condemnation, he draws attention to the common sinful nature of both men and women. Christ welcomed women as learners (Mary, in Luke 10:38-42), and several women even travelled with Jesus and the disciples (Luke 8:1-3). In this we see that Christ calls "all without distinction to the freedom of the kingdom of God."³

Christ also introduced radical teaching on the issue of divorce, for in NT times, a man could divorce his wife unilaterally, sometimes for minor reasons. We note the teaching on adultery in Mark 10:11-12, in which the wife and husband are treated equally.

We note also the appearance of Christ after his resurrection to the women in Luke 24:1-11 and John 20:1-18, who subsequently announced this to the eleven (Luke 24:9). Given that, at the time, a woman's testimony would not have been held in such high regard as a man's, this was a remarkable event.

4. Men and Women in the Writings of St. Paul & St. Peter

Paul emphasises the unity that all believers have in Christ in Galatians 3:28 : "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This logically follows his earlier teaching in v.26: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."

3. Henry, Carl, *Wycliffe Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, p712

Paul emphasises here that by faith in Christ, all are accepted as children of God, irrespective of class, sex or race. Stott points out that Paul celebrates here the equality, which was established through the created order, but later damaged by the fall, has been restored in Christ, in which men should note that women are “...heirs with you of the gracious gift of life (1 Peter 3:7).”⁴

In a separate passage in 1 Corinthians 11:11, Paul reaffirms the principle of complementarity, which has been restored in Christ: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.” He stresses here that men and women are one in the Lord (cf. Galatians 6:2) and are mutually interdependent, belonging and needing each other.

Paul's affirmation of equality in Christ must, however, be taken alongside another aspect of his teaching, i.e. male headship. Two key verses are 1 Corinthians 11:3: “... the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” and Ephesians 5:23: “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.”

The Greek word *kephale*, used in these verses for “head” has been understood by some as denoting authority (i.e. the traditional position of male headship, as Paul refers back to the created order in Genesis 2). No inferiority is implied in the submission of the wife to the husband, rather the differentiation of divinely ordained roles. This view emphasises the 'different but equal' role of men and women in the created order.

Kephale has also been understood as denoting 'source' or 'origin', i.e. reaffirming the priority in the created order of men over women. Thus v.3 reads: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the *source / origin* of every man, and the man is the *source / origin* of a woman, and God is the *source / origin* of Christ.” The last of these alternatives, in particular has been offered as strongly supporting this view.

4. Stott, John, Issues facing Christians Today, p332

Stott offers a third view of *kephale* as denoting 'responsibility'. Stott points out that while headship must be consistent with equality, it must also involve authority, which Stott argues is best expressed by responsibility.

“The choice of this word...is based on the two models Paul develops to illustrate the head's attitude to the body. The first is Christ's attitude to his body, the church, and the second is the personal concern which we human being all have for the welfare of our own bodies.”⁵

Responsibility involves firstly sacrificial love (Ephesians 5:23) and secondly, selfless care (5:28).

1 Peter 3:1 advises wives to submit to their husbands, with the verb here denoting submission to a recognised authority. It does not in any way denote inferiority, rather it is a submission that it is necessary for order in the home.⁶ Paul also calls for mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21, having in mind helping, encouraging and taking advice, one from another.

5. Women in Ministry

The Bible gives several examples of Women who were engaged in active ministry, with a notable example being that of Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), who Paul terms “...a servant (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchrea.” It is unclear exactly what degree of responsibility Phoebe may have had in the church there, but along with several other women mentioned in the chapter, they worked to support Paul's ministry. In the Old Testament, Deborah is described as a “judge” and “prophetess” who led Israel (Judges 4:4). Also significant is the fact that women would have been present on the day of Pentecost and would have thus received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). Some have seen this latter point as indicating that women have a clear role in taking part in the mission of the church to teach, preach and evangelise.

5. Stott, John, *Issues facing Christians Today*, p344

6. NIV, Study Bible Notes, 1 Peter 3:1

These positive models of women in ministry, must be taken alongside several other verses describing their role. They are to keep silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34), be submissive (Titus 2:5), even as Children (1 Timothy 3:4) and to listen in silence and not act as teachers (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

Some see these verses as reflecting the divinely ordained order established at creation insisting on male leadership and headship. Again, no inferiority is being implied, only the differentiation of roles.

To support this view, Grudem draws attention to the fact that the twelve apostles as men, were appointed by Christ as “..a pattern of male leadership in the church.” and also he notes the “history of male teaching and leadership throughout the whole Bible.” Also notable is the fact that in the Old Testament, the Priests, who had teaching responsibilities for the people were all male.⁷

Some have argued that Paul's instructions provide us with an example of situation ethics in which the apostle is writing to counteract specific situations, rather than laying down absolute laws and prohibitions. In Paul's time, there existed the Gnostic heresy, which exalted the role of Eve, as “bringer of both light and life, the mediatrix who brought divine enlightenment to mankind.”⁸ It may well be that Paul, writing in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 had the condemnation of such groups in mind. At any rate, Paul is reminding his readers that no-one has a privileged position with God on the basis of being male or female.

A further point of relevance is the fact that Paul's list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 carries no implication in the text that they were intended for men only, rather for all in building up the body of Christ. In fact, in the previous chapter, Paul mentions women who are praying and prophesying in the public assembly (1 Corinthians 11:5).

7. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp.940-1

8. 'Feminist Theology' in the *New Dictionary of Theology*, p258.

6. Conclusion

In the Bible, both men and women are created in the image of God and are totally equal before him, sharing jointly in the stewardship of his creation. However, alongside the principle of equality comes the principle of complementarity i.e. the fact that men and women, though equal, have differing roles. It is, as Stott has pointed out, this tension between the “equal but different” state that has proved problematic, especially within the context of ministry.

Some have taken the view, that in Christ, such distinctions have been rendered obsolete (Galatians 3:28), while others refer to the dominant patterns of male leadership throughout the Bible and the seeming prohibition of women exercising a ministerial role in the writings of Paul.

Paul also puts forward a third aspect of relations between men and women, i.e. the idea of male headship. Again opinions vary as to whether this denotes 'authority', 'source' (emphasising the order established at creation) or, in the view of Stott, 'responsibility', being likened to the relationship between parents and children, but more importantly, to that between Christ and his church.

Commenting on the tension between sexual equality and complementarity, J. Packer writes:

...the man-woman relationship is intrinsically non-reversible...This is part of the reality of creation...[We need to]...theologize reciprocity, spiritual equality, freedom for ministry and mutual respect between men and women within this framework. It is important that the cause of not imposing on women restrictions that Scripture does not impose should not be confused with the quite different goals of minimizing the distinctness of the sexes as created and of diminishing the male's inalienable responsibilities in man-woman relationships.⁹

9. Quoted in Stott, John, *Issues facing Christians Today*, p353

7. Bibliography

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