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# Male and Female

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**The relationship between male and female in the Bible** is a very live and important issue in current evangelicalism. Much has been written and is still appearing on the subject. One book which should be read is **The Role of Women** in the series entitled 'When Christians Disagree' published by IVP. The aim of this article is to identify the biblical areas in controversy and to engage in some initial expansion of them.

A useful introduction to the contemporary discussion of this subject is provided by a quotation from an essay by R.K. Johnson entitled 'The Role of Women in the Church and Home: An Evangelical Test Case in Hermeneutics'.

"It is almost impossible for the interested individual to keep abreast of the burgeoning discussion on women's place in the church and Christian home. Stirred by the steady stream of feminist literature which has caused a revolution in western society and prodded by the more liberal wing of the Church which opened up the discussion on the ordination of women twenty or more years ago, contemporary Evangelicals have become increasingly interested in re-evaluating the role of women."<sup>1</sup>

This statement is useful because it identifies two factors which are responsible for the prominence of the whole subject in our time, viz feminism and women's ordination. These are of course interconnected. But they do need to be seen as parts of a larger whole, namely the social upheaval which results from the technological revolution. This fuelled the demand for equality which began as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

But let us proceed with R.K. Johnson as he describes the two sides taken in the debate:

"The one side argues that the female in today's 'liberated' society is still a 'woman' and as such should fit into God's ordained and orderly creation, fulfilling her role of submission and dependence in church and home without impatience on the one hand or servitude on the other." (These are called 'Traditionalists'.)

"The other side argues that a Christian woman in today's society should be ordained to ministry if she possesses the gifts and has the training. It also holds that wives should join their husbands in egalitarian relationships characterised by **mutual** love and submission."<sup>3</sup> (These are called 'Egalitarians'.)

Now which of these is right? There is of course a prior question, namely, "How can we decide which is right?" To answer this question by saying "By what the Bible teaches", though correct, is not adequate because both sides would give it. That is the particular difficulty of this subject. R.K. Johnson

speaks on this as follows:

“Use of the Bible as a source of authority in the debate has brought mixed approaches and results. Feminists have tended to emphasise the broader affirmations of the gospel which stress one-ness in Christ. Traditionalists have usually centred on specific passages of advice in Scripture such as Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2. Moreover, in regard to specific biblical texts, differences of opinion have arisen at almost every conceivable place. Both sides ground their positions in Scripture and yet opposite conclusions are reached. Clearly one’s method of understanding Scripture is crucial at this point ... What is at stake ultimately is the nature and authority of Scripture itself as reflected in the current theological debate.”<sup>4</sup>

That quote indicates the degree of difficulty involved in this subject and the grave danger. We could end up not only having misunderstood a scriptural statement but having abrogated the authority of Scripture.

In this treatment of the subject I have isolated the matters which, in my judgement, lie closest to the heart of the debate for us to consider. I have divided these into two groups, namely, matters which are general in nature and those which relate to specific passages and statements of Scripture. I am only going to allude to the first.

## **General Matters**

There are two of these to which I want to draw attention. Strictly speaking the second is contained in the first or rather is a sub-division of it. They are the subjects of Biblical Interpretation and Culture. It will be appreciated that these are large subjects. My comments on each are going to be minimal, focussing on the bearing of each on our subject. They form together the context of thinking in which the male-female question has been given attention of late. They are most important for that reason.

## **Biblical Interpretation**

Of late evangelical scholarship has been concentrating on interpretation. “From Inerrancy to Interpretation” could justly be the title for a history of recent evangelical thought on or about the doctrine of Scripture. This is indicated by the publications, statements and summit conferences of the International Council on Bible Inerrancy. This is a recognition by inerrantists (perish the word) that the battle over inerrancy is a battle over a starting line and not a finishing tape. It is a battle for the Bible as a whole in order that it may have its full and intended effect. R.C. Sproul has written: “Discussion of inerrancy is mostly an academic exercise unless it concerns the individual Christian on the level of his growth in God.”

Added to this is the growing influence of the New Hermeneutic as an interpretive approach to which Evangelicals have had to respond in some way. This involves a recognition of “the contextual approach and the hermeneutical circle” in which the different contexts of writer and reader are stressed and a tuning-in fading-out process is necessary for an understanding of what is in the text. This is a challenge to grammatico-historical exegesis.

Rene Padilla has written: “How can the chasm between past and present be

bridged? An answer is found in the contextual approach which combines insights received from classical hermeneutics with insights received from the modern hermeneutical debate. In the contextual approach both the context of the ancient text and the context of the modern reader are given due weight.”

The result is that interpretation is by no means as straightforward as it used to be i.e. textual, linguistic, historical, theological study under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### **Culture**

This matter was brought to light partly by the above approach. Context and culture are almost synonymous. The Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelisation in July 1974 gave it prominence in its report and subsequent meetings of its Theology and Education group pursued it. The Willowbank Report on the Gospel and Culture is a case in point. In this it was accepted that: “The writing and reading of the Bible, the presentation of the gospel, conversion, church and conduct — all these are influenced by culture.”

The task is therefore: “To develop our understanding of the inter-relation of the gospel and culture with special reference to God’s revelation, to an interpretation and communication of it, and to the response of the hearers in their conversion, their churches and lifestyle.” This involves: determining what is cultural in any given passage and teaching; determining what is cultural in our view of the subject. In this way the biblical teaching can be distinguished from its cultural wrapper.

Now male-female relations form an aspect of culture. But are they **only** cultural? Is the relevant OT material to be regarded as **merely** patriarchal and the NT material merely rabbinic? Or are there data in those passages which are trans-cultural? The real danger in this approach is that something may be regarded as cultural and passé which is permanent and authoritative.

The reality and dimensions of this problem are indicated by the following quote:

“I enjoy living in a group of human beings whose affluent economy is based on loaning and borrowing money at interest, in a place where I wash my own feet before bed rather than having someone else wash my feet before meals, where my wife wears short and stylish hair without a head covering, where woman talk and pray in church. I have always been told that biblical teaching of another kind of behaviour was for the people of biblical days. But suddenly I find myself confronted with a new brand of interpreter who assures me **for the same reasons** that divorce is to be preferred to a dead marriage, that homosexual conduct is fine as long as it is faithful, that pornographic literature is excellent therapy for a sexually weak marriage, that pre-marital and extra-marital sex is the best way to love under some circumstances, that husband/wife roles should be inter-changeable. Suddenly I am made aware that every teaching of Scripture is “cultural” and that the idea of expecting obedience only to the principle that can be discerned behind any specific command of Scripture has made possible the

rejection of any teaching at all that is not deemed appropriate by any group of people. I have found myself increasingly willing to wash my brother's feet before the Lord's Supper, insist that my wife let her hair grow long and cover it in church, stop putting money in the bank to earn interest or borrowing it for the purchase of an automobile or any other alternative to giving up my Bible. I am not sure this is necessary but I have found myself facing seriously this alternative. I am convinced that God intended the Bible to mould our culture not to have the meaning of Scripture moulded by our culture."<sup>5</sup>

The possibility clearly exists that we should in the name of Christ, claiming the authority of Scripture, set up a pattern in church and home contrary to His will revealed in His Word.

### **Particular Passages**

These can be listed and grouped as follows:

1) Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25; 3:16

2) Galatians 3:28

3) 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:23; 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-15

I am going to comment on these, focussing as precisely as I can on the areas where the most important problems lie for this subject.

### **The Genesis Passages**

The passages listed above are found in differing though connected theological contexts, viz. Creation and Fall. That fact is an important one in the debate because an attempt is made to locate all rule or role between the sexes in the Fall narrative, i.e. Gen 3:16. F.F. Bruce has written: "It is in the Fall narrative, not in the Creation narratives, that the superiority of the one sex over the other is first mentioned. And here it is not an inherent superiority but one that is exercised by force."<sup>6</sup> Further Valerie Griffiths says while dealing with Genesis 3: "For the first time the rule of one person over another is mentioned."<sup>7</sup>

The suggestion of Bruce's statement seems to be that there is, to use his term, no "superiority" of male over female as created. Griffiths locates all rule of one over another in the context of the Fall. Both deny it a place in mankind as created and subdivided into male and female. The question then which has to be considered is "Was there no order or structure in the male-female relationship **before the Fall?**" The answer to this question is of major importance in the whole debate because if there was not and it only appears in the context of the Fall, then it is not only affected but, in principle at least, annulled by redemption.

### **The Pre-Fall Situation**

The material which is relevant to this question is, of course, Gen 1:26-28 and 2:18-25. While there is broad agreement about the teaching of the former, there is not about the latter. Gen 1:26-28 teaches that man and woman are alike in their relationship to God. Each is as human as the other and each bears the image of God as fully as the other. Together they share in ruling for God.

Gen 2:18-25 — and this must of course be co-ordinated with 1:26-28 and located within what the passage teaches — stresses the relationship between man and woman. The key-note of this passage is differentiation but a differentiation which does not destroy the element of unity and equality before God presented in the first chapter. It rather partakes of the character of complementarity. Woman stably complements man and we may infer that man complements woman. However equality in the humanity which both share does not amount to identity in the humanity which each bears. This element of differentiation between male and female does not appear in Gen 2 for the first time though it is more specified there. It is found in Gen 1:27. The female is not less a distinct and full human being than the male and vice-versa — and there is no such person as a neuter human.

This must be stressed against two other views:

**a) The Androgyne Myth**

The term is composed of the Greek words for male and female. This view sees every human being as partly male and partly female. Henri Blocher writes: "... the neighbour ... is a woman; she does not merely add a few feminine attributes to a 'neutral' humanity. As the hormones permeate the body, so femininity permeates the entire person, intelligence, feeling and will."<sup>8</sup> There is therefore no such thing as a sexless freedom apart from a few bodily characteristics.

**b) The Incompleteness of Man as Human**

This is not so much a view as an over-statement which is worth pointing out. God's declaration, emphatically expressed, that while everything was good, it was not good for man to be alone is slightly distorted by Valerie Griffiths who quotes David Clines with approval as follows: "What Adam lacks is not so much a wife that he may procreate like all the animals but another person so that he may **become** a human being."<sup>9</sup> What Genesis says was not good was not man as male but man as alone. What of Gen 2:18-25? On this passage, Valerie Griffiths writes: "Four facts have led people to assume from these passages the secondary and even inferior status of woman in relation to man, although there is no explicit statement on subordination in this passage: firstly, she was created after man in time; secondly, she was "taken" from him; thirdly, she was named by him; and fourthly, she was created as his helper."<sup>10</sup>

She proceeds to deal with this by way of reference to other biblical material as follows: Man was created after animals and priority there does not indicate superiority; man was taken from the dust and that did not glorify dust; the naming refers to a common nature possessed; and "helper" does not have to denote someone who is subordinate because it is used of God elsewhere in the OT. So the conclusion she draws from this is that the teaching of the passage is of mutual need and complementarity and not subordination or a hierarchy.

The interpretation of Gen 1-3 bristles with difficulties — of a general and particular kind. Answers to these views have been expressed on the basis of a different exegesis of the verses. How can the varying constructions be evaluated? Henri Blocher grants the possibility of some force in the arguments Griffiths presents e.g. that priority and help do not **necessarily** imply

subordination. His judgement therefore is of particular value in this matter and his reasoning sound. He writes: "If Paul, however, supports this argument about man as woman's head by the order of creation (1 Tim 2:13) it is because of its significance in the narrative (i.e. Genesis). 'Neither was man created for woman but woman for man' (1 Cor 11:9). That argument is not a dubious one, and it gives meaning to the order of creation."

Blocher goes on to refer to the man initiating a new household and not the woman and from this and his naming of the woman he concludes "an order governs the relationship between the sexes". Also he says: "The face-to-face partnership of man and woman is not a mere reciprocity equally readable from right to left and from left to right."<sup>11</sup>

An element of order can be legitimately found in Gen 2:18-25 as shown in 1 Cor 11 and 1 Tim 2 and it can be said that it does not contradict Gen 1:26-28. There a partnership in ruling for God is referred to; here the roles in partnership are apportioned. The most which 'egalitarians' claim is that Gen 2:18-25 does not **have** to teach subordination. Whether in the light of the NT it can fail to teach it is a question which we will have to answer when we examine those passages. Blocher regards the NT as unambiguous and definitive on the matter.

### **The Post-Fall Situation**

What is the meaning of Gen 3:16? This describes what effect the Fall had on the relationship between male and female as created in the image of God, for God and for each other. I have viewed Gen 2:18-25 as being an unfolding of what is contained in 1:26-28. This is consistent with the nature of OT material as a progressive and homogenous unfolding of God's truth. Gen 3:16 therefore must be integrally related to those passages, but how? On what basis?

The connection between 1:28 and 3:16a helps us on this point. 3:16a introduces a new element into the procreative pattern established in 1:28. While the power to generate, bestowed by God, remains in spite of the Fall, the process of procreation becomes associated with real pain for the woman, also at God's command. The verb rendered "greatly multiply" does not have to refer to numerous childbirths, it can be enough for it to mean an enlargement of pain and sorrow. This principle of the **alteration of something existing** rather than the **introduction of something completely new** holds good with regard to and makes sense of Gen 3:16b. This means that within procreation and in relation to life, the female's sexual desire for the male will provide him with the opportunity to dominate her.

History is full of examples of this tyranny — but from the beginning it was not so. Headship and responsibility on the one hand and tyrannical domination on the other are by no means synonymous. They can be connected but they do not have to be. The first exists in Gen 2; the second is introduced in Gen 3 which is not the only relevant OT passage to a subordination.

From the Genesis passages the following conclusions can be drawn:

1) Order in the male-female relationship was established in creation not the

Fall.

2) Order is not destructive of the fundamental equality of male and female as fully human and bearers of the divine image.

3) Order underwent an alteration as a result of sin and is therefore open to being affected by good or evil, by grace or sin in the course of history. When affected by grace, the Genesis 1 and 2 situation is restored. One must not use either the reality of creation in the divine image or redemption into the divine image to obliterate this distinction.

The second and third groups of passages, which comprise in fact the New Testament material from the Pauline epistles, will be considered in the second part of this article in the next issue.

**(To be concluded)**

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*"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments because you know they produce quarrels and the Lord's servant must not quarrel, instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful." 2 Timothy 2:23-24*

*It would seem that this reference to the Lord's servant reminds us of the Servant of the Lord who does not strive or cry, who does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax and who comes meek and lowly, riding on an ass. The danger so often in controversy and differences is that we come on a war horse with our visors down and our lances pointed. No wonder the other chap looks to his weapons. We should notice that it is a condition of leadership for elders that they are not strikers and not quarrelsome — and that is the opposite of being pugnacious and the trigger-happy, looking for a theological fight.*

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