

God feminist, sexist or ...?

Peter Wilson

24th February 2013

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is primarily pastoral. It is intended to give some background to the way and reasons by which our church supports both women and men in life, ministry and marriage. Let me begin by acknowledging that other godly Christian leaders will have different viewpoints on some of the matters discussed. It is not my intention to add to the controversy or pain associated with some of these topics. Instead, I hope to offer a balanced and thoughtful explanation of the position I take personally and as a pastoral leader. These notes are a summary only, and need to be read in conjunction with the accompanying sermon audio and reference list at the end.

Creation

Companionship and partnership were God's original purposes for creating a woman to be in relationship with a man.

"It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Genesis 2:18)

God has made us with a need for companionship and intimate relationship. For the majority of men and women this will lead to marriage or some other committed partnership at some stage in their lives.

The word "helper" is often misunderstood to mean that women were created to be the servants of men. But the term is most often used in the Old Testament to describe God. It suggests the notion of a "strong partner". (Compare Psalm 10:14, Exodus 18:4.) In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is described as our "helper" (John 14:16 Amplified)

Following Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden God pronounced a curse over their disobedience outlining the consequences of their actions (Genesis 3:14-19):

- For the man it was painful toil, unproductive labour and hard work until death.
- For the woman it was enmity with the serpent (Satan), pain in childbirth and being ruled over by her husband.

Woman was not created to be subservient to man. Being "ruled over" was a consequence of the Fall and not God's original intention. But in Christ we have been redeemed "from the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13). Through him we can now be productive and fruitful in our work, overcome death, defeat Satan, minimize the pain of childbirth and work in partnership.

Marriage

Genesis 2:24-25 outlines God's intention for a married couple:

- Leave father and mother (Begin a new family unit)
- Be united to his wife (Literally "cleave" – be totally connected)
- Become one flesh – (Deep intimacy reflected in sexual union)
- Naked and without shame – (A safe place to be totally vulnerable and accepted)

Christ

Jesus Christ radically redefined the status of women in his culture and context. See for example the woman at the well (John 4), the woman caught in adultery (John 8), the woman with a hemorrhage (Luke 8:43-48). Mary sat at Jesus' feet a position reserved for men learning from rabbis (Luke 10:39). The first witnesses to the resurrection were women (Luke 24:1-10)

Ephesians 5:21-33

Mutual love and respect are foundational to any relationship and especially marriage.

Instructions to husbands

- "The husband is the head of the wife **as Christ** is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour". (5:22)
- "Husbands, love your wives, just **as Christ** loved the church and gave himself up for her (5:25)
- "love their wives as their own bodies" (5:28)
- "love his wife as he loves himself" (5:28)

Instructions to wives

- "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands **as you do to the Lord.**" (5:22)
- "Now **as the church submits to Christ**, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." (5:24)
- "... the wife must respect her husband." (5:33)

Head

Some people argue that "head" in this context is a term of "authority" or "hierarchy", similar to "the boss". Others define it in terms of "source" as the origin of life, such as the "head" of a river. What we can safely say is that it is a biological rather than institutional image. His connection to his wife, like that of a head to a body is to care for and nurture her. He is to act like Christ in sacrificial love, but He is **not** Christ in terms of being his wife's Saviour, having Christ's perfection or being the soul or primary decision-maker.

The wife's submission is defined in terms of respect for her husband, "as you do to the Lord" and is paralleled to the church's submission to Christ. This is not to be understood as a mindless or unquestioning obedience. It is a reciprocal response to the husband's sacrificial love. When both parties submit to Christ and honour each other with Christ like love and respect they reflect the love, grace and saving power of Jesus.

The application of these principles is especially important in the areas of decision-making and the raising of children. Mutual submission, open discussion and prayerful unity are key concepts to be applied in marriage as well as in the life of the church. What becomes challenging is when one party fails to act like this. How far can and should the other party accept something less than love or mutual respect? As in other areas of submission this is not a blank check for blind obedience. Domestic violence, child abuse, criminal behavior etc. cannot be justified and should not be tolerated on the basis of this passage.

Any additional stipulations about what this might look like or the specific roles of husbands and wives are not spelt out in this passage. Assumptions about male leadership and protection are drawn from other passages. (See for example 1 Peter 3:1-7, also Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 18:12 but compare 21:8-13).

Church

The place of women in the church – silence, teaching, authority, ordination

1 Timothy 2:11-15

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over (possibly “dominate”) a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

Some considerations:

- The Greek word “have authority over” is only used here and is ambiguous in meaning.
- Which is the worse sin, deliberate disobedience or being deceived into disobeying?
- Salvation cannot be meant here as it is only ever by grace. Perhaps it means protected in childbirth (?)

(For a detailed discussion of the problems associated with this text and their resolution see Bilezikian pgs. 173-184.)

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

“As in all the congregations of the saints (Acts 9:13 “saints in Jerusalem”), women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

Some considerations:

- Women were not educated.
- Some commentators suggest Paul is quoting the practice of the Jewish Christian congregations, who also continued the synagogue tradition of men and women sitting separately. He may not be affirming this viewpoint.
- There is no specific prohibition against speaking in “the Law”.

But consider also:

- Priscilla and Aquila both teaching Apollos and described by Paul as “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Acts 18:24-26, Romans 16:3)
- “Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” (Romans 16:7)
- Junia – possibly a female apostle and certainly honoured by Paul.
- Four daughters of Philip who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9)

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

“The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman (wife?) is man (husband?), and the head of Christ is God”. (Vs. 3)

“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” (Vss. 11-12)

Galatians 3:26-28

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Glossary

Complementarian – this term can be understood in two ways:

Firstly, that male and female are different and “the primary “difference” is that females were created with the “role” to be in subjection to and under the final authority of, and led by males in the home and in the church;”

Secondly, the term is used to refer to “the “differences” between the genders without hierarchy (chain of command) implications as to who leads or is in final authority. This term avoids seeing the genders as identical, interchangeable, or basically the same.”

Egalitarian – This term can be used to mean either that:

Men and women are the same (interchangeable) in their nature and abilities, or it can also be used to describe “an equality of essential worth, rank, privilege, standing and full humanity without stereotyped gender functions as part of each one’s basic identity”

Feminist – Negatively, it may be “referring to more ‘radical’ feminism that wants to erase all significant differences between male and female ... (it also) supports the taking over of all authority structures by females, and thus replaces males in power with females in power.” Positively, it may be “referring to the equal worth, justice, privilege, standing, opportunity for service, and leadership of women as women in God’s kingdom program in home, marriage, church and social structures”. (See Johnson pg. 18)

Sexist

1: prejudice or discrimination based on sex; *especially:* discrimination against women

2: behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexism> last visited 21st February 21, 2013)

Reference List

Books

- Beyond Sex Roles – G. Bilezekian Baker Book House Grand Rapids Michigan (1985)
- Women in Ministry Four Views – B. Clouse and R.G. Clouse (Eds) Intervarsity Press Illinois (1989)
- How I changed my mind about women in leadership – A.F. Johnson (Ed) Zondervan Grand Rapids Michigan (2010)
- A woman’s place – L. Morris, J. Gaden, B. Thiering Anglican Information Office Sydney 1976

Some commentary links

A comprehensive overview and response to the issue of marriage, divorce and remarriage: <http://www.wardpowers.info/MAD.htm>

Women’s service in the Church: The Biblical Basis http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm last visited 21st February 21, 2013