

Gender Revolution and the Woman's Role in Ministry

One of the most significant changes in human history has occurred in the past 40-50 years—the gender revolution, or the blending of gender distinctions. In the words of historian William Manchester, “The erasure of distinction between the sexes is not only the most striking issue of our time, it may be the most profound the race has ever confronted.” Even among Bible-believing Christians, intense, emotional controversy exists over what the Bible says about the roles of men and women especially in the church. The two opposing views are that of evangelical feminists (egalitarian) and those who maintain that men and women have distinct roles in their ministry before the Lord (complementarianism).¹

The Fall

We must look at this issue, as well as any other issue in our human experience, through the grid of living in a fallen world. It is only in the first two chapters of the Bible, before creation is tainted by sin, and in the last two chapters, when the curse is lifted, that human experience is not affected by the fall. Hence, fallen man's grasp of the law of God is reduced to a “shapeless ruin,” as Calvin would describe it. Man is darkened in his understanding (Eph 4:18), the law of God is foolishness to him (1 Cor 2:14), and he is incapable of being subject to it (Rom 8:7). Compounding the problem, he perverts ethical values, calls that “good” which God says is evil, and calls that “evil” which God says is good (Isa 5:18-23; Mal 2:17). Furthermore, fallen man is blinded and ensnared by the Evil One, who denies the Gospel and who continually accuses even the forgiven and justified elect (Job 4:17-21; 1 Cor 4:4; 2 Cor 2:10-11; Rev 12:10). Even believers endeavor throughout their sojourn on earth to keep themselves from once again being enslaved to their former passions (Tit 3:3).

Beginning with Eve in Eden, Satan has been enticing women to question God's Word. “Did God really say?” were his first recorded words to Eve (Gen 3:1). Satan wanted her to question the truthfulness of God's Word, telling her she would not die and urging her to question God's goodness in that He was somehow withholding something. Satan still tells women that God's Word is not true and that God is withholding, even relegating her to menial submission, with no inherent glory. This deception affects many areas, so we must reexamine the biblical concept of womanhood.

Biblical Womanhood

God created both male and female equally in His image (Gen 1:27). They each bear the image of God uniquely from the rest of God's creatures. He created each to have unique roles in marriage (Gen 2:18) and in the church, which will be discussed shortly. Yet, resulting from the fall is a woman's struggle with dissatisfaction about her role and her desire for her husband's role instead (Gen 3:16). However, men are

¹ A helpful introduction to this issue is presented in chapter one of John MacArthur's *Different by Design*.

not guiltless, as many of them abuse their leadership position, choosing to lead harshly or in a contrary manner or becoming passive and not leading at all.

So, as already mentioned, God's Word states that men and women were created in the image of God, neither receiving more of the image of God than the other. In essence, the Bible begins with equality of the sexes. Adam was created first and then Eve was created from him for the purpose of being his helper. Though equal with Adam, she was given the role and duty of submitting to him. The word "helper" carries a very positive connotation, being used of God Himself as the helper of Israel (Deut 33:7; Ps 33:20), but it still describes someone in service to another. Submission² was part of the original design before the fall. Thus the first books of the Bible establish a pattern of equality of the sexes yet support the role of the wife (Ex 21:15, 17, 28-31; Num 5:19-20, 29; 6:2; 30:1-16). Notice the consequences of disobedience in the Genesis account (Gen 3:16-19), both for the man and the woman. She would now desire to rule and his rule would be oppressive. She would experience pain in childbirth and tension in authority. That term "desire" in 3:16 is also used in 4:7 to mean "excessive control over." Thus a new desire on the part of woman to control her husband was established, and he would exert his authority. History is a record of the ongoing struggle of woman seeking control and of man seeking dominance.

Search the biblical record. In reading through the first two thirds of the Bible (OT), you will find that God did not place woman in a leadership role, though she was still active in the religious life of Israel. Deborah (Judges 4) is a poster child for women's rights advocates, but she is clearly the exception and not the rule. No Old Testament woman was in an ongoing role of prophetic ministry, a priestess, a queen over Israel or author of either an Old Testament or New Testament book. In fact, Isaiah indicates that God allowed women to rule as part of His judgment on the sinning nation (Isa 3:12).

God's ordained order did not change in the NT administration either. However, Jesus raised the state of women, showing them love and respect. His interaction with them stood in stark contrast to Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture, which viewed women almost on the level of possessions. Jewish rabbis did not teach them, and the Talmud said it was better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman. Men in Jesus's day normally would not allow women to count change into their hands for fear of physical contact. But Jesus would touch women and heal them, even allowing them to touch Him (Lk 13:10ff; Mk 5:25ff) and to travel with Him and the disciples (Lk 8:1-3). They were in His audiences and included in His illustrations (Matt 13:33; 22:1-2; 24:41; Lk 15:8-10; Jn 4). He showed them compassion and respect, such as they had not known, but He never exalted them to a place of leadership over men.

Now notice in the epistles two parallel principles written to us about life in the church. They are equality and submission. Probably the most abused and oft-misquoted verse on the subject is Galatians 3:28. If anyone is going to show a poor

² For further discussion on "submission" see pp 172-78 in *Rediscovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* by Piper/Grudem. For helpful answers to common questions surrounding the topic, see the same book, pp 62-69.

hermeneutic, paying no attention to context, it is here. Paul is *not* addressing role distinction here, for he will clearly point that out elsewhere. And we must remember that not only is context king in Bible interpretation, but Scripture never contradicts itself. No single verse or passage stands as an island in isolation from the rest of Scripture to contradict it. This verse speaks of equality in Christ, indicating that the way of salvation is the same for both men and women. They are members of equal standing in the body of Christ, receiving the same blessing and benefit of salvation, though their functions are different. There still remain distinctions and divine prohibitions as will be noted in 1 Timothy. Galatians 3 does not eradicate all differences in responsibilities, nor does it cover every aspect of God's design for male and female. We cannot use it to contradict other passages that make clear distinctions between what God desires of women and men.

Furthermore, God's fingerprint of role distinction can be seen in the Trinity and mirrored in the institutions of the home and church. Though each member of the Trinity is God, each one has different functions. We see in Scripture the various roles: the Father orchestrates redemption's plan, the Son accomplishes it, and the Holy Spirit applies its work to the lives of individuals.

Though marriage involves mutual love and submission (Eph 5:21), Scripture expressly teaches wives' submission (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1). Husbands have been delegated the primary responsibility for leadership of their children (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21; 1 Tim 3:4-5). Wives/mothers are to be "workers at home" (Titus 2:5), giving their family priority so that even in leading a business and employees outside the home she does not do so at the expense of her family.

Ministry in the church is not the exception. Though there is no hierarchy, there is male headship in the home and male leadership in the church. Again, women have always fulfilled an important role in serving the Lord, and we see that in their vital role from the church's inception (Acts 1:12-14; 9:36-42; 16:13-15; 17:1-4, 10-12; 18:1-2, 18, 24-28; Rom 16; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 1:5; 4:19). She never served in a leadership role. The clearest and least ambiguous passage where God prohibits women from usurping a teaching position and leadership over a man is 1 Timothy 2:11-12. If Ephesians 5 is the "Mount Everest" of Christian marriage and roles in the home, then 1 Timothy is the Mount Everest of gender roles in the local church family. First Timothy 2 is to the local church what Ephesians 5 is to the individual family. Here, as elsewhere (1 Pet 3:1, 5; Eph 5:21, 22; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5), the woman is clearly instructed of God's perfect design of submission. Instead of crying "foul" and accusing men of discrimination, she is to recognize divine design, especially as Paul traced his argument back to the creation account. This is not an appeal to the culture of that day or for people of another time but a permanently binding requirement of God's creation distinctions.

To clarify, women are not forbidden from teaching. They simply cannot teach where men are present, whether in an adult Sunday School Class, or in a home Bible study. Though this forms a clear prohibition of where women cannot serve, she can be used greatly by and for the Lord. She is even commanded to serve the Lord in other areas like teaching younger women (Titus 2). And we see how valuable she is in instructing children (2 Tim 3:14-15). She merely is not to be teaching men nor exercising authority over them. This clearly limits women from exercising pastoral

oversight and serving as pastors/elders. The qualifications for overseers clearly assume a man as he must be a “husband of one wife” and “one who manages his own household well” (1 Tim 3:2, 4).

Several evangelical, biblical scholars gathered in order to sort out the biblical parameters of role distinctions in which men and women are equal in the eyes of God and yet distinct in their divinely appointed roles. The biblical affirmations in the Danvers Statement published by The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood are repeated here to provide concluding clarifications and applications of biblical truth.

1. Both Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood.
2. Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order and should find an echo in every human heart.
3. Adam’s headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin.
4. The Fall introduced distortions into the relationship between men and women.
 - In the home, the husband’s loving, humble headship tends to be replaced by domination or passivity; the wife’s intelligent, willing submission tends to be replaced by usurpation or servility.
 - In the church, sin inclines men toward a worldly love of power or an abdication of spiritual responsibility, and inclines women to resist limitations on their roles or to neglect the use of their gifts in appropriate ministries.
5. The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, manifests the equally high value and dignity which God attached to the roles of both men and women. Both Old and New Testaments also affirm the principle of male headship in the family and in the covenant community.
6. Redemption in Christ aims at removing the distortions introduced by the curse.
 - In the family, husbands should forsake harsh or selfish leadership and grow in love and care for their wives; wives should forsake resistance to their husbands’ authority and grow in willing, joyful submission to their husbands’ leadership.
 - In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men.
7. In all of life Christ is the supreme authority and guide for men and women, so that no earthly submission-domestic, religious, or civil-ever implies a mandate to follow a human authority into sin.
8. In both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries. Rather, Biblical teaching should remain the authority for testing our subjective discernment of God’s will.
9. With half the world’s population outside the reach of indigenous evangelism; with countless other lost people in those societies that have heard the gospel; with the stresses and miseries of sickness, malnutrition, homelessness,

illiteracy, ignorance, aging, addiction, crime, incarceration, neuroses, and loneliness, no man or woman who feels a passion from God to make His grace known in word and deed need ever live without a fulfilling ministry for the glory of Christ and the good of this fallen world.

10. We are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.³

Further Reading:

Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, John Piper & Wayne Grudem

Different by Design, John MacArthur

Men and Women: Equal Yet Different, Alexander Strauch

Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood...www.cbmw.org

Women's Ministry in the Local Church, J. Ligon Duncan & Susan Hunt

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³ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 470-71.