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What is at stake?

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Summary and Implications

What Is the Discussion About?

Two interpretations are put forward in this book. The first says there is a permanent and normative creation order that establishes the headship of men over women, or that gives men the lead responsibility in church ministries. It argues that this creation order was instituted by God at creation. It finds confirmation in the rest of the Old Testament in the patriarchal structure of family and community life in Israel, and by the restriction of the priesthood to men. According to this interpretation, redemption in Christ does not reverse creation order. It consistently reads the New Testament texts that deal with church leadership and family relations (1 Cor. 12 and 14, 1 Tim. 2 and Eph. 4) as using

creation order to limit the roles and ministries of women.

This first interpretation views men and women as equal in creation and redemption, but understands creation order to differentiate levels of responsibility for each. These differentiated responsibilities place boundaries on the roles of women. Women are gifted for ministry just as men are, but the public exercise of their ministries must occur within the context of male leadership. The critical issue regarding the ministry of women is not giftedness, but differentiated gender roles which limit certain ministries of women.

The second interpretation asserts the equality and complementarity of men and women, and the full gifting of women for church ministry. This interpretation is based on four biblical teachings.

First, man and woman together represent the image of God in creation (Ch. 4). Man and woman are equal and different. The differentness is viewed as complementary. This view argues that the creation accounts do not teach the subordination of woman to man. It notes that man does not name woman—the classic symbol of subordination—until after the fall. It does not read disapproval of women in leadership, even though such leadership is rare (Ch. 5), nor does it understand the Old Testament to teach the subordination of women based on creation.

Secondly, the teaching and practice of Christ underscore the equality of men and women (Ch. 6). Jesus and the gospels reject sexual discrimination and eliminate role differences based on gender.

Thirdly, salvation and baptism wipe out the sexual differences that divide and alienate non-Christian people and societies (Ch. 7). In Christ all people are equal

in terms of salvation and relations in the church. The social consequences of baptism into the church are equality; thus sexually determined church roles are ended in Christ.

The fourth biblical teaching emphasizes the importance of gifting by the Spirit for the ministry of men and women (Chs. 8, 10). Women are gifted for leadership in the church and exercise their gifts in the early church.

The second interpretation reads the restrictive texts as important to maintain sexual identity in the church, and marriage and family commitments (1 Cor. 11, 14, 1 Tim. 2). The 1 Timothy 2 text either is an historically time-specific instruction for the church in Ephesus that cannot be universalized, or a text that again addresses husband/wife relationships rather than church leadership in public worship. Likewise, the Ephesians 5 text concerns family relationships, not church leadership issues.

The two interpretations agree on several important points. First, men and women are equal as persons in creation and redemption. Second, women are gifted for ministry and should be freed and empowered by the church to exercise their ministries.

The two interpretations differ only at one critical point. The one says that women must exercise their gifts under male leadership. The second says women are free to exercise their gifts independently and interdependently with men as equals. The first argues for hierarchical relationships between men and women in church leadership; the second argues for the liberation of men and women from hierarchical relationships in church leadership. The critical issue that divides the

two interpretations is the meaning of “creation order” and “headship.”

How Do We Interpret the Bible?

We have two different interpretations of the same biblical texts in this book. Both interpretations are made by people equally committed to the full inspiration and authority of the Bible, and both are based on a careful reading of the Bible. How can this be? How can the teachers of the church disagree on biblical interpretation? Such disagreements are a result of several factors.

First, we are dealing with different texts written at different times in history to address different issues in the life of different believing communities, Israel and the church. There is Genesis 1 and 2, there are the words of Jesus, and there are the writings of Paul. The latter represent the biggest problem. Paul says things that directly affirm women in ministry, e.g., Romans 16:1-16 (women are identified as leaders, apostles and co-workers), 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (women pray and prophesy publicly, gender differences “in Christ” are irrelevant), Galatians 3:28 (baptism erases social differences based on gender in the church), Philippians 4:2-3 (women are leaders in the church), and 1 Timothy 5:3-16 (an “order” of widows serves the church). But Paul also restricts the public role of women, e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 (women are not to ask questions in church), and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 (women are to learn quietly, and are not permitted to usurp authority from men). The problem is intensified by the use of words and grammar that can have more than one meaning, for example, the naming of Eve, the meaning of *kephale* (“head”), and *authentain* (“authority”). The same text

can be interpreted differently depending on which definition an interpreter chooses.

Secondly, we are dealing with different interpreters. Every interpreter brings a pre-understanding or bias to the text. There is no such thing as “objective interpretation.” Gender, race, class, nationality, religious experience, marital status and experience, power status, and many other historical and cultural realities, influence how each person interprets the text. Thus different interpreters interpret the same texts, even the same words, differently.

Such interpretive diversity is not new. It has characterized the history of the church. Most theological disagreements in the church are the result of equally committed believers interpreting the biblical text differently.

The diversity in this book reflects the diversity of text and interpreter. Elmer Martens and Allen Guenther disagree on the interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2. Martens gives priority to Genesis 2, while Guenther gives priority to Genesis 1. Martens thinks the naming of Eve reflects a “creation order” hierarchy of relationships, Guenther says the passive form of the “naming” word only characterizes and does not order. Guenther argues that since Adam’s naming of Eve comes after the fall, it reflects the hierarchy of sin rather than of creation. Elmer Martens disagrees with John E. Toews on the meaning of *kephale* (“head”) and the significance of “creation order” in the New Testament. These are honest differences between equally committed interpreters of the Bible, and in this case among friends and colleagues in the same church and in the same seminary of the church.

Differences of biblical interpretation are a normal part of church life. They always have been, and they always will be. The question is, how do we sort out which of these interpretations is preferable?

One common approach says the critical guideline is the starting point of diverse texts. This principle usually says that priority should be given to the clear texts. Genesis 1 is clear, but Genesis 2 involves a host of interpretive issues and problems. One group argues that Galatians 3:28 is the starting point for understanding Paul. Others insist that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is the clearest of the Pauline texts, and should be the "window" for understanding the other Pauline texts. There is, of course, nothing in the Bible itself which tells us which texts should be given priority. That decision already reflects the bias we bring to the text. The issue of which text is the clearer is itself a controversial matter. The 1 Timothy 2 text is filled with serious, and in some cases unresolvable, difficulties (see Ch. 10 for details). On strictly exegetical grounds the Genesis 1 and Galatians 3 texts are much clearer texts. But that is not the main point of this section. It is, rather, that the question of which text we use as a starting point is itself an open question; the Bible itself gives no guidance on that question.

A second, and theologically more fruitful principle, says that differing texts must be ordered on the basis of which expresses the essence of the gospel most clearly. Two approaches may be used.

The first approach starts with Jesus. Jesus is understood to be the norm for ordering conflicting texts. Everyone is agreed that Jesus' relationships with women were revolutionary. Susan Foh, a conservative evangelical, and Mary Daly, a post-Christian feminist, are

agreed that what Jesus did with and for women should change once and for all the way the church and the western world views and treats women (see Foh, 90-94, Daly, 79-80). On the basis of this principle, the liberating Pauline texts are given priority over the more restrictive texts.

The second approach starts with the theological essence of the gospel. The gospel of grace, forgiveness, and freedom is the starting point. Thus F.F. Bruce argues that the Pauline texts which liberate women for ministry are closest to the intention of Paul. The restrictive texts are examples of adaptation for a specific time and setting, and must not be normative for other times and places (see Gasque).

The attempt to order the relationship of texts on the basis of the essence of the gospel introduces a profound theological issue. Such ordering distinguishes between the authority of the text and its normativeness. The whole Bible is authoritative. But the text functions differently in different times and places. For example, the command to "greet one another with a holy kiss" is authoritative (it is commanded 5 times—Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14—in the NT), but it is not practiced today because times have changed. People greet each other differently today than in the first century. Paul's command for women to wear a head covering is no longer expected because times have changed. Paul's restrictive words in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 are authoritative. Are they normative today? Or, have the specific occasions which called forth those instructions changed? These are questions on which equally committed evangelical people disagree. The point of disagreement is not the authority, or

even the interpretation, of the text, but the applicability of a specific text in our time.

Is There a Permanent Creation Order?

One of the critical points of disagreement in the two interpretations of this book is the status of “creation order.” Elmer Martens sees a permanent and normative creation order—male headship over women instituted by God in the creation accounts—that necessitates male leadership over women in the home and in the church. The other writers do not see such a permanent creation order. Allen Guenther reads the creation accounts to underline the equality and complementarity of men and women. Gordon and Lorraine Matties disagree that the Old Testament uses creation order or the fall (Gen. 3) to subordinate women.

What about the New Testament? The creation accounts are used four times in the New Testament. Jesus uses Genesis 1:27—God made humanity male and female—and 2:24—a man is to leave father and mother and become one flesh with his wife—to reject divorce. The text says nothing about a creation hierarchy or about the subordination of woman to man, only that a man is to leave his parental home and become genuinely one with his wife. The problem seems to lie with the man, not the woman.

Paul uses Genesis 1:27 in 1 Corinthians 11 to argue the necessity of a head covering for women in the church and to underline the interdependence of men and women. Again, there is no talk of hierarchy or subordination of women to men. The only issue is proper dress for women in public ministry. Genesis 2:24 is used in Ephesians 5 to command husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, not to exhort wives to be

submissive to their husbands. There is no hierarchy; mutual submission is asked of both the wife and the husband. 1 Timothy 2 uses Genesis 2:7 and 22 to explain why women should learn quietly (the only command in the text), and why Paul does not permit wives to sexually seduce or manipulate their husbands as part of their teaching. Hierarchical relations and submission language is not used in the text.

Old and New Testament usage raises serious questions about any kind of creation order. Such an order is certainly not explicit in any text. And where creation accounts are used in the New Testament, they are used primarily to exhort men, not women.

What Is the Meaning of Headship?

A second matter of common disagreement is the meaning of "headship." Some interpreters argue that headship clearly teaches a hierarchical relationship between men and women in the home and in the church, and the necessity of women to submit to men in the home and in the church. The problem is whether the meaning of *kephale* ("head") in Greek is "source" or "chief."

In the English language "head" usually means the one with authority over others. But in Greek the meaning is not that simple. The most comprehensive dictionary of the Greek language lists over twenty possible meanings for *kephale*. The primary meaning has to do with source or origin. Although possible, the use of *kephale* to mean "chief" or "the person of highest rank" is very rare in Greek. The point is that *kephale* has multiple meanings.

The meaning in any particular text must be determined by the context, including the other words used

in association with it. The only texts in the women in ministry discussion that use *kephale* are 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 (see Chs. 8 and 9 for details). The word is not used in 1 Corinthians 14 or 1 Timothy 2. Most commentators agree that in 1 Corinthians 11 it means source; its meaning is defined by the creation reference in vv. 8-9 which speak of man as the source of woman and woman as the source of man. Ephesians 5 uses it to describe the relationship of the wife to the husband. The husband is characterized as the head of the wife. What follows makes it clear that this headship does not mean authority over, but rather service under. For the husband to be the head of the wife means to love her, not to subordinate her.

The New Testament clearly uses headship language, but not to argue for a hierarchical relationship between men and women or to make the case for the subordination of women to men. Headship means men and women are the source of each other's lives, and that men are to love their wives.

The authors of this chapter believe that neither creation order nor headship as a hierarchical structure can be used to argue that women may exercise their gifts (the point on which all authors are agreed) only under the leadership of men (the only point on which the authors disagree). We believe the evidence favors the full equality of men and women in creation, redemption and ministry, and therefore, frees women to exercise the gifts of ministry given them by the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the church.

Why Are There No Clear Examples of Women Ministering in the New Testament?

The question asked most often is, if the preceding interpretation of freedom for ministry is correct, why doesn't the New Testament give us examples of women ministering in the early church? We think it does.

Acts reports that four daughters of the evangelist Philip prophesied in the church. Romans 16 reports nine women in important roles in the mission and life of the Roman congregation. Phoebe is a deaconness and a patron of the church at Cenchreae. In addition, Paul identifies a series of other female co-workers: Prisca (vv. 3-5), Mary (v. 6), Junia, an apostle (v. 7), Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia and Nereus' sister (vv. 12-15). 1 Corinthians adds Chloe and Philippians names Euodia and Syntyche (see Chs. 2, 7, 10).

The fact that women are singled out in letters written by Paul to whole congregations suggests that they held leadership positions. What emerges from these names is a clear picture of women who worked at the center of the Pauline mission and congregational life.

One other example is worth noting. 2 John begins with "the elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth." Some commentators suggest the "elect lady" means the church, but the simplest and most obvious reading is that the woman was the leader of the "house church" and the "children" were the Christians who met in her home (John often calls believers "children," e.g., 1 Jn. 2:1, 3:18, 5:2, 21, and 3 Jn. 4).

Why Now?

Even if the above were true, why does the call for the affirmation of women in ministry come at this time? Is the church not simply absorbing the ideas of secular

feminism? Is the church not being conformed to the culture?

In part, the answer is yes. The church is always influenced by the prevailing culture. There can be no doubt that the feminist movement in the Western world has influenced us in the church, just as secular capitalist ideas have deeply shaped thought and life in the church. Ironically, there is scholarship which suggests that the feminist movement also owes much to evangelical women who formed the heart of the missionary movement during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Larger cultural movements have always influenced the church, and taught the church to read the Bible through new eyes. But this explanation is too superficial. There are other, deeper forces of change at work in our culture.

Feminism is part of a much larger pattern of change in Western society. At one time people were assigned roles in life based on forces outside of their control, such as class, religion, race, gender, ethnic identity, marital status and geographic location. Some were farmers because that is what their parents were; others were merchants, or teachers, or servants. This has changed in the modern West. Today, roles are much more a matter of choice and ability. We no longer ask who a person's parents were or on what side of the tracks the person lived, but whether the person is competent for the job or role he or she undertakes. Most of us are grateful for this change. We are immensely thankful that even though our parents were poor, or uneducated, we now can become business persons, schoolteachers, university professors, health care professionals, lawyers, or pastors. But in the church we often forget that the movement away from ascribed roles cannot be neatly cut off at a

certain point. The very people who greatly benefit from new opportunities cannot suddenly say they are not open to women in the church. We need to realize that we are dealing with a large social pattern that most of us support most of the time.

Two areas have become the focus of controversy in the West: race and gender. Today almost everyone in North American society agrees that people should not be forbidden certain roles because of race, and most people say the same should be true for gender. Yet some in the church want to say that because of gender, certain persons should be restricted in the exercise of God-given gifts. Even if the movement of feminism disappeared, the pressure for gender inclusiveness would continue to build in the church. Why? Because we are dealing with a larger social pattern that cannot be arbitrarily cut off. Women now enjoy the benefits of education, both secular and theological. They read their Bibles and learn for themselves the message of God's justice and liberation. They experience the gifting of the Holy Spirit for ministry. They hear and respond affirmatively to the call of God to exercise their gifts. But too often, they discover that the church refuses to let them exercise their gifts (usually while denying that it has), and refuses to acknowledge that they have received a call from God (again while denying that it has), simply because they are women. Many men and women are asking, why? The question raised is one of justice. People are asking why gender is relevant when God gives gifts of ministry. Clearly the gifts of the Spirit are relevant, but why gender?

The old answer that "this is how God wants it" no longer works. Women can read and interpret the Bible themselves. They know that many biblical passages af-

firm their ministry, and that the traditionally restrictive texts are problematic at multiple levels. Furthermore, they have heard the church say that men and women are spiritually equal. They are aware that the church has blessed the significant contributions of women in overseas mission fields and parachurch organizations. Many women and men can no longer accept the idea that all are spiritually equal, but that in the ministries of the local church they are unequal.

There was a time, especially during the last century and the early part of this century, when the church responded much more positively to the decline of gender-based roles. Women were much freer to minister and to lead in the church from the seventeenth through the early part of the twentieth century. The Protestant Reformation's break with the Catholic concept of the minister as priest, based on the Old Testament priesthood, had liberating consequences for the ministry of women. John Calvin believed that the freedom of women to minister was a matter of human opinion based on particular cultures rather than a clear teaching of Scripture. Free church traditions, especially Anabaptist and Quaker, gave women special opportunity to minister in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A good number of women can be identified as ministers among the Baptists in Holland, England and America. The theological ground for this acceptance was an understanding that the Spirit empowers both men and women for ministry. The Wesley revivals in the eighteenth century encouraged both lay men and women to preach and minister. The same occurred in the eighteenth-century Great Awakening in America and the Evangelical Awakening in the nineteenth century. The revivalists stressed the importance of personal experience with God

as a criterion for ministry. Many women responded. In fact, women were often viewed as more religious and spiritual than men in a theology of “true womanhood” that developed during this century.

In addition, women were given new educational opportunities. As they studied the Bible on their own they felt increasingly called by God into church ministries. They moved to the vanguard of the anti-slavery and revival movements. The more they worked for the freedom of blacks, in part on the basis of texts like Galatians 3:28, the more they recognized their own equality and freedom in Christ.

The nineteenth century became known as the age of woman preachers. Three of the great preachers of the century were Phoebe Palmer, a Methodist evangelist and revivalist, Catherine Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, and Hannah Whithall Smith, one of the key founders of the Keswick Conference. Many denominations—Free Will Baptists, Free Methodists, Quakers, Brethren Church, Christian Missionary Alliance, the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.), the Church of God (Cleveland), Evangelical Free Church, Church of the Nazarene, American Baptists, and various Pentecostal groups—affirmed, even ordained, women for ministry.

All of this changed in the 1920s. The evangelical movement of the post-World War I era became restrictive on the question of women in ministry (see Ch. 12, and the article by Gloria Redekop for the same pattern in the Mennonite Brethren Church). An affirmation and openness for ministry that was experienced theologically and practically throughout the nineteenth century suddenly became a problem. Women were now told that they were excluded from ministry because of their gender.

Most women in evangelical American churches endured the post-1920 restrictions patiently, though painfully, until the 1950s. However, the evangelical renaissance of the 1950s included a growing desire and calling by women to exercise the gifts of the Spirit in the church. That desire has increased with the rejection of ascribed gender roles in the West. Today this growing desire has become a loud crescendo calling for true biblical justice and the freedom to exercise the gifts and the call the Spirit gives to the church.

Why now? First, because the inner structure and the basic values of western culture are changing. Roles based on ascribed characteristics are being replaced by roles based on choice and competence. These changes came about because of the teachings and activities of the church in proclaiming the gospel over the centuries. Secondly, because the church has become more restrictive since 1920. Consequently, the cries of pain from women gifted for ministry have become louder and the calls for change more strident. If certain forms of ministry by women created problems in the culture of the Pauline churches (note the honor and shame language used in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2), the opposite is true today. In our day, insisting on the silence of women in the church brings shame on the church.

What Shall We Do in the Church?

We live between the times on many issues in the church. The role of women in church ministry is one of these issues. What, then, shall we do? First, we must recognize and accept diversity in biblical interpretation. Equally evangelical students of the Bible read the same texts differently. The diversity presents us an opportunity for fruitful conversation and study in the

church. Because we are not dealing with a confessional issue that affects the evangelical theology or churchly identity of the church, we need to bless this honest diversity and free people and churches to come to different conclusions on the basis of careful study and sincere convictions.

Secondly, all the writers in this book agree that we need to affirm all the gifts irrespective of gender. God's Spirit gifts all Christians. Ministry is a function of baptism into the church. Baptism by water and the Spirit affects a gifting by God. All the gifts are to be enabled for ministry.

We agree with James Packer, evangelical theologian of Regent College. The church must give theological priority to gifts over offices in structuring the ministry of the church. The gifts are God's gifts to the church, not ours. All the gifts should be recognized, enabled and exercised for the well-being of the church. These gifts include leaders whose responsibility is to order and enable the many diverse gifts for the effective functioning of the whole. Church offices or church governance structures are not divinely mandated. Different cultural patterns and congregational preferences are responsible for the institutionalization of gifts into offices. Therefore, the difference in structure between the Jerusalem churches, the Antioch churches, and the Pauline churches. We believe the priority of gifts over office, and then the discernment and enablement of gifts, should be the starting point for all reflections on women and men in church ministry today.

Thirdly, we should use inclusive people language in the church. Why? Because the meaning of words has changed. When our grandparents said that God calls all men to serve the kingdom and the church, they were un-

derstood to mean that all Christians, men and women, are called by God to service. If we use the same words today, we are understood to say that God calls men, but not women.

The meaning of words like “man” and “men” has changed because the times have changed. Our grandparents lived in an era when neither women nor men as a whole were conscious that women's experiences were different than men's. Gradually, however, some words became more restricted in meaning. Under the impact of modern scientific and historical thought, some words lost the ability to have generic meaning and took on specific meaning. “Men” no longer denoted all people, but men as males in contrast to women as females. Women became conscious of themselves as female. As this consciousness grew, language changed even further.

Our grandparents used inclusive language, but now the same words are considered exclusive. They shut out over half the members of the church, and may act as a hindrance to the mission of the church as it seeks to reach unbelieving men and women. We need to learn to use inclusive language in the church, language that recognizes and blesses all people in their maleness and femaleness.

Fourthly, we must deal honestly and compassionately with contemporary fear and anxiety about changing role identities. We do not believe that the real issues concerning women in church ministry are biblical, but psychological and sociological. The deeper issues are personal questions of sexuality, power and personal identity. These changes are even more complicated because we have based traditional self-understandings and roles on our understanding of what the Bible teaches.

Men have been in power for centuries; they have been able to control the powerless—women—and to exhort them to be submissive and content. They have been conditioned to view women as sexual objects, temptations and distractions. Too often they have held women responsible for their [men's] sins, especially sexual sins. When all of that changes, when men are asked, even forced by the larger pressures in the culture, to accept and respect women as equals and as colleagues, male identity is threatened at its profoundest levels. It is time for the church to talk openly and honestly about male anxieties in times of massive cultural and personal change. Such honest and compassionate conversation in the church will also help address one of the profoundest indices of this fear and insecurity, male abuse of women in the home and in the church.

Women are also afraid. With increasing freedom comes the responsibility of choice. Many women are threatened by the changing demands of the culture. They are afraid that the roles of homemaker and mother will be devalued. They do not always understand the desire of some women to exercise leadership gifts in the church. Again, honest and compassionate conversation is needed to bring about acceptance of the diversity of gifts to be found in the church.

We conclude with a note from church history. There is an almost total disappearance of arguments about gender roles in the church during times of spiritual renewal. Revival-based equality stands in contrast to much current concern in the church with figuring out a “correct” view of women in ministry. Kari Malcolm, a Wheaton College graduate, says it well: “We have a world to win for Christ. The ship is sinking, we are standing on the shore arguing about who should go to the rescue—men or women” (Malcolm, 132).

ENDNOTES

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