

Back to Genesis

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“The Relationship of Men and Women in the Home and Church”

Intro: In our past lessons on Genesis, I mentioned that many of the discussions and debates in our society ultimately depend upon our view of God, creation, and the constitution of things as God created them. Perhaps no discussion has had more impact on our society than the so-called “gender issues.” A proper understanding of God’s will on these discussions takes us back to Genesis.

“Gender Issues” in the First Century

It is interesting that we are not the first to be confronted with such issues of the role men and women should play in the home and in society. Gender issues were clearly on the table in the first century church.

Modern scholars of the first century have documented a “feminist movement” of sorts among Roman women in the years preceding and during the first part of the first century AD that could very well serve as the backdrop for the NT discussions of these subjects. NT scholar Bruce Winter in his insightful work, *“Roman Wives, Roman Widows”* points out that a “new woman” emerged during this era—a woman whose provocative dress and sometimes promiscuous lifestyle contrasted starkly with the decorum of the traditional married woman. She was a woman who enjoyed a higher degree of freedom than had been common to women in the past. Consequently she occupied more public roles in commerce and government.

The emergence of this new woman appears to have had an impact on the first century church as well. The early church was confronted with the proper role of women in the home and church based on what was happening in the culture. There were several specific questions that had to be answered:

What role should a woman have in church government and church meetings? Should she have the right to occupy positions of leadership? Could she address or instruct the assembly? What if she possessed a gift of the Spirit involving teaching? Would she be able to publicly use this gift?

How should she dress in such meetings? Should she wear the elaborate dress that many women were wearing? Should she wear the veils matrons commonly wore in public? What about trends in changing hairstyles?

Many Roman women were wearing much more elaborate hairstyles that advertised their wealth and power. Should Christian woman also do this? If not, why not?

It is interesting to see how the NT church handled these issues. Where did they go to find relevant principles to guide them in such matters? What teaching served as the ground of their arguments? Interestingly they went to the same place—**back to Genesis**. In virtually every NT discussion about gender issues, the writer takes his audience back to the creation and to the

institution of marriage by God in Genesis 1-3. Here are the principles upon which they based their teaching.

Both man and woman are made in the image of God.

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

God's creation statement about "man" in Genesis one is not a statement about males only. It is a statement about both men and women. Thus, in keeping with our last study, we can see that Biblical writers made these conclusions about both men and women:

Both women and men were made for a relationship with God.

The sanctity of the life of each was to be respected.

Consequently the life, freedom, and property of both men and women were protected by God's laws.

OT teaching applied these principles:

It is a mistake to attach to the OT view of women the idea that women were second-class humans or that they had no rights whatsoever. A more careful reading of the OT will produce many laws that are designed to give women value, rights, and protections under their husband's and society's care. (This past week in Numbers we noted how the inheritance rights of women were upheld in the decision of God to preserve land holdings in those households that only had daughters.)

NT teaching responds to this equality of personhood in connection with salvation:

For 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, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:26-29)

NT teaching on marriage calls upon men to show respect for the equality of women in experiencing the "grace of life."

You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Pet. 3:7)

In these principles God challenges and rebukes the chauvinist who does not value the worth of women or their personal rights to life and the fulfillment of their needs.

And so in terms of personhood women were granted the same rights and privileges as men; but in terms of leadership women were given a different role.

Since woman was made from man and as His helper, she occupies the subordinate role in marriage while God assigns headship (leadership) to the man.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." (Genesis 2:18)

Read it carefully! Not helpmate but "helper suitable". The conception is that the woman was made for the man as a companion and helper to him.

The OT teaching preserves this distinction of equality in personhood but distinction in roles.

To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, In pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (Genesis 18:12)

One of the common terms for the husband in OT teaching is the word "baal" meaning "master, lord." It is not a suggestion that a wife is a man's slave ("I dream of Genie."); but it is an acknowledgement of the husband's role of caring rulership or loving dominion over his wife. The dominion is the role of a responsible caretaker, not an abuser or exploiter of power.

Sarah appears to accept this role without resentment; and it is upheld as the standard for godly women.

The NT teaching likewise preserves this distinction of equality in personhood, but distinction in roles.

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. (Ephesians 5:23)

Paul takes this principle right out of the book of Genesis (basing his arguments on creation of man and women in Genesis 2) and applies it to the disciples of Jesus.

Peter likewise appeals to the example of OT women influenced by the teaching of God and urges Christian women to follow their example of submission.

Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. (1 Peter 3:6)

Here is where God meets the feminist who argues for the removal of "patriarchal" distinctions in the home and society. Have you ever thought about what that term conveys? It is a direct allusion to the Biblical principle of father-rule that originated in the institution of marriage.

The roles of men and women in the church are an extension of the principles of husband and wife in marriage.

The church assembly brings together families (men and women who have a relationship of headship to one another). The principles of headship are not removed in spiritual matters but maintained there

Men are urged to lead in church worship and teaching.

Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. (1 Tim. 2:8)

Women are urged to take a subordinate role in worship and teaching.

Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.

But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. (1 Tim. 2:11-12)

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor. 14:34-35)

What are the grounds of these two role-related commands? Paul takes the Ephesians back to Genesis.

For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression. (1 Tim. 2:13-14)

but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. (1 Cor. 14:34)

Thus, the same OT teaching serves as the basis for the man and woman's role in the church as for the man and woman's role in the home.

However, there is but one divine authorized exception to this role.

Both men and women may give revelations in the church as long as they acknowledge their distinct roles by headdress.

Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved. (1 Corinthians 11:4-5)

The context suggests that both gifted men and women spoke God's words by revelation. In so doing the gender of the speaker became irrelevant when the message was a matter of divine inspiration (i.e. the Holy Spirit was the actual speaker and the person was simply a passive messenger for God). In such cases, the issues of headship and subordination find their proper application in this way:

The prophetess acknowledged the headship of Christ and her husband (or men in general) by veiling herself.

The prophet acknowledged the headship of Christ and his headship of his wife (or the women in general) by not veiling himself.

Again the ground of this distinction in headdress in using spiritual gifts was the teaching of Genesis.

But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:3)

For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. (1 Corinthians 11:7-9)

This approach made it possible for God to speak by inspiration through both men and women with respect for the teaching of Genesis. Here of course is where God meets the spiritual egalitarianist that argues that equality of personhood in Christ is equivalent to the removal of role distinction. Thus, churches have yielded to the pressure of society by allowing women to occupy roles of leadership and teaching.

Conclusion: It is interesting that the early church was confronted with a similar movement; but they would not yield to the culture! Instead they went back to Genesis for the answer to their questions. And so today it is important that we too go back to Genesis for an answer to the questions that may trouble us about gender issues.