Men, Women and God

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Women's ordination is now an established fact in the Church of England, so it may seem superfluous to publish any further comments about it. However, it has raised questions so fundamental to the relationship of men and women that the debate is not going to be laid to rest merely by a vote in the General Synod of the Church of England. I want therefore in this article to put forward some considerations that have not received a very wide airing in the public debate. They concern not just the question of ordination but also the wider issue of the harmony between the sexes in today's society.

Why not?

I may say at once that my own opposition to the 'priesting' of women does not turn on any special notion of 'priesthood', nor of the inability of women, for gender reasons, to 'represent Christ at the altar'. The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers; and the finality of the Cross means that no human priest (male or female) can ever again minister at a visible altar. Any objection on these grounds therefore, in the light of the New Testament, is ill-conceived. What then has been wrong with the pressure for women's ordination? Let me start with an examination of the well-known passage in Paul's first letter to Timothy.[1] One thing which has been disputed here is the meaning of the Greek verb *authentein* which occurs only this once in the New Testament. It is sometimes translated 'to have authority' or 'dominion',[2] but is often given a rather harsher tone: 'to usurp authority,[3] 'to dictate',[4] 'to domineer',[5] 'to tell [a man] what to do'.[6] This harsher sense has been strongly argued for by some evangelical supporters of women's ordination, such as that able expositor Steve Motyer;[7] 'domineering bossiness' is his understanding.[8] This raises at once the question of why Paul forbids this to women but makes no mention of men; are women the only ones liable to be bossy and domineering? I do not think this suggestion would commend itself to many! Steve Motyer is very hesitant himself to offer a reason, but one is surely not far to seek. Paul's train of thought here seems to be fairly clear. For he goes on at once to speak of the creation order in Genesis 2, and then of the temptation in Eden. It is entirely in keeping with this[9] to understand him as implying first, the ordained leadership of the man ('*first* formed');[10] and second, that this was ignored by Eve when the serpent approached her. The scenario for the temptation I take to be this: Adam and Eve were at least within earshot in the garden.[11] The serpent, eminent for subtlety and carefully

choosing its words, approached Eve rather than Adam—no doubt judging her (rightly or wrongly) to be the more readily taken in ('deceived'). In circumstances such as these it would have been both possible and right for either human partner to have first consulted the other; but this would have been especially so for Eve since she had presumably learnt of the divine command only through her companion. Fatally, Eve did not. She acted independently on her own initiative and 'took and ate' the forbidden fruit. Still in the lead, she gave it to her husband, and he ate. Is this where the *authentein*, the 'dictating', 'domineering' 'telling [a man] what to do', comes in? It would seem that the unbroken flow of Paul's thought indicates that *authentein* belongs somewhere in the Eden narrative; and where else than here? It makes good sense of his linking it only with woman, and also to his proceeding at once (puzzlingly to many exegetes) to stress a *genuinely* God-ordained function for womanhood, namely childbearing. If leadership is for man, Paul seems to be saying, here is an immense honour for woman—bringing a new human soul into the world. In *this*, Paul says, she shall indeed find divine approval.[12,13]

But to return to the Genesis narrative: of course the Lord God knew already exactly what had happened when he walked 'in the garden in the cool of the day'.[14] Why then the call 'Where are you?' directed specifically to Adam, not to Eve? (Note that the two were apparently together.) Surely because it was upon *him* that the responsibility for strict obedience had been imposed. Instead of facing up to that responsibility he had 'listened to the voice of his wife' (a more than possible suggestion that she had exercised some sort of pressure); and it is for this precise reason that his labour henceforth is to be burdensome. Divine judgment has often a very subtle character: with profound irony, God engineers (for instance) the exact opposite of what sinful man has attempted to seize. The one who exalts himself finds abasement; professing himself wise he becomes a fool; promising liberty he turns into a slave of corruption; and so on. The ironical element is frequent in Scripture: think of Jacob's life of deceiving—and being deceived! Is it any wonder that in this seminal passage woman, attempting to dominate, is reduced to having her husband 'rule over her'? Or that man, taking with fatal ease what is forbidden, is to find henceforth that what is freely given can only be won with sweat and toil? And is it not right to interpret these very judgments as falling intentionally upon the roles for which, first and foremost, each sex is divinely fitted: man to be breadwinner, woman to be mother of children? I find it hard not to think so.

If this exegesis is accepted Steve Motyer's understanding of *authentein* seems to make his case (for uniform equality) worse, not better. In public function, the man is *primus inter pares*; man and woman are not on a dead level. Leadership as a principle has been imposed on the man, and where he is weak, unworthy or otherwise not fit for it and woman has to take his place the situation is to be regarded as sub-standard and non-ideal.[15] A

very emphatic endorsement of this understanding is in Rev. 12:1ff., where the woman, Israel, brings forth 'a male child' (lit. 'a son, a male', with a distinct stress on the maleness) 'who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron', the fulfilment of man's primal responsibility.

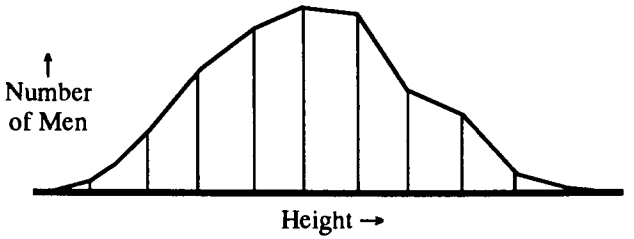
Feminine figures of speech for God

It is often argued that feminine metaphors or similes as well as male ones are used for God and that this permits us to use unsexed or even feminine language for him. Examples often quoted are Isaiah 66:13 ('as one whom his mother comforts so will I comfort you'); Luke 13:34 ('as a hen gathers her brood under her wings'); Isaiah 42:14 ('I [the Lord] will cry out like a woman in travail; I will gasp and pant'). But there is an immediate explanation for this. Feminine metaphors are used simply because they are the most vivid available, and no gender significance whatever is in mind. We use language in this way frequently ourselves: Bismarck, we say, *conceived* the idea of a united Germany, and Einstein that of General Relativity; an inventor has a very *fertile* brain; we refer to a *miscarriage* of justice, or of a scheme which *aborted*. The Bible itself speaks quite often in terms like this: the wicked man 'conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and brings forth lies' (Isaiah 59:4, Psalm 7:14). What about Gal. 4:19 where (contrast 1Cor. 4:15) Paul uses a powerful feminine metaphor (*ōdinō*) of himself? What about 1 Thess. 2:7, 11? No one can possibly read a gender reference in any of these, and the appeal of Christian feminists to such metaphors used of God really does their case more harm than good. What is much more significant in the Bible is not only that Deity is represented *passim* exclusively by masculine pronouns or titles, but also that we are actually instructed to do so (as in the Lord's prayer), and that in cases where a feminine term might seem a logical desirability it seems to be studiously avoided. There is a rather striking example of this in James 1:18 where the verb for 'brought forth' (*apokueō*) is 'the medical word for birth as the close of pregnancy', yet it is associated with two masculines (*boulētheis, autou*). In a rather similar way, Isaiah 66:13 runs into masculines ('his' twice) in the very next verse; and the female metaphor of 'pinions' and 'wings' (*cf.* Luke 13:34) is joined with masculines in Psalm 91:4. Similar comments apply to Isaiah 42:14 (*cf.* v.13c). Why is there never a 'she' or 'her' in these passages? The Greek for Spirit is *pneuma*, a neuter word, and so a neuter pronoun is grammatically quite proper. But in numerous places in John's Gospel where the Spirit's personhood is being stressed an emphatic (and ungrammatical!) masculine pronoun is used (*ekeinos*: John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13, 14). The argument from feminine metaphors for justifying unsexed language for God thus rather recoils upon itself; resorting to it is time misspent.

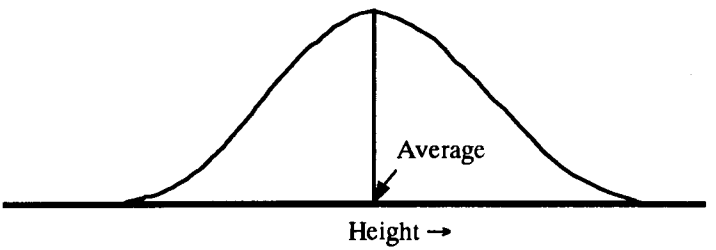
A statistical digression

Suppose we assemble a fair number of men, chosen at random, and mea-

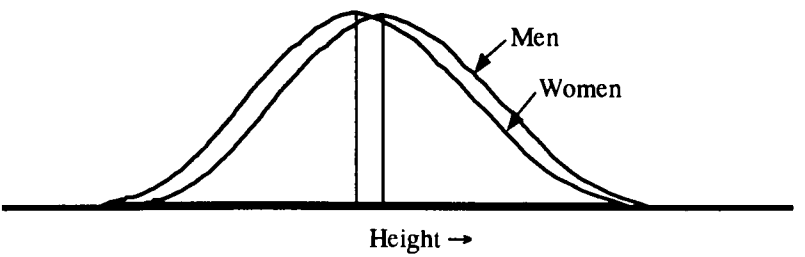
sure the height of each to the nearest inch. The results can be represented visually by drawing a horizontal line marked to show height and on this erecting at the appropriate points vertical lines whose length is proportional to the number of individuals scoring the corresponding feet and inches. The result will be something like this:



Joining the tops of the verticals gives a bendy bell-shaped line. Making the measurements more accurate (say to the nearest one hundredth of an inch) and including also more men (or the verticals would become progressively shorter), this line becomes more like a smooth curve, and eventually when the intervals are vanishingly small it becomes a real one:



The resulting curve is called the 'frequency curve' for height. It tells us that we can expect to find men with any height between the upper limit A and the lower one B but with increasing rarity as we approach the lower slopes of the 'hill'. The average height will of course be at the centre. If we repeat the whole exercise but this time with women, and then place their frequency curve on the same diagram, it will look like this:



It is the displacement of the women's curve to the left of the men's that justifies us in saying that men are taller than women; however it is important to recognize that it does not mean that in a mixed group any man will be taller than any woman, or even that the tallest individual will be a man. Of course not! There is quite a good chance that it will be the other way round, though not so high as a 50:50 chance. To say that men are taller than women is a *statistical* statement, one about averages, not one about selected individuals.

Men and Women

The purpose of this digression has been to introduce what is a more contentious issue. How do men and women compare when it comes to intellectual and other gifts? I once heard an honoured friend, a model of courtesy to women, say 'There is nothing a woman can do which a man cannot do better'. (He neither said nor implied, '*much* better'.) He instanced fastidious women choosing 'tailor-made' suits if possible, and the best hotels employing chefs; and so on. Of course it can be objected that this is only because in the past social circumstances have operated to favour men, and a reputation once established dies hard; that now, under the Equal Opportunities Commission reputations will eventually even-out and things will be different. There is doubtless some truth in this, but it is hardly the whole truth. Are men and women equally gifted? Remember we require a *statistical* conclusion, not a comparison of one selected individual with another. Take the incidence of genius. History records far more geniuses among men than among women. Genius in fact seems to inhere relatively rarely in womanhood. Where are the female artists, composers, sculptors, architects, dramatists, philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, surgeons and so on who can match the brilliant array of names on the male list? One has to search very hard to find them. There are obvious ripostes to this as already noted: women have had to bear and rear children; men are physically stronger and have made one-sided demands on the time and energies of their womenfolk; and so on. But this cannot be the whole story or anywhere near it. For one thing, there are a few spheres in which women have been the equal or nearly the equal of men—as novelists, for instance. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is one of the greatest novels ever written, and women novelists have many other claims to fame. So why have they not excelled everywhere? Again, many male geniuses have been without family obligations—Beethoven, Kant, Newton, Kierkegaard, Michaelangelo and so on. One might have thought there would have been supremely gifted women similarly unencumbered. The great Danish philosopher-theologian Kierkegaard once had a dispute with the fairy-story genius Hans Christian Andersen. The latter maintained that genius 'needs favourable circumstances for its development'. Kierkegaard's reply was otherwise—'Genius is like a thunderstorm which comes up against the wind'. Genius will out, in other words, whatever impediments it faces.

This also must surely be conceded, for many men of genius have faced tremendous difficulties, and triumphed. All things considered, it seems difficult to deny that supreme ability is much more common among men than among women; and this tends to confirm the remark with which I started. Of course in more everyday and commonplace cases this must be interpreted with a due regard to local conditions; the best cook in a given company may well be a woman, and the one cleverest with a needle a woman too, if only for the reason that there are more women than men in these occupations.

Are women inferior?

In view of the relative rarity of genius among women is it to be concluded that women are, in the widest sense, somewhat inferior to men? Certainly not! Consider the life of Jesus of Nazareth. When the Word of God became flesh, he did not choose to come as a genius. To call him such is nearly as derisive as to call him a superstar. At best, it is to seek for him worldly praise. He had none of the characteristics of genius. He bequeathed to culture no great works of art; he made no outstanding contribution to abstract thought; he advanced the practice of his trade by no striking new techniques or inventions; he enriched political theory with no brilliantly novel ideas. He left no great literature; his recorded sermons are not rhetorical masterpieces. No doubt all he produced as a working man was competent and of good quality; but so far as we know it never raised him to recognition as any sort of prodigy. He chose to come among us as a common man; 'He had no beauty, no majesty to catch our eyes, no grace to attract us to him. He was despised . . .'[16] Yet Jesus of Nazareth, all Christians agree, excelled all other men. In what respect did he do so? Viewing his life with purely human eyes there is probably no better way of expressing it than by using J.A.T. Robinson's phrase: he was 'the man for others'.[17] He came to *serve* and to *give* (Luke 22:27; Mark 10:45). More colloquially (and speaking strictly on a non-theological level), his purpose was to make life easier, richer and happier for others—men, women and children alike (John 10:10). And it is just in this direction that I believe women surpass men. Their specific gift is to excel, in many ways, in 'making life easier for others'. Men are not quite so quick or adept at doing it! This endowment is the centre-point in God's design in giving woman as a 'helper suitable for' man. If this is true, it is an immensely significant recognition; woman's character is a little closer than man's to that of the human Jesus of Nazareth. She is one jump ahead, one step nearer to that perfection to which we are called as his followers. 'Christ Jesus made himself of no reputation, took upon him the form of a servant,[18] and became obedient'. This is the ideal to which God is working for fallen humanity; and womanhood, true to itself, is nearer naturally to it than manhood is. Of course, we are speaking again statistically, of averages. In any given company the most Christlike individual may be a man. But it is more likely to

be a woman. Genius in the end will pass away and be forgotten; but love (and it is an aspect of love that we have been talking about) will abide, and for ever. No; women are not second-class, inferior to men, and all that has been said above about genius does not imply this. The trouble is, much secular feminism has erred here and taken misguided aim. In so doing its results have been to demean womanhood, not to exalt it. And some of its misguidedness has damagingly infected religious thinking. One of the best comments ever made on woman is that of the old Puritan, Matthew Henry, in his famous biblical commentary:

> If man is the head she is the crown; a crown to her husband, . . . the crown of the visible creation. The man was dust refined but the woman was dust double-refined, one remove further from the earth. . . . She was not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.[19]

This is not the progressivist emphasis of today; but I believe it is true to the ideals of the biblical picture, and gives far more honour to womanhood than anything for which secular feminism is striving.

Why is God 'He' in the Bible?

God is spoken of in the masculine gender in the Bible (and exclusively so). The use of feminine metaphors, as I have argued, constitutes no exception to this generalization. This exclusiveness is such an obvious fact that it is liable to pass almost unnoticed for very familiarity, and its significance is thus often missed. That Emmanuel, God with us, was a man and not a woman, expresses the same great archetypal principle: that in a universe of rational creatures with any degree of individual freedom, harmony can prevail only if all recognize one supreme authority; and authority can be permanent and stable only if it has the ultimate sanction of force. This is a position the Bible surely abundantly endorses.[20] Even within the trinitarian Godhead the fact of one *locus* of supreme authority can be argued from biblical premises. 'Thou *sendest forth* Thy Spirit' (Psalm 104:30); the address of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22–36 in the light of John 1:1–5, 14, 18; and the reference to the *Servant* and the Spirit together in Isaiah 48:16cd are Old Testament instances which support this assertion. The New Testament ones hardly need listing: the Father is the fount of Deity *in eternity* (John 5:26 with 1:4); the Son is *begotten*; the Spirit *proceeds*. Of course, within the limitless perfection of the divine love the sanction of force would be an absolute irrelevance; but in connexion with the finite created order it is otherwise. *The necessity for the ultimate sanction is surely the reason for God referring to himself as 'he' and not as 'she'.* It is not that God is male; Isaiah 45:9, 10 and Deut. 32:18 with their parallel 'father' and 'mother' allusions are two references among many which serve to deny this. Job 38:28f. is another interesting one. It is rather that

man possesses to an extent greater than woman what is implied by necessary authority. He has superior physical strength, a more masterful voice, and, it can be argued, a greater ability to assess accurately and to control effectively a dangerous situation. Again I must stress that I am speaking statistically, about averages. There are women who are superlative at controlling dangerous situations; but they are rarer than men, and most would agree that the popular image of the female (which is inevitably based on averages) does not suggest to potential trouble makers the no-nonsense authority required.

It would seem to be the case that it is in connexion with the matter of authority that God has chosen in the Bible to be thought of as 'he' rather than 'she'; for he has sovereignly given to the one sex in comparison with the other a general superiority in whatever qualities help to establish and confirm the impression of authority—physical strength and stature, capacity to make rational and objective judgments, creative ability in the world of thought and action. This is not to say that woman is far behind in these qualities; but she *is* behind, and that is what counts here. Her own superiority lies in another direction altogether, a direction that is characterized by the biblical conception of love which gives and serves. And as Paul has so eloquently told us, the things in which man excels will one day cease; those in which woman excels will abide. Fortunately, man need not be far behind in these things either; but he *is* behind.

Western Society today

One does not have to look far to see how prevalent violence is in our society, nor how pervasive it is at all levels. Murder, rape, child abuse, public acts of terrorism are, it can be argued, almost expected as natural accompaniments of twentieth century life. Teachers are attacked in schools and doctors and nurses in hospitals; unwanted babies are battered to death. There is no fear of God as once there was (at least to some degree, and within living memory). Churches are robbed, despoiled or otherwise violated as much as anywhere else. My purpose in writing about this is to draw attention to an often unremarked feature of this phenomenon: who are the chief offenders? It can hardly be denied that men, especially young men, are nearly always in the lead. It would seem right to say that they are far more often the culprits than their opposite numbers, the young women. Who are in the gangs bent on destructiveness, looting, football hooliganism, vandalizing of young trees, or reckless driving in stolen cars? 'Young men' is nearly always the answer. Young women have their own faults; they can bring out the worst in young men, and often do so provocatively. But it is still the young men who in the great majority of cases take the decisive step in law-breaking. They are the leaders; when young women are involved they usually stand behind, inciting them in one way or another to express their contempt for authority. This highlights two things. First, in such wanton incidents it is both natural for men to take the lead

and for women to expect them so to do. Second, that somewhere there has been a serious breakdown in the process of instilling into young men (and young women too) respect for authority—a respect which is by no means arbitrary and superfluous; for every one who thinks seriously at all must conclude that it is a principle absolutely essential for the good of society, especially in a world like ours. There may certainly be room to disagree about how authority should be constituted, but there rarely is about the need for it to be constituted somehow, and respected. For anarchy as a principle sooner or later (and usually sooner) shames itself into undeniable disrepute.

How then are young men to learn respect for authority? Primarily it must be from their fathers. Mothers can exert an enormous and irreplaceable influence for good. But obviously they are not usually so tough in physique and temperament, and when a boy is of a really rebellious nature the ultimate sanction of force may be unavoidable. God himself uses it with rebel societies; Isaiah 1 expresses a biblical commonplace. In family matters too it has his authority: Deut. 21:18ff. (which Jesus himself—Mark 7:9ff.—confirmed as God-given) expresses this. 'Fear him who has power to cast into hell' he also warned us. It may not be a doctrine popular today in religious circles, but that God threatens and then uses the ultimate sanction of force is *passim* in the Bible. No doubt love is the dynamic impelling of all God's actions towards his creatures (Ps. 145:8, 9), but that does not invalidate what has just been said, unless the biblical writers are hopelessly inconsistent.[21] The Bible leaves us with the impression that in this balanced respect too we are to be 'imitators of God as dear children'.[22] All this would seem to point to a very definite role for the father as the centre of authority in the home, strict when necessary; and this in turn would seem to point back to the appropriateness of masculine terminology for God.

The place of men and women in society

It is often remarked by feminists—Christian as well as secular—that women today have entered with distinction many professions previously regarded as exclusively male. Women are doctors, barristers, scientists, Members of Parliament, even Prime Ministers. This is true, and there is no reason why it should not be so—with certain provisos. The ultimate rule for the life pleasing to God and for that very reason fulfilling for man is this: 'Not my will, but thine'. Self-pleasing, one of the supreme motivations of disordered humanity, is fatal in the long run for happiness. In the desire for a career therefore Christian women (and men) have to ask themselves 'Are there any indications that this is not the will of God for me?'. Such indications may be particular, that is to say relate to myself in my particular individual circumstances; or they may be general, and relate to the general class in which in his wise providence God has placed me. Obviously in connexion with the present debate on women's ordination it

is indications of the latter type which are the relevant ones. Has God given any general indications that it is not his will that women should be ordained? I shall not spend much time in listing those which spring most readily to mind (our Lord's choice of men exclusively for the apostolic band for instance), but concentrate upon some less often cited. Let me say at once that where deep-seated differences between men and women exist we have to make up our minds beforehand whether we are to regard these as *accidental* or *providential*; that is, whether they are the result of blind, purposeless forces of nature acting by 'Chance and Necessity' as Darwin postulated; or whether they are the result of the Creator's wisdom and will. If the former, we are free to seek to set them aside by legislation, education or any other available means, provided we do so with due care and thoughtfulness. If the latter, our right course is clearly to bow to them and to work within their constraints. Some Christian thinking today fails to face this issue; it never isolates and examines its presuppositions. Here then are some considerations that spring from the biblical conviction that the differences are *providential.*

One outstanding difference between the sexes is that women alone can bear children. They are therefore essential for the continuance of the human race. With the availability of artificial insemination (as in stock breeding) it becomes apparent that the race could continue with the male becoming biologically much less important than the female; in fact with cloning, the male could actually become entirely obsolete. This leads us to ask why the Creator made us male and female with a built-in chromosome mechanism for ensuring roughly equal numbers of each? One answer indicated by the Bible is clearly God's design that man and woman should unite in exclusive faithful lifelong partnerships within which godly children could be raised and trained.[23] But this has serious requirements. In such little communities where shall ultimate authority reside? It is quite unrealistic to suppose that it could safely be shared equally by the two partners, even if their love were perfect. Differences of opinion are built-in to the very notions of creaturely freedom and responsibility; and if the family is to stay together there must be a prior understanding of who has the last word, and a willingness in the other to accept it. What ship is ever sent to sea with two captains? It makes sense therefore to believe that a wise Creator has given to one partner in an unambiguous way gifts of leadership, creativity and physical strength superior to those he has given to the other; and there is no doubt that this is a position the Bible endorses.[24] It is this quality of manhood that balances-out the superior importance of womanhood mentioned above (the basic principle operating here is stated in 1Cor. 12:22–26).

Such a conclusion of course needs to be well substantiated, for it is being very strongly challenged today. I have argued that it conforms to natural observation; but for the Christian it is even more important that it be fully authenticated from the Bible. I have quoted Eph. 5:22f. in support

and I will defend this further below; but it is upheld by other quite different lines of testimony. The formation of Adam was prior to that of Eve; could they not have been formed simultaneously? Presumably; so there must be some significance in the particular order God chose in which to describe his work. It is really no satisfactory riposte for the feminist to claim that the highest kinds of animals were formed last! Eve was not just another kind of animal in that sense; and neither was she formed out of the dust as they were. I have argued earlier that in one way woman is inferior to man, in another superior, and the points just made (formed *last*, but not out of *dust*) are consistent with this.

Again, one notes that in Scripture God names himself *in a particular way:* 'I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob' he says. Never does the formula become 'I am the God of Sarah, of Rebekah and of Rachel', however true that would be. To reply that it was only because society was patriarchal that this is so is to betray the presupposition that God has to take history as he finds it; that is, that it is accidental and not providential. But this is a position quite unbiblical, however tempting and fashionable it may be in many theological circles today.

The Bible of course does record women on several occasions as holding positions of eminence in Israel. Deborah for instance was a prophetess who judged Israel during a time of bitter oppression by neighbouring enemies.[25] She summoned Barak to raise ten thousand men to engage the enemy. She dominated the scene enough by her faith and strength of character for him to beg her to accompany his troops to battle. She was a married woman, but her husband seems to have had little significance. Huldah was also a prophetess, and again a married woman, in the critical days of Josiah (2 Kings 22). She had to deliver him a momentous message about the nation. And there are others. So there cannot be an absolute biblical injunction against women in places of leadership in public life. There is even a possibility in New Testament times that a woman was thought of as an 'apostle'.[26] But these instances were rare and they all concern what might be called the more 'unstructured' type of ministry, composed of special individuals raised up for the occasion like Amos.[27] Such ministry was not constituted formally by God as a feature of Israel's established religious life, which was served rather by the priesthood; and from this women were excluded. Of course, this does not constitute a conclusive argument against the ordination of women; *men* from tribes other than Levi were excluded too (perhaps after the incident of the Golden Calf), whereas the New Testament makes priesthood the privilege of all believers.[28] But as a contribution to the debate it is not without force. Further, the incident in which Miriam figures in Numbers 12 has another contributory lesson. Pressure for personal recognition as a spiritual leader is a very perilous business, and God found Miriam here seriously at fault. No doubt she felt 'pain' at not being officially acknowledged, but she would have been wiser surely to have left the matter to God, and if necessary, gone

without. Many features of the propaganda battle over women's ordination (on both sides) convey the impression that God is conceived as a passive spectator, hoping things will turn out to his satisfaction, instead of as the One who calls sovereignly and irresistibly to spiritual prominence those he will, and none can refuse or stand in his way.[29]

The legacy of Secular Feminism

Feminist pressure is having many strange effects on present-day society. In saying this I am not arguing for a return to previous relations between the sexes. None has ever been perfect or even nearly so, and many have been very imperfect. But the 'swing of the pendulum' is a familiar phenomenon, and in many respects this particular pendulum has swung too far. What are some of the adverse results noticeable today?

For one thing, the secular feminist claim for all-round equality with men has, I believe, made a very significant contribution to snuffing-out what used to be called 'gentlemanly behaviour'. Men no longer offer their seats in a crowded train or bus to a woman as woman, open the door for her, or treat her with any special consideration. The effect on family life has been destructive too. The headship of the father being no longer accepted as a fact of nature, children lose the sense of a firm *locus* of authority in the home, and become unruly. Married women claiming a high career profile for themselves have eroded their husband's sense of responsibility as breadwinner; this tends to be shared now as a matter of equality. Parents look at each other with a degree of ambivalence, and their mutual loyalty is subject to a new latter-day strain. An ancient element in their felt necessity of and for each other has withered, and cohabitation becomes preferable to marriage. Lacking a clearly defined function in the family men hive-off, and single-parent families proliferate. Children find themselves living with the new temporary boy-friend, and the stage is set for child abuse. If women are the equals of men in the way many now claim they can fend for themselves! Men cease to feel they have a protective role, in fact the reverse may prevail; gratuitous humiliation is contemptuously added to violence. Respect between the sexes falls to a low ebb, and with it the well-being of society of which it is a major ingredient. Men and women lose their sense of being necessary to each other; they become cynics and rivals, and homosexuality flourishes as an acceptable alternative to the providential order.

Of course, thankfully, things in our society have not become universally bad; there are fine stable families even where both parents have careers, and where the father possesses an accepted and considerate authority. But increasingly they have an old-fashioned air about them. Of course, secular feminism is far from being the sole or even most potent cause of all this; the matter is intricately complex. The general decay of religion (especially in its classical form of 'the fear of God'); the destructive effect of theological liberalism on belief in biblical standards; the spread of the youth

culture and the popularization of psychedelic drugs may be even more powerful; but secular feminism does contribute its share to the general malaise. One symptom of the demoralization of, especially, thoughtful men is the frequency with which one finds them giving in to its pressure. Steven Weinberg, a leading theoretical physicist and Nobel prizewinner, is an example. Writing about how highly abstract theories become generally accepted by the scientific community, he says:

> In the case of a true prediction, like Einstein's . . . it is true that the theorist does not know the experimental result when she [*sic*] develops the theory . . .[30]

So far as I am aware, there was at that time no outstanding female theoretical physicist anywhere in sight! The well-intentioned bouquet to womanhood will strike many as both patronizing and faintly ridiculous; I feel sure I would resent it were I a woman. It suggests a pretence; a transparent effort to disown a male superiority in which furtively the writer probably really believes. But women, I have argued earlier, have no need of being ashamed of themselves and patronized like this. Today's theologians are addicted to the same sort of window-dressing too. In a recent book[31] Keith Ward has five 'shes' and 'hers' in a paragraph about theists and Buddhists, and similarly in another on 'the fully human person'. Males seem to have disappeared without trace! Perhaps it is men who are ashamed of themselves; perhaps women think they ought to be.

There are other signs too. The suicide rate of young men is rising and well in the lead; what ultimate need, after all, has society for them? Reviews in the Arts section of *The Times* of well-known male authors discuss men's growing feeling of being increasingly unaware of their place in the scheme of things; and so on. Unemployment bears heavily on men; they go to pieces more readily under its influence than women do. Naturally, the more current secular feminism persuades women of the superior status and rewards of work outside the home the more married women will seek it, and this is bound to have *some* impact on men's opportunities.

Of course none of this is anywhere near being a knock-down argument against women working outside the home! They have an assured place in that sphere. It has been expressed rather to counter the prevalent aggressive disparagement of the work women have traditionally done *within* the home. Home building – no work is potentially more important. The hand that rocks the cradle still rules the world, and the break-up of home life is one of the great sicknesses of our society. Please God it may not be unto death.

Hierarchy in the home?

One factor which Christian feminism tends to have in common with its secular namesake is the denial of any degree of hierarchical order in the

home, that is, that the husband is (in the traditional sense) the 'head' of the home. Without claiming that the Bible's teaching on this has been correctly understood in the past (or even nearly so), I would nevertheless argue that the pendulum today is swinging too far in the other direction. Take for instance Mary Evans's otherwise excellent little book *Woman in the Bible*,[32] a work of careful scholarship and loyalty to Scripture. She allows, almost inevitably, that the meaning of *kephalē*, 'head', is hierarchical in content in Eph.1:21, 22, as it is also in the Septuagint (where it translates the Hebrew *rōsh*); there, this use is quite common.[33] But when she comes to Eph. 5:23 she argues for a meaning drawn from *secular Greek* ('source', which she says is 'sometimes used' there) as against that derived from the Old Testament. This is a rather questionable procedure! Paul is constantly referring his hearers, many of them Gentiles, *back to the Old Testament*; he does so later in this very chapter.[34] It is worth quoting C.E.B. Cranfield in his *Commentary on Romans*. Of the nineteen occurrences of *dikaioun*, 'to justify', in Paul's epistles 'none' he says, 'can be at all tolerably explained on the basis of the word's use in secular Greek'.[35] In spite of the fact that the *kephalē* of *v.*23 is sandwiched semantically between the two uses of *hupotassō* ('submit') of *vv.* 22, 24 (which must surely slant its meaning), Mary Evans defends her exegesis by explaining that in Eph. 5:24 'it is the self-giving' [not the hierarchical] 'aspect of Christ's relation with his church that is paralleled in the relation of man and wife'; [this] 'is confirmed in *v.*25'.[36]

However true this is (and it looks a little like begging the question), the most vivid and poignant expression of the self-giving of our Lord was surely the washing of the disciples' feet; but on this very occasion he chose to assert quite pointedly that he was 'Lord and Teacher';[37] the relation between him and them was emphatically hierarchical, and this must never be forgotten. If one gives this incident (of which Paul apparently knew)[38] due exegetical recognition, the introductory *But* of *v.*24 (to which Mary Evans draws attention) assumes importance. Paul is implying that even if the husband is truly self-giving to the same profound degree as the Lord was, the wife must not presume to think herself above 'submitting to him in everything'. The remarkably strong language of Eph. 5:33b supports this understanding. No, the human relationship between them is not one of exact symmetry, and Eph. 5:21 (on which I comment further below), hardly allows us to think otherwise. The relationship follows, at an almost infinite distance, that of Christ to the church.[39] Even if 'source' is part of the meaning of *kephalē* it cannot be all; the word is linked too intimately with hierarchy in another Pauline passage (Col. 1:15–18) for this principle to be so easily eliminated here.

Mary Evans seems rather inadequate too in her examination[40] of *hupotassō* ('submit', 'be subject to'), a common enough word in the New Testament (nearly forty times). She appears to have mistaken it for *tassō* in quoting its 'root meaning' as 'to order, arrange, put in place'. The prefix

hupo ('under') changes the meaning significantly. In the middle voice (which is the relevant one) the sense is: 'to subject oneself, obey';[41] 'to take rank under'. This puts a different complexion on things; the idea of hierarchy is inescapable with this military term. Nor can it be replied that the injunction of *v.*21 ('submit yourselves *one to another*') enjoins something equal and reciprocal between husband and wife; compare the very similar use of *allēlois* ('to one another') in 1 Peter 5:5 where the idea of simple reciprocity would be absurd. Yet a good deal of the author's understanding of the husband-wife relationship seems to turn on these points. She is no doubt right in suggesting[42] that in Col. 3:18 Paul uses *hupotassō* in connexion with wives in 'carefully-chosen contrast' to the distinct *hupakouō* ('obey') of *vv.*20, 22 for children and slaves. Behind this may lie a thought recalling our Lord's contrast in John 15:15; husband and wife are uniquely *friends*. If so, it certainly does not negate the idea of obedience (see *v.*14 of John). But this suggestion of Mary Evans invites another. By the same token, Paul no doubt uses *hupotassō* for the wife in Eph. 5:22 and later *agapaō, heauton paradidōmi* for the husband in 'carefully-chosen contrast' too.[43] For the wife, total submission; for the husband, total self-sacrifice. If this be accepted, it establishes a matter of importance for our discussion. For wifely submission means *conceding* the leadership; husbandly self-sacrifice means *taking* it. Good it was for us that our Lord did take it! (Rom. 5:6). If Paul means anything, he means that the husband has this positive obligation too. So here again there *is* a gentle hierarchy in the marriage relationship; but it is of leadership of a quite costly and unworldly kind, rare even among Christian men. It is a position of which they should be only subliminally aware; not something for them to demand, but for their wives rather to bestow. This is the divine ordering.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude this study. It has not been comprehensive; it did not set out to be. Its main premise has been that it is to man that the Creator has given the responsibilities of leadership and of providing for his own, and to woman those of helping and, within the family, of bearing and rearing children. Neither of these tasks is to be considered inherently greater than the other; the Lord does them both.[45] To both sexes has been given a balance of gifts suited to their responsibilities; to man, more of those needed for bold leadership and the exercise of authority, and to woman, more of those needed for caring and sustaining. These characteristics are patent to common observation. But no gift (except the purely biological) is exclusively the property of either sex; it is only the balance that is different. So there may be great women leaders, and very gentle and caring men. But this balance of characteristics must be regarded as providential, not accidental; that is, as something to be attributed to the gracious design of the Creator, and not just the outworking of blind natural law. It is thus evidence of the Creator's will, and men and women should regard themselves

accordingly. Of course, marriage and parenthood do not come to all, though they can be taken as the Creator's general design ('Be fruitful and multiply' was his first directive to Man in Genesis 1); but the same principles nevertheless apply, even to those who have no children of their own. Poignant human needs of all sorts cry out constantly and everywhere for help!

Within the Holy Trinity all Persons are equal in Deity. But the Bible gives us reason to say that *functionally* (if we may reverently use that term) the Father is *primus inter pares.*[46] (It was after all in eternity, not in time, that the *Father* gave the *Son* to have life-in-himself).[47] If the man has a similar *primus* within the constitution of mankind 'made in the image of God' this will not be surprising; nor will it be in any sense a denial that woman, equally with man, is made in that image. With this understanding it would be inappropriate for the Bible to speak of God in the feminine gender; in his self-revelation to the created order his authority, no less than his wisdom, love and power, must be emphasized beyond misunderstanding. The church thus has no licence to speak of God as 'she'.

Has all this anything to do with women's ordination? Without going into the evils of what we might call 'masculinism' (they have historically been, and continue to be, many and very great) I have tried to suggest some of those of even Christian feminism, which more immediately concern this essay. On the practical level it must be remembered that women considerably outnumber men in our congregations; is this imbalance likely to be reduced if women flood into the ministry? Or is man's masculine conceit going to make it worse? I fear the latter. That the only structured order in the religious life of Israel was exclusively of men, and that our Lord's personal ordinations were similarly exclusively so are also considerations which are bound to influence the view we take. But whether the case incidentally made here against the ordination of women is a good one or nor I must leave my readers to decide. It certainly is for a fundamental reappraisal of the all-important relationship between men and women. At the moment this is a shambles, with far-reaching and devastating effects on society: on men, on women, and on children. Men and women have lost faith in each other in every sector and level of society. No wonder cohabitation (or in a different way homosexuality) has become a better gamble than 'till death us do part'. The beauty of the whole thing has faded; its romance is gone. Over it is written *ICHABOD*, the glory is departed. This may be an exaggeration, but it is not an outrageous one. One of the most urgent tasks of Christian feminism (and Christian masculinism too) is to try to restore it in accordance with its Maker's instructions and in the fear of God to its true wonder and God-intended loveliness.

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NOTES

1 The interpretation placed here on 1 Tim. 2:11–15 and Eph. 5:21ff. is rather different from that of many recent writers. It presupposes that sufficient clues to understanding the first citation are 'on the spot'; they lie in the Old Testament passage itself to which reference is made, the narrative of Genesis 3. They are thus accessible to every generation of readers, and do not rely on a detailed understanding of the educational position of women in first century Ephesus society, something which requires considerable research to establish and which would certainly not be available to many early (and not-so-early) Christians. Since the issue is a matter of evergreen and agelong importance—the relationship of husband and wife—the former presupposition would seem to be *a priori* more in keeping with the genius of inspiration. That is one reason why I prefer it.

It supports this interpretation to recall that just as the term 'God' is used both of the Godhead and of the Father, so the term Adam ('man') is used both of humankind and of the first husband (Gen. 1:26; 5:1–3).

2 New International Version, Revised Standard Version, New King James Version, Revised Version.
3 Authorised Version.
4 Revised English Bible.
5 New English Bible.
6 Jerusalem Bible.
7 Lecturer, London Bible College.
8 *The Church of England Newspaper.*
9 Note the 'For', introducing *v.*13.
10 *Cf.* Matt. 10:2.
11 Note the 'with her' in *v.*6 (R.V., N.I.V., J.B.); the contrary, had it been the case, would surely have been more worthy of remark.
12 Note the allusion to Gen. 3:16 in John 16:21.
13 Paul's 'saved' does not necessarily imply physical safety; Luke 21:14–19; Rom. 8:28 and 2 Tim. 4:18 R.V. offer a possible understanding here.
14 Psalm 139:1ff.
15 Isaiah 3:12; perhaps Judges 4:9; 1 Kings 19:1ff., 21:25f.; Rev. 2:20; Neh. 13:26d.
16 Isaiah 53: 2,3 (R.E.B.).
17 J.A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God.*
18 Note, not the form of a genius.
19 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Bible* (1708–1710).
20 *E.g.* Psalm 93, Isaiah 45:23; Matt. 25:34, 41; Rev. 19:6, 15.
21 These two aspects of the divine character often appear in close juxtaposition: see, for example, Jer. 33 and Eph. 5:1f., 6.
22 Eph. 6:4; Heb. 12:5–11.
23 Mal. 2:15.
24 *E.g.* in Eph. 5:22f.
25 Judges 4.
26 Junia, Rom. 16.7.
27 Amos 7:14f.
28 1 Pet. 2:5, 7.
29 Exod. 3:10f.; Jer. 1:4f.; Luke 1:26f.; Acts 9:15f.
30 S. Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory* (1993).
31 K. Ward, *A Vision to Pursue* (1991).
32 M. Evans, *Woman in the Bible.*
33 *E.g.*, Exod. 6:14; Josh. 11:10; 2 Kings 2:3; Hos. 1:11.
34 *vv.* 28, 29, 30, 31.
35 C.E.B. Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 95
36 *Op. cit.*
37 John 13:13, 14.

38 1 Tim. 5:10.
39 Eph. 5:25; *cf.* John 13:14.
40 *Op. cit.*, p. 67.
41 G. Abbott-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament.*
42 *Op. cit.*, p. 77.
43 See also Col. 3:18, 19 where something very similar occurs.
44 Rom. 5:6.
45 Psalm 23; Deut. 32:15.
46 In the New Testament the Godhead is revealed as a Trinity of Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The unqualified term 'God' is customarily reserved for the Father, (as in 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'). He is thereby represented as *primus inter pares*, the 'first among equals'. The Father and the Son are declared to love each other (John 1:18, 3:35, 5:20, 14:31), but corresponding language is never used of either in connexion with the Spirit. Why is this? Perhaps because the Holy Spirit is the great *Communicator* of the divine love; he is the *vinculum caritatis* (as Augustine termed him), the active bond of love between the Father and the Son. (It is consistent with this that the 'gift of the Spirit' brings the believer intimately into the very circle of the divine love: John 14:16, 17 with 21, 23; Rom. 5:5.)

Now as 'made in the image of God', something of this trinitarian character might be expected to be dimly realized in the constitution of humankind, and it is hardly far-fetched to see it in this: man, woman, and the strong and particular bond of love established by the Creator between them (Gen. 2:18, 21f.). The latter becomes a sort of miniature replica of the divine *vinculum caritatis*, and one which is at least *associated* with personhood (through procreation) and which transcends the ordinary societal bonding of our race.

If this analogy is valid it throws a revelatory light on human family relationships: the Father gives his name to the husband (Eph. 3:15 R.V. marg.; 1 Cor. 11:7); and the Son, within the Trinity, is the Beloved (John 1:18; Mark 1:11, 9:7; Eph. 1:6). The analogy is not, and cannot be, exact; but it is clear enough for the language of Phil. 2:6 (N.I.V., R.E.B.) to suggest God's will for the Christian wife in her relation to her husband. There is a lesson too in the outcome of the Son's submission to the Father, Phil. 2:9. Perhaps this is something for the husband to ponder; compare also the teaching of Matt. 19:30.
47 John 5:26 with 1:4; *cf.* also 1 Cor. 15:24ff. and the trinitarian reference in John 14:6.