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# **Recognizing God's Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society**

## *WEF Theological Commission Working Group*

This working group dealt with the theme of faith and hope for the future as it relates to the issue of gender distinctives.

### **1. WE IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING KEY CHALLENGES TO THE CHURCH AND THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT MOVING INTO A NEW MILLENNIUM:**

1.1 With grief and empathy we recognize the tragic fact that gender distinctives often come to expression in the marginalization and oppression of women and girls in various and often shocking ways, and that such treatment, in the worst cases, is specifically because of their sex. Examples include female foeticide and infanticide, prostitution, rape, wife battery, incest, dispossession of widows, and severe psychological oppression. These injustices must be condemned and alleviated in the light of the biblical witness to the full human dignity of women and to their equality with men. There is both evidence and information relating to these issues of abuse, but by and large Christians are ignoring it. Evidence needs to be collated, and information disseminated, in a deliberate consciousness-raising strategy, and in a campaign as thorough as Wilberforce's to address the evils of slavery.

1.2 Women's and men's roles in societies the world over are changing rapidly in the face of socio-cultural, economic and political changes globally, and issues of gender identity and roles are being rethought in cultural debate. Fresh biblical and theological reflection on gender and gender distinctives is imperative in the light of this situation in order for the church not to lose capable, gifted and motivated women (or men) and so that it can best fulfil its task as the light of the world today rather than come to be judged as irrelevant or outmoded. The church should not merely reflect secular culture, or the cultural patterns of other religions, but neither should it lag behind where a society is pushing forward in right directions even if from secular convictions. We recognize that Christian understanding should not be driven by Western patterns, nor by those of radical feminists, for example, but by glad exploration of biblical teaching and illuminated application of it. [p. 381](#) We also recognize that gender roles may need to be expressed differently in different contexts; for example, what kind of models are possible and appropriate for Christian women in an Islamic society? Further, we recognize the need for fresh and incisive thinking about gender identity and roles for Christian men today, in a variety of cultural settings.

1.3 Women are already, and have long been, making significant contributions in the Christian church, and in the family. These contributions and the gifts from which they spring must be recognized and valued, given proper legitimation, encouraged and actively promoted for the sake of the body of Christ and the mission of the church to the world. Where there has been a conspiracy of silence, or a denial of the contribution and gifts of women, as, for example, in traditional church history texts, explicit corrections must be

made; in the light of these, it will be easier for Christian men and women to identify God-given possibilities for women in the present and the future.

1.4 Evangelical Christians are not in full agreement on questions of gender distinctives and on a Christian theology of gender. While recognizing the key role of Scripture for this issue, they disagree on the interpretation of the relevant biblical texts and their hermeneutical implications. Cultural differences can play a part in these disagreements. This impasse points to the need for more work on the problems of exegesis, hermeneutics, and the role of the reader's context in interpretation. Further, in addition to close study of specific texts, in the context of the testimony of the whole sweep of biblical material, we also wish to see a more thorough response to the charge that the Scriptures are themselves sexist, or that they are used to justify the oppression of women.

1.5 We note also the urgent need for careful and honest critical analysis of and response to the contributions of many feminist writers, especially those who raise legitimate questions but address them in an unbiblical manner. We grieve that in some cases the church has contributed to and exacerbated radical feminism by its failure to respond to justified criticism or to repent of sinful practices. At the same time, we have reservations about the goals of many feminists, and reaffirm that our goals must be defined in terms of the gospel. We confess that in some countries, evangelicals either dismiss more than they should or embrace more than they ought. We believe there is a special need to collate and analyze carefully feminist writings, and information about feminist agenda, in countries outside Europe and North America, and to make available to the world church the contextualized responses of male and female evangelical theologians working in the Two Thirds World.

1.6 We condemn sexism, misogyny and homophobia, and the toleration of such, wherever they occur: in attitudes and assumptions, views and trading, structures and actions, inside and outside the church. We believe that Christians are called to [p. 382](#) demonstrate 'a better way' of mutually respectful, affirming relationships, where men and women gladly serve each other and seek to do each other good. This living out of God's perfect design of harmonious and appreciative complementarity is to transform relationships in the family, in the church, and in society, and will in itself be a powerful testimony to the world of the gospel.

## **2. THE FOLLOWING APPROACHES AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES SERVE AS GROUNDS FOR FAITH AND HOPE IN ADDRESSING THESE CHALLENGES**

2.1 When all the relevant biblical texts are taken into account, and we resist the impulse toward harmonization, we discover a diversity of perspectives on gender distinctives within the Bible, from subordinationist to nonhierarchical models for gender roles. These perspectives are not necessarily contradictory, rather they point to the multiplicity of cultural expression of Christian faith and the context-oriented character of the biblical teaching on gender.

2.2 God created man and woman distinct (male and female), yet without differentiation as concerns being created in the image of God, being given responsibility for creation, and having individual accountability to God. Woman and man were created as complementary to each other.

2.3 Christ redeemed woman and man from sin and its consequences experienced in gender roles in the fallen creation. In Christ, man and woman remain sexually distinct, yet now they also have a *common* identity: 'you are all one in Christ'. This new identity based on being in Christ affects the whole of Christian existence (not only the relationship to God but also to fellow human beings). Thus in the body of Christ there is a new equality and a new reciprocity of woman and man ([Gal. 3:28](#), [1 Cor. 11:11–12](#)). The outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh and the distribution of spiritual gifts without regard to gender at Pentecost and in the early church gives evidence of this new equality and reciprocity. The Spirit can and does empower men and women to new roles not based on gender but on spiritual gifts. Equality of status thus expresses itself in equality of function.

2.4 Jesus' relationship to women in the Gospels provides a Christian model for a new understanding of gender. Jesus resisted gender discrimination. He made women full members of God's family, treated them as persons and not as objects of potential male lust, did not hinder women from learning at his feet over against traditional role expectations, but welcomed them in the roles of disciples, and sent women as his witnesses to proclaim the good news of his resurrection.

2.5 The New Testament teaching on gender roles is characterized by both sensitivity and adaptation to the culture as well as by critique and transformation of the culture in the light of the new creation and in the power of the Spirit of Christ (for example, by affirming celibacy for those who have the gift and not making gender role necessarily p. 383 dependent on biological sexual identity).

2.6 A redeemed version of male headship not characterized by oppressive domination but by the sacrificial love of Christ is one biblical model for gender roles and relationships. Examples of nonhierarchical models of gender roles and relationships are also found in Scripture (for example, the early Christian teacher couple Priscilla and Aquila, or Paul's description of equal and mutual marriage relationships in [1 Corinthians 7](#)). Experience has taught us the immense danger of the abuse of male power, inherent in hierarchical models, due to human fallenness, a danger which is not inherent in nonhierarchical models of gender relationships. At the same time, we acknowledge that women, equally with men, are fallen, and that neither women nor men are exempt from the sinful desire to dominate others.

2.7 The apostle Paul appeals to the created order in support of non-hierarchical models of gender relationships ([1 Cor. 11:11–12](#)) as well as a Christologically-defined gender hierarchy. This invites us to look for models which incorporate the strengths of both.

2.8 In contrast with much current debate (which is often acrimonious and destructive) and much common practice (which may be deeply marred by sin), God's design for men and women in all their relationships, in marriage and family, church and society, is born of perfect grace and love. We are therefore entirely confident that humble, careful, prayerful biblical and theological study, mindful of our limitations but seeking together to hear and obey God, can be only for our good and his glory. Therefore, while we are soberly aware of the difficulties of our task, we nonetheless approach it in hope and faith, believing that to seek to confront sin and to foster righteousness is entirely in line with God's will.

### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 We urge each national evangelical fellowship to study and address gender issues, in the light of these theological perspectives, in ways appropriate to their context. This should embrace general gender roles and distinctives in marriage and family life, church and society, and may also include issues such as ordination, inclusive language, sexual orientation/homosexuality and lesbianism, representation and voice. In addition, national fellowships should address those issues of abuse specific to their context, for example from among those listed under 1.1 above.

3.2 We recommend further theological and biblical reflection on gender issues by evangelical men and women. The lack of adequate theological resources has limited those working against abuses and exploitation of females. The theological and biblical task should be undertaken jointly by men and women, rather than only by men, or only by women.

3.3 We recommend that WEF facilitate and finance exchange of [p. 384](#) research and publications on gender issues in various countries.

3.4 We recommend that WEF offer scholarships for women to engage in theological study and to participate in conferences so that women's contributions are integrated into the mainstream of theological work.

3.5 We recommend the formation of a task force on women and gender by the WEF Theological Commission to work on issues raised here and other related to them.

The Working Group included the following:

Rev Khaled Boushra (Egypt) (p.t.); Rosemary Dowsett (Scotland); Dr Judith Gundry-Volf (Germany/ USA); Margaret Jacobs (Australia); Rev Joe Kapolyo (Zambia); Leela Manasseh (India); Rev Nikolay Nedelchev (Bulgaria) (p.t.), Beulah Wood (New Zealand/India); Dr Isaac Zokoué (Central African Republic) (p.t.).

The Working Group warmly invites response and contributions from readers of this document. In the first instance, this should be addressed to: Mrs Rosemary Dowsett, OMF International, 4 Borden Road, Glasgow G13 1QX, SCOTLAND, UK (Fax 0141 959 4976). We would gladly receive material pertinent to monographs and study guides addressed to specific issues raised above, or to assist in the preparation of a textbook on gender issues suitable for international use. [p. 385](#)

# **Proclaiming Jesus Christ as the One Universal Saviour and Lord in a World of Religious and Secular Pluralism**

*WEF Theological Commission Working Group*

**PLURALISM: BOTH FRIEND AND FOE**