

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 21

Volume 21 • Number 1 • January 1997

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

Gender Distinctives, Discrimination, and the Gospel

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This paper is intended to serve as a basis for discussion and strategizing of the working group, 'Recognizing God's Purpose for Gender Distinctive in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society', at the 1996 Theological Consultation of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. I would like to take as my starting point the problem of gender distinctives in the form of gender-based discrimination, and look at the material in the New Testament for help in developing approaches to this problem. How was the difference of women perceived then, and how did this perceived difference affect the treatment of women and the roles of women in Jesus' circle and the early church? How can this biblical material inform our thinking and practice in relation to the matter of gender distinctives today?

When we take stock of the differences between men and women in both the private and the public spheres today it appears that women suffer because of their sex. In many cultures and social or religious groups women are denied the same human dignity and rights as men. They are marginalized and do not play major roles in political, economic, cultural and religious life in the proportion that men do. They do not have the same access as men to education and other means of personal and professional development. They are objects of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. These phenomena can be observed in many Christian contexts as well as non-Christian and secular contexts. Women are frequently excluded from full participation in the ministries of the church. There are other, less overt forms of exclusion such as the use of exclusive language in liturgical contexts. Women do not have representation in church structures in proportion to their numbers in the church. They do not always have the same access as men to theological p. 42 education and other forms of training for ministry. Women are subject to subtle or overt pressures in the Christian church and family which inhibit their freedom of choice in vocation and ministry and in the private domain on the basis of their sex. They often lack positive encouragement to pursue their callings and exercise their gifts and suffer from a comparative deficiency of female models to inspire them. Other disadvantages could be named. I do not mean to overlook the progress which has been made in recognizing women's human dignity and securing women's rights, nor the differences between various social and religious groups in their treatment of women, but simply to note what are common experiences of women.

What is a Christian response to this phenomenon of gender-based discrimination? Should women be treated differently from men, assigned different roles from men in society, the family, the church? What would be a *Christian* understanding of gender difference?

I now turn to the New Testament itself for light on these questions. What difference did it make to be a woman rather than a man in the fellowship of Jesus' disciples? In the early church?

WOMEN IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

When Jesus began his public ministry he called twelve male disciples representing the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel to be his closest associates. But he also issued a general call to discipleship to all, regardless of gender. Women as well as men responded and followed him. They ranged from women of means, who contributed financially to the support of Jesus and his disciples, to women of the most tragic circumstances whom he forgave and healed and liberated from demonic forces ([Lk. 8:1-13](#); [Mk. 16:9](#)). Jesus called his women followers his own 'sisters' and 'mother' in his new family of disciples—they were all bound intimately together around Jesus as doers of God's will ([Mk. 3:31-35](#)). He also called them 'daughters' ([Mk. 5:34](#)), expressing their intimate relation to God their Father ('Abba').

Jesus' treatment of women differed from that of many of his contemporaries, and was not according to the stereotypes that brought social and religious disadvantages for women. Instead of avoiding contact with women as Jewish men were supposed to do to avoid sexual temptation and the possibility of cultic defilement through a menstruant, Jesus talked with the woman at the well, asked for a drink of water from her drinking vessel, and engaged in a theological conversation with her ([Jn. 4:7-42](#)). The singularity of his conduct is indicated by the disciples' reaction: they 'marvelled that he was talking with a woman'. Jesus acted similarly toward a so-called 'woman of the city' ([Lk. 7:36-50](#)). Instead of keeping her at bay to protect himself, he let her wash and kiss and anoint his feet, and received these actions as her worship of him. A Pharisee concludes that Jesus could not be a prophet, otherwise he would know 'what sort of woman this is who is p. 43 touching him, for she is a sinner'. But Jesus did know, and he exemplifies a liberating way of treating women, namely, as persons, even when their behaviour fits a certain stereotype of women's nature as morally lax.

Jesus also broke with patriarchal expectations for women's roles that were typical throughout the Greco-Roman world. When Mary sat down at his feet to listen to his teaching and Martha did all the domestic work, Jesus did not criticize Mary for taking up a typically male occupation ([Lk. 10:38-42](#)). He did not even accept Martha's criticism of Mary for neglecting 'women's work' and leaving her alone with all the serving. He praised Mary for doing the 'one thing [that] is needful', for choosing 'the good portion'. And he defended Mary's right to it: it 'shall not be taken away from her'. Thus Jesus makes learning or study the sphere of both sexes. He does not regard women as unsuited to intellectual or spiritual pursuits.

In the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, women play prime roles as witnesses, in contrast to the very circumscribed roles as legal witnesses that they could play in Judaism. Women are the first witnesses of the empty tomb and of the resurrected Jesus, and they are sent by the angels of the tomb and Jesus himself to report to the disciples what they had seen and heard ([Matt. 28:1-10](#); [Mk. 16:1-8](#); [Lk. 24:1-11](#); [Jn. 20:1-18](#)). Their being assigned these roles is significant also in the light of the fact that a woman's word was commonly considered unreliable, as the reaction of the disciples to their report on the first Easter illustrates: 'these words [i.e. the women's report] seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them' ([Lk. 24:11](#)). Later the women's words are authenticated, and thus their role as witnesses is legitimated, overturning contrary culturally-conditioned opinions and practices (cf. also [Jn. 4:39-42](#)). The fact that the women are witnesses of the risen Lord means that they fulfil the prerequisite for apostleship, which corresponds to Jesus' 'sending' them to announce his resurrection to the other disciples. In the gospels, therefore, women act as witnesses and apostles, just as men do.

In summary, the gospels give many indications that Jesus treated women no differently because of their sex. He resisted the gender discrimination around him. He

made women full members of his new family—his ‘sisters’ or ‘mother’—and of God’s family—‘daughters’. He treated women as persons and not as sex objects responsible for male lust and hindering men’s spiritual welfare. He welcomed women who wanted to devote themselves to learning and study at his feet and did not stop them from doing so because of traditional role expectations. He sent women as his witnesses, despite cultural barriers to this calling.

WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

This overcoming of gender discrimination in Jesus’ ministry is manifest also in the early church, most dramatically, at its very beginning. When the Holy Spirit came upon P. 44 the disciples at Pentecost and the church was born, there was no discrimination between men and women: ‘All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability’ ([Acts 2:4](#)). This event was, according to Peter, the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy: ‘Your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy ... Even upon my slaves, both men *and women*, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy’ ([Acts 2:17–18](#)). The empowering of women and men in the same way through the Spirit is thus a fulfilment of God’s end-time promises and a result of the eschatological gift of God’s Spirit. It marks a new day.

In the epistles of Paul and Acts there is evidence that difference of gender did not necessarily lead to difference of roles in the early church, but women and men could take up the same roles. Not only were there women prophets such as the four daughters of Philip ([Acts 21:9](#)) and others in Corinth ([1 Cor. 11:5](#)). There were also women teachers such as Priscilla (or Prisca), and other women apostles such as Junia. Priscilla and her husband, also an early Christian teacher, were coworkers of Paul and taught—‘expounded ... the way of God more accurately’—the eloquent and well-educated Jewish Christian preacher Apollos ([Acts 18:24–26](#)). Priscilla appears to have had a more prominent role than her husband rather than a subordinate one, since her name is most often mentioned before Aquila’s when they appear together ([Acts 18:26](#); [2 Tim. 4:19](#)). Junia, together with Andronicus, who is presumably her husband, are called ‘prominent among the apostles’ ([Rom. 16:7](#)). (The view that Junia is a male name goes against the unanimous evidence in antiquity for Junia as a female name, and is likely to have arisen from the presupposition that only men could be apostles). This evidence for women’s exercise of the same gifts as men in the early church suggests that gender is not a restriction in the Spirits’ distribution of gifts but that the Spirit has freedom in this respect and, as Paul states in [1 Cor. 12:11](#), ‘allots [gifts] to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses’.

Women in Paul’s circle are also called ministers of the gospel and perform the task of ministers. Phoebe is called a ‘minister’ (*diakonos*, a person entrusted with preaching and teaching in the churches, cf. [1 Cor. 3:5](#)) of the church at Cenchreae ([Rom. 16:1](#)). She had the responsibility of delivering Paul’s letter to the Romans, and he commends her for her other services as a ‘helper’ (*prostatis*) of him and many others (cf. also Lydia in [Acts 16:14–15](#)). Euodia and Syntyche were two women leaders in the Philippian church. Paul addresses them in [Phil. 4:2–3](#), describes them as those who ‘have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers’, and exhorts the others to ‘help these women’. Paul mentions other women by name who have ‘worked hard in the Lord’, an expression denoting the work of ministers of the gospel: they are Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa, and Persis ([Rom. 16:6, 12](#)). p. 45

How did these women come to take up the same roles as men in the early church? As I have already implied, the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh is clearly one of the main ways to account for this phenomenon. Only very powerful forces could have led to the

breaking down of traditional role models such as we see happening at Pentecost and in its wake. Socio-economic factors also help to account for the involvement of women at the highest levels in the early church. The church was born at a time when women in the Hellenistic world were gaining new freedoms as a result of socio-economic changes, and these changes were felt in the early church as well. Women with financial resources and a high social status and the privileges that came with it (such as education), like Phoebe, or Nympha, who had a church in her house ([Col. 4:15](#)) and possibly also Chloe, who may have been a woman of means ([1 Cor. 1:11](#)), were more easily able to attain leading roles in the church and perhaps even thrust into positions of leadership by virtue of their position, acquired skills and resources. Further, the simple willingness and hard work of women certainly helps to account for their roles. Paul notes these qualities in a number of women ministers and obviously values them highly.

In summary, the New Testament evidence suggests that there were quite a few women in the early church who took up the same roles as men: they prophesied, taught other Christians, including men, performed the tasks of apostles by going on missions that involved preaching and teaching, worked hard as ministers of the gospel, were entrusted with important responsibilities such as bearing apostolic letters to churches, and shouldered financial responsibility for missionaries and churches. They came into these roles through being empowered by the Holy Spirit, enabled through their personal circumstances based on socio-economic factors, and by their own choice and determination. And so these women made a very valuable contribution to the growth and vitality of the early church. The fact that their names and activities are recorded in the New Testament is a witness to the importance of their contribution and others' appreciation of it.

THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON GENDER

In [Gal 3:28](#) Paul proclaims 'in Christ ... there is no male and female'. This statement, of course, does not mean that the bodily differences between men and women are erased. Rather, 'in Christ' the implications of those bodily differences are in some sense nullified. But in what sense? Many scholars take the words in [Gal. 3:28](#) to be part of an early Christian baptismal liturgy and to express what took place in baptism: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Through baptism the differences which served as a basis for privilege and disadvantage are nullified, and those who were once excluded are included. But if [Gal. 3:28](#) as a description of what takes place in [P. 46](#) baptism implies equality *before God*, it also has implications for relationships between women and men in the body of Christ. For it describes what it means to be 'in Christ', which encompasses the whole of Christian existence. It is likely, therefore, that [Gal. 3:28](#) served as a theological basis for the egalitarian practice in the early church described above.

On the other hand, some New Testament texts explicitly affirm the difference between men and women ([1 Cor. 11:3-9](#), [13-14](#)) and reinforce distinct gender roles ([1 Cor. 14:34-35](#); [1 Tim. 2:11-15](#); [Col. 3:18-19](#); [Eph. 5:22-33](#); [1 Pet. 3:1-6](#)). These texts are struggling to take seriously the social and cultural contexts of Christian women and men in patriarchal settings. For example, Paul presupposes that demonstrating one's freedom and equality in Christ should not result in shame throughout the violation of cultural taboos against blurring the distinctions between the sexes, even when these distinctions are expressed in ways that support patriarchal definitions of gender roles (women's 'head-covering' and men's not 'covering' the head). The prohibition of women's teaching in Timothy's church takes into account the fact that women often lacked proper

theological training and could therefore be easily seduced by false teaching. When 1 Peter urges a Christian wife to exhibit conventional female virtues so as to win her unbelieving husband to faith in Christ, this is accommodation to the ethical and social norms of the wider culture out of an evangelistic concern. In other words, the New Testament writers take Christian views and practice on gender to be informed by culture as well as by the gospel, for Christians cannot live their lives as if they were not woven into the fabric of the world around them which partly defines who they are. Nevertheless, the New Testament also subjects patriarchal cultures to criticism and considers them to be in need of transformation through Christ. For example, in contrast to widespread attitudes about marriage in the Greco-Roman world, in [Eph. 5:25–33](#) husbands are urged to love their wives as their own bodies in imitation of Christ's self-sacrificial love for the church, and in [1 Cor. 7:2–5](#) wives and husbands are given equal rights and responsibilities in the sexual relationship. Other examples of counter-cultural applications of the gospel in gender matters have already been given.

A further explanation of the apparent discrepancy between [Gal. 3:28](#) and other New Testament texts on gender is that these other texts may stress difference in an attempt to counteract the explosive social force of the declaration in [Gal. 3:28](#) and disputable interpretations of it. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul may be trying to counteract unforeseen results or wayward interpretations of the declaration of 'no male and female' which he saw in Corinth. Some scholars explain [1 Cor. 14:34–35](#), which takes a very subordinationist stance, as an extreme reaction to gender innovations in the Corinthian church that is not a part of the original letter but was inserted later by a conservative copyist. In support of an interpolation [p. 47](#) these scholars point to the disagreement in early manuscripts on the placement of these verses.

Many Christians today, however, see the affirmation of different roles for men and women to be a matter not of taking seriously the cultural and social locations of Christians but of fulfilling God's intention for creation, which entails a hierarchy between man and woman, whatever their social or cultural locations. This view rests especially on [1 Cor. 11:2–16](#), where Paul draws on the creation stories in Genesis to describe man and woman. But this view can be called into question on two counts. First Paul appeals to creation in this text in support of a *specific, culturally-conditioned practice with a certain social significance*—gender-specific, head-dress which preserves social acceptability and averts shame. Second, he also appeals to creation and the created order in support of the *egalitarian ethos in Christian worship*. I will now elaborate.

Paul appeals to creation in [1 Cor. 11:2–16](#) because it supports his argument for displaying the difference between man and woman—through contrasting headdress—in order to avoid shame: 'man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man, for man is not from woman but woman from man, and man was not created for woman but woman for man' ([11:7–9](#)). It follows that the Corinthian women and men should avoid headdress customs that cause shame. The accompanying implication of the argument that woman is created to bring glory to man, and man to God, however, is that woman has a lesser significance and lower status than man on the basis of her coming after a man, deriving her existence from man, finding her purpose in being man's enabler, and having no immediate relation to God. This lower status and value is expressed concretely by the woman's covered head. Paul therefore uses arguments and supports a practice that imply woman's secondary status and even inferiority both in relation to man and before God (though his statements fall short of the outright misogyny found in many other ancient authors). That is, he operates with a patriarchal worldview here, and in such a way to make his statements hardly suitable as a basis for a Christian theology of gender. But his statements are not intended to have this function. To give Paul's arguments from creation

in [1 Cor. 11:7-9](#) independent theological weight apart from their specific parenetic goal is to go far beyond their intended use. What is true, however, is that in order to achieve his goal of preventing the Corinthians from incurring shame by transgressing wider cultural norms Paul uses arguments that share the patriarchal perspectives of that wider culture rather than depart from it. He reads creation through the lens of patriarchal culture to support certain cultural practices which will allow Christians to be integrated into their cultural setting and thus maintain social acceptability. Paul is working with a model of developing a Christian understanding of gender which is informed by culture, yet, as I will show below, his model also lets the new creation inform his understanding p. 48 of gender over against a particular culture.

What interpreters have not pointed out is the significance of Paul's making a further appeal to creation in [1 Cor. 11:2-16](#) when portraying the relationship between man and woman 'in the Lord' in a nonhierarchical way: 'Now neither is there woman without man, nor is there man without woman in the Lord. For just as the woman is from the man, so also the man is through the woman. And all things are from God' ([11:11-12](#)). Paul repeats his previous argument from creation implying the man's priority (woman is dependent on man for her existence), but he then makes two statements that deny the man's priority and instead give the woman priority or make them both equal with respect to creation. In the created order the woman has priority, for every man is born from a woman. And since God is the source of all things created, neither woman nor man has priority over the other. The upshot of all this is that man does not have *exclusive* priority based on creation. Creation also puts woman before man, makes woman the source of the man's existence, and makes them equally 'from God'. This way of viewing creation also supports a specific practice in the Corinthian church: the new roles which women are taking up in the Spirit and thereby assuming positions of priority and exercising spiritual leadership over men. Women pray and prophesy and minister to men in the public assembly as well as vice versa. Thus in [11:11-12](#) Paul shows that one can also read creation through the lens of the new creation in Christ which is unfolding before his very eyes in the Corinthian church. The unmistakable work of the Spirit among the Corinthian women and men which was most visible in their communal worship led Paul to acknowledge a new equality and reciprocity in gender relationships 'in the Lord' and to argue for it on the basis of creation.

In conclusion, the New Testament teaching that relates to gender distinctives is complex. The biological difference between men and women is never negated or considered something to be overcome (e.g. through an androgynous ideal). God's creation of humanity as male and female is still regarded as 'good'. Yet 'in Christ there is no male and female', that is, there is a fundamental freedom of women and men in Christ from pre-determined roles and thus also gender-based discrimination. [Gal. 3:28](#) proclaims the exact opposite of the oft-quoted prayer of the man in antiquity who expresses his gratefulness 'that I was born a man and not a woman'—the gender discrimination here reverberates loudly. Nevertheless, Christian freedom comes to expression within the particular socio-cultural contexts where Christians live, and thus it manifests itself to different degrees and in different ways, depending on how 'hospitable' those contexts are for such freedom. Further, when the gospel intersects with a culture it also transforms that culture and introduces new ways of thinking and practising gender difference. Creation acts as a guide but does not provide a blueprint, for it can support different construals of gender p. 49 identity and difference, both patriarchal and egalitarian.

CHALLENGES FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN VIEWS AND PRACTICE

The answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper should be clear by now. To be a woman should not mean to be excluded, marginalized or debased. As Christians we must stand against all gender discrimination, as Jesus did and as his Spirit inspired and empowered the early Christians to do. How close do we come to fulfilling such goals? I would now like to put forward some questions which issue from the above biblical reflections as a kind of self-test and to stimulate us further in our thinking and strategizing.

1. Attitudes toward and Treatment of Women. Are *stereotypes* of women prevalent in our midst and how do they influence behaviour toward women and women's own self-perception? In our churches are women treated as *persons*, or as sex objects by being made responsible for male lust and by being feared for their sexual attractiveness to men and thus shut out? Is *abuse* of women tolerated under the guise of a theology of subordination? Are there 'safe' places for women to talk about and report abuse and to receive help?

2. Roles of Women. What roles do women play in our churches? Do they take up only traditional female roles, or are they also students of theology, teachers, proclaimers, missionaries, Spirit-filled speakers of the word of God? Is the way made hard for these women to pursue callings not traditionally open to women, or is their willingness and determination met with *appreciation and encouragement*? Are there attempts to *remove the obstacles* that stand in the way of women's full participation in the ministries of the church, such as lack of theological education, or do we stand by and let these obstacles continue to serve as justifications for women's exclusion?

3. Accommodation to or Transformation of Culture. Do attitudes and treatment of women in our churches simply mimic the general culture? Is pseudo-theological legitimation given to sub-Christian ideas and practices? Do our churches even lag behind the general culture in willingness to recognize gender discrimination and effort to oppose it? Or are we *withstanding the pressure of culture and tradition* and being transformed by the renewing of our minds, following the example of Jesus and in the power of his Spirit? Are Christians showing others the way to a new, humane and redeemed way of living as women and men? How can we be *sensitive to the culture* without compromising the heart of the gospel when it comes to gender distinctives?

4. Not Quenching the Spirit. Is there a place in our understanding of gender roles for the *freedom of the Holy Spirit*? Do we recognize the gifts that the Spirit is giving to women, or deny them out of prior 'theological convictions'? Do we *welcome the new creation* or do we [p. 50](#) suppress its power by appealing to faithfulness to the 'created order'? Are we open to be persuaded that God is at work in ways that we formerly thought impossible?

5. Models for Women. Do our churches teach about Priscilla, Junia, Phoebe, Euodia and Syntyche and other *women leaders in the history of Christianity*, or have these women been forgotten? Is Scripture read as a source of liberation and healing for women, or used as an instrument to keep them in place? How can the examples of women's contributions in the history of the church and Christian missions be taught so as to inspire and strengthen women to pursue their callings today?

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