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On Women and Men Working Together in the Church

Who Will Lead Us? Surely the One whom the Spirit Gifts

Thomas C. Oden

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'Male and Female God Created Them' (Gen. 1:27)

There are two audiences for this paper: The Women's Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship (mostly women), and the Theological Commission (mostly men), together

representing some 150 million evangelicals worldwide. I have been invited to present this one paper, or portions of it, to serve both audiences.

The agenda for this discussion is largely shaped by the concerns of the Women's Commission, but since it deals with the biblical and theological issues of the gifts of women and men working together in the church, it will be of interest, I think, to the Theological Commission. Few issues are more pressing for evangelical Christians world wide than the relation of men and women.

How does the Bible invite us to understand the giftedness of women and men through the Holy Spirit? In what providential ways does the Spirit marvellously distribute to both genders? I am honoured to be asked to attempt to represent fairly both genders in this presentation. I ask your prayers, that my words be

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respectful to every person present.

The first and most important question has to do with the fairness of God.

I. The Giftedness of Women and Men through the Holy Spirit

1. Does God show bias toward one gender or another in the Incarnation?

Augustine wrote: God's 'temporal plan ennobled each sex, both male and female. By possessing a male nature and being born of a woman He further showed by this plan that God has concern not only for the sex He represented but also of the one through which He took upon Himself our nature'.¹ 'Not only *that sex which He assumed* pertains to God's care, but also *that sex by which He did assume* humanity.'²

If both sexes are to be honoured and blessed in the incarnation, and if the one giving birth must be female, then the one born must be male.³ Do not hasten over this point. Linger. Meditate. Savour a delicious classic inference: if the incarnation required birth, that males cannot do—there is no way physiologically — this forms

the plausible hypothesis for why the Saviour was male: *If the mother of the Saviour must of necessity be female, since only females are mothers, the Saviour would logically have to be male for both sexes to be significantly involved in the salvation event.* The only alternative would be to have a female mother of the Saviour and a female Saviour. For one cannot have a *male mother* of the Saviour. More so a male plus female (hermaphrodite) Saviour would fail entirely to share in the specific *either/or* nature of our human sexuality as male or female. Surely the female birth-giver is no less an intrinsic part of the divine economy than the Messiah in the male line of David as promised.⁴ This hypothesis reverses egalitarian arguments, by making the female birth-giver the primary basis upon which the incarnate Lord became male.

The incarnation indisputably convinces us that God is not ashamed of either female and male bodies, or of human embodiment, or of sexuality. Augustine must have been in a playful mood when he wrote, commenting on the biblical narrative of Jesus' baptism: 'Now the reason why the Holy Spirit was not born of a dove, whereas Christ was born of a woman, is this: The Holy Spirit did not come to liberate doves, but to declare unto humanity innocence and spiritual love, which were outwardly symbolized in the form of a

¹ R.J. Deferrari, ed., *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (100+ vols. to date. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 27:236

² *On Faith and the Creed*, P. Schaff et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series 1 and 2 (14 vols. each) (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887-1894), (Reprint, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952-1956, Reprint, 1971-79), 1 III:325

³ Augustine, *Eighty-three Different Questions, Fathers of the Church*, 70, p. 42.

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, Vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 7-9, 222-3; Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*, Vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 117-8, 148

dove. The Lord Jesus Christ, having come to liberate human beings, including both men and women destined for salvation, was not ashamed of the male nature, for He took it upon himself, or of the female, for he was born of a woman.⁵

Augustine delighted in imagining the ancient Deceiver's exasperation at both the female and the male sexes being decisively used by God for human salvation: 'There is a profound mystery that, as death had befallen us through a women, Life should be born to us through a woman. By this defeat, the Devil would be tormented over the thought of both sexes, male and female, because he had taken delight in the defection of them both. The freeing of both sexes would not have been so severe a penalty for the Devil, unless we were also liberated by the agency of both sexes.'⁶

Mary is female, Jesus is male. God's way of coming involves both genders in a particular way fitting to those genders: female, for the birthing of the One Mediator, the God become flesh, without human father, and male, for the mission of the messianic servant, according to Jewish expectation, of a male of Davidic descent.

The core of this classic equilibrium between female and male is found in Paul's Letter to the Galatians: 'But

when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law' (Gal.4:4). It is an article of faith that Jesus was born of a particular woman, without male assistance, not born of woman and man.

2. Are Spiritual Gifts Distributed according to Gender?

We find Paul's teaching of spiritual gifts concentrated primarily in Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 (compare these with 1 Pet. 4:10). *Charisma* is the gift of some God-given ability to render a service empowered by grace. The gifts of the Spirit are given by the risen Lord to build up his body (Eph. 4:11). The Spirit administers them, knowing what gift best befits each believer for service (1 Cor. 12), and each congregation's needs, and the world's needs.

The distribution of gifts is not stratified according to gender. These gifts are abundantly found among both women and men. By the Spirit 'Othniel judged; Gideon waxed strong; Jephtha conquered; Deborah, a woman, conquered', wrote Cyril of Jerusalem.⁷

Spiritual gifts are not given to individuals as such, but to individuals on behalf of the whole body, the community of faith, not for self-advancement but for upbuilding the body (*oikodomen tou somatos*, Eph. 4:12,16,29). When a symphonic conductor selects violinists for a difficult repertoire, he does so not to

⁵ Augustine, *Christian Combat* 22, *Fathers of the Church*, 21:339; see also Augustine, *Of True Religion*, J. Baillie et al., eds., *The Library of Christian Classics* (26 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953-1966), XIV, 27

⁶ Augustine, *Christian Combat* 22, *Fathers of the Church* 21:339; see also Letters, 3

⁷ *Catechetical Lectures* XVI.28, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2 VII, p. 122

advance their careers but to insure that the music they create will be rightly balanced and harmonized. Similarly, when the Spirit distributes gifts to the body of Christ, they are not for personal advancement, but rather for the health and upbuilding of the body.⁸ God has joined the members of the body so that 'its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it' (1 Cor. 12:25,26).

God's gifts continue to be given, even to those unaware of them, in ways providentially adapted to finite capacities. All of us are called to show mercy, but to some are given special gifts of showing mercy, or hospitality. While the command to serve one another applies to the whole church (Gal. 5:13), the gift of serving is given to some in greater measure. These gifts are not sorted out between men and women, but are given to both men and women.

Several varied lists of gifts of the Spirit are found in the New Testament. Those frequently listed include the gifts of discernment (1 Cor. 12:10), of serving (Rom. 12:7), and of governance (*kubernesis*) which seeks to enable the work of ministry of others (1 Cor. 12:28; cf. Rom. 12:8). Also described among the spiritual gifts are faith (1 Cor. 12:9), hope, (1 Cor. 13:13), joy, (Rom. 15:13), patience, meekness (1 Tim. 5:11), encouragement (Rom. 12:8),

the ability to distinguish true and false revelation (1 Cor. 12:10), showing mercy and generosity (Rom. 12:8), diligent leadership, wisdom, and knowledge (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28), prophecy, where one speaks the Word of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:1); evangelization, proclaiming good news to all (Eph. 4:11; Acts 21:8); teaching the truth (Rom. 12:7); the gifts of confession (1 John 4:2), exhortation (Rom. 12:8); healing (1 Cor. 12:9, 28, 30) and miracles (1 Cor. 12:28); ecstatic utterance, speaking in other languages, and the interpretation of other tongues (Acts 2:4,8; 1 Cor. 12:10). Married persons experience the gift of generativity and the privilege of nurturing families (1 Cor. 7:29, 33). Those called to the single life enjoy the gift of freedom from entangling commitments, in order to have the opportunity to serve the Lord more freely (1 Cor. 7:32). Above all there is the consummate gift of love, which shows forth God's own benevolence and mercy (Rom. 12:8), poured out upon both women and men.

3. *How do women and men work cooperatively in the gift based church?*

The evangelical vision of the church is a community in which the gifts of the Spirit enable and energize every member. We delight in and uplift the vision of the gift-based church, especially as it applies to the relation of men and women working together in the church.

The essential meaning of deacon (*diakonos*) is servant. Paul frequently used *diakonos* to describe his own ministry and that of others (Rom.

⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians*. X, XI, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1 XIII, pp. 99-108

16:1; 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Col. 1:23; 4:7), even as Jesus served as the model for the servant ministry (Mark 10:45). Persons in serving ministries must give able leadership in family life, being faithful to one spouse and nurturant of children (v. 12). *Diakonia* is not merely a silent ministry of service but a speaking ministry, wherein one gives the cup of cold water in the name of Christ, speaking Christ's name through the service.

In the gift-based church, everyone is called and enabled to serve on the basis of their giftedness. Everyone has a sense of belonging because they contribute something of value, something of their very own, to the whole body of Christ. Leadership rises from the awareness of who has the most appropriate gifts for each task. Each one is invited to ask: 'In response to God's self-giving, what would I rather do than anything else?' When we are trying to do things for which we are not gifted, we easily exhaust ourselves. When we serve according to our gifts, our joy in service overflows.

We see evangelical men and women today the world over sharing leadership. In the Spirit-led community, giftedness is the decisive factor rather than simply gender as such. Both men and women lead by empowering others rather than within hierarchical constraints.

This calls for an end to the battle of the sexes striving for power against each other, and a beginning for working together in humility and mutual respect. God wills us to live out our gifts joyfully and together.

To do this we need to reflect on some of the biblical and theological teaching on the relation of men and women in relation to the Giver of their maleness and femaleness in the Body of Christ. I ask your permission, for the sake of order and unity, to set aside for now the highly controverted question of ordination about which evangelicals have varying views, an important topic for some other discussion. If pursued here and now it could easily throw us off course from our search for unity in the truth of the gospel concerning the gifts of women and men. This will help us bring into sharp focus the urgent questions relating to the general ministry of the church, the whole gospel of the whole church to the whole world.

4. *Are women to learn and teach?*

Paul focuses in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 on the excellence or virtue of 'quietness'. Note that Paul's injunction is *not to prevent* women from learning Christian teaching, *but to permit*—'Let a woman learn' (v. 11). This represented a major step beyond the late Judaic view of the status of women, who by contrast were not allowed to prophesy or read Torah, confined as they were to the outer court of the temple. Greek women experienced even more limiting conditions. Even the fact that a few women were causing mischief for Timothy at Ephesus was itself a kind of indirect evidence of the improvement of the position of women in Christianity as compared with Jewish and Hellenistic circles, where these troubles would far less likely be connected with any sort of

'learning'.

The learning to be commended for women, Paul thought, was best accomplished with a particular attitude of tranquillity fitting to the special gifts of women: in *hēsuchia* (tranquillity, quietness, calm), silence with all submissiveness. The Greek phrase (*gunē en hēsuchia mathanētō en pasē hupotagē*) implies: Let a woman be a learner under tranquil conditions inwardly and outwardly, showing attentiveness to the received apostolic teaching. The point is not to be silent, but to seek inward quietness and attentiveness to the proclamation. Long before the King James English translators rendered this flatly 'silence', John Chrysostom understood clearly that 'he is speaking of quietness'—a particular virtue.

The same demeanour at public worship for women—quietness (*hēsuchia*)—is elsewhere commended for men (Acts 22:2; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12; 1 Peter 3:4; cf. 1 2:2; Titus 2:2). Certain women at Ephesus may have been disturbing services of worship in some unspecified way under the influence of disruptive teachers. This preempting of leadership roles was not occurring at Thessalonica or Rome or Philippi, but apparently was occurring at Corinth, and probably at Ephesus where Timothy was. Paul was not suggesting that women should be reduced in power in the life of the church but that their centring and resourcing for the exercise of power be based upon inner serenity.

Men and women are encouraged by Paul not to resist or despairingly

protest the natural limitations of their particular gender. Sexuality is a gift and a responsibility. Men are asked to refrain from complaining to God about the special burdens of their maleness. Women are asked to resist crying out against God for the special tasks of their femaleness. To learn tranquillity with all attentiveness is to learn that tranquillity from God through humility. The obedience is to God, not patriarchy.

(This section of Paul's letter to Timothy cannot be read without raising blood pressure. But the fact that our emotions enter strongly into dialogue with the text attests the fact that what Paul says is indeed important to us. This is a passage I have always disliked, resisted, and until now avoided at all costs. But in so far as I have allowed myself to be examined anew by the text, I have slowly come to realize that Paul requires my closest attention in grasping his deeper meaning and intention. However I may resist it, it comes to me as the word of God, asking me to listen and pray for guidance. So even against my reservations, the text has gradually invaded my consciousness and made its mark).

Verse 12 inserts a matter of personal instruction from Paul, as if it could be parenthetical—'I permit no woman to teach or to have [or more specifically usurp] authority over men'; she is to pursue inward quietness (this great virtue of *hēsuchia*, serenity, silence) (v. 12). 'I permit' is arguably a personal opinion as distinguished from a formal apostolic instruction. Wesley translated this phrase: 'to usurp authority over the

man—by public teaching' (p. 776). Wrote Jacob Bengel: '*Over the man*—implying not merely a husband but the whole human race'.⁹ The intent appears to be this: I personally do not allow a woman to teach or claim inordinate authority (to domineer, or dictate, lord it over, usurp, rule) over 'the man'. It is not that women in general cannot teach but that a woman cannot teach in such a way as to usurp authority over teachers already duly designated.

That Paul's statement here addresses a particular situation at Ephesus seems probable from the fact that he did not take this position about women in the other churches (Rom. 16:1-3; Philp. 4:2-3). This verse likely pertains primarily to a special time and place, Ephesus, with a particular problem. This problem was teaching church doctrine in a public worship setting, which had apparently been disrupted by the women who assumed a disputatious type of teaching role, under their false teachers, that evidenced a domineering attitude toward their husbands or other men in general.

Elsewhere it is clear that women had teaching roles and offices in the New Testament church: in Titus 2:3-4 older women were specifically asked and authorized to be good teachers of the younger ones. It is evident elsewhere in Paul's writings that Priscilla has served as a teacher, even of the learned Apollos, 'a native of Alexandria ... an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures'. For Priscilla and Aquila 'expounded to him the way of God more accurately', so as to enable Apollos to answer

critics, 'showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus' (Acts 18:24, 26, 28). It was this same Priscilla (Prisca) whom Paul had repeatedly commended (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16: 19; 2 4: 19). In Philippians, Paul commended the way in which Euodia and Syntyche laboured with him in the gospel (Phil. 4:2-3). Philip's four daughters are described in Acts as prophetesses (Acts 21:9).

5. Are the Spirit's Gifts to Women Distributed Widely in the General Ministry?

The New Testament did not limit women to duties of family and household. Women played important roles as prophets, an office that was typically ordered second only to the apostles (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; Acts 2:17,18; 21:9; Rom. 16:1,2; cf. Num. 11:29; 2 Kings 22:14).

Paul's first public proclamation in Europe was to a group of gathered women 'outside the city gate' by the river at Philippi. His first convert in Europe was a woman named Lydia (Acts 16:9-15). At the head of a long list of greetings in Romans 16, Paul commended to Rome 'our sister Phoebe' who was 'also a minister of the church in Cenchrea' [*kai diakonon tes ekklesias*], and a protectress [*prostatis*] of many (Rom. 16:1,2).

Contrary to the Jewish practice of initiatory rites only for males in circumcision, in Christian practice women were not only baptized but

⁹ Bengel, John A., *New Testament Word Studies* (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti*) (Reprint of 1864 ed., 2 vols.) (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971), 2:515

baptized others.¹⁰ Women were the first to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection to doubting male disciples (Matt. 28:7-9, 17). 'She, while apostles shrank, could danger brave; Last at the cross, and earliest at his grave.'¹¹

Among those who are by faith baptized into the body of Christ, having become clothed in Christ, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28).

6. Do women serve in ministry?

Having spoken in 1 Timothy 2:11 of women in public worship, Paul returns in 3:11 to the theme of women in serving ministries. He could be referring here to deacons' wives or deaconesses or female deacons or simply women. In any case, the women who served in ministry were perceived as working right alongside men in ministry, with courage and ability, labouring 'side by side' as full partners with Paul and other leaders (Philp. 4:3; Rom. 16:1-2). There can be little doubt that women held offices of ministry in the early church, of which widows devoted to works of mercy may have been a subgroup or a separable order (1 Tim. 5:9-10). References to Phoebe of Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1), Euodia and Syntyche (Philp. 4:2), Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41), and others

provide abundant evidence of the ministries of such women, to whom even Pliny's letter to Trajan made note. Paul hopes that faithful 'women helpers' would resist false teachings. As men were warned against double-talk, women were warned against malicious gossip. All their efforts should be marked by self-control and integrity, from alms distribution to instruction of women seeking baptism.

7. What are the gifts and responsibilities of men and women in public prayer?

The key passage on women and men in public worship is 1 Timothy 2:8ff. It begins with a call for peaceful character among men who lead public prayer: Men in public worship are instructed to lift holy hands without anger or quarrelling. To lift holy hands is to pray sincerely, in a way congruent with one's behaviour, without hypocrisy, single-mindedly, with a pure heart focused upon the one thing needful—attentiveness to the will of God.

Paul then proceeds to discuss the conduct of women in public worship, in the light of this distinctive excellence of women, quietness. In this context, he speaks of the adornment of women who participate in worship. The general subject under consideration is public prayer, viewed in terms of the two genders: male and female. This text is intrinsically connected with the previous sentence, not accidentally. The connection seems odd at first: As men are called to pray without anger, so women are called to adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel (v. 9)

¹⁰ Council of Carthage, IV, XII, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* 2 XIV, p. 41

¹¹ Amos Binney and Daniel Steele, *Binney's Theological Compend Improved* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1875), p. 195; cf. Matt. 26:56; Matt. 27:55,56; 28:1; Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983)

fit for the occasion of public prayer. Why this odd connection? The link keys upon behaviour fitting to the life of prayer in a community of prayer of men and women: (1) Men are to pray without anger and (2) women are to pray without ostentation. The kind of prayer Paul thought that men most need is that which reaches out for others in trust and mutual caring. The kind of prayer that women most need is that which actively manifests good deeds.

We diminish the depth of this passage if we think of it primarily as an instruction to men on the posture of prayer or an instruction to women on physical clothing. For the most fitting adornment of the person, man or woman, is good works of love rooted in faith. The most fitting posture of prayer, for men or women, is with accompanying deeds of moral responsibility.

The apparel one wears should be fitting to one's life as recipient of God's mercy in Jesus Christ. Women should adorn themselves in worship 'not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion' (v. 10). Paul does not promote drabness, which itself can become a matter of display and pride. Nor does Paul condemn all decoration or excellent clothing. Rather he was resisting the hypocrisy that would pretend verbally to come before God in penitence, yet contradict that penitence through one's whole physical self-presentation.

A part of the trouble in the Christian community at Ephesus sprang

from a small group of women under the guidance of disruptive teachers who had not made a sufficiently significant commitment to sexual chastity and moral purity; they were self-indulgent (1 Tim. 5:6); they 'learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies' (1 Tim. 5:13). If members of the Ephesian church came to public worship wearing clothing that announced a lack of commitment to the poor, they were forgetting the one who became poor for our sakes.

8. *Did God personally show the way of subordination for both sexes?*

Consensual Christian teaching did not uniformly affirm only passive or restricted roles thought to be traditionally assigned to women. It sought a theological language shaped by reciprocity between women and men.¹² But this did not mean that all subordination metaphors must be abandoned, for none other than God the Son has taken on the ultimate subordinate role, and called men and women to follow this serving model with the male serving and caring for the woman, and the female serving and caring for the man. 'In the Lord's fellowship woman is as essential to man as man to woman. If woman was made out of man, it is through woman that man now

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians*, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1 XIII, pp. 115-6; 123-4; 143-52; cf. David Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom* (St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary, S. Canaan, PA, 1995)

comes to be; and God is the source of all' (1 Cor. 11:11-12).

'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord...Husbands, loves your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for it' (Eph. 5: 21-25).

There are three kinds of subordination or subjection, only one of which is Christian. (1) A subjection which is coerced, such as rape or slavery. (2) A subjection which is socially constructed, economically determined, or based on class oppression. (3) A voluntary subjecting of ourselves to others out of love and reverence for Christ, who became servant unto death for our sakes. Only the last is biblical.

II. Rethinking Eve and Mary

1. If Eve went first in transgression, how are women to be saved?

Equally man and woman broke the command of God. If woman was first in yielding to temptation, man was first in following.¹³ Paul explained that 'sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned' (Rom. 5:12). The fall is thus a federal act, involving all humanity, but only through the cooperation of both genders did the fall occur. Indeed Paul says that it was 'through the disobedience of the one

man the many were made sinners' (Rom. 5:19). For 'by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man' (Rom. 5:17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:21). Yet far from exempting Eve from any responsibility, it emphasizes the power of woman to tempt.

Rabbinic teaching suggested that Eve, who would become the 'mother of all living', was created to complete something left quite incomplete in the male. This is not a statement of inferiority or superiority, as often interpreted, but completion of the spouse's limitation. (But one important way that this glorious completion would occur, thought Paul, is through her potential capacity for serene quietness. This larger capacity for tranquillity may just be a part of what makes women incontestably more beautiful than men). That man was created before woman does not imply that the male was complete in himself, for otherwise there would have been no Eve. The great Puritan preacher, Matthew Henry, commented:

Eve's being made after Adam, and out of him, puts an honour upon that sex, as the glory of man (1 Cor. 11:7). If man is the head, she is the crown. ... The man was dust refined, but the woman was dust double-refined, one removed further from the earth. [She was] not made out of his head to rule over him, nor 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.¹⁴

The rabbis generally held the view

¹³ Gen. 3:6; John Chrysostom, *Homily on Genesis*, 16, *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 74, pp. 207-21

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Rev. and corrected. 6 vols.) (New York: Revell) (Reprint, Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers)

that though woman was the second in creation, she was first in making an opening for sin. This was hardly an invention of Paul's.¹⁵ There is no suggestion here that Eve was mentally inferior or morally more perverse or spiritually deficient. If anything, Eve the rabbis portray as being more curious, more eager to experiment than Adam. The result was that Eve was the first to be deceived—ironically 'ahead' of Adam. She ate first, then offered the fruit for Adam to eat. Hence the fall of humanity was caused by a collusion of man and woman, with woman leading the way and man following.

2. Does childbearing redeem women?

Just as hard labour in the dirt is the context in which Adam's moral awareness would grow, so the hard labour of childbirth is the context in which Eve's moral awareness would grow. The pain of childbirth was not man's sentence but woman's; yet in undergoing this pain, salvation would appear through the coming of God to save humanity. The curse of Eve's transgression (that 'in pain you shall bring forth children', Gen. 3:16) proved a blessing, according to Paul's ironic interpretation. For Eve, the mother of all living, is the one from whose seed springs the Christ, God's own coming. The salvation of woman comes through 'the Childbearing', the birth of the Saviour.

Paul does not imply here a work-righteousness by which women are saved through a particular work, bearing children, which would be contrary to everything else he wrote. Women will be saved just as men through 'the Childbearing' (the incarnation), assuming that they abide in faith, love, and holiness, using good judgement.

The seed of this one woman alone, without male intervention, would become the Saviour of all. All human history would come from her seed and be unified in her seed. While one woman was called Eve (life-giving) 'because she would become the mother of all living' (Gen. 3:20), the other was called Mary, after Miriam, because she would deliver the Deliverer. Paul was not referring to childbirth generally but to a particular Childbirth, that of the Lord, a man born of woman, the promised seed. The woman (Eve) will be saved by the Childbearing (of Christ by Mary).

3. Why was the gospel first proclaimed to woman?

Salvation was promised to come through the seed of woman. Normally the metaphor of seed refers to the male seed, the semen, which implanted in the egg enables life. Yet the prophecy immediately after the fall revealed that the promised seed would be the seed of woman, the mother of all living, through the seed of Abraham as prototype of the faithful, and descendant from the royal seed of David (Gen. 13:15, 16; Ps. 18:50; 22:23; 48).

Genesis 3:15 prophesied that the tempter's temporary victory would ultimately be thwarted. The Lord

¹⁵ The 'deception of Eve' had a complex history of rabbinic interpretation: II Enoch 31:6; IV Macc. 19:6-8; Yebamoth 103b; Rabbah Genesis 18:6; Philo, Questions on Genesis 1.33, 46; Perke Rabbi Eliezer 15a

said to the serpent: 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' Virtually all classic Christian exegetes understood the seed of Eve as the coming Christ, who would crush the serpent's head, bind up the demonic powers, and bring salvation to Eve's descendants.

The first clue in scripture of the coming gospel came in the form of a promise to Eve that the Saviour would come from the seed of woman. Yet woman does not have seed. That is just the point. Without the seed of man, through the 'seed' only of woman, deliverance would occur. Through a woman the devil had tempted. Through a woman the devil would be bound. This passage is often called the 'earliest gospel' or 'protoevangelium' or 'first hint of good news' already embedded in the narrative of the fall.

The Redeemer would come by a female (from the seed of woman). The Redeemer promised to crush the demonic power would be male ('he will crush,' as a 'man born of woman'). Thus the crucial event of salvation was revealed from the outset: God turning toward the sinner in reconciling love to reverse the human condition from sin to promised salvation by grace (Gal. 4:4).

A Redeemer from a virgin, that is, by the seed of woman alone, without male initiative, and without any male implanting, would deal the death blow to Satan's head at the cross. Satan would cause the Redeemer to

suffer,¹⁶ but would be himself defeated. Thus through a man born of woman, God would guilelessly undo what the tempter of human freedom guilefully had done, and by holy love on the cross would bind up the strong man. Ambrose reasoned that it was fitting that a woman be appointed as first messenger of the gospel of the resurrection to all humanity, in order 'that she who first had brought the message of sin to man should first bring the message of the grace of the Lord'¹⁷. Tertullian commented: 'It was while Eve was yet a virgin that the ensnaring word had crept into her ear which was to build the edifice of death. Into a virgin's soul, in like manner, must be introduced that Word of God which was to raise the fabric of life; so that what had been reduced to ruin by this sex, might by the selfsame sex be recovered to salvation.'¹⁸ This is the crucial role of woman in salvation history, announced from the beginning.

4. *Is the metaphor of the church as Beloved Bride viable today?*

The New Testament characteristically employs the metaphor of the bride to understand the church. The Son

¹⁶ 'strike his heel'; John Calvin, *Commentaries* (J. King, trans. 45 vol. in 22. Edinburgh: Translation Society, 1845-56. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1 pp. 170-1

¹⁷ Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit*, III. XI.7, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2 X, p. 145

¹⁸ *On the Flesh of Christ*, 17, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (American reprint of the Edinburgh ed., 10 vols., Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885-1896. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951-1956. Reprint, 1978-80) III, p. 536

loves the church with a love willing to risk all for the beloved. 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Eph. 5:25-7).

The bridegroom willingly dies for the bride, to ready her for the end time wedding by cleansing her with baptism, washing away every hurt, so that she will be comforted, and without blemish, holy, completely ready for the final marriage feast celebrating the reconciliation of God and humanity (Rev. 19:7).

The intensely personal love of Christ for the church is richly described by John Chrysostom:

He espoused her as a wife,
He loves her as a daughter, He provides for
her as a handmaid,
He guards her as a virgin,
He fences round her like a garden
And cherishes her like a member:
as a head He provides for her,
as a root He causes her to grow,
as a shepherd He feeds her,
as a bridegroom He weds her,
as a propitiation He pardons her,
as a sheep He is sacrificed
Many are the meanings in order that we
may enjoy a part even if it be but a small
part of the divine economy of grace.¹⁹

The relation of Christ and the church prefigures the redeemed union of man and woman (2 Cor. 11; Eph. 5:21-33; Rev. 19:7-9). The metaphor of the bride has a long biblical history, from Hosea (1-3), through Ezekiel (6, 23), Isaiah (54:4-

8), Psalms (64), and the Song of Songs, and all this before it was transmuted in the New Testament by Pauline and Johannine traditions.

Scripture views the relation of God and the redeemed people with the most intimate symbol of bonding: as a marriage bond existing between a beloved husband and wife. The coming reign of God is often presented as an end time wedding celebration.²⁰ The readied church prepares as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:1-4).²¹ The espousal of the bride begins at Pentecost. The wedding will be consummated at the final day of history.²²

As dowry precedes marriage, so Christ provides gifts (*dotes beatorum*, the dowry of the blessed) to enable the spouse to enjoy eternal life and to enhance and beautify that enjoyment. The key event of the Revelation of John is the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6ff.). The scene is the messianic banquet. The bride, the church, appears in a spectacular wedding garment, clothed in the righteousness of the bridegroom, Christ. The other symbolic woman, Babylon, gaudily dressed, clothed in unrighteousness, is brought to nothing (17:4). The

²⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* VI, p. 319; Council of Vienne, H. Denzinger and C. Bannwart, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*. (Ed. 14 & 15) (Berlin: Herder, 1922), p. 901

²¹ Second Helvetic Confession, J. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1979), p. 143

²² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.25, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, p. 566; W.M. Abbott, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (n.p.: America Press, 1966), Ch 6.

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, *Eutropius, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* 1 IX, p. 262.

wedding feast ends sensationally with the fireworks of the conclusion of the existing heaven and earth, and the creation of a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1), a new Jerusalem (21:9-11), where God and the Lamb are worshipped, and where 'the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (21:3,4).

All members of Christ's body will in the end time be gathered from around the world (Mark 13:27). The dross having been burned away, and unworthy members having been removed, the church will receive her completed form (Matt. 13:41,42), and will celebrate her marriage 'prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Rev. 21:2), being welcomed into the city of God (Rev. 21:8-10).

III Language Fairness

1. Is biblical language unfairly masculine or oppressively male-dominated?

Classic Christian teaching holds that neither of the sexual pronouns, he or she, adequately reflects the fullness of the divine being. Yet it is not possible to speak in a literally sexless way of God, for that would require giving up all personal pronouns. Naming conveys power. The naming of God normatively or exclusively as 'he' tends to limit the idea of God by human sexual categories. Even when

its intent may have been generic to both genders, the tradition's language has sounded exclusionary to many, who regrettably may have too readily dismissed the biblical tradition on the grounds of language alone before allowing it a reasonable hearing.

The crux of the language fairness issue hinges on whether Father-Son language, with the reference to God as he, results primarily from male-dominated social structures, and therefore degrades the dignity of women and men, or whether such language is a part of the scandal of particularity that accompanies all claims of historical revelation. The 'scandal of particularity' means that, according to biblical history, God meets us in specific times and places amid people with specific names and genders and of particular parents of a particular race and culture. To back away wholly from gender reference is to stand offended at the gospel of a man born of woman, which remains an intrinsic aspect of God's historical self-disclosure, and thus actually seeks to promote the dignity and healthy self-identity of women and men when rightly understood.

2. Is the Spirit addressable as feminine?

May we appropriately, within the bounds of classic Christian assumptions, address the Spirit in the feminine gender? We cannot settle the issues on grammatical grounds alone: *Ruach* in Hebrew is feminine. *Pneuma* in Greek is a neuter, yet even when the neuter is used, masculine pronouns may accompany it. Even in the New Revised Standard

Version, whose mandate specified that 'masculine-oriented language should be eliminated as far as this can be done without altering passages that reflect the historical situation of ancient patriarchal culture', crucial passages could not be rendered in the neuter: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears [*akoueī lalēsei*], and he will declare to you the things that are to come' (John 16:13, NRSV). God is repeatedly named by Jesus as *Abba* (Father). The messianic Son (*ben, huīos*) stands in the male line of David. The Spirit is *ruach* or *pneuma* (feminine or neuter). Grammatical gender, however, does not necessarily imply sexual distinctions. We cannot with clarity appeal either 'to Hebrew or Greek to determine the choice of English pronouns for the Holy Spirit'.²⁴

While God has become self-revealed in scripture largely but not exclusively in masculine terms (such as king, lord, husband, master, and father), the work of the Spirit is at times compared to mothering and nurturing actions: 'As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you' (Is. 66:13; Ps. 22:9, 10; 139:3). God the Spirit is not named Mother but compared to a mother.²⁵

²³ John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, J. Quasten et al., eds., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (55 vols.) (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1946-) 31, pp. 27-30

²⁴ Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., *A New Language for God?* (Shaker Heights, OH: Episcopalians United, 1990), p. 8

²⁵ Roland M. Frye, *Language for God and Feminist Language* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1988) pp. 17-22

Grammatical heroics that attempt a complete withdrawal from masculine language too often result in rhetorically awkward, contorted, and unwieldy communication. We see this especially where nouns are repeated to avoid the pronoun regarded as offensive, where verbs are preferred that require no object, with the odd repetition of the word 'God' as a substitute for 'he,' and with the shifting of direct address to 'you.'

The great biblical teacher, Gregory Nazianzen, in the fourth century, was long ago amused by those who foolishly held 'God to be a male', which he regarded as a misplaced analogy. Just as one cannot say that God because Father is therefore male, so one cannot conclude that 'Deity is feminine from the gender of the word, and the Spirit neuter,' since the designation 'has nothing to do with generation. But if you would be silly enough to say, with the old myths and fables, that God [flatly and literally] begat the Son by a marriage with His own Will, we should be introduced to the Hermaphrodite god of Marcion and Valentinus who imagined these newfangled Aeons.'²⁶

3. Do modern sexist premises undermine classic understandings of the relation of the gifts of men and women?

Evangelicals are committed to allowing biblical texts to speak for themselves, hence classic biblical teaching

²⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, *Orationes*, XXXI.7, *On the Holy Spirit, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2 VII, p. 320

maintains faithfulness to the historic language of the church, but in doing so, seeks fairness and balance in the contemporary use of language.

It is because grace comes to us personally that sex has become a decisive theological issue. Sexual differentiation is not a novel or recent issue for biblical interpretation, but a question lodged already in the Incarnation event.

Whenever we speak *personally*, whether of ourselves or God, we use personal language, the language that speaks of he and she, and not merely it, i.e., with personal pronouns (him and her), rather than impersonal pronouns (it). Ironically when we speak personally of God it seems to trap us in sexual categories, because the English language does not have a capacity for generic personal terms (that would remain personal while not preferring one gender or another) except for them. Yet historically these personal terms for God have been preferred to the flat depersonalization of all language about God. Even then all personal plurals must be ruled out to avoid idolatry.

The Giver of grace is less a depersonalized 'it' than the divine personal Thou who addresses us as responsible, free individual persons. Only through a particular Person, God the Son, is the love of the Father offered up. It is only through a particular Personal Thou, God the Spirit, that the Father's love incarnated in the Son is applied inwardly. One is sorely tempted to rewrite scripture to gain a more advantageous posture with some modern audiences. But no well-instructed believer thinks of the

Giver of grace as 'it' or prays to an 'it,' even if steeped in modernity.

4. *Is God rightly called Abba (Father) by women struggling for justice?*

Elizabeth Achtemeier has astutely shown that the Hebrew prophets did not suffer from a failure of imagination to grasp God as female, for they were already surrounded by cultures dominated by feminine deities. Rather they deliberately chose in their context not to apply feminine language uncritically to God, she says, 'because they knew and had ample evidence from the religions surrounding them that the female language for the deity results in a basic distortion of the nature of God and of his relation to his creation' — namely, the deification of nature, pantheism, and immanent religion. Even as male terms for God are prone to diminish the fullness of God, so are female. 'When you have a Goddess as the creator, it's her own body that is the universe. She is identical with the universe.'²⁷ This the prophets called idolatry and classic Christianity has defined as pantheism. These dangers call us to make a sustained effort to use language fairly and without sexist bias, according to the mission of God which redeems and embraces both sexes.

Liturgical 'reforms' that systematically expunge the name Father from all acts of worship are unconscionable to the believing community. Jesus repeatedly called God

²⁷ D. Miller, ed., *The Hermeneutical Quest* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986), p. 109

Father (*Abba*). This is a singular feature of his teaching, quite unusual in the Jewish tradition. God is not merely like a father; God is Father, named as such by the Son. God the Spirit teaches us to cry out 'Abba' (Rom. 8:16). The church is that community that celebrates God as *Abba*.²⁸ Christian worshippers reticent to address God by the name Jesus specifically taught them to speak can hardly be said to have learned how to pray. 'We are bound to be baptized in the terms we have received and to profess belief in the terms in which we have been baptized'.²⁹ Yet the spiritually reborn do not utter the name of God as Father (*Abba*, Papa) without the community of faith as mothering matrix.³⁰ The life of faith is never motherless (*ameter*, Heb. 7:3).

The scandal of particularity remains. God meets us in specific

times and places amid people with specific names and genders (notice, not a single hermaphrodite), as ordinary people with particular parents of a particular race, an unrepeatable time, and a distinctive culture. To back away wholly from gender reference is to stand offended at the gospel of a man born of woman, and the Spirit who utterly transcends the linguistic limitations of gender differences that only seem to be implied in the feminine *ruach* and the neuter *pneuma*.

To denude language of all gender reference reveals an ideological bias reflecting an anti-historical prejudice, a hatred of actual history, that fails to reason with the believing church over all generations. This is quintessential modern chauvinism. This exclusion tends toward an implicit denial of our very createdness as sexual beings. No woman or man I know wishes to be called an 'it'. If so, how can one finally rest easy with 'it' language addressed to God? God is not rightly viewed as even less personal than ourselves.

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.8, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, pp. 533-4

²⁹ Basil, in Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 193

³⁰ Cyprian, *Letters*, 39, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* V, pp. 316-9

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