

A PERSONAL JOURNEY...

From Male Superiority to Mutual Submission

By John R. Kohlenberger III



A product of middle-class suburbia in the 50s and 60s, I was raised in a world well defined by gender-based stereotypes. A woman's place was in the home and a real man wouldn't be caught dead doing "women's work," which was less important and less valuable than real work you got paid for. In athletics, I learned not to run or throw like a girl, and when hurt, not to cry like a girl. At home, at school, and at play, I learned boys did things better than girls and men were superior to women.

A product of evangelical education and church affiliation in the 70s and 80s, my secular view of women was not only reinforced, it was sanctified with scripture. Eve was deceived and corrupted Adam. Sarah lacked Abraham's powerful faith. Jacob's scheming wives were nothing but trouble. Miriam criticized Moses. And don't forget Delilah and Jezebel! It seemed most of the women of the Old Testament were named only to be praised for their physical beauty or vilified for their treacherous dealings with men.

From the New Testament, I was taught that women were to be silent and without authority in the church, and were to

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be absolutely submissive to their husbands in marriage. A standing joke at Bible college and seminary was that women attended only to find a husband, or to learn to teach children. But on the seri-

ous side, little other career guidance was offered.

But this nearly monolithic programming in male superiority did not go unchallenged, due to persistent prodding and thoughtful interaction with my patient wife and my insightful mentor. Over time, it became clear that any concept of male superiority was absolutely shattered by the reality that both male and female are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and are co-heirs of the gracious gift of life (1 Peter 3:7). It also became clear that there were no commandments in either Testament consigning women exclusive-

ly to the home (or freeing men from serious involvement there!) or limiting their involvement in society. So, regardless of one's position on roles in marriage or church ministry, there was no biblical restriction on female involvement in business or government.

As to submission in marriage, I'd heard many sermons on wives submitting to husbands, but never heard anyone deal with the fact that in Ephesians 5:21, submission is to one another; in other words, husbands were to submit to wives as well. I had actually learned over the course of 23 years of marriage the wisdom of submitting to my wife in her areas of expertise, but only recently realized submission was a biblical imperative. And as to church ministry, only very recently have I realized the extreme significance of Paul naming women as his partners in ministry in Romans 16:3-15, as sharing his struggles in Philippians 4:3; calling Phoebe a "deacon" in Romans 16:1 (NRSV) and Junia an "apostle" in Romans 16:7 (NRSV).

Paul practiced what he preached, that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"

How to Embrace Biblical Equality

- **Work hard to eliminate personal pride** and the barriers it creates to effective interaction within the family, church and society by taking to heart the scripture, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" (Romans 12:3).
- **Fight any feelings of sexism**—or racism, or classism—with the truths of Galatians 3:28 and by remembering that male and female share equally the image of God and new life in Christ (Genesis 1:27, 1 Peter 3:7).
- **Practice mutual submission and servant-leadership** by not demanding to be served, but by serving others (Ephesians 5:21, Matthew 20:28).

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