

Gender Relations and the Biblical Drama

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How should Christians approach gender studies from a view that is both psychologically and biblically informed? Let me explain some principles I have taken, mostly from the broadly Reformed theological tradition, about the appropriate use of Scripture as a whole, in the context of which I will try to show—in a selective fashion—how such principles get worked out in the writing and teaching I do, especially in gender studies.¹

The importance of hermeneutics, even unacknowledged ones

My first point has already been implicitly made in my reference to a theological tradition—namely, that there is no unmediated reading of Scripture, notwithstanding the claims of primitivist-leaning Christian groups throughout church history. And you do not need to be a scholar of biblical hermeneutics in order to have a (usually unacknowledged) biblical hermeneutic. For example, it is still not unusual to find evangelicals who carry around only a New Testament, or who do carry around a full Bible, but with the words attributed to Jesus printed in red. Each of these practices embodies a hermeneutical assumption: the first to the effect that the Hebrew Scriptures are at best background to the doctrinally authoritative New Testament, and the second to the effect that, in matters of doctrinal or ethical dispute, the words attributed to Jesus automatically trump other parts of Scripture. Either of these assumptions may be defensible (although in the simplistic forms I have just described I do not think they are), but my point is that they are assumptions with which certain readers approach Scripture—not self-evident claims of Scripture itself.

More troubling, given the legacy of the fundamentalist/modernist divide that characterized much of twentieth-century North America, is the residual tendency among evangelicals to reduce the Bible to a “flat book”—that is, to an encyclopedic collection of decontextualized, propositional statements, all of which are either historically or scientifically “objective.”² Ironically, while claiming to confront “godless science” with a high view of Scripture, fundamentalists allowed the approach of early twentieth-century science (a view that knowledge is created through controlled studies based on previously proven facts, also known as positivist epistemology) to dictate the terms of the debate: They presumed that truth, in Scripture or anywhere else, can only come packaged as empirical or analytic statements. That, too, was a her-

meneutic, more often than not an unacknowledged one. It is presumably the hermeneutic behind the question once asked in the 1960s of Wheaton College English Professor Clyde Kilby by one of the college’s board members who wanted to know why Kilby taught courses on novels, since “novels contain nothing but lies.”

So, one’s hermeneutical assumptions about Scripture will be more or less explicitly articulated on the basis of certain traditions—theological, philosophical, scientific, and/or literary—or they will be denied while remaining covertly operative, often with far-reaching consequences both ethically and epistemologically. Charles Cosgrove, a Baptist ethicist and New Testament scholar, calls these hermeneutical assumptions “shared but typically unexamined plausibility structures [that make] a given appeal to scripture appear valid.” And he rightly adds that “appeals to scripture can only be persuasive if the speaker and audience share the same hermeneutical assumptions.”³ Thus, in the debate about male headship, where there is a shared assumption that the Bible is reducible to a “flat book” of authoritative, encyclopedic factoids, there will be a tendency to play what one of my evangelical feminist colleagues calls “proof-text poker.” Gender traditionalists and gender egalitarians will confront each other with their favorite handful of biblical texts (e.g., Gen. 3:16, Eph. 5:22, 1 Cor. 11:3, 2 Tim. 2:12, and 1 Pet. 3:1 for traditionalists; Gen. 1:26–28, Acts 2:17–18, Gal. 3:28, and 1 Pet. 3:7 for egalitarians). The assumption seems to be that the side with the fullest hand of proof texts wins the argument and, given the accepted authority of Scripture for Christian faith and life, gets to set policies for gender relations, at least in church and family spheres, if not for the whole of society.

Wise people have rightly rejected such a hermeneutic, calling it an example of “rigid, naive, proof-tested [sic] approaches.”⁴ While claiming in the fundamentalist past to represent a high view of scriptural authority, users of this approach actually betrayed a rather low view. For the “flat book” hermeneutic assumes that we can impose upon the Bible our modern epistemology with a positivist bias (scientific approach), instead of trying to understand how the Bible, in sixty-six different books of various genres written, edited, and collected over a thousand years or more, embodies God’s truth in an overarching cosmic narrative. This is not to say that exegesis is unimportant for discerning anthropological and ethical truths, in gender relations or any other area. But exegesis needs, among other things, to be sensitive to what Cosgrove calls “the Rule of Purpose,” i.e., that “the purpose (or justification) behind a biblical moral rule carries greater weight than the rule itself.”⁵ This is another way of saying that we need to distinguish between the spirit and the letter of the law.

Interpretation using the Rule of Purpose

In the ongoing debate between gender hierarchists and egalitarians, it is the latter group that is, in my view, more sensitive to the

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Rule of Purpose.⁶ Thus, when asked about all of Paul's passages that seem to endorse women's silence in the churches and male headship in the family, gender egalitarians point out that these must be put alongside all the other passages in which Paul praises female leaders of house churches, gives instructions for how women should in fact speak in church, and commends one woman for helping straighten out the doctrinal confusions of a male colleague. And, while using the language of wifely submission in some places, Paul reminds his readers in other places that spouses' bodies belong equally to each other and that husbands are to be ready to sacrifice, like Christ, unto the death for their wives.

Egalitarians, appealing to the Rule of Purpose, conclude that Paul's mixed voices on this issue indicate that he supports women's equal freedom and authority in Christ, but that, for the sake of spreading the gospel, he does not want women to go overboard in exercising that freedom. In the midst of a patriarchal society already inclined to see this struggling new Jewish-messianic sect as, at best, somewhat weird, and, at worst, politically subversive, some concessions to local gender norms were needed.⁷ But, if the purpose behind Paul's household and church rules is "responsible freedom in Christ for both women and men in the context of spreading the gospel," then those rules are not ends in themselves, but means to deeper ends that must be kept in mind as we organize Christian life in any subsequent time and place.

Charles Colson gives a more contemporary example of the Rule of Purpose in his discussion of the unfortunate trend among self-identified "born-again" American Christians to divorce and to cohabit outside of marriage at the same rates as the population at large. He blames these trends on the absence of an overarching Christian worldview, even among many who read the Bible and claim to respect its authority as the word of God. "It's not enough to know our Bibles, to cite chapter and verse," Colson asserts. "We also need a broader framework connecting our spiritual beliefs to our overall vision of reality."

For example, a Christian world-view perspective on divorce asks what God's purpose was in creating marriage. Marriage is not primarily a means of meeting emotional needs. It is fundamentally a social institution, providing structure for spouses to take care of each other and their children. It draws isolated individuals into a wider network of relatives and kin. It nurtures concern for the future. This world-view understanding of marriage provides the plausibility structure for specific scriptural commands regarding sexual morality. Without it, biblical sexual morality may appear arbitrary and negative, and even Christians begin quietly ignoring it in their daily lives.⁸

An unfolding biblical drama

Anglican theologian N. T. Wright develops this worldview theme further when he suggests that we need to understand the Bible—and hence the story of gender relations within it—as first and foremost the account of a cosmic drama still in progress. Wright invites us to do the following thought experiment: Consider a

troupe of Shakespearean actors, thoroughly versed in Shakespeare's available works, who stumble upon a previously unknown play by the Bard. The manuscript includes three acts and the tail end of the fourth act, but the in-between part of the final act is missing. The troupe does know, therefore, how the drama ends; it knows that the play is ultimately a comedy with a happy ending, and not a tragedy. But, to perform the play, the actors must improvise the missing portions of the fourth act, drawing on their knowledge of the rest of the play, on enduring themes and dramatic devices in Shakespeare's other plays, and on what they have learned by working with all these over the course of their individual and corporate acting careers.

So, too, the Bible reveals a cosmic drama of which God is the author. Creation, fall, redemption, and future hope are the four acts of that drama, and we human men and women are the actors made in God's image and called to announce and advance God's kingdom, as we fill in the missing parts of act 4. Like Paul, we do this by forming contextually sensitive rules for action, which we strive to conform to the Author's purpose in this "time between the times," from the resurrection climax at the end of act 3 (embodied in the gospels) to the promise of the new heaven and earth that is presented as the fragmentary end of act 4 in the book of Revelation.⁹ That cosmic drama is, for the most part, concerned with persons as generic human beings created, fallen, and called to embrace redemption and sanctification as citizens of God's emergent kingdom. But there is a subplot concerning gender relations, beginning with what Reformed theologians have called the "cultural mandate" in the first act of creation. And it is in part because of the cultural mandate, particularly as expressed in Genesis 1:26–28, that I have used the term "gender relations" rather than "gender roles" in the title of my article. Let me explain this further.

As many of you know, it is now standard practice in social science, when studying the behavior of women and men, to use the term *sex* to refer to that which is biological and the term *gender* to that which is learned. Although this dichotomy is a little too neat—inasmuch as biology undergirds learning, and learning, in turn, changes biology—it is still a useful distinction, especially when we are talking about the doctrine of creation and the cultural mandate. Decades ago, lay theologian Dorothy Sayers wondered why women and men are referred to as "opposite sexes" rather than "neighboring sexes."¹⁰ The question is still a good one today, given the popularity of books such as John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*¹¹ and the many similar evangelical volumes that pre- and postdate it.¹² These volumes tend to treat the sexes as if they are (or should be) fixed and virtually non-overlapping separate species. Their underlying assumption seems to be that gender is reducible to biological sex—or sometimes that gender is a metaphysical given even more ontologically basic than sex, subject to little individual variation and (either actually or ideally) immune to change.¹³

There is, as most know, a large social science literature that calls this assumption into question and supports instead Dorothy Sayers's contention that women and men are neighboring, not

opposite sexes. Over the past forty years, especially in industrialized countries, modest average sex differences in spatial, verbal, and other skills have become even smaller as educational opportunities have been equalized for males and females. And even where somewhat larger average differences persist—for example, in physical height or in communication and conflict management styles—the amount of variability *within* each sex greatly exceeds the small average differences that exist *between* the sexes.¹⁴

It is difficult to espouse a rigid gender essentialism in the face of such data unless, of course, you choose simply to ignore the data or to treat it as indicating an aberration (like cancer, perhaps?) that needs to be corrected. Both strategies—ignoring and pathologizing—are regularly used by Mars/Venus-leaning Christian writers, often with a breathtaking confidence that the alternative, archetypal reading of gender (with God often cast as the “ultimate masculine” beside whom we are all somehow “feminine”) is transparently biblical, when in fact it owes as much or more to the influence of pagan and Greek thought.¹⁵

But, a more responsible reading of Scripture indicates that God has built a lot more flexibility into what we call gender (which is why I always prefer to talk about gender relations rather than using the more static term gender roles). If we compare Genesis 1:20–22 with Genesis 1:26–28, we see that sexual reproduction is something that we share with the animals: Both they and we are told to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill [the seas, the earth].” What differs remarkably is that the primal man and woman are given an additional mandate: to subdue the earth. Reformed theologians have taken this to mean that human beings—whether or not they acknowledge the divine source of this mandate—are called to unfold the potential of creation in ways that flexibly express the image of God, yet stay within the limits of God’s creation norms. What Christians have too often done instead, under the influence of pagan and Greek thought earlier and the doctrine of gendered, separate spheres later, is to assign subduing the earth to men, while telling women to be fruitful and multiply.

This seems to me to get it quite backward. While I do not think that the cultural mandate requires a blanket endorsement of androgyny, it does suggest that any construction of gender relations involving an exaggerated separation of activities and/or virtues by sex is eventually going to run into trouble (as it has with a vengeance in the last half-century), because such exaggeration is creationally distorted and, therefore, potentially unjust toward both men and women. Gender is part of the cultural mandate, something to be responsibly structured and renegotiated throughout the successive acts of the biblical drama—not a mystical, rigid, archetypal given. Thus, we need to think of gender as much in terms of a verb as a noun: “Doing gender” is a responsible cultural activity whose mixed blessings need to be critically examined in the context of the large biblical drama in which we are actors. For people with a low tolerance for ambigui-

ty, this can be very upsetting. Many of us would rather be like the “wicked and lazy servant” in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), keeping our assets buried in the cold ground of gender stereotypes, instead of flexibly multiplying them in the service of

God and neighbor.

Let me add that the romanticizing and/or rank ordering of gender archetypes is biblically questionable, whether done by gender-role traditionalists, by cultural feminists who reverse the hierarchy by valorizing the

stereotypically feminine, or by evangelical writers who baptize the trendy men-are-from-Mars, women-are-from-Venus rhetoric with a thin Christian veneer. Far more in keeping with our created human status and the cultural mandate to which God calls all humans is the bumper sticker I recently saw that read, “Men are from Earth; women are from Earth. Get used to it.” Yale theologian Miroslav Volf summarizes it well:

The ontologization of gender would ill serve both the notion of God and the understanding of gender. Nothing in God is specifically feminine; nothing in God is specifically masculine; therefore nothing in our notions of God entails duties or prerogatives specific to one gender [sic]; all . . . are prerogatives of both genders. Men and women share maleness and femaleness not with God but with animals. They image God in their common humanity. Hence we ought to resist every construction of the relations between God and femininity or God and masculinity that privileges one gender, say by claiming that men on account of their maleness represent God more adequately than women, or by saying that women, being by nature more relational, are closer to the divine as the power of connectedness and love. . . . To find peace [women and men] with self-enclosed identities need to open themselves for one another and give themselves to one another, yet without loss of self or domination of the other.¹⁶

Having said all this, my strong creation theology also requires me to say that it matters that we are embodied male and female, just as it matters that we are born into one family or another, and into a given time and place, and we cannot become fully human by ignoring or deprecating any of these constraints. Gender is never a completely social construction. At the very least, it must cooperate with physical and reproductive differences between the sexes as these interact with the settings in which people carry out the cultural mandate. At the same time, these variations in time and place mean that just and healthy gender relations may differ in a subsistence hunting and gathering culture as compared to an agricultural one, or in both as compared to an urban industrial society. Indeed, even in a given time and setting, healthy gender relations may take different forms at different stages of the life cycle. When we add to this individual differences that have nothing to do with sex—the “varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” of which Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:4—then we have no mandate for laying down rigid, let alone hierarchal, gender scripts.

Within the biblical norms of stewardship, mutual regard, and commitment to bringing the next generation to healthy maturity, there is more than one way to play out faithfully the last act of the biblical drama.

Notes

1. For a more detailed treatment of these issues, see, for example, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990); *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us About Masculinity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Stanley J. Grenz, Mardi Keyes, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Women and the Future of the Family* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), ch. 5; Christine Firer Hinze and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "Whose Marriage? Whose Health? A Christian Feminist Ethical Response" in John Wall, Don Browning, William J. Doherty, and Stephen Post, eds., *Marriage, Health, and the Professions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), ch. 7; and David Blankenhorn, Don Browning, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, eds., *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal Regard Marriage and Its Critics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), ch. 2.

2. The "flat book" metaphor comes from Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley's *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1983).

3. Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 3.

4. Call for Papers, Wheaton Theology Conference, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Ill., April 2005.

5. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture*, 3. See also his ch. 1 on "The Rule of Purpose."

6. For a balanced analysis of these two contrasting rhetorics about gender, see, for example, Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

7. See, for example, Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992) and Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women*

Called to Ministry (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985). See also Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*, ch. 12, especially the discussion of the tension between the "missionary principle" and the "pilgrim principle" in the early church.

8. Charles Colson, "Any Ol' World View Won't Do," *Jubilee Extra* (May 1998): 4.

9. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992), ch. 5.

10. Dorothy Sayers, "The Human-Not-Quite-Human," in *Unpopular Opinions* (1947), reprinted in Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 37-47.

11. John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1992).

12. For example, Larry Crabb, *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991); Robert Hicks, *The Masculine Journey* (Colorado Springs, Co.: Navpress, 1993); Jani Ortlund, *Fearlessly Feminine: Boldly Living God's Plan for Womanhood* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000); John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991).

13. For an analysis of essentializing strategies in two prominent Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, see Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "The Carrot and the Stick: Abraham Kuyper on Gender, Family, and Class," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis Lugo (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 59-84, and *A Sword Between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2010). Among non-Christian academics, gender essentializing now tends to be done through the grid of evolutionary psychology, for one critique of which see Van Leeuwen, *My Brother's Keeper*, ch. 7.

14. For a more detailed technical discussion of these issues, see, for example, Hilary Lips, *Sex and Gender: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 2001).

15. See Van Leeuwen, *A Sword Between the Sexes?*, and also Faith Martin, "Mystical Masculinity: New Questions Facing Women," *Priscilla Papers* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 6-12.

16. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1996), 173-74, 176.

Posterity will serve him; future generations
will be told about the Lord.

They will proclaim his righteousness to
a people yet unborn—
for he has done it.

—Psalm 22:30-31

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