

QUESTIONS THAT MISLEAD THE GENDER DEBATE

By Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

Political polls unnerve me. The questions are carefully phrased such that one's answer *must* support the perspective of the pollster (not unlike the classic question, "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?").

When those who provide the answers also pose the questions, the debate easily veers off into conceptual territory that is favorable to those who are framing it. We need to keep an eye out for questions that serve more as assertions than genuine queries.

A question often asked by pastors and seminary students is: Which ministerial roles are appropriate for women? But this question is not even asked apart from the assumption that sexuality necessarily limits and defines women's activities, even in nonsexual areas of life (such as Bible teaching and decision making).

The following question, on the other hand, spotlights the crux of the issue: Is there a principle clearly taught and consistently applied in the Bible that states women are universally limited in their rights, opportunities, and authority (whether personal, cultural, or spiritual) solely on account of their sex, and, if so, what is the logical and theological explanation for this? Alas, few there are who ask this question. Those who readily answer "yes" to the first part of the question are usually either mightily confused or sublimely unconcerned with the answer to the second part of the question.

While today's gender hierarchalists are fond of pointing out the "historical novelty" of the egalitarian view, they themselves are promoting a view devised only in the last few decades: that women are, in principle (by virtue of their female nature), ordained and suited to occupy a permanently inferior status with respect to men, yet are not themselves inferior to men. Why, then, must women relate to men *as though they were* inferior to men? This question goes unanswered because it goes unasked.

Consider a question often posed by those who advocate gender hierarchy: Does Galatians 3:28 do away with gender role differences? The answer, readily acknowledged by nearly anyone, is "of course not." Yet,



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in posing the question the suggestion is made that some Christians (i.e., biblical egalitarians) are claiming that this text negates all gender specific roles--including, evidently, even gender specific roles such as husband and wife, or mother and father--thus rendering ludicrous any interpretation of this text that deviates from the traditionalist view.

The truth of the matter, however, is that biblical egalitarians are disputing the doctrine of a gender-based chain of spiritual communication and command, not the mere fact of male/female differences and the resultant differences in social/cultural roles. This text is not about gender differences and social roles; it is about the freedom of every believer under the new covenant to stand on equal ground before God, each one accountable directly to God with no mediator but the Lord Jesus Christ.

Asking, and answering, the wrong question is an effective way to "win" an argument without ever even engaging the argument. To face the real issue with this text, one must ask: Does Galatians 3:26-28 rule out a spiritual stratification of male and female in terms of their opportunity to access, understand, hear from, obey, and serve God, such that religious privileges denied to women are granted to men? Posing the question thus sweeps away the benign issue of mere "differences" between men and women (something we all recognize), and places at center stage the debatable theological compatibility of Galatians 3:26-28 with the male hierarchy of spiritual authority defended by traditionalists.

But this is precisely why the question is not typically cast in these terms: it requires one to begin with the premise that the issue is legitimately debatable; the question is real, not rhetorical. Once this is acknowledged, it becomes necessary to take seriously the evidence against the "traditional" position, to leave off making indignant pronouncements and to engage in actual arguments.

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