In God’s Image

Community that reflects the nature of God

“Often, people consider the leadership of women to be secondary. Because it is not a salvation issue, it is considered to have no importance. To the contrary, it is of foundational importance, because it affects the basic definition of church as community.” — Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian

CBE founder Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian shares the Bible’s vision of transformative community rooted in the reciprocal love and service that characterize the triune God.

Mutuality: In Community 101, you talk about Adam and Eve’s relationship and community in the Garden of Eden as being grounded in equality, and this equality being representative of God and the community within the Trinity. Could you explain a bit about how you see Adam and Eve’s relationship in Genesis 1–2 as representative of God and godly community?

Gilbert Bilezikian (GB): Yes, I think this is made pretty clear in Genesis. I am surprised that there is not more emphasis in egalitarian circles on the importance of Genesis 1 and 2 as the normative pattern given by God for the conduct of human life. As you saw in Community 101, the first three verses of the book of Genesis introduce God as Trinity.

In verse 1: God is the creator, the Father, the progenitor.

In verse 2: The Spirit is the one who protects and controls God’s world.

Then, in verse 3: The Word is presented to us as the creative agent of the Trinity.

In the Bible these three are presented as one being—the triune Godhead. The triune God resolves that the culmination of his creational work will be a creature that bears God’s own image. He creates one, but it is not good, because one cannot constitute community. So, out of the one, he makes two, and finally declares “this is good.” He bonds them together as the founders and the source of community on earth.
Mutuality: It's interesting that you talk about equality in creation as reflective of the community inside the Trinity itself. A number of influential theologians argue that the Son is equal with the Father in being and worth, but eternally subordinate in authority. This justifies the belief that in a community that reflects the Trinity, women are equal in value but eternally subordinate in authority to men. How do you respond?

GB: True, when Christ became incarnate, he intentionally humbled himself in obedience to his calling. His identification with humankind led him to adopt a new status, which was a departure from his eternal position of equality within the Godhead. But the New Testament never describes the submission he experienced to accomplish the redemption of humankind as an eternal state. To the contrary, after his resurrection, all authority on heaven and earth is given to him, and he assumes the name that is above every other name.

The manner in which he accepted humiliation to accomplish his mission reveals the true identity of God as both giver and servant within Trinity. The submission was not forced subordination, but was voluntary. He let go of the prerogatives of divinity and he submitted himself. Thus, he manifested the true character of God, which is to be a servant. In fact that is what bonds the Trinity together in oneness: mutual love and reciprocal servanthood.

Regarding the relationship between function and worth, I think that function reflects a value assessment. Function is an expression of worth: those deemed worthy are permitted to perform the most critical functions. One needs to prove worth to a greater extent to become a colonel than to remain a private in the military. The colonel’s worth is reflected in the pay and respect he or she receives. To say that a woman could not be a colonel because she is female implies that she has less worth than a man with the same qualifications. To affirm that a woman has the same worth for the kingdom of God but doesn’t qualify for certain functions just because she is a woman constitutes a denial of her worth.

There is no such thing in the Bible. The Scriptures recognize that the worth of human beings derives from their creation in God’s image. Their worth manifests itself in Christian community through the full participation and use of their gifts out of devotion to God and his purposes. The apostle Paul says the eye cannot say to the ear, “I don’t need you” and the head to the feet “I don’t need you.” Community best reflects the Trinity when it recognizes the equal worth of each person and encourages everyone to fully participate in community life, according to their gifts.

Such mutuality is a defining characteristic of community. Even when the Bible calls Jesus the head of the church, it never defines this relationship in terms of rulership or authority. In the epistles, Christ’s function as head of the church is one of provider and servant—he is the one who provides the church with fullness, life, and growth. His role as head of the church is that of a servant provider, not a master.

Mutuality: So is there a place for any sort of authority or hierarchy in the church?

GB: There has to be order for the church to function. Order cannot be obtained without enforcement. And enforcement requires the exercise of authority. But in the New Testament, with the exception of dire situations such as those addressed in the Pastoral Epistles, authority is not delegated to one person. Paul addresses his letters to the Romans and Corinthians, for example, to the congregation, not to a small group of leaders. He expects that the congregation will be responsible for leading the church in the right direction. Authority is ultimately vested in the community itself, and is carried by those whom the community designates.

However, there are times when the community leadership model does not work because of a lack of consensus or because the community lacks the spiritual maturity to govern itself. Then, it becomes necessary, as indicated in the Pastoral Epistles, to resort to an authoritarian model. But this is an interim authority structure that should be used to stimulate the spiritual maturity and to develop leadership skills for the benefit of the congregation.

Unfortunately, too often, these church-planting or remedial crisis structures become permanent. This opens the way for autocratic and self-referential leaders to assume power and usurp the authority that, according to Scripture, belongs to the community.
Mutuality: What would you say to a pastor or a lay leader trying to build egalitarian community in a church where other leaders have a decidedly less egalitarian understanding of leadership and community?

GB: New groups searching for a model of governance should engage in a study of the subject in Scripture. For instance, in my book, Community 101, those issues are surveyed from a biblical perspective that recognizes the need for authority to be exercised for the governance of the church. However, that exercise of authority should be subject to accountability to the group, not monopolized by individuals.

Often, people consider the leadership of women to be secondary. Because it is not a salvation issue, it is considered to have no importance. To the contrary, it is of foundational importance, because it affects the basic definition of church as community. The egalitarian claim does not concern the status of women as much as the integrity of the definition of the church as authentic community. The church is the image on earth of the oneness of the Trinity. It loses this identity when transformed from oneness into a split-level arrangement with half of its constituency subject to the other half on the basis of gender.

Wherever I am called to teach about such matters, I remind my hearers that the proper understanding of Scripture requires a proper framework for its use. We must first agree on a method of interpretation that finds its warrant in the Bible itself. Too often the Bible is viewed as a compendium of loose verses that are to be fitted together according to the ingenuity and the prejudices of the interpreter. By treating the verses of the Bible like the pieces of a puzzle that are manipulated at will to fit preconceived models, one can prove anything (or its opposite) as biblical truth. In my book, Christianity 101 (pp. 14–20), I have drawn from Scripture itself three rules for its own interpretation:

- Respect for the individuality of the sixty-six books that constitute the Bible in order to replace the popular “proof-texts collage” approach with consistent book-by-book study of themes one book at a time
- Recognition of the relationship of Old Testament to New Testament as one of preparation to fulfillment
- Caution with the interpretation of biblical texts or terms that appear only once, especially when they are not clear or when their meaning has been fruitlessly debated throughout the history of the church

However, good methods and intentions do not always produce unanimity. Some have been immersed in patriarchal church environments and don’t even know that an alternative exists. Their ideas are so entrenched that they fail to see that Scripture does not restrict participation in ministry on the basis of gender, but bases it on new-creation personhood enriched with the divine endowment of spiritual gifts.

Such persons are to be approached with love and care, recognizing that we are all seekers after truth. They often must be patiently initiated to a new paradigm on a one-on-one basis.

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They sometimes can be set on a quest for an inclusive definition of community with simple questions, such as "Do you really believe that it was God’s intention for the church to be divided in half between leaders and followers on the basis of gender?" or "Do you realize that God expects the total involvement of the spiritual gifts of all the members of the body, and that excluding gifted women from total participation to the maximum of their capacities mutilates Christ’s body?" The world employs the skills of women in government, business, and education. We need to ask ourselves whether men have the right to deprive the kingdom of the skills and abilities God has invested in women.

Such an approach can create a holy discomfort that softens hearts and changes attitudes. Christians know that the kingdom grows one person at a time. Like we chip away at the task of evangelism, we also chip away at erroneous views of gender. We uphold the values of the kingdom of Christ, embodied in the divine dynamic of a community where men and women are equal participants in the pursuit of God’s purposes.

Mutuality: Chipping away slowly for years can be difficult; what encouragement do you have for egalitarians who want to see mutual community become a reality in their churches?

GB: God has granted me the grace to proclaim in writing and in pulpits the message of oneness since I had my own change of heart several decades ago. I have often felt the loneliness of a voice crying in the wilderness. But God has been raising a host of teachers, leaders, and churches that advocate and demonstrate the beauty of community functioning without the hindrances of prejudice and exclusion. I often have the opportunity to feel their passion and to measure the extent of their commitment. I feel confident that a powerful movement of church reformation is gathering strength. More than ever, it is time for believers who have been freed from the shackles of erroneous traditions to band together to protect the honor of the bride whom Christ wants to present perfect to the eternal courts of heaven.

Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian (ThD, Boston University) is a professor emeritus of biblical studies at Wheaton College. He has written several books, including Community 101, Christianity 101, and Beyond Sex Roles. He is a founding leader of both CBE and Willow Creek Community Church.

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