Chain of Inference: “Seeing” Male Authority as God’s Design in Genesis

By Bob Edwards

Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” (Gen. 2:22–23)

When Saint Augustine read this passage, he believed that he saw clear, biblical evidence that God’s original intention was for men to exercise authority over women in human relationships. In a commentary on John, Augustine refers back to Genesis, revealing his view on male-female relationships:

“This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh...” Flesh, then, is put for woman, in the same manner that spirit is sometimes put for husband. Wherefore? Because the one rules, the other is ruled; the one ought to command, the other to serve. For where the flesh commands and the spirit serves, the house is turned the wrong way. What can be worse than a house where the woman has the mastery over the man? But that house is rightly ordered where the man commands and the woman obeys. In like manner that man is rightly ordered where the spirit commands and the flesh serves. (On John, Tractate 2, § 14, Emphasis mine)

Contrary to what Augustine believed he saw, men are not in fact referred to as “the spirit” in Genesis 2—or anywhere else in the Bible. Augustine is making what is properly called an inference.

An inference is “a step of the mind, an intellectual act by which one concludes that something is true in light of something else’s being true, or seeming to be true... Inferences can be accurate or inaccurate, logical or illogical, justified or unjustified” (Foundation for Critical Thinking, “Distinguishing Between Inferences and Assumptions”).
Inferences are not supplied by a text or its author. Rather, they are supplied by the reader. They actually originate in the reader’s mind, albeit unconsciously. They may or may not be an accurate reflection of the author’s intended message. When Adam calls Eve “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” for example, there is no evidence of overtly hierarchical language, yet Augustine infers it. Why?

**Link 1: Plato to Augustine**

If Augustine’s inference did not originate in the biblical text, where did it come from? Inferences are drawn from our unquestioned beliefs and assumptions. In other words, Augustine “saw” male authority as God’s will in Genesis 2 because of what he already believed. In his book, *Confessions*, he shares the origin of this belief:

“Simplicianus congratulated me that I had not fallen upon the writings of other philosophers, which were full of fallacies and deceit, ‘after the beggarly elements of this world,’ whereas in the Platonists, at every turn, the pathway led to belief in God and his Word.” (*Confessions*, Book VIII, chapter 2. Emphasis mine)

Repeatedly throughout *Confessions*, Augustine tells us that the philosophy of “the Platonists” helped him make sense of what he read in the Bible.

The philosophy of the Platonists was dualistic, hierarchical, and sexist. The mind was viewed as good; the body as less good. The spirit was viewed as good; the flesh as a source of evil. The good must rule over the less good or the evil. Men were associated with the mind and spirit, women with the body or the flesh. These ideas can be found in the following dialogue from Plato’s *Republic*:

Let me further note that the manifold and complex pleasures and desires and pains are generally found in children and women and servants. . . . Whereas the simple and moderate desires which follow reason, and are under the guidance of the mind and true opinion, are to be found only in a few, and those the best born and best educated.

Very true. These two, as you may perceive, have a place in our State; and the meaner desires of the [many] are held down by the virtuous desires and wisdom of the few.

“Seeing then, I said, that there are three distinct classes, any meddling of one with another, or the change of one into another, is the greatest harm to the State, and may be most justly termed evil-doing? This then is injustice.

“You are quite right, he replied, in maintaining the general inferiority of the female sex…” (Emphasis mine)

Plato believed that a just society consisted of classes divided on the basis of—among other things—sex. The wisdom of the best born and best educated men must “hold down” the less noble desires of the many: women, children, and slaves. The well-being of society depended on this order being maintained. Any mixing of the classes was referred to as “injustice.”

When Augustine made a case for male authority in the church, he used Plato’s language and concepts:

It is the natural order among people that women serve their husbands and children their parents, because the justice of this lies in (the principle that) the lesser serves the greater. . . . This is the natural justice that the weaker brain serve the stronger. This therefore is the evident justice in the relationships between slaves and their masters, that they who excel in reason, excel in power. (*Questions on the Heptateuch*, Book I, § 153. Emphasis mine)

Thanks to the philosophy of Plato, when Augustine read “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” in Genesis, he believed he saw a divine mandate for male authority.

**Link 2: Augustine to Calvin**

Augustine is not the only influential Bible commentator to infer male leadership from the Genesis creation account. Protestant reformer John Calvin believed he saw a mandate for male authority in the following passage: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen. 2:18). When Calvin saw that the first woman was referred to as a “helper,” he arrived at the following conclusion:

We may therefore conclude, that the order of nature implies that the woman should be the helper of the man. . . . It is also the part of men to consider what they owe in return to the other half of their kind, for the obligation of both sexes is mutual, and on this condition is the woman assigned as a help to the man, that he may fill the place of her head and leader. (Calvin’s commentary on Genesis. Emphasis mine)

Believing that he saw a mandate for male authority in the word “helper,” Calvin refers to the first woman’s role as that of a “faithful assistant.”

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It is important to recognize that the word used by the author of Genesis to describe the first woman as a “helper” (ezer in Hebrew) does not, in fact, denote subordination (more on this on p. 18).

John Calvin’s patriarchal inference does not have its origin in the biblical text itself. In his commentary on Genesis chapter 2, he discloses the actual source of his beliefs: “. . . as nature itself taught Plato, and the others of the sounder class of philosophers, so to speak” (emphasis mine).

His affinity for Platonism was learned directly from Augustine. It was Augustine’s work that formed the basis of John Calvin’s understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith: “Augustine is so wholly with me, that if I wished to write a confession of my faith, I could do so with all fullness and satisfaction to myself out of his writings” (Calvin, “A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God”).

Link 3: Calvin to Complementarians

Today, some complementarian scholars continue to make sense of the Bible through the interpretive lenses passed down to them from John Calvin. For example, in the book Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, a mandate for male authority is based on Calvin’s interpretation of Paul’s reference to the creation account in 1 Timothy 2:11–15:

Calvin properly interpreted 1 Timothy 2:11–15. . . He acknowledges exceptions to the general rule [of male authority] but argues that these exceptions pose no threat to the ordinary and constant system of government.

Though abundant evidence suggests that Paul was warning Timothy about false teaching and abusive authority taking place in the church at Ephesus, Calvin inferred from this letter that the apostle was prohibiting all women for all time from teaching or exercising authority in the church. He based this inference on the following assumption:

[A woman] is formed to obey; for gunaiokratia (the government of women) has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing; and, therefore, so to speak, it will be a mingling of heaven and earth, if women usurp the right to teach. (Calvin’s commentary on Timothy, Titus, and Philemon)

This mandate for male authority is the result of a chain of human inference stretching from many of today’s leading complementarians back to John Calvin, Saint Augustine, and finally the non-Christian philosophy of Plato.

Has the government of women “always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing” as Calvin suggests? No indeed. God, for example, appointed a woman named Deborah to govern Israel (Judg. 4:4–5). In the creation account found in Genesis, God also gave both male and female shared dominion over all the earth (Gen. 1:26–28). Calvin, admittedly, derives his “wisdom” from Saint Augustine and Plato. According to Plato’s philosophy, not the word of God, the government of women was portrayed as injustice.

The creation account found in Genesis does not, in fact, establish a mandate for male authority in the church. This mandate for male authority is the result of a chain of human inference stretching from many of today’s leading complementarians back to John Calvin, Saint Augustine, and finally the non-Christian philosophy of Plato.

This chain must be broken so that its captives may be set free: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8).

Bob Edwards is a social worker, psychotherapist, and former Bible college professor. He is also the author of the number one bestselling book entitled A God I’d Like to Meet: Separating the Love of God from Harmful Traditional Beliefs.