

Logical and Theological Problems with Gender Hierarchy

The idea that women are equal in their being, yet unequal by virtue of their being, simply makes no sense.

REBECCA MERRILL GROOTHUIS

THE DEBATE OVER BIBLICAL TEACHING ON GENDER ROLES HAS FOCUSED PRIMARILY ON THE exegetical intricacies of a handful of controversial texts, with neither side able to answer completely every objection or difficulty with their position. After more than two decades, it seems clear that this approach is not exactly moving the discussion toward resolution. Perhaps there are other perspectives from which this disagreement may be assessed more productively.

If we look not only at the controversial biblical texts, but also at the philosophical assumptions and theological implications of the doctrine of gender hierarchy, we find inherent difficulties that seriously undermine the traditionalist belief system. This, then, offers a compelling cause to favor egalitarian rather than hierarchical interpretations of the controversial texts.

Being and function

Problems within the traditionalist belief system are both logical and theological. The biggest logical problem is with the assumption that woman's inferior status does not entail an inferiority of woman's essential nature. How often have we heard it explained that the subordinate female role is only a matter of "function" and does not mean that women are inferior to men? "Equal in being, unequal in function" is the theoretical construct to which traditionalists appeal in order to assert female subordination to male authority and, at the same time, to affirm the biblical teaching that men and women are spiritually equal.

This is a crucial point, because the entire traditionalist agenda turns on the assumption that women's subordination to men does not violate the fundamental biblical equality of women with men. If it can be shown that the subordination traditionalists prescribe for women entails an inferiority not merely of function but also of being, then the traditionalist agenda as currently expressed is internally incoherent; it contradicts itself.

I agree that it is possible for a person to be justly placed in a position of functional subordination without being fundamentally inferior as a person. Yet I disagree that this is what is happening with the traditionalist subordination of women. Female subordination is very different from functional subordination. In functional subordination, roles are assigned and accepted for the purpose of accomplishing a certain function, and with a view to individuals' dif-

fering abilities in performing particular tasks. For example, someone may serve on a committee under the direction of a coworker who is otherwise her equal in a particular organization. Or, a person who wants to learn how to play the piano will accept a role of subordination to her music teacher.

In female subordination, the criterion for who is subordinate to whom has nothing to do with expediency or the abilities of individuals to perform particular functions. Rather, it is determined entirely on the basis of an innate, unchangeable aspect of a woman's being, namely, her female sexuality. Her inferior status follows solely from her essential nature as a woman. Regardless of how traditionalists try to explain the situation, the idea that women are equal in their being, yet unequal by virtue of their being, simply makes no sense. If you cannot help but be what you are, and if inferiority in function follows necessarily and exclusively from what you are, then you are inferior in your essential being.

There are other ways in which female subordination differs significantly from functional subordination. Functional subordination is limited in scope to the specific function that is at issue, or it is limited in duration to the time it takes for the function

to be accomplished or for the subordinated person to "outgrow" his limitations. Often, it is limited in both scope and duration. For example, a committee member is subordinate to the committee chair only with respect to the task of the committee and only until the committee has completed its task. The music student is subordinate to her teacher only when it comes to playing the piano and only as long as her piano-playing skills are inferior to those of her teacher. By contrast, the subordination of a woman to her husband's authority covers all her activities, and it endures throughout all her life. She never outgrows it, and it never ends.

Although functional subordination can coexist with essential equality, female subordination cannot. Male superiority and female inferiority are very much implicated in



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the doctrine of male authority and female subordination. Merely to assert that women are equal despite their inferior status does not dismiss these clear implications. Historically, women were kept in an inferior role because they were believed to be inferior in their essential being. This position at least made sense. The only sensible alternative to it is that neither gender is inferior to the other and that men and women ought, therefore, to have equal opportunity to serve in whatever capacity each one is gifted, called, and qualified. Because traditionalists claim to affirm both female equality and male authority, their position is internally incoherent, grounded in a contradiction.

Servant leadership

Another key traditionalist assumption is that a husband's spiritual authority over his wife can (and should) be exercised in a way that benefits and serves her. The husband's role is thus described as "servant leadership." But the nature of the authority that traditionalists assign to husbands differs at every point from actual servant leadership. The ideal of servant leadership among competent adults is apropos only for situations in which: (a) a group of people need a leader in order to act in a united and effective way, and (b) the leader has earned his authority and is accountable to the people for his leadership. In traditionalist male "headship," a man's authority is neither earned, necessary, beneficial, nor accountable to the one he governs.

A man's exercise of spiritual authority over his wife would be a service to her only if she were, in fact, less spiritually and psychologically mature than he and, therefore, in need of his guidance and governance. But if this were the case with all wives and husbands, then women would not be essentially equal with men, either spiritually, mentally, or emotionally.

The Bible teaches that women and men stand on equal ground before God, and that in Christ there is no spiritual distinction between male and female. Yet traditionalists insist that a woman (at least in certain contexts) obeys and hears from God by hearing from and obeying a man, while a man is never required to submit and be obedient to a woman in order to know and do God's will. How can this be consistent with spiritual equality?

The godlike gender

This observation brings us to the theological contradictions inherent to the traditionalist doctrine of gender hierarchy. If different and unequal spiritual roles arise necessarily from sexual differences, then it follows that the sexual nature in some sense defines and determines the spiritual nature. Once spirituality comes to be grounded in sexuality, the gendered imagery for God in Scripture ceases to be metaphorical and instead becomes literally descriptive of God's essential, spiritual nature. Because the gendered

imagery for God is more often masculine than feminine, God's nature comes to be characterized primarily by the spirituality of maleness. It then becomes impossible to regard woman and man as imaging God equally; the man is clearly more like God than is the woman.

It also follows that the maleness of Christ is theologically necessary. An essentially masculine God must be incarnated as a male; he must have the physical sexual nature that reflects and corresponds to his metaphysical sexual nature. From here it follows that members of the godlike gender have a divine right and responsibility to represent God authoritatively to those whose nature is but a dimmer image of the divine.

Notions of an essentially masculine God, of men bearing the divine image more fully than women, of Christ's maleness as spiritually significant, and of the ordained ministry as a uniquely male role of divine representational (priestly) authority are unavoidably entailed in the doctrine of women's universal and God-ordained subordination to the spiritual authority of men. But such notions are antithetical to the biblical principle of women's essential equality with men.

The truth of the biblical equality of all persons under God is grounded in Creation. According to Genesis 1:26-27, both male and female are created in God's image. James 2 and Acts 10:34 state that God shows no favoritism

for one group of people over another. Galatians 3:26-28 says that in the New Covenant all believers are "sons," or heirs, of God in Christ, so there is no longer any distinction in spiritual privilege or status between Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. First Peter 2:5 and 9 tells us that all believers are priests unto God, and 1 Timothy 2:5 makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and human beings.

If all believers are equally sons (or heirs) of God, then every believer has an equal right—and responsibility—to represent the Father and to hear from, obey, and stand directly accountable to God apart from any merely human mediator. These rights of sonship, and the irrelevance of gender to the determination of these rights, necessarily rule out the notion that male believers should have some sort of unique access to God through a divine representational ministry. The traditionalist agenda, whereby a man in some sense mediates his wife's relationship with God, is more akin to the Old Covenant than the New Covenant.

According to the New Testament, there are only two types of priestly ministries: the priesthood of all believers and the high priesthood of Christ. The introduction of a priesthood of Christian manhood divides the members of Christ's body—solely on the basis of physical criteria—into two spiritual roles: one group is removed a step away from direct access to God through Christ, while the other group is moved up into a role of imitating, or supplementing, the mediatorial ministry of Christ. Situating a third category of priests between the high priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of all believers detracts from the priestly min-

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istries of all believers and presumes upon the unique mediatorial ministry of Christ.

In the debate between gender hierarchy and gender equality, we are not dealing merely with questions of social order or the exact meanings of two or three ancient Greek words. We are debating the theological legitimacy of defining manhood as priesthood, of imputing to the Christian man a divine representational authority that, in one way or another (and however unintentionally), undermines the priestly ministries of Christ and the members of his body.

In brief, then, the biblical doctrine of the fundamental equality of all persons before God—in particular, the spiritual irrelevance of group distinctions such as race, class, and gender (Gal. 3:26–28)—is not logically or theologically compatible with the doctrine of a universal hierarchy of female subordination to male spiritual authority.

The traditionalist proof texts

Yet traditionalists insist that gender hierarchy is clearly and incontrovertibly taught in a handful of biblical proof texts. Does the Bible then contradict itself? No. A careful look at these texts reveals that they all stop short of teaching the spiritualized and universalized chain of command that traditionalists see in them. None of these texts requires that female subordination to male spiritual authority be regarded as a creational, God-ordained mandate. The submission exhorted of women in the New Testament was not a spiritual subordination necessitated solely by reason of their essential female nature (as in traditionalist teaching today). Rather, depending on the particular text, it was either an expression of one aspect of the mutual submission that should exist between equals in Christ, or a social subordination that followed from what women were able and

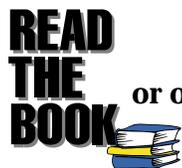
expected to do in the cultures of that time. Traditionalists go beyond the legitimate scope of the biblical texts in their efforts to render women's submission universal and unilateral, and spiritual as well as social.

Apart from logical and theological scrutiny and in isolation from the rest of Scripture, the traditionalist proof texts can be understood to be teaching either a universal principle of female subordination to male authority, or specific applications of general moral principles such as civil obedience, social propriety, respecting and submitting to other believers, or requiring those who teach or lead to be adequately prepared. Because any biblical text is properly interpreted only in light of the teaching of the entire Bible, an egalitarian interpretation of these texts is clearly the more reasonable alternative.

The traditionalist claim that Scripture universally mandates women's subordination to the spiritual authority of men contradicts the clear biblical teaching that men and women stand on equal ground before God; it effectively denies that Galatians 3:28 has any significant meaning, and it imputes to the texts on women's submission a scope and import that is by no means demanded by the texts themselves. In other words, the assertion of a universalized and spiritualized gender hierarchy in the home and church goes beyond what is clearly stated in these particular passages, and goes against the teaching of Scripture as a whole. ■



Rebecca Merrill Groothuis is a freelance writer and editor and author of *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Baker) and *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Wipf & Stock). This article is taken from material in *Good News for Women*.



Books Mentioned in This Issue

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or online Book Store (Web address: www.CBEInternational.org)13

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