

Humility: The Path for Male-Female Relationships

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Humility is relevant to the theology of gender in three ways.¹

First, humility is a model of God in relationship with humanity. God accommodated himself to ancient peoples' situations and needs, and he met them in terms of cultural expectations so that people could respond to him. Like a loving parent to children, God listens to prayers and serves by responding to peoples' requests. He does as they ask, like a servant obeying a master's will. God humbles himself to serve his creatures because he loves them. Humility is a model of what God does in his relationship with humankind.

Second, humility is a model of the NT churches in relationship with the nonbelieving people in the cultures of their mission fields. Churches accommodated themselves to the situations and needs of their neighbors and met them in terms of cultural expectations so that people could engage with God through the gospel. Churches sought to avoid slander and persecution to maintain winsome appeal for the gospel. Churches humbled themselves in culturally important ways for outsiders so they could represent Jesus Christ. All Christians are called to humility, and by humbling themselves churches are being like God. Humility is a model of what NT churches did as missionaries in the first century.

Third, humility is a model of Christian women and men in relationship with each other. They live to honor, value, and serve others, considering others' interests above their own. Jesus is the model for all Christians by the way he humbled himself to serve the church. Jesus loves us by his service, and all Christians are to love one another by serving one another. Humility like Jesus's means that Christians must set aside their concerns for personal rights and roles. These personal concerns distract us from humbling ourselves and are an obstacle to unity and love among us. We have been freed by God to serve one another in the way that Jesus humbled himself to serve us. Humility is a model of women and men in relationship with each other, since we are called to love as Jesus does.

The model of humility in these three ways can help resolve, by the pattern and power of God's own actions, the battle of the sexes.

Humility is a Model of God in Relationship with Humanity

During the OT period, we see that God humbled himself to relate to his people, using the available cultural materials that made sense to them.² When we read the Bible in the twenty-first century, we have to work to remember that laws given by God were often accommodations to what the people already expected. The commands are often approximate to God's will for them but do not express God's transcendent purpose, such as with slavery and divorce. God progressively drew them along to relate to him by grace through faith, and the Torah regulations were a temporary guardian for that progress (Gal 3:23–25). Craig Keener explains that many Torah commands are not intended by God as absolute revelations of his will—they are accommodations to the cultural situation:

We must still ask whether slavery in even its mildest form was ever God's ideal purpose. Some of God's laws were concessions to human weakness, as Jesus clearly stated [about divorce] (Mark 10:5; Matt. 19:8).³

As with Yahweh's regulations about slavery and divorce, many gender passages in the Bible also reflect the conditions of the ancient world. We can discern this because God's clearest agenda for people is to love one another. Gender roles in the past and present block the humility which facilitates love for one another. Yahweh humbles himself to meet people in terms of their cultural expectations about gender roles. We read in the Bible about polygamy, divorce, rape, and incest. We read that Esther is drafted into a king's harem, that Jephthah sacrifices his daughter—all these examples express ancient cultural practices rather than God's will for how to treat women. We must be careful not to conclude from biblical statements that these are prescriptions. As offensive as they are to twenty-first-century sensibilities, we are to see them as a demonstration of God's patient humility in accommodating ancient Israel's cultural gender roles.

For example, we should not imagine that the limitation of circumcision to males means for us a divine preference for males compared to females. We should not think that the limitation of the priesthood to male Levites means a divine preference for males compared to females in religious functions. These accommodations in the OT fade in the light of NT clarity about the value of women to God, a clarity that finally transcended the cultural gender roles and degradation of women in the ancient world.

To sum up this point, humility is a model of God's relationship with people. He is the sovereign Lord who serves his people and frees them to love as he does. Some biblical statements about gender show God's missionary intention to meet people according to their cultural expectations about women and men. God appropriates many elements of cultures like wrapping paper on a gift to reveal himself in ways people can accept. The wrapping paper is not the gift of revelation, but it reveals God's humility as a missionary in the ancient world. God went further and wrapped himself in a human being to become permanently visible, tangible, and audible as a creature with us. He used the incarnation as a mode for revealing himself and a revelation of his loving humility toward us.

This humility of God is continued in the NT churches that humbled themselves to be missionaries to their cultures.

Humility is a Model of New Testament Churches

The NT passages about gender which seem restrictive to modern minds continue the humility of God's accommodation to ancient cultural expectations about gender. Christians receiving letters from the apostles already knew the expectations about gender roles in their first-century Mediterranean societies. Christians needed to operate in those cultures to avoid slander and persecution. Like

Yahweh in the OT period and Jesus as a human being, churches operating as missionaries needed to express themselves in some of the cultural wrapping paper of the society around them.

The NT shows that outsiders to the churches viewed the new Christian faith with suspicion and slandered them for questionable behavior and beliefs. Much like the way that modern Christian missionaries traveling to a foreign culture adopt the clothing, language, and customs of the people they visit, NT Christians adapted as much as possible, outwardly and winsomely, to make the gospel appealing and accessible to nonbelievers. Accommodation helped with two concerns.

First, churches were concerned about persecution. In the NT, we read about persecution of Jews and Christians from neighbors, mobs, and political authorities. Jews were expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2). The Apostle Paul was imprisoned for threatening the customs and social structures among Romans (Acts 16:21) and Jews (Acts 28:17). Persecution was a constant threat to early Christians who adapted to survive. Accommodating themselves to cultural expectations may have helped them to avoid persecution.

Second, the apostles were concerned about negative opinions of the gospel because Christianity was seen negatively as one of many new religions. Many NT statements tell churches to avoid slander by their behavior. Christians and the gospel faced negative public opinion by outsiders. Slander hindered God's mission through the church.⁴ A related idea is the concern for Christians to live entirely *above reproach*.⁵ Repeatedly, the NT urges Christians to live in a way that makes the gospel appealing and attractive.⁶ One repeated aspect of life that outsiders watched was how Christians supported or undermined the three most important relationships for stable society: master-slave, husband-wife, and father-children.⁷ Romans were suspicious of all new religions because of past experience with groups that threatened these orders of the home; home order always carried implications for stability of the empire. David Balch explains:

Romans made certain stereotyped criticisms of new, foreign cults. Their rites involved immorality (especially corrupting women), murder, and sedition. Romans were accustomed to slaves who were willing to worship the Roman gods and were very disturbed by Jewish slaves—and later Christian ones—who were unwilling to conform to that practice. The Egyptian Isis cult was criticized because it was thought to reverse the proper household relationship between husbands and wives. These were stereotyped criticisms, and Romans seem to have used them indiscriminately. A new religion would face many of the same slanders which had earlier been directed against other foreign, Eastern religions. Judaism and Christianity inherited slanders which Greeks and Romans originally directed against the Dionysus and Isis cults.⁸

Balch also explains the problem of Roman suspicion toward Jews, which compares to the same problem facing Christians, and the response of NT churches.

Josephus wrote an apologetic encomium on the Jewish nation. . . . which involved the wives' chastity and submission to their husbands and the proper training of children . . . and the law

for slaves. . . . Jewish marital customs had been criticized, so Josephus defended them when he said that the Jewish woman was properly submissive. The Jewish "house" in a Roman "city" was properly "ruled." Jews were "obedient," and their customs would not subvert the Roman constitution.⁹

Uniformly, the mission field of the Mediterranean world valued patriarchal order in the home. An example from the first century is Plutarch's *Advice to Bride and Groom*:

So it is with women also: if they subordinate themselves to their husbands, they are commended, but if they want to have control, they cut a sorer figure than the subjects of their control. And control ought to be exercised by the man over the woman, not as the owner has control of a piece of property, but as the soul controls the body . . .¹⁰

As much as possible, the early churches had to accommodate themselves to appear respectable and honorable to outsiders. Accordingly, the Christian exhortations that their wives submit to husbands, slaves obey masters, and children obey parents reflected the Roman, Greek, Jewish, and other cultural expectations of the Mediterranean world. These are accommodations made by Christians as missionaries trying to avoid slander and disrepute. As argued by Cynthia Long Westfall:

In order for Paul's gentile mission to succeed, the behavior of Christian women would need to be consistent with what was practiced by women in the broader first-century Greco-Roman world. Therefore, Paul's gender concerns were often missional when he addressed gender roles in the church and the home, and his intention was for believers to fit into the culture while remaining ethically pure.¹¹

Many NT exhortations give two levels of reasons for Christian conduct. The first level is about *respectability* as perceived by *outsiders*. The second level concerns *responding to God* who cares for and rewards people when they suffer unjustly.

For example, 1 Peter speaks on the first level about *respectability* as perceived by outsiders inclined to be hostile to Christians:

First Peter 2:12: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God."

First Peter 2:15: "It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people."

First Peter 3:13: "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?"

First Peter 3:15–16: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

Specific virtuous responses are then noted: submit to governments (2:13–14), avoid evil generally (2:16), respect everyone (2:17), slaves obey masters (2:18–25), and wives submit to husbands and dress honorably (3:1–6). The second level of *response to God* transcends the ancient cultures by exhorting slaves to bear unjust suffering—as Jesus suffered unjustly—so that enslavement was used by God positively and paradoxically to conform new Christians to Jesus (2:19–25).

Christian life is freedom for the practice of love and humility.

Also going beyond the ancient culture is the exhortation that husbands honor their wives, with the warning that not doing so could affect their access to God in prayer (3:7). The second level, *response to God*, continues in 1 Pet 3:8–12 and 4:1–5, saying that the Christian life is freedom for the practice of love and humility instead of the practices common among pagans: revenge, drunkenness, sexual immorality, and idolatry.¹² Not living in these ways was cause for outsiders to slander Christians, as Peter wrote: “They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Pet 4:4). For these behaviors in the second level of *response to God*, Christians are obligated to God (4:5), and suffering for doing right is part of how they are engaged with Jesus, who also suffered while doing right (3:17–4:2; 4:12–19). The NT churches lived in the world, resembling some cultural expectations. But they also were not of the world since they *responded to God*.

The analysis of two levels in 1 Peter shows us that exhortations to Christians had two functions. The first level is behaviors that accommodated the cultural expectations as part of the church humbling themselves to serve outsiders with the gospel. These behaviors include clearly temporary features such as maintaining slavery, obeying corrupt government authorities, and respecting people for the sake of sharing with them the gospel. We can see that telling wives to submit to husbands also functioned on the first level, since this element of family order was important to ancient cultural groups.

However, wives submitting to husbands also fits on the second level of *response to God* as Christians who love one another and serve each other in humility. Husbands also have a second-level exhortation for *response to God* by living love and humility, as Peter exhorts them specifically: “in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect . . . as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Pet 3:7). This sort of balancing statement to husbands has no parallel in the ancient world. It sets marriage free from male domination caused by sin, as stated in Gen 3:16, “he will rule over you.” Wives and husbands are freed to relate to each other in unity by their mutual love, by humbling themselves and by submitting to each other. Keener’s conclusion is a helpful reminder that egalitarian interpretation does not set aside biblical authority: “This is not to play down the need for a wife’s submission, but to emphasize that husbands are called to submit and serve no less.”¹³

My point is that when we consider the many things Christians are told to do and not do, some have only the single function of gospel witness, but many function doubly as inherently good Christian practice and also gospel witness. Additionally, some of the second-level behaviors, such as Christian sexual morality and the call for husbands to respect their wives, could provoke animosity from outsiders. Public relations and optics are among several other concerns. The apostles helped NT churches discern how to honor God and, at the same time, fit in with their cultures. In the case of wives submitting to husbands, the cultural norm on its own is

oppressive to women and coincided with the ancient view of women as less valuable than men. The Christian correction is not to reverse the roles of husbands and wives, but to balance the relationship as fitting for two people who are both the image of God, both disciples of Jesus, and both called to humble themselves and love the other the way Jesus loves us (John 13:34–35). The specific counter-cultural exhortations to husbands show a fully Christian vision of marriage. This second level *response to God* also upholds the purpose of first level witness to the culture by mimicking the ancient expectation that wives submit to their husbands.

Had it not been for the ancient conditions of slavery, we would have no statements that Christian slaves should obey their masters. Had it not been for the ancient expectations that wives submit to their husbands, we would have no statements that Christian wives should submit to their husbands. Instead, all Christians would be exhorted to the same single mission: love one another as Jesus has loved you. We can be sure of this because the same emphases on humility, love, and service are stated multiple times to all Christians, just as Jesus is the model for all Christians of every age, gender, ethnicity, and economic status.

Christians also had to practice their freedom to love and serve in ways that honored Jewish concerns, since the Jews were their initial mission field in every new city. For example, Paul circumcised Timothy so they would be acceptable to the Jews who believed that for Paul not to have done so was a sign of zero credibility (Acts 16:3). Paul consecrated himself and two others in Jerusalem for the sake of looking like proper Jews, since slander had spread that Paul was an enemy of Israel (Acts 21:20–26). These attempts to manage impressions were inadequate. Jews persisted in slandering Paul for overturning their way of life and defiling the temple, provoking his arrest by the Romans (Acts 21:27–29). On other occasions, Paul repeatedly gained a hearing with Jewish audiences by proving his faithfulness within Judaism. His missionary motive was always to humble himself for others: “I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law. . . . To those not having the law I became like one not having the law” (1 Cor 9:19–23). Living as a Jew or as a Gentile was wrapping paper for Paul, just as he used his Greek name (Paul) instead of his Hebrew name (Saul). (Silas also did so, using the alternate form, Silvanus.)

Along with Paul, the NT churches that increasingly grew with gentile members accommodated themselves to Jewish concerns to avoid eating meat from strangled animals, blood, food that had been sacrificed to idols, and practicing sexual immorality.¹⁴ Christians had their own reasons to avoid the sexual immorality that was normal for the Hellenistic world, but a missionary motive was repeatedly stated as another reason to humble themselves for the sake of the Jews to receive the gospel.

Other accommodations by which the church humbled themselves for missionary purpose were in the way they worshipped together. Outsiders were watching, so the outsiders’ cultural expectations had to be considered. That is what humility does—consider the interests of others above your own (Phil 2:1–8). Romans were concerned about the new religions that had frenzy, music, and drunkenness as part of spiritual experiences. Christians had their own reasons for

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avoiding drunkenness and chaotic meetings, but orderly meetings doubled as a way to be honorable in Roman eyes. For example, Paul describes the need for order when an “unbeliever or an inquirer comes in” as the reason to prioritize prophecy in a known language to speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:22–25). He cautions them about how to behave with a view to the appearance to outsiders. The church is in missionary mode, which also means an orderliness to speaking in tongues and prophecy (1 Cor 14:26–40). The cultural expectation about orderliness as honorable and chaos as shameful is related to the cult of Dionysus. Keener explains that Romans were highly suspicious of raucous meetings:

Any Christian worship that could be remotely compared to the worship of Dionysus would be quite a poor strategy for preventing scandal in Rome; and if Jewish worship had been compared to that of Dionysus, the Christians could expect the comparison to be drawn with them, too. If Christianity wished to dissociate itself from the popular perception of some of the wilder of the non-Roman religious groups, one front it could emphasize was its own disdain for drunkenness.¹⁵

When we recall that church meetings were ordered partly with an eye to the skeptical perception of outsiders toward new religions, together with two other factors about women in the ancient world—false teaching and the view of women as inferior—then it is natural that NT churches presented themselves primarily with men in charge. As with the other aspects we have considered, the church most likely accommodated themselves to the cultural expectation by putting men forward as the elders or overseers of churches. The activity of prominent women such as Phoebe, Junia,¹⁶ and Priscilla, along with the scandal of women having been the first witnesses of Jesus's resurrection, shows that women were not excluded by the apostles or churches from so-called leadership roles.¹⁷ While it may have been expedient on the first level of *respectability to outsiders* for churches to appear to be ordered under male so-called leaders, the reality on the second level of *response to God* is that women were valued and contributed to ministry alongside men in every dimension of service: teaching, exhorting, admonishing, praying, prophesying, acts of mercy, etc. The NT identifies every Christian as a priest, sharing in Christ's priesthood, so every Christian is qualified by Jesus to serve the church as a priest of Jesus.¹⁸ The ministries specified in the NT as produced by the Holy Spirit are never differentiated by a person's gender.¹⁹ Why then do NT letters show restriction of women? Two factors about women may have had the effect of minimizing their prominence as so-called leaders in NT churches.

The first factor about women in the first century is what we know from 1 Timothy about false teaching that had spread among Christians at Ephesus to and through women.²⁰ This may have included a problem of some women in the church attempting

to teach in a domineering way at Ephesus, so Paul responded by censure and the recommendation that women learn.²¹ Most likely is that women did not have opportunity to learn the biblical and theological content necessary to function as teachers and elders. We know this from Paul's insistence that women learn, which he backs up with analogy from history by pointing to Eve's inexperience, making her more vulnerable to temptation.²²

The second factor about women in the first century is that men viewed women as ontologically inferior to men. Accordingly, men thought women should be ruled by men and that women should be silent in public settings.²³ Recall that with slavery, NT churches upheld cultural expectations that slaves obey masters—as on the first level of *respectability to outsiders*—and NT churches lived by a second level of *response to God*, honoring slaves in Christ as brothers and sisters among masters and other free people. A similar testimony in the NT shows that churches upheld cultural expectations that women be subordinate to men at home and in public. Churches lived by a second level of *response to God*, honoring women in churches as sisters gifted by the Holy Spirit for ministries of all kinds, as women who are the image of God, and as sharing in the dozens of “one another” statements by which Christians shared life together: pray for, teach, admonish, forgive, confess your sins to, rejoice with, and encourage one another (twenty-eight in total).

To sum up this point, the NT churches followed a policy of humility for missionary outreach to their surrounding cultures. The accommodations in how Christians operated to meet the cultural expectations compares to what missionaries always do in foreign cultures and what God has done in reaching out to us. The biblical and cultural wrapping paper of Christian accommodations to the ancient world should not be mistaken for transcultural divine orders about gender roles for Christians to live by today. Instead, the universal divine order for gender relationships is always humility, since this is the way to fulfill love for each other, which is God's goal for all people.

Humility Is a Model of Women and Men in Relationship

Humility has been overlooked by overemphasis on an interpretation that God ordains gender roles.²⁴ The importance of humility for relationships is that humbling oneself is opposite to the normal human inclinations to power, control, status, pride, ambition, selfishness, and abuse of position. Humility is for our healing. Humility is the only way we will live together in the unity and love God envisions for us. Love is what moves us to humility. Humility follows what we have seen in God and early church practice as missionaries to their world.

Humility is introduced to us most clearly by Jesus. He humbled himself by becoming a human being. He is a demonstration of God's humility toward us. God is one who serves his creatures because he loves. God is the model of humility, as with all other virtues. Since humility is an important model of God's activity, our own activity in relationships among women and men can best follow God's pattern when we humble ourselves to serve each other. Humility is a response of one person to another, as when Jesus obeyed his father by going to the cross (Phil 2:7–8). To humble oneself is to serve another's will. Pointing to Jesus's action, the meaning of humility is that people are to “value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests

but each of you [must look] to the interests of the others” (Phil 2:3–4).²⁵ Jesus humbled himself to serve his disciples: he washed their feet as a slave after he took off his outer garment like a slave (John 13:1–17). He humbled himself to a position beneath them so he could show them he served them, loved them, valued them above himself, and considered their interests above his own. Jesus humbled himself in Gethsemane, telling his father, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus is a servant to God, and he is a servant to people: “Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth” (Rom 15:8). Jesus as Lord and ruler should evoke for us power and authority that he uses to serve his people in humility. Martin Luther observed that “Christ, the supreme ruler, came to serve me; he did not seek to gain power, estate, and honor from me, but considered only my need.”²⁶ Since Jesus is God the Son, he shows us that God humbles himself to meet us by serving our needs and desires.

Every person who is in Christ is obligated to humble themselves for service to others, without exception, since Jesus is the one who humbles himself the most: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21), “serve one another humbly in love” (Gal 5:13), and “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another” (1 Pet 5:5). Humble submission is for all Christians to do, not only wives in marriage.²⁷ Martin Luther agrees, having identified the Christian as one who is a “dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”²⁸ Jesus gave himself up for us so that we could do the same for each other. Everyone is to submit to everyone else because that is how the Holy Spirit transfigures normal humans into members of the body of Christ who love each other.

Complementarianism listens to the Bible for directions about how men and women are called to different roles but has been deaf to directions that men are called to submit to women. For example, husbands are to serve a wife as Jesus serves the church by dying for her (Eph 5:24–25), husbands are physically obligated to their wives (1 Cor 7:3–4), and husbands must respect their wives as an heir with them in Christ (1 Pet 3:7). Complementarianism carves out an exception *from humility* for men to take charge in relation to women at home and in some church activities simply because of their gender.²⁹ When men take charge instead of humbling themselves, doing so is a mistaken departure from living according to Jesus’s command and example that we all love and serve each other.

Humility is a primary action which we are to live out in response to God and with each other. If we forget humility, then we will have lost our way from God’s intention for us. The Bible reminds us several times that God opposes the proud and favors the humble (e.g., Prov 3:34). We must humble ourselves in response to God if we are to live with him. Entrance into the kingdom of heaven is only possible through humbling ourselves. The meaning of faith is that people must depend completely on God like children depend completely on parents (Matt 18:2–5). We must also humble ourselves in response to other people around us, which means we serve them, honor and value them above ourselves, and consider their interests above our own. Humility is an annihilation of our own pride, ambition, and desire for power in relationships. Humility is generosity to the point of giving our whole selves, as Jesus did, so humility overlaps closely with love.

Women and men would do best to honor each other, value each other, and consider the interests of others above their own. By

humbling ourselves daily in our relationships, we can serve each other constantly at home, in churches, and in society. This sort of response is the only way we can be sure that we are loving each other. We are further told in John 15:12–14 that we must give ourselves up for others as Jesus did by laying down his life for us. John 15:12–14 matches Eph 5:25, where husbands are told to give themselves up for a wife, but this is not limited as an obligation to husbands alone. Wives also are told by John 15:12–14, since they are disciples of Jesus under his command, to love in the way that Jesus loves, which would include giving themselves up for their husbands. This is further not limited to marriage, since all Christians are called to love each other in this absolute way that Jesus loves us. Only by this supernatural love will Christians manifest the unmistakable relation to Jesus (John 13:34–35). Humility is parallel to this love.

If we all seek humility by serving each other, then the supernatural way of living that is commanded and demonstrated by Jesus will be fulfilled. God is the model of humility. Early churches lived by humility. The union, mutual support, and collaboration of women and men will grow as we live by humility. The pathway of humility with each other as sisters and brothers encompasses all activities in the home, church, and society. Humility is contradictory to the normal desire for control, pride, and power according to individual goals. Humility is the goal for all human life and the way of relationship among sisters and brothers in the kingdom of God. The anonymity, love for others, and disregard for one’s position or recognition by others is characteristic of God’s own humility that is to be expressed in our lives. Differences of gender make humility necessary. Differences of gender do not make for different versions of humility. All sisters and brothers in Christ are called to live by humility. Doing so shows all outsiders that we are disciples of Jesus, since he is the one who lives by humility most of all, and so that all are freed from evil to love as he does.

Conclusion

Some may object that it would be chaos in relationships if everyone is aiming to serve everyone else. A friend might ask: “What do you want to do?” Her friend responds: “I want to do what you want to do.” Friends frequently sort out this mutual kindness easily. Often it will be the case that many people are *not* humbling themselves, so we will find it unusual that two or more people are actually trying to honor others, value others, and consider their interests above one’s own. Consider how Jesus was the only one who washed everyone else’s feet. I expect that this will be typical for us were we to live by humility at home and among Christians in church life. Everyone serving each other does not make for chaos. Love, service, and humility are what make for unity and solidarity in mutual support that we all want, as among caring sisters and brothers, a husband and a wife, or children and parents.³⁰

I have proposed that humility is relevant to the theology of gender in three ways. First, humility is a model of God in relationship with humanity. Second, humility is a model of the NT churches in relationship with the nonbelieving people in the cultures of their mission fields. Third, humility is a model of Christian women and men in relationship with each other. Instead of setting out roles for women and men that arise from culturally defined gender norms, the biblical imperative is that we serve each other. This is a supernatural

and alien relational mode rooted in the values of the kingdom of God. Rebecca McKinley's statement, below, shows the blanket call of humility—born of love—upon us all:

God tells men to do what wives must do—submit to one another—and he tells women to do what husbands must do—give up your life for one another—because these are the obligations of love and humility pressed upon all Christians. These are acts of humility that God does towards us. All Christians are called to participate in these acts of humility.³¹

Notes

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1. Gender is related to ways women and men operate in culture, psychology, and their human bodies. Femaleness and maleness are two ways of being human, with more in common than different, but the differences mean our ways of relating to each other can be challenging. Each gender is the other to the other, so some distance of differences lies between us.
2. These examples show the pattern of God humbling himself to meet people:
 - Humanity is the image and likeness of Yahweh.
 - God dictated the covenant to Israel in a typical suzerain-vassal treaty.
 - The earth is described like a tabletop with corners.
 - The sky is described as a hard dome with windows for rain to fall through.
 - The sun and stars are described as moving around the earth.
 - Yahweh engaged the diviner Balaam and the witch at Endor.
 - Yahweh guided people through visions, dreams, and omens that were familiar to people.
 - The Torah inspired by God used conventional literary forms: narrative, poetry, proverbs.
 - The religious rituals of male circumcision, sacrificial meals, and bloody sacrifice atonement.
 - Some of the names for God—*El*, *Elohim*, *Theos*—were stock terms for the ancient world.
 - When Israel asked for a human king, Yahweh listened and did as asked (even though it was not good).
 - Yahweh used human languages to reveal himself and his intentions to people.
3. Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Hendrickson, 1992) 192.
4. Rom 3:8; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Tim 5:7, 14; 6:1; Titus 2:2–8; 1 Pet 2:12–15; 3:15–16; Rev 2:9.
5. 1 Tim 3:2, 7; 5:7, 14–15; Titus 2:5. Lynn. H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Baker, 2009) 69: “The descriptions of a wife in the Pastorals serve an apologetic function, as a failure to follow the dominant culture’s expectations for wifely submission would cast a shadow over the early Christian movement (Titus 2:3–5; cf. 1 Tim 5:14).”
6. 1 Cor 10:32–33; Col 4:5–6; 1 Thess 4:11–12; Titus 2:10.
7. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives*, 145: “The family was held to be the basic unit upon which society was built, and ever since Aristotle political philosophy had outlined the proper family relationships necessary for the health of society as a whole.” Also, “Groups accused of undermining the moral fabric of Roman society thus sometimes protested that they instead conformed to traditional Roman values, by producing their own lists, or ‘household codes,’ fitting those normally used in their day.” See also: Aristotle, *Politics* 1.12, 1259a37, trans. T. A. Sinclair

(Penguin, 1962) 91–92: “three parts of household management, one being the rule of a master [over a slave] . . . next the rule of a father, and a third which arises out of the marriage relationship. This is included because rule is exercised over wife and children—over both of them as free persons, but in other respects differently: over a wife, rule is as by a statesman; over children, as by a king. For the male is more fitted to rule than the female. . . . As between male and female this kind of relationship is permanent.”

Aristotle, *Politics* 1.13, 1260a24, 96: “the poet [Sophocles] singles out ‘silence’ as ‘bringing credit to a woman’; but that is not so for a man.” Aristotle, *Politics* 1.13, 1260b8, 97: “For these [three] relationships are part of the household, and every household is part of a state; and the virtue of the part ought to be examined in relation to the virtue of the whole.”

8. David Lee Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Scholars, 1981) 118.
9. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 118.
10. Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 142E (late 1st c. AD). Cited by Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 99.
11. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 13.
12. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 10: “Paul’s fundamental teaching on Christian behavior directly confronted prevalent Greco-Roman sexual practices and expectations. . . . if Paul’s sexual ethics have any logical coherence, then it is a significant indicator that Paul’s theology of gender is going to be distinct from that of the dominant Greco-Roman culture.”
13. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives*, 225.
14. Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25, Rom 14:1–15:13; 1 Cor 8:7–13.
15. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives*, 261.
16. The conclusion that Junia was named by Paul as an apostle is explained by Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 270–71. Richard Bauckham’s hypothesis that Junia is a Roman name for Joanna as named in the gospels is plausible. See Bauckham, ch. 5 in *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2002). Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (IVP Academic, 2023) 138–44, notes that the name *Junian* in Rom 16:7 is not clearly a masculine or feminine name, much like the way *Chris* in English can be a short form for *Christopher* and *Christina*. The name corresponding to *Christina* is *Junia*, with 250 ancient examples, but a name corresponding to *Christopher*, such as *Junias* or *Junianus*, has no examples. Chrysostom is an early witness identifying *Junian* as the woman *Junia*.
17. I say “so-called leadership” because NT teaching about what Christians considered leadership emphasizes these leaders as slaves to the church, a long way from the high status and authority that has been ascribed to church offices. The term “leader” is rare in the NT. The clearest teaching about church leadership is that people are servants, not lords (Matt 20:25–28).
18. Martin Luther, “On the Ministry,” in *Luther’s Works: Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Fortress, 1999) 40:21. Luther is specific that women and men are qualified for priestly service in all seven priestly functions of Jesus: preach the word, loose and bind sins (hear private confession and reassurance of absolution), administer baptism and the Lord’s supper, serve others sacrificially, pray for others, and judge doctrine.
19. Eph 4; 1 Pet 4; 1 Cor 12; Rom 12.
20. Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 167–68.
21. The translation and interpretation of *authentēō* is widely disputed. I trust the conclusions reached by Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 290–94, that the word in 1 Tim 2:12 has a negative sense, “in a domineering way,” that is not acceptable for anyone to do in the churches, men or women.
22. In 2 Cor 11:3, the serpent’s deception of Eve is an archetype for all people being susceptible to temptation, not simply women.
23. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 14: “Aristotle advised his male

readers on how to govern their wives because of women's essential inferiority. Greeks believed that a gender-based hierarchy is based on the ontological nature of women and men. . . . Platonic-Aristotelian ideas about the ontological nature of men and women and the relationship of the household to the general society had direct influence on Roman Stoics and Hellenistic Jews such as Philo and Josephus, who appear to carry forward the same arguments and assumptions."

Aristotle, *Politics* 1.13, 1260a24, trans. Sinclair, 96: "the poet [Sophocles] singles out 'silence' as 'bringing credit to a woman'; but that is not so for a man."

24. I am indebted to Rebecca McKinley for the importance of humility to understand the theology of gender. I value her perspective as a witness to the many ways women are disregarded and belittled by others in church and society.
25. All translations from the Bible are from the NIV 2011.
26. Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," in *Luther's Works*, 45:120.
27. Women and men do have some different gifts, just as Christians are diverse members of Christ's body, so that we each have need of the other and opportunity to serve the other. The need and service make for unity out of differing individuals. This unity from collaboration in the body of Christ is also in marriage and society for women and men as created things, not a Christian theology of gender roles. Similarly, Luther argued that marriage is a relationship in the order of Creation, for all people, not in the order of Redemption, for believers.
28. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, 31:344.
29. In many churches following complementarianism, only men are eligible to function as elders, overseers, and pastors, and only men teach the entire church or a group where men are present. Male gender is one requirement for eligibility to share

in the decision-making and influence for the church. Husbands often are regarded as possessing a final word or tie-breaker vote when they have a disagreement with the wife.

30. Luther, "Temporal Authority," 45:117: "Among Christians there shall and can be no authority; rather all are alike subject to one another, as Paul says in Romans 12: 'Each shall consider the other his superior'; and Peter says in 1 Peter 5[:5], 'All of you be subject to one another.'" Luther goes on to address the question of order in churches: "What, then, are the priests and bishops? Answer: Their government is not a matter of authority or power, but a service and an office, for they are neither higher nor better than other Christians. Therefore, they should impose no law or decree on others without their will and consent. Their ruling is rather nothing more than the inculcating of God's word, by which they guide Christians and overcome heresy. As we have said, Christians can be ruled by nothing except God's word, for Christians must be ruled in faith, not with outward works."
31. Rebecca McKinley, in personal conversation.



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