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Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord. (Acts 18:26)

Editorial

A certain fable tells of a wicked lion that took over a forest. He hunted not just for food but because it amused him to kill. The terrified animals hastily convened a meeting and came to a decision. They would persuade the lion to accept an animal as his meal each day, sent to his den. The lion agreed. Each day, his meal arrived as promised. One day, the meal failed to arrive at the usual time. The lion waited, getting hungrier and angrier by the hour. At last, a rabbit appeared, running as if her life depended on it. “Great lion,” she panted on arrival, “six rabbits were sent as your meal today, but we were waylaid by a lion bigger and fiercer than you. Only I have escaped to come to you.”

The lion was furious. Another lion? Did he have a rival? The rabbit offered to show him, and brought him to a deep well on the edge of the forest. “The other lion lives in this well—look and see!” said the rabbit. The lion looked into the still water of the well below him and saw, of course, his own reflection. Without another thought, he let out an angry roar and leaped into the well. And that was the end of him.

In the fallen state of humanity, men and women often relate to each other as the lion did with his reflection: with suspicion, with animosity, with the desire to supersede. A relationship that was to be governed by mutuality is fraught with rivalry. The patriarchal social structures that continue to dominate our homes, churches, and workplace communities are the hotbed in which the abuse of power flourishes.

Alan Myatt persuasively presents how hierarchical thinking in Christian theology, especially as it endorses the superiority of the male over the female, reflects the Greek philosophical

concept of the Great Chain of Being, which locates all that exists into vertical positions of power relative to each other. Dwayne Howell illustrates through the story of David and Bathsheba how social power structures result in exploitation and questions the reading of Bathsheba—influenced by hierarchy—that seeks to blame the victim and absolve the perpetrator.

Moving from what *is* to what *should be*, Ian Payne and Aaron Husband examine what it means for men and women to be created in the image of God. Payne teases out the threads that constitute the equality of women and men, both at creation and in the reality of the new creation that Christ brings us into. Husband explains, using the analogy of a female-male pair appointed as co-directors of a Christian event, how the complementarian hierarchical position is incompatible with the concept of humanity—male and female—as bearers of the divine image.

A final contribution to what *should be* is John McKinley’s essay, which proposes that Christlike humility as it was practiced by the NT church is the means by which abusive male-female power relations can be deconstructed.

We look towards a world in which lions are wiser than in the fable: creatures that recognize the likeness between God and themselves (irrespective of sex) and honour it in each other, resisting the fallenness of hierarchical power relations.

Praying that this issue of *Priscilla Papers* inspires us to serve together, side by side, in God’s world.

Havilah Dharamraj
Editor

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Hierarchy and the Biblical Worldview

Alan Myatt

After decades of discussion, the evangelical debate over the roles of women and men in church and at home shows no sign of resolution. Both sides affirm the final authority of Scripture but arrive at very different conclusions. It is as if each side is looking at the Bible through a different set of lenses. Here I will examine the interpretive lens that leads to a male-female hierarchical reading of biblical texts. I aim to show how theological patriarchy can be said to ground female subordination in a view of the creation order that bears relation to ancient Greek philosophy, and, as such, is incompatible with the biblical doctrine of creation. Therefore, the hierarchical structure of family and church supported by complementarianism replicates an unbiblical worldview that distorts God's intention for church, home, and society.¹

The Greek Roots of Hierarchy in the West

The ancient Greeks observed that the world is composed of a wide diversity of individual things grouped together into larger categories. What makes aspen, elm, or pine trees all *trees* when they are individually distinct? Greek philosopher Plato (428/423–348/347 BC) reasoned that there must be a universal principle, such as “treeness,” that unifies all particular trees. These principles are abstract ideas that represent the “true essence” of individual things. Hence, the *idea* of a thing is its most perfect reality, not the individual tree growing in your front yard. Plato traced each category to a higher and more abstract level of unity until he concluded that ultimate reality itself is the pure idea of perfection, absolute goodness, or the One. In this we can see the suggestion that ideas and the particular things that represent them may be organized into a hierarchy stretching from the perfection of the abstract One down to the imperfect world of the Many.

Plato's most famous student, Aristotle (384–322 BC), also had an incipient notion of hierarchy in his discussion of the relation between the various species of animals as well as the relationships among human beings. He argued that it is just and proper for some people to be slaves, because nature has made particular persons to be ruled and others to be rulers. He wrote, “The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”² For Aristotle, maleness is fullness; it is knowledge; it is that which is rational, active, and commands. The female nature represents deprivation, opinion, the emotional, the passive, and is created to obey.³

The seeds of hierarchy planted by Plato and Aristotle eventually came into full bloom in Plato's most famous interpreters in antiquity, Plotinus (AD 204/5–270) and Proclus (AD 412–485). Plotinus, in the *Enneads*,⁴ and Proclus, in his *Elements of Theology*,⁵ each developed the hierarchy of Being⁶ into complete cosmologies that unified all creation. This became known as the Great Chain of Being.

Plotinus taught that the original reality was the One, an absolute state of perfection and unity with no distinctions. Out of this absolute state of unity, diversity descends in a series of emanations. Like the rays of the sun, the emanations shine downward as a magnificent chain. They unite all things on a scale of existence down to the lowest specks of dust. The first emanation from the One is Mind. From Mind follows Soul. Soul, in turn, produces matter and unites with it to form living creatures, the highest of which is humankind. The rest are arranged in descending order of rationality, followed by the plant world and, finally, non-living matter. Even the stones are arranged in a hierarchy, since gold is more noble than lead, which is in turn higher than mere dirt. Everything has its due place in the hierarchy of the created order.⁷

Though hierarchicalism had gained inroads into the church through such figures as Gregory of Nyssa,⁸ Augustine,⁹ and others, Proclus sought in Plotinus a means of combatting the growing marginalization of pagan Greek religion by Christianity. He understood the hierarchical cosmology of Plotinus to be incompatible with the worldview of Christianity and wanted to use it against Christian teaching. He was, no doubt, correct in this assessment, but that did not prevent the Neo-Platonic metaphysics of hierarchy from being gradually adopted by Christian theology, especially in the Greek-speaking east.

Proclus's *Elements of Theology* was transmitted to the Latin West by a translation from Arabic of an Islamic adaptation titled *The Book of Causes*,¹⁰ and through the highly influential works of Dionysius the Areopagite. The latter was dubbed Pseudo-Dionysius, as he was clearly not the disciple of Paul from Acts 17 whose name he adopted. Pseudo-Dionysius created a syncretism of Neo-Platonic and Christian concepts, forging a hierarchical cosmology that became the framework for subsequent theological and philosophical speculation.

In Pseudo-Dionysius, the One becomes fully identified with the God of Christianity. Written between AD 485 and 528, his books *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesial Hierarchy* described the Great Chain of Being in elaborate detail.¹¹ In the spiritual realm, the Chain stretches from God through a hierarchy of angels arranged in three triads. First are the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones, who are above the Dominations, Virtues, and Powers, ranking above the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Spirit meets matter in humanity, which in turn rules over the hierarchy of animals, plants, and inanimate things. In each of these classes, every individual has a designated place in the hierarchy, subordinate to those above it and superior to those below. Any attempt to step outside one's divinely appointed place in the hierarchy upsets the very order of creation.

The Victory of Hierarchy in Medieval Theology

Among the many medieval thinkers probably influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274) was the

most influential. Although Aquinas is well known for his use of Aristotle, contemporary scholars note that it was *Neo-Platonic* Aristotelianism that he inherited.¹² Indeed, his teacher, Albert the Great (AD 1196–1280), is notable for his synthesis of Neo-Platonism with the philosophy of Aristotle.¹³ Aquinas gained his knowledge of Plato through sources including Augustine, *The Book of Causes*, Dionysius, and Proclus, in which hierarchy was fully developed.

Thus, it is no surprise to discover that Aquinas viewed the structure of creation as a hierarchy of Being.¹⁴ Etienne Gilson commented, “It is easy to see the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on the mind of St. Thomas.” Dionysius, says Gilson, “leaves the conviction that it is impossible not to consider the universe as a hierarchy; but he leaves the task of filling this hierarchy to St. Thomas. . . .”¹⁵ For Aquinas, each individual on the ladder of Being was inferior in its participation in the qualities of the thing on the next level above. To be lower on the hierarchy was to be inferior in Being and further from God.¹⁶ The hierarchy of Being extends from God through numerous ranks of angels, humans in various social positions, and the lower animals. While the hierarchy is, in a sense, a ladder to God, it is proper for each creature to remain in its assigned place in the created order.¹⁷

By the time of Aquinas, the Neo-Platonic idea of hierarchy was well along the path of being completely embedded in the structure of medieval Christendom, both in the church and in the social structure of the feudal kingdoms that arose after the breakup of the Roman Empire. The idea of the Great Chain of Being provided an all-encompassing worldview to justify and sustain this social reality.

The Hierarchical Scheme of Medieval Feudal Society¹⁸

The Great Chain of Being

Supernatural	Earthly		
	Church	State	Family
God	Pope	King	Husband
Angels	Archbishops	Dukes	Wife
People	Bishops	Earls, etc.	Children
Animals	Priests	Knights	Servants/ Slaves
lion			
dog	Laity	Serfs	
Plants		Slaves ¹⁹	
Inanimate Objects			
gold			
dirt			

It is impossible to read classic literature in Western history without seeing references to the philosophy of the Great Chain of Being. E. M. W. Tillyard discusses the concept in detail in *The Elizabethan*

World Picture, a book designed to give students of Shakespeare the background needed to understand his works. He observes:

The chain stretched from the foot of God’s throne to the meanest of inanimate objects. Every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another: there could be no gap.²⁰

As a typical example, Tillyard quotes an influential work from the 1400s on natural law:

In this order angel is set over angel, rank upon rank in the kingdom of heaven; man is set over man, beast over beast, bird over bird, and fish over fish, on the earth, in the air, and in the sea: so that there is no worm that crawls upon the ground, no bird that flies on high, no fish that swims in the depths, which the chain of this order does not bind in most harmonious concord.²¹

Each individual thing in the Chain of Being, no matter how lowly, has a function necessary for the well-being of the whole. Things run smoothly when each link stays in its proper place, fulfilling its divinely mandated function. In this way, although things higher on the chain have greater degrees of nobility and a higher participation in Soul or the spiritual, all things have equal value and dignity. They are each equally necessary to maintain the proper balance and function of creation, and the failure of any link in the chain to do the work proper to its nature upsets the order of creation with disastrous results.²²

In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the catastrophe of rebelling against one’s place on the Chain of Being comes into full view. First, Lucifer attempts to break the Chain by overthrowing God and taking his place. Later, the authority structure of God over man, man over woman, mankind over the animals is ruptured when Eve attempts to ascend to the level of God, ironically by submitting to the direction of the serpent. She eats the forbidden fruit and gives it to her husband. He acquiesces to her leadership by accepting it. Through this sequence of ruptures in the Chain of Being, evil with all its woes enters the creation.²³

Evangelicals and the Chain of Being

Arthur Lovejoy showed in his classic study, *The Great Chain of Being*, that by the time of the Protestant Reformation, the idea of hierarchy so permeated European culture that it was simply taken for granted.²⁴ It never occurred to the Reformers to question it. Hierarchy was practically the air they breathed.

In this setting, John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote that Paul forbids a woman to teach because she “by nature (that is, by the ordinary law of God) is formed to obey.” He uses the language of the Chain of Being to assert that women “must keep within their own rank,” clearly below the rank of men.²⁵ He situates women firmly within the Chain of Being. Man is preeminent over woman, who is “inferior in rank,” since she was created for man. This echoes how Neo-Platonism describes the emanation of lower elements from the higher. Woman must be inferior and subject to man because she “derives her origin from the man” and the thing produced must always be subject to the thing that causes it.²⁶

This is not to say that Calvin was consciously applying Pseudo-Dionysius in his exegesis. It is simply to recognize that the idea of the Chain of Being was so completely pervasive that everything, including Scripture, was viewed through its lens. While they succeeded in rejecting the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, Calvin and the other reformers did not question the hierarchies of the political and social order. Women remained firmly in their place below men on the Great Chain of Being.

The Chain of Being's influence over evangelicals continued down through the centuries as evidenced by their use of it to justify the brutal enslavement of Africans. This extended into early Anglo-America and was used against the abolitionists' egalitarian readings of Scripture.²⁷ Historian Winthrop Jordon notes that belief in the Chain of Being was pervasive in America during the 1700s.²⁸ It was a convenient tool for classifying Africans below Europeans, just above the apes, though not without creating tension in the minds of Christians, who could not avoid seeing that Africans are humans, not animals. Evangelical slaveholders resolved this tension by affirming both the spiritual equality of Africans and their functional subordination to whites.²⁹ The parallels between this and the complementarian insistence that women and men are equal in value while women are functionally subordinate is no mere coincidence.

Contemporary evangelicals no longer defend slavery, but the Great Chain of Being persists in its influence, particularly in contemporary defenses of male authority over women. Perhaps there is no clearer statement than that of Elisabeth Elliot, who grounded male authority over women in what she viewed as

a glorious hierarchical order of graduated splendor, beginning with the Trinity, descending through seraphim, cherubim, archangels, angels, men, and all lesser creatures, a mighty universal dance, choreographed for the perfection and fulfillment of each participant.³⁰

The inclusion of this in one of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood's principal collections of essays would appear to be endorsement. The remaining question is to determine if this is truly biblical.

The Great Chain of Being and the Bible

The idea of the Great Chain of Being is not unique to the West. It is so common in world history that anthropologist Louis Dumont dubbed humanity *Homo Hierarchicus*.³¹ To discover if the Bible teaches that the Chain of Being accurately describes the creation order, we will compare the biblical creation account with the worldview of ancient Egypt.

Ancient Egyptians saw the original Being as "the Primordial Abyss of waters (which) was everywhere, stretching endlessly in all directions. . . . all was dark and formless."³² The waters, called Nu or Nun, are "the basic matter of the universe" from which consciousness came into being.³³ "This Nun, however, was not so much a primary substance or form of matter, but rather a mythic symbol of the abstract reality of the full potential of being."³⁴

Before the beginning of creation, there was only an infinite dark, watery, chaotic sea. There was nothing above or below the sea—the sea was all there was. Immersed in the sea, Atum (or Re or Amun or Ptah), the creator god and source of everything, brought himself into existence by separating himself from the waters.³⁵ The gods evolved from this impersonal, original One, manifesting as a descending hierarchy of beings, and creating a hierarchy of the various classes of humans.³⁶

Recent scholarship has argued that the long-observed similarities between Genesis 1 and Egyptian mythology are not simply borrowed ideas, as earlier critical scholarship assumed. Instead, it recognizes that the biblical creation account serves as a polemic against ancient Egyptian cosmology.³⁷ This polemic is apparent in that Genesis 1 opens by flipping the Egyptian creation account on its head. Egyptian mythology declares impersonal, chaotic Being to be ultimate, with consciousness and the gods arising from it and subject to it. In contrast, Genesis reveals that the infinite, personal, self-contained God came first. Divinity did not rise from the primordial waters as in the Egyptian view, but rather God spoke the primordial waters into existence from nothing. The idea of a hierarchical Chain of Being linking nature to God is decisively ruptured by Genesis 1:1.

The worship of heavenly bodies was a significant part of ancient Egyptian religion, since it identified the sun, moon, stars, and planets with the hierarchy of gods. As elements of the hierarchy of Being superior to humankind, they had power over human destiny, provoking fear. The writer of Genesis, however, shows no such fear. He reveals that the sun, moon, and stars did not emanate from uncreated Being as the Egyptian astrologers believed. They were created as distinct entities for the purpose of serving the needs of humankind. Hence, they have no power over us.

The Hebrew account of the creation, function, and limitation of the luminaries is another unequivocal indicator that in Genesis 1 there is a direct and conscious anti-myth polemic. The form in which this Hebrew creation account has come down to us portrays the creatureliness and the limitations of the heavenly luminaries as is consonant with the worldview of Genesis 1 and its understanding of reality.³⁸ Genesis 1 inverts the order in which the luminaries were created in Egyptian mythology, breaking the hierarchy of divine Being implied therein.³⁹

Likewise, the creation of animals and plants does not depict the fashioning of a hierarchy linked by degrees of participation in the Being of the One. Instead, God creates each group distinctly after its own kind. There is discontinuity between each of the kinds. Each reproduces within the limits of the kinds in which they were created. The text does not indicate that they are linked on a scale of existence. Not only is there no link between kinds, but the creation of the simpler forms of life first reverses the order of emanation of the animals from the One in ancient mythology.

The first hint of hierarchy in the biblical creation story does not appear until God gives humanity the mandate for dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26–30). Here, the hierarchy is God over humans (male and female) and humans—male and female alike—over the rest of creation. Unlike the Chain of Being, there is no continuity of Being linking these three categories. God is distinct in his Being from

humans, just as humans, who bear the divine image, are distinct from the rest of the creation. Likewise, there are no hierarchies indicated within the three categories of the divine, the human, and the rest of creation. The divine Being is personal and One, not a hierarchy of finite gods as in Egyptian polytheism. Humans are created both male and female, with no hint of priority or authority given to one gender or the other. Both are equal recipients of the command to have dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28).

It is worth noting what the text of Genesis 1 does *not* say. While silence is not proof, when an obvious opening exists for making a claim critical to an argument, we may assume that its absence is not simply an oversight. We would expect the notion of a hierarchy of Being to be introduced here if it were relevant, yet we see nothing of the kind. This is significant because wherever it appears, the Great Chain of Being is the central, unifying motif that provides structure, coherence, and order to a worldview. If creation were truly structured in a hierarchy of Being, then Genesis 1 would be the most obvious place to say so. Instead we see just the opposite: namely, the consistent disruption of hierarchies.

Many have argued that there is a hierarchy between male and female humans in the text of Genesis 2. But why, after ruling out hierarchies in nature, would the writer suddenly revert to hierarchical thinking in the next chapter? That makes no sense. Nevertheless, we need to comment briefly on common arguments in favor of such a hierarchy.

Complementarians have argued that the creation of the man first and the woman second indicates a hierarchical relationship requiring female submission to male authority.⁴⁰ The man was created first, they say, and for this reason enjoys priority as the leader over the woman. However, we have seen that the order in which the animals were created does not support hierarchy. If it did, then, by the same logic the animals should have authority over humans. What we do find in the OT are examples of first-born children being given less priority than their younger siblings.⁴¹ Apparently, chronological order is not necessarily relevant for establishing authority in the Bible.

Complementarians have also reasoned that since the woman was created to be the man's helper in Genesis 2, she must function as an assistant under his direction and supervision.⁴² The problem here is that the Hebrew word for helper, *ezer*, does not have the same connotation as the English word "helper." The Hebrew word is used principally to describe a superior party who comes to the rescue of someone in need. In other passages, the word is used to refer to God when he acts as the "helper." If anything, taking *ezer* literally would invert the traditional male-female hierarchy. At the very least it erases hierarchy as an option in Genesis 2.⁴³ Rather than being an assistant, the woman was created as "a strength/power equivalent to him," equally able to carry out the creation mandate assigned to humanity.⁴⁴

Thus, we see that the biblical account of creation is a rebuttal to the hierarchical worldview. A hierarchical Chain of Being is simply incompatible with the creation order as established by God in which man and woman share dominion equally. Against this background, female subordination first enters the world as a result of the fall (Gen

3:16). Male-female hierarchy appears here for the first time, not as the God-ordained order of creation, but as a devastating aspect of sin. It turns the creation order upside down, wrecking the proper mutual relationship between man and woman. Ever since the fall, hierarchicalism has been a distorted lens that the fallen mind uses to view the world. It eradicates the Creator-creature distinction by placing God at the top of a hierarchy of Being merging with the created realm, thus giving license to the rebellious human quest to ascend to godhood. It alienates humankind from creation, making its dominion one of environmental exploitation and destruction, rather than stewardship and godly development. It creates power hierarchies of race, caste, class, and gender that issue forth in oppression and abuse.

Conclusion

In light of the incompatibility of the Great Chain of Being with a biblical worldview, I conclude that hierarchy is not a viable rubric for interpreting Scripture. A consistently biblical hermeneutic must be a worldview hermeneutic. Difficult and disputed texts such as 1 Cor 11:2–16, 1 Tim 2:11–15, and Eph 5:21–33 simply cannot mean something that contradicts the most basic presuppositions of the biblical worldview as established from Genesis to Revelation. On the contrary, a correct interpretation of these texts will support and reinforce the biblical worldview. Since the Bible takes a hierarchical interpretation of creation off the table in its opening chapters, it cannot be what the inspired writers of Scripture intended for us to understand.

Our study shows that, rather than being derived from the Bible, hierarchicalism is the fruit of a non-Christian worldview reflecting pagan Greek philosophy. Over time, it entered the church and became a distorted lens for reading the Bible in such a way as to mandate the practice of female subordination, contrary to its egalitarian intent. Reading the Bible without the influence of unbiblical, Neo-Platonic presuppositions frees us to see that the disputed passages actually *subvert* hierarchies in human relationships and point us back to the egalitarianism of the original creation order. May we take this to heart and banish human-made hierarchies from disturbing the order and freedom of all members of the body of Christ.

Notes

This article is an enlarged version of the presentation "The Worldview of the Bible vs. the Worldview of Hierarchy," delivered at the CBE conference in São Paulo, Brazil, 2023.

1. My thesis here is not original; I am building and expanding upon two previous articles: Letha Scanzoni, "The Great Chain of Being and the Chain of Command," *The Reformed Journal* 26/8 (Oct 1976) 14–16; Robert K. McGregor Wright, "Hierarchicalism Unbiblical," *Journal of Biblical Equality* 3 (June 1991) 57–66.
2. Aristotle, "Politics" 1.1, in *Aristotle: The Complete Works* (Pandora's Box) Kindle Location 820.
3. Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 1997) ch. 2.
4. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
5. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, 2nd ed., ed. E. R. Dodds (Clarendon, 1992).

6. I am using “Being” with a capital B to represent the Greek concept of existence itself. It embraces all that is, including God and the universe. It is synonymous with ultimate reality. Applied to God, I use the capital B to denote God as ultimate Being, distinct from the creation, which is “being” with a lowercase b.
7. cf. Dominic J. O’Meara, “The Hierarchical Ordering of Reality in Plotinus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge University Press, 1996); D. E. Cuscombe, “Hierarchy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. S. McGrade (Cambridge University Press, 2003).
8. Dmitry Birjukov, “Hierarchies of Beings in the Patristic Thought: Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite,” in *The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy*, ed. Mikonja Knežević (Sebastian, 2015) 71–88.
9. Lia Formigari, “Chain of Being,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Weiner (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973) 1:326.
10. *Book of Causes: Liber de causis*, English and Latin Edition, trans. Dennis J. Brand (Marquette University Press, 1984).
11. Both may be found in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker, vol. 2 (James Parker and Co., 1899).
12. Wayne J. Hankey, “Aquinas, Plato, and Neoplatonism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford University Press, 2012) 56.
13. Markus Führer, “Albert the Great,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/albert-great/>.
14. I use a capital B here because, even though Aquinas affirmed the Creator-creature distinction, his use of the Greek notion of Being in general obscured it.
15. Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (B. Herder Book Co., 1924) 274–75.
16. Gilson, *Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 196.
17. Gilson, *Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 154–57, 272.
18. Table adapted from Bruce R. Magee, “The Three Estates and Their Potential Vices,” in *Course Notes for English 201* (Louisiana State University, 2008), https://latech.edu/~bmagee/201/intro2_medieval/estates&chain_of_being_notes.htm.
19. On medieval slavery, see *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 2, AD 500–AD 1420*, new ed., ed. C. Perry, D. Eltis, S. L. Engerman, and D. Richardson (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Burnard, in his review, remarks, “Slavery was unproblematic because it fitted well into hierarchical assumptions, especially in regard to understandings of the place of women and children in society.” Trevor Burnard, “A Global History of Slavery in the Medieval Millennium,” in *Slavery & Abolition* 43/4 (2022), 819–26, https://web.archive.org/web/20210422143616/http://www2.latech.edu/~bmagee/201/intro2_medieval/estates&chain_of_being_notes.htm
20. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Taylor and Francis) Kindle Location 26.
21. Sir John Fortescue, *Works*, ed. Lord Clermont (London, 1869) 1:322, cited in Tillyard, *Elizabethan World Picture*, 27.
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Women and Men: A Biblical and Theological Perspective

Ian Payne

“My first memory was from when I was three years old,” he said to me. “I’m clinging to my mother’s sari as my father is strangling my mother!” It helped me understand a little more his struggle to stop beating his wife.

Relationships between men and women can be heaven. They can be hell. How easily men learn they can dominate women! They learn to think they must keep them in line. They learn to treat women as subordinates, as possessions.

“Is a woman a person?” This is the title of Sudhir Kakar’s article, written not long after the nation-shocking rape in a Delhi bus of a young woman dubbed by the media as Nirbhaya.¹ Kakar, an Indian psychoanalyst, explores the tension between Western and traditional views of women. Is a woman a person? The answer, it seems, is yes—so long as she is a mother, daughter, sister, or wife. If not, the answer is no. She is just an object, an object for the enjoyment of men, an object for the playhouses of their minds.

The article makes a great discussion point in my theology classes. Is a woman a person? Are men entitled to treat women as subordinate, as possessions? There is plenty of ill-treatment of women in the Bible. Does the Bible permit, even promote, this? Though God’s word comes through patriarchal settings, does it reinforce that patriarchy—or not? By looking at God’s purposes for men and women in creation and in new creation, focusing especially on 1 Corinthians 11:7 and Galatians 3:28, we will find the Bible certainly speaks today. The Bible presents a vision of equality and giftedness.

Men and Women in Creation

Equally Created

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26–27 NRSV)

Right from the first chapter, God’s purposes for humanity focus on men and women. Their being made in his image distinguishes them from animals. We are told God “created humankind in his own image,” and immediately come the words “male and female he created them.” Traditionally, this has been seen merely as preparing the way for the

Is a woman a person?
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topic of reproduction in the next verse. But is that all? Is it significant that there is mention of the sexual difference straightaway (unlike the animals)? When we ask what this sexual differentiation means for understanding the *image of God*,² we unfold a richer meaning. The poetic parallelism is synonymous; the author intends us to see the second line further explains the first line. That means sexual difference is part of the *image of God* and hence that men and women are equally made in the image of God.

We should be careful not to derive too much significance from this one verse, but it already points us away from seeing the *imago Dei*³ as primarily structural and, instead, as something that is also social. It is not some substance within us; rather, it is how we behave in community. When we attend to the larger biblical context surrounding Genesis 2:18, together with Ephesians 5:22–33, we see where the Bible is going with the sexual differentiation between men and women. In the former passage, we see God’s paradigm for all marriages; in the latter, all marriages point ultimately to *the* marriage—of Christ and the church. Marriage is linked, in the end, with the marriage supper of the Lamb. The image of God theme points us to the destiny of the new humanity in Christ.⁴

How does sexual differentiation relate to the story of God’s ultimate purposes for humanity? Gender works to transform us by drawing us out of ourselves. Felipe do Vale sees gender as love. “Through loving,” he says, “we bring the beloved into ourselves and incorporate them into our stories. . . . [but because] love has its source and end in God, who is love . . . [the] social goods that we are called to love are to be loved as gifts from the Creator, according to the specifications set forth by the Giver, and in a right order. . . . The forces that shape us into godliness are the same forces that tell us who we are as gendered selves.”⁵ Using a different metaphor, Jonathan Grant says, “Our one-sidedness as either male or female creates a homing instinct that calls us beyond ourselves, to seek relationship with God and others.”⁶

Men and women feature centrally throughout the human story. We must now consider how they introduce the dramatic tension. Adam and Eve fall into sin.

Equally Fallen

It starts so well. God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a corresponding partner for him (Gen 2:18).” But in the Garden, Adam and Eve disobey God. Equally created, they are now equally fallen.

Much has been made of Paul’s observation that “Adam was not the one deceived; it was Eve who was deceived and became a sinner”

(1 Tim 2:14 NIV). This follows Paul's statement that he does not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man. Does Paul believe men are less prone to deception than women? Does this lead us to conclude only men should have leadership positions in the church? Cynthia Westfall gives good reasons why to do so would be to misunderstand Paul. Her wider study of what Paul says about temptation leads her to assert, "Even though Eve was a woman, according to Paul, the possibility of being tempted or deceived by Satan or sin is a universal experience. Eve's deception is a paradigmatic example of the human condition."⁷ Furthermore, after showing that "Christian women in Ephesus were being deceived in a way that was unparalleled in other churches," she argues it is plausible to understand Paul's prohibition in v. 12 to be based on Eve's deception and transgression as an illustration of the deception of women and men in *Ephesus*. That is, the situation (perhaps some gullible women) in Ephesus, rather than an ontological flaw in all women, justifies the ban on their teaching.⁸ Yes, some women are more prone to deception than some men, and this suited Paul's point in 1 Timothy in that particular situation. But elsewhere, referring to the same Genesis event, Paul lays the blame on Adam. Paul teaches that sin entered the world through Adam (Rom 5:12–21, focusing on his humanity rather than his maleness). No, being prone to deception is not a universal principle for all women in all places. All humans can be deceived. We are equally fallen.

Equally Dignified in Cultural Cross-currents

Equal dignity has been rare. There is no doubt most cultures in history provide cross-currents for seeing women as equal in status with men. The culture in Paul's day is no exception. What we know about women and attitudes toward them in the ancient world paints an awful picture. In Judaism, women were not counted in the quorum needed for a synagogue. Jewish men used to daily thank God that God had not made him "a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."⁹ In Greco-Roman culture, things were worse.¹⁰ One ancient writer said women were the worst plague Zeus made. Ontologically, perfection, strength, and rationality were found in men; imperfection, weakness, and irrationality in women. Women, though useful, were sometimes considered mere chattels, without intelligence, without legal status. Extramarital sex was often seen as acceptable for a husband but as shameful for a wife. Infanticide and abandonment of female babies was widespread, more so than of males. By and large, women were viewed as inferior. "Disdain for women was almost universal."¹¹

How does Paul address this? Does Paul say women and men are equally bearers of God's image? Or does he think men are privileged and women are subservient? Many think subservience is the basis of what Paul is arguing in 1 Cor 11:2–16.

In those verses, he is discussing the propriety of covering the head when the Corinthian Christians gather for worship. In v. 7, the reason he gives that a man ought not cover his head is: "since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man." Paul is thinking of the Genesis creation narrative, for he continues in v. 8, "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (NIV). So in light of this passage, the question is whether women and men bear the

image of God in different ways. Are women subordinate to men? Or are they equally made in the image of God?

This is a rather famous crux. Many interpreters say women are subordinate by creation;¹² others equal by creation.¹³ Part of the problem lies in the influence that culture has on our understanding and reading of Paul. What do we think of that ancient culture's endorsement of the general subservience of women? How does our own culture think about the symbolism of head and of head coverings—whether hats, veils, or hair? The most persuasive reading of 1 Cor 11:7 is that women and men are equal by creation but inhabit cultural cross-currents.

Paul says that when the house church gathered for worship, men were to have their heads uncovered and women were to have their head covered. Why? It is common to assume that the women were flouting the convention of wearing a veil in the house church and Paul is correcting them. The opposite scenario makes a plausible and compelling reading: the women *want* to wear the veil, and Paul is correcting the men!¹⁴

What does the head covering mean? In my (Western) culture, the headcovering of a judge or a police officer signals authority, but a veil signals subservience or subordinate status. The meaning of veiling in Corinth (and many non-Western cultures today) was to signal modesty and to avoid signalling sexual availability. Veiling was typically restricted to the upper classes. In these verses, then, Paul is defending the women's right to resist pressure to remove their veils. "Paul's support of *all* women veiling equalized the social relationships in the community. . . . [It] secured respect, honor, and sexual purity for women in the church who were denied that status in the culture."¹⁵ This view also makes sense of v. 10: ". . . a woman ought to have authority over her own head." There is no need to understand this as a figure of speech which upturns the meaning of the grammar (as if they must wear a veil as a sign of [accepting *the man's*] authority on their heads).

We have not yet talked about a key word found in v. 7: *head*. The same word is prominent in v. 3: "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (NIV). Compared with the English "head," the Greek word translated "head" (*kephalē*) has a range of metaphorical meanings including "source of life." "Source of life" makes good sense in this context. So v. 3 could be paraphrased, "But I want you to realize that every man's life comes from Christ, woman's life comes from man, and Christ's life comes from God." Paul's words are not intended to convey hierarchy (and therefore patriarchy).¹⁶ Paul's description balances the equality and the created distinction between man and woman, just as he later balances the priority of man's creation (v. 8) with the interdependence of man and woman (vv. 11f.).

So what does v. 7 mean? "For a man should not have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of the man." Paul is urging that "man shows his humility before God as the unadorned image of God, and woman shows honor to God, herself, and her family by diminishing her glory/beauty in public and in worship. . . . The fact that woman was created for man's sake (1 Cor 11:9) indicates the purpose of her greater beauty and her attraction for men."¹⁷ Paul is not diminishing women's attributes

but “sees them in a positive light: a woman’s hair is the glory of her head. Her hair is something valuable that needs to be protected and managed appropriately.”¹⁸ “Woman is the glory of man . . . describes the power women have over men.”¹⁹ So, v. 7 indicates that women are *both* made in the image of God *and* are the glory of man. This makes better sense than presuming women bear God’s image in a different and reduced way compared with men.

Notice Paul does not minimize the created distinction between man and woman. “Woman is the glory of man” highlights the distinctiveness of women. Since all are born of woman, men cannot exist without women. They fit; they are well suited for one another. We see this fit also in Genesis 2. For Adam, the animals do not fit, but the woman does. Adam rejoices in the identity-in-distinction, exclaiming she is “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.” God-given sexual difference impels people generally to come together in marriage and in community. Paul’s treatment of veiling shows women and men appropriately expressing their gender differences in culturally specific ways that vary from culture to culture.

We have been looking at women and men in the light of creation. “In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Women and men are equally bearers of the image of God. They possess distinctive attributes necessarily expressed in diverse cultural situations. From among the various ways of expressing gender available in our contexts, we should choose those that express their equal dignity. Each culture tends to warp the equality or blur the diverse glories that woman and man each have. Keeping the focus right depends on not only looking backward to creation but also looking forward to the new creation.

Women and Men in the New Creation

If, in creation, God has made women and men equal (though distinctive) image bearers, how does God continue doing so in the new creation work in Christ? The NT sees a necessary continuity between creation and redemption. God’s purposes in eschatology provide confirming proof of his purposes in creation. The destiny of women and men reflects the purpose of God’s creation of humanity. More than this, Jesus is pivotal. “Human destiny—the full flowering of the image of God—has already been realized in Jesus’s resurrection.”²⁰ In other words, because of Jesus, God’s new creation shines even more light on his purposes for women and men.

Not only are they equally made in the image of God, but women and men are also *equally called to be in the image of God*. This is true both in terms of ultimate destiny and our everyday character and service.

Equal Destiny

In Galatians 3, Paul describes the pivotal role of Christ in the unfolding purposes of God. Until Christ came we were “under the law”; now we are “in Christ” (Gal 3:23–26). Grace supercedes law. It is not that, with the coming of the New Covenant, the law has disappeared and we can now do whatever we like. Rather the law has been put “in our minds and written in our hearts.”²¹ Because Christ has fulfilled the law, stunningly, his obedience is counted as ours. The law was our guardian, making sure we knew God was

our Judge (v. 24). Now by faith we are free as children of God, our Father (v. 26). Like a sonic boom, Christ’s coming means God’s sure goal has broken into the world. He has begun to change and perfect everything. In language Paul uses elsewhere, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17 NRSV). “The renewal of the individual in conversion prefigures the renewal of the cosmos at the end.”²⁴

As Paul makes explicit in Galatians 3, our point is this: women and men share equally in this new reality, this eschatological hope.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26–29 NIV)

Men and women have the same eschatological hope without distinction. We share an equal destiny. Read it again: “. . . Nor is there male and female.” Along with the distinctions of race and rank, in God’s new creation the distinction of sex becomes irrelevant. Paul is emphatically asserting the equality of the sexes. Of course, he does not mean these distinctions are actually obliterated. We do not ignore people’s sex, treating someone as if they were actually the opposite sex or somehow neuter. John Stott clarifies, “When we say that Christ has abolished these distinctions, we mean not that they do not exist, but that they do not matter. They are still there, but they no longer create any barriers to fellowship.”²³

“Paul fully and explicitly includes women and men in humanity’s final destiny. In Galatians 3:26–4:1, this destiny will be one of rule and authority, as God’s children and equal heirs in Christ.”²⁴ Women and men will equally rule with Christ. Furthermore, in Christ, we anticipate the same resurrection body as Christ’s, regardless of gender.²⁵

The problem is, however, that barriers for women in the church have often remained. Paul’s logic has been traditionally resisted. One would think their equal created dignity and their equal share in destiny would lead the church to encourage all to achieve their God-given potential in skills and leadership, regardless of their sex. The actual loss of a share in authority and rule for women is the result of the fall in Genesis 3:16. It is part of a general corruption of power in human relationships, which sin has brought about. There is no justification for mistreating or subordinating women.

Some have suggested the fact that Adam was created first requires a hierarchy, with men over women. But to qualify what he means about Adam’s priority and to exclude hierarchy, Paul asserts a balancing interdependence (1 Cor 11:11). Of the people of God, only Jesus has a superior status; only he is the *firstborn*.²⁶

It has been persuasive for me to reflect on the maleness of Jesus. Does the incarnation mean men are more God-like than women? Are men more closely related to Christ than women are and therefore more truly human? The simple answer is no.²⁷ One reason is that men and women are equally “brought into union with Christ through the power of the Spirit so that we come to take on the very

characteristics of Christ.”²⁸ The fact that Christ was a man does not somehow privilege all males.

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Equal Calling

Equally made in God’s image, we are equally called to bear his image. The same Spirit at work bringing us to our destiny is at work forming the Christian’s character and service in daily life. Being in Christ means becoming increasingly like Christ. Indeed, this is the central characteristic of salvation; becoming like him is the fruit of our union with Christ. Our point is this: women and men alike are called to become like Christ. The Bible calls all people to be holy and Christlike. There is no hint that men can become more holy than women.

Christlikeness is spiritual and ethical. While our life is always embodied, Christlikeness is never pictured in relation to body shape or eye colour—or gender. Being like Jesus does not mean wearing sandals or becoming carpenters or remaining unmarried²⁹—or becoming masculine.

None of our bodies look like Jesus’s; that is not the goal. But we will all become like him in character, for as John writes, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2–3 NIV). “Love, joy, peace . . .” The fruit of the Spirit is the picture of Christlikeness in both women and men. Women and men are equally called to purity and self-sacrifice, to authentic transformation and service.³⁰

Consonant with all this, God equally enables women and men to serve him. Protestants routinely say we believe in the priesthood of all believers—and rightly so. This is fundamental to Paul’s famous call to worship and service in the body of Christ in Romans 12:1–8. We are all urged to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. In vv. 3–5, we are called to diverse service in unity. God has given each of us spiritual gifts to benefit the body of Christ, the church. Notice that Paul urges us to evaluate what our personal gift is according to “faith” (v. 3) and to “grace given to each of us” (v. 6). It is problematic when men claim that a woman’s faith and experience are invalid in discerning her gift. In vv. 6–8, Paul teaches that gifts are given to meet the needs of the body of Christ. The list of seven gifts Paul gives is representative rather than exhaustive, but he covers a wide range: prophecy, serving, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership (which links with elders and deacons), and mercy. It

is significant that God gives spiritual gifts to women as well as to men. Paul sees no need in Romans 12 to teach that half of what he is saying does not apply to half of his audience! The truth is that spiritual gifts are given by God without restriction as to sex.

How sad it is when Christian men reserve for themselves the gifts of leadership and teaching, and restrict women’s participation.³¹ Exclusive male leadership is in the long run toxic and unjust. Ultimately, it reflects a different theology for women than for men.

What is needed is recognition that God equally calls women and men to serve him in the church and in mission—where unjust cross-currents will certainly be encountered even more. To please the Lord, Christian women and men need to be Christlike and adaptable.

Equally Self-Sacrificial in Cultural Cross-Currents

In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul teaches how the young churches where Timothy and Titus serve should live as a community and among unbelievers. Similarly, in passages often called household codes, Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1 offer advice directed to wives, husbands, children, parents, slaves, and masters. We can learn from the way he gives different advice to each group. Slaves are taught to obey; masters to be just. Wives to submit; husbands to love. In Ephesians 5:22, 25 we read, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for . . .” (NIV).

What does Paul mean? The word *submit* means “be courteously respectful,” yielding one’s own rights. It is a grateful acceptance of love, not grovelling obedience. In 1 Cor 11:3, Paul sees a creational model of headship meaning “source.” Here he adds a model of the headship of Christ in relation to the church. The church willingly submits to Christ. Submission and headship are powder keg words. That is because of their connection with *power*.

Headship is not hierarchy. Some men exercise control and make all the decisions, either openly or secretly. That is simply *tyranny*. It is as if he remotely controls an electric dog collar on his wife’s neck. Headship conceived as control leads to power games. One seeks to dominate, either by open demand, by physical violence, by playing the victim, or even by threatening suicide.

Rather, headship is self-sacrificial love. In between tyranny and rivalry are marriages in which husband and wife display something more mysterious. Headship is *reverent responsibility*. The head is the source of the provision of life in a relationship of *equals*. But this is a priority of *love* not of *power*. Paul could have echoed Jesus’s teaching about *servant leadership*. It is not about “lording it over others.” Marriage is like a dance, where mutual submission (v. 21) is how we dance, respecting our distinctives (vv. 22–33). A wife’s submission is self-sacrificial; a husband’s headship is *also* self-sacrificial, and this is exactly what Paul emphasises as expected of husbands.

Back then, the most strikingly countercultural line in these marriage instructions is Paul’s command to husbands, and that is why he dwells on it four times as long!³² Most interpreters see that the effect of Paul’s teaching is to soften the hard edges of the hierarchical social structures in the ancient world. The question

is whether Paul agrees with them and is urging believers to *conform* or whether he disagrees with them and aims to *subvert*. In the new creation, God is now actively reversing the fall, equally bringing women as well as men toward the completion of their same destiny. Paul's "in Christ" vision has missional and therefore also sociological implications. What is true "in Christ" needs to become a practical reality insofar as mission priorities allow.³³ Paul is arguing, in other words, "for the entire church to adopt a missional and self-sacrificial adaptation to fallen social structures of the Greco-Roman world as a strategy to advance the gospel. . . . Like secret agents, Paul wanted his communities to fit in as much as possible; they did the same things that their neighbours did yet for eschatological reasons: they served another king and belonged to another kingdom."³⁴

So, when Paul enjoins submission of women to their husbands in keeping with the Greco-Roman setting and upends that culture by requiring self-sacrificial love of men to their wives, his motive is not conformity, but subversion. Each sacrifices their right to self-determination. It is the Saviour, the head, who determines. Each is impelled to generous service to the other. To people in our context wondering if submission to God's lordship reduces their humanity, Christian communities and marriages can demonstrate submission to God's authority that is liberating. Indeed, as something penultimate, marriage points to the ultimate mystery of Christ and the church, in which our calling to self-sacrificial love finds its final purpose.

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Conclusion

Whether we are looking back to creation or forward to the new creation, the Bible teaches us that men and women have equal dignity and destiny. In God's purposes, by grace and faith, sexual difference draws us out of ourselves into community and to his ultimate goal of eternal fellowship with him.

God has three purposes for gender. They are transformative, missional, and unitive. That is, God's purpose is to foster in us love, like his, that transforms us as individuals, incorporates us in community, and unites us in fellowship with himself. Here are some lessons.

First, God wants us to become morally like him. Since he regards women and men as equally made in his image, we should respect them equally. Created equal in dignity, women and men live in interdependence. Societies that celebrate women and men as equal image-bearers flourish. Their created equality means women are never possessions of men, not even of husbands. Disability or gender deficit³⁵ does not disqualify people from that equal status. Furthermore, women and men are equally called to become image bearers. In Christ, *there is no male and female*. Women and men share an equal destiny: we are all to be holy. Holiness is not somehow easier for men, as if they were

more truly human. Women and men are equally given gifts to serve the community and the church. So we should encourage all to achieve their God-given potential in skills and leadership, regardless of their sex. Women and men are called to share dominion.

Second, God wants us to be fruitful. When we face cultural cross-currents to God's purposes, mission informs how we adapt to culture. From among the various ways of expressing gender available in our context, we should choose those that express the equal dignity of women and men and the counterintuitive power of mutual submission. Whether our context favours tyranny or rivalry, Christian women and men should live out their equal dignity through self-sacrificial love. We share in God's mission of drawing all people together under the headship of Christ, in whom we find true freedom in submission. We must be willing to upend our culture's gender stereotypes and rampant consumerism for the sake of the gospel.

Third, God wants us for fellowship with himself. God aims to teach us to love him. To lose ourselves for the sake of another, against all insecurities and self-centredness, is Christlike. At the marriage supper of the Lamb, there will only be women and men whose love for Christ has eclipsed their love for themselves.

Notes

This article is an edited version of a chapter in Ian Payne's forthcoming book, *The Message of Humanity*, in The Bible Speaks Today series (IVP, 2025).

1. Times of India (Jan 9, 2013).
2. Latin for "the image of God."
3. See Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Westminster John Knox, 2001) 270ff.
4. Filipe do Vale, *Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and our Social Worlds* (Baker Academic, 2023) 238.
5. Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Brazos, 2015) 146.
6. Gen 2:18. The Hebrew word for "helper" (*ezer*) does not connote subordination, for in its usage the most common reference is to God.
7. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 111. Note that, in 2 Cor 11:3, Paul fears that the Corinthian church (not just the women there) might be led astray.
8. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 117f.
9. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Daily Study Bible, rev. ed. (Theological Publications in India, 1976, 1991) 168.
10. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 14ff.
11. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1979) 224. See further, Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Baker Academic, 2009).
12. E.g., D. J. A. Clines, "Image of God," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (IVP, 1993) 426ff.
13. E.g., Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 61–69.
14. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 26, 32.
15. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 33–34.
16. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987) 502.
17. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 40f.
18. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 40f.

19. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 67. See also 1 Esdras 4:14–17.
20. Kevin Vanhoozer, “Human Being, Individual and Social,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge University Press, 1997) 173.
21. Jer 31:32. The result is we now want to obey the law and by grace, in Christ, we can, though until heaven imperfectly so.
22. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 2005) 427.
23. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (IVP, 1968) 100.
24. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 147.
25. 1 Cor 15:49.
26. Rom 8:29; Col 1:15ff.
27. Lack of space precludes further discussion. See Marc Cortez’s chapter, “The Male Messiah,” in his *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Zondervan, 2017) 190–211.
28. Cortez, “The Male Messiah,” 210.
29. Being unmarried is not a shortcoming, and marriage is not required for holiness. Jesus and Paul were unmarried, and Paul commends its advantages in 1 Cor 7.
30. Rom 12:1–2.
31. It seems tendentious to interpret 1 Tim 2:12 to universally deny women can teach when contradiction with 1 Cor 11:5 is a result, and when clearer and more significant passages such as Rom 12:1–8, 1 Cor 12:1–29, and Eph 4:7–13 apply equally to women as to men. 1 Cor 14:34 can similarly unfortunately be used to deny women’s participation when its concern is with disorderly “chatter.”
32. After all, they had the most cultural power.
33. “The Jew-Gentile issue was the greatest stumbling block for the gospel in Paul’s day. While Paul granted slaves and females equality ‘in Christ,’ there was not the same kind of urgency in terms of working out the social dynamics.” William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (IVP, 2001) 86.
34. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 147, 161.
35. Such as is experienced by people who are intersex, or DSD (disorders of sex development).



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Victim Blaming and the David and Bathsheba Narrative

J. Dwayne Howell

A few years ago, I found several colleagues across various schools in deep discussion over the question of Bathsheba's innocence or guilt in 2 Samuel 11. This was on the theologically astute site known as Facebook. As I read the comments, I offered my insights, given that one of my dissertation chapters is on David and Bathsheba. I have thought about this discussion, often asking: why is there a need to save David at the cost of blaming Bathsheba?

Many denominations have been affected in the past several years by scandals concerning sexual abuse and the cover-ups that sought to hide the abuse.¹ Victims of such abuse are further victimized by insinuations that they were willing participants or that they entrapped the men involved—men who are often in positions of leadership. Referred to as *victim blaming*, the men absolve themselves by deflecting personal accountability onto the victim. Related to this is *toxic masculinity* in churches where the submission of females to males is emphasized. This allows for situations with the potential for a variety of abuses: physical, psychological, and spiritual. This essay acknowledges that there is a spectrum of possible abuse in a church or other institution. However, the focus is the abuse of females by male authority figures.

The David and Bathsheba narrative of 2 Samuel 11 provides an example of such abuse. While the biblical text does not accuse Bathsheba of any wrongdoing, interpretations of the text sometimes situate Bathsheba as seducing David into adultery.

Literary Analysis of 2 Samuel 11

The narrator uses the introduction in v. 1 both to begin the story and to provide a transition from the previous chapter (2 Sam 10) by tying it to the theme of war.² Spring is when “kings go out to battle.” David does not go to battle, but instead sends Joab out to lead on his behalf. The narrator establishes irony in the introduction by contrasting David with other kings.³ While other kings go to war, David does not. While Joab and the soldiers leave home, David remains at home.⁴

The use of Hebrew verb “to send” serves an important role in the narrative. It emphasizes that David is the central focus of the narrative. It is used twelve times in the story (11:1–27), playing a role in each part except the conclusion (v. 27b).⁵ In each scene, “send” brackets the action. In Scene One, David *sends* to enquire about the beautiful woman and then *sends* for her. The scene closes with the woman *sending* a message that she is pregnant.⁶ Scene Two begins with David *sending* for Uriah and ends with David promising to *send* him back if he would stay another day. In Scene Three, David *sends* Uriah's death warrant to Joab through Uriah, unbeknownst to Uriah. Joab then *sends* a messenger to tell David that Uriah is dead. The final scene simply states that David *sends* for the woman and marries her. Significantly for this word motif, the next narrative (2 Sam 12) begins “And the LORD *sent* Nathan to David.” The narrator is concerned with David's actions throughout the story. As the

narrative proceeds, the emphasis is placed increasingly on David's actions, not Bathsheba's.

Verses 2–5 introduce Bathsheba to the narrative. David is walking on his rooftop after resting (v. 2). From this vantage point, David sees a beautiful woman bathing. After asking, he finds that the woman is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite. David sends for the woman, but nothing is said about his inner motivation for the summons. As Kyle McCarter puts it: “The most egregious behavior possible on the part of the king is attributed to David without a word of mitigation.”⁷

Does Bathsheba purposely bathe outside to be seen by David? The narrator does not address this possibility, nor does the narrator seem to care about Bathsheba's motives. The emphasis is on David's initiative in the relationship that follows.⁸ Bathsheba is a passive character, acted upon rather than acting.⁹ The reader is not told whether she comes willingly or is forced. Outside of Bathsheba's mourning for her husband (v. 26) and her son (12:24), nothing is known of her emotions.¹⁰ Bathsheba serves merely as the character David acts on through rape. When she is referred to, it is nearly always by the generic “woman” or “wife” (vv. 2, 3, 5, 11, 26, 27) and as such, related to a male (daughter of Eliam, v. 3; wife of Uriah, vv. 3, 26; David's wife, v. 27).¹¹ Only once is she called “Bathsheba” in the narrative (v. 3). Walter Brueggemann asserts: “She has no existence of her own but is identified by the men to whom she belongs.”¹² In the culture of the ancient Near East, women had few rights and found their protection by being attached to a male. The narrator discloses just the one fact about Bathsheba: she is bathing to ritually cleanse herself after her monthly period (v. 4).¹³ Significantly, the readers are told this fact after intercourse has occurred, so they are not surprised by the message that Bathsheba sends David: “I am pregnant” (v. 5).

The barebones style picks up again near the end of the story as it concerns Bathsheba: she mourns; David sends for her, brings her to the palace, and marries her; she bears him a son (vv. 26–27a). The conclusion ties together David's sexual wrongdoing and his murder of Uriah.¹⁴

What becomes clear is that 2 Samuel 11:1–27 is a study in David's character.¹⁵ From the start, the narrator emphasizes that something is wrong with David: he has not gone out to war. The narrator then follows David through sexual sin, attempted cover-up, and murder. By the end of the story, the reader finds a David who is not concerned about the death of a loyal soldier; ironically, it is a death ordered by him. The narrator follows David throughout the story, inviting the reader to observe him as he becomes increasingly enveloped in his wrongdoing.

Within this story arc, Bathsheba is—surprisingly for some of us!—given the space occupied by a minor character. Through her, the narrator conveys David's initial sin. Little is known about her, outside of her beauty, lineage, and pregnancy. The other two times she is mentioned are in the succession from David to Solomon as

a go-between—between Nathan and David (1 Kgs 1:11–31) and between Adonijah and Solomon (1 Kgs 2:13–25). In each of the narratives in Samuel and Kings, Bathsheba is acted upon. She does not initiate action. So peripheral is she to the narrator's focus that she is not even mentioned in the Chronicler's accounts of David.

What further complicates our reading of Bathsheba is the use of narrative gaps throughout 2 Sam 11.¹⁶ The reader's attention is caught by what is *not* communicated.¹⁷ In vv. 2–5, the reader is not given information on questions such as: “Why does David stay home?” and “Why does Bathsheba come (immediately) when David sends for her?”

Interpretations of Bathsheba

In attempts to deal with this ambiguity in the narrative, Bathsheba's role is expanded in later interpretations. In her book, *Bathsheba Survives*, Sara M. Koenig tracks and examines the reception history of the David and Bathsheba story from rabbinic writings through modern times.¹⁸ She says about Bathsheba:

She has not only been characterized on the spectrum from helpless victim to unscrupulous seductress; but also, she has filled that spectrum. It might seem that the sparse profile of biblical Bathsheba stands in stark contrast to the varying interpretations of her through the centuries, but they are in fact, related. Bathsheba has invited a succession of gap-filling that has gone on through the centuries. Tracing the history of Bathsheba's reception through different eras illustrates how enigmatic and multidimensional the varying views of her have been over time.¹⁹

While early interpretations of Bathsheba tended to be more benevolent to her, later interpretations have not been. Koenig notes:

The more negative interpretations of her as a seductress begin in the medieval period, and continue into the contemporary world. During the enlightenment the benign shifts to a both/and approach, where interpreters maintain that David is in the wrong, but also do not remove blame from Bathsheba for their sexual liaison.²⁰

During the Enlightenment and in modern times, Bathsheba becomes a full-blown co-conspirator with David and is guilty of both adultery and murder. Perhaps this is best portrayed in the 1951 movie “David and Bathsheba,” starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward. David and Bathsheba are portrayed as developing a love interest even before the 2 Samuel 11 narrative. Even in the more subtle references to Bathsheba's role in the story, Koenig comments how they “indicate that a woman is at fault for what a man has chosen to do, taking away his responsibility, and often blaming the victim.”²¹ These interpretations, again, seek to save David by blaming Bathsheba.

Beyond Bathsheba

The story of Bathsheba is not unique in the OT. There is a culture of the abuse of women throughout it. Stories of rape (Gen 34; Judg 19; 2 Sam 13) and kidnapping (Judg 21) are recorded. Also, prophetic literature uses the image of sexual violence as a metaphor for

God's judgment (Hos 1–3; Ezek 16, 23; Nah 3:4–7).²² Proverbs often portrays the woman as a danger to young men, seeking to lead them astray (Prov 6:20–35, 7:1–27, 30:20).

How are we to understand these narratives of sexual assault? A male dominated society permeates the OT as well as the ancient Near East. These texts are to be read as descriptive of the culture of that time. They are not meant to be prescriptive—for that historical period or for ours. A woman had little protection outside of being attached to a man, either as a wife or a concubine. As a result, she was subordinate to a male, often her father or her husband. The sexuality of the woman was guarded primarily to protect the man's progeny. On the other hand, in this culture, the man seems to have been afforded more sexual freedom.

While a woman could be sentenced to death for both fornication and adultery, extramarital sex for men was tolerated, so long as another man's rights were not infringed. The male desire for more than one sexual partner was catered for not just by the concession of polygamous marriage, but also through concubinage and prostitution.²³

So, while Bathsheba may be interrogated for her actions and inactions, David may be excused by saying “boys will be boys” or “Bathsheba should have guarded herself from tempting David.” This is part of a rape culture that is “perpetuated through use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety.”²⁴

Victim Blaming and the Church Today

In modern times, Bathsheba could be a part of the #MeToo movement, having been taken advantage of by a man in authority. Diane Langberg, in her book *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, goes as far as calling David “Bathsheba's Harvey Weinstein.”²⁵ Her study deals with abuse within the church. The response is often to cover up the abuse and protect the abusers. Langberg notes that they are “preserving an institution rather than the humans meant to flourish in it.”²⁶

Likewise, in the process of protecting the institution, the victim is often blamed:

What did you do to encourage it?
What were you wearing?
Why did you go to . . . ?
Why didn't you yell or try to get away?

The inclination to blame the victim for what she did or did not do is, in part, due to people wanting to assure themselves that if they follow the rules, sexual assault will not happen to them. As one writer puts it, “It is easier to blame someone for their harm than it is to accept that it could *happen to anyone*.”²⁷ For the victim, however, such shaming only increases self-doubt and self-incrimination.

Kristen Kobes Du Mez speaks to how such a culture develops in the church in her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. Emphasizing the male role as head of the house and head of the church, she states that

rugged, outspoken male leadership is often held up as the ideal in the church: “The evangelical cult of masculinity links patriarchal power to masculine aggression and sexual desire; its counterpoint is a submissive femininity.”²⁸ While men are praised for their testosterone-driven leadership, women are to avoid tempting men outside of marriage with immodesty or by seeming to be available.

Caught up in an authoritarian setting where a premium is placed on obeying men, women and children find themselves in situations ripe for the abuse of power. Yet victims are often held culpable for acts perpetrated against them; in many cases, female victims, even young girls, are accused of seducing their abusers or inviting abuse by failing to exhibit proper femininity. While men (and women) invested in defending patriarchal authority frequently come to the defense of perpetrators, victims are often pressured to forgive abusers and avoid involving law enforcement.²⁹

Viewing the David and Bathsheba narrative in such a light, Bathsheba is at fault because she does not protect David from being tempted by her beauty.

In May 2022, the Southern Baptist Convention’s (SBC) Executive Committee released a third-party report on sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches. For years the Convention had avoided such a study, saying it did not have authority over local churches. Yet, in cases of sexual abuse, certain Convention leaders sought to blame the victims. One of the leaders of the cover-up, David August “Auggie” Boto, said: “The whole thing should be seen for what it is—a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not Gospel. It is a misdirection play.”³⁰ Victims who came forward to speak up were often blamed and portrayed in unflattering ways in the Convention-owned Baptist Press and other SBC social media.³¹ A 205-page list of abusers was also released in May, with 703 names, 409 of which have served at SBC-affiliated churches.³²

In an earlier article in the *Houston Chronicle* exposing sexual abuse in SBC churches, one writer commented: “Yet the SBC had a record of promptly ‘removing from fellowship’ churches that hired female pastors, even as it appeared unable to discipline those that hired known sex offenders.”³³ This brings us to another aspect of abuse within the church: even women who serve in ministerial roles are not immune from unwanted advances and sexual harassment by men in the church. Anecdotally, it has been explained to me that a woman cannot be in the pulpit because her breasts may distract the men in the congregation. So once again, the woman is held responsible for a man’s ability—or better, inability—to control his own libido. Katie Lauve-Moon, in her book *Preacher Woman: A Critical Look at Sexism Without Sexists*, writes that women in ministry are often held to higher accountability than their male counterparts: called to be feminine but not too feminine, masculine but not too masculine.³⁴ She remarks, “Women pastors’ bodies and expressions of femininity were also treated as the object of male congregants’ attraction. In contrast to women congregants who expected the women pastors to not sexualize their bodies, men in the congregation did the exact opposite.”³⁵ Women ministers are expected to change, but the congregations’ attitudes toward women are not supposed to change.³⁶ Women ministers are blamed in order to save the institution. So, I come back to the question I started with: *Why is there a need to save David at the cost of blaming Bathsheba?*

Conclusion

In 1952, Kitty Wells sang J. D. Miller’s “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” which deals with the result of abusive relationships. The second verse puts it this way:

It’s a shame that all the blame is on us women;
It’s not true that only you men feel the same.
From the start most every heart that’s ever broken
Was because there always was a man to blame.

While the examples I have used reflect the abuse in conservative churches steeped in patriarchy, such abuse occurs in moderate and progressive churches as well. When such abuse is exposed, the response of many has been to save the institution at the cost of the victim. Actions taken in the pulpit and by the church need to emphasize male responsibility in sexual abuse and raise the voices of the abused, who often are blamed. While the OT often describes women as second-class citizens, treated as property with little to no rights, this is descriptive of the culture of the ancient Near East and should not be emulated in the church today. Sermons need to be preached about the lack of rights these women had, including Bathsheba. Even more importantly, the church should be a place in which victims feel free to share about their abuse without blame. The abused need to be more important than the institutions.

Notes

An earlier form of this article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 2022, Denver, CO.

1. The World Health Organization describes sexual assault as “actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.” See: “Sexual Exploitation and Abuse” pamphlet at <https://who.int>.
2. Cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981) 76. Alter states that 2 Sam 10 provides the context for the “king’s moral biography,” including its “political and moral ramifications.”
3. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 1985) 191–94. The king is placed in ironic contrast with the others by the narrator’s use of ambiguity, by not telling the reader why the king is not with the others.
4. Herschel M. Levine, “Irony and Morality in Bathsheba’s Tragedy,” *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* 32 (1975) 70. Cf. Gale A. Yee, “‘Fraught with Background’: Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11,” *Int* 42 (1988). Yee, 242–43, includes three other reasons, besides irony, for David not going. First, the death of David could be demoralizing to the army (cf. 2 Sam 21:15–17). Second, siege work was too tedious to involve the king. Finally, David could have been too old.
5. The conclusion is also a transition to 2 Sam 12, and the first phrase in 12:1 is: “The LORD sent Nathan to David.”
6. Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12* (JSOT, 1990) 86. Bailey believes the verb “to send” with Bathsheba as the subject is a sign of authority.
7. Kyle P. McCarter, *II Samuel*, AB 9 (Doubleday, 1980) 289. Cf. Hirsch H. Cohen, “David and Bathsheba,” *JBR* 33 (1965) 142–48. Cohen does a psychological profile of David in 2 Sam 11–12. David may have been suffering from “retirement neurosis” in 2 Sam 11. Having reached the prime of his career, he might have needed something to reassure his masculinity.

8. The story is not concerned with Bathsheba's guilt or innocence but with David's guilt. Cf. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 288.
9. Cf. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Almond, 1983) 27: "She is not even a minor character, but simply a part of the plot." See also, R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative* (Alec R. Allenson, 1968). Whybray, 40, notes that Bathsheba is used throughout the succession narratives: by David (2 Sam 11), by Nathan (1 Kgs 1), and by Adonijah (1 Kgs 2).
10. Joyce Hollyday, "Voices Out of the Silence," *Sojourners* 15 (1986). Hollyday does not see 2 Sam 11–12 as David's "Great Sin" but as Bathsheba's "Great Loss" (21).
11. Bathsheba was not merely a beautiful woman (v. 2); she is also the wife of Uriah (v. 3) and thus not available to David. Still, she becomes David's wife in the end (v. 27). Cf. Yee, "Fraught with Background," 245.
12. Even in Matt 1:6 she is referred to as "the wife of Uriah." Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (John Knox, 1990) 273–78.
13. Cf. Lev 15:25–30. This would be approximately fourteen days after the start of her menstrual cycle.
14. George P. Ridout, "Prose Compositional Techniques in the Succession Narrative (2 Sam. 7, 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2)," (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1971) 67.
15. Levine, "Irony and Morality," 74.
16. Yee, "Fraught with Background," 240. Yee defines narrative ambiguity as "a deliberate stylistic device which engages the reader, seizes the imaginative processes, and creates an interaction with the characters of the story that a more explicitly detailed account does not allow to happen." See also Levine, "Irony and Morality," 69. See also Sternberg, *Poetics*, 186–229. In his chapter "Gaps, Ambiguity, and the Reading Process," Sternberg uses 2 Sam 11 as the major pericope for the study of ambiguity. The narrator is "omniscient but far from omniscient" (190).
17. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 191.
18. Sara M. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018).
19. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 1–2.
20. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 8–9.
21. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 52.
22. Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Fortress, 2012) 136–39. Seibert provides several examples of these metaphors.
23. Niamh M. Middleton, "The Portrayal of Women in the Old Testament," ch. 2 in *Jesus and Women: Beyond Feminism* (Lutterworth, 2021) 23.
24. "Rape Culture, Victim Blaming, and the Facts," Southern Connecticut State University, <https://inside.southernct.edu/sexual-misconduct/facts>.
25. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Brazos, 2020) 98.
26. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 78. See also Mark Wingfield, "Prominent Arkansas SBC Church Accused of Hiding Knowledge of Former Staff Member's Abuse of Child," *Baptist Global News* (Dec 12, 2023). The story shares how the church attempted to conceal and deal internally with accusations of sexual abuse in the church. The article also shows how this church's actions are similar to other instances of cover-up of sexual abuse in other churches and institutions.
27. James Whiting, "How Denial and Victim Blaming Keep Sexual Assault Perpetrators, Communities, and Even Victims Get Caught in the Webs that Hide Abuse," *Psychology Today* (Jan 16, 2019).
28. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2020) 277.
29. Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 277.
30. Andrew Wolfson, "Report: Southern Baptist Executive Smeared Louisville Victim Advocate of 'Satanic Scheme,'" *Louisville Courier-Journal* (May 24, 2022).
31. The SBC recently resolved a court case involving sexual abuse of young men by Paul Pressler, an architect in the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC. Among documents disclosed in the case, it was discovered that the "SBC defense philosophy [was] of delay, filing a multitude of motions and blaming the victim." Mark Wingfield, "Law Firm Representing Rollins against Pressler Comments on the Abuse Case," *Baptist News Global* (Jan 10, 2024).
32. Wolfson, "Report."
33. "Abuse of Faith," *Houston Chronicle*, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/abuse-of-faith/database/>.
34. Katie Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman: A Critical Look at Sexism Without Sexists* (Oxford University Press, 2021).
35. Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman*, 109.
36. Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman*, 108.



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The Image of God as a Statement of Mutuality: An Illustration

Aaron K. Husband

The image of God is only mentioned explicitly in three passages in the OT (Gen 1:26–28, 5:1–3, 9:6), yet it is likely the most foundational doctrine related to human identity in the entire Bible. As such, there is a vast bibliography available on its meaning. This essay will contribute to this literature by exploring an analogous experience my wife and I had that illustrates the image's mutualist implications.

The most probable understanding of the *imago Dei* ("image of God") is the royal-functional view, a view well defended by J. Richard Middleton,¹ who notes that it boasts a "virtual consensus" among OT scholars, though it is "quite distinct from the typical proposals found among systematic theologians."² This view typically sees the image of God to mean that embodied humanity is responsible for administering the earthly realm as the Creator's authorized representatives with delegated royal power.³ I shall be using this view in a broad sense to include those understandings that either state the image of God is this representative royal function or that it *entails* or *ought to entail* this function. Regardless, the image of God necessitates the radical claim that all of humanity are kings under God, God's royal representatives to the world and each other. It therefore implies—even more, is a direct statement of—true biblical equality between the sexes: a mutualist position over and above a hierarchicalist view.⁴ After a brief review of the merits of the royal-functional view, I will use a recent shared experience with my wife to demonstrate how the image of God concept makes a mutualist statement.

The Royal-Functional View

It is sometimes asserted that the meaning of the phrase "image of God" is left undefined in Genesis 1.⁵ This may be strictly true, but context shapes meaning, and there are enough textual and cultural background clues for us to arrive at a reasonable inference.

Genesis 1:26–28 clearly associates the image of God with ruling, introducing the image (and likeness) idea (1:26) and immediately linking it with rulership. In the next verse (1:27), the famous triad marking male and female as made in God's image is followed by God's commissioning of humanity to rule. D. J. A. Clines says that the "dominion is so immediate and necessary a consequence of the image, it loses the character of a mere derivative of the image and virtually becomes a constitutive part of the image itself. From the exegetical point of view this opinion is completely justifiable."⁶ This is reinforced by Psalm 8 setting out humanity's elevated status as ruler over God's works (cf. Rev 22:5) with implications for humanity's likeness to God.⁷

Ancient Near Eastern background information confirms the image's strong royal and authoritative significance.⁸ For example, Pharaoh Amenhotep III is described by the god Amon-Re thus: "You are my beloved son, who came forth from my members, my image, whom I have put on earth. I have given to you to rule the earth in peace." Note the connection between imaging and ruling. Similarly, the Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I, in a context describing the king's divine origin and status, is described as "the eternal image of Enlil, attentive to the people's voice, the counsel of the land." Likewise, a letter to a seventh-

century Assyrian king calls the king the image of the chief god Marduk, noting the king's word has godlike finality, suggesting the image expresses a functional similarity between the king and the god, whereby the king speaks with the god's authority. Clines provides a good synopsis:

The image of God, when applied to a living person, is understood almost exclusively of the king. As in Mesopotamia, so also in Egypt, if a god is spoken of at all as being imaged in living human form, there is only one person who can be regarded as the image of the god, namely the king. He is already believed on other grounds to be closest of all men to the realm of the divine, if he is not already, as in Egypt, a member of it.⁹

He adds, "It is the king who is the image of God; in virtue of his being the image of God he is ruler. Likewise in Genesis 1 the concept of man's [that is, humanity's] rulership is connected in the strongest possible way with the idea of the image."¹⁰ In short, the image of God presents humanity with a royal status and a royal task, both delegated from God. How does the royal-functional view express itself in marriage and ministry? Consider the following example.

An Illustration: Co-Directing

My wife and I serve together as campus ministers for a Canadian para-church organization. One year, we were asked by our supervisor to direct our annual Scripture Camp. There, college and university students communally and inductively study Scripture in-depth for a week. We were both directors as individuals—we were not half-directors—as well as directors in a communal or corporate sense, for there was only one conference with one directorial role we fulfilled together. We never once wondered whether we had equal authority relative to one another, nor did we need to make a reasonable inference toward that end. Rather, the very fact that we were sharing the highest authority for the conference was in itself a statement of our mutual authority relative to one another. One can debate endlessly whether directing is an authoritative status or identity that implies a task or a task that implies an authoritative status or identity, comparable to debates about the *imago Dei*. Regardless, being made co-directors was, by definition, a statement that we had mutual authority relative to one another and, individually and together, we carried the highest authority relative to Scripture Camp.

Likewise, God has directly and explicitly made male and female co-kings, the co-rulers of the earth under God, representing him to the world and each other. Note that I say *kings* rather than *kings and queens*, as queens are often understood to have lower authority than kings. Authoritatively, all are kings, presented with the same rank: the image of God. We are all co-regents, assigned by God, with mutuality, to share the highest authority on earth under God.

Possible Rebuttals

Rebuttals could be developed by arguing: (1) the authority from the image is purely individualistic; (2) the authority is purely collective;

(3) the equal authority has a limited scope; (4) hierarchicalism is a secondary authority, as defined below, independent of 1–3; or (5) the image carries no authoritative implications. As 5 is simply a challenge to the consensus view of the image that I have briefly defended above, further rebuttal will not be offered.

Is the Authority Purely Individualistic?

A key reason our co-directorship implied equal authority was that Scripture Camp was a single, collective project. If we were only directors individually—that is, we were directing separate conferences—nothing could be ascertained about my wife’s authority relative to mine.

Likewise, could the authority from the image be only individualistic, saying nothing of the authority between men and women? There are numerous problems with the image being purely individualistic. First, it lacks exegetical support. Genesis 1:27 states:

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (NIV)

The “them” in the second line is singular in Hebrew, referring to mankind or, to translate woodenly, “the humanity.” Thus, the text makes explicit that the image constitutes a collective reality.¹¹ Humanity, as a singular collective, is created in the image of God.

Further support comes from the explicit tasks God gives humanity: to rule, subdue, and fill the land (Gen 1:28). These royal tasks are not only calls for humanity to care for creation; they are the high-level summary of the *entire* human vocation. Both Gen 1:26 and 28 mention every sphere from Genesis 1 (skies, land, and water) and all the creatures within these spheres (fish, birds, and every living creature on the ground), implying a task with total scope.¹² As humanity was to both rule God’s earthly realm alongside working and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15), this task likely implies spreading the boundaries of the garden, the hotspot of God’s presence, to all the earth.¹³ This royal task cannot be done individually. Everyone can only be in one place at a time. As such, humanity must collectively be commissioned to a single, communal task.

Furthermore, if the tasks God gave were individual, we would all need to jockey to rule the whole earth to fulfill our tasks. We would find ourselves needing to step on each other to be the true royalty of the earth. By individualizing our commission, we describe precisely the sinful human condition and, ultimately, what is now wrong with the world.

Even if we take the image to be strictly individualistic, it is still *by the image* that humanity is given a collective authority over the earth, shown in the tasks we were assigned. As such, the equal authority inherited from the image would still have a collective bearing.

Humanity was to communally work together to spread God’s good garden-presence to the ends of the earth. Genesis 1 points towards the image of God being a collective reality for humans, just as co-directing Scripture Camp was collective.

Is the Authority Purely Collective?

Conversely, one could argue humanity’s authority from the image is only collective. If so, the image of God is less like co-directing

and more like a company being given authority over a project. A company is given the authority as a single, collective entity, but this says nothing about leadership hierarchies within the company itself. Given the royal-functional view, this would plausibly imply that no individual is made in the image of God.

Surprisingly, virtually nothing in Genesis 1 overtly presents individuals as God’s image. However, the breaking down of humanity into male and female components hints at this reality. This is reiterated in Genesis 5:1–2: “When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female . . .” (NIV). Genesis 5:3 then follows up with a description of Seth, an individual, as being in Adam’s “own likeness, in his own image” (NIV). This implies that Seth inherits the same image as Adam, continuing the royal line. That every individual is made in the image of God is then confirmed in Genesis 9:6, as murder is prohibited because of the image. Every homicide is a regicide.

With Scripture Camp, when my wife and I were assigned to direct as a collective, internal leadership was not left undefined. We were asked to co-direct a single conference, making us both individually and collectively directors. Likewise, the royal authority granted equally to both women and men applies both individually and collectively, marking each with the same inherent authority relative to one another.

Does the Authority Have a Limited Scope?

Though my wife and I had the same authority relative to one another for Scripture Camp, this said nothing about our authority relative to one another outside of Scripture Camp. Could the equal authority of the sexes found in Genesis 1 be limited in scope?

There are three problems with this position. First, as we have seen, humanity’s dominion is the high-level summary of the *entire* human task. The scope is total. Second, humanity’s dominion is inseparable from the image. To limit the scope of equal rulership necessitates that the image of God be limited in scope. The authority of kings is only limited by the places they are not kings. It is preposterous to think there are spheres of life where someone is not made in the image of God. Third, part of the job of co-directing was directing alongside an authoritative equal; it was not a separate job! Likewise, it is absurd to assert that inter-human relationships are outside the scope of imaging.

Though my wife and I co-directing did not speak to our authority relative to one another in contexts outside of Scripture Camp, if there were no contexts outside of Scripture Camp, the inherent, equal authority between us would be universal in scope. Likewise, there is no scope of life where mutual, equal authority from the image does not apply. Still, justified authority differences do exist throughout life, bringing us to our final potential objection.

Is Hierarchicalism a Secondary Authority?

In nearly every sphere of our lives, humans interact amongst authority differences. When we stop at a traffic light, we are submitting to government authorities. At work, we have bosses. As children, we are under our parents. In informal group settings, often leaders emerge whom others follow. Indeed, society would fall apart if all authority differences were inappropriate. Still, the royal-functional view not only explicitly identifies men and women as having equal authority relative to one another, but implies *all*

people have equal authority relative to one another. How can this be compatible with good, everyday authority differences?

Hierarchicalists could argue that, though they accept the OT scholarly consensus on the image of God while recognizing the image's authority as collective, individual, and unlimited in scope, male leadership in church or marriage does not overstep the image of God in women. Rather, it is appropriate like other everyday hierarchies, such as governmental authority or workplace hierarchies. To explore this possibility, a brief understanding of different types of authority will be beneficial.

1. Basic and Secondary Authority

It is plausible that some authorities are more foundational than others. A more foundational authority could be called a more basic or higher-order authority, while a less foundational authority could be called a lower-order or secondary authority. Secondary authorities are somewhat nominal relative to more basic authorities. They are rooted, not in someone's true authority *per se*—that is, their basic authority—but in the requirements of the task.

For example, my wife and I divided authority over different subtasks. Even when we met with our planning team, we took turns leading the meetings and were thus regularly under each other's authority, despite our equal directorial authority. This was teamwork, not usurpation. The subtasks were secondary authority relative to our basic directorial authority. But even our directorial authority was secondary to more basic, higher-order authoritative equality. Those we directed were authoritatively equal to us outside the context of Scripture Camp. This chain of more basic authoritative statuses continues upward right to our ultimate, most basic royal statuses from God's image.

Differentiating between basic and secondary authority reasonably harmonizes authority differences experienced in the day-to-day routines by people all made in the image of God. A just authority difference is one where there is not an authoritative *status* difference *per se*, but a *functional* authority difference entered—whether tacitly or formally—by authoritative equals.

As such, it is plausible that a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for an authority difference to be justified is that higher-order authoritative equalities are not being contradicted or nominalized, the highest being the image of God. Nominalizing a higher-order authority does not necessitate directly challenging that authority, only acting in such a way as to imply that authoritative equality is not ultimately true. For instance, I could have made unilateral directorial decisions, implying my wife was not truly my co-director.

For hierarchicalism to be true, therefore, it must be able to coherently posit that male authority is a secondary authority that upholds the basic authoritative equality between men and women.

2. Is Male Authority Secondary?

There are several views under the banner of hierarchicalism. One hierarchicalist view is analogous to relegating my wife to an assistant camp director, while I retain the role of camp director. Given the royal-functional understanding of both male and female humans created in the image of God, this view is clearly untenable.

Another hierarchicalist view is analogous to our supervisor assigning me the leadership of a particular directorial subtask, like the planning meetings. It would certainly be within our supervisor's rights to assign me this subtask. Even though I would have authority over my wife in these meetings, this would not render my wife's directorship nominal. Where hierarchicalists err, however, is that they do not recognize that our supervisor would never create assignments inconsistent with the status my wife and I share as co-directors. Our supervisor would neither place an *arbitrary* restriction on my wife leading planning meetings nor would she appeal to my wife *having a lower authoritative status* than me to justify the restriction. She could, of course, assign that directorial subtask to her, rather than to me.

A minority of hierarchicalists claim women are *inherently* less capable leaders than men. Even if we were to grant women are *generally* less able to lead than men, there are many women qualified and gifted in leadership. This group of hierarchicalists would not permit them to lead either, and the reason would be their sex. Imagine a scenario where women, who are generally shorter than men, are barred from a certain activity because women generally do not meet a set height requirement. Now imagine a tall woman who does meet the height requirement. If height was truly the reason, she would not be barred from the activity. If she is barred despite meeting the requirement, it would prove that the height requirement is only a pretence to achieve the intended goal of barring all women from that activity. Unless there are *no* good female leaders, it is simply a façade to argue for hierarchicalism on the basis of men generally making better leaders.

God gave women dominion over all the earth (Gen 1:26–28), implying their leadership capacity. There is no sexual discrimination with the Spirit's gifts, including leadership and teaching (1 Cor 12, Rom 12:3–8, 1 Pet 4:10–11). God even pictures *his own wisdom* as a woman whose authority and teaching we must come under (Prov 1:20–33, 3:13–20, 8:1–36, 9:1–12). Further, if women are less capable leaders than men, women should not hold *any* authority, let alone teach children! Yet, some of the best leaders—and Bible teachers—I know are women. Furthermore, marriages where mutualism is practiced are happier, less likely to result in abuse, and massively less likely to end in divorce.¹⁴ It is difficult to imagine why mutualist marriages are healthier if women lack the capabilities necessary for mutual leadership in marriage.

Other hierarchicalists might argue that, while women are as capable as men in leadership, there is an overriding transcultural rationale for male leadership.¹⁵ However, if this rationale is truly transcultural, it must be independent of the cultural or situational context. We know that context can justify authority differences. For example, it would be transculturally wrong to set ethnic restrictions on church leadership. However, given the injustices against indigenous peoples due to colonization, it could be wise and right in some indigenous communities to limit church leadership to indigenous people. This would be not only for insider cultural competency but also to counteract claims that Christianity is a “white man's religion” or is the fuel for genocide and conquest. This is, however, a purely context-driven, temporary restriction, wise and right for the sake of Christian witness (cf. 1 Cor 9, Phil 2:1–11). This example shows a restriction that is *dependent* on an intrinsic characteristic, namely, ethnicity. Yet, this restriction could be justified because the rationale for the restriction is not *rooted* in the status of one ethnicity over another. Rather, it is rooted in

the necessities of the context. However, since hierarchicalists claim male leadership is transcultural, they cannot appeal to context to argue for exclusively male leadership.

If the reasoning behind the restriction on women in leadership is neither functionally helpful nor contextually justified, it must be rooted in women *per feminitatem*. Is this not the implication of arguing—incorrectly—for male leadership from, say, created order, or other arguments derived from the stories in Genesis 1–3 that lay the biblical foundation for human identity? To root women’s authority restrictions in femaleness is to root those limitations in the image of God. The image of God, and therefore the authority it implies, is *explicitly* associated with maleness and femaleness (Gen 1:27). Women share with men—equally—the highest authority on earth under God. To argue that women cannot operate in certain spheres of authority simply because they are women is like saying my wife, as a *director*, could not have *director-level authority* over certain Scripture Camp tasks. Even if these tasks were subtasks, it would be logically untenable since the rationale is at odds with her directorial authority. Supposedly biblical, sex-based authoritative inequalities root the inequality—whether hierarchicalists admit it or not—in the very concept (that is, one’s sex) explicitly identified with authoritative equality (Gen 1:27)!

There are possible counterexamples of authoritative inequality rooted in intrinsic characteristics that are comparable to sex, such as the case of children or the case of Levites. However, each can be conceptualized consistently with the *imago Dei* as espoused here. Parental authority diminishes over time. (Children can even have authority over their parents as they care for them in their old age.) So, parental authority cannot be rooted in the parent-offspring relationship *per se*. Instead, parental authority is rooted in children’s need to learn *how* to rule (Gen 1:28). To be a child is to be a king undertaking a royal apprenticeship under experienced kings. It is as if my wife had much more experience at directing than me, and so our co-directorship would have been temporarily one-sided until I was up to speed. Few would say this would infringe my directorial status.

As for Levites, they were chosen by God to replace the firstborn offering, serving in the Tabernacle (Num 3:11–13, cf. Num 1:47–53, Exod 12, 13:1). Among the Levites, only Aaron’s descendants could be priests (Exod 28:1). No explicit explanation is provided for these unique responsibilities. They are plausibly not authoritative roles *per se*, but only representative roles. But even if authority is intended, that authority is only functionally *dependent* on priestly lineage, not *rooted* in it. Throughout the OT story, the Levites’ distinctive—even if imperfect—zeal is regularly highlighted, particularly at Dinah’s rape (Gen 34) and the incident of the Golden Calf (Exod 32). It is plausible that one reason God chose the Levites was as a symbol of his zeal for justice and holiness, a critical component within the broader imagery of the tabernacle. This symbolism could not be borne by any other tribe because it was intricately connected to the Levites’ zealous actions. Through their symbolic role, God redirected the Levites’ zeal for justice into channels that best served the nation. It would be as if our supervisor requested that my wife, having some publicly significant events in her past, lead a certain subtask because of its relatedness to the past events and the significance it would add for both her and the camp students. As with parental authority, few would argue this would dishonour our identical authoritative standing.

The same cannot be said of hierarchicalism. Hierarchicalism affronts the image of God in women. To affront the image of God in women is to affront their value and equality. As Rebecca Groothuis has said, “Advocates of male authority seem to have difficulty acknowledging that the *reason* for the difference and the *nature* of the function determine whether such a difference can logically coexist with equality of being. As it happens, the reason for and nature of woman’s subordination logically excludes woman’s equality.”¹⁶

Conclusion

The image of God is the foundational human doctrine, setting guardrails for interpretations of later texts. Through the concept of *imago Dei*, Genesis 1 asserts mutuality. Indeed, the command to rule as God’s images, like co-directing, was a command to share equal authority. The hierarchicalist position is like saying I ought to have had authority over my wife even as we explicitly had equal authority as co-directors. In asserting that women ought not to image God alongside men, hierarchicalists presume that women are not truly made in the image of God. Hierarchicalism, therefore, should be rejected.

Notes

1. See J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos, 2005).
2. Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 25. The disconnect between systematic theologians and biblical scholars is likely the reason the image is often left underdeveloped in mutualism-hierarchicalism debates.
3. See J. Richard Middleton, “Image of God,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Samuel E. Ballentine et al. (Oxford University, 2015) 516–23.
4. The terms “hierarchicalist” and “mutualist” are used to describe “complementarian” and “egalitarian” more accurately. See Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women* (IVP Academic, 2019) 6–7.
5. E.g., William Lane Craig, *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*, Kindle ed. (Eerdmans, 2021) 528.
6. D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynBul* 19/1 (May 1968) 96.
7. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 57–58.
8. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 109–18.
9. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 92. The one exception is a priest. See Clines “The Image of God in Man,” 93. A priestly (mediatory) role is implied by the image. See Middleton, “Image of God,” 516–23. Temples are also closely associated. *Tselem*, Hebrew for “image,” is a common term for an idol (e.g., 2 Kgs 11:18, Ezek 7:20). Humanity is like the idol statue in God’s creation-temple, representing him and his rule to the world. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 45–48, 77–90, 104–8.
10. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 95.
11. Alternative views of the image struggle to account for this.
12. Except the chaotic sea monsters (*tanninim*, Gen 1:21).
13. See Gregory K. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48/1 (March 2005) 5–31.
14. See Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky, *The Great Sex Rescue*, Kindle ed. (Baker, 2021) 31–35.
15. Symbolic functions, such as imaging Christ and the church or the Trinity through hierarchy, are exegetically and theologically unsound. Additionally, the male being the leader on these views would be arbitrary. Space limitations prevent an exploration of these views.
16. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “‘Equal in Being, Unequal in Role’: Challenging the Logic of Women’s Subordination,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021) 408. Emphasis original.



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Humility: The Path for Male-Female Relationships

John McKinley

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 sorrier 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

The New Testament 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.

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

This is an edited version of an article presented in November 2023 at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Antonio, TX.

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 reassure 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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Book Review:

The Struggle to Stay: Why Single Evangelical Women Are Leaving the Church

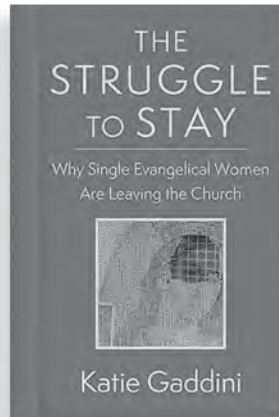
By Katie Gaddini (Columbia University Press, August 1, 2023)

Reviewed by Emma Feyas

Combining deep ethnographic research with personal experience and cultural realities, Katie Gaddini tells relatable stories and asks difficult questions. Her research seeks to understand not merely why single women might leave the evangelical church, but what exactly makes them stay. Walking alongside four women—Carys, Jo, Maddie, and Liv—who move from deep commitment and service to evangelical congregations to “Christian-ish,” Gaddini’s narration provides an empathetic window into the reality of evangelical women, especially single evangelical feminist women.

Gaddini’s objective to “expose the costs of being an evangelical woman” is successful in three distinct ways. First, her storytelling ability brings the reader into the excitement, struggle, pain, and hope experienced by women like Carys, Jo, Maddie, and Liv in their respective journeys into, out of, and away from evangelicalism. The majority of the book reads like a novel full of characters who feel familiar. Second, Gaddini interweaves her own story and journey through the research process. She is not merely an observer or a sterile interviewer, but a friend to each woman and a guide to the reader. Finally, her remarkable ability to elevate complexity demonstrates the care and effort she put into the study and the writing of this book. She asks profound and difficult questions that push the boundaries and uncover the complicated realities of being a single woman in evangelicalism.

In between the narratives of each of the women in the study, Gaddini explains evangelical norms and cultures for readers who may be unfamiliar with them. White, mid-upper-class evangelicalism provides the boundaries for the study. Following a preface and explanation of the purpose of the study, she launches into narratives of the women and of her own departure from evangelicalism. In addition to the primary four women, Gaddini conducted over fifty interviews which provide further context, examples, and insight. Present in most of these interviews is each individual’s story of conversion, or testimony. She begins with the positives of these stories, demonstrating how evangelicalism can feel like a kind of homecoming. There is something warm and welcoming about the context and community, such that even she begins to feel an impulse to participate again. Continuing on, she starts to uncover what is so attractive about evangelicalism for single women vis-a-vis evangelical ideals and practices of community. In every interview and interaction, community was a primary reason women stayed in evangelical spaces even when they felt the larger church had no space for them.



Next, Gaddini begins to highlight the tensions and difficulties that come naturally with evangelical teachings about the world and a believer’s relationship to it. Evangelicals define themselves in relationship to other traditions (i.e., how they are different and what they are not). There are organizational lines and boundaries which are drawn by church leaders and individuals in order to distinguish the Christian from the secular. These lines can be written and rewritten through the journey of life and conversion. For women in evangelicalism, especially those who experienced conversion later in life, these boundaries and guidelines are not necessarily experienced as oppressive or difficult. They describe a slow “changing of appetite” where one no longer desires the things of the “world.”

This discussion on tensions and boundaries naturally leads to the topic of sex and purity culture. Gaddini demonstrates a clear frustration among single evangelical women with the nearly non-existent conversation about sex in the church. In these pages, a familiar scene plays out over and over again of the devout young Christian woman convinced of purity and chastity who ultimately struggles with shame and confusion because of a lack of space for vulnerability and genuine education. Additionally, she highlights the imbalanced responsibility for purity that is placed almost entirely on women to remain pure for themselves and for the sake of the men they are around.

Gaddini goes on to describe the “Ideal Woman.” Highlighting social media influencers and pastors’ wives, it is evident that a particular image exists in the white evangelical space. If anyone does not match this thin, fit, perfect archetype, their singleness will continue, and their value will diminish. Not to mention, this image harms even the women who do fit the type. Most apparent here is the path to leadership and influence that exists for those women who are not single and who marry pastors or pursue ministry as a team with their spouses. Continuing to dig into harder and deeper realities around life in the evangelical church for these four women, it is clear that despite obstacles, these women demonstrate the ability to hold their anger and criticism separate from their own faith. This conversation more distinctly highlights the disparities in leadership and representation of women, even among evangelicals who affirm women in ministry. A disconnect between theological stance and ministerial practice is glaringly apparent. In response to the tensions and difficulties around women in leadership, Gaddini also details the perceived threat of feminism that has been continually reprised

throughout history. Every movement gains momentum and a small bit of ground but ultimately dies until the next generation takes up the task of taking the next step forward.

Finally, the unfinished stories of these four women highlight the need for equality for single women in evangelical spaces. The community, vulnerability, and acceptance these women seek may be enough to encourage them to stay, but if there was space and support for them in leadership positions and influence, staying may no longer be a struggle.

Struggle to Stay is an example of empathetic and serious research that highlights the complexity of reality for women in evangelical spaces. Though Gaddini no longer considers herself a member of this community, she approaches her work with respect and curiosity. For single women struggling with the inconsistencies and obstacles in their own evangelical churches, this book may not provide clear-cut answers, but it does open the conversation and put words to frustrating experiences.

Ultimately, this text demonstrates the need even among egalitarian evangelical churches to create space and empower women in their churches generally and leadership especially. As readers encounter familiar stories, they will find words for the reasons they love their churches and evangelical contexts. They will also find powerfully articulated questions that bring forth the inconsistencies and difficulties they may have faced in evangelical contexts. Gaddini's thoughtful and respectful work will meet and empower women within evangelicalism and, for those who have moved on from evangelicalism, its reminders of what they once enjoyed in evangelicalism may provide healing and closure.



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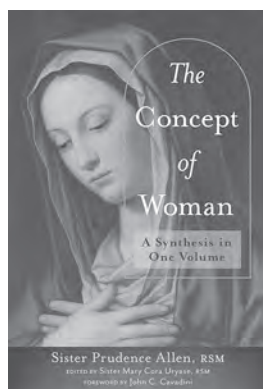
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