

Male and Female, in the image of God

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“When I am back home in Canada I refer to myself as a missionary but when I am in Japan I am pastor.” That statement was by a woman whom I met in the early 1990s. She was a missionary partially supported by the church where I was a pastor. That particular denomination and church did not believe that women should and/or could be pastors. They arrived at and still hold that conclusion based on their understanding of the bible and their conclusions of differences between men and women. She knew that I affirmed women in leadership and pastoral ministry so she felt free to talk openly.

That church and denomination did believe that God called women to be missionaries. In reality her activities and responsibilities were being a pastor to a local congregation in Japan. Her perspective was that it was not worth fighting the battle while back home for a few months. She could use her time and energy for renewal and refreshment then go back to her pastoral ministry. For a while, I felt that I could change some viewpoints in that church but after while I realized there would be no movement not only on this point but others. It was time to use my life in other ways.

Our denomination, the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, have recognized and ordained women as pastors since 1947. In the lobby book rack, I put an account written in 2013 of Muriel Carder who was the first woman ordained. While we ordain women in ministry I think we still need to continue to advocate for the truth of this series theme verse. Galatians 3:28. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; **nor is there male and female**, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

We began the series with the question: **What do we all have in common?** Answer: **God loves us**. One Sunday I asked for your response to how you think people of different life experiences, race and beliefs would feel if they came to Heritage Green. Our model for how we respond to people is first **Loving like God loves** and **Living like Christ lived**. To love like God loves we need to have the same rugged commitment to love.

Today we start on male and female relationships and roles. Our church affirms women in leadership and ordains women but I think there may be some difference either in opinion and practice when we talk about equality. Being in the image of God has implications for our roles in society, work, home, marriage, and the role of single women and single men. We should always be ready to discuss our understanding, ideas, beliefs and be open to sharpening, adjusting or changing. If we are not open to discussion, then our beliefs become stale dogma rather than vibrant living growing faith.

Our culture forces us to examine our beliefs and actions regarding equality, the relationship of faith and science, gender and sexuality. That pressure from culture is good. We don't blindly accept just because it is 2016 and therefore we have to fall in line with the world. But we go back to scripture looking for understanding. With the aid of the best available scholarship we ask; "Have we correctly understood God's word?" Or have we looked through the lens of male dominated culture that filters some of the story and as a result drawn certain conclusions? Being challenged is good for us and helps us answer the questions of people in church and as well as in culture.

As evangelicals we believe the bible is the standard for faith and practice. So if we say that we are going to find what the Bible says about a particular matter you might think that we are all going to arrive at the same conclusion. That should be easy - Just read the English words and there you have it. You hear the phrase: "God said it I believe that settles it." Not so simple. What you are saying is that you believe your interpretation of the bible.

The core of our faith has been the same since the apostles in the first century. We have a firm foundation of what the church has believed in the Nicene Creed. We emphasized that a few weeks ago to remind us that there is a core of orthodoxy and there are other issues which still need interpretation. The mindset we begin with will influence our findings, interpretation and conclusion. How we approach a question determines our outcome. Interpretation requires understanding of; the genre, context, meaning of words in the context, in that particular book of the bible, the bible and the culture of the time. We also need interaction with people who disagree to sharpen our thinking and see our blind spots.

A criticism of the Old Testament and New Testament is that women are not portrayed as equal to men. Both male and female interpreters have concluded God's plan is for men to lead in society, church, home and marriage. These people are known as patriarchal. Gradually in our society there are fewer of these people. Feminists thankfully have initiated change. The F word, feminist, may have negative connotations for some if you are thinking of radical feminists. If we understand feminist to be one who advocates and supports equal rights for all people of all ages and all people, then we can say that we are feminists.

The Old and New Testament is the story of God revealing himself in a particular place and time that was male dominated. It was a patriarchal culture controlled by men for the benefit of men. However, the Bible shows God taking people where they are and moving them toward a preferred future of human flourishing of all people.

We are going to touch down in a few place in the Old and New Testament. Also, I printed a couple of copies of a Jesus Creed blog, Biblical Womanhood, where the author has made a list of the references to women and stories about women in the Bible. That is available in the lobby.

Let's start at the beginning. **God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.** Genesis 1:27. God made both female and male in his image. Both equal. Both are given the same mandate.

We have misunderstood and come to some wrong conclusions regarding the status of men and women at creation. One misunderstanding is about Adam's response after God had formed Eve from Adam's rib. Adam proclaims in Genesis 2:23. **"This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man Genesis 2:23.** A common interpretation of these verses has been that since woman was taken out of man she is second. Rather this verse is an affirmation that she is equal, bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh, she is just like me. The story also distinguishes between humans and animals. The sequence in the story is; Adam had named all the animals but had not found a suitable helper. Part of meaning is that there is a distinction between animal and human species.

That word "helper" has also caused some to think that the role of women is just to help men, to fulfill men, to compliment them in areas where men could use some assistance because they are doing more important work. Without further reflection on how that word "helper" is used in other parts of the Old Testament you can incorrectly interpret the Genesis passage. That term helper is also used to describe how God acts in response to his people in love and power to act sacrificially on their behalf. Certainly we would not see God as inferior to man because he acts in love to help his people. In Ephesians we are directed to mutual submission.

If you think that the bible promotes gender roles that reinforce patriarchy you need to look at the actual stories. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt the Pharaoh ordered the Israeli midwives to kill all the male Israeli babies. The Pharaoh was worried that the Israelite were becoming too powerful. The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." They were not intimidated by the Egyptian king.

Miriam is described as prophet and leader alongside her brother Moses leading God's people from Egypt to the promised land. In settling the promised land there were still elements of a patriarchal culture. The middle eastern culture was for sons to inherit the family land. However, God's instruction was that if there were no sons then daughters inherited the land rather than land passing out of the immediate family to a male cousin or uncle. This was a step forward in that culture.

When you get to the book of Judges you find a pretty rough and tumble crew. Deborah was up to the task as prophet, judge, military leader. It is crazy to say that it is because no man stepped forward or it was a special case. The bible just presents this as normal without any commentary of the circumstances.

If you want to find a charming, demure, gentle woman in the Old Testament don't look to Jael in the book of Judges 4:17-21. Check that story out but it is not a kid's bedtime bible story.

Abigail was a wise politician, and by going counter to her husband's direction she negotiated a peace deal that saved their lives. In a brief mention as a matter of fact statement Sheerah is credited with being a builder of two cities. In the book of Kings, we find five male priests going to Huldah the female prophet to inquire of the Lord.

There are other powerful women such as the Queen of Sheba, Rahab, Ruth, Rebekah, Esther, and the passionate forthright lover in the Song of Songs. On the negative powerful side is Jezebel and Athaliah the schemer. Incidentally there are more instances of men behaving badly in the Bible than women behaving badly.

These stories show that women found their own role beyond gender stereotypes of their culture or what we read back into the bible through our lens.

In the new testament we find Jesus assuming women as equals and treating them that way. During Advent and Christmas, we have talked about Mary mother of Jesus, and the prophet Anna. Women played a prominent role in the group of people who traveled with Jesus. The twelve were all men, and there is important symbolism in the selection of twelve. But it is not clear that inner circle of followers was all male. Women provided support, traveled along with men as part of the inner circle, were at the cross, witnessed the resurrection, and were with the 12 in the upper room before Pentecost, and received the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul is often accused of being a misogynist, - a person who hates, dislikes or mistrusts women. There are a few verses in Paul's letter that have been misinterpreted to give that impression. We will look at one but first let's look at how Paul talked about specific women. Junia is named as outstanding among the apostles. Priscilla and Aquila led a house church. Nympha led a house church in her home. Phoebe, a leader of the church in Cenchreae was a benefactor. Euodia and Syntyche, two women, contended at Paul's side for the cause of the gospel.

You will still hear, some people both men and women yes but there are other verses that teach men are to be the leaders in the marriage, home and church. You would be hard pressed to find any verses in the bible that clearly said men were to be the head of the wife, head of the home and head of the church. We won't settle all the questions this morning or be able to deal with all the interpretations. We are starting the conversation. Remember we all believe the essentials of orthodoxy and continue to work out our faith together.

Part of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthian church has a vexing passage. First Corinthians 11:3-5 says; "I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved."

These verses have been analyzed dissected and one word has had particular focus. What did Paul mean by the Greek word that he used that we have translated here as head? Did that word mean: source, authority, head covering, or hair style?

People have buttressed a theology of male leadership from these verses and mainly from the Greek word “kephale” which we translate “head.” Some understand it as source and others mean as authority. Allan Johnson published a paper comparing the many well researched differing viewpoints how that Greek word “kephale” was used in the first century Mediterranean world. And there is no definitive answer.

I think that Lucy Peppiat who teaches in the U.K. gives a very viable option. Other interpreters acknowledge that early in 1 Corinthians it is clear that Paul is answering some questions put to him by the Corinthians. Peppiat proposes that Paul is refuting the claims of some overbearing men in Corinth who have worked out a theology of male headship where women have no glory of their own. Paul is repeating their claims and then refuting their thinking. This train of thought requires more than just one short verbal explanation and I can give you some more information. However, I think it makes sense when you take into account other statements by Paul and how he commended women in leadership. As you can see the interpretation of scripture is more than just reading the plain English right in front of your noses.

Earlier I brought up the term **patriarchal**, meaning that men wield power beneficently and women are to subordinate themselves. Hopefully that will only be used when referring to our history.

Complementarians believe that men and women have equal value before God, but are intended for different functions: men as leaders and women as supportive followers. In most complementarian churches, women are restricted from at least some leadership positions. Complementarians extend this to marriage and family. Complementarians argue that this is good for both men and women, because we are all happiest when we embrace God’s plan (gender role) for our lives. But it’s hard not to notice that this plan is disadvantageous for women and seems like a pretty sweet deal for men. We don’t always get the best decisions when one person thinks they are always correct and needs to be in control.

Egalitarian or mutuality. Is someone who champions the dignity, rights responsibilities and glories of women as equal in importance to men and who therefore refuses discrimination against women.

Why I bring up the terms and we seek to understand God’s ideal for relationships is because they have huge implications in peoples lives. Valentine’s Day is the loneliest day of the year for single people and this year is triple jeopardy being on the Sunday of Family Day weekend in Ontario. Singles are alone on valentine’s day and if they come to a church where all they hear about is focus on the family, male headship, and being married is the only way to live- this

intensifies the loneliness. If women or men have suffered under the abuse of a patriarch or women under a complementarian those wounds still haunt them today.

We want single people, single again through divorce, widowed, married, seniors, children and youth to know that they are loved just the same as other groups. How we understand male female relationships and roles for female and males affects how children, teens, young adults, mature adults and seniors see themselves. They wonder if they can use the gifts and abilities to serve God if they don't fit the married mold. Or if their spouse does not share the same love for God where do they fit in? Singles wonder that since they are not married like the majority or may not want to be married; is there something wrong with them, does God not love them?

I believe the Bible teaches the full **equality of men and women in Creation and in Redemption (Gen 1:26-28, 2:23, 5:1-2; I Cor 11:11-12; Gal 3:13, 28, 5:1)**. We can see the record of the early church that there were both single and married people part of leading in the church.

I am leaving you with a question for further thought and discussion. Beyond our official position: Do our structures, programs, actions and words promote egalitarian understanding not only in the church, but also in marriage, families and between single females and males. Keep up the discussion in love.