

Gender: Male *and* Female *in* Christ

NOTE: As we read Scripture, we must distinguish between what is *descriptive* (describing a factual situation) and what is *prescriptive* (presenting a divine command).

This is especially important as we look at this topic, since the issue of gender distinctions is pressured both from *authoritarian* and *egalitarian* forces in the church and in culture.

1. Gender is created by God as part of how human beings bear God's image:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

From this first instance of 'male' and 'female' in Scripture, we see four important things:

- Gender is created and imparted by God,
- Gender is fixed, not fluid,
- Gender is distinctive,
- Gender creates interdependence (cf. Gen. 2:22, 1Co. 11:11).

2. In calling woman a "helper fit for him," Scripture *differentiates* but does not *denigrate* women:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Gen. 2:18)

- The Hebrew word for 'helper' (*ēzer*) is elsewhere used in the Old Testament to speak of the help God gives – for example, "My *help* comes from the LORD," (Ps. 121:2).
- Similarly, the expression "fit for him" is more accurately translated as "corresponding to him" (CSB) or "suitable for him," (NASB/NIV).
- Thus the Scriptures are *not* saying that women were made to be the slaves or tools of men. Rather, God created women to be man's counterpart and God-given help.

3. In every way that it means to be human, men and women are equal:

- Glory – created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27, 5:1-2),
- Tragedy – fallen in the sin of Adam (Rom. 5:12ff, 6:23),
- Hope – to be redeemed in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Pet. 3:7),
- Destiny – to enjoy eternal communion with God in Christ (2 Cor. 3:18, 4:16-18).

4. In general, the Bible does not give us explicit definitions or prescriptions for what it means to be a man or woman. Rather, it portrays the lives of men and women with much variety:

- In the Old Testament, the general pattern we see reflected the realities of life.
 - In an era when military weaponry was all manual (bows, spears, swords), those who were physically larger and stronger (men) did most of the fighting (Num. 1:26).
 - Yet Jael was capable – and praised – for killing Sisera (Jdg 4:17-22, 5:24)!
- Other Old Testament examples warn us against constructing simplistic stereotypes:
 - Jacob was "a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (Gen. 25:27)
 - Rachel was shepherdess who kept her father's sheep in the pastures (Gen. 29:9)
 - Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah were 'prophetesses' – and Huldah even gave instruction from the LORD to King Josiah (2Ki. 22:14-20)

- Deborah is honored as a civil leader and “mother in Israel” (Jdg. 4-5)
- Even the description of the “excellent wife” (Prov. 31:10-31) shows that there is significant overlap between “working outside the home” vs. “working at home”
- New Testament examples also show a similar variety:
 - There were women who traveled with Jesus (Mk. 15:40-41)
 - Priscilla is referred to as a tentmaker along with her husband (Acts 18:3)
 - Phoebe traveled to Rome with Paul’s commendation (Rom. 16:1)
 - Lydia was a traveling merchant from Thyratira whom Paul met in Philippi (Acts 16:14)
- Besides the many books that focus on male characters (cf. 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings), we also see entire books of Scripture that highlight the active initiative of women in the life and history of God’s people (cf. Ruth, Esther). The Gospel of Luke includes much material in its opening chapters that came from women’s firsthand accounts, and in all four Gospels women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Likewise, the book of Acts and the letters of Paul note the patronage and assistance given to the gospel mission by women.
- Alongside of all this, the New Testament also acknowledges some traditional expectations:
 - Peter acknowledges that women are to be honored as the “weaker vessel” (1Pe. 3:7)
 - Paul expects that married women will focus on “working at home,” (Ti 2:5)
- Theologically, there is an emphasis on men as leaders in the church and in the home (*see below*), and it is worth noting that although Eve was the first to sin (Gen. 3:6, 1Ti. 2:14), the responsibility for humanity’s fall is laid at the feet of Adam (Gen. 3:9ff, Rom. 5:12ff).

Conclusions?

- The Bible gives us much *description*, but little *prescription* about what it means to be a God-honoring man or a God-honoring woman. This suggests that there are many ways in which believers can live faithfully as men and women.
- Observing the overall picture, we might *generally* conclude: “Men have a gift of independence, a ‘sending’ gift. They look outward. They initiate... Women have a gift of interdependence, a ‘receiving’ gift. They are inwardly perceptive. They nurture.”¹ Yet these are generalizations.
- In terms of specific prescriptions/prohibitions for men and women, we only see these when it comes to leadership in the church and home (*see below*).

5. In the church, there are many ways in which men and women serve together equally:

- Worship (Acts 1:13-14, Eph. 5:19)
- Witness (Acts 2:1-18)
- Welcoming (Rom. 15:7)
- Care (Rom. 12:7, Gal. 5:13)
- Encouragement (1Th. 5:11)
- Hospitality (Rom. 12:13, 1Pe. 4:9)
- Personal Exhortation (Heb. 3:13)
- Promoting Peace (Rom. 12:16)
- Raising Children (Eph. 6:1-2, 2Ti. 1:5)
- Informal Teaching (Acts 18:26, Col. 3:16)

¹ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 180.

6. The Scriptures do, however, limit special leadership offices in the church to qualified men:

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor... Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife... (1Ti. 2:11-14, 3:2)

- Women prophesied in the early New Testament period (Acts 2:18, 21:9; 1Co. 11:5).
- However, the apostle Paul clearly limits the perpetual office of ‘overseer’ – what we today called ‘elder’ and ‘pastor’ – to qualified men (1Ti. 2:11-14, 3:1-7).
- Most Reformed denominations also understand this limit to apply to deacons (1Ti. 3:8-13).

7. In Christian marriage, both husbands and wives submit to, and imitate Christ – though this looks different for each (Eph. 5:22-33):

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church... “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

- The husband is called to lead through sacrificial authority;
- The wife is called to follow through voluntary, sacrificial submission.
- Although these are different specific roles, both are a submission to and imitation of Christ:²

Although Jesus was equal with God, he emptied himself of his glory and took on the role of a servant. Jesus shed his divine privileges without becoming any less divine, and he took on the most submissive role—that of a servant who dies in his master’s service. In this passage [Philippians 2:5-11] we see taught both the essential equality of the First and Second Persons of the Godhead, and yet the voluntary submission of the Son to the Father to secure our salvation. Let me emphasize that Jesus’s willing acceptance of this role was wholly voluntary, a gift to his Father. I discovered here that my submission in marriage was a gift I offered, not a duty coerced from me.

In John 13:1-17, Jesus, on the night before his death, famously washed his disciples’ feet, both showing and teaching them how he was redefining authority and headship... Jesus redefined all authority as servant-authority. Any exercise of power can only be done in service to the Other, not to please oneself. Jesus is the one who did not come to be served, as the world’s authority figures expect to be, but to serve, to the point of giving his life.

- In this as in all things, there is Christian liberty to work out the details:³

When we moved to Philadelphia for Tim to teach at Westminster Theological Seminary, we bought a home for the first (and only) time. We shortly discovered that Tim’s salary was not big enough to cover our living expenses plus a mortgage payment, so I took part-time employment with Great Commission Publications as an editor. I had to go out to work in the mornings, year round, while Tim’s more flexible daily and summer schedule meant that he could be the “Mr. Mom” who got the kids off to school and watched them during the summer break. An outsider looking at our marriage might have thought a role reversal was going on, or at least a negation of our gender roles. Quite the contrary, in fact. Although the superficial details of who did what had changed, I was still bringing my gifts as a strong helper to Tim, making it possible for him to teach.

² Kathy Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 174-175, 177-178.

³ *Ibid.*, 186-187.