

Foundations

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Date: 30 October 2005

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[0 : 00] As Willie Philip mentioned a bit earlier in this evening's service, he's asked me to preach a series of four sermons on the ministry of Christian women, or I should say a bit more precisely on what the Bible teaches about the ministry of Christian women.

Now, as many of you will know, the Church of Scotland took the decision some time ago to ordain women into the ministry, and quite a number of parish churches up and down Scotland now have a woman as their minister.

The Church of England as well, which I know rather better than the Church of Scotland, at least for the moment, also took the decision to ordain women. I think it was in 1992, and with those women, many of them having been in ordained ministry now for over ten years, the question is now being hotly debated in the Church of England as to whether some women should now become bishops, as they have already in the Anglican Church in the United States and in other parts of the world too. Now, I don't suppose that a parish church in England or in Scotland some centuries, some 100 years ago, or even 50 years ago, would have felt the need for a sermon series on the ministry of Christian women.

The fact that churches need this kind of Bible teaching today is an obvious reflection of the strength and the influence of secular feminism during the course of the 20th century.

[1 : 25] Feminism has been and remains today hugely influential in the Western world, arguably as influential as the two world wars or the information technology revolution.

And inevitably, its influence finds its way into the churches as well as into every other area of life. In the churches, it leads ultimately to questions like, should women be ordained?

Should women be bishops in an Anglican setting? Should women preach from the scriptures in the Sunday congregation where there are men present? Now, those practical and very important questions are really the end point questions.

And before we can begin to see how the Bible might answer them, we have to start a long way further back. So in these four sermons, I want to look first this evening at God's teaching about the essential, original nature of men and women, as taught in the opening two chapters of Genesis. Then next time, which I think is a fortnight from this evening, we'll be thinking about the dynamics of Christian marriage, looking particularly at Ephesians chapter 5. And then only in the last two sessions will we think about how the Bible's teaching plays out in practical terms in the differing ministries that men and women are to exercise in the Christian church.

[2 : 45] In other words, I think we need to look at the foundational teaching before we look at the final practical outworkings of it. Now, let me say two further things by way of introduction before we get into Genesis chapter 1.

First, something about the secular feminist movement. As we study the Bible's teaching on these things, we'll quickly become aware that there is much in modern feminism that the Bible radically challenges.

But movements which have a great deal wrong about them may not be entirely wrong. And we may come to see that while much about secular feminism is anti-Bible and anti-God, certain aspects of secular feminism may sit quite happily with the Bible's view of life.

So, for example, where feminists say that pornography demeans and degrades women, Christians are going to agree with that with all their hearts, on the basis of the Bible's teaching about the equal dignity of the two sexes.

Or when feminists speak out strongly about men abusing women, or treating women as second-class citizens or as goods and chattels, again, Christians will agree heartily on the basis of the Bible's teaching.

[4 : 02] It was modern feminism, too, that led to women being able to vote. Now, would any Bible-believing Christian wish to say that in our elections, only men should elect our representatives to the House of Commons or the Scottish Parliament?

Or to go a little bit further back into the 19th century, It was only during the second half of the 19th century that the famous women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge were founded. Because before the late 19th century, there were no places for women at the universities. And it was secular feminism that opened up university education to women. And I imagine that most of us would think that that was a very good thing.

So I'm simply wanting at this stage to sound a cautionary note. Those who love the Bible and trust the Bible become very black and white in our thinking.

Now, that is a good thing as regards the teaching of the Bible, because the Bible itself is so clear and so definite in distinguishing truth from error and falsehood from what is right and godliness from ungodliness.

[5 : 07] But when one is thinking about a complex movement like modern feminism, if we are to be true to the Bible, it may well be necessary to welcome certain aspects of the movement, while at the same time rejecting much that lies at the movement's core.

Now, a second introductory point. In thinking about these issues, one might be tempted to think of a traditionalist position vis-à-vis a revisionist position.

So tradition versus revision. Or even conservatism versus liberalism. But our concern, if we're Bible people, should not be to be traditional or to be conservative, but rather to be biblical.

Because the Bible is just as likely to challenge conservative traditions as it is to challenge liberal revisions. Now, this is very true when it comes to feminist issues.

Certainly, the Bible will challenge much that is new and revisionist in secular feminism. But it will also challenge much that is traditional and anti-feminist, such as a ruthless male domination that would wish to subjugate women and confine them to the position of second-class citizens or goods and chattels.

[6 : 23] So when the Lord teaches us through his words in the Bible, we are liberated both from a traditionalist conservatism and from a revisionist liberalism so that we can serve him and each other as he intends.

Well, so much for introduction. Let's turn now to this passage in Genesis chapter 1, verses 26, 7, and 8. I want us to look at particularly. But let me read again verse 27.

Genesis 1, 27. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them.

Now, I've got three main points this evening. And here's the first. Genesis teaches that there are two sexes. You might have known that already, but it needs to be re-emphasized.

Genesis teaches that there are two sexes, male and female. He created them. So in the context of Genesis chapter 1, God created the sun to be the sun, the stars to be the stars, the many varieties of wild animals to conform to their various types.

[7 : 36] So we don't have hippopotamuses pretending to be giraffes or basset hounds pretending to be Siamese cats. He made the trees to be trees and he made men to be men and women to be women.

And his verdict, you'll see in verse 31, is that all that he had made was very good. So he didn't get to the end of these six momentous days of creation and then put his head into his hands and say, oh dear, oh dear, I should never have put those human beings into two categories.

It's going to cause so much trouble. No. It was his will to make us male and female. And in his view, the division of the human race into the two sexes is not merely good.

It is emphatically very good. This means then that we can rejoice in our gender, whichever of the two it happens to be, and we can thank God if we're men for making us men and if we're women for making us women.

Our gender, whichever it is, is something that we can enjoy because it's a gift from God. It's part of a great package of varied gifts that he has given to each one of us.

[8 : 49] And this rejoicing in our gender is just as much something that single people can do as married people can do. Jesus himself was neither married nor sexually active, but his humanity and his maleness were not in the least bit lessened by his being single.

I think one reason why we need to relearn the Bible's teaching that there are two sexes is that today's world is full of pressure to reduce and to minimize the differences between men and women.

Let me read you a quotation from the recent writing of John Piper, who's a pastor and preacher from Minneapolis in the United States. He writes this, The tendency today is to minimize the unique significance of our maleness and femaleness.

But this depreciation of male and female personhood is a great loss. It is taking a tremendous toll on generations of young men and women who do not know what it means to be a man or a woman. Confusion over the meaning of sexual personhood today is epidemic. The consequence of this confusion is not a free and happy harmony among gender-free persons.

[10:09] The consequence, rather, is more divorce, more homosexuality, more sexual abuse, more promiscuity, more social awkwardness, and more emotional distress and suicide that come with the loss of God-given identity.

Don't you think that's a telling quotation? Genesis 1.27, Male and female, he created them.

So this verse challenges the elements in modern feminism which seek to downplay the distinctions between men and women. No, we can and we must rejoice in the maleness or femaleness that the Lord God has given to each of us.

Genesis teaches that there are two sexes. Now, second, Genesis teaches that the differentiation of the sexes reflects diversity within God himself.

The differentiation of the sexes reflects a diversity within God himself. Now, we're still here at verse 27. And if you look again at that verse, you'll see that the phrase in his own image is immediately restated in slightly different words in the next line.

[11:29] In the image of God, he created him. Now, that repetition must be for the sake of emphasis. In fact, if you look back to verse 26, you'll see it there again.

Let us make man in our own image after our likeness. The Lord wants to leave us in no doubt that humankind is a reflection of himself in a way that the animal kingdom can never be.

But the striking feature of verse 27, at least for our purposes this evening, is the fact that one gender of human beings could not adequately reflect God's nature.

In other words, if human beings were all men, it wouldn't have answered. And if we'd been all women, it wouldn't have done either. Can you imagine a world with only men in it?

Isn't that a gruesome thought? Smelly, disorganized, unkempt, and barbaric. Can you imagine a world with only women in it? There are elements, at least at the more extreme end of modern feminism, that would be happy with that idea, where we hear people saying, men have brought us nothing but trouble and pain, so we'd gladly be rid of them altogether.

[12:40] But that would be equally gruesome. It is the two sexes rightly relating to each other that express the image of God. That's what's being taught here. And verse 26 gives us an important clue to the diversity which exists within the Godhead, within God himself.

Normally, when God speaks, he uses the first person singular. So you'll see that, for example, in verse 29, where God says, behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed.

But in verse 26, God surprises us by using the first person plural. Let us make man in our image. So we have there a fairly explicit Old Testament hint that while God is one, he is also more than one.

Now we may say, mathematically, that doesn't work. How can an entity be both one and more than one at the same time? But look at God's image. Look at God's reflection.

Initially, it seems as if we have two. We have male and female. But the passage goes on to tell us that at a certain level, that twoness again becomes oneness.

[13:51] For when Adam and Eve are finally married, at the end of chapter 2, we discover that their union makes them one. One flesh, as chapter 2, verse 24, puts it.

In fact, if you think about it, their union is more like a reunion. Because Eve, originally, was part of Adam's very structure. Remember how she was formed out of one of his ribs.

So when she and Adam are subsequently united as man and wife, we don't see a union between two beings who have always been previously apart and have had nothing to do with each other.

We see a reunion between two beings who were formerly one and the same being. So Genesis is teaching that the differentiation of the sexes reflects a certain diversity within God himself.

Well, now third, Genesis teaches that Adam is to be the leader and Eve is to be the helper. Look with me here at chapter 2, verse 18.

[14:54] Then the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are two different accounts of the creation, but they don't contradict each other, they complement each other.

Genesis 1 gives us more of an overarching and panoramic view of the whole process with the creation of humanity. You'll notice occupying only five of the 31 verses of Genesis chapter 1. Genesis 2, by contrast, focuses in a much more detailed way on the creation of Adam and Eve and it shows us what their respective roles are intended to be by God.

Back in Genesis 1, we know from verse 28 that in general, mankind has two main responsibilities. Look with me at verse 28. The first of those responsibilities is to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth to be fruitful and increase in number.

I have a clergyman friend who's a bachelor, now aged 60-something, and he always advises newlywed Christian couples to have as many babies as they possibly can, assuming they're within the child-bearing age range.

[16:13] But he also adds that he speaks with the reckless courage of the non-combatant. It's a great idea, isn't it? The Lord has commanded the newlyweds to have as many babies as possible.

So there's the first responsibility. Now the second, still in chapter 1, verse 28, is the responsibility of ruling over the lower orders of creation, the fish and birds and animals.

In other words, we have a position of authority under God which places us over the animal part of the creation. But having just been told in verse 27 that we're male and female, it soon becomes clear that the responsibilities outlined in verse 28 need both of the sexes if they are to be fulfilled. Obviously, Adam is going to need Eve if he's to be fruitful and multiply just as she is going to need him. And governing the animal kingdom, that also by implication seems to be a role for both the sexes.

If you think about it, there have been some very famous dog trainers and wildlife experts who have been women as well as men. But then you'll see the Lord specifies a further responsibility for Adam in chapter 2, verse 15.

[17:24] And that is to work the Garden of Eden and to keep it or to till it. So this is the beginning of agriculture. But just before we get to verse 18, Adam the farmer, who now has this big responsibility to take care of the Garden of Eden, Adam seems to be looking distinctly for lawn.

I don't know whether you sing this at Scottish children's birthday tea parties. We certainly do in England. The farmer wants a wife. The farmer wants a wife.

E-I-A-D-E-O. The farmer wants a wife. Now, the Lord recognized that a very long time ago and that is why he says in chapter 2, verse 18, it is not good that the man should be alone.

I will make him a helper fit for him. So the bringing of a wife to Adam brings a wholeness and a completeness into the picture which was sadly lacking before Eve's creation.

In fact, it is so much lacking that the Lord says in verse 18, it is not good. Now, think of it.

Everything back in chapter 1 of Genesis was good. The Lord reached the end of each of those six days of creation.

[18:34] He looked at what he'd made and behold, it was very good. So it's a real surprise to find here that there was something in the primeval creation that was not good and that was the absence of a wife for Adam.

Modern feminism, at least in its more extreme forms, will argue for the independence of men and women of each other. It will typically want to say women can get along fine without men and men can go and whistle.

But Genesis is teaching not the independence of men and women of each other, but the interdependence of men and women upon each other. And here it teaches that their roles differ.

They have a different responsibility. The man is to be the leader and the woman, chapter 2, verse 18, is to be the helper. So the man, you'll see, is to take the lead in work, back in verse 15.

And also, it's he who is to take the lead in moral obedience, in verses 16 and 17. You see what the Lord says there. The Lord commands the man, saying, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

[19:44] Eve was not created when those words were spoken. And when the fall takes place in the next chapter, in chapter 3, it is Adam who is clearly held to account as well as Eve.

To Adam, the Lord God says, just flick over to chapter 3, verse 27. To Adam, he said, because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.

See, Adam is responsible. When the serpent was offering or suggesting to Eve that she should have taken that fruit and ate it, Adam should have cried, stop, don't do it.

But he said nothing. Noiselessly, he handed over responsibility. So he has to take the lead in moral responsibility. So both in work and in moral obedience, and the woman, you see, is to be his helper back in chapter 2.

Yes, she is also to become his sexual partner in marriage a little bit later on. But the first role, the first role defined for her by the Lord in verse 18 is that of helper.

[20 : 43] And these complementary roles, let me just say, I'm just about to say something very important. So if your neighbor, if your neighbor's breast is heaving up and down very quietly and regularly because he's fallen asleep, just give him a nudge in the ribs at this point because this is important.

These complementary roles of leading for the man and helping for the woman are the foundational definitions on which subsequent Bible teaching on the roles of men and women is built and developed.

In other words, it is this position here which sets the direction for the Bible's further teaching about men and women and also ultimately about their respective and differing ministries in the Christian church.

Now, it's at this point that we begin to wince. If we have drunk for long years at the fountain of modern feminism, we say, is the woman to be only a helper, only a helper, and tutored as we have been by modern feminism, phrases like second class citizen and even subjugated inferior quickly spring into our minds.

Our hackles rise and we begin to protest. But, let's think about this word helper for a moment. Our problem is that it seems so lowly, the idea of a helper, so second class-ish.

[22 : 07] It's a little bit like a mother speaking to her little girl on a Saturday afternoon and saying to her, now then, darling, I'm going to be baking biscuits in the kitchen this afternoon. Will you come along in with me and be mummy's little helper?

It seems so patronizing, doesn't it? But we get a very different view of the word helper when we see how it is used in the Bible as a description of God, of God.

Let me give you a few examples. Exodus chapter 18 verse 4. Moses says, my father's God was my helper. Exodus 18, 4. Or Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 29.

Moses says of God to the people of Israel, he is your shield and helper. In Psalm 10 verse 14, the psalmist says to the Lord God, you are the helper of the fatherless.

In Psalm 27 verse 9, David says to God, you have been my helper. And you perhaps are familiar with Hebrews chapter 13 verse 6, where the author quotes from the Psalms, he quotes Psalm 118 verse 6, and he says, the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.

[23 : 19] Now the point of all these quotations about God being the helper is that when this helper draws alongside, suddenly, great reservoirs of strength are made available, whether it's to Moses or David or whoever.

Without the Lord as helper, the situation is fraught with weakness. But as soon as the frail man looks up and sees the Lord coming to him to be his helper, it's like the arrival of the United States cavalry over the horizon.

The helper is the one who brings the real strength, the decisive difference into the situation. Now this is what Adam needed at the end of Genesis chapter 2 verse 17, where the Lord looked at him standing in the garden of Eden with his garden fork in his hand and a mystified and hapless look on his face.

It's as though the Lord shook his head and said, this will not do. It is not good that this man is on his own. Some of you may know that my family and I, my wife and children and I, had a nasty motor accident just over a year ago and my wife Catherine had a very serious injury from which, thankfully, she's made an excellent recovery.

But some months after this nasty car accident and my wife's broken neck, my littlest girl Emily, who's, she was then six and she's just turned seven now, but she and I were sitting in our kitchen together in Burton-on-Trent and she turned to me and said to me, in a very matter-of-fact kind of way, she said, Dad, if mummy had been killed in our accident, you would have had to marry again,

wouldn't you?

[24 : 57] Now that was a Genesis chapter 2 verse 18 moment. She had me rumbled. She wasn't talking about the more intimate side of married life.

She wouldn't understand that. It was really as though she was saying, Dad, you wouldn't cope on your own. Our life as a family would fall to pieces. It would be chaos and incompetence if you were in charge on your own.

It's probably quite right. Now, mercifully, I still have my helper and that means that domestic chaos has been kept at bay. But do you see the point of the Bible's use of this word, this great strong word, helper?

Far from it being a derogatory or patronizing term. The helper is the one who brings a new level of strength into the situation, whether it's the Lord helping David, or Eve helping Adam.

But let's also notice how the final paragraphs of Genesis 2 emphasize the equality of Adam and Eve. Yes, they have different roles, but they are emphatically equals.

[26 : 00] Look with me at chapter 2, verse 19. As soon as the Lord has voiced the need for a suitable helper for Adam, in verse 18, he then brings the animals to Adam, one after the other.

Now, why is this? Well, there are two reasons. The first is to enable Adam to name them. Elephant, buffalo, tiger, and so on. That's an expression of his rule over them.

Because if we have a name for something, in a sense, we have a handle on it. So Adam has the authority from God to classify and categorize all these beasts. But then the second reason for the animal parade emerges at the end of verse 20.

In the end of verse 20, it says, but for Adam, there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord is showing us that although the buffalo and the tiger are fine and magnificent beasts, they're not suitable to be Adam's helper.

Why not? Because they're not his equals. They're not up to the job. They're the second class citizens of the world, if you like. Yes, the animals can serve him.

[27 : 09] So the cow will give him milk. The horse will pull his plow. The dog will fetch his slippers and hunt his foxes. But they are subordinate to him. They're of a lower order.

They're of a sub order. But when the woman is brought to Adam in verses 22 and 23, he says, and there's a real feeling of relief and joy as he says it.

He says, at last, this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. In other words, she is of the same order as I am. She and I are made of the same stuff. Implication, she and I are equals.

So let's notice how the image of God is displayed in mankind, male and female. God's diverse roles, his role as leader and initiator, is mirrored by Adam's role and God's role of helper, which brings reservoirs reservoirs of strength into the situation, is mirrored by Eve's role.

And the equality of the sexes is established by Adam's words in verse 23. This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. And I would suggest that when we understand this, it brings a level of real women's liberation to us that modern feminism is a stranger to.

[28 : 27] So Genesis teaches that Adam is to be the leader and Eve is to be the helper. And that pattern is developed and continued as the Bible itself develops.

I think you could sum up the whole thing by stating three foundational principles which govern the relationship of the sexes as taught by the Bible. Equality, diversity, complementarity.

First, equality. Men and women are equal before God in status, in dignity, in humanity. But being equal does not mean being identical.

Secondly, diversity. Men and women have a diversity of roles within marriage. He leads, she helps, and both of those roles reflect God's own roles in relating to us.

And then thirdly, men and women are complementary. They can't function without each other, at least not properly. Their roles complement each other so that they work as a team.

[29 : 31] And this is true not only in marriage and childbearing and childrearing, but also in our more extended relationships in the church and in the wider community. Now, I've nearly finished, but let me end with a few words of encouragement.

What we've seen tonight from Genesis 1 and 2, you're well aware, is already throwing down the gauntlet to secular feminism. What we're going to see later in this series, particularly when we get to the letters of the Apostle Paul and his teaching about the differing ministries of men and women in the churches, that too will bring further and stronger challenges to modern feminism.

We may discover in these matters that we and other modern Christians have been drinking at the fountain of modern feminism much more than we've been drinking at the fountain of the Bible. But, and here's my encouragement, there is no need for us to be on the back foot. Where the world holds wrong and anti-God views and the Bible holds right and pro-God views, let's not be apologetic for the Bible's views.

Secular feminism, we all know this, has been speaking with a particularly strident and hectoring voice for the last 50 years or so. And it tends to say to believing Christians, the Bible, the Bible is absurd and ridiculous and totally out of date.

[30 : 56] How can you Christians still be believing all that stuff? And we tend to react by being cowed and apologetic. Well, yes we say, but we do actually believe the Bible.

Well, the battle is half lost if we behave like that. God has not given us this wonderful truth and teaching so as to make us apologetic. He has given it to us to make us happy.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. So God created man in his own image.

In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. It is not good that the man should be alone.

I will make him a helper fit for him. Our dear Heavenly Father, we do confess to you that we have much to learn about the teaching of the scriptures concerning these great matters which affect us and the human race today so deeply and have such far-reaching implications and consequences.

[32 : 16] So please, dear Heavenly Father, help us to understand your truth. We've said tonight in our hymn that we have made it our choice to love your law and to follow it and to live by it and we pray that that will be the case also in this matter of men and women and the way that they should relate to each other both in marriage and in the community and in the church and leadership in the church as well.

So please help us over these coming weeks as we grapple with these things to make progress and to learn to think more as you think and teach us in the Bible. And we ask it for the glory of Jesus' name.

Amen.