

Equality of Status, Differentiation of Function

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, we're continuing today in our series of sermons on the ministry of women. However, it's a couple of weeks since our last adventures with this subject, and we've been doing it in the evening services and not the morning services.

So I think I'd better begin with a very brief description of what we have seen so far from Genesis chapters 1, 2, and 3, and also from Paul's teaching about marriage in Ephesians chapter 5.

Now, the opening chapters of Genesis teach us three foundation principles to do with men and women. And the three principles are these.

First of all, equality between the sexes, equality of status, of dignity, and of humanity. But we saw from those first two chapters of Genesis that being equal is not the same as being identical.

Then secondly, diversity. The differentiation of the two sexes reflects something of the diversity within God himself, for he is not only one, but also three in one.

[1 : 09] And then thirdly, complementarity. Men and women need each other, not only within marriage, but also in the church and the community, for we cannot function properly without each other.

So these three things from early Genesis, equality, diversity, complementarity. Now, as well as these three foundation principles, we also saw from Genesis chapter 2, which records the creation of Eve, that God gives the man and the woman different roles.

So the man is to be the leader, and thus the one on whom the responsibility chiefly falls in the relationship, and the woman is to be his helper. And we then saw in Genesis chapter 3, that when Adam and Eve rebel against God and eat the forbidden fruit, they're not only ruining the relationship between themselves and God, they're also badly damaging their relationship to one another.

Because in effect, they reverse their God-given roles. Eve, you remember, in Genesis 3, takes the lead in talking to the serpent, and in taking the decision to eat the forbidden fruit, whereas Adam abdicates his responsibility to be decisive, and he spinelessly follows his wife's lead.

So in Genesis chapter 3, not one, but two God-given structures or orders are reversed. First, the structure of God first and mankind second is overturned, as the first man and woman make a bid for independence of God.

[2 : 43] But second, the structure within creation of man first, woman second, and serpent third, is also overturned, and is now replaced by serpent first.

In Jesus' language, he now becomes the prince of this world. Woman then second, and man, as he follows her lead, is now third.

And when God judges Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3, part of their judgment or curse is that marriage will now become a battleground, not wedlock, but deadlock.

As the wife, following Eve, finds herself constantly wanting to master her husband and to keep him under her thumb, while the husband finds himself either subjugating his wife harshly or, like Adam, abdicating responsibility for leadership within the relationship.

And this sets the pattern for fallen humanity. The tendency and temptation all the way down through the generations for the wife will be to put our hands on her hips and to boss her husband about, and the temptation of the husband will be to run away from taking responsibility and leave all the big decisions to his wife, or at other times to lord it over his wife in a harsh and even brutal fashion.

[4 : 04] Now, Paul's teaching to Christian husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 is designed to undo the effects of the fall, to reverse the effects of the fall. So the husband now in Christ, rather than treating his wife harshly and abusively or running away from responsibility, is to love her.

In fact, he is to love her so much as to be prepared to lay down his life for her as he follows the example of Jesus. And the wife now in Christ, rather than asserting herself against her husband, is to submit to him gladly, and that will involve encouraging him to take the lead and thus fulfill his proper role.

There are a number of passages in Paul's letters which deal with the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the churches. Paul believes strongly in the ministry of Christian women.

Let me repeat that sentence. Paul believes strongly in the ministry of Christian women. And we'll see that more clearly next time in a fortnight than today. Paul highly values the unique contribution that they make, the women make, to the work of the gospel.

Like Genesis 1 and 2, Paul treats men and women as being equal in status, in dignity, and in personal value. But like Genesis 1 and 2, he clearly distinguishes their respective functions within the church.

[5 : 29] Like Genesis, Paul teaches equality of status between men and women, but differentiation of function between the two sexes. And if we don't grasp that, we will misunderstand the apostle Paul.

Equality of status between the two sexes, but differentiation of function. Now let me give a classic and common example of confusion over this. In Galatians chapter 3, verse 28, no need to turn it up, I'll read it out.

In Galatians 3, 28, Paul says, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now we, because we have long imbibed the spirit of secular feminism, we immediately jump to the conclusion that in Paul's teaching, in Galatians 3, 28, men and women are equal in function.

As well as in status. And we then turn to a passage like 1 Timothy 2, the passage I read a moment ago, or 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul sharply distinguishes between the respective functions of men and women, and we scratch our heads in perplexity.

And we say, there's a mismatch here. Paul is clearly confused, and he's obviously contradicting himself. He seems to be abolishing the distinction between men and women in Galatians chapter 3, but he's strongly upholding distinctions between the sexes in these other passages.

[6 : 57] And because secular feminism has so much shaped our thinking, and also because we're naturally a bit lazy, and we shrink from painstaking Bible study, we tend to say, let's forget the passages that draw the distinctions, and we'll run with Galatians 3, 28.

After all, it harmonizes much more comfortably with modern society, and it's going to cause us fewer problems if we stick with the idea that men and women have identical and interchangeable roles.

But Paul is not contradicting himself at all. The Galatians 3 passage is not to do with function and role and appropriate ministry.

It's only to do with status. So when Paul says, there is neither Jew nor Greek, he's not suggesting that Jews who become Christians are not Jewish Christians, nor that Gentiles who become Christians cease to be Gentile Christians.

And when he writes, there is neither slave nor free, he knows very well that slaves in the Roman Empire who become Christians continue to be slaves and have to function and work as slaves.

[8 : 07] And he knows perfectly well that men who come to Christ continue to function as men and women as women. The point of Galatians 3, 28 is purely about status and its revolutionary doctrine.

In ancient society, Jews despised Greeks. Free men lorded it over slaves and men looked down on women. So Paul is saying in Galatians 3, that one-upmanship mentality, that mentality of one class despising another and regarding them as of lower status, that is all gone once people come to Christ.

Once we're Christians, the slave can look the free man in the eye. The Jew and the Gentile can share meals together and visit each other in their homes. And the women can know that they are no longer lowly goods and chattels, but in Christ, they have a status equal with that of men.

But while status is equalized in these three great areas of social life, Christians who are slaves have to continue to function as slaves and have to continue to work for their masters.

Jewish and Gentile Christians have to respect each other's social backgrounds and learn to live lovingly together. And men and women, while rejoicing in their new equality of status, have to function in the churches according to the different roles that God gave them at their creation back in Genesis chapter 2.

[9 : 37] So there's no contradiction in Paul between Galatians 3 and his other letters. Paul teaches equality of status, but difference of function. And let me just add this as an aside.

If we do occasionally find the Apostle Paul difficult to understand or to accept, it's safe to assume that the problem lies not in Paul, but in us. The onus does not rest on Paul to explain himself more clearly, but on us to study him more carefully and humbly.

He is the Apostle and teacher of the Gentiles, which is us. So let's thank God very much for the Apostle Paul and let's indeed allow him to be our teacher.

All right, well I hope that section on Galatians 3 clears the ground for us as we turn now to 1 Timothy 2 verses 8 to 15. Men and women are equal in status, but their function is firmly differentiated.

Now this first letter to Timothy is a kind of minister's manual, if I can put it like this. It wouldn't surprise me if Willie Philip had passages from 1 Timothy stuck up in different parts of his kitchen walls to remind him of his priorities as a pastor while he's washing up and so on.

[10 : 51] He can look at them. Timothy, you remember, was a senior church leader living in Ephesus and this letter contains detailed instructions on how the churches of Ephesus should be run and on what principles.

So Paul gives Timothy clear guidance on, for example, the kind of people who should be appointed as local church leaders in chapter 3, how to care for the widows of the church in chapter 5, how to advise slaves about their conduct in chapter 6, how to teach Christians about their attitude to money in chapter 6, and here in chapter 2 about how men and women should relate to each other in the church and fulfill their differentiated functions.

And all this teaching is set against the menacing background of the presence of false teachers, and that's why Paul says in chapter 1 verse 3, as I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.

So there was a great deal of spurious, misleading religion around. In fact, Paul in chapter 4 verse 2 describes some of the false teachers as insincere liars whose consciences have been seared.

So Timothy, in the midst of all this pressure from false teachers, who are seeking to lead the church members up the garden path, Timothy has to hold the line, teach the truth, and apply the truth rightly in all the practical relationships that function within the churches.

[12 : 23] Now in chapter 2 verse 8, Paul gives some brief instructions to Timothy about the men. So let me read that one verse again. I desire then that in every place the men should pray lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.

Now why should Paul mention anger and quarreling at this point? Well clearly, it was a problem stirred up by the influence of the false teachers. Looking back to chapter 1 verses 3 and 4, we see that these false teachers were devoting themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which, says Paul, promotes speculations rather than the work of God.

So the false teachers were filling the churches with disputes over irrelevant matters. In fact, in chapter 6 verse 20, at the very end of the letter, Paul again mentions irreverent battle or godless chatter, which leads people away from the faith.

So we won't be far wrong if we assume that the quarreling and anger of chapter 2 verse 8 is a product of this controversy creating false doctrine.

And what is Paul's remedy? Prayer. I want men to pray and to lay aside this irritable disputing. When men, male men, dispute in anger, their aim is generally to defeat their opponent, whether they're on the rugby pitch or whatever the situation.

[13 : 47] It's a little bit like Prime Minister's question time in the House of Commons. Think of those moments that we hear little bits of on the radio. The two leaders of the two big parties are constantly trying to knock their opponent down so as to feel victorious and triumphant.

And when one of them deals a knockdown punch, the winner crows with delight because he's mastered the other man. So angry disputation between male men is about me mastering him.

Whereas prayer is about God mastering me. And although Paul doesn't say this explicitly here, isn't it true that a prayerful man is going to be a man who accepts his God-given role of leadership and responsibility much more than a man who doesn't pray?

A praying man is a man who accepts the principle of structured authority. And if he accepts the God-given order that God is his master and must be submitted to, he's also going to accept the God-given order that man is to be the leader and woman is to be the helper.

Now, I'm not wanting to press verse 8 to yield more than it actually contains. But in view of what Paul goes on to say in verses 9 to 15, I think it's fair to suggest that his insistence that men be prayerful indicates that he has in mind the proper structures of authority that link God with men and men with women.

[15 : 13] After all, if Adam had been prayerful at the moment of temptation in Genesis chapter 3, I guess he would have remembered his responsibility and snatched the forbidden fruit out of Eve's hand and thrown it straight into the river Euphrates.

But he didn't. All right, let's turn now to the more explicit instructions about Christian women in verses 9 to 15. And as we look at these, let's be constantly mindful that man's chief temptation is to abdicate responsibility or to rule harshly.

And woman's chief temptation is to want to control men and be herself the leader while the men are led. So let's notice three things from these verses. First, from verses 9 and 10, the appropriate clothing for women.

Let me read those verses again. Likewise also, that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness, with good works.

So Paul defines the appropriate clothing for women here, both negatively and positively. Having said that Christian women should dress with modesty and decency and propriety, he then gives his negative, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.

[16 : 36] And then he gives his positive, but with good works, appropriate for women who profess godliness. So the appropriate clothing for women, Paul is of course speaking metaphorically, is a life of action, good deeds, caring for others, serving them, and so on.

Now someone will probably say, why does Paul have to be so negative about the Marx and Spencer side of things? Why can't he be positive all round? Why can't he say, good deeds and pretty clothing and jewelry?

Be the all round modern Christian woman, actively living the godly life, but also being attractively turned out. Now the reason must be that Paul the apostle, pastor and apostle, knows the human heart so well, and he is countering the classic temptations of both men and women in these verses.

Paul knows what men are like. He knows that we are weak and quick to abdicate responsibility, and that women are quick to want to control men, and what better way for this to happen than for women to go big on clothes and jewels and hairstyles.

Now I'm not aware of anyone here in this church who would fall into these traps, so I'm not looking around the congregation or anything like that. I feel I can speak freely. Well I must speak freely. But if there were some women in our church who were gorgeously decked out week after week, wouldn't they be wrapping the men of the church around their little fingers in no time?

[18 : 10] So Paul is saying to the Christian women, sisters, you must help us men. We're weak. We quickly go weak at the knees in the presence of too much female charm. And you know, don't you sisters, that if you over express your female charms by taking great care and expense over your appearance, you will begin to assert an inappropriate kind of control over the men of the church.

And that upsets God's ordering of things because the men should be taking the lead and the women should be their helpers. So there's the first thing. The appropriate clothing for women is good deeds of service and care.

Now second, from verses 11 to 14, Paul teaches the appropriate attitude for women in relation to men. Let me read those verses again. 11. 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.

Now, I'm aware that the instructions of verses 11 and 12 are very difficult for people like us who have been so steeped in modern feminism. Feminism teaches the equality of the sexes not only in status but also in function.

[19 : 35] The Bible teaches equality of status but not of function. That's where our difficulty lies. That's the nub of the problem. So what is Paul teaching here? Well, just as in Ephesians 5 in the context of marriage, Paul is teaching here that the men of the church should lead and the women of the church should submit to the men's leadership.

And the leadership of men is primarily expressed in their role of teachers. So the nub of Paul's instruction in verse 12 is that women should not teach men or have authority over them.

Now, elsewhere in his letters, Paul explains that women have a vitally important teaching ministry. And we'll look at that in a fortnight's time. But that is a teaching ministry towards other women and also to children.

But it's teaching men that Paul says is inappropriate for women. And he gives the reasons for this concisely and simply in verses 13 and 14.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. What Paul means is that the church ought to reflect the God-given created order.

[20 : 48] God made Adam first as the leader and Eve second as the helper. and church life should reflect that original and perfect design. Now, those who argue against the apostle Paul, of course, there are many who do at this point, will often say that Paul's reasoning is culturally conditioned.

In other words, that in Paul's own day in the culture of the first century, women were generally subjugated by men. And therefore, it would have been inappropriate and insensitive for Paul to allow something to happen in churches which was so very different from the prevailing cultural norms.

But, these critics of Paul also say, the culture has changed around us so much in the modern West that we should regard Paul's instruction as appropriate perhaps for his own day, but of temporary relevance and certainly no longer applicable in the very different culture of the 21st century West.

Now, that argument is quickly refuted when we see that in verses 13 and 14, Paul grounds his teaching not in first century culture, but in Genesis 2 and 3.

Verse 13 reflects Genesis 2 and verse 14 reflects Genesis 3. So, Paul's instructions in verses 11 and 12 take us way back to God's original blueprint.

[22 : 16] It isn't a question of varying cultures in varying centuries. It's a matter of the church expressing God's original intentions in its corporate life and arrangements.

And part of that original intention is that man should lead and woman should be the helper who submits to his leadership. Now, friends, I'm saying all this and I'm convinced Paul is saying all this, but I know that it will still stick in the craw of some people.

I think I can hear one or two crawls croaking this morning at this very moment. So, let me add this. It really is the devil's lie that Paul is misogynistic and horrible and repressive towards women.

The truth is quite the opposite. Isn't the truth this, that Paul loves both Christian women and Christian men so much that he is determined that the churches should express God's original and very good blueprint design for the way men and women should relate to each other.

It's for our happiness and our joy that God teaches us these things. It's when we don't accept them that we become disgruntled and frustrated. So, the appropriate attitude for Christian women is to allow and to welcome suitably gifted Christian men to teach the congregations.

[23 : 35] The women have a vital role as teachers but that's to be teachers of other women and of children. And in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul also encourages Christian women to pray out loud and to prophesy in the assembled congregation.

Though, of course, prophecy in that context must mean words of encouragement that don't have an authoritative teaching content to them. Paul's overriding concern is that the churches should reflect Genesis chapter 2 and not Genesis chapter 3.

So, Paul teaches the appropriate clothing for women, the appropriate attitude for women in connection with teaching in the church and then lastly and briefly a special encouragement for Christian women in verse 15.

Yet, she will be saved through childbearing if they continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control. Now friends, this is a famously difficult verse. If you have a new international version of the Bible in front of you, you'll see how difficult it's been for Bible translators because there are all kinds of footnotes attached to it giving different versions of it.

So let me offer you an understanding of it which seems to make the best sense to me though I put it forward somewhat tentatively. Two things that Paul cannot mean in verse 15.

- [24 : 54] First, he cannot mean that Christian women are saved in the eternal sense through the bearing of children. He's just reminded us in verse 5 of this very chapter that Christ is the only saviour.

So it would make nonsense of the gospel to suggest that while most Christians are saved by Christ, some are saved by childbearing. So it can't mean that. And then secondly, Paul cannot mean that all Christian women who are pregnant will be brought safely through childbirth.

We know perfectly well from Christian history, modern and ancient, that Christian women have died and do die in childbirth. So what can Paul be saying here? Well, the interpretation that I find most persuasive is that Paul is countering here a particular aspect of the false teaching that was going on at Ephesus.

The false teachers there, a little bit like modern secular feminists, were probably encouraging women to abandon their traditional and appropriate roles. Sisters, they were saying, if you really want to experience everything that God has for you, abandon your role as homemaker and childbearer and get involved in teaching and leading in the church.

Take the opportunity, sisters, fulfill your potential. Something like that. And Paul is saying in verse 15, no sisters, continue in the appropriate role.

- [26 : 14] He's probably using the word childbearing as a shorthand term which implies the whole range of activities appropriate to the married woman. Childbearing, childrearing, homemaking, home management and so on.

The whole gamut of activities that the purposeful, strong, godly wife of Proverbs chapter 31 is engaged in doing which includes money earning work outside the home incidentally.

But Paul is saying, sisters, that is the environment, childbearing and everything that goes with it in which you will experience and work out your salvation as long as you persevere, continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control.

That is the way in which the saved Christian woman operates. Don't be persuaded, he's saying, by these people who are really teaching you to follow what Eve did in Genesis chapter 3.

Now, of course, Paul is not excluding from salvation those Christian women who have never had children. There are many such. We must bear in mind that in the churches of the first century, singleness would have been much rarer than it is today and therefore a greater proportion of the women in the churches would have been both married and mothers, a greater proportion than we're used to in the churches today.

- [27 : 32] So the apostle is urging Christian women to love and follow and maintain the key roles that scripture gives to them, being the helper, not the leader, raising children to love and trust the Lord, managing their households well.

That is the sphere in which they work out and experience their salvation. So the appropriate clothing, the appropriate attitude and in verse 15 this special and loving encouragement to be a Genesis 2 type woman and not a Genesis 3 type woman.

Well having seen this morning something of the restrictions that the apostle places on the ministry of Christian women, we're going to look in a fortnight's time in the evening at the glorious, rich and fulfilling ministries that Paul urges Christian women to undertake.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Our dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that in scripture the devastating consequences of the fall are reversed through the coming of Christ and the roles of men and women are set back in their original and perfect and good order and our prayer is that you will help us not only to understand these things from the Bible but to love them and accept them and follow them and we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen.