

BETTER TOGETHER

EQUALITY IN CHRIST

Eight short studies with discussion questions

Kevin Giles



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Australia

Tel/Fax (03) 9383 1266

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STUDY ONE (1)

Introduction : Christians living in a revolutionary age

In the last forty years, one of the most momentous social changes known in human history has taken place, women's liberation. A number of factors came together in the late 1960s to open the door for this revolution. First of all, women caught up in the education stakes and then gained a small lead. Girls today do a bit better on average at school than boys and now over 50 percent of graduates are women. Then the nature of work changed. When brute strength mattered more than brain power in the workplace, men had a big advantage. Now that brain power has triumphed the two sexes are more evenly matched. Next the Pill became available. Women from this time could control their own fertility. They could decide when to have a family and when not to get pregnant. As a result of these three things, women joined the work force in large numbers and soon were involved in leadership positions at all levels. Now we are not at all surprised to meet a female judge, airline pilot, bus driver, managing director, builder, prime minister or president, mining engineer or professor. In America today almost a quarter of women earn more than their husbands and in Australia the percentage of women earning as much or more than their husband is not far behind that in the USA. What this opening up of work opportunities for women has meant is that for the first time in human history women can support themselves and, if they have children, their family as well. They are no longer dependent on men. They can stand on their own two feet.

This monumental social revolution has not been easy for women to work out in theory or practice, extremely hard for many men to adjust to, difficult for business to implement and a huge challenge for the churches. At first the large mainline churches were entirely hostile to the women's movement, even though it had its origins in the advocacy of 19th Christian women, and only gradually have we seen change beginning to occur.

The situation today in the churches

From its inception, the most respected church in Australia, the Salvation Army, has insisted that men and women be treated equally and allowed to exercise leadership at every level, including the rank of General. The growing Pentecostal churches believe women anointed by the Spirit can preach and lead churches but have not always been consistent in practice. Today they are trying to encourage and develop more female leaders. The Uniting Church in particular is noteworthy for its affirmative stance on women in leadership. From its inauguration in 1977 it has accepted the position of its three constituent churches, that women may be ordained. On principle, women are on all its church councils. Many missionary agencies have also been very affirmative of women in leadership. They have sent out and supported women evangelists, church planters, and theological teachers to all parts of the world. At one point not so long ago, one third of all missionaries were women. The story of these women and their achievements is a wonderful story in its own right.

The rest of the Australian churches have not been so positive about the leadership of women. The Baptists at conference level in most states now allow women to be accredited for church leadership but at a congregational level many of the bigger Baptist churches remain opposed to this. The Lutherans are bitterly divided on the issue and still exclude women from church leadership. The Anglicans in Australia fought about the ordination of women for decades but eventually most dioceses allowed it. The strongest opposition to women in church leadership and thus ordination has come from the Sydney evangelical diocese, which is still adamant that women must not be allowed to lead in mixed Christian gatherings, and sometimes this teaching is applied to home groups. The Presbyterian Church takes much the same stance. Women cannot be ordained and they cannot be (lay) elders. Initially the Roman Catholic Church took the most intransigent position but in 1987 Pope John Paul II issued his binding encyclical, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity of Women*.¹ In this he rejected the view held for centuries that in creation God subordinated women to men, insisting instead on their 'essential' equality. However, on the question of leadership in the church he was not consistent. Appealing to the fact that the twelve apostles were all men, and to the traditional Catholic idea that the twelve apostles were the first priests, he argued that women therefore could not be ordained in the Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox churches all exclude women from leadership of any kind in the church.

1. St Paul's, Homebush, 1987.

In what has just been said the matter of the ordination of women is mentioned several times but in this and the following studies and discussions it is not the issue in focus. It hardly gets a mention. We will be focusing almost entirely on whether or not the Bible permanently subordinates women to men.

The debate about what the Bible says on the sexes is very much a contemporary issue, one that became a red hot question only as a consequence of the revolutionary social changes outlined above. When the Western world affirmed the full equality of the sexes, all Christians were forced to rethink what they thought the Bible said about women. For long centuries Christians simply reflected and endorsed the prevailing cultural norms of society, arguing that women were subordinated to men in all spheres of life – the home, the church and every part of society. Theologians and clergy, along with everyone else until the turn of the twentieth century and often up to the 1960s, generally spoke of women as ‘inferior’ and of men as ‘superior’, and the Bible was interpreted to teach this. Many interpretations given of key texts were demeaning of women. Tertullian interpreted Genesis 2 as a reminder to women that ‘each of you is Eve. You are the devil’s gateway: you are the first deserter of the divine law.’ Calvin believed Paul taught that women ‘are born to obey, for all wise men have always rejected the government of women as an unnatural monstrosity.’ And as late as 1957, Donald Guthrie in a Tyndale evangelical commentary says 1 Timothy 2:13 teaches ‘the superiority of men over women’ and verse 14 ‘the greater aptitude of the weaker sex to be lead astray.’

Profound cultural change and the interpretation of the Bible

In the face of the fact that the wider culture had changed its view of women, Christians were forced to rethink their teaching on women and their interpretation of the key texts that they had appealed to in the past to subordinate women. Profound changes in how the world is perceived always forces believers to rethink their theology. In such periods of transition Christians have to distinguish between what they believe as those seeking to be guided by the Bible and what they may tacitly believe as those living in a given culture. This has happened many times in Christian history. When everyone thought the world was flat, theologians read the Bible to teach this. When everyone thought the sun revolved around the earth, the Bible was read to teach this. When everyone thought the world was created in seven literal days about 7000 years ago, Christians read the Bible to teach this. Changed world views that are compelling force Christians to

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rethink what they believe the Bible actually teaches. Note carefully: these changes in world view did not lead to the rejection of any Biblical teaching, but simply prompted a re-reading of what it actually said. The change in thinking on women is of this kind. Until modern times it was very easy for Christians to think the Bible endorsed the subordination of women because they lived in a patriarchal context where men ran the world. And because the Bible was written by those living in a taken-for-granted patriarchal context, by necessity it reflected this world. Only when the world changed did Christians see clearly for the first time that there were profound and principled statements in the Bible that spoke of the equality of the two sexes in creation and in Christ.

When cultural change leads Christians to change their thinking and their theology, as it often does, believers can feel very uneasy about this, especially in the period of transition. They wonder if the Bible is in fact their final authority, or if their brothers and sisters who support the change are accepting the authority of the Bible. In reflecting on this, it is to be noted that Christians follow culture on most things: using a knife and fork, driving a car, sending emails and endorsing democratic elections are examples of this. Even on weightier issues such as divorce, it is obvious that cultural change can modify the thinking of Christians. I am sure we all agree that our contemporary non judgmental stance towards those who have experienced the awfulness of marriage breakdown is a step forward. Following culture is not necessarily evil and never so when we come to see that our thinking in the past had no biblical warrant, or possibly was contrary to much in the Bible. When it comes to the question of women, we have to ask, which side is it that has *given in* to culture?

Those supporting the permanent subordination of women (they describe themselves as ‘complementarians’), argue that they are holding fast to the historic interpretation of the Bible. In reality, as noted above, they have profoundly toned down and significantly changed what was once taught and believed. In reply to them, evangelical ‘egalitarians’ (as they designate themselves) argue that ‘complementarians’ are simply trying to find reasons for holding onto pre-1960s cultural ideas on women. ‘Egalitarians’ insist that they are not following 1960s secular feminists: they have changed their mind because they have come to see that the Bible affirms gender equality. They argue as well that their egalitarian roots go back to the first evangelical advocates of emancipation in the 1860s, a movement that led to equality in ministry in the Salvation Army (founded in 1865).

At this point something must be said about homosexuality. The matter

cannot be avoided. On hearing positive comments on how cultural change can impact on biblical interpretation, some say, ‘If you think that cultural change *determines* how the Bible is understood, why not endorse homosexual marriages and allow practising homosexuals to be ordained?’ Sometimes this question is genuinely raised but more often it is put to catch egalitarians on the back foot. First of all in reply let me say clearly that no evangelical, Pentecostal or charismatic Christian believes that cultural change should ‘determine’ how the Bible is read. It is agreed that the Bible stands over culture and all other authorities in matters of Christian faith and conduct. Thus, simply because our culture today allows abortion on demand, theologically conservative Christians who happen to be egalitarians do not follow. The fundamental Christian belief in the sanctity of life means that Christians on both sides of this debate come to much the same mind on abortion on demand. What is argued above is *not that culture determines* how we understand the Bible but that profound cultural change invariably forces Christians to reconsider how they understand the Bible – sometimes they about turn, sometimes they adjust a little and sometimes they stand firm. Metaphorically speaking, a profound change in culture gives Christians a new pair of glasses with which they see what is in the Bible.

When it comes to homosexuality, cultural change has made most Christians far less judgmental and more thoughtful on this matter, and this is good. However, egalitarian evangelical and Pentecostal Christians have not done an about turn on this matter. They insist that there is a great gulf between the debate about the ordination of women and the ordination of homosexuals. The two matters are not the same. Evangelical egalitarians argue that women should be accorded full equality because this is the creation ideal (Gen. 1:26–28) and it is what Jesus endorsed in word and deed. No one today suggests women should be excluded from church leadership and thus ordination because there is some ethical question about their behaviour. In contrast, when it comes to the ordination of homosexuals, the only matter in contention is an ethical one. The Christian sexual ethic can be summed up the words, ‘Faithfulness in marriage, celibacy in singleness.’ This ethic has to be accepted as the ideal for all Christians and binding on the ordained who are supposed to be exemplars of the faith. On this principle no one is excluded from ordination because of who they are, heterosexual or homosexual, but only if they do not, or will not, agree to keep to this ethic. When the ongoing debate about homosexuality is introduced into the argument as to whether or not the Bible affirms the leadership potential of both men and women, it only muddies the water, and this is often done deliberately for just

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this reason, I am sorry to say. Evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic egalitarians equate how the Bible deals with slavery and the subordination of women because the Bible does this (*see* for example Gal. 3:28) but never homosexuality and women's emancipation, because the Bible never does this.

The post-1970s opposing interpretations of what the Bible says on the sexes

In the post-1970s period, some came to the conclusion that 1 Timothy 2:11–14, supported by 1 Corinthians 11:3–16, 14:33–34 and Ephesians 5:22–23, quite clearly taught that God had put men in charge of the church and the home. Man is to be the 'head' of the woman. (We will study all these texts later.) The Timothy text is absolutely fundamental and pivotal to this position. Paul's words in this passage are taken to teach that before the fall (i.e. in the perfect world before sin was present) woman was set under the man. Thus male 'headship' is the unchanging and unchangeable creation-given ideal which pleases God. By appointing twelve men to be the apostles, Jesus endorsed the creation-given 'headship' of man. The many references to women leaders in the Bible such as Deborah and the prophet Huldah in the Old Testament and Priscilla and Junia in the New Testament are explained by arguing that their leadership was of a subordinate kind under a man. To complete this particular post-1970s reading of the Bible, three highly significant changes were made to the way in which women's subordination was spoken of in the past. First, the supposed creation-given 'headship' of men that had applied to all creation was limited to the home and the church – part of creation. Second, new language was introduced to make this theological position sound acceptable to modern ears. Rather than speaking of women as 'inferior' and men as 'superior', as had been the case in the past, or as subordinate, the terms 'different' and 'role' were used. What the Bible teaches is that men and women have 'different roles' by which it is meant, men have the 'headship' role, women the subordinate 'role'. Finally, and only from the 1990s, this reading of the Bible was called, 'the complementarian position', again to sound acceptable to modern ears.² This really confused things because for twenty years previously, egalitarian evangelicals had been speaking of the complementarity of the sexes, as they still do.

Many evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics developed a very different way of reading the Bible in this new social context. They insisted

2. This first use of this term to designate the case for the subordination of women appears in J. Piper and W. Grudem, eds, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Crossway, 1991), where the editors explain why they made this novel departure.

that the right place to begin any study of what the Bible says on the sexes was to begin where the Bible begins, Genesis chapter 1. Here the primary and fundamental truth is revealed, that God made man and woman alike in his image and alike he gave them rule over creation and alike he made them responsible for procreation (Gen. 1:26–28). Genesis chapters 2 and 3 are then read in the light of Genesis 1. The suggestions that created ‘second’ and Eve’s deception indicates woman’s subordination, are rejected as incompatible with the teaching of Genesis 1:26–28, the plain meaning of the text of Genesis 2 and 3 and of the fact that woman’s subordination is explicitly made a consequence of the fall (Gen. 3:16). Rather than the subordination of woman being the God-given ideal, these evangelicals conclude that it reflects what is not ‘good’, not the ideal, something not pleasing to God and as such is to be opposed by Christians. Jesus did not support male ‘headship’, they argued; rather he affirmed in word and deed the equality of the two sexes. Luke’s and Paul’s theology of ministry, in which the Spirit’s gifting trumps gender, shows that the apostles believed that in Christ there was a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor. 5:17) where men and women stand side by side (Gal. 3:28) as they did before the fall in the original good creation. The numerous examples of women leaders in the New Testament churches illustrate the practice in the apostolic theology of gift-based, not gender-based ministry. The three texts in which Paul regulates the ministry of women in some way (1 Cor. 11:3–16, 14:33–34, 1 Tim. 2:11–12) they take as speaking to exceptional situations where women were doing something to disrupt the life of the church. It is to be noted that in this reading of the Bible, 1 Timothy 2:11–12 is studied last because it is the final significant text on women, if you are reading the Bible chronologically. When we come to this text last, what it says stands out like the proverbial sore thumb. Nothing has prepared us for this exceptional comment which is so negative about the ministry of women. It is also to be noted that in this outline of what the Bible teaches on the sexes the obfuscating and unbiblical language of ‘differing roles’ is not used.

What this outline of the two opposing post-1970s biblical theologies of the sexes makes plain is that this is not a debate about the authority of scripture. *It is a debate entirely about how to interpret the Bible rightly* when for the first time in human history the church has had to seriously face the fact that women are not imperfect versions of the male. They are women not men, but alike they are part of God’s ‘good’ creation and alike made in his image. For Christians of one opinion to identify ‘their’ *interpretation* with what the Bible actually says, when other informed Christians are of another opinion – and this applies to both sides – is arrogance. When this

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happens we hear people claiming, ‘What I say the Bible says is what God says and so to disobey what I say is to disobey God.’ In this debate about *interpretation* of the Bible, one side has got it basically right and one side has not. And this is no incidental or minor matter. In question is the status and equality of opportunity for half the human race in both the Western World and the Third World.

Finally

If you are going to go home after each of these studies feeling stimulated, enriched and looking forward to the next study you will need to be gentle and kind to one another, allowing others to have opinions different to your own. Few matters can arouse so much heat and hurt as discussing the status and ministry of women. There are many reasons for this. Some have been taught that the Bible does subordinate women and they will have a number of texts in their mind. Another opinion appears to them to be a denial of biblical authority. For others the differences between the sexes are a personal concern. They hear comments on equality as a denial that God has made us men and women, two differentiated sexes. For some men how their marriage works fills their mind. They want to ask, ‘What would happen in my family if I treated my wife as an equal?’ To help group members see new possibilities, grace and tact will be needed. It is important not to go on the attack.

Remember at all times that in the following studies and given questions you are considering what the Bible actually says. In seeking to ‘hear rightly’ what the Bible is saying, always think first about the historical and cultural context in which the passage is set. This context is very different to what we know in the 21st century.

Study groups run so much better if times are set and kept. If the commencement time is 8 pm expect people to be on time and start say by 10 past, giving everyone time to say hello to others. If a cuppa is served first, then start sharp at say 20 past. Also set and keep a time to close the discussion at the end. Many groups find setting a given time for each question also helps – say ten minutes.

One last matter: it is only possible to have an informed discussion if everyone in the group has read the chapter on which the questions are based. The suggestion is thus made that each group make it a rule that people who come to a group meeting who have not read the chapter for discussion beforehand do not speak in the discussion. They simply listen and learn. If this rule is not made then it would be best if time is given to read the chapter before beginning the discussion.

Questions for discussion

1. Give everyone the opportunity to tell their story on how they perceive the male-female relationships and of any change in thinking that has taken place for them over the years. A good commencement point for each person would be to start with how their mum and dad related and what they learnt from this. Allow each person to speak *without comment* at this point.
2. After all have spoken ask the group, how can we share in this discussion on the male-female relationship without hurting one another? Perhaps list what similarities/differences of experiences have emerged in the discussion so far.
3. The point was made above that profound social change tends to impact on how Christians understand (interpret) the Bible. Metaphorically speaking, it gives them new glasses to see through. Discuss.
4. Convinced evangelicals have opposing *interpretations* of important texts on the man-woman relationship. Can we accept this and can anything be done about it? Is there a way forward?
5. Year 12 exam statistics regularly indicate a higher overall average score for girls than boys and more women than men graduate from universities. Despite claims of equality in society, half of Australia's top 200 companies have no women on their Boards and few female executives. Why do you think that even in Australian secular culture the reality is so often far removed from the ideal?

Further Reading

Should you want to do more reading as background to these studies, the following books are highly recommended:

Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The doctrine of God and the contemporary gender debate* (Grand Rapids, InterVarsity, 2002). This book is on the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, women's subordination and slavery.

Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2008). A very readable small book on interpreting the Bible rightly that makes the question of what the Bible says on women the test case.

Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (Abingdon, CPAS, 2008). This covers the key biblical texts very well and also explores the essential servant nature of Christian leadership and the pressures on all contemporary church leaders, especially women.

Philip Payne, *Man and Woman: One in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2009). This is the definitive study on the interpretation of the key Bible texts on women and men.