

Male and Female, Part II: Biblical Womanhood

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THE SOURCE OF OUR QUESTIONS

Our Changing Culture

In her book, *Radical Womanhood*, Carolyn McCulley notes that *modern* feminism did not begin in the 1960's and 70's.¹ Rather, it began around the time of the Suffrage Movement (the legal and constitutional battle for a woman's right to vote); this, she terms, was the "First Wave". It gained momentum during a time of true injustice, when women did not enjoy the same legal protections as men. However, the motivations and means for this correction were not always biblical and therefore honoring to God. In many instances, the motivation was human autonomy – the freedom to design gender roles according to one's sense of reason, not the supreme arbiter of truth: God's revelation.

McCulley argues that the 1920's "Flapper culture" represented a watershed in this regard. Younger women "literally took off their corsets" and became much more libertine in their sexuality. Seemingly justified by the arguments of women like Margaret Sanger (herself an atheist, socialist, and founder of what eventually became Planned Parenthood), these sought to divorce sexuality from procreation and marriage. Increasingly, women viewed children and family as a burden, a cause of personal, social, and economic stress. More and more women sought autonomy in their relationships, an end to brutish male dominance in the home and culture. It's telling that one of Sanger's earliest journals was named "The Woman Rebel" and bore the slogan, "No Gods and No Masters."

Actually, what most people consider the start of the modern feminist movement began (i.e. the 1960's and 70's) was, according to McCulley, its "Second Wave". The technological and legal developments of this time such as the "pill" and Roe vs. Wade were actually the culmination of a philosophical current running through American society for decades.

Now, today, McCulley contends that we're seeing a "Third Wave" of feminism - one that not only seeks to "deconstruct" traditional understandings of femininity, defending women against the domination of a patriarchal society – but also goes on the offensive, seeking to use female sexuality as a weapon to control and dominate men. Once, feminists universally condemned pornography as the subjugation of women. Today, many argue that it actually empowers them. John Piper once noted, and I think correctly, that the female body is one of, in not the, most powerful marketing tool in our consumerist culture.²

¹ For this section, see: McCulley, Carolyn. *Radical Womanhood: Feminine Faith in a Feminist World*. Moody Publishers, 2008.

² John Piper, "Manhood and Womanhood: Conflict and Confusion after the Fall". Retrieved 2/2010 from http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByTopic/49/680_Manhood_and_Womanhood_Conflict_and_Confusion_After_the_Fall/

Our Confusing Culture

It's no wonder that we live in a confused culture on the issue of womanhood and femininity.

- Many herald the recent movie, "The Princess and the Frog," as a feminist fairy tale.³ Gone, it seems, are the days of princesses that sit around in dire situations, waiting for their knight in shining armor to deliver them. Now, the woman powers ahead, realizing her own aspirations. This, of course, is very different from other popular and still cherished movies and stories like *Sleeping Beauty*. So, which vision should capture the hearts and minds of young girls and women?
- We have at least two cable networks devoted to so-called women's programming, *Lifetime* and *Oxygen*. Even one of my favorite, admittedly nominal Roman Catholic, comedians notes: "'My favorite channel is the Lifetime channel because Lifetime is 'Television for women' Yet for some reason, there's always a woman getting beaten on that network.'" And why are Lifetime movies known for their caricatures of male domination? Simply stated, for the modern feminist, patriarchal society is the archenemy of women.

It's true, even to the casual observer, that American pop culture sends an array of often conflicting and confusing messages regarding the nature of women and the male-female relationship.

The fault line of these cultural rifts runs through the Church as well. Consider that:

- During the "second wave" of feminism, mainline Protestant denominations faced tremendous pressure to modify Church teaching regarding the roles of women in church leadership. For centuries, the offices of elder and deacon were – due to Scriptural exegesis, not cultural concession – restricted to men called by God to those roles. Our own denomination was born in the midst of those debates.
- Even today, in our own denomination, there is a peaceful and I think quite gracious and intellectually credible desire to clarify exactly what the Scriptures teach regarding the role of women in leadership in the Church. This was a central issue considered by last year's General Assembly. Our own Presbytery reflects on it today.

Yes, we are a very conflicted society and apparently Church. But again, as we noted last week, some common themes emerge in our culture's divided mind:

- Americans increasingly view gender as a social construct and therefore malleable
- Americans are more sympathetic to autonomous sexuality, free from issues of gender

³ For a feminist critique of the movie, see "Feminist Mom Film Review: The Princess and the Frog" (1/5/2010). Retrieved 2/2010 from <http://www.canow.org/canoworg/2010/01/feminist-mom-film-review-the-princess-and-the-frog.html>

- Americans are more likely to see historic gender roles as rooted in power relationships
- The thrust of many today (be they ideological feminists, militant homosexuals, and so on) is the eradication of *masculinity* and *femininity* as outdated and outmoded concepts

Our Confusing Traditions

As we noted last week: to make matters worse, it's not as easy as pressing the "reset" button. Christian theologians and thinkers note that we should be very careful before running to America's more "traditional" and "conservative" visions of gender, marriage, and family life. If we're not careful, we can confuse our commitment to *sola Scriptura* (acknowledging the Scriptures alone as the highest authority in faith and life) with *sola Americana*.

We, as the Church, must confess that there has been historically significant, terrible, and at times even horrifying subjugation of women in our culture. Men have and continue to oppress and exploit women. Some of this oppression and exploitation is not only individual or familial, but also societal – woven into the institutional fabric of society. So what is the answer? Is the answer to foment a "war of the sexes"? Is the answer the radical redefinition of human sexuality, marriage, and family?

Our Confused Women, Young Women, and Girls

This absence of consensus within the Church and culture is both a cause and symptom of perhaps the most confused generation of women and young women in American history: women called to be women, with no clear understanding of exactly what that means.

THE SOURCE OF OUR ANSWERS: SCRIPTURE

So, how do we answer the question of gender? Of femininity?

To begin an answer to that question, let me again stress - as I did last week - that I want to approach it from the perspective of Scripture and Scripture alone. For many of us here this morning, that is a difficult challenge. We all struggle to realize God's vision for our callings as men, women, husbands, wives, and children. We all know those that we love living outside of God's plan. However, culture changes; God does not. In the words of theologian, Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:

"Confronted by the biblical evidence, we must make a vitally important interpretive decision. We must choose between two unavoidable options: either the Bible is affirmed as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, and thus presents a comprehensive vision of true humanity in both unity and diversity, or we must claim that the Bible is, to one extent or another, compromised and warped by a patriarchal and male-dominated bias that must be overcome in the name of humanity."⁴

⁴ Mohler, Albert. "A Call for Courage on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood." Retrieved 2/2010 from <http://www.crosswalk.com/1313855/>

In truth, and as we look toward Scripture, we will see that modern feminism isn't so modern after all. It goes back all the way to the dawn of time, to the Garden of Eden and we must return to that scene for answers to this question. With that in mind, let's turn to Genesis 1:26-28.

The Broader View: Genesis 1:26-28

This is the Word of God:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, ^[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

In these verses, God reveals three primary truths to us:

- God created humans. They are products of divine intent, not blind bio-chemical chance.
- God created humans in his image. We marred that image in the fall, but it remains.
- God created humans in his image, male and female – of equal dignity and worth.

The Closer View: Genesis 2:15ff.

Last week, we took a closer view of this creation event through the microscopic lens of Genesis 2:15ff. We won't read that again this morning. However, we will note the four conclusions that we drew from it – those that John Piper, a theologian that I hold in the highest regard, notes in his work with the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood:

- **God creates the man first**
God deliberately did not create Adam and Eve simultaneously. There is a primacy to Adam. It has nothing to do with his worth relative to the woman (Genesis 1:27 establishes the basis of their equality in dignity and worth: their dual creation in the image of God). However, it has everything to do with his function. Adam is the leader, the initiator. *Eve is the helper*. She is subordinate.

Now, I understand that a statement like this might be, for all the reasons mentioned before, offensive to our relativistic society, maybe even your own sensibilities. However, the Scriptures bear out this primacy. Paul notes that there is significance and consequences to Adam's creation before Eve in 1 Timothy 2:13.

- **God gives man the moral pattern**

Even before creating Eve, God entrusted the moral pattern governing creation to Adam (2:16-17). It was then Adam's responsibility to initiate, to lead - instructing his wife in the commandments of God. Instruction was not *solely* Adam's responsibility, for God desires that women teach as well in countless settings and ways. Again, the question is one of primacy. Adam, the man, bore the primary responsibility for spiritual instruction and therefore accountability.

Paradise Lost

Of course, Genesis 3 records how Adam – and we in him – failed in his responsibilities to love God by loving his wife. As a result, note that:

- **God interrogates the man first**

Only if Adam is in this primary position of leadership does it make sense that, at the fall, God first interrogated Adam – although Eve sinned first. He bore the primary responsibility for even her actions.

- **Satan attacks the woman first**

Finally, note that Satan's attack on humanity is on not only them as individuals, but also as a divinely established structure. He seeks to corrupt the marriage relationship by first deceiving the woman and then, through her, the man. It's an inversion, a perversion of not only a specific commandment but also an entire order.⁵

And what is the curse flowing from this rebellion? We read about it in Genesis 3 as well. Spiritually and physically, the ultimate consequence was death. And most of us know that the misery of our new estate consisted in a frustrated creation resulting in a lifetime of toil for the man; increased difficulty in childbearing for the women; and ultimately death to the serpent.

What we often don't realize is that our continued confusion and even contentiousness about the male and female identities and relationship stems from this pivotal event. Listen to these words of God to Eve (Genesis 3:16-17):

¹⁶ To the woman he said,
"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."

¹⁷ To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,'
"Cursed is the ground because of you;

⁵ Piper, John. "Manhood and Womanhood before Sin." Retrieved 2/2010 from http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByTopic/49/681_Manhood_and_Womanhood_Before_Sin
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through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.

There are two things of special note. First, notice the curse pronouncement: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (v. 16). Some theologians note that the Hebrew phrase here is nearly identical to another phrase in Genesis, only a chapter away (4:6).

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

In this passage, God warns Cain – the murderer of his brother, Abel – that sin desires to have him, but that he must rule over it. Piper notes:

Now the reason this is important to see is that it shows us more clearly what is meant by "desire." When 4:7 says that sin is crouching at the door of Cain's heart (like a lion, Genesis 49:9) and that its desire is for him, it means that sin wants to overpower him. It wants to defeat him and subdue him and make him the slave of sin.

Now when we go back to 3:16, we should probably see the same meaning in the sinful desire of woman. When it says, "Your desire shall be for your husband," it means that when sin has the upper hand in woman, she will desire to overpower or subdue or exploit man. And when sin has the upper hand in man, he will respond in like manner and with his strength subdue her, or rule over her.⁶

Paradise Regained

Thankfully, there is hope. We find a clear, concise expression of what the Gospel makes possible for men and women – as individuals and together - in Ephesians 5:22-33:

²²Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing^[b] her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."^[c] ³²This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³However,

⁶ Piper, John. "Manhood and Womanhood: Conflict and Confusion after the Fall." Retrieved 2/2010 from http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByTopic/49/680_Manhood_and_Womanhood_Conflict_and_Confusion_After_the_Fall/

each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

THE IMAGE OF PURE MASCULINITY: CHRIST

Thankfully, whereas Adam fails, Christ – the Second Adam - triumphs. He is the perfect expression of godly masculinity.

THE IMAGE OF PURE FEMININITY: CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

It might be surprising then that Christ, as the *God-man*, reflects something of femininity. However, remember that God created man (male *and* female) in his image and likeness. In his subordination to the Father, Christ shows women that submission can be something of incomparable beauty and love (see Philippians 2).

However, Christ not only evidences the respectful submission to which God calls women; He evidences the loving leadership to which God calls men. In other words, in the person of Jesus we see the end of the “war of the sexes” and find instead the peace of Christ.

The Essentials of Femininity

With that in mind, it bears mention that Christ-like femininity is primarily a question of essential Spirit-born character and divinely established responsibilities than specific lifestyle choices. If godly character and is present in increasing abundance, so too will a lifestyle reflecting it.

The Liberties of Femininity

I mention that because many of us in the Church confuse cultural tradition with Biblical teaching. We think that faithful women invariably spend their days baking bread,

The fact is that women have tremendous liberty to realize Christ-like femininity in a variety of expressions. Can true, Christ-like women work outside of the home? Yes. Can true, Christ-like women play hockey? Yes. Can true, Christ-like women be openly affectionate and warm with their husbands and children? I hope so.

True Christ-like femininity finds expression in a myriad of ways evidencing the character of and obedience to the commandments of Christ.

APPLICATION

Many of the applications from last week’s message apply this morning as well. I commend them to you via our website, if you were not here. We’ve posted the audio and I hope to post the sermon manuscripts this week as well.

However, let me close with this final encouragement. As a church, we’re presently in the process of reshaping our men’s and women’s ministries. In short, we want them to promote a deeper and more

pervasive understanding of God's complementarian vision for manhood and womanhood. In the coming weeks, you'll be hearing more about this. Please get involved. God renews his image within us not only as individuals, but – as we've seen - together.

PRAYER

Let us pray.