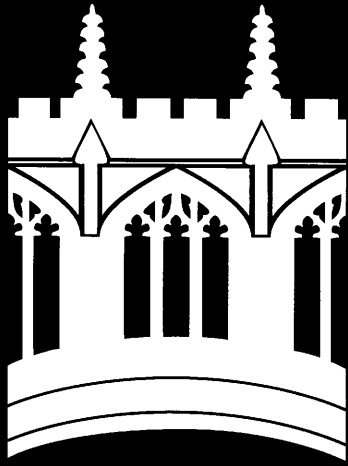


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# *Equality but not Symmetry*

**Women, Men and the Nature of God**

*by Michael Ovey*

**S**ummary: presuppositions matter in any debate. This paper looks at a presupposition sometimes held in the debate over women's ordination, that God could not by His nature restrict certain roles in churches to men. In the light of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, it will argue that this presupposition is mistaken.

"Feminists of the Jewish and Christian faiths are faced with a basic dilemma. Are they to be faithful to the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures, or are they to be faithful to their own integrity as whole human beings?"

(Letty M. Russell in *"Feminist Interpretation of the Bible"* p.137)

The full humanity of women is a heart-cry of feminist theology today, and rightly so. But as this quotation indicates, this legitimate concern has sometimes been perceived as hopelessly inconsistent with commonly held biblical interpretations of women's roles. It is suggested, for example, that we must choose between accepting restrictions on women's teaching authority and accepting the full humanity of women. The two are mutually exclusive, it might be said, because to exclude a person from a particular function amounts to denying that person's full humanity.

## **Humanity in the Image of God**

The idea of "full humanity" is obviously central to this position and has far-reaching consequences. Thus Margaret Farley remarks that the full humanity of women implies two principles: first, equality (women and men are to be treated as equally human and valued as such) and secondly, mutuality (humans are relational as well as autonomous and free). Biblically, full humanity is rooted in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 in which both women and men, uniquely in creation, are made in the image of God (see especially Genesis 1: 27). This truth is vital because our own uniqueness in creation as humans is bound up with the image of God: to understand ourselves fully as humans we must understand what it means to be made in the image of God. Only then can we answer the question 'What does it mean to be fully human?' Without answering that question it is extremely difficult to see how to evaluate any distribution of authority, whether between the sexes or otherwise.

This paper, therefore, shares the widely held starting point, that women share full humanity in the light of Genesis 1:27 and must be valued as such. The next step is to look at what the image of God involves. The bible teaches that God has revealed Himself to us not only in the Word of God written but also within creation. To a certain extent the image can be seen in human experience. However, as a result of the fall of Genesis 3, sin mars that image. Just looking at ourselves, or meditating on what we find within, does not give us an authenticated picture of what the image of God means, in spite of the general revelation available to us as humans. Our own experience, therefore, cannot safely be used either as a source or as an absolute criterion of religious truth. Christians of whatever persuasion face this predicament.

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## The Image of God in Jesus

We have to look at Jesus. For the biblical teaching is that he is the image of God sinlessly. He is the image both in his divinity and in his perfect humanity. Seeing him we do not need to ask to see the Father for we have seen him in Jesus (John 14:9) who reveals him to us since he is equally divine. Jesus is in this sense uniquely the image for he is descriptive of divinity. At the same time he is the image in that he is the perfect human, for he is sinless, the Adam who did not fall. As such he shows us what it means to be fully human, human as God intended. In him the image of Genesis 1 and 2 remains intact and unmarred. Jesus' humanity is normative humanity: he teaches us, both men and women, how to be fully human.

All this is important for the debate over women's roles due to the implications it may have for traditional interpretations of biblical texts relating specifically to women, such as Ephesians 5 or 1 Timothy 2. Of course many committed to the supremacy of scripture have concluded that those traditional interpretations are incorrect: the texts simply do not say what these interpretations suggest. But others accept the interpretations as accurate but feel that the texts themselves simply cannot be of God because they say something inconsistent with the nature of God. God, so it is said, simply could not say these things because he is not like that. This paper is concerned with examining this latter position. To assess its strength we must find out what God is like from elsewhere in the biblical witness, in order to see what could be in accord with the divine nature. The significance of Jesus in this is that he reveals to us both the nature of God and the nature of full humanity. In this way looking at the nature of God may illuminate what could or could not be conceivable for a humanity made in his image.

These two aspects of Jesus as the revealed image of God are the concern of what follows: first the divine nature of Jesus in relation to God the Father which is a question of the eternal character of the triune God, and secondly the perfect humanity of Jesus in relation to other humans.

## Jesus and God the Father

It is bedrock orthodoxy to see Jesus as fully divine: as divine as the Father is. Nevertheless Jesus and God the Father remain distinct persons. This is particularly clear in one aspect of their relationship: the obedience of Jesus. John's gospel, which has such striking incidents as Thomas' confession ("My Lord and my God"), also stresses the sonship of Jesus: he is the obedient son of God, the one who does his Father's will. This is poignantly clear in his prayers in Gethsemane, "... not my will but yours ...". This father/son language points to distinct persons in the godhead, as the church fathers observed. Moreover, because it is language of submission to another's will it points to a "subordination" between Father and Son, yet without derogating from the full equal divinity of Jesus. As the church fathers also found, it is difficult to capture in words this relationship between Father and Son. The word chosen here is subordination, which must be understood, following the fathers, as pointing to a subordination of function and not a subordination of being. Further, the father/son language appears to capture the eternal dynamics of this trinitarian relationship. The primacy of the Father neither derives from the Father enjoying a higher order of being than the Son nor confers such a superiority. The Word always has been and is equally divine.

This means there can be a permanent relationship between beings who have equal value but asymmetrical roles,

for the Son obeys the Father's will and the Father glorifies the Son. There is equality but not symmetry. Reference was made earlier to Margaret Farley's remark that full humanity involved equality and mutuality. So here with full divinity: there is the equal value and mutuality of two persons but their roles are not symmetrical. Yet since the triune God is a perfect being this must be a perfect relationship. It is moreover not incompatible with a relationship of love: the love of God the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father is a continual biblical theme. It is worth stressing that in the biblical view the Father's relationship with Jesus is one of both primacy and also love. The Godhead, therefore, shows us that relationships can exist between equals involving subordination but without being necessarily immoral or unloving.

## The Relevance of 1 Corinthians 11: 3. Headship as "source"?

For many a central text to support this view comes in 1 Corinthians 11: 3:-

"... [T]he head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." (RSV)

A crucial question in construing this passage is whether or not the word for head, *kephale*, imports a note of authority or whether it should simply be taken as meaning "source". Some scholars, including some evangelicals, take the view that source is the appropriate sense in that passage.

However, the source translation is not taken here for a number of reasons. It is certainly true that in extra-biblical literature *kephale* can simply mean source but when the Old Testament was translated into Greek *kephale* was used at times to import authority. The frequency of this usage is disputed, but the word can have that sense. The question, then, is whether it bears that (some would say unusual) sense in this instance.

The most obvious area of misgiving comes in the implications which the source idea has for the person of Christ. In what sense would Christ be equally divine if the Father was his source? In the other two relationships mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:3, the head is the source in a temporal sense. There was a time when men were not, and when women were not, but there came a point when their existence was derived from their "heads". But to use headship in this way with respect to the Father and the Son makes the Son into a lesser derived being - it would mean that once the Son was not, rather similar to Arian thought. This is at odds with other elements of the biblical witness which endorse the idea of the Son's obedience and submission to the Father.

Some would say, perhaps, that Paul is referring to the Son being eternally begotten of the Father, but this has been understood to refer not to an inferiority of being between the two but the Son's eternally existing relationship with the Father, one of eternal willing submission to the Father in which the authority notion is clearly present. Others would say, possibly, that the words of 1 Corinthians 11:3 refer to the sending of the Son in the incarnation. But the authority idea certainly is present in the incarnation. The Son on earth does the Father's will and it is not orthodoxy to believe that the Son ceased to be divine during the incarnation. If he did, that would suggest that divinity is not an essential attribute but is rather like a snake's skin, something which can be sloughed off leaving the same essential being behind.

Moreover, in Ephesians 5:21-24 Paul uses the head idea

in the context of the church's submission to Christ – this seems particularly clear in v.24 (again this interpretation is disputed). This text suggests *kephale* as importing authority would not be unparalleled in the pauline corpus.

Furthermore, in terms of the headship relationship between the man and Christ a note of authority would by no means be out of place. It does not follow from this that authority would therefore have to be the sense, but it does show that *kephale* as importing authority fits two out of the three pairs of relationships well whereas in at least one of the pairs (God – Christ) to take *kephale* as source is definitely inappropriate.

For these reasons the traditional interpretation of *kephale* in 1 Corinthians 11:3 is preferred here, so that the headship relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, and therefore also between husband and wife, is seen in terms of authority rather than simply source.

### **Father and Son are Equals in an Asymmetrical Relationship**

Looking at the relationship of Father and Son within the trinity shows that having different roles in a relationship does not imply necessarily an inferiority of being, even where that difference relates to authority and submission. To say that it necessarily does would logically falsify the eternal trinitarian relationship of Father and Son. That in turn would suggest that Jesus cannot give us accurate information about God and therefore casts doubt on him as the incarnate God.

In addition, relationships between equal beings without symmetry of function exist elsewhere than between women and men. Complementarity underlies Paul's discussion of the church as a body with different parts, yet there is no hint that one part is inferior to others. For Paul, different roles do not entail diminished value. Moreover, Paul enjoins obedience to church leaders and those in authority. In neither case is it suggested that leadership derives from or confers a superiority of being; rather what is at stake is God's right to delegate a degree of authority to others, and His delegates are not chosen because they are higher beings. We do not obey them because they are intrinsically higher beings (although their qualities may make obedience easier) but because of our quite independent obedience to a third party, God.

Is this simply endorsing "hierarchy"? The Father/Son relationship within the godhead does indicate a "hierarchy" of sorts but, crucially, not a hierarchy of being, rather of voluntary submission by an equal to an equal. Nor is it a hierarchy of exploitation but of perfection. It shows there can be "hierarchies" involving authority where the authority is not intrinsically evil. It is to the question of the nature of authority that we now turn, and it will be examined within the framework of Jesus' relationships with other humans.

### **Jesus' Exercise of Authority**

The gospels show Jesus as a person of authority, able to command nature, demons and, of course, people. His relationships with others are certainly "mutual" in that they are personal. They involve responsiveness and care but also authority. However, this is not a domineering authority. Jesus does not lord it as gentile rulers do and he instructs his followers that their pattern of authority is to be similarly distinctive too. The model for the exercise of authority is that of a humble servant, strikingly illustrated when he washes his disciples' feet. Christians are in a relationship of submission to Jesus, and yet his promise is that in this relationship we enjoy not a stunted life but life

in all its fulness. In that sense being subordinate far from diminishing human experience actually fulfils it. Authority as normatively revealed by Jesus is a relationship not of exploitation but of benefit, since authority is given for serving others, not aggrandising self.

At this point men and indeed the church must recognise that the texts on submission of wives have often been cited to justify authority which has been sinfully perverted from its servant purpose to enforce service on others. This is something that cries out for repentance. If men want to be biblical then they must live out John 13 rather than simply expecting their wives to observe those parts of Ephesians 5 that they as husbands find most congenial. That in itself forces a re-evaluation of stereotypical roles: part of the thrust of the footwashing in John is that Jesus assumes tasks which are genuinely menial. His authority is not used to try and make sure someone else does them. In terms of our present social structures this servant ideal is no doubt as unwelcome to men as the authority idea is to women: it forces them to look again at things like distribution of domestic labour, or the proper place for their career ambitions ("Do I genuinely want that promotion for the sake of my family?"). Furthermore, if one accepts the principle of "equality but not symmetry," then that equality must be recognised and defended in, for example, the workplace.

The general failure by men to use authority as God intended calls for repentance and change. But is this not one feature of the general human tendency to pervert authority, a tendency also found in the way men treat men or women treat women? Surely this does not mean that every authority relationship is intrinsically evil or sinful and should be abolished? Rather we should strive to purify those relationships which involve or require authority.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has not dealt with all the usual texts discussed in connection with the role of women. It has therefore not dealt with the question "Has God actually established equality but asymmetry between the sexes?". Rather it has looked at the question "Could God conceivably establish equality but asymmetry between the sexes?". Given his eternal nature as the trinitarian God, and given humanity in his image as shown to us by Jesus, it is clear that God could indeed establish asymmetry without denying the equality of the sexes. Indeed since we are made in the image of this trinitarian God equality and asymmetry in our relationships need not be surprising. (Galatians 3:28 is not a bar to this since its context is not church order or the wider social order but the universal availability of salvation through Christ, and we know that Paul did envisage sexual distinctives being preserved after salvation: marriage, for instance, continues.)

This is obviously relevant for the debate over women's ordination. Space precludes discussing all the relevant texts and issues – for example, what exactly ordination involves, or whether the same considerations apply to "sacramental" and pastor/teacher ministries. But it is clear that we cannot assume that God by His very nature must inevitably be in favour of ordination for both sexes in order to maintain their equal value, as some seem to assume. This means that in answering the question of ordination of women we cannot say, for example, that the traditional interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 confining ultimate responsibility for teaching in the church to men is so wildly out of character with other parts of the biblical witness that we can safely disregard it. Whether that interpretation is in fact correct is, of course, a separate question. The fear is that in the present climate an erroneous

presupposition controlling what God “must” say about ordination obscures what he actually has said.

It should also be stressed at this point that the traditional interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 is not a blanket ban on women’s ministry. It deals with only one aspect of ministerial work. The contribution of women already made and to be made in the future in ministry should not be allowed to disappear from view in the present debate, nor be devalued. On this point, again, men need to reconsider and repent.

We all agree that women and men are made “in God’s

image”, but our understanding of this phrase must be controlled by God’s self-revelation. At this point far from being trivial the ordination debate touches on the most fundamental ideas about God’s nature. Further, taking the image of God as the starting point throws into sharp relief the question “What is the kind of God you believe in?”. Perhaps one of the dangers in this debate is that inadvertently we create our own image of God which conforms to our own cultural presuppositions, rather than ensuring that our image of God is conformed to what Jesus reveals.

