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CHAPTER ONE

A PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH

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Introduction

Some women (like me) who take the Scripture seriously and have great passion for theology and evangelism feel frustrated, not knowing whether we are to just “shut up and be passive wimps” being instructed by our husbands at home (“Yes, dear.”) or can we use our minds and abilities to His glory? It seems there is very little “legal” ground for women. And yet wherever the church as a whole is enjoined to a task, we can reasonably assume women can take part, right? Evangelism—declaring the gospel—as well as apologetics—defending the faith from error/detractors—seems within the “legal” purview of women. . . . Excuse the ranting. . . . It’s a difficult issue. Sometimes I’m so discouraged I want to leave the church—but where could I go? No. It’s the best place to be, but frankly I don’t feel I fit in—I don’t like children’s ministries (I know I’m weird, but some women actually don’t like spending time with kids! I’m not good at it!) and in my church that’s about all there is in terms of ministry opportunities. I love my pastor and am grateful for the strong male leadership. I don’t know what the answer is. . . .

The note above from a personal friend represents the turmoil in the minds and hearts of many women and not a few men in the church today. The focus on the role and status of women in the culture at large, raised by the modern feminist movement, has evoked similar concerns in the church. The significance of the issue for the church is seen in the title of the cover story in *Time* magazine a few years back (November 23, 1992): “God and Women: A Second Reformation Sweeps Christianity.” Although that article dealt more with the changes taking place in the more liberal mainstream churches, as the note above indicates, conservative Bible-believing churches are not immune from this troubling question. It may simmer below the surface in private hurt and anger or erupt in contentious conflict. But it is there.

The issue may be felt more personally by women; however, it cannot be dismissed or ignored by men. My own (Bob) pilgrimage in relation to this question perhaps reflects that of many men reared in the evangelical church. The role of women in church ministry was simply not a burning question until it asserted itself in recent decades in conjunction with the modern women’s movement. The Bible taught man’s headship and forbade women to teach men in the church. I cannot recall a great deal of teaching or controversy that delved into the real meaning and significance of these biblical statements. For the most part they were taught and practiced in a straightforward way that focused on obedient structure or form.

The eruption of the women’s question into the limelight of our culture prodded me as a theology instructor who regularly taught the doctrine of the church to look more deeply into the scriptural teaching on the role of women in the church. What did these biblical passages dealing with women in the church really teach? What were the women who were asking hard questions really saying, and was there any biblical validity to the issues they raised? As noted in the preface, this probing was spurred on by women students who above all desired to obey God in their church ministry, but in the midst of confusing voices they were not sure what God’s Word said on the subject.

My study led me to the realization that the injunctions concerning the ministry of women in the church were not instructions dealing with a specific somewhat isolated issue. The relationship of men and women, as one might suspect from its importance to human life, is a prominent theme of biblical instruction. For me, therefore, the answer to the

question of their relationship in church ministry must be sought within an understanding of this entire teaching. In brief, along with affirming an order between man and woman in human community that recognized their created difference, I became more aware of the biblical teaching that they were created for a complementary relationship and more aware of what that really meant for their life and service together.

As a result, although I believe there is a rejection of biblical teaching on the part of many within the women's movement, I could not say that the biblical picture of God's design for the relationship of men and women was fully operative in most churches today. My participation in this work, therefore, represents part of my own process of hopefully coming not only to a fuller understanding of the biblical teaching, but also a greater enjoyment of God's plan for us as His people in this area of our life.

The significance of this issue makes it unlikely that it will go away. For the nature of man and woman and their relationship deals with the very essence of our humanity. Its scope touches every realm of thought concerned with human life, e.g., theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology. Most important, it is more than an academic debate over abstract truth. It inevitably and inescapably must be lived out in day-to-day relationships. The significance of this issue makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion of Piper and Grudem that "before the struggle ends, probably no Christian family and no evangelical church will remain untouched."¹

The Source of Our Problem

The question of the role and status of women in society and the church is, of course, not a modern question. It is the most fundamental question of human society—the relationship of man and woman—which has existed from the beginning. As such, it is not simply the question of "a woman's place in the church," but involves the bigger question of the divine design of the relationship of man and woman in creation and redemption.

In creation God declared that it was not good for man to be alone, so He created woman as his complement. They were created for each other, to need each other, and thus together to be one. In the creation of *adam* (mankind) in God's image, Scripture tells us that "He created

him; male and female He created *them*” (Gen. 1:27, italics added). Man and woman are different, “male and female,” “them”; but they are also one, “him,” i.e., one humanity, one *adam*.

The unity of man and woman according to the divine design is delightfully seen in the first recorded words of a human being in the Bible. At the sight of the woman whom God had made for him, the man cries out in rapturous exclamation, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23).² Something of the excitement over the relationship is captured by Cassuto in his sense of the opening words: “This creature, this time [that is, at last], is in truth a helper corresponding to me! Thus the man exclaims in his enthusiasm and heart’s joy.”³ “Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” is more than the obvious physical relationship. It is the language of the relationship of mutual loyalty and responsibilities.⁴ The man recognizes his unity with this new gift from God, giving her a name corresponding to his own: “She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Created in the very image of a loving God, man and woman lived for each other, bound together in love.

But this loving relationship was soon broken by sin. Rather than gratefully accepting their relationship to their loving Creator, both man and woman succumbed to the tempter’s lie that they could be like God themselves. Cut off from the only source of true love that gave them the ability to love each other with a self-giving love in likeness to God, they became hollowed, impoverished creatures. Instead of living out of the fullness of life with God’s self-giving love that grows as it is given to the other, man and woman, alienated from God, now exerted their energies to protect their false, inadequate, god-playing self.

Pitiably they tried to hide from each other by hastily constructing makeshift clothing from fig trees. As God approached, they used the bountiful trees of the garden that He created for their delight and nourishment as shields to hide from Him. When finally confronted, they defended their threatened selves by laying the blame for their actions on another—the woman pointed to the Serpent, and the man charged the woman and God who gave her to him.

This early biblical picture of the created unity and alienating effect of sin captures all subsequent human relationships. Created in the image of the triune God and still bearing the remnant of that image, we yearn for relationship. We know in our heart the truth of the saying, “*Ein*

Mann ist kein Mann” (“One man is no man”). We are social beings created to live in the bond of love, mutually giving ourselves one to the other. But the nature of sin as the self-centered assertion of self destroys relationships through strife and jealousy as we seek to play God and get our own way.

If this situation is true of all human relationships as a result of sin, it is most true of man and woman in relationship to each other. Created as complementary partners in need of each other, the pull toward unity is greatest between them. But the closer the unity, the more sin’s friction enters to bring tension and strife. Thus the saying of both men and women about the other sex, “You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.”

History continues to record this struggle, which will finally be overcome only when the presence of sin is banished from human relationships.

Focusing on the Issue

Posing the Right Question

In any problem, the way one poses the question is vital to arriving at the correct solution. Unfortunately, the question regarding women’s ministry in the church has not always been framed in helpful ways. At times the issue has been confused by posing the question in such limited terms that it fails to get to the real underlying issue involved. In other instances it is stated in misleading global questions that purportedly solve the issue, but in reality beg the question by again not facing the central issue.

An example of the first type of question is to frame the issue as one of women’s ordination. Should women be ordained? One’s answer to this question depends on the meaning and application of ordination. Is it limited only to the highest office of the church, i.e., elders/bishops, or can others be ordained for specific service within the congregation as the seven men in Acts 6 were? One’s answer to that question would surely affect one’s answer to the question of whether a woman can be “ordained.” Moreover, limiting the question to the issue of ordination does not address the more basic underlying question of the overall relationship of man and woman in the church.

More frequently, the topic of women's ministry is posed in broad questions that transcend the real issue and are therefore unhelpful and often misleading. Liefeld, for example, sees the entire issue revolving around the nature of Christian ministry. He writes,

The conclusions we reach with regard to women and ministry are inevitably affected by the way the questions are posed. It could be said . . . that there is only one question: Should Christian ministry, which by all testimony of Scripture is *spiritual* in nature, be limited by the gender of the minister, which is by nature a *human* distinction? That is a basic and straightforward way of putting it. It cuts through to the heart of the issue and sets the agenda without ambiguity.⁵

In actuality this question presupposes a position that itself needs careful evaluation. Is it not possible that church ministry could be both "human" and "spiritual"? After all, is not "spiritual" ministry done by those who are "human"? Without a biblical answer to this prior question, any conclusion based on the proposed question is surely a case of question begging.

In a somewhat similar vein, the question is often said to be one of spiritual giftedness: Are the gifts gender-specific? Since Scripture does not explicitly assign spiritual gifts to specific genders, the conclusion is drawn that there can be no difference between men and women in ministry roles. Such a question again fails to encompass all of the data and allow for further questions, which must also be considered before one can arrive at a solution. For example, even though spiritual gifts are not gender-specific, does this preclude their functioning in certain relationships? The fact that both men and women are gifted in teaching surely does not preclude some distinctions in the practical use of these gifts.

Even more unhelpful ways of framing the problem involve global questions that attempt to determine the issue solely on such broad biblical doctrines as personhood and redemption. According to Patricia Gundry, "There is but one central and watershed question in this conflicted issue: Are women fully human? All other questions and issues are peripheral to this question."⁶ Responding to Gundry's assertion, Gretchen Gaebelein Hull goes even further to ask: "Are Women fully redeemed?"⁷

To frame the questions in this fashion is, of course, to answer them. No one could possibly interpret Scripture as giving anything but a positive answer to both of these questions. Women in Christ are as fully human and as fully redeemed as men. But as significant as these questions may be to the issue, they overlook other biblical teaching related to the question at hand. The absence of distinctions at one level does not preclude their presence at another level. The fact that man and woman are fully human and redeemed manifestly does not remove all distinctions in life between men and women. If men and women are truly different and therefore complementary, to say that their differences cannot entail functional distinctions appears to assert more than can rightly be concluded from an equality of personhood and redemption.

This is not to deny the validity of the above questions. Specific questions such as the ordination of women are related to the issue of the role of women in church ministry. But their answers must be sought in further questions concerning underlying principles. Similarly, the issues of personhood and redemption have an important bearing on the entire question. All would agree that the controversy before the church involves those who are both persons and redeemed. But they are also men and women. So again, the question of the biblical teaching on men and women and their relationship must be addressed. If the Bible teaches that being human and redeemed eliminates all distinctions between men and women, then the matter of their roles in church ministry would appear to be solved, i.e., there can be no distinction of any kind. If, on the other hand, a distinction between the genders is still valid even among believers, then the categories of personhood and redemption do not close the issue. The basic issue in the question of women's ministry in the church is thus: Does God intend any role distinction between men and women in relation to ministry in the church?

Although this is the fundamental question in the present controversy, its answer and an understanding of the biblical picture of the role of women in church ministry must be sought in the context of other questions related to the total picture of New Testament church ministry. (1) What is the meaning and function of the biblical terms for church functionaries, e.g., elder, bishop, deacon, pastor, "minister," etc.? How did these people actually function as leaders in the church? (2) What is the "church" in relation to the question of ministry? Does it refer to all of our "church" functions (e.g., home gatherings, Sunday school, etc.)

or only “corporate” worship? What about so-called parachurch ministries—are they “church”? (3) What was the nature of the meeting of the New Testament church? Did it involve the participation of more people than our contemporary services? That is, did more people (men and women) have opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts when the church met together than they do today? Have we structured our usual church service with certain functions (e.g., preaching) so dominant (and often restricted to men) that only a few individuals actually minister, thereby excluding the ministry of women (and most men)? The issue of the place of women in the ministry of the church today is more than the question of whether or not there is a gender distinction. Since according to Scripture the church grows through the ministry of every member (men and women), the question is finally an understanding of God’s design for the complementary relationship of the ministry of man and woman in the church.

An Overview of the Positions

Although there is disagreement on some of the details of meaning and application, most interpreters agree on the central message of the primary passages dealing with the relationship of women and men both in the church and in the home. They are willing to acknowledge, for example, that there are several statements in the New Testament that instruct wives to be in submission to their husbands (e.g., Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1). Similarly, Paul’s prohibition against women teaching men, at least in some form, is also generally accepted (1 Tim. 2:12). The disagreement comes over whether these teachings are still normative for the church today.

The position that does not take the biblical teaching as normative for the church today is known as *egalitarianism*. Because it is generally included in the overall feminist stance, it is also described as the feminist position. According to this understanding, there are no distinctions between the roles of men and women in ministry; all functions and positions in church ministry are equally open to both genders. On the other side are those who see the biblical teaching of a distinction in roles between man and woman in the church (or in the home), who are commonly known as *complementarians*. This position has also been traditionally called *patriarchy* or *hierarchism*, although these latter terms are

more limited in meaning, emphasizing only the headship of man rather than the complementary contribution of the distinct role of woman.

Egalitarianism

Egalitarians, those who see no distinction between women and men in church ministry, are broadly divided into two camps in their interpretation of the Scriptures that teach a distinction between men and women either in the home or in the church. One group, generally associated more with liberalism, understands all of the Scriptures that draw a distinction between men and women in the home or church as simply expressing the prevailing patriarchal opinion of the writers' day. It was not God's perspective, but the opinion of the fallible culture-bound writer.

Most evangelicals reject this understanding, affirming the biblical teaching as authoritative.⁸ However, they restrict the apostles' teaching of distinct roles for women and men as applicable only to the particular historical situation addressed. For example, Paul's prohibition against women teaching or exercising authority over men in 1 Timothy 2:12 is related to a particular issue in the church of Ephesus at the time of its writing. Opinions vary as to the nature of the situation calling for this prohibition. Some see the apostle as teaching a temporary patriarchy as expedient for the sake of Christian testimony in the surrounding patriarchal culture. Others see specific issues such as the lack of women's education as the rationale for the prohibition.⁹ Although the explanations for the apostles' teaching vary, there is agreement that this teaching is not normative for the church at all times.¹⁰

Complementarianism

Contrary to egalitarians, complementarians understand the biblical passages dealing with men and women as teaching a permanent normative order between man and woman in the home and in the church. With regard to the question of men and women in church ministry, the apostles are interpreted as teaching an order that entails the leadership of men in the church. There is, however, considerable variation among complementarians as to how this is to be worked out in the practical functioning of men and women in church life.¹¹

At one end of the spectrum, some understand Scripture to teach that church leadership and the leadership of all public ministry is to be exercised by men. Women's participation in public worship is largely limited to group participation.¹² The prohibition of women ruling is interpreted as excluding women from such positions as choir director or Sunday school superintendent—in short, any church position that puts men under their authority.

A more common understanding of the meaning of the order between men and women in the church restricts women only from the office of pastor or elders, i.e., the teaching-ruling positions of the church. All other ministries and positions of authority are open to women.¹³ Perhaps the least restrictive view held by advocates of a biblical gender order in the church is that women can do anything as long as it is under male leadership. It would be permissible, under this view, for a church to appoint a woman preacher as long as her ministry was under the authority of men.

Arriving at a Solution

For the believer in the authority of Scripture, the solution to the question of the relationship of women and men in church ministry must be sought in the considerable scriptural teaching on God's design for men and women and their relationship. This involves both that which is directly related to the ministry of women and the total biblical picture of the nature and relationships of men and women. In addition, although Scripture alone is canonical, the natural disciplines of psychology and anthropology are also useful in our understanding of the nature of man and woman and their life together.

The biblical teaching directly related to the ministry of women in the church and the role of women in the church is central to our question. This includes texts giving explicit instructions relative to the subject. In addition, the whole life and practice of the New Testament church plays a vital role in determining the biblical answer to the question of the place of women in church ministry. If we assume that the apostles and the churches under their authority sought to implement the apostolic directives, then these examples of actual ministry are valuable in showing what the apostolic teaching looked like in its practical outworking in the church.

Although the meaning of the explicit biblical texts dealing with the

role of women in the church and the actual examples of women in ministry are central to the discussion of the role of women in the church, these can only be rightly understood in the context of the total picture of God's design for man and woman. The apostolic teachings and practices concerning the ministry of men and women in the church do not come as incidental or foreign elements thrust upon the new human community of the church. Nor is there any evidence that the apostles were bringing something radically different in God's design for the overall functional relationship of man and woman. The relationships of men and women in the church are clearly one with the general pattern of relationships discernible throughout Scripture.

Scripture, of course, contains many examples of sinful aberrations that must not be seen as part of God's pattern. There are also some changes that take place in the divine plan as a result of the progression of God's salvation history. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and the resultant universality of the priesthood of all believers bring about increased ministry for both men and women. Despite these changes, an underlying relationship pattern between man and woman is visible throughout biblical history. This total biblical picture of the nature of men and women and God's design for their life together as co-humanity is therefore essential as a background for the proper interpretation of the specific passages dealing with women's roles in the church.

An important element in this total biblical picture is an understanding of how men and women are designed by God to relate personally to each other. The issue of the role of women in the church is more than the questions of "what" with regard to the ministry of both men and women; it is also the question of "how." It is not enough to see the basic structure of relationships or a divine order between man and woman. An understanding of this order in terms of functioning relationships and attitudes must be fleshed out if men and women are to work together in harmony and fruitfulness in the church.

Foundational to this understanding is the biblical teaching of the complementary relationship of man and woman by creation. This complementarity means that two important realities are grounded in the very nature of all men and women: (1) They are different by nature, and (2) they require each other for fullness of their humanity. If such is the nature of man and woman by creation that they exist as co-humanity in a complementary relationship, this truth must find expression in all

of life, including church ministry.

The truth of complementarity raises questions for both the new egalitarian interpretation of women's ministry and the traditional understanding. For the former we would ask, If men and women are different, what differences does it make in the actual life of the church? How does the full equality of men and women in the church harmonize with their created differences? Could it not be possible that one gender is more suited for a particular function by God's design than the other? It does not seem to be adequate to simply assert equality without also dealing with differences and how these play out in practical functioning together.

But advocates of a traditional viewpoint of the leadership of men in church ministry must also deal with the principle of complementarity. Does the interpretation of Scripture that often limits the role of women in church largely to social activities and ministry with children square with this principle of the need of men and women for each other? If men and women are basically complementary in life, including spiritual life, is a larger contribution of women somehow necessary in the whole of church life, as in the family, for all to mature into the fullness of the new humanity of Christlikeness?

The Approach of This Book

In our search for the biblical understanding of the role of women in church ministry and how both men and women can function in a complementary way for the good of the church, we will begin by laying the foundation of the overall picture of the relationship of men and women. Parts 2 and 3 will present the most significant biblical teaching concerning man and woman and their relationship. The biblical picture will include what can be gleaned from direct instructions as well as practice from the Old Testament, the teaching and example of Jesus, and the early church.

In an attempt to further understand God's design for the complementary functioning of man and woman, part 4 will attempt to gain an understanding of the meaning of femininity and masculinity. Both the light of the special revelation of Scripture and the insight given through natural revelation in the observations of human life and behavior by social scientists will be brought to bear on this subject. With the assumption that history gives support to the natural pattern for man and

woman, part 5 surveys the relationship of man and woman within human societies throughout history.

This picture of the general pattern of the relationship of man and woman provides the background for the final major section, part 6, which focuses directly on the relationship and functioning of men and women together in the ministry of the church. The background of the total picture of the nature and relationship of men and women provides the picture of ministry together in a rich and necessary complementarity according to the divinely created order.