

**Side**

by

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Gender from a Christian  
Perspective

*Editor: Beulah Wood*

SAIACS Press

2007

Side by Side  
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## INSPIRATION

Men and Women Dependent on Each Other  
*(1 Corinthians 11:11)*



## NOTE FROM THE SPONSORS

### GREETINGS FROM PILGRIM PARTNERS

What a privilege it was to partner with God and with His people in planning and bringing into being the Side by Side conference.

It was exciting to see the way God worked out the large and small details of the conference. We are humbled as we think of all the help that was given us. What a blessing it was to hear the message of equality of men and women delivered with clarity and certainty. There was a beautiful variety and yet oneness as we worshiped and broke bread together.

All we can say is Hallelujah! Blessed be the Name of our God!

*Ellen M Alexander*

*Chairperson, Pilgrim Partners*

### ACKNOWLEDGING GOD'S GOODNESS

We praise God for the Side by Side conference, and now for the coordination needed for publishing this compendium of the conference papers.

It was important for us in UESI to endorse the conference as we have steadily worked through the relevant Bible passages to reach our understandings on the biblical equality of men and women and recommend equality of teaching and practice in our work with students. The conference has already helped reinforce this truth and the book can take it further.

May this production be blessed by God for the growth of justice among Christians in India, and enable us to increase the justice for women in all communities of our country.

*Mathew Verghese*

*Former General Secretary*

*Union of Evangelical Students of India, UESI*

### **ENDORSEMENT OF SIDE BY SIDE**

The Asian context is fertile ground for new egalitarian paradigms into Scripture, gender and Christian service. Significantly, Side by Side represents an international solidarity of Christians from many disciplines who affirm a biblical foundation for gift-based, rather than gender-based service. As an emissary for biblical equality and justice for more than ten years, I have been deeply nourished and empowered by these leaders. I thank God for their scholarship, pioneering vision, faithful Christian service, and intellectual depth. They live out the Gospel side by side, and model the love of Jesus for us all.

*Mimi Haddad*

*President, Christians for Biblical Equality*

*www.cbeinternational.org*

### **A GREETING FROM SAIACS**

With this compendium of papers from the Side by Side conference, you have reached a new level of potential impact from the already successful conference in February 2007.

The conference with international speakers and participants, yet placed here in south Asia, brought out many issues that concern us theologically, and allowed the dozens of people who attended the conference to think hard about both theory and practice. Now this book will make the papers available in hundreds of homes and libraries and enable more people to consider the issues.

I personally, am very keen that we teach equality for women and men. Inequality is so pervasive that it has affected my own daughters and made a marked difference in their lives and careers. My wife and I long to encourage more equal and respectful treatment of women and girls in our own state, in our theological colleges, among Christians, and in society in general.

May this book serve well in promoting justice and biblical equality.

Yours very sincerely,

*Dr F. Hrangkhuma*

*Principal, SAIACS, www.saiacs.org*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Planning a conference is always a great deal of work, and Side by Side was no exception. For the key organisational role, we thank Pilgrim Partners, Bangalore, and especially the President of Pilgrim Partners, Ellen Alexander. We gratefully thank three further organisations that sponsored the conference: Union of Evangelical Students of India, Christians for Biblical Equality, Minneapolis, and South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, SAIACS, at whose campus the conference was held.

We thank also George Korah, General Manager SAIACS Press, who initiated the preparation and publishing of this book.

However, the core of gratitude goes to the conference contributors who offered their papers and then spent many hours to rework them for publication. Thank you to every one of you.

We pray this volume will be enormously beneficial to the promotion of justice for women and girls, improved communication and respect in thousands of families, better pastoring for the needs of families and women in the churches, and greater use of the talents and gifts of women and girls in the work of the Gospel in south Asia.

*Beulah Wood, Editor*

*Bangalore*

*September 2007*



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## 2

### GENDER FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE: SOME REFLECTIONS FROM THE TRINITARIAN NATURE OF GOD

*Richard Howell*

It is a universal fact that the human race exists as female and male, and humankind would not exist if there were either no women or no men. It is also a fact that, with the exception of some matriarchal cultures such as Garos and Khasis in Meghalaya and of the Nair community of Kerala, India, most societies throughout human history openly or tacitly considered men superior to women. But are women deficient? Is there a reason to subjugate them?

The social world women inhabit is not constructed for their benefit; it is a world made for males in which females often feel pressurised to conform through discrimination and oppression.

It is the same in churches in India. We have largely failed to offer both women and men a Biblically satisfying version of who they are in relation to each other, and a framework of meaning within which to structure their relationships in family, church and society. Evangelicals have habitually not been able

to think their way theologically out of the constrictions of culture in their views of women and men.

### **THE ISSUES**

Though the debate about gender roles includes questions about the role of women in ministry, most people think more deeply about it in terms of their marriage and family. The debaters are in two camps: the complementarians and the egalitarians. Complementarians stress male headship and female submission. Egalitarians prefer to talk about biblical equality and mutual submission. Most of the controversy between these two groups stems from differing interpretations of biblical passages. In particular, differences relate to what is culturally relative and what constitutes trans-cultural truth in the Scriptures.

### **THE PERSONAL GOD**

Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at the well why she should worship God, not at this mountain or that, but in spirit and truth. He said, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). As spirit, God is invisible. The risen Christ explained to the astonished disciples that a spirit or ghost "does not have flesh or bones", as they saw he had (Luke 24:39). Further, as spirit, God is personal. In the biblical teachings, the divine Spirit exhibits personal capacities of self-consciousness and self-determination. In our understanding of God as personal, we must not project on God our finite, physical limitations.

God is person while above the physical aspects of both maleness and femaleness. However, since God created both female and male in his image, we may think of both as like God in their distinctly non-physical, personal male and female qualities. As we shall see later in some detail, because God is essentially personal, he may be even superpersonal or tripersonal, as indeed he revealed himself to be, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As spirit, God is living and active. "We have put our hope in the living God" (1 Timothy 4:10). The God of Abraham, Sarah, Aquila and Priscilla actively creates, sustains and covenants with people. He sent his Son into the world, provides the atoning sacrifice, raises Christ from the dead, builds the church,

and judges all justly. The God of the Bible is an active architect, builder, freedom fighter, advocate of the poor and oppressed, and empathetic counsellor, a suffering servant, and a victorious deliverer. So “God is spirit,” means that God is one invisible, personal, and active being.

Since God is beyond sexual distinctions, masculine and feminine metaphors for God do not mean that God is male or female. This is a simple biblical truth with important implications for our consideration.

If God is beyond sexual distinctions, then why is language about God gendered? Language about God is gendered because it develops from the realm of creatures, including humans.

The nature of God tells us nothing about what it means to live as female in distinction to male and vice versa. We cannot use God-language to say what humans are like. God does not model gender identity.

Since God is beyond sexual differences, there is nothing in God that can correspond to the specifically fatherly relation that a man has toward his offspring. A human father can in no way read off his responsibilities as a father from God the Father.

There is nothing in God that is specifically feminine, and nothing in God is specifically masculine. Therefore, nothing in our notions of God entails duties or prerogatives specific to one gender; all duties and prerogatives entailed in our notions of God are duties and prerogative of both women and men.

Women and men share femaleness and maleness not with God but with animals. They image God in their common humanity. For this reason, we ought to resist every construction of the relation between God and femininity or masculinity that privileges one gender.

We should avoid the temptation to make idols out of biblical words. We start the work of interpreting the scripture by studying the inspired words, but the concepts conveyed by those words two millennia or more ago may not convey the same concept today. We may need to explain biblical figures of speech non-figuratively, and coherent teaching from the Scriptures about God may call for terms that are more technical.

The truth that God transcends leads our meditations beyond the physical, visible, audible, changing, temporal world to the God who is, acts, and speaks. Failure to understand God's transcendent being can turn our worship and service into idolatry.

### **SEX AND GENDER**

We have considered above the implications of our belief that God is neither male nor female. Our God-language develops from the realm of creatures, including humans. How then do we understand the important issue of sex and gender?

Women's and men's gender identities follow from their specific female or male bodies. We need the distinction between "sex" as a biological category (genes, hormones, external and internal genitalia, etc.) and "gender" as a socio-cultural word (learned characteristics, personality traits, behavioural patterns, etc). This helps account for differences in the notions of "masculinity" and "femininity" in different cultures over time and space. The different views of how men and women behave in different cultures show that gender difference and identity is given not only by our biology but also from the views of our society. It is the result of interaction between women and men within a given culture. Gender views change, while being male or female does not change. Furthermore, we do not need to freeze the meaning of male gender or female gender to a permanent definition for all cultures, for that would freeze into place one particular cultural understanding of gender identity and seek to impose it inappropriately in changing situations. What then is our model of human relationships? This brings us to consider the interpersonal relations of the triune God.

### **THE TRINITARIAN NATURE OF GOD**

Having a right concept of God is basic for both our belief and our practical Christian living. The starting point for the doctrine of the Trinity is the self-identity of God in revelation. God is as he reveals himself to be. The New Testament proclaims the relationships of the Father, the Son and the Spirit as acting agents, three persons in one God. We conceive these persons as "subjects of the one, common divine substance, with

consciousness and will". Each of the persons in the Trinity functions harmoniously in an unbroken fellowship of love with the others.

If the Godhead is a model for humans, the crucial question for our consideration is, Are the relations between the divine persons asymmetrical, non-egalitarian, hierarchical? The answer to this question would appear to be yes, if we consider that the Father is the "origin," if the Son is "generated," and if the Spirit "proceeds." However, Jürgen Moltmann has suggested that we distinguish in the Trinity between the level of "constitution" and the level of "life." The one level speaks about how persons are constituted and the other how they relate to one another.

At the level of the constitution of the divine persons, the Father is the "first" because he is the source of divinity. Without such a source, divinity would collapse into one undifferentiated divine nature. The Father gives all divine power and all divine glory to the Son.

At the level of relations, the Son not only "comes from" and "goes to" the Father, but the Father has "given all things into his hands" and "glorifies the Son" (John 13:1 following, 17:1).

As the source of divinity, the Father therefore sets up the mutual relations between the persons in an egalitarian rather than hierarchical way. All persons are equal in power and equal in glory. At the level of the life of the Trinity, the Father is not "the First," but "One among the Others" (Moltmann).

We must now also consider the ministries of the Triune God to people in space-time history. The very idea of mission is at the heart of trinitarian belief. In love, the Father sent the Son. Jesus Christ came into the world to make human beings, created in the image of God, live with one another and with God in the same relationship of self-giving as that in which the divine persons live with one another.

We need to differentiate two areas in our thinking. We have a sexed body which gives our identity as male or female, a given and not subject to change, and we live within a view (provided by our society) of how males and females (should) behave, and this can change. Along with this, we have the promise from the one triune God in whose image all human beings are created of peace between women and men.

**BIBLICAL PASSAGES**

Let us now reflect theologically on three biblical statements on gender: Genesis 1 and 2, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, and Ephesians 5:21-33. We will interpret the text from within the framework of an egalitarian understanding of the Trinitarian relations and from the egalitarian perspective of such central assertions as the one found in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ."

**FEMALE AND MALE**

In Genesis we read; "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (verse 28). Human beings exist in a duality of male and female; there are no generic humans, only male or female humans. Though the content of masculinity and femininity may vary with culture and their boundaries may at times be blurry, the marks of maleness and femaleness are indelibly inscribed in our human bodies. This is basic to Genesis 1 and 2.

But here is a question: Does not Galatians 3:28 teach a contrary lesson that in Christ there is "no longer male and female," denying Genesis 1? Some have argued that Paul's ideal, which will be fully realised at the eschaton of the future, is "a state of androgyny, a cancellation of gender and sexuality." However, the source of unity for Paul is not some abstract "One" which erases particularity and difference, but a single and differentiated body of the crucified and resurrected Christ given for all (1 Corinthians 10-12; cf. Ephesians 4:11-14). What Christ erased was not sexed bodies, but some important culturally implied norms attached to sexed bodies, such as obligation to marry and procreate and the prohibition on women from performing certain functions in the Church. Oneness in Christ indicates a community of people with sexed bodies and distinct gender identities, not some abstract unity of pure spirits or de-gendered persons.

Some Jewish males greeted each new day by praying. "Lord, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." Christianity enlarged and enhanced the position of women. Our faith in Christ transcends these differences and makes all believers one in Christ. The Church in India needs to make sure

that that we do not impose distinctions that Christ has removed. Because all believers are heirs, no one is more privileged than or superior to anyone else. Paul's elaboration of oneness found in Christ leaves no room for those in Galatia, nor for us twenty first century readers, to practise any discriminatory or oppressive treatment of fellow believers in the light of gender, ethnic, or economic particularities.

We learn from the doctrine of the Trinity that the three persons are not reduced to a common undifferentiated divine nature. Analogously, one gender should neither be transformed into another (say femininity into masculinity) nor melted into a new synthesis. As we emphasize the biological duality alongside changing social pictures of gender identities, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fundamental equality between men and women. When we uphold duality, we risk affirming inequality.

Some say men and women are equal because they are the same. We both reject sameness and affirm equality between women and men. We seek to change the social practices in which the presumed inferiority of women is embodied and perpetuated – and even perpetuated when people say men and women are equal.

### **COMMON WHOLENESS**

Coming from different sides, women and men need to make a journey into a common wholeness, alongside the biological difference that makes for two kinds of wholeness. Though both can only become whole together, the wholeness is specific to each. At times, the identity of women is threatened, requiring "boundary maintenance" and "identity formation." This is the reason for reserving certain privileges for women, and in India particularly for Dalit women.

Explaining the relationship between women and men "in the Lord," the Apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 11, "Neither is woman without the man nor man without woman" (verse 11) (KJV). The evidence Paul gives that neither gender is without the other comes from bodily creation, "For just as woman came from man so man from woman" (verse 12). Judith Gundry-Volf observes that Paul has two readings of creation in 1 Corinthians

11, one from the patriarchal culture, which finds hierarchy in creation (verses 8-9), and the other from the perspective of the new life in Christ, which finds equality in creation (verse 12). In the Lord, the difference of the sexed body is not erased; to the contrary, this difference grounds the interdependence of women and men.

Paul uses “not without”. Woman is “not without” man and man is “not without” woman, suggesting a complex and dynamic understanding of gender identity that corresponds to the nature of identity that we have encountered in the doctrine of Trinity.

The distinct persons in the Trinity are internally constituted by the indwelling of other persons in them. The Father is Father in no other way than in the dynamism of his relationship to the Son and the Spirit. Analogously, the Pauline “not without” suggests the identity of one gender cannot be thought of “without” the other. Men cannot be defined simply as what “women are not”; women cannot be defined simply as “what men are not.” To be a woman means to be a human of female sex who is “not without man”; to be a man means to be a human being of male sex who is “not without woman.” A self-enclosed identity constituted in pure opposition to the other would do violence to the identities of both women and men, which grow out of the inevitable interconnectedness of our social images of ourselves.

In a world where one sex seeks to dominate the other, much like human relations in general, relations between sexes all too often lack respect and love and at times sink to enmity. Pursuing and preserving distinct gender identities and building identities that include the other, is the way forward.

But why pursue these strategies, especially in the presence of enmity? Why not insist on one’s own pure identity? Why not simply disregard the identity-needs of others? The answer to these questions again lies in the self-giving love, which characterizes the Trinity. The Son eternally gives himself to the Father by seeking to “glorify” the Father and make space in himself for the Father. The same is true of the Father and the Spirit. When the God of love enters the world of human enmity, we see the historical self-sacrifice of Christ as the model

for relations between humans. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to make her holy" (Ephesians 5:25-26).

Self-giving is not loss of self. It means to move toward the other in order to "nourish" and "tenderly care," in order to make "without blemish" and clothe in splendour" (verses 29, 27). Self-giving means the opening of the self for the other, who remains the other and is not transformed into a non-essential extension of the self, and can be experienced as the love of the self (verse 28). In the twofold sense of seeking to make the other blossom and of creating space in the self for the other, women and men should grow into the likeness of the great self-giving God of love.

Only through the power of self-giving love can a new community of women and men emerge, where distinct but dynamic gender identities that are "not without" the other will be fashioned and re-fashioned in peace. Is any other way possible than that modelled by the self-giving love of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ?

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN IN MINISTRY**

Christ offers salvation equally to women and men. God gives The Holy Spirit equally to women and men. Women and men equally receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit gives the gift of being a pastor to a woman, who are men to oppose it? We should take care not to oppose the Holy Spirit of God.

#### **CONCLUSION**

If we can even begin to comprehend the nature of God's love for his people, the contentious questions of submission, headship, and gender roles may become less divisive. If human love can even begin to approximate the self-sacrificing love of Christ, our models of marriage may begin to change.

The time is right for egalitarians and complementarians to work together to further the cause of Christ and advance the gospel of life in a culture increasingly marked by violence, decay, and death.

The key to success is self-sacrificing love as modelled by the

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The key to success is self-sacrificing love as modelled by the

Trinitarian love of God. By exercising love within this debate and within our marriages, ministry and society we present a unified and compelling picture of Christ's love.