

An Exploration of Evangelical Exegetical and Hermeneutical Differences Over Gender Hierarchy

This paper addresses the two fundamental 'big picture' issues that are set for the first session and which are often raised in relation to differences among evangelicals concerning Scripture's teaching on men and women: (1) whether or not Scripture teaches some form of gender hierarchy or "male headship"¹ as God's purpose in creation and so applicable in all times and places and an interpretive key for some of the individual texts explored later and (2) more general issues of biblical and theological hermeneutics (with some arguing that those evangelicals who deny such teaching have a flawed hermeneutic which, among other things, will lead to acceptance of same-sex relationships).

What follows is focussed on the first of these questions. Although I will touch on matters of concern in relation to (2), especially in the Introduction and Section Three, I believe the question of whether evangelicals denying gender hierarchy have a flawed and somehow un-evangelical approach to Scripture is best addressed not in the abstract and theoretically but concretely by reflection on how Scripture is actually being interpreted and that a similar question must also be asked of those who affirm gender hierarchy.

Introduction

My basic conviction is that Scripture is, in the words of the CEEC Basis of Belief – “the wholly reliable revelation and record of God's grace, given by the Holy Spirit as the true word of God written. The Bible has been given to lead us to salvation, to be the ultimate rule for Christian faith and conduct, and the supreme authority by which the Church must ever reform itself and judge its traditions”.² I believe that church traditions which restrict women's ministry and theological justifications which are offered for such restrictions (such as “the principle of male headship in the family and in the covenant community”³) are judged negatively by the true word of God written. It follows that any Church which takes Scripture as its supreme authority but refuses to recognise God's call to an office or welcome the exercise of spiritual gifts on the grounds of a person's gender therefore needs to reform itself. It must do so not in order to conform to society but in order to conform to Scripture. Rather than claiming that sin “inclines women to resist limitations on their roles”⁴ and that biblically “some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men”,⁵ I believe that Scripture places no such restrictions and that it is sin which leads people to insist women must have “limitations on their role” simply because they are created by God as women.

Section One seeks to highlight the major flaws in the argument for “male headship” in the order of creation and thus as a basis for restrictions on women's ministry and to demonstrate that Genesis does not teach this alleged principle but rather a non-hierarchical equality and mutuality that has been disrupted by human sin. *Section Two* briefly examines whether, when read in the context of the whole canon, especially Paul's teaching in 1 Cor (2.1) and 1 Tim (2.2), Genesis must nevertheless be held to teach gender hierarchy. *Section Three* summarises the case that contemporary defences of the hierarchical view depart from its expression in tradition and rarely follow through their logic in

¹ The phrases 'gender hierarchy' and 'male headship' are used interchangeably in what follows

² http://www.ceec.info/basis_of_belief.htm

³ The Danvers Statement, Affirmation 5, at <http://www.cbmw.org/Danvers>

⁴ The Danvers Statement, Affirmation 4.

⁵ The Danvers Statement, Affirmation 6.

application (3.1) before returning to the wider hermeneutical issues concerning how we read and interpret these texts (3.2) and raising some practical questions about the way forward (3.3).

Before turning to Genesis, it is important to note that Scripture nowhere speaks of ‘headship’ as a concept. That is not, of course, to say that such a doctrine cannot be in any sense ‘biblical’ (the terminology of ‘Trinity’ or ‘substitutionary atonement’ is similarly lacking within the biblical text) but, given the strong claims sometimes made in relation to the biblical basis of these beliefs, it is important to remember this basic fact. The language of ‘head’ does not of course appear in Genesis 1-3 in discussion of the original creation and it is used metaphorically only seven times in the New Testament, in three Pauline letters.⁶ Only two of these (1 Cor 11.3 and Eph 5.23) relate to the relationship of men and women and the latter certainly and the former possibly refers to husband and wife rather than men and women generally. What The Danvers Statement calls ‘the principle of male headship’ therefore has very little to work with if it is to be tied to the biblical use of the language of ‘head’.

Undoubtedly a major plank in the argument of those who do believe in ‘the principle of male headship’ is a reading of the opening chapters of Genesis which roots this principle in created order. Doriani, a supporter of the principle, in his survey of the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 notes in relation to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* that ‘Nineteen of its twenty-two authors argue for their position on the basis of creation or the order of creation, and they do so in twenty-one of the book’s twenty-six chapters, on at least eighty-one pages’.⁷ Similarly, The Danvers Statement has 13 biblical citations from Genesis 1-3 and 7 from Pauline letters which refer to these chapters. It is therefore clear that these chapters are crucial to this debate and need careful scrutiny.

Section One – Male headship in creation according to Genesis?

(1.1) Genesis 1 and Genesis 3: Original equality and post-lapsarian male rule in marriage

No serious scholar argues that Genesis 1 teaches any form of gender hierarchy or male headship. The author, although clearly interested in issues of rule and governance (cf 1.16, 18, 26, 28), refuses to use such language for male-female relationships. There is also no desire to distinguish separate and distinct “roles” between the man and the woman. Instead, male and female are portrayed as ruling together over the rest of creation. They do so because they are both created ‘in the image of God’. Although Paul in 1 Cor 11 only refers to man as ‘the image and glory of God’ (1 Cor 11.7), not even the most ardent contemporary defenders of patriarchy and headship deny that women too are in God’s image⁸ and that the first chapter of Genesis shows a fundamental equality in creation between men and women. As Wayne Grudem states, ‘Men and women share equally in the

⁶ 1 Cor 11.3; Eph 1.22, 4.15, 5.23; Col 1.18, 2.10,14.

⁷ Doriani, “History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2,” 258 n180.

⁸ Chrysostom, in the fourth century, apparently claimed that woman no longer had God’s image (“The “image” has rather to do with authority, and this only the man has; the woman has it no longer.....’, *Discourse 2 on Genesis 2*, quoted in Clark, *Women in the early church*, 35.). Although a minority view, this has appeared at various times in Christian history. See, for example, Horowitz, “The Image of God in Man - Is Woman Included?.” Aquinas argues that “The image of God in its principal signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman...But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature....” ([ST Iq93, a4, ad1](#)).

tremendous privilege of being in the image of God...Anyone preaching or teaching on manhood and womanhood has to start here – where the Bible starts – not with our differences, but with our *equality* in the image of God'.⁹ The problem, as we will see, is that Grudem then goes on to undermine this calling as co-equals by creating a hierarchy other than that between God and humans or humans and the rest of creation, a hierarchy of rule within humanity which subordinates women to men and thus prevents them from fully realising this foundational calling to rule together as equals over all of creation.

Just as there is no contemporary voice denying equality between men and women based on Genesis 1, no serious scholar disputes that Genesis 3 shows the pattern of male-female relationships as among those which are disfigured and disordered as a result of humanity's sin. There is first the recrimination between the man and the woman when faced with God's questions, with the man blaming the woman and, indirectly, God: 'The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it' (3.12). Then there is God's judgment which includes these words to Eve – 'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (3.16). The language of 'desire' may well refer to a desire to dominate, as Susan Foh argues, noting the close parallel with 4.7.¹⁰ However, that desire to dominate does not necessarily imply (as Foh claims) an original proper subordination (it can just as easily be read as a rejection of original equality and mutuality). Nor does it in some sense validate the rightness of man's post-lapsarian rule.¹¹ Most commentators rightly see the description of the husband's rule (note this relates to husbands and wives not men and women generally) as a negative consequence of the Fall and not as something commendable.¹² Although it is theoretically possible that this is a pattern of mis-rule which distorts an original proper hierarchical rule, this would require such a proper ordering and structure of authority between man and woman or husband and wife to be clearly inserted between this verse in chapter three after the Fall and the original fundamental equality and shared rule of men and women over creation which was discussed above in relation to Gen 1.26-27. It is, therefore, clear that the interpretation of Genesis 2 is crucial in determining whether or not Genesis teaches some form of 'male headship' and limitation on women in relation to men.

(1.2) *Genesis 2: Male rule and authority as part of God's good creation?*

The first major hurdle that is faced by those arguing for 'male headship' in Genesis 2 is that Genesis 3.16 is the first explicit reference to any relationship of rule or authority in the relationship between the man and the woman. In contrast to Genesis 1, with its various references to rule and governance

⁹ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*, 26, 28.

¹⁰ Foh, "What is the Woman's Desire?." online at http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Articles-Books/Foh-WomansDesire-WTJ.pdf

¹¹ This distinction between the good and weak parts of Foh is also drawn by Hess at Hess, "Equality with and without innocence: Genesis 1-3," 92..

¹² Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 58-80 provides a detailed discussion of six possible interpretations before advocating his own, seventh, reading of this text. A helpful summary of his view of headship, submission and equality (where he proposes five views for these verses) is online at <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/books/wim/wim13dav.htm>; http://www.andrews.edu/~davidson/Publications/Women%20in%20Ministry/headship_submission_equality_scripture.pdf

within creation, Genesis 2 lacks this terminology. This blatant omission points, *prima facie*, to this issue not being a major concern of Genesis 2 and this form of relating between male and female as a mark of the fallen world rather than the good created order.

Despite this lack of textual clues that Genesis 2 is concerned with issues of authority and rule, the chapter is frequently appealed to by those who defend 'different roles' (ie restrictions on women's ministry) and 'male headship'. This approach is even followed by many whose biblical hermeneutic generally makes them cautious about drawing theological truths or moral absolutes from biblical narratives (such as that found in this chapter), preferring to look to more explicitly didactic genres and concrete commands. Such didactic and command forms are of course present in the teaching about men and women made in God's image and called to rule in Gen 1.26ff. Genesis 2 also provides such a framework for interpretation of the narrative with its crucial penultimate verse – "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2.24), a verse frequently cited in the New Testament. In other words, the story of the creation of woman in Genesis 2 does not end (despite the impression given by some 'headship' readings of it) with a universal lesson for male-female relationships – "For this reason man will be head of woman and rule over her and she is created to be subordinate to him and live under his authority" – or even a similar lesson for the proper structure of a marriage. Rather, its purpose and rationale is clearly focussed on explaining the institution of marriage and its (re-)union of male and female as husband and wife. Given this lack of textual evidence for such a concern, great care should therefore be taken in appealing to elements of the narrative to defend any 'male headship' view or some creation order of male-female hierarchy, especially if those elements claimed to signal some role-differentiation or hierarchy illuminate (or are even necessary for) the clearly stated purpose of the narrator in 2.24.

There are, nevertheless, three aspects of the narrative in Genesis 2 which are often cited in support of gender hierarchy and each of these needs to be noted and weighed in turn.

First, there is the astonishing declaration that something in creation is 'not good', which is especially stark after the constant refrain of Genesis 1: 'The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."' (Gen 2.18). Here we have a clear designation that God seeks to provide the man with a 'helper' and that, some have argued, is evidence of male headship.¹³ Within the tradition this role of being a helper is often clearly seen as in some sense an inferior position. So Calvin writes of women, in relation to this verse, as "nothing else than an accession to the man... in the second degree...created in the image of God...".¹⁴ In fact, however, the language of 'helper' says nothing about inferiority or authority or rule or subordination as is evident from the fact that of the 21 uses in the Hebrew Bible, no less than 16 describe God as 'helper' of Israel. As Davidson notes, 'never in Scripture does the word refer to a subordinate helper (unless Genesis 2 is seen as an exception to the consistent usage elsewhere)' but rather it is 'a relational term, describing a beneficial relationship, but in itself does not specify position or rank, whether of

¹³ So Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*, 36-7.

¹⁴ Calvin, Commentary on Genesis 2.16 at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.viii.i.html>. Augustine famously could only think of procreation as a reason for woman being made as man's helper – [Literal Commentary on Genesis, Book 9, Chpt 5](#), an emphasis repeated in Aquinas – [ST I q92 a1](#)

superiority or inferiority'.¹⁵ Grudem himself makes a similar claim, noting that the word 'cannot settle the question of superior or inferior authority or rank'.¹⁶

In fact, as Grudem again also notes, this verse reaffirms the fundamental equality of male and female (also perhaps implicit in the failure of the animals to provide the necessary help) in that the woman God creates is to be 'suitable for him', a phrase which points to equality without hierarchy and strongly supports the conclusion that, although clearly showing that the woman is different from the man (or else she would not be much help!¹⁷), this verse and phrase 'in no way implies a male leadership or female submission as part of the creation order'.¹⁸ Of course, this designation is also a crucial element in explaining what the chapter seeks to illuminate i.e. why the man leaves and cleaves to his wife: he needs her help.

Second, there is the 'naming' of the woman in verse 23. A quite astonishing amount of weight has been placed on this verse in many theologies of headship and yet it is much too fragile a foundation on which to build. In terms of the biblical text itself, there is both no explicit teaching that links naming to having authority over the one named and no appeal is ever made to this verse and Adam's 'naming' of the woman in any other part of Scripture. There are a number of more specific textual and hermeneutical problems with seeing this as teaching some form of gender hierarchy. *First*, as argued by a number of scholars both non-evangelical (eg Tribble) and evangelical (eg Grenz), the verse is not obviously a standard form of supposedly authoritative 'naming', as perhaps shown by the lack of the Hebrew noun for 'name'. On this understanding such 'naming' only occurs after the Fall and the expulsion – when she is given the name 'Eve' in 3.20. While such a lexical argument is not watertight, as discussed below, there is a better way of understanding this verse than a 'naming'. *Second*, and much more significant, Ramsey, who has critiqued the Tribble lexical argument, shows clearly that to give someone a name is not necessarily a sign of having proper authority over the one named. The best example of this comes later in Genesis where Hagar names God in 16.13.¹⁹ *Third*, strictly the man does not name the woman in this verse for the 'name' he uses – *issa* – is already given to her in the preceding verse while he is unconscious and has yet to meet her – 'the Lord made a woman...'. *Fourth*, even if the lexical argument of Tribble against this being a 'naming' is not conclusive, there is little doubt that what we are given in v23 is not such as we find in naming of other individuals or places in other parts of the Old Testament but more a poem of delight and wonder (the first formal poetry of Genesis) in response to God's provision. This poetic outburst 'names' through a play on words in the Hebrew and a designation which leads perfectly into the following verse's rationale for the narrative – because the man recognises the woman as 'bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh', he will leave his father and mother and become 'one flesh' with

¹⁵ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 29.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*, 118. although he then tries to argue that this verse nevertheless points to male headship because it shows a created role for women as men's 'helper'.

¹⁷ One of the most unhelpful and fraudulent claims in some defenders of gender hierarchy (evident in part in their preferred designation as 'complementarians') is that unless one accepts headship and hierarchy and relations of authority one is saying that there is no difference between men and women. I know of no evangelical 'egalitarian' who would say that men and women are identical and interchangeable.

¹⁸ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 30.

¹⁹ Ramsey, "Is Name-Giving an Act of Domination in Genesis 2.23 and Elsewhere?". Grudem tries to avoid the implications of this by creating a distinction between "public" and "private" names (Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*, 33 n17).

her in marriage. This interpretation also fits with Ramsey's argument that 'naming' more generally is not about authority or exercising control but rather discernment about the reality. That reality is that, unlike the animals he viewed and named earlier, the man now has a counterpart who is equal to him for she was taken out of him and is 'bone of my bone'. To quote Davidson again, 'The wordplay in v.23.... and the explanation that the woman was taken out of man are not given to buttress a hierarchical ranking of the sexes but rather to underscore man's joyous recognition of his second self'.²⁰ This 'joyous recognition' and the 'name' provided is also, of course, essential to what we have seen is the chapter's central motivation: the explanation of marital union as rooted in God's purposes in creating human beings as male and female.

In both these cases, therefore, defenders of 'headship' are selecting an element of the narrative and claiming that, despite this not being explicitly stated, it implicitly teaches some form of hierarchy. This is asserted even though no other text of Scripture draws attention to these elements of the narrative, the claims made are textually very weak, and there is a much more natural reading which relates to the re-union of male and female in marriage and does not create tensions with the egalitarian reading of Genesis 1.²¹ The other main claim is, however, a more central feature of Genesis 2 and one which is highlighted elsewhere in Scripture:

Third, there is man's temporal priority over woman and her derivation from him in the narrative.²² This is such a prominent feature that it is regularly cited in Christian tradition and contemporary defences of gender hierarchy. Once again, however, it is important to note that Genesis itself draws no explicit conclusion from this element of the narrative.

It is also important to realise that, although some form of male supremacy or rule is a conclusion shared by conservative evangelicals and classical theologians of the past, the understanding of the significance of man's prior creation is varied and the attempt to connect a view of 'headship' to this feature of the narrative is neither consistent nor coherent across time nor conclusive. Indeed, Calvin, in his discussion of Paul's appeal to this feature in 1 Timothy 2 (to which we return below in section two), although he has no doubts about the conclusion (female subordination), is honest enough to note that 'the reason that Paul assigns, that woman was second in the order of creation, appears not to be a very strong argument in favour of her subjection; for John the Baptist was before Christ in the order of time, and yet was greatly inferior in rank'.²³

A small sample of classic treatments of the creation of woman is illuminating in order to demonstrate how much has been read into the meaning of God's work in creation:²⁴

²⁰ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 33.

²¹ Grudem and others sometimes add other incidental features such as that the man is addressed by God, adam is used generically etc. Some of these are helpfully rebutted by Davidson and most simply read into the story a deeper and universal significance which is better explained in terms of the narrative flow as it moves towards its aetiological climax.

²² A further element – the serpent's tempting of the woman and her disobedience is discussed below in section two as it relates to Gen 3 and the Fall more than to any divine order of creation.

²³ Calvin on 1 Tim 2.13 in his *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.iii.iv.iv.html>

²⁴ A fuller listing appears in Webb, *Slaves, women & homosexuals*, 257-62. and similar discussion in Giles, *The Trinity & subordinationism*, chap. 6. online at <http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/2663-6.pdf>

Chrysostom - If it be asked, what has this to do with women of the present day? It shows that the male sex enjoyed the higher honour. Man was first formed; and elsewhere he shows their superiority (Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man. 1 Corinthians 11:9). Why then does he say this? He wishes the man to have the preeminence in every way...²⁵

Aquinas - Subjection is twofold. One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin. There is another kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates. Nor is inequality among men excluded by the state of innocence, as we shall prove (96, 3).²⁶

Luther – Woman seems to be a creature somewhat different from man: in that she has dissimilar members, and a varied form, and a mind far more weak than a man...Woman, though she was a most beautiful work of God, yet did she not equal the glory of the male creature...The female sex is not excluded from all the glory of the human nature, although it is thus inferior to the male sex.²⁷

Luther - This is the way God has ordained it. The principal role belongs to the man. Adam was first, etc. Therefore the greater authority lies in the man rather than in the woman...God Himself so ordained that man be created first – first in time and first in authority...Whatever occurs first is called the most preferable. Because of God's work, Adam is approved as superior to Eve, because he had the right of primogeniture....There was more wisdom and courage in Adam....Adam was wiser than Eve...by divine and human right Adam is the master of the woman...²⁸

Calvin - Moses shews that the woman was created afterwards, in order that she might be a kind of appendage to the man; and that she was joined to the man on the express condition, that she should be at hand to render obedience to him. (Genesis 2:21.) Since, therefore, God did not create two chiefs of equal power, but added to the man an inferior aid, the Apostle justly reminds us of that order of creation in which the eternal and inviolable appointment of God is strikingly displayed.²⁹

²⁵ Chrysostom, Homily 9 on 1 Timothy, online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230609.htm>

²⁶ Aquinas, [ST 1 q92 a1 ad 2](#). This article asks whether the woman should have been made in the first production of things. Kevin Giles falsely attributes to Aquinas the earlier statement in this article in the second objection which this statement responds to with a more nuanced account of 'subjection'. Aquinas in ad 1 also states, "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence; such as that of a south wind, which is moist, as the Philosopher observes (De Gener. Animal. iv, 2). On the other hand, as regards human nature in general, woman is not misbegotten",

²⁷ Luther, [Lectures on Genesis 1-5](#). Astonishingly this is a comment not on Genesis 2 but on Genesis 1.27! His later comments on 2.18 offer a much more positive egalitarian reading – 'she was then, in no respect whatever, inferior to Adam' – that is difficult to correlate with these statements.

²⁸ Luther on 1 Tim 2.11-14 in *Works* vol 28, 276, 277, 278.

²⁹ Calvin on 1 Tim 2.13 in his Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon, online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.iii.iv.iv.html>

John Wesley - First - So that woman was originally the inferior.³⁰

Similar views are also expressed in more recent scholarship such as the multi-volume 19th century *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* by Keil and Delitzsch which states that in the creation of man and then woman, 'the priority and superiority of the man, and the dependence of the woman upon the man, are established as an ordinance of divine creation'.³¹

It is clear from these citations that the argument here is held to establish a pattern described in terms of 'superiority' and 'inferiority', 'preeminence', 'subjection' and 'inequality' and that this is understood to refer universally to women as women due to God's purpose in creation. While such explanations make perfect sense in the cultural and historical context of these theologians,³² they are, significantly, arguments which few if any contemporary defenders of 'headship' are willing to advance. This is because they seek to defend 'headship' within a framework that does not require holding to some universal form of female ontological inferiority and deficiency which is the hallmark implication drawn from the creation narrative in much of the earlier writings with which they claim continuity.³³

The argument for gender hierarchy, whether in its traditional harsher form or its contemporary softer form, has no basis in the biblical text of Genesis (or, as discussed below, its use in Paul).³⁴ In fact, set in the context of ancient near eastern creation stories and examining the structure of the chapter, there is evidence that it significantly mis-reads Genesis 2.

First, great care must be taken in assuming anything from the order of creation. Within the narrative of Genesis, of course, subsequent creation in chpt 1 marks the crowning of creation with the plants and animals being created first and humans last. There can be little doubt that if woman was created before man there would have been many (male) commentators drawing attention to how this demonstrated that the man was the climax and head of creation and should rule over all earlier creatures! Such an ordering of woman and then man would not have been impossible. The Mesopotamian creation story of Atrahasis describes the woman before the man when it speaks of marriage and humanity's creation and always mentions the woman first. Given that all the evidence is that this society was much more patriarchal and women much more subservient than in Israelite society this illustrates that 'the *sequence* of man's and woman's creation has no significance for implications of the society's view of or assumptions regarding hierarchy. In sum, the view that the

³⁰ Wesley, Explanatory Notes on the Bible on 1 Tim 2.13 at http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/notes/1Timothy.htm#Chapter+II

³¹ Quoted from K&D 1:36 in Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 27..

³² Giles describes them as 'more a reflection of the androcentric and misogynist views of the theologians quoted, who are immersed in a thoroughly patriarchal culture, than the mind of God as revealed in Scripture' Giles, "A Critique of the 'Novel' Contemporary Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 Given in the Book, *Women in the Church* (Part I)," 164..

³³ Grudem advances as his first argument for 'male headship in marriage before the Fall' that of the order of creation. Not only does he here seemingly restrict headship to marriage but he makes no claims based on created distinctions such as those cited above from the tradition but simply on the basis of his reading of 1 Timothy 2 (Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*, 30). His response to rejections of this claim also avoids such clearly non-egalitarian claims as found in the tradition and quoted above (*Ibid.*, 123-5.)

³⁴ Hurley, a defender of gender hierarchy, acknowledges that 'The actual text of Genesis 2 makes clear the prior formation of Adam, but does not discuss its implications *as such*' (Hurley, *Man and woman in Biblical perspective*, 209.

man's creation before the woman's implies his authority over her cannot be sustained by study of the text of Genesis 2, the context of Genesis 1-3, the comparative literature of the ancient Near East or the invocation of putative customs of primogeniture in ancient Israel'.³⁵

Second, a case can be made that Gen 2 is an *inclusio* where the opening creation of man and concluding creation of woman are of equivalent importance. Davidson, drawing on the work of Trevor Dennis, notes that 'the narrator underscores their equality of importance by employing precisely the same number of words (in Hebrew) for the description of the creation of the man as for the creation of woman'.³⁶ Rather than a movement from superior to inferior providing a rationale for male authority and leadership over women the move is from incompleteness to completeness providing a rationale for the union of male and female in marriage (as shown also in the move from 'not good the man is alone' to 'become one flesh') and 'woman is created as the climax, the culmination of the story, and as Adam's full equal'.³⁷

(1.3) Conclusion to Section One

It is clear and now almost universally accepted that there is a fundamental equality between men and women clearly taught in Genesis 1 and similarly that our experience of 'male headship' (and, sadly, some visions of such headship taught in the past by Christians³⁸) is distorted by the Fall and reflects the judgment of Genesis 3. The question is whether there is a proper gender hierarchy (and if so of what form) within God's creation of humanity and in particular whether that is taught in Genesis 2 as an elaboration/qualification of the equality in Gen 1 and a normative standard against which to measure the disorder and abuse of Gen 3. This section has argued that although much of the Christian tradition has claimed to find such male rule in the text it has in fact read this into the text out of its own context and culture (and so often expressing its 'biblical' understanding in ways which even contemporary defenders of 'male headship' tend to avoid repeating). Such a reading has no basis in Genesis 2 itself which focuses on the difference between men and women which is the

³⁵ Hess, "Equality with and without innocence: Genesis 1-3," 85-6.. On primogeniture, there is no explicit biblical warrant to apply this concept to the creation narrative or guidance as to what it would entail if one did (hence perhaps the quite different scope and weight of male supremacy/superiority in different appeals to man being made first). In addition, God frequently in Israel over-rides the norms of primogeniture and favours and blesses and gives special status to other than the firstborn. It must also be recognised that few if any Christians uphold primogeniture as a universal principle for human society. Although not all his arguments are convincing, Webb, *Slaves, women & homosexuals*, 134-45. provides a helpful discussion of this.

³⁶ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 27.. There are 16 Hebrew words in 2.7 and in 2.21b-22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*.. That this is not simply the effect of feminism in society is shown by Davidson's citation of a 1954 article which states 'The creation of woman is the climax towards which the whole preceding narrative tends...The narrative treats woman as an equal and a partner of man. This feature does not appear in any ancient Near Eastern story' (n 41).

³⁸ Perhaps the most extreme example of this is that cited by David M. Scholer – "On August 17, 1549, a Bible, fundamentally a new edition of the 1537 Matthew's Bible, was published in London by Jhon [sic] Daye, edited with notes by Edmund Becke. [I] The most famous of all the notes in Becke's Bible is the one for the phrase, "Likewise, you men, dwell with them (your wives) according to knowledge" in 1 Peter 3:7. Becke annotated: "He dwelleth wyth his wyfe according to knowledge, that taketh her as a necessary helper, and not as a bonde servante, or a bonde slave. And yf she be not obedient and healpful unto hym, endeavoureth to beate the feare of God into her heade, that thereby she maye be compelled to learne her dutie, and to do it."" (Scholer, "The Evangelical Debate over Biblical "Headship"," 28. and online at <http://www.godswordtowomen.org/scholer.htm>)

basis for marriage, says nothing about questions of authority, leadership and 'headship', and actually continues to bear witness in various ways to the fundamental equality of men and women taught in the opening chapter.

In the words of Richard Davidson in his magisterial study of sexuality in the Old Testament:

None of the arguments advanced from Genesis 2 to support a hierarchical relationship between the sexes can stand the test of close scrutiny. In light of the foregoing discussion, I concur with the a host of other commentators and scholarly studies – both liberal-critical and evangelical – in their conclusion that Genesis 2, like Genesis 1, contains no statement of dominance, subordination, or leadership/submission in the relationship of the sexes. The man and the woman before the fall are presented as fully equal in rank, with no hint of an ontological or functional hierarchy, no leadership/submission relationship between husband and wife.³⁹

Of course, as noted in passing above, even if it is accepted that Genesis 2 interpreted on its own provides no basis for 'male headship' the question must remain whether the Bible elsewhere provides a basis in creation for submission and hierarchy in the man-woman relationship and relates this to Genesis. If Paul teaches this and claims his teaching is based on Genesis then an evangelical approach to Scripture means that such a view cannot be dismissed (eg "Paul got it wrong here and misread Scripture and misunderstood God's purposes") but must be accepted as both God's word to us through Paul and a divinely inspired interpretation of the divinely inspired text. While that question is properly the subject of other papers, the following section briefly sketches some of the key issues raised for our interpretation of these chapters in Genesis by Paul's appeal to them.

Section Two – Genesis according to Paul: Biblical witness to hierarchy?

Although other texts could be examined (for example, the citations of Gen 2.24 in 1 Cor 6 and Eph 5 or the impact of Gen 1.26ff on Gal 3.28 or the egalitarian discussion of marriage in 1 Cor 7), the two texts most often claimed as evidence that Paul teaches gender hierarchy, places restrictions on women's ministry and roots this in Genesis are 1 Cor 11.2-16 and 1 Tim 2.11-15 and this will therefore examine those. A detailed study of all aspects of these texts is impossible (and the focus of another paper and discussion), the key question here is what light they shed on Paul's understanding of Genesis and God's purposes in creation for men and women and how we interpret these difficult texts.

(2.1) 1 Corinthians 11

This chapter is focussed on propriety in worship and in particular in relation to gender differentiation and its expression in public worship. Verse 3 is the only biblical verse that perhaps uses the language of head in relation to men and women generally (although some argue for reference only to husband and wife). The meaning of the term and its contemporary significance is famously a matter of dispute but as the term is not tied to an appeal to Genesis by Paul it need not be examined

³⁹ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 34-5..

here.⁴⁰ Verses 4-7 address men and women in relation to head coverings in worship in the form of male conduct (v4)-female conduct (v5)-rationale for female conduct (v6)-rationale for male conduct (v7). The rationale for male conduct in v7b alludes to the Genesis 1 story – ‘since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man’ in a manner which is selective (only man is called the image of God) and goes beyond Genesis itself (in calling the woman the glory of man). There then follow two verses which explain the earlier injunctions by explicitly appealing to the Genesis 2 narrative. This is done to reject and correct false views relating to the order of creation in reference to both source (v8 - man did not come from woman, but woman from man) and purpose (v9 - neither was man created for woman, but woman for man). It is possible that these false views were being explicitly expressed in Corinth and Paul is therefore countering them or they may simply be hypothetical beliefs which Paul begins by denying (as the opposite of that which he then goes on to affirm as the teaching of Genesis). To this point nothing has been said about limitations on women’s ministries or activities, the concern has rather been that both men and women exercise the same ministries (praying and prophesying) but in a manner which identifies them as men and as women, differentiates them from each other and does not bring shame on their respective ‘heads’ of whom they are the glory.

This argument is then brought to a conclusion in v10, ‘by all counts...one of the truly difficult texts in this letter’.⁴¹ Paul clearly appeals to his summary of key points from Genesis (and, in an obscure reference we thankfully don’t need to examine, to ‘the angels’), to reiterate his teaching about female conduct in relation to headwear (confirming that this, rather than male conduct, was the main problem even though he has earlier addressed both). He also adds a further explanation of the head covering which explicitly brings in the language of *exousia* but in a manner which – as a comparison of translations shows – is very difficult to interpret. There are, broadly speaking, three main options here: (1) the head covering is a sign of the man’s authority and woman’s submission to that authority (favoured by those supportive of gender hierarchy), (2) the head covering is a sign of the woman’s authority to pray and prophesy (so Hooker and others following her), (3) Paul is simply calling for the women to exercise authority and control even as they use their gospel freedom to prophesy and pray (so Thiselton who translates ‘a woman ought to keep control of her head’).

In an important move, Paul then turns from creation-based arguments to arguments based on being ‘in the Lord’ which, as Fee and Thiselton among others note, ‘qualify’ what has been said in the preceding verses. In a chiastic structure, this replays verses 8 and 9 to produce a vision of true interdependence and mutuality: ‘neither woman without man nor man without woman’ (v11 cf v9) and ‘just as woman from the man so the man through the woman and all from God’ (v12 cf v8). Even were one to accept option (1) above in relation to v10 and see Paul here teaching some form of gender hierarchy rooted in creation, the gospel (unsurprisingly, given Gal 3.28) means that one cannot simply appeal to a hierarchical created order apart from Christ. In the words of Thiselton, ‘gender differentiation is decreed in creation, expressed in convention, and not abrogated in the order of the gospel...Whereas the creation order entails a differentiation that may also embody a

⁴⁰ Thiselton translates as ‘man is foremost [or *head? Source?*] in relation to woman’ and notes that whatever reading one follows we must ‘exclude any competitiveness that might lead one to “impose” upon the other by sheer weight of authority’ (Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 171.

⁴¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 518.

hint of priority, at least in terms of the Genesis narrative, Paul adds that in the gospel differentiation is determined more explicitly by a principle of mutuality and reciprocity. *There could be no reciprocity or mutuality unless each was differentiated from the other....*⁴²

It is clearly possible to argue that in this text Paul teaches a creation based hierarchy in which man being head of woman entails men having authority over women and women being subordinate to men, that this order needs to be upheld in the public worship of the church and that his teaching about head coverings is seeking to ensure that it is upheld in response to a rejection of it by certain women in Corinth. In that sense, such a view can claim gender hierarchy could have some biblical basis. This is, however, not the only or the best interpretation and it must recognise the following features of Paul's teaching and implications of its own interpretation:

1. This chapter does not place any limitations on women's ministry compared to men's ministry and so whatever we make of its appeal to creation order it does not here justify such restrictions from Genesis (or, strictly, derive any wider principle of 'headship' from Genesis although vv7-9 may be viewed as supporting v3) but simply appeals to Genesis in relation to the issue of head-coverings.
2. The primary concern is with gender differentiation (which could but need not entail gender hierarchy) and reinstating the respect for this within the Christian community in public worship which was being rejected and denied by some women in Corinth.
3. The problems in Corinth likely arose in part from the freedom of women and gender equality proclaimed in the gospel. Paul reiterates the centrality of this in not preventing women from exercising public speaking ministries, in his qualification of the appeal to creation in vv11-12 and possibly (on Hooker's reading) in his emphasis on head coverings as a sign of the woman's authority in v10.
4. If verse 3 and the language of 'head' teach a principle of subordination then, unless one translates as husband and wife, this (especially if it is also rooted in creation and implicit in his appeal to Genesis) is something which is to mark all male-female relationships in some way, with the practical teaching that follows simply being one instantiation of the 'headship principle'.
5. Unless we insist on head-coverings today in the manner demanded in Corinth,⁴³ we accept not only that certain Pauline injunctions concerning the proper expression of gender differentiation are culturally conditioned and context-specific but also that his appeal to Genesis and the creation narrative to support these contextual injunctions does not entail that the practical implications are therefore universally binding across time and space.

⁴² Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 842., italics original.

⁴³ Roger Nicole, perhaps the leading Reformed conservative evangelical who is an 'egalitarian' comments, in his helpful outline of hermeneutical issues, 'It is therefore of some interest that evangelical patriarchalists almost to a person reject altogether the one clear *prescription* in this passage (1 Cor 11.6, that women must have their heads covered when praying and prophesying). Yet at the same time they wish to use the passage as theological evidence for the subordination of women to men in the church and home – to the point that some will even argue for eternal subordination within the ontological Trinity in order to make this lesser point!' (Nicole, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender," 362.

(2.2) 1 Timothy 2

There is little doubt that this is the central text for those who defend gender hierarchy and restrictions on women's ministry in the church. Although it does not use the language of 'head' it combines limitations on women with an appeal to Genesis and is thus often claimed to provide conclusive proof that such a stance is biblical and must be adopted by any Christian or church seeking to be biblical. Again, detailed exegesis is the focus of another contribution and discussion so the focus here is on the appeal to Genesis in the light of the argument above that Genesis itself does not teach female subordination.

As with 1 Cor 11, the focus is clearly order in worship. Having given general teaching in vv1-7 and addressed men specifically in v8, Paul turns to speak to women in vv9-15.⁴⁴ He begins with instructions about attire (vv9-10) before stating that women should learn (and in quietness and submission, v11). He then places two restrictions on women – they are not to teach or exercise authority (either generally or in a particular manner) – before calling for them to be silent (v12). This is then followed by reference to the order of creation in Gen 2 (v13) and the deception of Eve in Gen 3 (v14) before a famously obscure verse relating salvation to childbirth (v15).

As with 1 Cor 11, it is clearly possible to read this in a paradigm of 'male headship' with the restrictions being universal and this being demonstrated by Paul basing them in Genesis and the order of creation. Once again, though possible, this is certainly not the only (nor, I believe, the best) interpretation of these difficult verses.

There are five questions that need to be addressed and only one pathway through these questions leads to the conclusion that Paul is here establishing permanent restrictions on women based on a universal teaching of gender hierarchy derived from Genesis' account of creation (and, in v14, Fall). *First*, there is the question of what is meant by the prohibitions in v12 and especially the meaning of *authentein* (which is a *hapax legomenon* and most likely refers not to any exercise of authority but one which is dominating and/or usurps authority) and also whether it is an activity distinct from teaching or in some sense qualifies the restriction on teaching. *Second*, there is the question of whether Paul is addressing a specific problem in Ephesus or laying down a universal rule which applies to women in all churches at all times and in all places. This second question about the intended scope of the limitations leads on to the three questions more directly related to the appeal to Genesis.

Third, there is the question of whether the appeal to Genesis in vv13-14 is intended to justify some or all of Paul's earlier injunctions in vv9-12 or whether it is responding to a wider phenomenon of false teaching in Ephesus relating to creation and particularly the role of women. Thus Philip Towner, in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, notes that "the creation account may have been employed not for its universal applicability to any and all man/woman situations, but rather in order to combat a specific view or correct an interpretation of the creation account somehow linked with the heresy....In response (2.13-14), the author refers to a correct reading of the Genesis material to reorient the church's thinking around a view of the present that accounts

⁴⁴ Some have argued that the concern again is with 'wives' in relation to 'husbands' rather than women and men generally (eg Hugenberger followed by Davidson).

properly for both creation and the realities of sin and redemption".⁴⁵ If this is Paul's purpose then there is little or no support for a creation-based hierarchical reading of the verses.

Fourth, if, however, it is felt that the appeal to creation is in order to defend the earlier injunctions there is the question as to which injunction(s) it supports. A case has been made that the call for woman to learn (v11) would be the most surprising of his commands in the original context and that the rationale given makes sense if it is explaining this – woman had to learn from the man in creation because she followed him (and God in Gen 2 gives the command not to eat of a particular tree to the man before the creation of woman) and (perhaps because of a lack of teaching?) it was the woman who was originally deceived (and so in order to limit the risk of deception, women must first learn, lest in teaching they become deceivers having been deceived). It must also not be forgotten that the appeal to Genesis in 1 Cor 11 was in relation to head-coverings so, strange as it may seem to us, his opening commands in v9 may also be understood as in part undergirded by the Genesis teaching.

Fifth, if it is held that the appeal to Genesis is in order to justify and explain the limitations of v12 there then follows the question as to whether or not such an appeal to Genesis and creation renders the limitations unchangeable.⁴⁶ As noted in relation to 1 Cor 11 and head-coverings it is quite possible for a culturally specific command to be justified from an appeal to Genesis in such a way that, despite it being supported by reference to the creation narrative, it is not thereby absolutely binding trans-culturally. In other words, it is quite possible to conclude that Paul is here in writing to Timothy defending, by an appeal to creation, limitations on women he felt necessary faced with the situation in Ephesus, without that appeal thereby making the limitations requisite in every situation.

Finally, if one does follow through these different questions towards a view of universal limitations on women's ministry due to a gender hierarchy based in creation, there is the question of the nature and scope of the limitations and their causes and rationale. Again a contrast with the tradition on this is illuminating. Calvin is quite clear in his commentary that he knows 'woman...by nature (that is, by the ordinary law of God) is formed to obey; for γυναικοκρατία (the government of women) has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing' but, as noted above, even he has to admit that 'the reason that Paul assigns, that woman was second in the order of creation, appears not to be a very strong argument in favour of her subjection'.⁴⁷ Luther is similarly clear that v11 means that 'she should refrain from teaching, from praying in public....This passage makes a woman subject. It takes from her all public office and authority'.⁴⁸ In contrast, most conservative evangelical Anglicans are now happy for women to have authority as church wardens (though that development inevitably aroused much concern in the 19th century) and as Synod members and many are happy for women to teach at least on an occasional basis. In short, even if restrictions are being placed on

⁴⁵ Towner, "1-2 Timothy and Titus," 894.

⁴⁶ Nicole writes that 'Paul's descriptive analogy between Adam's priority in creation and Eve's priority in sin in 1 Timothy 2.13-14 – even though it is used to support the ad hoc prescription in 1 Tim 2.12 – seems to fall far short of being theologically prescriptive or determinative', adding in his note that 'one simply cannot make universal gender statements on the basis of ad hoc descriptions that are used to serve other points' (Nicole, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender," 357.

⁴⁷ Calvin on 1 Tim 2.12, 13 in his Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon, online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.iii.iv.iv.html>

⁴⁸ Luther on 1 Tim 2.11 in *Works* vol 28, 276.

women's authority and teaching they are not understood as of the same *scope* as in most of the tradition which appealed to these verses as biblical warrant for much stronger patriarchal structures.

Turning to the flow of Paul's supposed argument in these verses, the regular traditional interpretation of v14 is even more unpalatable (including to most defenders of a conservative view today who have sought to reinterpret the tradition and offer an alternative and novel interpretation of Paul's rationale). There is relative clarity about the *cause* of the restriction according to Paul⁴⁹ with major theologians viewing woman as 'weak and fickle...collectively'⁵⁰ and man as wiser than woman (so Luther quoted above). So Aquinas is clear that women 'generally speaking are not perfected in wisdom', 'seldom keep a firm grip on things', lack 'in firm rational judgment' and therefore normally 'their conduct is not based on solid reason, but easily swayed by feeling' so that they 'do not pursue what reason has counselled'.⁵¹ Wesley similarly is clear that v14 shows that a woman should not teach because 'she is more easily deceived, and more easily deceives'.⁵² This "biblical" view of women continued into the nineteenth century with Abraham Kuyper arguing that constitutionally a woman is 'less well adapted to offering resistance' to temptation⁵³ and evangelical Donald Guthrie writing in the late 1950s that Paul 'may have in mind the greater aptitude of the weaker sex to be led astray'.⁵⁴ A major challenge therefore for those who appeal to 1 Tim 2.14 as a biblical basis for limiting women's ministries is to explain this verse and its place in the argument (and why, if women are as described, they can teach other women and children who presumably are less discerning than men).

There are also stark conclusions about the *consequences* of Eve's expression of this feminine failing with Calvin writing, 'Because she had given fatal advice, it was right that she should learn that she was under the power and will of another; and because she had drawn her husband aside from the command of God, it was right that she should be deprived of all liberty and placed under the yoke'.⁵⁵ Some Puritans even extend this to marriage and the need for silence before one's husband – William Gouge is clear that Paul speaks 'not only of a woman's silence in church, but also of a wife's silence before her husband'.⁵⁶

In summary, these verses clearly can be read to defend 'male headship' and those who continue to do so have the weight of tradition on their side in broad terms but they are usually offering a significantly different reading and a vision of 'headship', its rationale and its implications that is at variance with their forebears and struggles to be not only persuasive but coherent. In the words of Kevin Giles,

⁴⁹ For a larger sample of these see Webb, *Slaves, women & homosexuals*, 262-8.

⁵⁰ Chrysostom, Homilies on Timothy cited in Doriani, "History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2," 227.

⁵¹ Aquinas quoted in *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵² Wesley, Explanatory Notes on the Bible on 1 Tim 2.14 at

http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/notes/1Timothy.htm#Chapter+II

⁵³ Quoted in Doriani, "History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2," 244.

⁵⁴ Quoted in (Webb 2001, 268). I vividly recall a UCCF Travelling Secretary attempting to argue along these lines in the late 1980s when opposing the OICCU plan to remove its constitutional restrictions on women but it did not persuade many then and is rarely heard today.

⁵⁵ Calvin on 1 Tim 2.14 in his Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon, online at

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.iii.iv.iv.html>

⁵⁶ Quoted in Doriani, "History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2," 244.

The tradition is uniform...the best of past theologians interpreted the Bible to be teaching that women are more prone than men to sin and error. There is little ambiguity or dissension within the tradition. Across the centuries, until very recent times, exegetes and theologians have understood the Bible to be teaching that women are a subordinate class or race who are inferior to men and, as such, are to be excluded from leadership in society and the church. They are to keep silent in public—especially in church—and they are to obey men, whom God has made superior. Women are to accept their lot in life because they were not made fully in the image of God, because they were created second and because they are more prone to sin and are more easily deceived than men. Women as a “class” or “race” need men’s protection and leadership. The subordination of the wife to her husband is simply a particular application of the God-given rule that women are set under men. For nineteen centuries, this is how the Bible has been interpreted.⁵⁷

Thankfully, as has been shown (and is filled out in Emma Ineson’s paper), a ‘male headship’ interpretation is not the only way of understanding Paul’s argument here. A faithful reading of 1 Tim 2 is possible which does not entail reading into Genesis 2 created structures of authority and permanent gender hierarchy which, as shown in section 1, are not required on a plain reading of Genesis 1-3.

(2.3) Conclusion to Section Two

It must be accepted that a small number of Pauline texts could teach gender hierarchy and do so on the basis of Genesis⁵⁸ and that they have certainly been read in those terms by most of the tradition. Evangelicals, however, are bound not by a tradition (even a traditional reading of Scripture) but by God speaking through Scripture itself. Although unable to offer a complete exegesis, this section has argued that 1 Cor 11 and 1 Tim 2 need not be read in this way and that, in fact, the appeals to Genesis are not claiming and establishing a creation-based subordination of women which entails certain restrictions on their ministries in the body of Christ in all times and places. In fact, in the light of these two sections, the best explanation of both the tradition and contemporary ‘headship’ readings is that Paul has unnecessarily and erroneously been thought (often because of the interpreter’s own cultural context and presuppositions about gender) to teach this and attempts have then been made to find that teaching in Genesis 2 by extending the alleged Pauline case and arguing for further evidence than Scripture itself adduces and which is simply not present in the Genesis text. The final section draws together some of the threads critiquing contemporary defences of ‘hierarchy’ and addressing a number of hermeneutical and practical issues related to disagreements over Scriptural teaching in this area.

Section Three – Conclusion: Some hermeneutical and practical questions

This section falls into three parts which seek to focus some of the issues raised by the preceding discussions. It opens with five questions addressed to those evangelicals who believe Scripture

⁵⁷ Giles, *The Trinity & subordinationism*, 154-5. online at <http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/2663-6.pdf>

⁵⁸ It is of course ‘important in the hermeneutical process to distinguish what in Scripture is *prescriptive*, embodying God’s commandment to us, and what is *descriptive*, relating events or attitudes that may or may not be desirable” (Nicole, “Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender,” 357.

teaches gender hierarchy (3.1) and then responds to five areas of concern they often raise about those who reject gender hierarchy (3.2) . Finally, it notes some questions which if we can address them together may clarify how we might live with these differences both as evangelicals and within the Church of England (3.3).

(3.1) Questions re contemporary defences of gender hierarchy

As has been acknowledged above, while there are likely some defenders of gender hierarchy who are driven by prejudice and misogyny (just as those failings are present among critics of gender hierarchy), the presumption should be that those Christians who hold this view do so because of the witness of Scripture and tradition. Sections one and two have sought to show that this interpretation of Scripture is, however, not the only one and that it has serious weakness. They have also argued that the expression of this view and defence of excluding women from public ministries which is found in Christian tradition is often in a form that contemporary supporters of gender hierarchy would not wish to commend. This raises the **first** question – *Is it accepted that traditional interpretations of biblical teaching on gender have been shaped by the cultural norms and understandings of the interpreters' world, that many of these are no longer accepted as biblically based by contemporary defenders of gender hierarchy and that they led to misrepresentations of the biblical witness even by significant theologians?*⁵⁹ If the answer to this is affirmative then, of course, criticising evangelicals today who deny gender hierarchy for being simply shaped by culture (a critique addressed below) while appealing to the tradition in support of a conservative view borders on being hypocritical.

One consequence of this reality of the history of interpretation is that contemporary defenders need to present a new, plausible rationale for their model of male-female relationships and a fresh basis for any limits on women's ministry. The **second** question is therefore – *On what basis are prohibitions placed on women's ministry or arguments made for male authority?* The tradition's rationale has usually been expressed in language of superiority/inferiority and women's intellectual weakness. Until relatively recently that has been accepted as plausible in both church and society (see, for example, Calvin's comments above about the government of women). If its conclusions are still basically adhered to but their basis rejected then a new justification needs to be offered.⁶⁰

It may be that this is simply a matter of biblical exegesis and an appeal to God's will as expressed in creation and revealed in Scripture but such a voluntarist argument (which Doriani labels 'Scotist') is increasingly undermined by criticisms of the exegesis (some of which are set out above) which suggest that this is not the only or best way to read Genesis or Paul and also by the context of a wider society which, rather than breathing the same hierarchical air as for the last two millennia, is

⁵⁹ Much of this is explicitly acknowledged by Doriani – 'The complementarian position has developed.

Assertions of the ontological inferiority of women have become rare, so natural law or Thomistic arguments based on the size, bearing, and rationality of men have virtually disappeared from serious discourse. Most declare that women are different in function, but equal to men in spiritual, mental and emotional being. Women "may be given gifts of ruling or teaching, but she may not use them as an elder in the church". She bears the image of God in all but authority' Doriani, "History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2," 257-8.

⁶⁰ Doriani notes that 'traditionalists have used varied rationales to defend male leadership. So egalitarians might accuse traditionalists of knowing what they want and using theology to justify the taking' (Ibid., 262..

withdrawing the oxygen of support for such restrictions. Doriani, as a supporter of conservative views, powerfully states the challenge to defenders of gender hierarchy in his essay on the history of the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 (sadly not reprinted in the revised edition of the book): the reliance on God's will and decree and ordering of creation as defence

... is too slender a reed to support and advance the entire traditionalist position. Of course, many Christians will accept the traditional view on the mere authority of the Bible. But without supplementary arguments, I doubt its ability to hold waverers, let alone convince the sceptical, as our society becomes more monolithically, confidently, aggressively egalitarian. For confirmed egalitarians the claim that men must lead seems counterintuitive at best, suspicious at worst. But to argue that men must lead women because God has ordered it so, and to say little more, sounds like special pleading, like a *deus ex machine*. Perhaps many complementarians believe there are no ontological differences between man and woman; perhaps they are reluctant to state unpopular ideas. Either way, few traditionalists explain God's reasons or explore how he may have etched his decree in nature...⁶¹

The **third** question relates to the *extent* of gender hierarchy – *why are restrictions limited to the church (and marriage) and not applied to wider society?* Again, the tradition does not know such a dualism, in part because its ecclesial restrictions were within a wider context where any female rule was viewed with at best suspicion and more often outright opposition (most famously John Knox's 1558 *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*⁶²). It may be argued that Scripture does not explicitly prohibit female rule outside the church but if the appeal to the restrictions within the church is made on the basis not simply of divine command but of created order (as it evidently is in relation to hierarchical readings of Genesis and appeals to 1 Tim 2) then the logic of this argument is difficult to follow: the ecclesial order is a witness to the redemption of the created order and so part of the church's mission should be the restoration of that order within society as a whole.

The cumulative effect of these weaknesses in the attempt to uphold a conservative position on a non-traditional basis is most evident in relation to the attempt to insist on male and female equality while limiting women's ministries and upholding male headship understood in terms of authority. This can be focussed in the **fourth** question – *Is it coherent to speak of gender equality while defending gender hierarchy?* Clearly nobody is denying men and women are equally precious to God, have equal access to salvation in Christ etc but the language of equality cannot be simply limited to the 'spiritual' divine-human relationship with no implications for human-human relationships. Here it is important to realise how the language of 'equal' functions. If person A is better able than person

⁶¹ Ibid., 260-1.

⁶² A flavour of its line of argument - 'For who can denie but it is repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to leade and conduct such as do see? That the weake, the sicke and impotent persons shall norishe and kepe the hole and strong? And finallie, that the foolishe, madde and phrenetike shal governe the discrete and give counsel to such as be sober of mind. And such be al women, compared unto man in bearing of authoritie. For their sight in civile regiment is but blindness; their strength, weaknes; their counsel, foolishnes; and judgment, phrensie, if it be rightlie considered'. Online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9660>

B to perform a task or fulfil a role but person A is prevented from doing it solely because they have a fixed characteristic (X), over which they have no control, which person B lacks, then it is generally held that person A (and the wider class of persons with fixed characteristic X) is not being viewed as or treated as equal to person B (and the class of persons lacking fixed characteristic X). Of course, appeal could be made to the restriction nevertheless being right due to God forbidding those with characteristic X from performing a task or fulfilling a role. However, to continue to assert equality between A and B in such circumstances is to stretch the meaning of the term far outside its normal usage.

These are largely theoretical questions but their importance relates to practical implications. When restrictions on women's ministry were defended as they were in the tradition (and in a social context where they were simply an ecclesial subset of wider social restrictions) there was little need to worry about where lines were drawn. That is no longer the case and so the crucial *fifth* question is *what concretely does Scripture forbid women from doing?* In other words, *what patterns of women's ministry are acceptable to defenders of biblically based gender hierarchy and will certain restrictions on women within conservative circles be rejected as lacking biblical warrant?* Having grown up in an evangelical church where women could not even hand out hymn books and welcome worshippers, I know this is a real problem! The danger is that, faced with what is perceived as a rejection of creation order in church and society, *any* opening up of roles or offices to women is viewed as dangerous 'liberalisation' and sometimes patterns of ministry that were previously accepted (eg women lay readers preaching or women leading house groups) are suddenly viewed with suspicion or brought to an end out of a perceived need to obey Scripture.

(3.2) Responses to common concerns re evangelical rejections of gender hierarchy

First, while critiques can be offered of gender hierarchy on a range of grounds – sociological, psychological, political, cultural etc – for evangelicals the question of the proper relationship between men and women in God's purposes and in the ordered life of God's people must be addressed in relation to Scripture. Although only able to cover a limited scope, this paper like many others, has sought to critique 'male headship' through careful biblical exegesis. As in relation to any biblical text there will be differences in understanding and no exegesis is likely to persuade everyone completely. Nevertheless, there is now a sufficiently well-established defence of an 'egalitarian' perspective from a large number of evangelical biblical scholars that such a view cannot be simply dismissed as 'unbiblical'.

Second, it is important that while each text of Scripture needs to be read carefully in its own right, Scripture is ultimately read as a whole ie canonically. This paper has done this by first providing detailed study of Genesis and then examining the main texts appealed to by those who argue that Scripture itself reads Genesis as teaching gender hierarchy. The further canonical challenge is that addressed in Ian Paul's paper – how the witness of Scripture to women teaching and leading is consonant with its alleged absolute and universal teaching of gender hierarchy based on creation order.⁶³ In relation to the need to read the whole of Scripture, one crucial hermeneutical element in

⁶³ Calvin, who was unable to conceive of women governing, responds to this challenge by appeal to the freedom of God which clearly opens up the possibility that God may exercise his freedom and call women today – "If any one bring forward, by way of objection, Deborah (Judges 4:4) and others of the same class, of

a faithful canonical reading is that the more difficult passages of Scripture must be interpreted in the light of the clearer passages. There is little doubt that both 1 Cor 11 and 1 Timothy 2 are less clear, not simply because of what they say about women but because of the reference to angels in 1 Cor 11.10 and women being saved through childbirth in 1 Tim 2.15, passages where those who see gender hierarchy in other verses struggle to be clear what Paul is teaching.

Related to a canonical reading is the need for a theological interpretation which recognises that 'some elements of our faith or duty are more basic to our understanding of our doctrine or life, while others are more peripheral'.⁶⁴ Roger Nicole, in citing this as one of his 'six foundational hermeneutical principles on which all evangelicals would agree'⁶⁵ draws the following conclusion which is perhaps surprising for someone from a Reformed tradition but explains why many from the charismatic and Pentecostal traditions within evangelicalism are biblically unconvinced by the claims for gender hierarchy:

It is of some interest that many patriarchalists affirm the gifting of women for ministry of various kinds but are resistant to women's holding positions of leadership in the official structures of the church. On this matter, one would think that Spirit gifting, which receives considerable attention in the New Testament with regard to the ministry of the body of Christ to itself and in the world (Rom 8.3-8; 1 Cor 12-14 etc) would be more central than 'church order'. This is especially so since there is *no prescriptive passage* that dictates the structures or nature of church order. Church order was undoubtedly assumed; but the lack of prescriptive instructions about it suggests that it is a more peripheral consideration than ministry itself.⁶⁶

Third, an evangelical view which believes God calls and equips women for all ministries clearly has to address those passages which seem to place restrictions on women and while sometimes this may take the form of saying that the restriction has been misunderstood (eg *authentain* refers to a particular form of exercising authority and the prohibition on that remains) often this is done by viewing the prohibition as limited in scope to a particular situation and not universally applicable in all times and places. Some criticise this as a denial of evangelical hermeneutics and biblical authority but in one sense such a careful contextualising approach is demanded by the biblical text itself – the apparently universal prohibitions on women speaking found in 1 Cor 14.33-35 (and of course 1 Tim 2.12) fit with

whom we read that they were at one time appointed by the command of God to govern the people, the answer is easy. Extraordinary acts done by God do not overturn the ordinary rules of government, by which he intended that we should be bound. Accordingly, if women at one time held the office of prophets and teachers, and that too when they were supernaturally called to it by the Spirit of God, He who is above all law might do this; but, being a peculiar case..." (Calvin on 1 Tim 2.12 in his Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon, online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.iii.iv.iv.html>)

⁶⁴ Nicole, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender," 359.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 359-60.. The difficulty of focussing on office is illustrated by David Phillips' recent [assertion](#) that the Bible confines the office of presbyter to men, even though none of the texts in Scripture state this.

neither 1 Cor 11 and its permission to pray and prophesy alongside men nor with the witness to women exercising speaking gifts elsewhere in the New Testament. As noted, very few read Paul's injunctions about head-coverings in 1 Cor 11 as setting down a dress-code in perpetuity. The nature of Scripture is such that 'we must understand scriptural statements in terms of the situation of the people addressed or represented'⁶⁷ and that may lead us to recognise that because our situation is different we are not required to follow the statements to the letter. Good evangelical hermeneutics therefore takes seriously both the context of the biblical text and that of the reader of the text in order to understand how, through what he said to his people there and then, God wishes to direct his people here and now. That is not an exact science and requires careful, corporate discernment, but it is an inescapable consequence of being creatures within history spoken to in history by God.

Fourth, the claim is sometimes made that rejection of gender hierarchy is simply a capitulation to contemporary Western liberal and postmodern culture with its feminist and egalitarian philosophies. Clearly there are critiques that take this form either explicitly or implicitly – they show little concern about biblical teaching on the subject or reject it as unenlightened or of no value in contemporary society. Furthermore, all of us are shaped by our culture and, as noted, this applies to defences of 'male headship' who revise the traditional reading as much as those who reject hierarchy. The fact that the 'egalitarian' reading has gained such widespread support cross-culturally (the Ugandan church being a clear example of this) combined with the careful studies offered of both the biblical text and their original cultural context should be sufficient to show that (while the conclusions reached may still be wrong), evangelicals who reject gender hierarchy are not simply buying into the spirit of the age. In fact, as the readings of scriptural teaching on gender offered through Christian history demonstrate, 'the great problem for Christianity is not that biblical egalitarians have been carried away by their desire to emulate secular feminism. Rather, the problem appears to be that Bible-believing people have permitted themselves to fall below biblical standards because they were unduly influenced by surrounding societies in which oppression prevailed in spite of centuries of Christian witness'.⁶⁸

Fifth, there are often concerns that rejection of restrictions on women's ministry leads to rejection of prohibitions on homosexuality. Again, this cannot be adequately covered here but has been extensively covered elsewhere.⁶⁹ While some arguments (including some propounded as evangelical) may open up this development it is false to see it as necessary or likely when the arguments in relation to women are developed from Scripture not culture. (Of course, once one accepts that Scripture may have been mis-read and that we need to be open to God correcting and reforming us through his Word, as in the CEEC statement, development in our understanding of Scripture cannot be absolutely ruled out even when, as here, it is hard to see a biblical rationale for such a development). In particular, although rejecting gender hierarchy, evangelical egalitarians do not say men and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 361.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 361-2.

⁶⁹ See, for example, France, *A Slippery Slope?*, Webb, *Slaves, women & homosexuals*. I've recently addressed some of these arguments at <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/?p=18273>

women are identical or interchangeable. As noted in the discussion of Genesis 2, the central theme of that chapter is not hierarchy but rather the complementarity of male and female as together made in God's image and the importance of heterosexual marriage as the reuniting in one flesh of a man and a woman. Most crucially, even defenders of 'male headship' must acknowledge that there are a diversity of voices within Scripture in relation to women and that they face 'difficult texts' which sit uneasily with their overarching interpretive framework. Reading the Bible thus raises questions as to how to be faithful to the whole of biblical witness in relation to men and women. No such diversity within divine revelation is found in relation to same-sex sexual relationships where the witness of Scripture is uniform and consistently negative.

(3.3) A Way Forward?

It is inevitable that evangelicals are going to remain divided over this issue, probably for ever. Biblical teaching on gender therefore joins many other issues where those who subscribe to the same evangelical doctrine of Scripture and its supreme authority are nevertheless unable to agree on its specific teaching in an area which, though it is addressed in Scripture, is not central to the gospel message. Sadly, in recent decades the impression has sometimes been given by some who hold to gender hierarchy that those who do not believe this to be biblical teaching have ceased to be evangelical and must be described as unbiblical in their teaching and practice. As long as this remains the case, greater evangelical unity will be impossible and so it is imperative that either this is recognised as non-essential to evangelical identity (along with views on war and peace, remarriage after divorce, infant baptism, structures of church governance etc) or it must be made clear why this issue is a significant boundary-marker.

Related to this, those of us who welcome women's ministry without restrictions would benefit greatly if those who defend some form of gender hierarchy could be clearer both what this entails in church practice today and how they then view individuals and churches which do not follow that practice. This is vital in part to prevent totally unwarranted restrictions on women's ministry but also ensure women clergy (including evangelical women clergy) are not treated in an unjustifiable way by conservative evangelicals. It is also vital to determine what sort of provision is necessary for those who oppose women bishops from an evangelical perspective: does the fact that the church as a whole accepts women bishops and priests simply make it impossible to remain in full communion with what is understood to be an unbiblical church?; what forms of presbyteral and episcopal ministry should not be exercised by a woman and why?; what is a Christian response when offered such ministry and when and why should it be refused? For Anglo-Catholics, who believe women are simply *unable* to be priests and bishops and yet believe that certain ministries can *only* be performed by priests and bishops the problem is clear but for evangelicals for whom the issue is more one of 'women should not' rather than 'women cannot' and who have a less 'high' doctrine of ordination the implications of a biblically grounded understanding of 'male headship' are much less clear when the church reads Scripture as placing no absolute prohibition on women exercising any ministry but rather welcomes their ministry as a witness to the redemption of creation and to the truth that men and women

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are created equal but different and called to image God as they rule and exercise authority together in both the church and the wider world.

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