

Hermeneutics and the evangelical debate about women's ministry

Introduction

1. In this paper I would like first of all to respond to the approach in **Power, Equality, Humility and Suspicion**, as well as address the points it makes about the approach of the two sides. Out of this I will make some observations about the process, and note some key issues in the debate about how we read Scripture.
2. Firstly, I think that the paper's approach to this is immensely helpful. For me, one of the most powerful things about this whole process has been to experience prolonged exposure to views that are different from my own, and to be forced to engage with why I disagree with them. When I have done this in the past, I have often found that my own view modified, and I learnt some new perspectives from the conversation partner. In this conversation, however, perhaps because this is not the first time I have engaged in this debate, I think the end result has been to feel further away from the 'other' and more clear about the strengths of the position I have adopted. (As the author does at several points, I say this not pejoratively, but simply as a record of fact.) There has, for me, been growth in understanding, but it has highlighted a significant gap between the positions.
3. But I have to admit to being very impressed by the first section of this paper, as an imaginative exercise in empathetic listening. I think it is very successful at highlighting key issues for further exploration. Although it is cast in terms of a meta-hermeneutical process, I believe that its real strength lies in focussing on the details of the interpretative process itself and the differences that have opened up. In the end I think this whole debate really is about how we read Scripture, how we decide what Scripture 'really' says, and what we do when others read Scripture differently. That is why I think it is a crucial issue for evangelicals, whose unity begins and ends with a commitment to be shaped by Scripture, since it is through Scripture that God speaks to us, so this does come down to our openness to the word of God in our midst.
4. The paper's overall picture of how the 'Awesome' side perceive the 'Reform' side has a good deal of truth about it, and I am glad that the author can articulate how terrifying the Reform position must seem at times to those of us on the other side. He is right. But there are some important things to clarify on this side of things and I will offer my own take on this, though I hope it will be representative.

The 'Awesome' position

5. In relation to Gen 2, my view is that there is no subordination. There are numerous literary features of the passage which point to symmetry, including the existential *inclusio* of the passage, and the meaning of *kenegdo* in 2.18 (which clearly communicates the idea of symmetrical correspondence, as in two opposite banks of a river; older translations of 'meet' or 'suitable' don't communicate this). A careful reading, influenced by Jewish reading traditions, pays attention to how words are used, and this leads to seeing a clear difference between the naming of the animals and the naming of the *isha*. I can only explain the collapsing of this, and further collapsing of both of these into Gen 3, as a failure to attend to the text sufficiently. A literary reading of these chapters indicates a clear division between Gen 2 and Gen 3, so that the man ruling over the woman is indeed a result of 'the fall', since it is so strongly contrasted with the symmetry of Gen 2.
6. Another example of what I would see as careless reading arises in the discussion of *hupotasso* and *hupakouo*. It is wrong to say that we believe *hupotasso* does not mean 'to submit'; it clearly does, but this clearly does not mean the same as 'obey'. It is an elementary lesson of Greek language study that English translations are wrong to put a section heading at Eph 5.22, or even start a sentence—or even insert a verb, since none of these are in the Greek. The 'submission' of wives to husbands is,

grammatically, but one instance of the submission of all believers to one another, which in turn is the result of being filled with the Spirit. The example of Sarah obeying Abraham in 1 Peter notwithstanding, the NT appears to be careful and consistent in asking children to 'obey' parents, but wives to 'submit' to husbands. There are some important issues of context that arise from this, but the vital exegetical step is first to notice this.

7. In relation to the Trinity, the paper interprets the lack of hierarchy in the Trinity to a lack of submission. My view would be the opposite; there is mutual submission of all persons to each other, arising not from hierarchical structures, but from mutual respect. It is this mutuality of submission which Paul is asking us to imitate in his calls for all to submit to one another, which is why being filled with the Spirit, the very presence of God himself, leads to mutual submission.
8. In relation to 1 Timothy, I think the paper quite seriously misreads my approach. It seems to think that adhering to an egalitarian approach drives a particular reading of 1 Tim 2. In fact, it is exegesis of this passage and others which would make me have (what others might call) an egalitarian approach, not the other way around. I am very clear that the exegetical data of this passage supports my reading. So I do not feel that my exegesis must conform to a prior conviction; good exegesis of each of the relevant passages in fact builds together to offer a coherent picture, which in the paper is described as egalitarian.
9. In relation to 2.17, the author is right. I do harbour misgivings about Reform's attitude to power, and think it is significant that most are male. I would want to ask any theological group which shares significant sociological characteristics to reflect critically on the interconnectedness between theology and psychology. My reading of Paul over the years makes me think more and more that a key question about Christian truth is whether people agree to it from very different social, emotional and cultural perspectives, since it is this which marks it out as God's truth rather than the convenience of a particular group. According to Paul, unity *in diversity* is a key test of the Spirit's work.
10. In relation to 2.21, yes, I think marriage vows which include 'obey' are wrong, because these have not attended to a careful reading of Scripture, and the difference between 'obey' and 'submit', and for that reason I chose not to use these vows at my wedding 16 years ago.

The Reform position

11. My overall response to the points made here is to find it a rather mechanical approach to reading. Many of the examples cited involve the use of metaphors, and metaphors only function when the subject and vehicle of the metaphor are both alike in some ways but also unlike in others. Understanding the first two persons of the Trinity as 'son' and 'father' is a metaphorical understanding, so we need to be aware of the limits of such a metaphor even though it is a foundational one in understanding God. (The literalising of this metaphor has, for example, proved a serious problem for Muslim understandings of Christian belief.)
12. My other main observation is that the movement of argument often appears to be from the exegesis of one passage, to the formulation of a principle, to the application of that principle to another passage. At times, passages must be seen to be in agreement and are put together prematurely, rather than offering an exegesis of each passage in its own terms, and only then seeing how diverse passages might fit together to form a biblical theology.
13. On 3.5, I think it is vital to read Romans 13.1 as a call to submit to state powers as those instituted by and accountable to God, and *not* as obedience. The latter leads to a mistaken social conservatism which undermines a vital Christian moral critique of systems of power—a critique we find prominent in the Book of Revelation. The submission of creation to Christ arises from the recognition by a loved cosmos of a humble king, not the subjugation or forced obedience of a defeated enemy to a victor.

14. On 3.8, I find the reading of Eph 5 strange in that it seems to assume that Paul's analogy implies that *everything* that is true of Christ's relation with the church is true of a man's relation with his wife, and vice versa.
15. In 3.9, the paper again talks of the command to 'obey' in Eph 5. The word simply is not there.
16. Again, I find the discussion of the 'new Adam—where is the new Eve?' in 3.15 odd. Paul is clearly talking about Adam and Jesus not as archetypal *males*, but as archetypal *humanity*. This in fact has its roots in the first ungendered occurrence of *adam* in Gen 1 where the meaning is 'earth-creature' (related to *adamah*) and specifically *not* 'male human'. This is not to suggest that Christ is ungendered, but that his significance is in his humanity and not in his maleness.
17. The paper is right in thinking that our understanding of the Trinity widely differs. Of course Jesus obeys the Father in his earthly life, because he is modelling the proper response of Israel, as it ought to have been, and in doing so also models the ideal human being responding to his creator God. Is 'the eternal relationship actually other than what we see and hear on earth' (3.23)? Yes of course it is! Otherwise the incarnation would not actually have happened, in that Jesus would not have become fully human. Does Jesus still not know the day or the hour of his return (cf Matt 24.36)? That is, are there things the Son now knows that he did not know on earth? Or to explore this question through the converse, when Jesus was on earth, did he know about Einstein's theory of relativity, but decided that it would be a bit confusing for the disciples so didn't tell them? I believe that Jesus as the incarnate son of God was limited in ways that the eternal Son of the Father is not.
18. The danger of the view expressed is not (as I see it) Arianism, but docetism. If Jesus in his earthly life shows all that is true of the Son in relation to the Father, was Jesus fully human, or was he only pretending to be? My observation is that many 'conservative' Christians do not see Jesus as fully human—they do not see him as a model of true humanity on which they can base their lives, and so instead look to Paul, which leads to a preference for Paul's writings over the gospels. As someone once said to me: 'How can Jesus be a model for my life? He was perfect and I am not.'
19. The concerns about the lack of humility and obedience within God follow from the writer's misunderstanding of what I see as mutual submission mentioned in 7 above. I agree with Michael Ramsay's adaptation of 1 John 1.5: 'God is Christlike, and in him there is no unChristlikeness at all'. If there is humility and submission in Christ, then, as God is One, there must be humility and submission in all the Godhead. I would see even the very act of creation as an act of self-emptying love, as God who was all in all makes space for the Other, the created order, and loves it into life. (There is a similar idea in the Jewish mystical doctrine of the *tzimtzum*).

Concluding observations about method

20. I was nurtured as a young Christian by Scripture Union Bible reading notes, which (I think under the influence of John Grayston) encouraged me to ask 'what?' (questions of discovery), 'why?' (questions of understanding) and then 'how?' (questions of application). I continue to use this as a framework in teaching hermeneutics, having discovered that engaging with the particular ('what?'), the universal ('why?') and the contemporary ('how?') offers a distinctively Christian, Trinitarian and biblical way of reading a text.
21. My concern with much 'conservative' reading is that it often fails to follow this discipline, jumping ahead either to issues of doctrine or implications, and then feeding these back into exegetical questions, which then distorts careful reading of the text of Scripture. I can see signs of this even in papers presented for this session. Rather ironically, I think that in this sense 'conservative' exegesis has something in common with some reader-response approaches, including feminist readings, in prioritising the world of the reader over the world of the text, and thus failing to allow the text to be genuinely 'other' and challenge our preconceptions.

22. Doctrine is important in clarifying our thinking about God, but doctrine must be seen as an organising hermeneutical principle, something that helps us read Scripture aright, and not an end in itself—still less the goal for Scripture. I sometimes have the feeling that ‘conservatives’ think that Scripture is something of an inconvenience, and life would be much more straightforward if God had given us a doctrine textbook rather than a whole lot of stories, letters, poems, hymns and complaints—in fact, God might even have made a mistake and we need to correct this by focussing on doctrine.
23. The commitment to certain doctrinal positions in this debate has had a seriously damaging effect on our reading of Scripture together. In recent months and years I have been struck by three particular examples:
- Eldon Jay Epp documents how compilers of the Greek text in the 1920s actually changed the text of Romans 16.7 on the basis that Junia could not be female and be ‘of note among the apostles.’ The notes to the recent NET (packaged with the text) continues this tradition by carefully ruling out the clear possibility that the female Junia could be numbered amongst the apostles—not on grammatical or lexical grounds, but because it cannot countenance a female apostle.
 - I have documented (in *Biblical Studies Bulletin*) Knight’s flagrant disregard of Wilshire’s clear refutation of his interpretation of *authentēin* in 1 Tim 2.12. Knight’s NIGTC is still influential amongst ‘conservatives’ in shaping their exegesis—but, *contra* Knight, all pre-Patristic occurrences of the term which are highly negative in connotation, giving a sense of illegitimate seizing of authority to the point of taking another’s life.
 - Philip Payne’s recent volume documents Wayne Grudem’s misleading argument about the meaning of *kephale* in extra-biblical literature, and he now finds (he says in personal correspondence) that conservative journals will no longer publish his articles on textual criticism, he believes on the grounds that they do not agree with his conclusions about women and men.

I don’t think it would be an exaggeration to call these examples corruption of the exegetical process. They ill behave a constituency which claims both to know the truth, and to know this truth on the basis of what Scripture says.

24. The unity we seek is in listening to Scripture. If we share certain doctrinal positions (God as Trinity, the centrality of the cross, the vital importance of mission), then it is because these are things that Scripture makes plain, and not because these are in themselves the defining marks of evangelical identity. To be ‘evangelical’ is to be centred on the *evangel*, the good news of what God has done in Christ, faithfully testified to in Scripture. The humility we need is to submit all our cherished traditions to what Scripture says. The real danger for the Awesome position is being taken over by the alternative impetuses towards the consecration of women, as outlined by Andrew Goddard’s paper, the first five of which are sub-evangelical and the last clearly anti-evangelical. But the challenge for the Reform position is to ask whether it is genuinely open to what Scripture says, whether its tradition can be reformed by Scripture—or whether the weight of interpretative conservatism, which prioritises tradition for itself, will silence Scripture’s voice.

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