

Foundations - Genesis 1 & 2

Through history, and still today, women have often been treated very badly by men. For many today the Bible is seen as the cause, not the solution to this evil. The Bible's teaching on humanity as male and female is increasingly in conflict with the assumptions and agendas of our society. Even within the church there is confusion and controversy about how to understand and express God's design in family and church life.

While most of the Bible's promises and commands are not gender specific, the Bible also recognizes important distinctions between men and women. In this series we're going to look carefully at what the Bible says about this (and what it doesn't say!). We will look at the key passages, seeking to approach the Bible not only as the authority to which we submit, but as the loving and profoundly good word of God for us. Along the way we'll try to not dodge the hard questions we might have.

1. How do you feel about starting this series? (Be honest with each other)
2. The foundation for the Bible's understanding of men and women is given to us in Genesis 1 & 2. **Read Genesis 1.**
 - a. What is different/special about humanity (HCSB – "man") in verses 26-31? (Hint: Along with what is said, look for differences in the patterns established in verses 3-25).
 - b. Look carefully at the 3 lines of verse 27. What does the emphasis of each line add to our understanding of humanity?
 - c. What job description is given to the man and the woman? Are any distinctions made here?
3. Now **read Genesis 2.**
 - a. Why did God make a helper for the man? (In verse 18 God says that he will make "a helper as his complement" (HCSB). For us the word "helper" sounds like someone of less importance. However, it takes strength to bring real help to someone else. God is himself described as the helper of his people – Exodus 18:4, Psalm 33:20 & 118:7.)
 - b. What do we see here of the essential unity and interdependence of the man and the woman?
 - c. In what ways are the man and the woman different in how, when and why they are made by God? What do you think God shows us in this?
4. Acknowledging that the world before Genesis 3 is not the world we currently inhabit, what is good about God's original design?
5. God has designed men and women as equal in value and dignity, and also with distinctions.
 - a. What attitudes & actions does this encourage in us?
 - b. What attitudes & actions does it condemn?
 - c. What questions have been raised for you?

Frustrations - Genesis 3 and beyond

We live in a broken world. One of the ways we see and experience this is in the sad and painful consequences of men and women treating each other badly. We may well wonder: Why are things (between men and women) like this? And, what is the solution?

1. Other than Biblical answers, what answers do people in our society commonly give to these questions?
2. God's answer to why the world is broken is given in Genesis 3, in which relations between men and women are prominent.
 - a. The Crime. Read Genesis 3:1-7.
 - i. In Genesis 2 we saw that God rules the man and the woman (his helper), who in turn together rule over the animals. How is this order reversed here?
 - ii. In what ways did Adam and Eve each contribute to the rebellion of humanity against God (ie. when Adam ate the fruit)? How did they both fail to fulfil the roles given to them in 2:15-18? (see also 3:17).
 - b. The Enquiry. Read Genesis 3:8-13. How has the sin impacted the man and woman's relationship with God and with each other? What similarities and differences between the man and the woman do we see here? In what ways do we see ourselves in them?
 - c. The Sentence. Read Genesis 3:14-21. These sentences are not telling people how to act, nor excusing bad behaviour. They are a description of how things (generally) will now be. Each party will now experience pain in an area of life pertinent to them, and endure a losing battle.
 - i. In what ways do women still experience pain in childbearing (not just giving birth)?
 - ii. The woman's "desire" for her husband could refer to her longing for him, but in light of Genesis 4:7 it probably refers to her desire to control him. In what ways do we (sadly) continue to see the woman's 'losing battle' being worked out today?
 - iii. What is the pain and the losing battle imposed upon Adam?
 - iv. In what ways do both sexes also suffer from the curses imposed on each other?
3. The Bible is realistic book. It doesn't hide from the ugly features of life in this world. In summary what is the Bible's answer to the question – why are things like this?
4. What then is the solution to fix the problems men and women experience? As time permits, what do these passages tell us about where hope lies? Genesis 3:15 & 21, Romans 5:12 & 15-17 & Colossians 3:5-14.
5. In what ways do you see restored relationship with God transforming relations between men and women? Pray that this will happen more and more.

Marriage – Ephesians 5:22-33

In the New Testament Jesus, Paul and Peter all build on the foundation of Genesis 1-3 to teach about the relationships between men, women and God in marriage. The key passages are Matthew 19:1-12, Ephesians 5:22-33, Colossians 3:18-19 and 1 Peter 3:1-7. In this study we will focus on Ephesians 5.

Read Ephesians 5:22-33.

1. Biblical submission means to 'voluntarily place yourself under another person's God given authority'. What is your first reaction to the call for Christian wives to submit to their husbands? Why do you think many Christians today find this difficult, or even embarrassing?
2. Husbands are called to love their wives by giving themselves for them, as Christ did for the church. In what way is this similar and different to the instruction for wives? Who do you think has the harder role?
3. From the passage itself, its context in Ephesians and the wider Biblical context:
 - Why should Christians today seek to live this way? (Why does it matter?)
 - Why this way (female submission to male headship in marriage)?
4. Look more closely at the instructions for husbands and for wives. What is the shape and scope of each role? Who is responsible for putting it into practice? What if the other person is not fulfilling their role?
5. In his book "Married for God" Christopher Ash identifies 4 ways that God's design for men and women becomes distorted in marriage. What truths do each of these distort/deny?
 - The tyrannical husband (orders his wife to do what he says & fulfil his desires).
 - The bossy wife (wants to take the lead or insists on the inter-changeability of the roles).
 - The mousy wife (a 'doormat' who always agrees with her husband).
 - The abdicator husband (avoids loving & leading his wife).
6. Little detail is given about how submission and headship will work out in practice. Although we often seek simple rules, God is concerned with the attitude of our hearts. The same attitude may lead to different practical outcomes in different marriages and different situations. Focussing on yourself, and your own sex, what attitudes and behaviours do you see that you need to work on?
7. Many of us are not married. What implications might this passage have for those who are single?
8. What is attractive about the relationship between Christ and the church? How is it good (for society and individuals) when both wives and husbands embrace God's pattern?

As time permits...

1. Are there limits to Christian submission and self sacrificial love in marriage? If so what might they be and why? (See also Acts 4:19-20, Romans 13:1-2, 1 Peter 3:1-7)
2. Does Ephesians 5:21-33 have any implications for decisions about divisions of duties in the home (including decisions about if/when a woman returns to paid work)? If so, what might they be?
3. How could Ephesians 5 be used to help a Christian marriage that is struggling?
4. Our society is critical of this pattern of relating in marriage. Some say it demeans women. Some say it promotes domestic violence. Some say it is just outdated. How might we respond to these criticisms?
5. The instructions in Ephesians 5 are addressed to the whole church. What can we all do as a church to cultivate this pattern for Christian marriage?

Church (Part 1) – 1 Timothy 2

1 Timothy 2 has been at the centre of much controversy in our generation. In a letter where Paul writes so that Timothy will know “how people ought to act in God’s household” (3:15), he includes an instruction that a woman is not to “teach or have authority over a man” (2:12). What does this mean? How should we apply this in our church today?

Read 1 Timothy 2

Although verses 1-7 are important and encouraging, our focus is on ‘men, women and God’ so we will concentrate on verses 8-15.

1. As we come to read any passage of Scripture, and this one in particular, what attitudes do you think are important for us to have?
2. In verse 8 we find an instruction directed to men. In what way are men to pray? Why do you think this might be particularly directed to men?
3. In verses 9-10 the focus shifts to women. In what way are women to dress? Why do you think this might be particularly directed to women? How might a woman dress herself with good works?
4. From verses 11-12, what should and shouldn’t a woman do in the church community? (Note: The word “silent” is also used earlier in verse 2, translated as “quiet”. Rather than ‘saying nothing at all’, it is an attitude that respects and honours the leadership of the men God has called to oversee the church). Although you may have many questions...
 - a. What do you think is the main principle here?
 - b. What two reasons does Paul give for this instruction (v 13-14)?
5. A common objection to applying these verses today is to claim that they only applied to a specific situation or to first century culture. How would you respond to such a claim?
6. What do you think “saved through childbearing” means in verse 15? How does verse 15 as a whole encourage women to put verses 11 & 12 into practice?
7. Although the instructions in this passage (v 8-15) are directed to either men or women, to what extent do you think each also applies to the other sex?
8. Why do you think this teaching causes such controversy in our generation? How might we help each other to understand, accept and apply these teachings?
9. In the final study of this series we will look at the many ways that the New Testament shows men and women working side by side “in the trenches” of Christian ministry. (As we also see in our church!) How then do you think verses 11 & 12 should apply to our church life? What particular roles and activities seem to you to involve teaching and having authority over men?
10. What would be good to pray in response to reading this part of God’s word?

Church (Part 2) – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

1 Corinthians is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. Much of the letter is taken up with responding to specific issues in the church. In Chapter 11 Paul writes about how men and women differentiate themselves. The issue is not so much about what men and what women do, but the way in which they do the same things. Although both men and women “pray and prophesy”, Paul insists that gender distinction is important.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

1. What is your immediate reaction to this?
2. What (in a nutshell) are the men and women in Corinth told to do when they pray or prophesy? (See esp. v 4-5, 7 & 10)?
3. What reasons does the apostle give for insisting on maintaining gender distinction in church? Try and explain each one in your own words.

v 3

v 7-9

v 10

v 13-15

v 16

4. To what extent are these reasons tied only to first century culture? To what extent do they apply to all cultures? Do you think this passage requires women today to physically cover their heads in church? Why or why not?
5. In our culture what demeanour, dress codes or symbols or might express or suppress the gender distinctions God has built into creation?
6. In what way are verses 11 & 12 a corrective to potential misunderstandings of what the apostle is saying?
7. What challenge does the passage give to men?
8. (As time permits) In 1 Timothy 2 women are not permitted to “teach” men (formal authoritative ongoing instruction of God’s people from God’s Word). Here it is assumed that women do “pray and prophesy” in church. From these verses, what can we learn about what prophesy is? 1 Corinthians 14:1-3, 23-25, 29-33. In what way do you think men and women prophesy in our church?
9. In response to this passage, what would be good for your group to thank God for, and to pray for?

In the Trenches

As we have seen in this series, God gives men responsibility for teaching and having authority in the church. This is illustrated by the way men fill the roles of teachers and leaders: Jesus' disciples, Paul, Timothy, Titus, and the overseers/elders they appoint.

At the same time, all Christians are called to speak God's word to others and to serve in many different ways for the progress of the gospel and the building of the church (while respecting gender and marriage relationships). Not surprisingly, we also see this illustrated as men and women serve side by side "in the trenches" of gospel work.

Importantly, all of the privileges of the Christian life, and most of what Christians are called to do, are for both men and women. For example, both sexes: teach new disciples (Mathew 28:18-19), pray and prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), speak the truth in love to build the church (Ephesians 4:15-16), admonish and teach one another (Colossians 3:16), encourage one another (Hebrews 10:25), etc.

In this study however, we will focus on what we see women doing side by side with men.

1. In what ways (and at what crucial moments) were women involved in the life and ministry of Jesus? Luke 1:26-33, 2:36-38, 8:1-3, 10:38-42, 23:48-49, 23:55-24:12 & 24:22-24.
2. Women are also prominent in the book of Acts. In many places the text simply refers to "everyone" or "all the believers", but sometimes women are specifically mentioned. According to these verses, what were they doing? Acts 1:14, 9:36, 12:11-14, 16:13-15, 18:1-3 & 24-26.
3. Two passages from Paul's letters to churches provide a window into the network of gospel co-workers. What do we learn from these about what women were doing? Romans 16:1-15 & Philippians 4:2-3.
4. Finally, we can also see specific mention of women in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. What were these women doing or called to do? 1 Timothy 5:9-10, 2 Timothy 1:4-5 & 3:14-15, Titus 2:3-5.
5. From what you have seen of what the women were doing, how is their ministry similar and different to what you know of the ministries of men? (As time permits: In what ways does this reflect the foundations laid in Genesis 1 & 2?)
6. In what ways do men and women serve side by side in the Lord's mission in/through our church? How do we benefit from the ministry of both men and women?
7. In what ways might we (both men and women) better encourage/support women in their ministries?
8. Give thanks for the many ministries of women in our church. Pray that God would continue to raise up many more women and men who will give themselves fully to the work of the Lord.