

# HOW FEMINISM WILL IMPACT THE CHURCH

## Introduction

- A. Text: **Gen. 1:27**.
- B. Does it make any difference to God whether the teaching and ruling roles in the church are filled by men or by women?
- C. Events are pressing the question on us more forcefully every day.
- D. In his lecture, Melvin Curry has helpfully overviewed this issue of church-related gender roles.
  - 1. I found much to agree with in his analysis.
    - a. I appreciate the comprehensive bibliography that accompanies his lecture.
    - b. This will be not only a guide but an incentive to many who need to begin doing some serious background reading on this issue.
  - 2. Curry begins exactly where I would have begun: by looking at the early chapters of Genesis.
    - a. I couldn't agree more that the point of departure for discussing gender roles in the church of the New Testament must be the creation principles found at the beginning of the Old Testament.
    - b. How we are to relate to one another — in the church or elsewhere — can't be understood without correct concepts of our essential nature as created beings.
    - c. What we do grows out of what we think we are.
  - 3. It's absolutely essential, then, that we grapple with the basic statement in **Genesis 1:27** that God created us "male and female."
    - a. If we misunderstand what is inherent in manhood and womanhood — if we read too much or too little into the creation account — we make a mistake that reaches out and does damage in many places.
    - b. This controversy has to do with our very nature as human beings.
    - c. That's why it is such an important subject and why it is connected to so many other important subjects.
- E. Most of us would agree that, if the Lord tarries, gender problems are going to give us trouble in the church.
- F. But what form will this trouble take?
  - 1. I happen to believe that gender issues are of more than academic interest.
  - 2. They generate some very practical problems.
  - 3. To underscore this point, I would like to elaborate briefly on three areas of concern.
  - 4. This will indicate my best guess as to the actual ways feminism is going to have an impact on us.

## I. BIBLE AUTHORITY

- A. Gender trouble will precipitate yet another crisis of biblical authority for us, one that in some ways will be worse than any we have seen up to now.
  - 1. This is so because the Bible, as it stands, is simply incompatible with feminism and egalitarianism - e.g. **Eph. 5:22**.
  - 2. A straightforward reading of the text of Scripture indicates that God restricts teaching and ruling roles in the church to males - e.g. **1 Tim. 2:12**.
  - 3. The plain meaning of Scripture, recognized for centuries, must be rejected or reinterpreted to maintain any other position. Cf. **1 Cor. 4:6; Col. 3:17; 2 Tim. 3:16,17**.
  - 4. Some are ready to do this very thing — and that represents a great danger.

5. But an even greater danger is that the willingness to do violence to the Scriptures at such a point will end up as a cynical disregard for any scriptural teaching that does not fit our philosophy.
- B. Considering the uniquely powerful societal pressures that are involved in this particular issue, I predict that we will see people discount what the Bible says about gender roles who have never done such a thing on other kinds of issues.
1. We will have people who have never in all their lives deliberately disagreed with the Bible, but who, when it comes to gender roles, will say, "Well, I know that's what it says, but I don't accept it."
  2. The dynamics of this problem being what they are, this will be the first real point at which some will find the walls of their allegiance to biblical truth breached.
  3. Once breached, these walls are likely to fall down completely.
  4. In time, we can expect to see more and more adults with a general disregard for scriptural authority that began as a specific questioning of scriptural teaching on male-female distinctions.
  5. **When the history of the twentieth century is finally written and we are able to identify the social forces that threw biblical authority into general disrepute, feminism will be near the top of the list.**

## II. EVANGELISM

- A. As the biblical view of men's and women's roles in the church comes more and more to be thought of as unacceptable to mainstream society, our position in the religious world will be even further marginalized.
1. We are accustomed to being in the minority, but gender issues present a different situation.
  2. Whereas some of our doctrinal positions have long been considered eccentric and quaint, there has never been the social stigma attached to them that is now being attached to the traditional biblical view of gender roles.
  3. **Evangelism will present some tough challenges when we have to inform those with whom we study that we still hold to a view about men and women that is so outdated and abhorred by society that its practice may eventually be made illegal.**
- B. Randall Balmer talks about the growing sense of "cultural dislocation" that fundamentalists like ourselves feel at present.
1. He argues that *"fundamentalists have found the rapidly changing views of women in recent decades utterly disconcerting. Perhaps nothing — not even Darwinism and higher criticism, the issues of the 1920s — has contributed so greatly to their sense of cultural dislocation. . . . [The] feminist movement has left them confused and full of resentment because the domestic ideal that fundamentalism has reified since the nineteenth century is now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture."* Randall Balmer, "American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity" in *Fundamentalism & Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.54.
  2. Whether or not we are "confused and full of resentment," Balmer is certainly correct in that our views on gender are "now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture."
  3. The point is not just that the biblical view is thought to be anachronistic, but that it is derided as such.
  4. This derision will have profound evangelistic implications that we may as well be prepared to face. Cf. **Phil. 2:15; 1 Pt. 2:11,12.**

## III. OUR CHILDREN

- A. When they reach maturity, will our children be willing to publicly identify themselves with views that are ridiculed by mainstream society? Cf. **Eph. 6:4.**
- B. **Will they accept a religious position on gender roles that not only puts them out of step with**

### **respectable society but risks the possibility that they will be charged with violating human rights?**

- C. By now, the feminist principles of equality have so thoroughly saturated our culture that average people simply take them for granted.
1. The present generation of children will be the first in America to grow up never having known any social environment but this one.
  2. When they have to choose between the fundamentalist faith of their parents and the politically correct views of nearly everybody else, what will their choice be?
  3. When they realize that what we taught them about the roles of men and women is “now derided as anachronistic by the broader culture,” how will they react?
- D. Those who think that feminism will not have any significant practical impact among the non-institutional churches of Christ had better get in touch with their kids.

### **Conclusion**

- A. The “question” of gender roles in the church, involving as it does a number of separate questions, presents us with a veritable thicket of problems.
- B. I fear that the cluster of issues overviewed in Curry’s “Male and Female in the Church” will not only create significant trouble for us, it will do so sooner rather than later.
- C. We need to get ready.
1. **I would suggest, first, that we must learn to deal seriously with the biblical texts that have been so dangerously reinterpreted by the egalitarians.**
    - a. It’s not enough merely to shout “No, that’s not what those verses teach” - e.g. **Gal. 3:28**.
    - b. We must do our homework and be ready to show how the texts have been misused.
    - c. As one of the pioneer preachers said, the best way to show that a stick is crooked is to lay a straight stick alongside it.
      - 1) We must understand the sometimes subtle mistakes that make up the feminist hermeneutic.
      - 2) We must demonstrate the twisting of the truth that is taking place.
      - 3) Being able to do these things, of course, requires hard work — work that is yet to be done by most of us.
    - d. It’s time to dig in and study, more seriously than we ever have, each passage of Scripture that has a bearing on gender roles.
  2. **Second, I would suggest that in dealing with gender-related issues in the church we must do more than take a reactionary stance.**
    - a. We can’t afford merely to be against what is wrong.
    - b. We must be for what is right.
      - 1) Our vision of how men and women should relate themselves to one another in the Lord’s church must be more than a vision of what men are allowed to do and women are not.
      - 2) If it is biblical, ours will be a vision of men’s and women’s roles, and it will have all the positive winsomeness of truth and reality.
      - 3) It will be a vision in which sisters in the Lord are honored no less than brothers, their work being understood and affirmed as it should be.
    - c. When we come, for example, to Paul’s description of Phoebe as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea” (**Rom. 16:1**), we must do more than evade the passage with embarrassed explanations of what it does not mean.
      - 1) The question is: what does it mean?
      - 2) And how important ought that to be to us?
    - d. We can’t claim to stand for God’s truth unless we are willing to stand for all of God’s truth, even parts of it we have previously paid little attention to.

- e. I maintain that feminism would not be able to challenge churches so dangerously today if in the past our vision of men's and women's roles had been biblically balanced.
  - f. Satan is attacking at a spot where we truly are weak, an area where our practice has fallen below the heights of the goodness and strength of God's word.
- D. As Christian men and Christian women, the very best way we can refute the feminist falsehood about roles in the church is not only to learn, but to live the truth of **2 Timothy 2:21**: "Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work."
- E. When we study and grow and serve as vessels in the Lord's house, rejoicing faithfully in the unique place the Lord has prepared for each of us, then our women no less than our men can know the fullness that comes from being "a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work" (NKJV).
- F. **When we get the part about being a "vessel" right, then the part about the "honor" will tend to take care of itself, whether we are women or we are men.**

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