

Male-Female Equality and Male Headship

Genesis 1–3

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Why go all the way back to the first three chapters of the Bible, if our concern is with manhood and womanhood today? Because as Genesis 1-3 go, so goes the whole Biblical debate. One way or the other, all the additional Biblical texts on manhood and womanhood must be interpreted consistently with these chapters. They lay the very foundation of Biblical manhood and womanhood.

My purpose in this essay is to demonstrate from Genesis 1-3 that both *male-female equality* and *male headship*, properly defined, were instituted by God at creation and remain permanent, beneficent aspects of human existence.

Let me define *male-female equality*:

Man and woman are equal in the sense that they bear God's image equally.

Let me also define *male headship*:

In the partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, man and woman, the man bears the primary responsibility to lead the partnership in a God-glorifying direction.

The model of headship is our Lord, the Head of the church, who gave Himself for us.¹ The antithesis to male headship is male domination. By male domination I mean the assertion of the man's will over the woman's will, heedless of her spiritual equality, her rights, and her value. *My essay will be completely misunderstood if the distinction between male headship and male domination is not kept in mind throughout.*

Evangelical feminism argues that God created man and woman as equals in a sense that excludes male headship. Male headship/domination (feminism acknowledges no distinction) was imposed upon Eve as a penalty for her part in the fall. It follows, in this view, that a woman's redemption in Christ releases her from the punishment of male headship.²

What, then, did God intend for our manhood and womanhood at the cre-

ation? And what did God decree as our punishment at the fall? The first two chapters of Genesis answer the first question and the third chapter answers the second.

What God Intended at Creation

Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” [RSV]³

In verse 26, God announces His intention to make man. This divine fanfare, unparalleled in the creation account, sets the making of man apart as a special event. God seems almost to jeopardize His unique glory by sharing His image and rule with a mere creature. Nevertheless, such a one God now intends to create. Verse 26, then, has the force of riveting our attention on God’s next creative work, the zenith of His genius and benevolence.

Verse 26 teaches the glory of man in three ways. First, God says, “Let us make man. . . .” In verse 24 God had said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures. . . .” By the sheer power of His spoken will, God had caused the living creatures to emerge from the earth “by remote control as it were.”⁴ In the creation of man, however, God Himself acted directly and personally.

Second, man was created to bear the image or likeness of God. Taking in the whole of Scripture, I think it probable that the image of God in man is the soul’s personal reflection of God’s righteous character. To image God is to mirror His holiness.⁵ Other interpreters construe the image of God in a more general sense, including human rationality, conscience, creativity, relationships, and everything we are *as man*.⁶ But however one interprets the *imago Dei*, God shared it with man alone. Man is unique, finding his identity upward in God and not downward in the animals.

The third indication of man’s greatness in verse 26 is his special calling under God: “. . . and let them have dominion. . . .” Man stands between God above and the animals below as God’s ruling representative. Man is the crown of creation.

In verse 27, God fulfills His purpose as declared in verse 26. In describing God’s supreme creative act, Moses shifts from prose to poetry:

So God created man in his own image,
 in the image of God he created him;
 male and female he created them.⁷

Each of these three lines makes a point. Line one asserts the divine creation of man. *We came from God*. Line two overlaps with line one, except that it highlights the divine image in man. *We bear a resemblance to God*. Line three boldly affirms the dual sexuality of man. *We are male and female*. Nowhere else in Genesis 1 is sexuality referred to;⁸ but human sexuality, superior to animal sexuality, merits the simple dignity given it here. Further, Moses doubtless intends to imply the equality of the sexes, for both male and female display the glory of God's image with equal brilliance: ". . . in *the image of God* he created him; *male and female* he created them." This is consistent with God's intention, stated in verse 26, that both sexes should rule: ". . . and let *them* rule. . . ."

Finally, in verse 28, God pronounces His benediction on man. In verse 22, God spoke His blessing out over the mass of the lower creatures. But here in verse 28 we read, "God blessed them and said *to them*. . . ." With man alone, male and female alike without distinction, God shares an I-thou relationship. In His benediction the Creator also authorizes male and female together to carry out their mission to rule the lower creation.

To sum up: Man was created as royalty in God's world, male and female alike bearing the divine glory equally.

Most evangelical feminists would heartily agree with this interpretation of the text. Genesis 2 and 3 are more controversial. But I must challenge two points of feminist interpretation before moving on to chapter two.

First, in commenting on verse 26, Gilbert Bilezikian notes that God refers to "them," both male and female, as "man." He writes:

. . . the designation "man" is a generic term for "human beings" and . . . encompasses both male and female. This fact is made especially clear in Genesis 5:2 where the word *man* designates both male and female: "He created them male and female; at the time they were created, he blessed them and called them 'man.'" (NIV)⁹

This is a striking fact, indeed. It demands explanation. After all, if any of us modern people were to create a world, placing at its apex our highest creature in the dual modality of man and woman, would we use the name of only one sex as a generic term for both? I expect not. Our modern prejudices would detect a whiff of "discrimination" a mile away. But God cuts right across the grain of our peculiar sensitivities when He names the human race, both man and woman, "man."¹⁰

Why would God do such a thing? Why would Moses carefully record the fact? Surely God was wise and purposeful in this decision, as He is in every other. Surely His referring to the race as "man" tells us something about ourselves. What aspect of reality, then, might God have been pointing to by this means? Bilezikian continues:

Thus, when God declares, "Let us make man in our image . . ." the term *man* refers to both male and female. Both man and woman are God's image-bear-

ers. There is no basis in Genesis 1 for confining the image of God to males alone.¹¹

Who, I wonder, is teaching that men only bear God's image? No contributor to this volume will be found saying that. But not only is Bilezikian's argument diverted by a non-issue, it also fails to explain what the text of verse 26 does say.

How may we understand the logic of God's decision to describe the human race as "man"? Let me suggest that it makes sense against the backdrop of male headship. Moses does not explicitly teach male headship in chapter 1; but, for that matter, neither does he explicitly teach male-female equality. We see neither the words "male-female equality" nor "male headship" here or anywhere in Genesis 1-3. What Moses does provide is a series of more or less obvious hints as to his doctrine of manhood and womanhood. The burden of Genesis 1:26-28 is male-female equality. That seems obvious—wonderfully obvious! But God's naming of the race "man" whispers male headship, which Moses will bring forward boldly in chapter two.

God did *not* name the human race "woman." If "woman" had been the more appropriate and illuminating designation, no doubt God would have used it. He does not even devise a neutral term like "persons." He called us "man," which anticipates the male headship brought out clearly in chapter two, just as "male and female" in verse 27 foreshadows marriage in chapter two. Male headship may be personally repugnant to feminists, but it does have the virtue of explaining the sacred text.

Some contend that, in principle, one ought not to refer to the human race as "man." Such terminology is unfair to half the population, they insist. I am not arguing that one must always use "man" in social and theological discourse to avoid misrepresenting the truth. I am arguing, however, that, in light of Genesis 1:26-27 and 5:1-2, one may not call this linguistic practice unjust or insensitive without impugning the wisdom and goodness of God.

My second challenge is directed at the concept of the image of God found in feminist interpretation. Aida Bensançon Spencer writes, "Male and female are together needed to reflect God's image."¹² That is, man and woman together as collective man, rather than the man and the woman separately as individuals, reflect the image of God. Leaving us in no doubt about her meaning, Spencer makes this claim:

There is no possibility, according to [Genesis 1:26-27], that Adam, the male, could by himself reflect the nature of God. Neither is it possible for Adam, the female, by herself to reflect God's nature. Male and female are needed to reflect God's nature.¹³

There is *no possibility*, in light of Genesis 1:26-27, that either the man or the woman alone could display the image of God? What, then, of Genesis 5:1 and 3?

When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. . . . When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.¹⁴

God created man in His image. Later, Adam had a son in *his* image.

Implication? Adam, who was in God's image, passed the divine image (albeit flawed by sin) on to his son Seth. The divine image resided in the *individuals* Adam and Seth. So Spencer's insistence on a collective divine image in man-plus-woman is unwarranted. Genesis 1:26-27 can and should be construed to say that each individual created by God bore His image, male and female alike.

For this reason, Spencer's practical application of the *imago Dei* to church leadership lacks force. She writes:

Females as well as males are needed in positions of authority in the church to help people better to comprehend God's nature. God's image needs male and female to reflect God more fully.¹⁵

Even if it were true that the *imago Dei* would necessarily be incomplete in a single individual, it would still not follow that both men and women are needed *in positions of church authority* "to help people better to comprehend God's nature."

Genesis 2:18-25

There is a paradox¹⁶ in the creation account. While Genesis 1 teaches the equality of the sexes as God's image-bearers and vice-rulers on the earth, Genesis 2 adds another, complex dimension to Biblical manhood and womanhood. The paradox is this: God created male and female in His image equally, but He also made the male the head and the female the helper.

For clarity's sake, let me restate my definition of male headship (not male domination):

In the partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, man and woman, the man bears the primary responsibility to lead the partnership in a God-glorifying direction.

That is, God calls the man, with the counsel and help of the woman, to see that the male-female partnership serves the purposes of God, not the sinful urges of either member of the partnership.

What will now emerge clearly from Genesis 2 is that male-female equality does not constitute an undifferentiated sameness. Male and female are equal as God's image-bearers. They are spiritually equal, which is quite sufficient a basis for mutual respect between the sexes. But the very fact that God created human beings in the dual modality of male and female cautions us against an unqualified equation of the two sexes. This profound and beautiful distinction, which some belittle as "a matter of mere anatomy," is not a biological triviality or accident. It is God who wants men to be men and women to be women; and He can teach us the meaning of each, if we want to be taught. We ourselves can feel intuitively the importance of distinct sexual identity when we see, for example, a transvestite. A man trying to be a woman repulses us, and rightly so. We know that this is perverse. Sexual confusion is a significant, not a slight, personal problem, because our distinct sexual identity defines who we are and why we are here and how God calls us to serve Him.

God has no intention of blurring sexual distinctness in the interests of equality *in an unqualified sense*. In fact, there are many areas of life in which God has

no intention of levelling out the distinctions between us. Consider the obvious: God does not value intellectual or aesthetic equality among people. He does not value equality in finances, talents, and opportunity. It is God who deliberately ordains inequalities in many aspects of our lives. When I came from the womb, I had only so much potential for physical, intellectual, and aesthetic development. Some are born with less than I was, others with more. Because God is ultimately the One who shapes our lives, I have to conclude that God is not interested in unlimited equality among us. And because God is also wise, I further conclude that unlimited equality must be a false ideal. But the Bible does teach the equal personhood and value and dignity of all the human race—men, women, and children—and that must be the only equality that matters to God. One measure of our wisdom as God’s image-bearers is whether we share this perspective with God. One measure of our reconciliation with God is whether His sovereign decrees draw from us a response of worship or resentment.

How, then, does Genesis 2 teach the paradoxical truths of male-female equality and male headship? The crucial verses are 18-25, but we should first establish the context.

God created the man first (2:7) and stationed him in the Garden of Eden to develop it and to guard it (2:15). God laid a dual command on the man. First, the man was commanded to partake freely and joyfully of the trees God had provided (2:16). Second, the man was commanded not to eat of one tree, lest he die (2:17). Here we see both God’s abundant generosity and man’s moral responsibility to live within the large, but not unrestricted, circle of his God-ordained existence. For the man to step outside that circle, to attempt an autonomous existence, freed from God, would be his ruin.

That is the scene as we come to verse 18, which hits us from the blind side:

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him.”

Amid all this stunning perfection in the Garden of Eden, God said, “There is something wrong here. The man ought not to be alone.” God put His finger on the one deficiency in Paradise. The man needed “a helper suitable for him.”

Surprisingly, however, God did not immediately create this helper. Instead, God paraded the animals before the man for him to name them (2:19-20). Why? Because the man did not yet see the problem of his aloneness. And so God translated the man’s objective aloneness into a feeling of personal loneliness by setting him to this task. In serving God, the man encountered his own need.

This is so, because the task of naming the animals entailed more than slapping an arbitrary label on each beast. The task required the man to consider each animal thoughtfully, so that its name was appropriate to its particular nature. Out of this exercise, it began to dawn on the man that there was no creature in the garden that shared *his* nature. He discovered not only his own unique superiority over the beasts, which the privilege of naming them in itself implied; he also discovered his own solitude in the world.¹⁷ We may surmise that an aching longing welled up within the man for the companionship of another creature on his level.

And so God performs the first surgical operation (2:21-22). Imagine the scene: As the last of the beasts plods off with its new name, the man turns away

with a trace of perplexity and sorrow in his eyes. God says, “Son, I want you to lie down. Now close your eyes and sleep.” The man falls into a deep slumber. The Creator goes to work, opening the man’s side, removing a rib, closing the wound, and building the woman. There she stands, perfectly gorgeous and uniquely suited to the man’s need. The Lord says to her, “Daughter, I want you to go stand over there. I’ll come for you in a moment.” She obeys. Then God touches the man and says, “Wake up now, son. I have one last creature for you to name. I’d like to know what you think of this one.” And God leads Eve out to Adam, who greets her with rhapsodic relief:

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called woman,
because she was taken out of man. (2:23)

These are the first recorded human words, and they are poetry. What do they express? The joy of the first man in receiving the gift of the first woman: “This creature alone, Father, out of all the others—this one at last meets my need for a companion. She alone is my equal, my very flesh. I identify with her. I love her. I will call her Woman, for she came out of Man.” The man perceives the woman not as his rival but as his partner, not as a threat because of her equality with himself but as the only one capable of fulfilling his longing within.

This primal event explains why we see men and women pairing off today, as Moses teaches in verse 24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” The Garden of Eden is where it all started—not in the social evolution of mankind but in the original, pre-fall creation by God. At its very heart, marriage is not a human custom, variable according to changing times; it is a divinely created institution, defined for all ages and all cultures in our shared, primeval, perfect existence.

And what does marriage mean? What distinguishes this particular social institution? Moses reasons that marriage is the re-union of what was originally and literally one flesh—only now in a much more satisfying form, we would all agree. This is why “He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh.”¹⁸ Becoming “one flesh” as husband and wife is symbolized and sealed by sexual union, it is true. But the “one flesh” relationship entails more than sex. It is the profound fusion of two lives into one, shared life together, by the mutual consent and covenant of marriage. It is the complete and permanent giving over of oneself into a new circle of shared existence with one’s partner.

Lastly, verse 25 seals the creation account with a reminder of the perfection in which Adam and Eve¹⁹ first came together: “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” They felt no shame because they had nothing to hide. They lived in perfect integrity together.

In the conspicuous phrase, “a helper suitable for him” (2:18, 20),²⁰ we encounter the paradox of manhood and womanhood. On the one hand, the woman alone, out of all the creatures, was “suitable for him.” She alone was Adam’s equal. A man may enjoy a form of companionship with a dog, but only on the dog’s level. With a wife, a man finds companionship on his own level, for she is his equal.

On the other side of the paradox, the woman is the man’s helper. The man

was not created to help the woman, but the reverse. Doesn't this striking fact suggest that manhood and womanhood are distinct and non-reversible? Doesn't this make sense if we allow that, while the man and the woman are to love each other as equals, they are not to love each other *in the same way*?²¹ The man is to love his wife by accepting the primary responsibility for making their partnership a platform displaying God's glory, and the woman is to love her husband by supporting him in that godly undertaking.

So, was Eve Adam's equal? Yes and no. She was his spiritual equal and, unlike the animals, "suitable for him." But she was not his equal in that she was his "helper." God did not create man and woman in an undifferentiated way, and their mere maleness and femaleness identify their respective roles. A man, just by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God. A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood, is called to help for God.

Must the male headship side of the paradox be construed as an insult or threat to women? Not at all, because *Eve was Adam's equal in the only sense in which equality is significant for personal worth*. Woman is just as gifted as man "with all the attributes requisite to attaining wisdom, righteousness and life."²² In a parallel sense, a church member has as much freedom and opportunity to achieve real significance as does a church elder; but the elder is to lead, and the member is to support. There is no cause for offense.

Why then do some godly people resist this teaching so energetically? One reason is a smothering male domination asserted in the name of male headship. When truth is abused, a rival position (in this case, feminism) that lacks *logically* compelling power can take on *psychologically* compelling power. But male domination is a personal moral failure, not a Biblical doctrine.

If we define ourselves out of a reaction to bad experiences, we will be forever translating our pain in the past into new pain for ourselves and others in the present. We must define ourselves not by personal injury, not by fashionable hysteria, not even by personal variation and diversity, but by the suprapersonal pattern of sexual understanding taught here in Holy Scripture.

The paradox of Genesis 2 is also seen in the fact that the woman was made *from* the man (her equality) and *for* the man (her inequality). God did not make Adam and Eve from the ground at the same time and for one another without distinction. Neither did God make the woman first, and then the man *from* the woman *for* the woman. He could have created them in either of these ways so easily, but He didn't. Why? Because, presumably, that would have obscured the very nature of manhood and womanhood that He intended to make clear.²³

Another indication of the paradox is that Adam welcomes Eve as his equal ("bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"), yet he also names her ("she shall be called Woman").²⁴ God charged the man with naming the creatures and gave him the freedom to exercise his own judgment in each case. In doing so, Adam brought the earthly creation under his dominion. This royal prerogative extended to Adam's naming of his helper.²⁵ Nevertheless, the name he gives her, "Woman," springs from his instantaneous recognition of her as the counterpart to "Man."²⁶

Let us note this carefully. In designating her "Woman" the man interprets her identity in relation to himself. Out of his own intuitive comprehension of who she is, he interprets her as feminine, unlike himself, and yet as his counterpart and equal. Indeed, he sees in her his very own flesh. And he interprets the woman not only for his own understanding of her, but also for her self-understanding. God

did not explain to the woman who she was in relation to the man, although He could have done so. He allowed Adam to define the woman, in keeping with Adam's headship. Adam's sovereign act not only arose out of his own sense of headship, it also made his headship clear to Eve. She found her own identity in relation to the man as his equal and helper *by the man's definition*. Both Adam and Eve understood the paradox of their relationship from the start.

Still another signal of the paradox is detected in verse 24. Because the woman alone is the man's very flesh, their re-union in marriage is a "one flesh" relationship. Adam could not have joined himself to a lesser creature without degrading himself. But it is the man who leaves his parents to found a new household with his new wife at his side. His wife does not leave her family to initiate the new household; this is the responsibility of the head.

Genesis 2 supplements Genesis 1 by showing that God's commission that we "have dominion over the earth" (1:26, 28) as male and female works out practically through marriage. And in marriage the man heads the home for God and the wife helps him to fulfill the divine calling.

We ought to be sufficiently agile intellectually and emotionally to accept this paradoxical truth. Christians, of all people, have a reason to live with paradox. After all, God exists as one Godhead in three Persons, equal in glory but unequal in role. Within the Holy Trinity the Father leads, the Son submits to Him, and the Spirit submits to both (the Economic Trinity). But it is also true that the three Persons are fully equal in divinity, power, and glory (the Ontological Trinity). The Son submits, but not because He is God, Jr., an inferior deity. The ranking within the Godhead is a part of the sublime beauty and logic of true deity. And if our Creator exists in this manner, should we be surprised and offended if His creaturely analog on earth exists in paradoxical form?

But what does evangelical feminism have to say about Genesis 2? Spencer adopts a most eccentric view of "a helper suitable for him."²⁷ She dissects the Hebrew word translated "suitable for him" (*kenegdô*) into its three constituent parts: *k^e* + *neged* + *ô*, that is (very roughly), "*as + before + him*." Spencer then paraphrases the sense as "a helper 'as if in front of him.'" This is not strictly incorrect, but it would be more effectively paraphrased, "a helper corresponding to him." That is, the woman is a helper suitable for the man, on his level, in contrast to the animals. But Spencer goes further in interpreting the *neged* element in the construction: "'Front' or 'visible' seems to suggest superiority or equality."²⁸ A helper *superior* to Adam? Spencer cites as evidence favoring her view the fact that the noun *nagîd* means "leader," which it does. She reasons as follows:

The same preposition [*neged*] when converted into a noun (*nagîd*) signifies "a leader, ruler, prince or king," an "overseer." Literally it signifies the "one in front."²⁹

There is no evidence, however, that *neged* is "converted into a noun" to become *nagîd*.³⁰ By Spencer's line of reasoning we could argue that the English adjective "front" converts into the noun "frontier," suggesting that the word "front" connotes sparse habitation and primitive living conditions. This is simply invalid reasoning. Moreover, if *neged* means "superior to," then what are we to make of, say, Psalm 119:168? "All my ways are before (*neged*) you." Is the psalmist saying, "All my ways are superior to you, O Lord"? Not only is that an

unbiblical notion, the whole burden of Psalm 119 is the excellency and authority of the law over the psalmist. The *neged* element in *k^enegdô* merely conveys the idea of direct proximity or anteposition.³¹ The woman, therefore, is a helper corresponding to the man, as his counterpart and equal.

It is the word “helper” that suggests the woman’s supportive role. Spencer argues, however, that this description of Eve “does not at all imply inherent subordination.”³² She adduces the fact that God Himself is portrayed in Scripture as our “Helper,” which He is. She then interprets this fact: “If being ‘one who helps’ inherently implies subordination, then, in that case, God would be subordinate to humans!”³³ This reasoning is not really fallacious. The fallacy lies in the implication of what she says, namely, that God cannot be subordinate to human beings. It is entirely possible for God to subordinate Himself, in a certain sense, to human beings. He does so whenever He undertakes to help us. He does not “un-God” Himself in helping us; but He does stoop to our needs, according to His gracious and sovereign will.

Similarly, I subordinate myself to my children when I help them with their homework. I do not empty my mind of my own knowledge; but I do come down to their level to see their questions from their perspective and to point them toward solutions they can understand. Their needs set my agenda. In this sense I subordinate myself to my children whenever I help them with their homework.

So it is with God. When He helps His people, He retains His glorious deity but (amazingly!) steps into the servant role, under us, to lift us up. He is the God who emptied Himself and came down to our level—below us, to the level of slavery—to help us supremely at the Cross. Therefore, the fact that the Old Testament portrays God as our Helper proves only that the helper role is a glorious one, worthy even of the Almighty. This Biblical fact does not prove that the concept of helper excludes subordination. Subordination is entailed in the very nature of a helping role.

I see this fallacy again and again in feminist argumentation. “Subordination = denigration” and “equality = indistinguishability.” Whence this insight into reality? Is the Son of God slighted because He came to do the will of the Father? Is the church denigrated by her subordination to her Lord? Are church members less than “fully redeemed” on account of their submission to their pastors and elders? Are children less than “fully human” by virtue of their submission to their parents?³⁴

“But,” someone will say, “doesn’t hierarchy in marriage reduce a woman to the status of a slave?” Not at all. The fact that a line of authority exists from one person to another in both slavery and marriage, and, for that matter, in the Holy Trinity, in the Body of Christ, in the local church, in the parent-child relationship—the fact that a line of authority exists from one person to another in all of these relationships does not reduce them all to the logic of slavery. Feminists seem to be reasoning that, because *some* subordination is degrading, *all* subordination must necessarily be degrading. On the contrary, what Biblical headship requires and what slave-holding forbids is that the head respect the helper as an equally significant person in the image of God.

Why then this arbitrary equation of submission with dehumanization in manhood and womanhood? For what logical reason *must* equality be defined in terms of position and role? This thinking did not spring up out of evangelical soil. It grew up out of worldly soil, and it has been transplanted into evangelical soil and

is sustained there artificially by the potent fertilizers of the worldliness and doctrinal confusion widespread in the evangelical movement.

Bilezikian concludes his discussion of Genesis 2 with the following statement:

Whenever the principle of equal rights is denied and one sex is subjected to another, a natural outcome is the denial of the right of privacy for the subordinated party. Violation and exploitation ensue. The obscenities of rape, prostitution and pornography are the sinful results of male dominance. To strip a woman naked and hold her down under the power of a knife, a fistful of money, or the glare of a camera is the supreme expression of man's rule over woman. Such rulership was not a part of God's creation ideal.³⁵

I challenge this intemperate statement at several levels. First, the issue is framed in terms of “equal rights.” That sounds noble, but does God really grant husbands and wives equal rights *in an unqualified sense*? Surely God confers upon them equal worth as His image-bearers. But does a wife possess under God all the rights that her husband has *in an unqualified sense*? As the head, the husband bears the primary responsibility to lead their partnership in a God-glorifying direction. Under God, a wife may not compete for that primary responsibility. It is her husband's just because he is the husband, by the wise decree of God. The ideal of “equal rights” in an unqualified sense is not Biblical.

Second, the “natural outcome” of godly male headship is female fulfillment, not a denial of female rights. And anyway, in a one-flesh relationship, who has a “right of privacy”? I am an open book to my wife—not that I always enjoy that, but it is true. After nineteen years of marital intimacy with her in every sense, privacy is more than a moot point; the very idea is inane. If you wish to preserve your right to privacy, don't get married!³⁶

Third, how is it that in the last twenty years or so, as we have increasingly lost our understanding of male headship and as feminist ideals have been aggressively pursued throughout our society—how is it that, under these conditions, sexual exploitation and confusion and perversity have exploded in incidence? Male headship is not to blame. Male domination and feminism are the two viruses attacking our sexuality today. They vandalize God's creation and multiply human misery. How can anyone who loves God's glory, who feels for people, and who cherishes the gift of our sexuality not be inflamed at the enormities being committed by these two monsters, male domination and feminism?

Finally, Bilezikian asserts that such perversities as rape, prostitution and pornography are “the supreme expression of man's rule over woman.” But if we define “man's rule” from Holy Scripture as godly male headship, then the supreme expression of it is the woman's nobility, fulfillment, and joy.

Bilezikian's incautious paragraph simply asserts the feminist perspective without evidence or argumentation. Neither does he show any awareness of the nuances of the position he earlier claimed to be answering—a position, like ours, which advocates male headship without male domination.³⁷

What God Decreed at the Fall

How did our fall into sin affect God's original, perfect, and paradoxical ordering of the sexes? What did He decree as our punishment at the fall?

Those who deny the creation of male headship in Genesis 1-2 often argue that, in Genesis 3, God imposed male headship/ domination (no distinction is allowed) upon the woman after the fall. As the corollary to this interpretation, they go on to argue that redemption in Christ reverses this decree and reinstates the woman to “full equality” with the man. We have seen, however, that God built male headship (not male domination) into the glorious, pre-fall order of creation. Our purpose here is to summarize the doctrine of manhood and womanhood taught in Genesis 3, especially in verses 16-19, and then to challenge feminist interpretation of this passage.

Genesis 3 is one of *the* crucial chapters of Holy Scripture. If it were suddenly removed from the Bible, the Bible would no longer make sense. Life would no longer make sense. If we all started out in Edenic bliss, why is life so painful now? Genesis 3 explains why. And if something has gone terribly wrong, do we have any hope of restoration? Genesis 3 gives us hope.

Because Paul in 1 Timothy 2:14 cites the woman’s deception as warrant for male headship to be translated from the home into the church,³⁸ we will survey the narrative of that deception on our way to verses 16-19.

In verses 1-5, Satan, masquerading in the guise of the serpent, draws Eve into a reconsideration of her whole life. To paraphrase and amplify his reasoning,

“Queen Eve,” the serpent inquires in astonishment and disbelief, “something is bothering me. Is it really true that God forbade you two to eat of any of these trees? That perplexes me. After all, didn’t He pronounce everything ‘very good’? And hasn’t He put both you and King Adam in charge of it all? Our loving Creator wouldn’t impose so severe a limitation on you, would He? I don’t understand, Eve. Would you please explain this problem to me?”

Eve hadn’t even known there was a “problem.” But the Serpent’s prejudiced question unsettles her. It knocks her back on her heels. And so the Serpent engages Eve in a reevaluation of her life *on his terms*. She begins to feel that God’s command, which Adam had shared with her,³⁹ has to be defended: “We *are* allowed to eat of these trees, serpent. But there is this one tree here in the center of the Garden—God said, ‘Don’t eat of it; don’t even touch it, lest you die.’” God had actually said, “You shall *freely* eat from *any* tree, with only one exception.” But Eve’s misquote reduces the lavish generosity of God’s word to the level of mere, perhaps grudging, permission: “We *may* eat from the trees.” Already the Garden doesn’t look quite the same to Eve. No longer is the Tree of Life at the center of things (cf. 2:9). She doesn’t even mention it. Now, in her perception of reality, the forbidden tree is at the center. Life is taking on a new, ominous feel. Eve also enlarges God’s prohibition with her own addition, “you may not touch it.” In her mind, the limitation is growing in significance. At the same time, she tones down God’s threat of punishment: “you shall *surely* die” becomes the weaker “lest you die.”

With Eve’s view of the consequences of sin weakened, the Serpent springs on that point: “You will not surely die.” Now we see that he hasn’t been seeking information at all. He knows exactly what God had said. And then the Serpent pretends to let Eve in on an important secret:

“Eve, I’m going to do you a favor. I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you deserve to know. God has a motive other than love for this restriction. The truth is that God wants to hold you back, to frustrate your potential. Don’t you realize that God Himself has this knowledge of good and evil? He knows what will enrich life and what will ruin life. And He knows that this fruit will give you two that same knowledge, so that you will rise to His level of understanding and control. Eve, it may come as a shock to you, but God is holding out on you. He is not your friend; He is your rival.

“Now, Eve, you have to outwit Him. I know this Garden seems pleasant enough; but, really, it is a gigantic ploy, to keep you in your place, because God feels threatened by what the two of you could become. This tree, Eve, is your only chance to reach your potential. In fact, Eve, if you *don’t* eat of this tree, you will surely die!”

It was a lie big enough to reinterpret all of life and attractive enough to redirect Eve’s loyalty from God to Self. The lie told her that obedience is a suicidal plunge, that humility is demeaning, and that service is servility. *And so Eve begins to feel the aggravation of an injustice which, in reality, does not exist.*

Having planted the lie in her mind, the serpent now falls silent and allows Eve’s new perception of reality to take its own course (3:6). With Moses’ enablement, we can imagine what her thoughts might have been:

“It doesn’t *look* deadly, does it? In fact, it makes my mouth water! How could a good God prohibit such a good thing? How could a just God put it right here in front of us and then expect us to deny ourselves its pleasures? It’s intriguingly beautiful, too. And with the insight it affords, I can liberate us from dependence upon our Creator. And who knows? If He finds out we’ve caught on to Him, He’ll take this tree away and we’ll be stuck in this prison forever! Let’s eat it now while we have the chance!”

After his careful, detailed description of Eve’s deception, Moses describes the actual act of Adam and Eve’s sin very simply, as a matter of fact, without a hint of shock: “. . . she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (3:6b).⁴⁰

Mark well what the text says and what it does not say. The text does not say, “. . . she took some and ate it. Her husband, who was with her, also took some and ate it.” What actually happened is full of meaning. Eve usurped Adam’s headship and led the way into sin. And Adam, who (it seems) had stood by passively, allowing the deception to progress without decisive intervention—Adam, for his part, abandoned his post as head. Eve was deceived; Adam forsook his responsibility. Both were wrong and together they pulled the human race down into sin and death.

Isn’t it striking that we fell upon an occasion of sex role reversal? Are we to repeat this confusion forever? Are we to institutionalize it in evangelicalism in the name of the God who condemned it in the beginning?

But if Adam and Eve fell into sin together, why does Paul blame Adam for our fall in Romans 5:12-21? Why doesn’t Paul blame both Adam and Eve? Why does Genesis 3:7 say that it was only after *Adam* joined in the rebellion that the eyes of *both* of them were opened to their condition? Why does God call out to

Adam, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)?⁴¹ Why doesn’t God summon both Adam and Eve to account together? Because, as the God-appointed head, Adam bore the primary responsibility to lead their partnership in a God-glorifying direction.

This may explain why Satan addressed Eve, rather than Adam, to begin with. Her calling was to help Adam as second-in-command in world rulership. If the roles had been reversed, if Eve had been created first and then Adam as her helper, the Serpent would doubtless have approached Adam. So Eve was not morally weaker than Adam. But Satan struck at Adam’s headship. His words had the effect of inviting Eve to assume primary responsibility at the moment of temptation: “*You* decide, Eve. *You* lead the way. Wouldn’t *you* rather be exercising headship?” Just as Satan himself fell through this very kind of reasoning, so he used it to great effect with Eve. Presumably, she really believed she could manage the partnership to both Adam’s and her own advantage, if she would only assert herself. Adam, by contrast, defied God with eyes wide open.⁴²

When confronted by God, Adam does not actually lie. He just shifts the blame to Eve: “The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it’” (3:12). Why is it that we all feel Adam’s face-saving, despicable hypocrisy in his factual, but evasive, reply to God? Because we recognize, if only intuitively, that Adam bears the final responsibility for what happened. Eve, when challenged, can only hang her head and admit, “The serpent deceived me” (3:13).

In 3:14-15, God curses the Serpent, condemning him to humiliation and to ultimate defeat under the victorious offspring of the woman.⁴³ Our only hope as a fallen race is God’s merciful promise to defeat our enemy, which He will accomplish through human instrumentality.

In verse 16 God decrees a just settlement with the woman:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.

God’s decree is two-fold. First, as a mother, the woman will suffer in relation to her children. She will still be able to bear children. This is God’s mercy providing the means by which He will carry out His death sentence on the Serpent. But now the woman will suffer in childbirth. This is God’s severity for her sin. The new element in her experience, then, is not childbirth but the pain of childbirth.

Second, as a wife, the woman will suffer in relation to her husband. The exact content of her marital suffering could be defined in either of two ways. Either she will suffer conflict with her husband, or she will suffer domination by him.⁴⁴ The form and logic of Genesis 4:7b bear a most striking resemblance to our passage:⁴⁵

3:16b: *w^eel-’išēk t^ešūqātēk’ w^ehū’ yimšol-bāk*
4:7b: *w^e’ēlēkā t^ešūqātō w^e’attāh timšol-bō*

And 4:7b reads, “[Sin’s] desire is for you, but you must master it.” To para-

phrase and amplify the sense: “Sin has a desire, Cain. It wants to control you. But you must not allow sin to have its way with you. You must rule over it.”

How does this parallel statement illuminate the interpretation of 3:16? Most importantly, it clarifies the meaning of the woman’s “desire.” Just as sin’s desire is to have its way with Cain, God gives the woman up to a desire to have her way with her husband. Because she usurped his headship in the temptation, God hands her over to the misery of competition with her rightful head. This is justice, a measure-for-measure response to her sin.⁴⁶

The ambiguous element in the equation is the interpretation of the words translated in the *NIV*, “and he will rule over you.” We could draw one of two conclusions. First, God may be saying, “You will have a desire, Eve. You will want to control your husband. But he must not allow you to have your way with him. He must rule over you.”

If this is the sense, then God is requiring the man to act as the head God made him to be, rather than knuckle under to ungodly pressure from his wife. Accordingly, 3:16b should be rendered: “Your desire will be for your husband, but he must rule over you.”⁴⁷ In this case, we would take “rule” as the exercise of godly headship. This interpretation matches the reasoning in 4:7 more nearly, but another view is possible.

Second, God may be saying, “You will have a desire, Eve. You will want to control your husband. But he will not allow you to have your way with him. He will rule over you.” If this is the true sense, then, in giving the woman up to her insubordinate desire, God is penalizing her with domination by her husband. Accordingly, 3:16b should be rendered: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”⁴⁸ The word “rule” would now be construed as the exercise of ungodly domination. As the woman competes with the man, the man, for his part, always holds the trump card of male domination to “put her in her place.”

But however 3:16 should be interpreted, nothing can change the fact that God created male *headship* as one aspect of our pre-fall perfection. Therefore, while many women today need release from male domination, the liberating alternative is not female rivalry or autonomy but male headship wedded to female help.⁴⁹ Christian redemption does not redefine creation; it restores creation, so that wives learn godly submission and husbands learn godly headship.

In 3:17-19, God decrees His judgment upon Adam:

“Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

“It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,

since from it you were taken;
for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

God gives Adam up to the painful and ultimately futile attempt to eke out a liv-

ing from the cursed ground. Notice four things in the text. First, work is not Adam's punishment, just as childbearing was not Eve's punishment. The new punitive element is his pain in working the ground and his ultimate defeat in it. After a lifetime of survival by the sweat of his brow, the ground from which he was first taken will swallow him up in death.

The second important point here is God's rationale for this punishment. God does not say, "Because you have eaten of the tree which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it' . . ." God does say, "*Because you listened to your wife* and ate from the tree. . . ." Adam sinned at two levels. At one level, he defied the plain and simple command of 2:17. That is obvious. But God goes deeper. At another level, Adam sinned by "listening to his wife."⁵⁰ He abandoned his headship. According to God's assessment, this moral failure in Adam led to his ruination.⁵¹

The third interesting point is the very fact that God addresses Adam with this introductory statement, "Because you have listened. . . ." God does not address Eve in this way, but God does issue a formal indictment to Adam before his sentencing. Why? Because Adam was the head, the finally responsible member of the partnership. His disobedience, not Eve's, was the pivotal factor in the fall. Notice this. God says, "It is because of *you*, Adam, that the ground is cursed" (verse 17). God does not say, "It is because of you both, Adam and Eve," as if they shared equal responsibility in an unqualified sense.

The fourth point here is that God told Adam alone that he would die. But Eve died, too. Why then did God pronounce the death sentence on Adam alone? Because, as the head goes, so goes the member.

By these dreadful, and yet hopeful, oracles of destiny, God shapes for us the existence we all share today. Under these conditions, our pain alerts us to a great truth: This life is not our fulfillment. This life is not meant to be a final experience. Our pain and limitations point us to God, to the eternal, to the transcendent, where our true fulfillment lies.

Adam understood this truth, I think. Instead of turning away from the bar of God's justice in bitterness and despair, Adam turns to his wife and says, "I believe God's promise. He has not cast us adrift completely. He will give us the final victory over our enemy and we will again enjoy the richness and fullness of life in God. And because you are the mother of all those who will truly live, I give you a new name—Eve, Living One. I believe God, and I honor you."⁵² In contrast to the cruel, cutting words of verse 12, Adam reaches out in love to Eve and they are reunited in faith and hope.

I personally find that, after studying this profound and moving passage on its own terms, it is depressing to read feminist commentary. A work of truth and beauty is being defaced. For example, Bilezikian writes:

The fall had spawned the twin evils of woman's suffering in labor and of man's laboring in suffering. As a result of Satan's work, man was now master over woman, just as the mother-ground was now master over man. For these reasons, it is proper to regard both male dominance and death as being antithetical to God's original intent in creation. Both are the result of sin, itself instigated by Satan. Their origin is satanic.⁵³

I respond in two ways. First, Bilezikian misrepresents the opposing view. Responsible interpreters do not advocate demeaning, oppressive "male domi-

nance.” They advocate selfless male headship, in which the man undertakes to serve his wife and family by providing the leadership that will glorify God and benefit them without regard for the price the man must pay to fulfill that responsibility. Headship calls us men to lay down our lives for our families.

Second, if Bilezikian would still argue that the exercise of male *headship* is satanic, then I must conclude that he is profoundly misguided. In his Conclusion he refers to “the repulsive pagan practice whereby one spouse exercises power over the other.”⁵⁴ If the mere exercise of headship power is repulsive and pagan (and, presumably, satanic as well), then is it repulsive when a parent exercises power over his child? It can be. But *must* it be?⁵⁵ Is it pagan when a church elder exercises power over a church member? It can be. But *must* it be?⁵⁶ Is it satanic when Christ exercises power over His church? That *cannot* be! His headship over us is our salvation. It follows, therefore, that the ugliness and paganism evident in other relationships must be blamed not on the exercise of power itself but on sinful abuses of the exercise of rightful power. The origin of marital misery lies not in male headship, which God created for our blessing, but in a multitude of other, personal factors.

Bilezikian also labors to mitigate the moral repugnance of Eve’s role in the conspiracy of Genesis 3. He seems to wish for Eve a sort of victim status in the affair. One must read his entire presentation to appreciate this unusual moral perspective, but let me quote him at one point:

The only ray of hope in the statement of the curse appears in relation to the woman. In Adam all die, but Eve, as the mother of the living, shall bring forth life—and from her seed will issue redemption.⁵⁷

But does the Bible set Adam and Eve off as death over against life? Paul, in Romans 5, sets Adam and *Christ* off as death over against life. Bilezikian’s feminism seems to have swept him away into an anti-male prejudice that completely misses the point of Genesis 3.

Concluding Appeal

Male-female equality and male headship, properly defined, are woven into the very fabric of Genesis 1-3. Non-evangelical feminists recognize this. To quote one such writer, “Feminist theology must create a new textual base, a new canon. . . . Feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible.”⁵⁸ Evangelical feminists, however, cannot create a new feminist canon without losing their evangelical credentials. So they reinterpret the sacred canon that exists to suit their purposes. I do not charge that they do so consciously. God alone knows our secret thoughts. But all of us know the stripping experience of discovering, to our dismay, that we have been making the Bible say things it does not really say. To make such a discovery and then to change is simply to grow in grace.

What might be the principal source of evangelical feminist blindness to the Biblical text? Consider the following. *There is no necessary relation between personal role and personal worth.* Feminism denies this principle. Feminism insists that personal role and personal worth must go together, so that a limitation in role reduces or threatens personal worth. But why? What logic is there in such a

claim? Why must my position dictate my significance? The world may reason that way. But doesn't the gospel teach us that our glory, our worth, is measured by our personal conformity to Christ?⁵⁹ Or have we lost confidence in the gospel's perspective on reality? The absurdity of feminism lies in its irrational demand that a woman cannot be "a serious person" unless she occupies a position of headship.

Fortunately, this type of reasoning has already been put to the test in real life, so we can see its practical consequences. Look at the world. Is it any wonder that we see all around us a mass stampede for power, recognition, status, prestige, and so on? But the world's reasoning is invalid. Authority does not authenticate my person. Authority is not a privilege to be exploited to build up my ego. Authority is a responsibility to be borne for the benefit of others without regard for oneself. This alone is the Christian view.

Ironically, feminism shares the very premise upon which male domination is founded, namely, that my personal significance is measured according to my rung on the ladder, and my opportunity for personal fulfillment enlarges or contracts according to my role. By this line of reasoning, the goal of life degenerates into competition for power, and no one hungers and thirsts for true fulfillment in righteousness. No wonder both male domination and feminism are tearing people apart!

I appeal to my readers in the name of God, I appeal to you on the ground of Genesis 1-3, to reconsider rationally the basis of your personal significance. Your glory is found only in the image of God within you, as you resemble His holy character, whatever niche you may occupy in His larger scheme of things.