

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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What does the Bible teach about: The Role of Women

I'm acutely conscious that today's subject is very topical in 21st century western society; and that to allow for different ideas on controversial issues, the broadcaster may precede a programme with the warning, "The teaching in this programme may not reflect the views of everyone." However, I was encouraged by one of my *Truth for Today* colleagues, who admonished me, "Just tell them what the Bible says". That's very much in keeping with our Truth for Today motto *The Bible Explained*. Hopefully, I'll stick so close to the various texts in my comments on them that you will criticise me afterwards for having stated only what Scripture itself says!

With any controversial subject, it's best for Christians to ask, "What did the Lord Jesus himself have to say about the topic?" In this respect, the apostle Paul cautions:

"If anyone teaches [different doctrines which do] not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy..., which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people" (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

So, where should I begin today? About divorce, a topic related to today's subject, the Lord told his questioners, in Mark 10:6, that they must consider what had been established "from the beginning of creation". He then went on to quote parts of Genesis 1:27 & 2:24 to substantiate his reply in verse 9. Therefore, I'll read Genesis 1:26-28:

God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over...[everything]..." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And 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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Notice in both verses 26 & 27 that men and women are first called "man" whereas nowadays we would say, "mankind" or "human beings". They both, equally, make up the human race. But they're also distinguished by their individual gender: "male and female." This statement is repeated for emphasis in 5:2, "Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created." Their joint name was Adam [meaning Man] – although some modern translations use the name, mankind. They acted together in exercising their dominical rights.¹ So far so good, but I must now read Genesis 2:18-25 to establish that the man was created before the woman:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see

what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Genesis 2 describes how God blessed Adam by planting the Garden of Eden - that special environment for him - and supplying food, water and minerals in abundance to sustain him. But over and above all these things, God's greatest blessing was Eve, "a helper fit for him" (v.18). So, the Lord God built Eve from Adam's side and presented her to him as his wife. He found in her his counterpart, one who was like himself. I paraphrase his appreciation, "Eve, you are exactly what I need!" (v.23). Yes, verse 24 states the social reason for God's provision, the woman was to be the man's wife. Hence the second role of woman is clearly stated from the beginning of creation. Not just his partner to help him in all his stewardship, but his wife on whom to pour out his love and care! This latter fact is well testified to throughout the whole of human history. Human relationships are built around the family unit. The intimate husband/wife love-relationship is based upon their distinctive sexuality. What God established at creation remains enduringly good, beneficial and healthy for all mankind. But for Christian believers, there's an extra dimension to the husband/wife relationship in v.24. It's the spiritual reason, described by the apostle Paul as a special secret kept hidden throughout time to be revealed in the Christian era. After quoting Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31, he exclaimed:

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (v.32).

The respective responsibilities of husband and wife have always been required of mankind by God's decree since the creation. However, Christians have the additional responsibility of ensuring that Christian marriages reflect the truth of this great mystery. A wife's role is to submit in everything to her own husband. By doing so she acknowledges the Lordship of Christ and demonstrates the fact that the Church submits to Christ. Paul even gave the reason for this submission:

For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour (v.24).

However, a Christian husband also has responsibilities towards his wife - to show the eternal reality of Christ's love for his Church:

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ... However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (5:25-31 & 33).

Paul expanded upon this teaching in that oft-overlooked scripture, 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, where their mutual conjugal rights are stressed.

But mutual marital submission is even more emphasised in 1 Peter 3:1-7:

“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewellery, or the clothing you wear— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

However, the role of women extends beyond the family situation as 1 Corinthians 11 makes clear. It continues the themes of headship and submission as they apply to praying and prophesying. But first, a word of explanation. To pray is to speak to God. To prophesy is to speak from, or on behalf of, or about, God. As such, these functions are to be practised by believers at any time in any place, whether or not they're "in church". I'll read verses 2-16:

“Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of [woman] is [man], and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but every [woman] who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a [woman] will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a [woman] to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a [woman] ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a [woman] to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.”

In verse 1, Paul told the Corinthians to imitate him in the same way as he followed Christ. Like the Lord Jesus, Paul also based his teaching of the relative roles of men and women upon the creation account. So, in verses 3-16 men and women in general are spoken of. The instructions apply to the unmarried as well as to the married. This isn't a matter of culture, or custom, or just a matter of habit. God has established a certain order in creation which we should recognise and observe. V.3 makes a plain statement. God set up this order of authority when He created man. Overall, the ranking is: God is supreme head of everything because He's Deity; Christ is next because He's God's chosen, ideal, anointed Man; then man because he was made in the image of

God; and finally woman because she was created from man and made for him. The Creator has most evidently so constituted every man and every woman by nature to fill distinct places in society. As we have seen, these roles were allotted at creation. But verses 3-16 give us an exquisitely guarded and balanced presentation of how these roles should work out. She's to recognise man's headship so that when she prays or prophesies, she places a covering on her head as a sign of his authority over her. Her head should be covered because woman was created for man and is of man. Christ's glory, and not man's, is to be displayed in God's presence. But since man is the image of God and Christ is his head, it would be dishonourable and shameful to Christ his head, if he were to have his own physical head covered when praying or prophesying.

Verses 14 and 15 teach that it's natural for a man to have short hair because he, especially his own physical head, reflects the glory of God his Maker. By contrast, a woman should have long hair, because she reflects the glory of man. Her hair is her peculiar glory and special beauty to show she's different from man.

This created natural order has a spiritual dimension. If a man prays or prophesies with his head covered he would dishonour himself, Christ - the person who controls and directs him - and God to Whom Christ is subject. If any woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, she dishonours herself, men, Christ and God. Verses 5 and 6 mean she's to recognise her subjective position by veiling her hair, so that her natural glory isn't seen. However, verse 10 (NKJV) introduces something else:

“For this reason [that is, her place in creation] the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.”

Angels are God's highest order of created beings. According to Ephesians 3:10, they're privileged to take account of the working out of God's wisdom within the Church - another reason why men and women should exhibit God's order “in church”. Paul was sensitive to the prevailing attitudes in Corinthian culture. Therefore, he wanted the Corinthian church to appreciate that he wasn't selecting them out for special prohibitions. Rather, they were to understand that neither the apostles, nor any other Christian church, did otherwise:

“But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God” (verse 16, NKJV).

Paul further reinforced the women's role in 14:34-40:

“The women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord [so that] all things should be done decently and in order.”

Paul gave other headship instructions in 1 Timothy 2:8-15:

“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman

was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.”

Paul wanted Timothy to know and to teach piety so that everyone in the Ephesian church would be equipped to practise it:

“I am writing these things to you so that...you may know how [a person] ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God” (3:14-15).

In 2:8, He emphasised that the role of praying in public is the men’s responsibility (see complete section, 2:1-8). By contrast, the women’s role is to exhibit godliness by modest dress and by accepting it’s the men’s role to pray, teach and preach “in church”. Paul added explanatory comments in vv.13-14: Adam was formed before Eve and she was deceived into usurping his authority at the Fall.² V.15 focusses on a woman’s vital role in childbearing; and as a mother. Paul acknowledged this fact regarding Timothy’s own spiritual upbringing by his grandmother Lois and also his mother Eunice (see 2 Timothy 1:5).

However, some Christian women don’t marry, either because they haven’t had the opportunity or because they have deliberately chosen to remain single – “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (see Matthew 19:10-12). A single woman’s role is to dedicate herself to serving God in a way which isn’t open to a married woman; and to be, “anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit” (1 Corinthians 7:34).

But I finish today with references to some godly women in Scripture who livingly demonstrated the role of women of faith. We’ve already seen Sarah cited by Peter. In the Gospels, Mary the Lord’s mother, was very devout and treasured bringing him up – Luke 2:51-52. But other holy women played major roles in practically supporting Him throughout His public ministry (Mark 15:40-41). They remained faithful even following Him to the Cross and the tomb (Luke 23:53-56). Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary (James’ mother) and some other women carried the news of His resurrection to the eleven apostles (Luke 24:1-11). Mary Magdalene also delivered the special message of the Christian’s new relationship with the Father (John 20:17-18). And the woman of Sychar was the first disciple to learn how to worship the Father! (John 4:13-26). In Acts, devout women supported the apostles in the early church. For example, Mary made her house available for prayer meetings (1:14, 5:14 & 12:12). There was the busy Dorcas (9:36-42). The businesswoman, Lydia, extended hospitality to Paul’s group to facilitate their Gospel efforts in Philippi (16:13-15). Also, Euodia and Syntyche “laboured side by side” with Paul in that Gospel campaign (Philippians 4:2-3). Philip’s unmarried daughters witnessed to the Lord (Acts 21:9). Finally, in 1 Timothy 5:10, Paul defines godly women as those who: have a reputation for good works; are attentive to bringing up their children; show hospitality; attend to the needs of the saints (just like Paul’s spiritual mother mentioned in Romans 16:13); care for the afflicted; and devote themselves to every good work.

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk, number T1130, on *What does the Bible teach about The Role of Women*.

For transcript

All scriptural quotations are from the *English Standard Version (ESV)* of the Bible, except where stated otherwise.

Footnotes

1. See also Psalm 8:6-8, quoted in Hebrews 2:7-8.
2. See Genesis 3:1-6 & 16.

3. Other *Truth for Today* talks with information on the subject:
 - a. T0405, *1 Corinthians 11*.
 - b. T0739, *The Covering of heads*.
 - c. T0751, *Actions speak louder than words: Head covering*.
 - d. T0875, *What Christ is to us: Head*.
4. Emmaus Bible School (UK) studies available covering the role of women:
 - a. The Woman Who Pleases God.
 - b. Women of the Old Testament.
 - c. The Three Marys.

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