

Is The Christian Faith Oppressive to Women?

I was invited to speak to a college class on the Christian perspective of death and dying. What happened was that when the class began the professor said, "This is a class on death and dying, but since we've got this pastor here today, feel free to ask whatever you want."

Immediately hands went up from three women. When he called on one, she said, "What we want to know is this: Why is Christianity oppressive to women?" As she asked this question, the other two women were nodding in agreement as if this was something they had all been talking about.

The concern those women expressed and the question they asked are common today. For many people the idea of equality is basic and foundational to their understanding of right and wrong. When they hear that Christian faith places certain restrictions on women in the church or outlines different roles for husbands and wives in the home, they sometimes judge it as outdated and dismiss it as oppressive.

Now, if the question was, "Have Christian men or institutions ever been oppressive toward or discriminated against women?" the answer would have to be yes. Christian people and institutions are at best imperfect reflections of Christ and Christianity. It ought not to be that way, but sometimes it has been. If you are not a believer and then become a Christian, you too will be an imperfect embodiment of Christ and Christianity. That's not an excuse. It's just the truth. But what about this bigger question: Is Christianity itself oppressive to women? Where do we go to answer that question?

Let's begin at the beginning in the biblical book of Genesis. If we begin there, what we find is that from the very beginning the Scriptures and Christian faith teach that . . .

Women Are Absolutely Equal to and Uniquely Complementary to Men

Women and Men Are Equally Created in the Image of God

In Genesis 1:26 God says He is going to create man in His own image. The Hebrew word for "man" is the same as the word for "mankind." Not only does God say He will create mankind in His own image but that He will give *them*

dominion over the earth. Verses 27 and 28 show God doing what He said He would do. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (verse 27). The image of God is not just male but male and female. In verse 28 God, having created man and woman in His image gives them together what is called the Creation Mandate. "God blessed *them* and said to *them*." The command to fill, rule, and care for the earth was addressed equally to men and to women. Men and women are created equal to reflect together the image of God and are given an equal mandate to rule the world.

That is the foundation for the Bible's view of women and men. But something else must be added to this.

Men and Women Are Not Only Equal to Each Other but Are Complementary to Each Other

Look again at verse 27. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Each human being is created in the image of God, yet the larger idea is that it takes two aspects of mankind, both male and female, to fully reflect that image. Why? Because God is not just a singular person but a trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is triune. To fully reflect His image, we need relationship. One person would not reflect fully a multipersonal God. Also the image of God is reflected by two people of a complementary nature. God did not create two men or two women but man and woman, two people who are complementary to each other.

When we go to Genesis 2, we have a more detailed account of the creation of woman. After creating man, God says it was *not good* for man to be alone. And then comes this amazing story of how God caused a deep sleep to fall on the man, and He took one of his ribs and, as verses 22-23 say, "then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man." The point here is that Eve was of the same *stuff* as he. Verse 24 goes on: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

The idea conveyed is that women and men are equal, sharing the same stuff, distinct from each other and yet complementing each other so that together they can form a oneness that reflects God. And because men and women are equal and complementary, there is a unique role the woman can play in relation

to the man.

In Genesis 2:18 God says He would create a helper suitable for the male. This is often misunderstood. What did He mean?

Many women in earlier generations grew up with the King James Bible, which translates the word *helper* as “help meet.” The images and ideas that came to mind were sometimes considered demeaning. Sometimes the image was that of Mom vacuuming the living room while wearing a frilly apron and pearls. We think of the word *helper* and make it seem trivial. But that's not the Bible's meaning when it speaks of a wife as a *help* for her husband.

The Hebrew word “helper” is *ezer* (pronounced "ehzer"). It's a word loaded with significance. It is found twenty-one times in the Old Testament. Twice in Genesis 2, it describes the woman. There are three places where it is used in the prophets, in each case referring to someone who helps you fight in time of war. Sixteen times it refers to God as our help in the struggles of life. The vast majority of times *ezer* is used in the Bible it refers to God as our help, and when it does it uses powerful military language. God is the helper, deliverer, shield, and sword for His people.

Psalm 121:1-2, “I lift up my eyes to the hills-where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Psalm 33:20: “We wait in hope for the Lord, he is our help and our shield.”

An *ezer* is not a flunky but a friend who fights by you and for you. A helper is one who comes to your side in the battle and brings skills and strengths that you don't have. The goal God has for the woman is to be a fellow soldier standing with the man in life's battles. She is to be his intimate and necessary ally. There is no weakness in that image.

In the mythic motion picture trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Arwen plays this role for Aragorn. Arwen is a princess, a beautiful and brave woman. She comes into the story in the nick of time when a poisoned dagger has wounded the little hobbit Frodo. Aragorn, her husband to be, tells her to stay with the hobbits while he goes for help. But she says, “I'm the faster rider, and I'm not afraid of danger.” Knowing that is true, he listens to her. She is the one entrusted with Frodo's life and with him the future of the whole Earth. She rides and fights her way to safety. She is not masculine, but she is not weak. She is far from helpless. She is the help he needs.

God wants us to see there is something uniquely beautiful and powerful

about His design for a woman. A strong woman reflects, as no one or nothing else can, something of the heart of God, who longs to be our help in time of need. She has a powerful and irreplaceable role to play in the drama of creation and redemption.

God uses words and images, story and poetry, to teach us that men and women are not interchangeable or identical but complementary and equal. To say they are complementary suggests the man is better at reflecting *one part* of the heart of God than the woman is. The woman is better at reflecting *another part* of the heart of God than the man is. God wants us to celebrate that difference.

Everything the Bible teaches about women reflects this foundation that begins with creation.

Both the Equality of Women and the Unique Role of Women Should Be Reflected in the Home and Church

In the Home

God calls wives to willing submission and husbands to loving leadership.

Ephesians 5:22 says, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." That doesn't mean submit as if he were the Lord but for the Lord's sake, or as if you were doing this for the Lord. Then in Ephesians 5:25 we read, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

What does this submission mean? We can study the concept of submission and look at other verses, but I doubt we can end up doing better than John Piper's definition in his book *Desiring God*. Piper says biblical submission is "a disposition to yield and an inclination to follow." He says something like this: "The reason I say that submission means a *disposition* to yield and an *inclination* to follow is that no submission of one human being to another is absolute." That's all through the Bible. Another reason for stressing that submission is a disposition of the heart is that no list of outward behaviors can cover all the richness of actual relationships. People are different, and situations are different.

This submission is not an unbending command from God that endangers a woman's health or stifles her need for discernment. Sometimes people say, "I understand the ideal of submission, but what if your husband is abusive?" If you have an abusive husband, you still need to help him. So do him a favor. Send him to jail and write him good letters. You are not helping him if you let him live like that.

The submission that Paul describes takes place in the environment of a loving relationship. Ephesians 5:25 says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The leadership of the husband should never be oppressive. The model for Christian leadership is a Lord who washed the feet of His disciples and lay down His life for our salvation. Husbands are never told to try imposing submission on their wives. The call to submission is a call for her to offer willing and voluntary submission to his loving leadership in Christ.

What the Bible describes is not the oppression of an unwilling woman but is a picture of two believers following their Lord and building a relationship of harmony on a foundation of equality. Some people say, "That's not equality!" Why? Because the roles are not identical. But that is a very narrow, superficial way of looking at equality. What if there is a better, higher, deeper way of looking at equality that actually echoes the wisdom and heart of God?

If two people are going to sing a duet, do we get the most beautiful music by having both sing identical notes? No, we get richer, fuller music when the singers sing in a way that is not *identical to* but in *harmony with* each other, where we hear not just a note but a chord. The soprano sings the melody, and the alto harmonizes, a third below the melody line, and the notes work together in a way that is richer and bigger and complementary and more beautiful. The Bible says God created men and women as male and female, not to conflict or compete with each other nor to simply to be clones of each other but to create a harmony that echoes the created order of a loving God.

In the Church

In the church God also calls men to a place of leadership that reflects the pattern of the home and the purpose of creation.

The place of women in the life of Jesus was revolutionary. He included them not only in His ministry but also in His closest circle of friends. Mary was the first one entrusted with the message of the resurrection. Yet Jesus, although perfectly willing to poke a finger in the eye of conservative religious culture in many ways, never chose a woman as an apostle.

Paul spoke of women as sisters, friends, and fellow-workers. He taught us to affirm the equality of women and to welcome the development of their giftedness. And yet he also taught that when it comes to how the church is *organized*, women are not to take the role of being the authoritative leaders and teachers of the men. Why? Not because of any lack of ability, but because God

wants the beauty of His creative purpose to find an echo in our hearts and then be expressed in home and church. He wants the structure of the church not to undermine but to reinforce the order of creation.

Sin in our world has distorted God's design. It pushes us to extremes and our reactions to extremes. It can turn men into barbarians or wimps. It can turn women into doormats or domineering divas. The Christian faith sets itself completely against traditional male dominated cultures that foolishly or selfishly oppress women and demean them. But it also sets itself against the non-Christian misguided reactions that fail to do justice to the reality of God and the uniqueness of the sexes. The Bible, through the gospel, ultimately calls us to a new way of life that is uniquely liberating and fulfilling.

The Christian view of women is uniquely liberating because it reflects the reality of God.

If there is no God and just chance brought people out of chaos through unguided evolutionary processes, then there is no right or wrong or higher purpose. And then there would be no logical reason for the strong and powerful not feeling fine oppressing whomever they can get away with oppressing. But if, as the Bible tells us, men and women are created to reflect the image of God together, then there is a uniquely powerful foundation for affirming women, protecting their rights, and celebrating their contributions.

The Bible says not only that there is a God but that God is a trinity. From all of eternity there has always been a loving relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three, being one God, are equal in power and glory. But in what has sometimes been called "the dance of the Trinity," they have different roles in relationship to each other. God the Son is willingly in submission to God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit willingly submits to the Father and the Son. They are equal, but they are not identical. When the Bible says God created us in His image, male and female, the idea is that there is a rich harmony reflecting the Trinity that He wants us to represent in the church and in the home.

A pastor I know tells of a woman in her late thirties who had never married. Her family and most of the other people from her part of the country believed there was something wrong with any woman that age who was single. She wrestled with a lot of anxiety and eventually went to a counselor.

The therapist said her problem was that she was trying to find her sense of value and worth in what her family told her she needed, namely a husband and children. The counselor said she needed to get rid of that old-fashioned view of

self-worth and get a career that could be a better and more satisfying source of identity.

But about this time she was also going to a church where she was clearly hearing the gospel for the first time. She realized that the well-meaning counselor was asking her to throw off a politically incorrect system of finding one's value in a husband and children for a politically correct one of finding one's value as a woman in a career.

She said, "Why should I leave the ranks of the many women who make 'family' their identity and source of significance to join the ranks of the many men who make 'career' their identity and source of significance? If I did that I'd be just as crushed by career setback as I am now when romance fails. No. I will receive Christ and learn to find my identity and joy in Him. Then I can look at men or career and say, 'What makes me beautiful to God is Jesus, not these things.' Only then will I have power and freedom to do whatever God calls me to do."

Real freedom and power do come only from a relationship with God. Whether one is a woman or a man, the ultimate question is, "Do you have that? Do you have Him?" God offers us Himself. God, in Jesus Christ, came into our world, died on the cross, and rose from the dead to redeem us. We don't have to earn His love—we never could. What we must do is repent and turn to Christ as Savior and Lord, trusting in Him as the one who died and rose again for us. What we receive when we receive Christ is not oppression but redemption. Our sins are forgiven, and we are given new life and a relationship with God.

The heart of a woman, like the heart of a man is ultimately made for that relationship with God and a life lived in the light of His grace and truth. Nothing is more liberating than that.