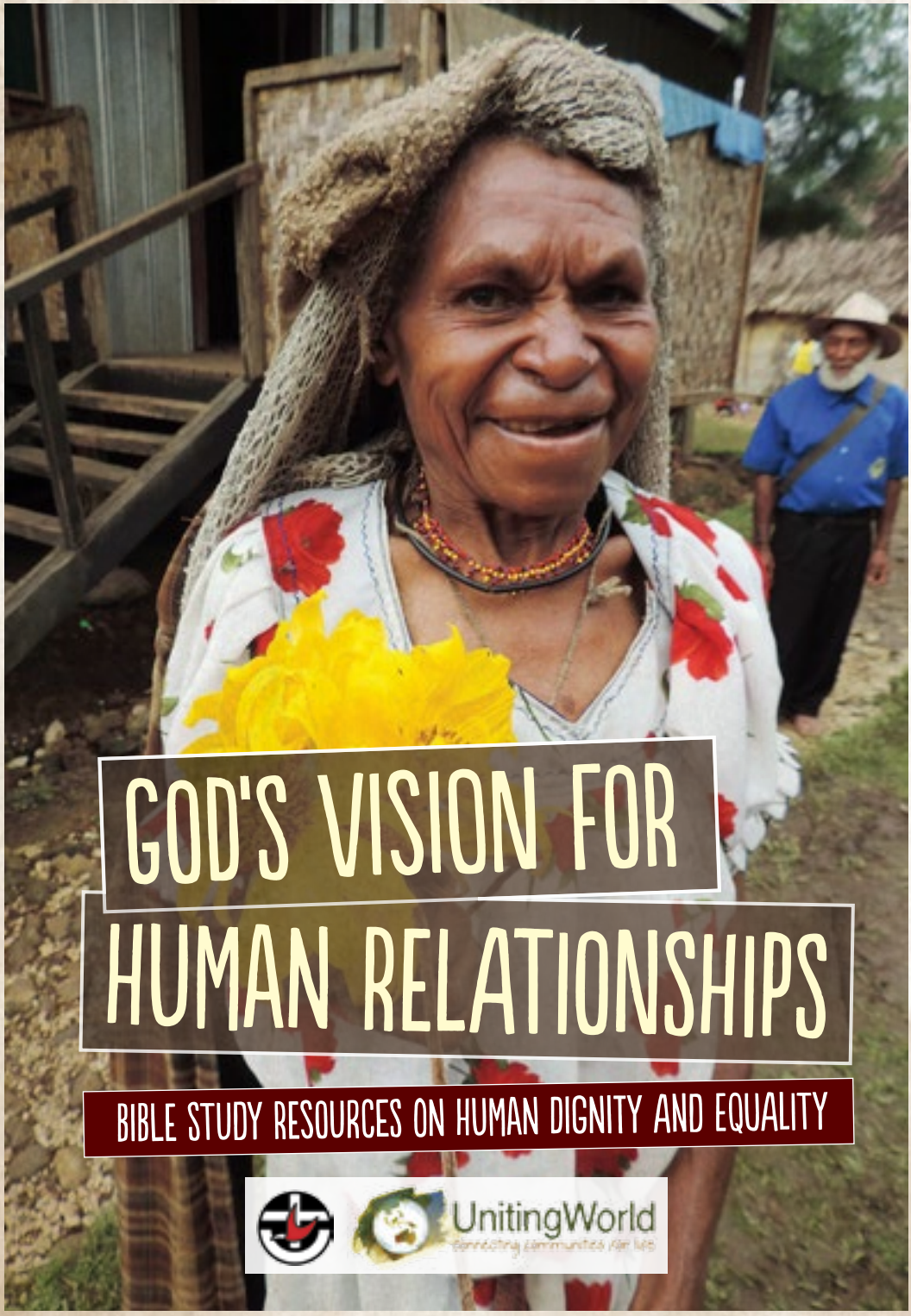


GOD'S VISION FOR HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES ON HUMAN DIGNITY AND EQUALITY

UnitingWorld
Connecting Communities for Life



Contents

Introduction 4

Bible Studies 8

STUDY 1
Humankind Created in the Image of God 10

STUDY 2
Woman as "Strength Equal to Man" 16

STUDY 3
Power Relations in Society:
re-examining "turn the other cheek" 23

STUDY 4
Mutual Submission Between Husband and Wife:
Reinterpreting the household codes in
Paul's letter to the Ephesians 30

STUDY 5
The myth of the weaker vessel:
Woman has equal honor and dignity with man 39

Works Cited 45

Introduction

Equality between men and women begins from the very being and heart of God. This truth is seen and expressed through traditional Christian theologies. Look at three traditional theologies for instance.

Firstly, in the theology of the Trinity the 'three persons' of the Trinity, namely the "Father" and "Son" and "Holy Spirit" are all equal and at the same time distinct. No one "person" is inferior or superior to the other: equal and distinct in and of themselves; equal in status; and equal in dignity. Each one relates to the other as "persons" of equal standing, and each one engages with creation in ways that give and affirm life, and in the spirit of reciprocity. There are two important points to remember when speaking of the "persons" of the Trinity:

- When talking about the Trinity as "Father" and "Son" and "Holy Spirit" there are important factors to bear in mind. The use of "Father" or "he" for God does not mean that one must, therefore, view God as biologically male. The following points underlie this observation: Israel reflected on the gender of God (Elohim) not in sexual-biological categories as we would normally do for a human father, but rather in the affirmation that God is complete and cannot be divided; God has no consort and does not biologically conceive Israelite sons and daughters, or children of God in the Christian sense, but creates a people by adoption; when the Old Testament refers to God as "Father", it is more often thinking about redemption. God is, or even becomes, "father" of a people primarily as their rescuer or protector, not as their biological father.
- Traditional Christian theology and Christianity in general commonly refer to God in the masculine (see above). The femininity or femaleness of the Holy Spirit is expressed also in some Christian traditions. The historical roots of this tradition are traced to the Syrian church fathers who were fond of referring to the 'ruach' or Holy Spirit in the feminine as 'divine mother'. In the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus called the Spirit his 'Mother'. Jürgen Moltmann writes about the notable feminine aspects of the Holy Spirit in Christian scriptures and points out that "Whereas the conception of God the Father is bound up with the creation and the distance of the Creator from his creatures, the maternal mystery of the Holy Spirit contains the more intimate relationships of outpouring, indwelling and mutual influence."[1]

1 See Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, (1991), God – His and Hers, chapter 3 section on "God as Mother" by Jürgen Moltmann, 33-38.

Secondly, the message of equality of male and female is also at the heart of Christology. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ were a critique of the cultural-religious-economic values, practices, systems and structures of society which kept so many people from experiencing the abundant life that God intends for all. The core message of his public ministry was, and is, the reign of God (kingdom of God) and the offer of abundant life to all. Integral to the reign of God, as seen in Jesus' teachings and demonstrated in his life, is the dignity and God-given worth of every person. He stood up for justice for the poor, destitute, children, women, sick and disabled – the so-called sinners – and those who were treated as not belonging within society. The reign of God proclaimed and practiced by Jesus Christ is the greatest leveller of all time. In the reign of God everyone stands on level ground, male and female are equals.

Thirdly, in theologies of the Spirit, the Spirit is the source and giver of all life. There is neither discrimination nor gender preferences in the Spirit's bestowal of life on every human being. The Spirit who gives life to male human beings is the same Spirit who gives life to female human beings, and the life that the Spirit gives to female human beings is the same life given to male human beings.

The above brief summary goes to show the following: equality is part and parcel of the very being of God; equality is proclaimed by Jesus in his teachings of the reign of God, and embodied in the ways that he lived; equality is in the very essence of life that is given by the Spirit to every human being. Equality between male and female, men and women, girls and boys is rooted in these core theologies. From this theological foundation, the call for equality between male and female is in simple terms a call to return to the place where God intended and intends for humanity. Equality and human dignity are not the privileges of any culture or context. These are given by God only and not by any process or system of valuing human beings. As such human equality and dignity can neither be given nor taken away by any person, culture and religion.

The problem of glaring and chronic inequality between male and female, and all the consequent violence that have been and continue to be perpetrated against women and girls, can be traced to three main sources: elements of Western philosophy; Christian theology and ideological interpretations of relevant Christian scriptures; and elements of traditional cultures.

There were strong elements of Western philosophy which portrayed woman in rather negative ways: as an incomplete and damaged human being; as intellectually and morally deficient; and as ruled more by her emotions, appetites and bodily desires.[2] This was the perception about women which underpinned Western civilisation for over two millennia. In contrast man was portrayed as fully developed human with very high intellectual and moral capacity and is ruled by the power of the mind and his sense of logic. These views of woman and man were

so powerful and influential for such a very long time that they became accepted as the "natural" order of things and the natural order of relationships between men and women.

Also for two millennia Christian theology and most biblical interpretations were aligned with the philosophical underpinnings which look down on women. Because interpretations of Christian scriptures were done mostly by men in male-centred and male-dominated contexts, such interpretations favoured men and worked against women. Situations of inferiority and violence committed against women and girls were/are very often justified through such male-biased interpretations. This only really started to change for the good and benefit of women and for the good of all God's people in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Cultures and cultural traditions, cultural beliefs and practices – as these are perceived, interpreted and enforced by men – have also been used to justify the ill-treatment of women and girls and their subordination to men in all places and walks of life. There is a tendency in many parts of the world, including the Pacific Islands, to describe cultures as originating from God and must therefore be respected and followed. However, the truth is that cultures are human constructs. We humans create and make cultures. The roles and relations, responsibilities and attributes, and expectations assigned to boys, girls, women and men are constructed and created by/in/through cultures. Because it is people who construct cultures, it is also people who can and must change cultures that dehumanise and deny certain groups of people their God-given humanity, dignity and equality.

Patriarchy and the philosophical and cultural factors which underpinned and supported its outworking in societies existed well before Christianity and as a result "Christianity was already taken over by men and made to serve patriarchy" [3] from its inception, and this persisted through much of the history of Christianity. This is evidenced in the letters attributed to Paul and in the thoughts and writings of many well-known early church fathers and theologians.[4]

Statistics on violence committed against women, girls and children do not look good at all. In fact, the statistics are shocking to say the least, and go to show that something is terribly wrong with human societies and communities, particularly with prevailing and dominant views and understandings of masculinity. The most recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)[5] focussing on some countries in the South Pacific analyses statistics that should, and indeed must, lead to actions that counter the evil head-on. The report finds that ever-partnered women between the ages of 15-49 experienced physical and/or sexual violence by intimate partner:[6] Fiji 64 percent, Kiribati 68 percent, Samoa 46 percent, Tonga 40 percent, Solomon Islands 65 percent, and Vanuatu 60 percent.

The studies that follow are built upon the theological-biblical premise and foundation of equality and dignity of human beings. Equality and dignity of all human beings is the point of departure and the continuum and the goal which these studies embody. The studies transcend common and traditional ways of engaging with biblical texts, and open up and present alternative ways that underpin and further advance the equality and dignity of all human beings. This booklet is the first in a series.

2 Early church fathers and later theologians, including both Catholic and Protestant, were greatly influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian views on male and female relationships. In Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas for instance, we find strong connections with the Aristotelian philosophical roots of male-female relations. Both men attempted to paint a positive view of women but in the end it was their negative views that were stronger and more influential for Western civilisation. See for instance Genevieve Lloyd, "Augustine and Aquinas" in Ann Loades (ed.) Feminist Theology: A Reader (London: SPCK, 1990), 90-98. Well known Protestant theologians, including Martin Luther and Karl Barth were not exempt from viewing women in not so positive terms as they did men. For instance, both theologians still see the subordination of wives to their husbands as the natural order of relations in families, and women to men in societies.

3 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, "Becoming Human in New Community," in Constance F. Parvey (ed.) The Community of Women and Men in the Church (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 31.

4 Following are some church fathers and theologians who, despite their great contributions to the development of Christian theology, also had rather negative and destructive views about women: Tertullian (155-245 CE; Saint Augustine (354-430 CE); Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE); Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE); Karl Barth (1886-1968 CE).

5 Harmful Connections: Examining the relationship between violence against women and violence against children in the South Pacific. (Suva: UNICEF Pacific, 2015).

6 Harmful Connections, 12-21. The situation of denial by some governments, churches and leading figures in the region of the presence and extent of this evil does not and will not in any way help to eliminate such evil committed against fellow human beings.

INTRODUCTION

Bible Studies

These Bible Studies have been developed by Rev Dr Cliff Bird, for UnitingWorld and Partner Churches. Cliff is a prominent Pacific theologian from the Solomon Islands and UnitingWorld's Pacific Regional Coordinator.

STUDY 1

Humankind Created in the Image of God
(Genesis 1: 26-31)

STUDY 2

Woman as Strength Equal to Man
(Genesis 2: 4b-25)

STUDY 3

Power Relations in Society: re-examining "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5: 38-42)

STUDY 4

Mutual Submission between Husband and Wife: reinterpreting the household codes in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 5: 15-31)

STUDY 5

The myth of the weaker vessel: woman has equal honor and dignity with man (1 Peter 3: 1-9)

BIBLE STUDY METHOD

Various methods of bible study have been developed, and one of these is in the area of contextual methods. The method which is followed in these studies is along the contextual methods and is adapted from two sources: *Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence*,[7] and, *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual.*[8] The method involves four steps of engaging the biblical text. These steps are outlined below.

Step 1: Reading in front of the text

This step provides the space for participants to share their thoughts freely. Each person, or as many people as possible, is encouraged to share what they think the text is about. It is an open kind of sharing. The focus is not whether an answer or opinion is right or wrong; rather it is to enable each one share what in her/his opinion the text is saying and telling him/her directly.

Step 2: Reading (inside) the text.

This step provides the space for participants to look into the text and to do some close analysis of the text. This close focus on the text allows it to 'have its own voice' among the voices of the participants.[9] Questions will be provided to guide the group in looking into the text closely and also critically. Some explanations will also be provided alongside some of the questions.

Step 3: Reading behind the text.

This step provides the space to identify, highlight and discuss the background and context of the text. This is collated and provided in the study itself by the author of the bible study. It is important that this contextual background is provided because it was the context in which the text was originally written or put together and, therefore, the context in which its meaning must be sought.

Step 4: Appropriating the text.

This step provides the space for participants to seek appropriate interpretation(s) and meaning of the text for today. It is a return to in front of the text (step 1) but with a difference: "to examine what the text now projects to us as participants, only to discover that this is deeper, fuller, more meaningful or even quite different to our first reading of the biblical text!" [10]

These steps could be illustrated as in **Figure 1**.

The fourth step is included under the "present" (in front of the text), which is adapted in these studies as appropriating the text within the present context of the readers.

The studies are written in such a way to encourage and allow participation by each one in the group.

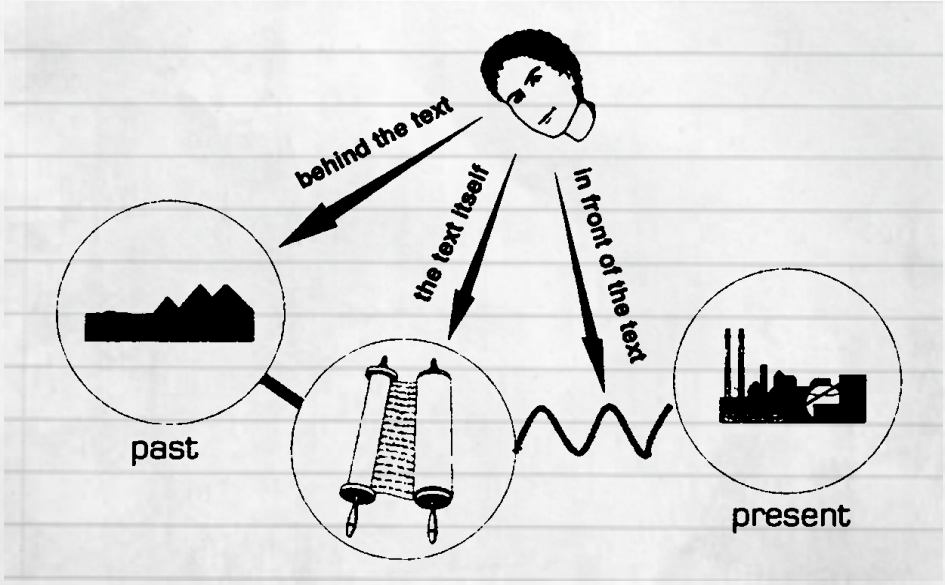


Figure 1: Contextual Bible Study Method by Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre Staff. (See West, 8)

7 Fred Nyabera and Taryn Montgomery, (eds), Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence (Nairobi: The Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and The Horn of Africa, 2007).

8 Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre Staff. Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual (Johannesburg: Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, 2007).

9 West, 9.

10 West, 9.

BIBLE STUDIES

STUDY 1

Humankind Created in the Image of God

INTRODUCTION

The opening chapter to the bible is this story of God willing and calling forth creation into being. Integral to this story is God's creation of humankind "in our image, according to our likeness" (v.26). Both male and female were created according to the image of God. Most early church and traditional interpretations of this text, however, have attempted to downplay the female as equal image bearer of God with the male.[11] This first study aims to do the following:

1. Look closely into and analyse the Genesis 1 creation story.
2. Present alternative ways of interpreting the text, which depart from the traditional and popular interpretation mentioned above.
3. Affirm the view that a woman's image does not derive from man, but from God.
4. Guide participants to seek ways to live out and practice the equality between women and men.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 1: 26-31 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind[a] in our image, according to 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 wild animals of the earth,[b] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

27 So God created humankind[c] in his image, in the image of God he created them;[d] male and female he created them.

28 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." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Footnotes:

a. Genesis 1:26 Heb *adam*
b. Genesis 1:26 Syr: Heb *and over all the earth*
c. Genesis 1:27 Heb *adam*
d. Genesis 1:27 Heb *him*

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

a. Read the text in Genesis 1: 26 – 31a above. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it, or the group divide according to how many speakers or voices are in the text. E.g. in this text there are 2 speakers, namely God and the author (who would be the narrator when reading).

b. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what the text is telling him/her directly. At this point there are no wrong or correct answers.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow.

a. What are the main themes in the story? (Related question to Step 1).

b. Who is/are the main character(s) in the story? What do we know about these characters? What does the character do?

c. Who could God be referring to by "us"?

The "Trinity" – (God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) – is a New Testament idea. It did not originate in the Old Testament.[12] The word "Trinity" does not appear in the writings of the New Testament. Writings in the New Testament, such as John's gospel and Paul's letter to the Colossians, that seem to suggest that the idea of the Trinity is somehow based in the Old Testament, must be taken in their context and background. The idea and doctrine of the Trinity is constructed from New Testament writings that make mention of the three "persons" such as in the letters of Paul. The "us" in this text points to God in communion, and could refer to heavenly council: the Lord God, the Spirit (Hebrew ruach) of God, and angelic beings. This communion in God is the basis for communion between God and human beings and with the rest of creation. It is a communion in the Spirit for this Spirit is the source of all life.

d. Adam (humankind) created in the image of God.

'Then God said, "Let us make humankind [adam] …" In Genesis 1 the most appropriate translation of adam is humankind, but it can also be used to refer to an individual human

11 Take two examples: Tertullian (155-245 CE) for instance wrote that only man is the image of God and that woman, through the curse of Eve, had destroyed God's image, namely the man; Saint Augustine (354-430 CE) wrote that man only is the (normative) image of God. Woman has the image of God only after the man. Because woman is so prone to her bodily functions and desires and to sin, she needs to be redeemed in order to participate in God's image. However, it is only when the woman is seen together with her husband in and through marriage that she can then participate in the image of God.

12 See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, The Trinity: Global Perspectives (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). This publication provides a useful exploration of the various ways in which the Trinity is written about and articulated in many contexts and cultures around the world.

HUMANKIND CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

being as in Genesis 2.[13] Adam in Genesis 1 is translated humankind and includes both the male human being and female human being. Both are created in the image of God. Male and female human beings have God's imprint in equal measure!

e. What is this "image of God" *(imago Dei)*?

Both male and female (man and woman) are created in the image of God by the same God. Woman bears God's image just as much as the man. This is undeniable. "Image of God" has been interpreted in three main ways:[14] (i) it refers to intellect and reason, freewill, and spiritual and moral qualities (justice, holiness, righteousness etc.); (ii) image refers to the relationality and communion that is in God. God exists in communion and relationship, thus to be created in God's image is to live relationally and in communion; (iii) image refers not to something that humans possess but to the function given to the man and woman by God, which is to multiply and "have dominion". To be created in God's image is to exercise care and stewardship for God's creation. All these three interpretations of the "image of God" give a fuller understanding of God and of men and women as created in God's image.

What commands and/or responsibilities are given to the man and woman?
Both the male human being (man) and female human being (woman) are given the same two commands and responsibilities, namely to procreate and to have dominion. The commands to "be fruitful and multiply" and "have dominion" are given to both the man and woman equally. Procreation involves sexual intercourse in which both the man and woman engage as subjects of equal dignity created in God's image. The female human being is not an object for the man to release his sexual pleasures or urgings. Similarly, the command to 'have dominion' is given to both human beings equally. This means both are to care and to demonstrate interest and concern for creation. It also means that both are to enjoy the fruits and benefits of creation equally.

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text.

It is generally accepted that the book of Genesis was written or compiled during the period of the Babylonian captivity. This captivity began about 587 BCE (Before the Common Era). This was a very difficult and trying time for the people of God, to say the least. They were uprooted, dislocated, and felt abandoned and lost. The captives experienced chaos, emptiness and hopelessness. Genesis was written to address this critical and dire situation, in order to try to make sense of it all.[15] In the emptiness and darkness of captivity the spirit of God was hovering (1:1-2); out of the darkness and loneliness of captivity God spoke and brought forth light and life (1:3-22); out of the chaos and disruption caused through captivity God spoke and brought order and goodness(1:3-31); out of the sense of identity lost through captivity God assured them of who and whose they were and whose image they bear (1:26-27); out of the sense of lost purpose due to captivity God reminded them of their calling (1:28-30). In part Genesis was written to speak to the situation that the Israelites faced, and to create meaning out of meaninglessness, and form a people out of formlessness.

The world in which Genesis was written or compiled was ruled and run by men. It was a patriarchal world and societies were dominated and ruled by men. In this system a woman had no life of her own; she was a property and possession of her male heads – father, husband and eldest son (should the husband die). This patriarchal system existed and was practiced in Eastern Mesopotamia long before Israel came to be.[16] When Israel became a people it was powerless against this system. Israel adopted and adapted this system to be its own, and this is evidenced throughout many stories and passages of the Old Testament. At the same time the Old Testament also contain stories and passages which tell of God's good and noble intentions for humanity – for both man and woman, male and female. Genesis 1:26-31a is one such passage. This passage records God's original and noble vision and intention for humanity. Whatever the situation is or may be that we face in life, this story tells us that we belong to God, that we (men and women) bear God's image in equal measure, and that we live to carry out God's vision and dream for the earth.

STEP 4:

Appropriating the text

To help the group appropriate the text, discuss the following questions.

a. How are women treated and seen in your/our cultures and societies?

b. In cultures and societies where women are treated and seen as inferior to men, what lesson(s) can we learn from this study?

c. As a church what actions can you do to ensure that the equality of men and women in God is practiced?

d. Which areas in your community (e.g. education, house work, employment, salary levels, etc) could/should you begin to work to ensure that women are treated equally as men?

e. How might God's vision of equality and dignity of men and women become the vision of your church and community?

13 See William Loader, Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 9-12.

14 These categories are discussed by Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 3 vols. in 1 vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 500-501. See also J. Richard Middleton, The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1 (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 25-29.

15 See for instance Peter Enns, "When was Genesis Written and Why Does it Matter? A Brief Historical Study," The BioLogos Foundation from www.BioLogos.org/projects/scholar-essays.

16 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, "Becoming Human in New Community," in Constance F. Parvey (ed.) The Community of Women and Men in the Church (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983). See also Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, God – His and Hers (London: SCM Press, 1991).

HUMANKIND CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

NOTES



STUDY 2

Woman as "Strength Equal to Man"

INTRODUCTION

Parts of the bible have been read and interpreted to argue for and justify the position that women are not equal to or with men. The creation narrative in Genesis chapter 2 is commonly used to support such a view. Popular interpretations of this Genesis 2 story say the following: woman was made as "helper" for man, not as equal to the man; woman was created from the rib of man and, therefore, is inferior to man; man named the woman and so has authority over her. This study aims to do the following:

Look closely into and analyse the Genesis 2 creation story.
Present alternative ways of interpreting the text, which depart from the traditional and popular interpretation mentioned above.
Put forward the view that woman is not inferior to man, but is a power equal to man.
Guide participants to seek ways to live out and practice the equality between women and men.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 2: 4b – 25 (New Revised Standard Version)

In the day that the Lord[a] God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; 6 but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— 7 then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,[b] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. 8 And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. 11 The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; 12 and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. 13 The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." 19 So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, 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. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man[c] there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman,[d] for out of Man[e] this one was taken."

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Footnotes:

Genesis 2:4 Heb YHWH, as in other places where "Lord" is spelled with capital letters (see also Ex 3.14–15 with notes).
Genesis 2:7 Or formed a man (Heb adam) of dust from the ground (Heb adamah
Genesis 2:20 Or for Adam
Genesis 2:23 Heb ishshah
Genesis 2:23 Heb ish

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

a. Read the text in Genesis 2: 4b – 25 above. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it, or the group divide according to how many speakers or voices are in the text. E.g. in this text there are 3 speakers, namely the author (narrator), God, and the newly formed man.

b. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what the text is telling him/her directly. At this point there are no wrong or right answers to the question.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow.

a. What are the main themes in the story? (Related question to Step 1).

b. Who is/are the main character(s) in the story? What are the actions of the main characters?

God is presented as the creator and originator of life, and is depicted in the text as making a model human being. To make the first human being (Hebrew adam), God used ground or dust of the earth (Hebrew adamah).

The connection is clear: adam is formed from adamah. To make adam into a living being, God breathed into the human being the breath (Hebrew ruach) of life. Ruach is the Hebrew word for spirit, breath, wind or simply air.[17] Adam was, therefore, an earthling made alive by the ruach of God. As such Adam was connected to adamah and to God at the same time. In this creation narrative the first human being God made was a man (Hebrew ish, v.23) and from the man made a second human being (Hebrew ishshah, v.23). Both are, therefore, from the same earthly substance and are given life by the same breath.[18] Inferiority of the ishshah is neither assumed nor affirmed in this sequence of creation. They are equal and are companions. This is supported by other insights as explained below.

c. How is the man described in the story (see especially verses 18-20)?

The man is put "in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." He is allowed to eat from any tree in the garden except "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Unfortunately the man is lonely, so lonely in fact that God is concerned. God realised this oversight and tried to save the man from such loneliness by bringing him all kinds of birds and animals but none of these did the job. It was then that God formed the ishshah (woman) from the tsela (side) of the ish (man) and this saved and rescued the man from his loneliness. Raanan Eichler puts it in the following way: 'While its interpretation as "help" or "helper" is essentially correct, [ezer] always refers to an entity that is more powerful than the person being helped; thus, it means "helper" in the sense of "savior," "deliverer," or "rescuer." It almost always refers to God … and almost always when God is saving the person from serious, even life-threatening, danger.'[19] Woman is in this sense the rescuer or saviour of the man! Yet she is equal to the man as explained further below.

d. God decides to make a partner for the man: how is this partner described, or what words are used to describe the partner?

Listen to what God said: ""I shall make him a helper fit for him," (Revised Standard Version), "I will make him a helpmate," (Jerusalem Bible). This statement attributed to God has been traditionally interpreted to say that woman does not occupy the same level as man, and that she is inferior to man. However, it must be said that this was never the intention of the Genesis 2 creation story. David Freedman argues that from a careful study of the original Hebrew terms, and their various combinations and uses both in Genesis and elsewhere, a plausibly more correct translation is, "I will make him a power (or strength) equal to him."[20] This alternative translation is strengthened and makes strong sense when the creation story in Genesis 1 is taken into consideration: God created both man and woman in God's own image; both the male and female human beings are entrusted with the same "have dominion"; the command to "multiply and be fruitful" is given equally to the man and woman.

17 Arthur Walker-Jones. The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

18 Loader, 9-12.

19 Raanan Eichler, "Gender Equality at Creation," http://thetorah.com/gender-equality-at-creation/

The making of the woman according to the statement, "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh" (NRSV), has also come under scrutiny. The Hebrew word (tsela) that is translated "rib" in English can and has been translated slightly differently as in the following versions of the Bible: "And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and he took one of his sides and closed up the flesh in its place," (Jubilee Bible 2000, JB 2000, italics added); "So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was asleep, he took part of the man's side and closed up the place with flesh," (New English Translation, NET, italics added). Translated in this way, the implications are huge and encouraging. Man and woman are to stand and live side-by-side as persons of equal humanity because woman was/is just as perfect a creation as man, and is equally patterned after the image and likeness of God.

e. What does the man say?

The man's exclamation shows that the woman is not just his bone but also his flesh: "This is now etzem [bone] of my etzem, and basar [flesh] of my basar …" (Orthodox Jewish Bible, OJB). This joyful statement by the man lends support to the versions of the Bible mentioned above. However, that the man calls the new human being ishshah or woman does not mean that the woman is therefore inferior to the man. Quite on the contrary, naming here is not only an expression of joy, contentment and wholeness but also recognition and affirmation of the divine gift of the woman.[21] Man and woman are made equal by and in God. They are endowed with the same substance and enlivened by the same Spirit.

f. Which character in the story has no voice, or is silent? What could be the explanation for this silence?

Notice that the ishshah or woman is given no voice in the story. This is reflective of the common perception of women at the time where their voices were not heard were or drowned out by the voices of men.

g. "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (v.24). How might this nakedness and "not ashamed" be interpreted?

To "become one flesh" is to speak of being passionate, honest, trusting, and loving affirmation. It speaks of a union between husband and wife that is built on openness and support – a relationship that espouses equality and freedom from shame. Dennis Olson stresses

20 See R. David Freedman. 'Woman: A Power Equal to Man – translation of woman as a "fit helpmate" for man is questioned.' Libronix Digital Library System, 6/6/2004. Freedman argues that '… God made up for the inadequacy of His original creation of man—an inadequacy that He admits to by saying "It is not good for the man to be alone"—by creating the female of the species, who is intended to be … "a power equal to him."

21 Jerome Gellman argues that "there was no equality to begin" between man and woman in the Genesis 2-3 accounts. He contends that domination by man over woman is the message of these two chapters. See Jerome Gellman, "Gender and Sexuality in the Garden of Eden", Theology and Spirituality 12:3 (2006): 319-336. Revisionist theologians such as Freedman (footnote 18 above) and many others argue otherwise. Read within the broader creation narrative in chapter 1, where equality is highlighted, the position taken by Freedman and many other feminist theologians actually makes more sense.

that "This marital bond is so intimate that the two "become one flesh"--naked, open to one another, vulnerable, trusting, passionate, loving, and "not ashamed" (2:24-25). This union of two lonely human beings yearning for community and finding it in one another is the great climax of the second creation story." [22]

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text

Genesis 2 continues in much the same vein as in Genesis 1. In the context of dislocation, abandonment and chaos caused by captivity, Genesis 2 paints a picture of order, peace and harmony. In contrast to the painful realities of captivity in Babylon the Garden of Eden is a picture of perfection – a paradise. Man and woman were formed and given the spirit to live in and be a part of this paradise. In part Genesis was written to speak to the situation that the Israelites faced, and to create meaning out of meaninglessness, to form a people out of formlessness, and to reaffirm their identity that is given by God.

The world in which Genesis was written or compiled was ruled and run by men. It was a patriarchal world and societies were dominated and ruled by men. In this system a woman had no life of her own; she was a property and possession of her male heads – father, husband and eldest son (should the husband die). This patriarchal system existed and was practiced in Eastern Mesopotamia long before Israel came to be. When Israel became a people it was powerless against this system. Israel adopted and adapted this system to be its own, and this is evidenced throughout many stories and passages of the Old Testament. At the same time the Old Testament also contain stories and passages which tell of God's good and noble intentions for humanity – for both man and woman, male and female. Genesis 2: 4b – 25 is one such passage. This passage locates man and woman in a peaceful and harmonious world. It takes further God's original and noble vision and intention for humanity: that humanity is part and parcel of the earth and earth's harmony; that humanity is given life through the spirit or breath or wind of God; that man and woman, husband and wife, are of equal dignity and standing in and before God.

STEP 4:

Appropriating the text

To help the group appropriate the text, discuss the following questions.

a. What is your church's common interpretation and understanding of the creation story in Genesis 2?

b. What do the interpretations outlined in Step 2 (b – f) mean for you?

c. The woman in this story is not heard? Are there women in your church, community who are not heard? What are the reasons and/or cause of their silence? What can be done to change this?

d. How might you, your group or church ensure that the more humane interpretations and understanding given above are transformed into policies and programs?

22 Dennis Olson, "Commentary on Genesis 2:18-24." See https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=400, cited 11/08/15

NOTES



STUDY 3

Power Relations in Society: re-examining "turn the other cheek"

INTRODUCTION

Parts of the bible have been read and interpreted to argue for and justify the position that women are less than equal with men, or that women are inferior to men. Matthew 5:38-42 is one of these scripture passages. This passage has been used to justify violence perpetrated against other people, such as violence against a wife by her husband, violence against women by men, and violence against children by parents especially by the father. The words by Jesus have been misinterpreted in various ways: violence is acceptable under certain circumstances, such as when a wife disobeys or dishonours her husband; Jesus teaches and affirms silent acceptance of and passive submission to violence; violence is therefore the will of God. These are wrong.

The passage has been used to dominate, control and abuse women, and other persons who are subject to the authority of another. This study aims to do the following:

- Look closely into and analyse the given text, restating common interpretations.
- Present alternative ways of interpreting the text, which depart from the traditional and popular interpretations.
- Put forward the view that "turn the other cheek" is not about passive resistance to and silent acceptance of violence. Rather it is about taking an active non-violent resistive stance against violence.
- Guide participants to seek ways to live out and practice the equality between women and men.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE STUDY

Matthew 5:38-42 (New Revised Standard Version, NRSV)

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

Read the text above. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it.

Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about as brief as possible. Question: what in your opinion is the text about? At this point there are no wrong or right answers to the question.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow, and read the explanatory notes. A bit more time should be allocated for this step, 30 minutes or so. Record the answers that arise from discussions on each question.

a. In light of chapter 4 verses 23-25, to whom was Jesus addressing his words when he used "you" in verses 39b, 40 and 41? What could you say about this group of people?

b. What do we know about this crowd that was following Jesus up the mountain? (See Matt. 4:23-25).

c. Who is the main character (speaker)?

d. What do we know about the main character (speaker) from both tradition and the text?

e. *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* (cf. Deuteronomy 19:21). What is this Old Testament law about?

f. *Do not resist an evildoer.* Does this imply or mean that disciples of Jesus should simply let evil and doers of evil go unchallenged and unrestrained?

g. *If anyone strikes you on the right cheek* … In the situation of master-slave relationship, who was most likely to do the striking? Why? Who was most likely to be struck? Why?

h. What other relationships might this "striking" occur?

i. *If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat* ... who or which kinds of people would most likely use a piece of cloth (an outer garment or a blanket) as collateral or security for a loan? Who was/is most likely to file the suit?

j. *If anyone forces you to go one mile* … who was most likely to ask, even force, another to carry his load? Why? Who was most likely to be asked, even forced, to carry the load?

k. What does all of this tell you about power relations in the society in which Jesus lived?

[*Important:* make sure to discuss well questions (f) to (h) before proceeding to step 3 below].

STEP 3:

Reading behind the Text

THE CONTEXT

The passage is located within the part of Matthew's gospel commonly known as "Sermon on the Mount." This sermon runs from the beginning of chapter 5 through to the end of chapter 7: (in 5:1 Jesus went up on a mountain, and in 8:1 Jesus came down from the mountain.) This entire section is, in Matthew's narrative, like the inaugural speech or sermon by Jesus. The section is primarily about what it means to follow Jesus within the horizon of the reign (or kingdom) of God which he has just declared in 4:17. Through Jesus' teachings and actions this reign of God had begun to unfold. Soon after Jesus announced the dawning of God's kingdom, he started to preach and performed miracles, and as his reputation spread far and wide a large crowd of people started following him. This crowd grew even larger by the time he went up on a mountain in chapter 5.

OT Retributive Justice Transformed

The OT law (cf. Leviticus 24: 19-20; Deuteronomy 19:21; Exodus 21:22-25) deals with "retributive justice," that is, justice understood as paying back what is "fair and square." Hence **one** eye (**NOT** two or more) for an eye and **one** tooth (**NOT** two or more) for a tooth, etc. Fair and Square! Even-so this was what Jesus challenged and transformed.

The words 'But I say to you,[23] Do not resist the one who is evil' in verse 39a have led to what Walter Wink[24] describes as "door-mat theology" – a theology which says, do not resist those who do evil, do not resist those who abuse you, do not resist those who violate your dignity. Let them do as they please; be a door-mat! In other words, it has been taken as Jesus' teaching on non-resistance; that it is still ok to go through life naked, being abused and violated, and that one does not have to resist evil, violence and injustices. Unfortunately it is the women and girls and children and those seen by society to have no power that have been, and continue to be, the victims of violence and abuse because of such misinterpretation.

"Turn the other cheek" Reinterpreted

A proper re-reading and closer analysis of the text within the social, economic and cultural practices of Jesus' time would result in a different and more correct interpretation.[25] Let us take a closer look at the practice of striking. For a correct interpretation the following important points must be borne in mind:

a. The left hand was used only for the so-called "dirty" jobs, such as cleaning the posterior end. It was not used for other purposes, not even for striking someone.

b To strike another person with a right hand closed fist was a clear indication that the person being struck has equal status and standing with the one who did the striking. Striking with a right hand closed fist was what persons of equal status did to each other.

c. To strike the right cheek of an opponent would need the right back-hand strike, and this was what Jesus had in mind.

23 For an insightful and beneficial discussion on the significance and counteracting and transforming power of Jesus' words "But I say to you …" see Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003).

24 Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). This study owes much to the explanations provided by Wink.25 Wink (1992). See especially chapter 9, "Jesus' Third Way: Nonviolent Engagement".

POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIETY

d. According to Wink, "a backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors: Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews."[26] The right back-hand strike or right back-hand slap was what a person deemed superior by culture would do to someone who was perceived to be inferior: a master striking his slave, or a husband striking his wife, or a father striking his daughter.

e. The right back-hand strike/slap was purposely to inflict shame and humiliation on the one being struck; it was to show the one being struck who was the boss and who had the power; it was to put the one being struck in his or her "place".

The words by Jesus, "… if anyone strikes you on the right cheek …" clearly show that what he had in mind was the right back-hand strike. The striker would use neither his left hand for the reason given in (a) above, nor his right hand for the reason given in (b) above. The only logical conclusion would be the right back-hand strike. By "… turn the other also …," Jesus meant the left cheek. The striker can neither use the left back-hand strike on the person for the reason given in (a) above, nor could he use his right hand to strike the person for the reason given in (b) above.

So what could or would the striker do? This was exactly the point of Jesus' teaching! The one being struck, by taking the initiative to respond in a non-violent manner, had placed the striker at a loss and in a dilemma and awkward situation. By turning the other cheek, the victim had assumed power and taken control of the situation and deprived the striker of the power to strike him again. The one being struck had taken control of the situation in a way that his striker did not anticipate. For the readers today the words "turn the other cheek" must not and are not to be taken literally. Jesus' teaching is about power dynamics in society. Clearly the words by Jesus dealt a decisive blow at the very heart of unequal power relations and disproportionate power dynamics in society.

Turning the other cheek is not about passive submission to those who do evil or perpetrate injustices. The teaching is about taking the initiative and turning situations of violence and evil into opportunities for empowerment. The teaching is about taking control and asserting one's human dignity without resorting to violent ways and means. It is about power dynamics, and here Jesus encourages subversive power so that those who wield power are rendered without power to control, manipulate and abuse their fellow human beings.

Verse 39a does not mean that one should continue to submit to evil or violence or abuse. However, at the same time it does not mean that one should respond with violence or to resist evil and injustice with violence. Love does not mean tolerating or enduring violence. Nor does it mean resisting evil and injustice with violence. The spirit of Jesus' teaching is for his listeners, including listeners today and those yet to come, to find a way that is 'neither submission nor assault, neither flight nor fight'[27] but a way that can secure human dignity. Wink calls this "Jesus' third way," which is active nonviolent engagement.

26 Wink, 176.

27 Wink (1992), 185.

STEP 4:

Appropriating the Text

To help the group appropriate the text, discuss the following questions.

Where unequal power relations exist in a family who is most commonly perceived to hold more power: husband? wife? male children? female children?

In situations where the one who is seen to hold more power does violence to another, as in a husband physically abusing his wife or children in a home, what are some active non-violent ways of responding?

In what ways can your church address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in non-violent ways which uphold and stand up for the dignity of women and girls, and at the same time effect transformation to the attitudes of perpetrators of violence, who are usually men?

What groups, organisations, networks, agencies, authorities, etc. operate in your community or church or nation which could be involved as active non-violent options to dealing with violence in the family or community, etc.?

NOTES



STUDY 4

Mutual Submission between Husband and Wife: reinterpreting the household codes in Paul's letter to the Ephesians

INTRODUCTION

Paul's instructions to husbands and wives in the Ephesian church are generally referred to as the household codes. Taken literally and at face value Paul's instructions have been read and interpreted to justify and support the one way submission of a wife to her husband. Taken further such interpretations say that the instructions to the wife to submit to her husband means that she is not equal to her husband, or that she is inferior to him; that the husband is a level above his wife and is the sole leader and head of the home. The theological analogy used by Paul to present his position is the relationship between Christ (as head) and the church (as body). However, the appropriateness of this analogy and the extent to which Paul follows Christ's life examples and teachings has been questioned.

This study aims to do the following:

Look closely into and analyse Paul's application of the non-Christian Roman cultural household codes to the church in Ephesus. Present alternative ways of interpreting the text, which depart from the traditional and popular interpretations mentioned above. Put forward the view that in the final analysis, the household codes are about mutual submission by both husband and wife to each other instead of a one-way submission of the wife to her husband.

Guide participants to seek ways to advance and practice mutual submission between wife and husband.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE STUDY

Ephesians 5: (15) 21-31 (New Revised Standard Version)

21 submitting to one another out of or
reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit
to your own husbands, as to the Lord.
23 For the husband is the head of the wife
even as Christ is the head of the church,
his body, and is himself its Savior. 2 Now
as the church submits to Christ, so also
wives should submit in everything to their
husbands. 2 Husbands, love your wives,
as Christ loved the church and gave
himself up for her, 2 that he might sanctify
her, having cleansed her by the washing
of water with the word, 2 so that he might
present the church to himself in splendor,
without spot or wrinkle or any such thing,
that she might be holy and without blem-
ish. 2 In the same way husbands should
love their wives as their own bodies. He
who loves his wife loves himself. 2 For no
one ever hates his own flesh, but nour-
ishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does
the church, 3 because we are members
of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave
his father and mother and hold fast to his
wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'
This mystery is profound, and I am saying
that it refers to Christ and the church.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

a. Read the text in Ephesians 5 beginning at verse 15 through to verse 31. You can read it together as a group or according to any arrangement that you find meaningful.

b. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about as brief as possible. **Question: what in your opinion is the text about?** At this point there are no wrong or right answers to the question.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text.[28]

a. What are the main themes in the story? (Related question to Step 1).

b. Who is the main speaker in the text?

c. What do we know about this character from both tradition and the text? (Note: it is important for the group to discuss these two aspects because what is known from tradition about this main character may not necessarily be the same as reflected in the text).

d. Verse 21 says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (NIV). To or for whom did Paul write this words?

The letter is addressed to the entire church, (Christians, body of Christ including men and women), in Ephesus. Verses 17 – 20 are about the appropriate conduct in the context of common/church worship. Verse 21 applies to everyone in the Ephesian church, which includes all men and women. They were exhorted to submit to one another out of their reverence for Christ, to whose body they all belong as equal members. Verse 21 is also is a transition (a linkage) between this conduct in church worship and conduct in the home between husband and wife. In this way, mutual submission belongs both in church worship, and marital conduct in the home. In other words, the appropriate conduct in church worship (call to mutual submission) is to extend and be carried over into the home life, especially in the mutual submission of husband and wife: the call to mutual submission is for the church as much as it is for the husband-wife relation in the home. There must not be two different lifestyles.

e. What do the words, "Wives, submit to your husbands … ," (v. 22a, English Standard Version, ESV), tell you about:

- the structure of society in the Greco-Roman world in Paul's time?
- the place and status of women in such society during Paul's time?

This instruction must be taken within the context of verses 15-21, which includes the

28 The explanations and clarifications provided in this Step 2 are adapted from two main sources: Lisa Marie Belz, "The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Its Place in Pauline Tradition," (PhD thesis, Loyola University Chicago, 2013); Richard M. Davidson, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in Nancy Vyhmeister (ed.) Women in Ministry (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998).

MUTUAL SUBMISSION BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

call to mutual submission both in church life and home life. It is very noticeable that instructions to wives come in only three verses (22-24). The instructions follow the unchristian dominant cultural practice of the time for the wife to submit to the husband. However, Paul injects something that was brand new and quite countercultural: submission by the wife is "as to the Lord". What does this little word as mean in this context? Firstly, the husband is not the Lord to whom both husband and wife are exhorted to submit together. Secondly, the wife is exhorted to submit to her husband whose relationship with and treatment of his wife is to be modelled on Christ. By the use of this analogy of Christ and his Church, Paul transforms the traditional Greco-Roman idea of the headship of a husband over his wife and the cultural expectation of a wife to submit passively to her husband's authority. A traditionally Greco-Roman vertical relationship shifts as both husband and wife become mutually subordinate to each other since both are baptised members of the body Christ. This is because of the equal dignity and status they both share as God's beloved children; each having been made holy and beautiful through the Servant Christ's washing them with his bath of water, i.e., baptism.

f. In verses 22-33, who is given more instructions – wives or husbands? What is the focus of the exhortations to the husband?

g. To what extent is the husband exhorted to love his wife?

h. Paul makes the church/wife and Christ/husband analogy where Christ is head of the Church (body) and who also serves the Church as its saviour: what does this mean for husbands?

[These comments cover (f), (g) and (h).] As the church submits to Christ so also the wife is to submit to her husband. However, it is important to remember that the church includes both husband and wife so both husband and wife together submit to Christ, and on the basis of verse 21, both submit to each other as members of the body of Christ. This is about mutual submission.

Instructions to the husband come in six verses (25 – 30), which is double the number of verses that instruct the wife. The husband is exhorted to love (agapao) his wife. More is required of the husband for the love he is called upon to love his wife is modelled upon three pillars:

i. *the ultimate selfless sacrifice of Christ (v.25).* Christ is the head of the church, but Christ also saves and serves the church through his death and continuing presence. Likewise husbands, too, are to love their wives selflessly and sacrificially. This means being humble enough to discover and embrace that which is to the best interest and welfare of their wives and to willingly submit because of the love demonstrated by Christ. It means also putting the welfare and dignity of their wives first before their own.

ii. *the servant-hood of Christ.* Christ is head of the church but Christ is also portrayed in the role of the servant in verses 26-27. In these verses Christ assumes the servant's role of the washing and sprinkling of the church, and husbands are instructed to do likewise, and to take a subservient role toward their wives. Husbands are instructed to assume the lowliest of all tasks to serve their wives, which invites submission through selfless love.

iii. *the respectful and loving treatment by husbands of their own bodies (28 – 31).* Husbands do not hate their own bodies but nourish and care for them, so also must they love their wives as they love their own bodies. Christ loved his body the church and cares for it.

Paul re-contextualises and thereby reforms the relationship of husband & wife within the analogy of Christ and his Church. Christ's love is the love of "giving himself up" for the sake of his bride. Such love not only stoops down to serve her, but also highly esteems her and raises her status. Christ's headship is exercised in self-sacrificing service to his beloved bride. With Christ as the standard and model, a Christian husband is told to love his wife in the same way that Christ loves his Church. Furthermore, in the same way that Christ's headship is expressed in loving service to his beloved Church, so too, should a husband's headship be exercised in loving service to his beloved wife. Effectively, therefore, a husband is to serve his wife, which means to be subordinate to her and vice-versa.[29]

So in a roundabout kind of way Paul injects a new and very countercultural perspective to the dominant cultural practice of wifely submission, and calls for the mutual submission of wife and husband. It must be remembered that this mutual submission is neither forced nor coerced upon one another; rather is given freely and willingly out of reverence for the Lord Jesus Christ. The husband is not to force or coerce his wife to submit to him, and likewise the wife is not to force or coerce her husband to submit to her. They both give it freely and willingly to the other because they both revere Christ and they love and respect one another as equal members in the body of Christ.

WIDER NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXTUAL READING

i. Compare the instruction, "Wives, submit to your husbands …," with what Paul says in Galatians 3:27-28, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (ESV). What is your reaction?

j. Compare this same instruction with what Jesus said and did in the Gospels in welcoming, helping and befriending women in general and women who were scorned or rejected by society in particular. What is your reaction?

k. Think about an experience you had about unequal power relations, where you were in the inferior position: share your experience(s) when and why you did not submit willingly.

MUTUAL SUBMISSION BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text

To the question as to why Paul wrote in the way that he did, there are two important factors that need to be pointed out, namely the structure of the family unit, and the political situation during which Paul wrote the letter.

Social and family structure in the Greco-Roman world: the Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived and conducted his missionary work was a patriarchal one. This was the world where power, authority and control were in the hands of men; it was a male-dominated social structure. In the family it was the man (husband and father) who had and exercised all power and control over the wife, children and slaves. In that male-dominated world, the wife was expected and required to submit to the husband and to ensure that his reputation in the wider society was upheld and maintained. If it was any consolation she had the task of looking after the home. She was expected to bear children, care for them, cook meals, clean and tidy the home and carry out other menial tasks in the home. If her husband was well off and had slaves, she shared some of these tasks with them. In fact a female hardly had a life of her own in that world, and especially so in the religious world. A line in the ancient synagogue prayer said as follows: 'Blessed art thou, O Lord God, king of the universe, who hast not made me a woman.' The family structure and household codes which Paul talks about in his letter were the very ones that were practiced in the Greco-Roman world during his time. They were not given by God in a divine mail or dropped from heaven in a package. These were cultural practices and codes, they were not Christian. Paul took these cultural practices and household codes and "Christianised" them by developing a theology of Christ about them. This theology is the one that we read about in the text. Remember that Paul was writing to a church that was predominantly Gentile! The cultural practices and household codes were so deeply embedded in society and in the family that even Paul was unable to challenge them directly. This is part of the reason why he injects new (theological) perspectives to call for and instil mutual submission between husband and wife in a rather subtle and roundabout way.

Political situation confronting Paul: it is generally agreed by New Testament scholars that Paul wrote the letter when he was a prisoner of Rome under house arrest in Rome. The writing of the letter could have taken place anywhere between AD59-63, although the consensus seems to be AD60. Although there were no State sanctioned persecution of Christians before AD64 (when Emperor Nero ordered the persecution of Christians), there were nevertheless some persecutions and martyr of Christians. There was also general hostility and animosity toward the Christians. Paul would have been aware of these situations and would, therefore, used language that would not endanger the recipients of his letter and himself. This could also be part of the reason why Paul wrote in the way that he did.

29 For further explanations see Lisa Marie Belz, "The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God …," especially chapters 3-5.

STEP 4:

Appropriating the text

To help the group appropriate the text, discuss the following questions.

1. **What kind of social and family structure do you have in your context? Is it similar or different to the ones that Paul talks about in his letter?**
2. **What does your church teach about male-female conduct and relationship in the context of worship?**
3. **What does your church teach about husband-wife conduct and relationship in the home?**
4. **In the text, Paul teaches and urges the transformation of one-way wifely submission to a mutual wife-husband submission: what does this mean for your family, church and society?**
5. **What hindrances are there to fulfilling mutual submission between wife and husband? How might such hindrances be overcome?**
6. **In what practical ways might a husband serve his wife?**
7. **In what ways might the mutual submission be put into practice in the home, church and society?**

30 See for instance "The Role of Women at the Time of Jesus," http://www.bible-history.com/jesus/jesusThe_Role_of_Women.htm

31 "The Role of Women at the Time of Jesus." http://www.bible-history.com/jesus/jesusThe_Role_of_Women.htm



NOTES



STUDY 5

The myth of the weaker vessel: woman has equal honor and dignity with man

INTRODUCTION

1 Peter 3: 1-9, especially verse 7, is one of the passages that have been used to keep women down. This passage has been used to support the position that women are inferior to men. The argument goes like this: regardless of what you say or believe the word of God says that women are the weaker vessel. Because women are weaker, they are more vulnerable to deception and temptation. There are so many things that they do not know and cannot deal with. They need the strong and godly authority of men to guard their hearts and spirits. The passage has been used to dominate and control women. This study aims to do the following:

- Look closely into and analyse the given text, restating common interpretations.
- Present alternative ways of interpreting the text, which depart from the traditional and popular interpretation mentioned above.
- Put forward the view that woman is not the "weaker vessel," but is "vessel of honor" and joint heir of God's grace.
- Guide participants to seek ways to live out and practice the equality between women and men.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE STUDY

1 Peter 3:1-9, English Standard Version (ESV)

1 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, 2 when they see your respectful and pure conduct. 3 Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— 4 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. 5 For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, 6 as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

7 Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor 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.

8 Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

STEP 1:

Reading in front of the text.

a. Read the text above. You can read it together as a group, or one person may read it, or the group divide according to how many speakers or voices are in the text.

b. Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about as brief as possible. Question: what in your opinion is the text about? At this point there are no wrong or right answers to the question.

STEP 2:

Reading (inside) the text

To help group members to "read inside the text" you are asked to discuss the questions that follow, and read the explanatory notes. Record your answers that arise from discussions on each question.

a. What is/are the main theme or themes in the passage? (Related to Step 1).

b. Who is the main character (speaker)?

c. What do we know about the main character (speaker) from both tradition and the text? (Note: it is important for the group to discuss these two aspects because what is known from tradition about this main character may not necessarily be the same as reflected in the text.)

d. What do verses 1-4 (such as "wives, be subject to your own husbands …" in verse 1) tell you about the place or status of women in society in the time of Peter? What do these verses tell you about the type of society during Peter's time?

e. What do verses 5-6 tell you about the place or status of women in the Old Testament, such as in the time of Sarah and Abraham? What do these verses tell you about the type of society during Peter's time?

f. Read again verse 7: does it really say that woman is the weaker vessel?

A closer analysis will show that to say "woman is the weaker vessel" is wrong according to the text, and according to many experiences and events in real in life. The following insights support this view.[32]

a. Firstly, it is very clear that the exhortation is given to "wives" to subject to their "own husbands". The text is primarily about a marriage relationship between wife and husband. Verse 7 is an exhortation to a husband in a marriage relation to his wife. Specifically the text is about how one particular man (a husband) should relate to one particular woman (his wife.) It is NOT an exhortation given to all men and all women in general. It is therefore the wrong interpretation of the text to say that woman is the weaker vessel or that all women are weaker vessels.

b. Secondly, the rightful attitude for a husband toward his wife is "in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman …" This calls upon the husband to be considerate, empathetic, kind, compassionate and caring. Clearly these instructions do not give any right to the husband to dominate, control, abuse and violate the wife in any way. Moreover, the rightful attitude is "showing honor to the woman," not to belittle, oppress and suppress, and not to embarrass her.

c. Thirdly, the key word is honor, which is a term that expresses value, worth and respect. The words "honor" and "vessel" put together as they are connects with the biblical image of pottery and the potter: Israelites compared with the clay (vessel) and God with the potter (Jeremiah 18), and Christians compared with clay (vessel) and God with the potter (Romans 9:20-23). In the tradition of pottery, the finer a piece of work the more precious and valuable it is. The honor given to the woman is because she is a vessel of honor, the work of the master potter and the image bearer of God. Thus a husband is exhorted to treat his wife as valuable, special, priceless and precious. He is to treat her as more important than himself. So why use "weaker vessel"?

d. Fourthly, the ESV uses the words "as the weaker vessel" instead of "is the weaker vessel." This has very often been completely ignored, sometimes deliberately in order to push and justify the ideological position that wives are inferior to their husbands. The Greek word that is translated here is h s, which is transliterated into the English word "as" NOT "is". The bible does not say, "the woman is a weaker vessel." It says, "show her [wife] honor as a weaker vessel." Small letters yet so significant in correct interpretation! Take another scripture passage where the same word "as" is used: "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves," (Matthew 10:16, ESV). Surely, Jesus does mean to say that his disciples should grow wool or feather or have slithery skin! He uses a figure of speech. Thus to say "woman as a weaker vessel" is to use a figure of speech; it is a comparison not an equivalent! Woman IS NOT EQUIVALENT to or with weaker vessel. Quite to the contrary, there is so much in life which proves that woman is not weak!

e. Finally, the reason for husbands to relate to their wives with understanding and honour is very clear: "since they are heirs with you of the grace of life." Wives are "heirs with you [husbands] of the grace of life." They are not inferior to their husbands but stand shoulder to shoulder with them. They receive God's grace in the same measure as their husbands; they are adopted as God's children as their husbands; they are given the same Spirit, and are equally bearers of God's image as their husbands. By extension we must say that this applies to all women everywhere regardless of culture or context.

STEP 3:

Reading behind the text

Given that the foregoing is a more correct and appropriate interpretation of the text, why then did Peter write in the manner that he did? It is important to remember that the letter was written to a diaspora community of predominantly Jewish Christians. There are two important factors to remember:

32 The following insights are inspired by and adapted from the article, "The Myth of the Weaker Vessel" by Eric Pazdziora. See http://ericpazdziora.com/the-myth-of-the-weaker-vessel/, cited 25-03-15.

- Firstly, part of the reason for the Jewish dispersion was because of persecutions by imperial Rome. As with some of Paul's letters Peter had to be careful with the way that he wrote to the Jewish Christians in such a situation.
- Secondly, Peter was writing within the culture of male domination, that is, patriarchy. The Greco-Roman world in which Peter lived was a patriarchal one. This was the world where power, authority and control were in the hands of men; it was a male-dominated social structure. In the family it was the man (husband and father) who had and exercised all power and control over the wife, children and slaves. In that male-dominated world, the wife was expected and required to submit to the husband and to ensure that his honor in the wider society was upheld and maintained. If it was any consolation she had the task of looking after the home. She was expected to bear children, care for them, cook meals, clean and tidy the home and carry out other menial tasks in the home. If her husband was well off and had slaves, she shared some of these tasks with them. In fact a female did not have a life of her own in that world. In her childhood and youth she was under the control of her father; in her marriage she was under the control of her husband; should her husband died before her she was under the control of her eldest son.

The wifely subjection culture which Peter talks about in his letter was the dominant practice in the Greco-Roman world during his time. This practice was not given by God in a divine mail or dropped from heaven in a package; it was a cultural practice and was not Christian to begin with. Peter took this cultural practice of wifely submission and "Christianised" it by linking it to the Old Testament and to Christ. This theology of wifely submission is the one that we read about in the text. Remember that Peter was writing to a diasporic group of Christians in a predominantly Greek culture! The cultural practice was so deeply embedded in society and in the family that even Peter was unable to challenge it directly. However, he was able to circumvent this dominant culture and says in a rather round-about way that wife and husband are equal, and by extension that men and women are equal.

STEP 4:

Appropriating the text

To help the group appropriate the text, discuss the following questions.

1. What does your church teach regarding the wife-husband relationship in the home?
2. How are women and men placed in your society? How are they placed in your church?
3. "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman." What might hinder husbands to follow these exhortations? In what practical ways could husbands demonstrate this?
4. "They [wives] are heirs with you [husbands} of the grace of life." What might be the reasons for husbands to deny this truth? What might this mean for positions of leadership in the home, church, and wider community?
5. Suggest practical ways in which the fresh understanding in step 2 above could be practiced and sustained in the life and ministry of your church.





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