



Male and female he created them

A Bible study on God's loving gift of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female

Lesson #3: Selfless leading (head) and selfless yielding (helper) partnering in the home and in Christ's Church

Introduction

The author of this Bible study grew up in a congregation where women wore hats to church and men did not. He pastored a congregation where within the living memory of no small number of its members, men sat on one side of the sanctuary and women on the other. Now as the equivalent of a lay member of his congregation, he helped author a revision of bylaws that saw men and women beginning to partner together on four of its seven standing committees. Are such changes in practice clear signs that we have changed our confession of the biblical principle? Or are they evidence that, while the biblical principle is unchangeable, the applications that reflect that principle can change as they are impacted by shifts in culture and setting over the decades and centuries of the church's history.

Let's begin by stating what should be obvious to anyone who studies Scripture on this topic. God has given us a clear principle (the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female) that he has woven into our very creation, but he has refrained from giving us multiple specific applications of what this will look like.

If we don't recognize this in our homes and our churches, we easily end up exalting "the way things were done" in the homes and churches in which we were raised from the level of application (which may change) to the level of principle (which does not change). We end up saying more than Scripture says.

Or, the reverse happens. When we fail to carefully distinguish unchangeable principle from changeable application, we may carelessly jettison a particular application assuming we are wise and free so to do only to realize that the change sent an unintended message that clouded or distorted the biblical principle itself. We end up saying less than Scripture says.

That's why it remains forever important to grasp very clearly the principle from Genesis 1 and 2 that we've spent two lessons studying. It is always important to reaffirm in our minds the beauty of the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female before

we start with questions of application. If we do not, we can easily make (or reinforce) applications that call sin what is not sin or wink at what clearly is unwise or even sinful.

Here's how the proposed restatement of our synod's doctrinal statement on male and female seeks to state the relationship of the principle and its application in our homes:

God's Word provides few specifics for exactly what the interdependent and complementary partnership will look like in each marriage. Providing a general principle with few specific applications leaves room for Spirit-worked faith to bear fruit in ways that make the most of the unique gifts God gives to everyone in the household. It also leaves room for applications of the unchanging principle to look quite different from household to household, from culture to culture, and from age to age.

Here's how the proposed restatement of our synod's doctrinal statement on male and female seeks to state the relationship of the principle and its application in our churches:

Within the Christian church God has supplied us with the unchanging principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding, but he has given few specific applications. This leaves room for Spirit-worked faith to bear fruit in ways that make the most of the unique gifts given to each believer, in applications that may change from setting to setting, from culture to culture, and from age to age.

Where do we see God's wisdom in providing a clear principle but few specific applications?

What challenge does this lay before us since God is dealing with us as his mature children in Christ?

In this lesson, we will look at one key application section of Scripture for our Christian homes and three key sections that apply the principle to our Christian congregations. May God give us wisdom to recognize what makes for wise application in each setting of his principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female!

Part 1: The partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding in the home

➤ *Read Ephesians 5:22–6:4*

This is Scripture's most extensive treatment of selfless leading and selfless yielding as those unique callings partner in the home.

What does it say about the responsibility before God for the welfare of the home that God has given Christian husbands when we note that Paul speaks of the wife's calling of selfless yielding in three verses but it takes him eight verses to address husbands in regard to their calling to selfless leading?

What point is Paul especially wanting to help wives understand when he compares their yielding (submitting) in marriage to the church submitting to the selfless leading of Christ?

To what degree does the blessing we have just outlined remain true if a Christian wife has an unbelieving husband?

What is the clear biblical exception to the "in everything" that Paul speaks in 5:24?

The heart of Paul's encouragement to Christian husbands can be found in 5:25 where he urges them to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Why would it be helpful to Christian husbands, as they consider what it means to love their wives as Christ loved the church, to ponder not only what we call Jesus' passive obedience (his willing death in our place) but also Jesus' active obedience (his perfect life offered in our place)?

How do verses 26 and 27 answer the husbandly objection that he would certainly sacrificially love his wife if only she were acting more loving herself?

What is the beautiful and ennobling honor God is paying to marriage as we consider this section of Scripture as a whole?

Remembering the beauty of the doctrine of vocation, what does it say to married Christians as they consider the importance of how they live out their callings as husband and wife?

How does it speak to the husband's unique calling to selfless leading to note that Paul speaks to fathers specifically when he talks about the spiritual nurture of children in the home (6:4)?

Why is a daily humbling and yet exalting grasp of our need for, and the beauty of, our forgiveness in Christ such a key element in the functioning of this interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in marriage and the home?

Here's how the proposed restatement of our synod's doctrinal statement on male and female seeks to summarize the beauty of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in the home:

- The interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female finds its fullest expression in marriage. In a Christian home, male and female, as husband and wife, seek to live out what it means to be partners for their family's (Ephesians 5:22-33) and society's good. They do this as co-heirs of God's gracious gift of life (1 Peter 3:1-7).
- God uniquely created the male, the husband, for the calling of selfless leading (head). The husband does this by loving and caring for his wife just as Christ loves and cares for the church (Ephesians 5:25-30). Selfless leading includes encouraging his wife to make the most of her God-given gifts (Proverbs 31:10-31) for the good of those influenced by their household.
- God uniquely created the female, the wife, for the calling of selfless yielding (helper). She submits to her husband and acknowledges his leadership in the same way that the church submits to Christ and acknowledges his leadership (Ephesians 5:22-24,33). This includes encouraging her husband to make the most of his God-given gifts for the good of those influenced by their household. Such self-yielding

service does not include consenting to what is sinful since her Savior always remains her ultimate Head (Acts 5:29).

- While God designed the day-to-day spiritual nurture of all those in the household to be a shared task, it is the husband and father, as the one called to selfless leading, whom God holds primarily accountable for spiritual nurture (Ephesians 6:4).

Where do these paragraphs help you understand the partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding in the home? What further questions do these words raise for you?

Part 2: The partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding in Christ's Church

We now turn our attention to a brief study of three specific sections of Scripture that most directly make application of the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female.

➤ Read 1 Timothy 2:1-15

In verses 1-7, Paul is addressing all Christians, both male and female, with an encouragement to pray, in particular to pray for their leaders in government. The goal is that they might be able to live in peace and carry out the work of the gospel unhindered.

Before we get to the key verses, it is also worth noting something else about this introductory context of verses 1-7. It is sometimes stated within the church today that we are only doing harm to the central work of gospel outreach by “majoring in minors” in teaching this principle. In the face of such objections, it is rather interesting to note that Paul follows up a clear statement about God's longing for the salvation of all people (verse 4) by going into one of his lengthiest treatments of the application of the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female. And he grounds his reason for doing so not in some changeable special circumstances in Ephesus (where Timothy served as a pastor) but on the original foundation of God's creative design for male and female. Apparently love for gospel outreach and love for this principle are not incompatible at all.

In verse 8 Paul begins specific application of the principle we are studying. And he signals that by suddenly shifting his more generic word usage about “all people” (a better translation for the word he uses in verse 4) as he now uses the word that shows that he is speaking specifically to the adult male members of the congregation.

How does the application Paul makes to males in verse 8 speak to the calling of selfless leading?

Why, also, when addressing their selfless leading, does Paul quickly urge them to do this “without anger and disputing”?

As he shifts to Christian females in verse 9, just as he addressed a particular challenge for Christian males at the end of verse 8, so he addresses a particular challenge for Christian females (getting caught up in impressing others with outward beauty rather than the beauty of the believing heart evidenced in faith-filled actions).

In verses 11-14 Paul makes one of his most extensive applications of the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female to the life of a Christian congregation.

While the principle of selfless leading and selfless yielding is nowhere limited in Scripture only to the authoritative teaching of the Word, why would that be an especially important application to mention?

In the original language, Paul uses the term for learning as a disciple (in verse 11), and (in verse 12) he uses the term for the kind of formal teaching that Jesus often did with his disciples gathered around his feet. It helps us picture the kind of setting that Paul clearly has in mind with his application. He is picturing for us someone clearly functioning as Jesus did as an authoritative teacher with others clearly in the position of the learning disciples at his feet.

What kinds of settings within the work of the church come to mind when you picture the kind of teaching with authority that Paul speaks of in 1 Timothy 2?

When we understand the kind of formal teaching with authority that Paul’s words clearly have in mind in the context of 1 Timothy 2, that helps us understand that Christian women are not violating the principle when they take part in discussions in Bible class and also confess their faith whenever God gives the opportunity with both fellow believers and unbelievers. Those are royal priestly privileges that God has given to every Christian male and female, young and old, as Peter so eloquently testifies in 1 Peter 2:9 and Paul also testifies in Colossians 3:15,16.

Another caution about over-application is also in order here. Some have at times made applications as if Paul had used a Greek word in context here that means “complete silence” (he does use such a word in 1 Corinthians 14, which we will discuss later). Furthermore, some have failed to grasp that even if the word meant “silence” here (which it clearly does not), that would still be a part of an application and not the principle itself.

In 1 Timothy 2, the word translated in the NIV as “quietness” and then later “silence” (even though it is exactly the same word in the Greek and forms a bookend repetition in Paul’s line of thought) is not at all forbidding speaking. Rather Paul uses that word twice to bracket the whole encouragement to Christian women to learn in a spirit of humble respect from those to whom God has entrusted a bit of his authority within the church—here specifically the formal teaching of the Word by males in mixed groups of males and females. Such humble respect does not at all forbid asking questions to learn or speaking answers and confessing faith in ways that give evidence the Spirit has indeed blessed their learning.

In all such questions, it is absolutely critical to keep in mind what is principle and what is application.

➤ **Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-10**

In order to understand this section of Scripture, it is important to note that Paul is dealing with a custom (head coverings for females) that was at work not just within the congregation at Corinth but also within the culture of their city. For an adult female to appear in public in Corinth with her hair uncovered was to advertise that she was not under the leadership of any male.

One other thing is worth pondering as we begin to study this passage. It is very hard for us in this chapter, and in chapter 14 that we will study next, to recreate a detailed picture of what the various gatherings of the Christians of Corinth were like. Notice, for instance, that here in chapter 11 the women are praying and prophesying (remember: silence is not the principle, but only an application where God-given authority would be dishonored). However, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is going to make an application of absolute silence for them in that specific setting he addressed there.

Because of the house-church structure of much of early Christianity (many poorer Christians, few large gathering places where they could all easily come together), some have suggested that chapter 11 may have in mind the smaller and thus less formal gatherings of Christians in their homes for study and prayer (something more like a small group discussion or prayer group we might think of today). Then, they would suggest, chapter 14 has in mind those times when those smaller groupings of Christians in the city would all gather into one larger assembly (more as we would picture corporate worship on Sunday morning).

While the specific setting and situation in each chapter would have been perfectly clear to Paul’s first readers, we must acknowledge that we struggle to know precisely how their gatherings were structured. And since the Corinthians had a rich measure of extra-ordinary spiritual gifts (like speaking direct revelation from God [prophecy] and speaking in languages they had never studied [“tongues”]), what worship was like for them is even harder for us to picture. Not to mention hard for them to manage themselves! The challenge of exercising all these special gifts of the Spirit without having their gatherings descend into disorderly chaos (using spiritual gifts as an excuse to ignore God’s created order), must have been great, as Paul’s words testify in both chapters.

While Paul is addressing his encouragement in particular to the women of the congregation, what may be the wisdom of beginning this section (verse 3) by saying that the head of every male is Christ, and also that, as the incarnate God/man, even Christ recognizes the headship of his heavenly Father?

Why would Paul speak so strongly to the women of Corinth about observing this custom when the custom itself was neither commanded nor forbidden by God?

This is one of the most helpful sections of Scripture when it comes to understanding the difference between application (which may change depending on culture or setting) and unchanging principle (which remains unchanged).

Why is it today, while we still honor the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female, that we do not urge females to wear head coverings at worship?

In verse 7, Paul is certainly not disagreeing with the reality that God gifted in creation (and in recreation in Christ) both male and female with his image. However, he is drawing attention to something that does mark us as unique as males and females.

In what special sense is the man—wherever he honors his calling to selfless leading— “the image and glory of God”?

In what special sense is the woman—wherever she honors her calling to selfless yielding— “the glory of man”?

Though we have already studied it, let’s remind ourselves here how quickly after his statements about our complementarity (uniqueness, not duplication) as males and females in verses 4-10, Paul turns our attention back to our interdependence in verses 11 and 12. He is guarding the beauty of the biblical middle ground by saying two things as he stresses both the interdependent and complementary nature of the God-designed partnership of male and female. That’s why, after urging us, “Don’t act as if you are carelessly formed duplicates of each other . . .”, he

hastens to add, “. . . but remember that God didn’t fashion you as complements for you to live in loveless and arrogant independence from each other. Men and women—you are a carefully crafted partnership by God’s design.”

➤ **Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-40**

Having already set the scene for both of these sections from 1 Corinthians above, here we need to note another unique feature of the Corinthian Christians’ gathering that Paul is describing. The spiritual gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy (speaking by direct revelation from heaven) was regularly being exercised by multiple speakers in the gatherings Paul is referring to in this section. As Paul describes this setting, to stand up to speak would often have a powerful impact on the previous speaker. For example, if someone received a new revelation while another was speaking, as that person stood to speak that would silence the one currently speaking (verse 30). And, since someone could falsely be claiming to speak prophetically (by direct revelation from heaven) but then share something other than God’s truth, there would also be those with the gift of discernment who would stand up to judge what that prophet had just shared (verse 29).

Imagine yourself in such a gathering of God’s people in first century Corinth. How does that setting, as Paul describes it for us, help us understand why Paul speaks of silence (and the word he uses here is indeed a word for absolute silence) for the women in that setting?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Scripture does not give Christ's New Testament church any specific requirements for how a congregation organizes its governance. While there is a brief glimpse of the casting of lots (an Old Testament practice) used among the believers in Acts 1:46 as a replacement for Judas was selected, that certainly is not a divine mandate—or necessarily even a suggestion—that the casting of lots is a required part of congregational governance. Since in any form of church governance there will clearly be those called to exercise authority on behalf of the whole body of believers, we do well to ponder the implications of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in whatever way the church in its freedom determines for authority to be operating in its midst.

The most common form of government found in our congregations (by custom, but not by command of God) tends to vest final decision-making authority with the voters' assembly. While we do not believe that all voting is always an exercise of authority, where a vote is clearly exercising the authority to give direction to others they are to follow for their good or for the good of others, there God's people honor the calling God has given to the adult males of the congregation to exercise that authority on behalf of the family of faith.

However, while that application (remember: voting is not the principle) guards the complementary side of the principle, we often still have much to learn when it comes to honoring the equally important interdependent side of the principle. Congregations do well to work hard to make sure that the wisdom, insights, and concerns of all in the congregation are considered as decisions are made. That God intended both men and women to exert such godly influence in the process is the intent of—not a violation of—the interdependent and complementary partnership. Once again, Genesis 2:18 needs to resonate in our ears: "It is not good for the man to be alone."

Christian congregations are certainly free to search for other forms of church governance that may enable them—in their culture and setting—to best carry out the work of the gospel for the edification of the flock and outreach to those not yet in the flock. In fact, throughout the five centuries of Lutheran history, and even currently around the world, Lutheran congregations have been and are structured in many different ways in keeping with the customs and culture in which they were or are found.

However, no matter what form of church governance is chosen, honoring the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female will always play a key role. The God who moved all creation from "formless and empty" to well-ordered still delights today when his people imitate him as they delight in how he has so lovingly and beautifully ordered his world. This may in some cultures mark us as very different from the prevailing culture outside the church. At those times, we remember that embracing the cross as followers of the crucified (not functionaries of our culture) will never hurt us.

END OF THE FURTHER STUDY

Even as we wrestle to understand the unique setting of Corinthian worship, it is also vital to note that Paul does not ground the stated reason for his application in that unique situation of Corinth. At the close of verse 33, he states that he is making an application that was consistently made “in all the congregations of the saints” when it came to teaching the Word (application) with authority (the principle). Paul is thereby consistently making the same general application of the selfless leading with authority that he asks of the males in 1 Timothy 2. This guards the complementary side of God’s good principle.

At the same time, we are wise to refrain from speaking with certainty that this setting in Corinth is equivalent to the modern-day voters’ assembly. To claim that 1 Corinthians 14 commands that women must be silent in all such meetings of God’s church is to claim to know far more about the setting in Corinth than we do. It also easily does violence to the interdependent side of God’s good principle.

As we close our study of this section of Scripture, it is good for us to notice what Paul does in verse 36. There he reminds us that the Word of God didn’t start with us, nor does it end with us. With that Paul lifts our sights beyond the narrow confines of our congregation’s walls by calling us to see the much bigger picture of brothers and sisters in the Holy Christian Church. We especially think of the Christians who “walk together” (the meaning of the word “synod”) with us in our church body and those who are in fellowship with us around the world in the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference.

Why is seeing beyond our congregation’s walls or our church body’s boundaries such an important insight to keep in mind as we make decisions about how we will make applications of the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female?

Also here there is a need to say two things. When other congregations adopt applications that are different from our own, what debt of love do we owe them?

Here’s how the proposed restatement of our synod’s doctrinal statement on male and female seeks to summarize the beauty of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in our Christian congregations:

- Just as within the home, so also within the gatherings of the body of Christ (the church), God designed male and female to use their God-given gifts guided by the interdependent and complementary partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding so that in all things God’s grace in Christ may be honored (1 Peter 4:10,11; 1 Corinthians 12; 1 Corinthians 14:12).

- The unique callings of selfless leading and selfless yielding do not hinder but rather guide the use of the gifts of both male and female. The Scriptures provide abundant evidence of how God used the gifts of both without violating the interdependent and complementary partnership he has established (Romans 16:1-16).
- The encouraging and admonishing with the Word that all Christians are called to carry out as God's royal priests is a shared responsibility of both male and female (Colossians 3:15-17). Likewise, making the most of every opportunity in all their God-given callings to witness the truth to the troubled or unbelieving is a privilege of both male and female (1 Peter 3:15).
- When God's people gather for Bible study and worship, both male and female rightly participate in the singing of psalms and hymns, in the discussion of God's Word, and in adding their voices to the church's corporate prayers.
- When authority is being exercised in the church, God holds males responsible for exercising such selfless leading for the benefit of God's family (1 Timothy 2:12).

Where do these paragraphs help you understand the partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding in the church? What further questions do these words raise for you?
