5. Justice and Equality: Is God Interested?

Ray C. W. Roennfeldt
Avondale College of Higher Education

Introduction

It is obvious that a complete coverage of the topic of God's attitude to justice and equality is beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, a more focused approach is taken here, in which several key passages and stories (cases) are examined in order to explicate Scripture's overall perspective. While the area under discussion is much wider than God's attitude towards women, given the contemporary debate regarding the ordination of women in Seventh-day Adventism, this dimension of the topic will often appear in the foreground.

The approach taken is as follows. First, the Genesis account of the creation of humankind is examined to find the divine ideal for human relationships. The fact that God creates all of humankind in his making of Adam and Eve is surely significant for attempts to discover the divine attitude towards humankind and their relationships with each other. Humans, of course, did not remain as God made them, and it needs to be asked whether their "fall" into sin changed God's expectations in terms of his original ideal.

Second, the divine attitude towards justice and equality in general as shown in Scripture is examined. The Old Testament material will be examined chiefly through the lens of two case studies that conveniently combine several characteristics; both of the individuals involved were women and they were not of the "chosen people." The New Testament material will be entered initially via Jesus' own mission statement, then through some of the many outstanding instances of Jesus' interactions with women, and briefly through the *locus classicus* of Galatians 3:28.

Third, as with any biblical teaching or doctrine, there are difficult passages that cannot be easily 'squeezed" into a systematic approach.[1] Not all of these passages are examined in detail. Rather a sampling of texts is examined via a threefold approach: the nature of Scripture itself, the overall perspective of biblical teaching, and the concept of divine accommodation.

Fourth, as the global, multicultural church grapples with the issue of justice and equality a possible path ahead is plotted through the hermeneutical system portrayed as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and through the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 viewed as a case study in church politics.

Human Relationships: the Divine Ideal

The climax of the Genesis account of creation is the creation of human beings. Everything that has gone before on the previous five days and earlier on the sixth is a prelude to the creation of humans. However, there is something quite distinctive in this creative act. Humans are the last creatures mentioned in the account and, as pointed out in Genesis 2:7, 22, they are "separately formed by God ... and made from the dust of the ground."[2] The human is not merely called into being as was the rest of creation, but is specifically "shaped" as a potter shapes the clay. Gordon Wenham points out that this "[s]haping' is an artistic, inventive activity that requires skill and planning."[3]

It should be observed that although the Pentateuch provides the Israelite people with an explanation of their existence as a people, in the creation of Adam and Eve is the creation of all of humankind. This is made obvious in the genealogy from Adam to Noah (Gen 5) and in its continuation in the table of nations (Gen 10). To be specific, all of humankind finds its reason for being, its dignity, and its equality in a special divine creation, and it is apparent that God planned and intended it to be so.

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1 For instance, there are difficult passages that do not appear to "fit" neatly into a doctrine of the perpetuity of the Sabbath and texts that seem to teach a doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

2 Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis and Exodus* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008) 39. Ross is the author of the section on Genesis and henceforth this work will be referred to as Ross.

3 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco TX: Word, 1987) 59.

Furthermore, all humans are made in the "image of God." This is stated explicitly in Genesis: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27[4]).

What does this mean? Various explanations have been offered, ranging from (1) the natural human qualities in which humans resemble God (e.g. reasoning and personality); (2) the "mental and spiritual faculties that man shares with his creator;" (3) the human "physical resemblance" to God; and (4) to the image as "God's representative[s] on earth."[5] Laurence Turner comments that "While the text of Genesis 1 does not state explicitly what the image is, it does provide hints. If humans are in God's image then there must be some analogy between God and humans."[6] Turner then explains that the projected human dominion over creation is analogous to God's subjugation of and transformation of the earth from its primeval chaos. He concludes that "This suggests that the 'image of God' in humans refers not only to what humans *are* but primarily to what they *do* ..."[7]

There may also be a relational aspect to the concept of the image of God. The Creator-human (or Father-man/woman) relationship is clearly inferred in God's declaration, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Gen 1:26; c.f., 5:1-3). The same passage also refers to the other two foundational human relationships. The relationship between humans and their environment is explicitly mentioned (Gen 1: 26, 28–30) and the creation of humans as male and female (Gen 1:27) points to the relationship between human and human.[8] If this interpretation is correct, at very least it means that there is something about humans of both genders that equally "images" God in the world.

However, some argue that the order of the creation of Adam and Eve portrays a basic inequality between the two.[9] However, there is

4 Unless otherwise noted the biblical citations in this chapter are taken from the NIV.

5 Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* 29–30; cf., Ross, *Genesis,* 39–40.

6 Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis*, (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary), 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009) 14.

7 Turner, *Genesis* 15. In pointing to their role as "God's representatives," Ross states that "God's image in humans is functional" (Ross, 40).

8 For this insight, I am indebted to a Christian Anthropology (MA Religion) class taught by Gottfried Oosterwal at Avondale College during the 1980s.

9 See for example Danny Burk, "5 Evidences of Complementarian

no hint of that in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. While Adam is created first, the "order" of the creation narrative would forbid such a conclusion. Within the account there is a distinct progression from what might be construed as simple living things to the more complex (e.g., vegetation on the third day, birds and fish on the fifth day, and, finally, land animals and then humans on the sixth day. In addition, the "structure" of the creation account indicates the same kind of progression: what is formed on day 1 is filled on day 4; what is formed on day 2 is filled on day 5; and what is formed on day 3 is filled on day 6. It is an ironic fact that, given the inherent structure within the narrative, one could actually argue for the superiority of Eve over Adam!

Adam's declaration concerning the woman contains no indication of inequality between the two: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). In commenting on the relationship between Adam and Eve, Allen Ross remarks that "The woman is described as a helper, which means that she supplied what he lacked ... and by implication the reverse would also be true."[10] With the creation of the woman, the situation of Adam's aloneness described by God as "not good" (Gen 2:18), is now "very good" (Gen 1:31). Commenting on the symbolism of the creation of the woman, Ellen White aptly says:

> God himself gave Adam a companion. He provided "an help meet for him"—a helper corresponding to him—one who was fitted to be his companion, and who could be one with him in love and sympathy. Eve was created from a rib taken from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, nor to be trampled under his feet as an inferior, but to stand by his side as an equal, to be loved and protected by him. A part of man, bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh, she was his second self ... [11]

In summary, it can be concluded safely that the Genesis accounts of creation indicate the intention of God to create humans as equal beings in terms of family of origin and of gender.[12] All of humankind

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Gender Roles in Genesis 1–2" https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-evidences-of-complementarian-gender-roles-in-genesis-1-2

10 Ross, *Genesis,* 48.

11 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1890, 1958) 46.

12 Susan E. Elliott maintains that gender equality "is a dynamic and repeated theme from Genesis to Revelation". See Susan E. Elliott, "Biblical Gender Equality in Christian Academia," *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal*

is portrayed as finding their common ancestors in Adam and Eve while God's ideal is obviously that women and men will live together in equality. However, Genesis 3 reveals that the parents of the human race fell away from this ideal. We need to examine whether this "fall" destroyed the divine ideal of human equality and whether God now established a different order in which women were subordinate to men.

Clearly, Genesis 3 indicates that the original perfect relationship between male and female was shattered. The disobedience of humanity's first parents led to blame and fractured relationships between each other and God (Gen 3:10–13). God utters "curses" and declares penalties on the serpent, on the woman, and on the man (Gen 3:14-19).[13] A key passage is the pronouncement on the woman for that is the only one that is indicative of a change in the relationship between herself and the man: "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16).

Is this pronouncement prescriptive or descriptive? In other words, is God here outlining what *must be* the part of women from henceforth, or is he indicating what *would be* in many cultures and societies? The context seems to indicate that this passage is descriptive rather than prescriptive. While Adam would now struggle with the soil to produce what was necessary to sustain life, there is certainly no edict that he was to "submit" to the fact that the soil would "now produce thorns and thistles for you" (Gen 3:18). By analogy, one might legitimately assume that the woman, also, was not predestined to be dominated by the man.[14]

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of the Oxford Roundtable Summer 2010. (The online version of Elliott's article cited in this chapter, does not contain page numbers.)

13 In fact, the "curses" are only on the serpent and the ground (Gen 3:14 and 17), so they are better seen as divine pronouncements. See Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* 81.

14 In the past it was sometimes argued that the woman should not receive analgesia during childbirth because God has decreed that she was to have pain. For instance, during the 1800s "many members of the British clergy argued that this human intervention in the miracle of birth [i.e., the use of analgesic drugs] was against the will of God" (Bhavani Shankar Kodali [of Harvard Medical School], "A Brief History of Pain Relief in Labour," available at http://www.papapetros.com.au/HistoryPainRelief.pdf (accessed 4 June 2017).

While the fall into sin "changed the game" in every way for humankind, it did not mean that everything was lost. Humans still reflected God's image, although rather more dimly.[15] Clark Pinnock insightfully observes that

> ... the Fall into sin is the most empirical of all the Christian doctrines. Few things are more obvious about human nature than its deeply flawed character and the misuse of human freedom. It explains much of what we see in and around us. What Adam [and Eve] did in this story is repeated and confirmed practically every day in the lives of all of us (Rom. 7:9–10).[16]

The remainder of the Old Testament witnesses to fractured relationships between God and humankind, between humans and their environment, and between humans and humans. The latter, as illustrated most starkly in the injustice and inequality experienced by women speaks volumes, as does the divine intention to ameliorate the situation not only through the promise of the "offspring" of the woman (Gen 3:15), but also in day-to-day life situations.

Justice and Equality in the Old Testament

The Old Testament provides stories in which God (almost surprisingly) treats women with justice and equality when culture and society would have prescribed otherwise. One clear example, told in Genesis 16, is the case of Hagar. Not only was Hagar a woman, but she was a woman of no account, being an Egyptian slave to Sarai, the wife of Abram. Being unable to bear a child herself at Sarai insists that Abram sleeps with Hagar in order to conceive a child.

There are several interesting dimensions to this story. It is clear that Sarai, while very clearly burdened by her barrenness, is hardly the submissive wife in this instance. She arranges the impregnation of Hagar by her husband as a means to overcome "the curse of her childlessness."[17] However, Hagar then "began to despise her mistress" (Gen 16:4) and Sarai complained to Abram: "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now

15 See, for instance, Gen 9:6, where God continues to refer to humans as being in his image.

16 Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1990) 195.

17 Turner, *Genesis,* 75.

that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me" (Gen 16:5). Abram's spineless reply is, "Your servant is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best" (Gen 16:6). The result is that Sarai mistreats Hagar and she flees into the desert (Gen 16:6–7).

The angel of the Lord now comes to Hagar and asks her where she has come from and where she is going, to which she replies that she was running from her mistress Sarai (Gen 16:8). Hagar is instructed to "Go back to your mistress and submit to her" and "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count" (Gen 16:10). The angel promises her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery" (Gen 16:11).

While modern (or postmodern) sensibilities might wish for a different ending to this story, Hagar's positive response is to name the Lord who spoke to her, "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me" (Gen 16:13). In Hagar's view, God had revealed himself as a God of justice, albeit as viewed through the lens of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture.

A second example is provided by the story of Ruth, again a foreign woman—a Moabite. Once again the scenario is not particularly positive. During a severe famine in Israel, Elimelech and his wife Naomi moved from Bethlehem to the land of Moab. There, against a divine prohibition, their two sons had married Moabite women (e.g., Deut 7:3; 23:3). About ten years later, after the death of her husband and her two sons, and hearing that there was now food to be had in Israel, Naomi decided to return home. Ruth, one of Naomi's daughters-in-law, declared her intention to accompany her: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17).

In one of Scripture's great love stories, Ruth meets Boaz in Bethlehem, Boaz acts the part of a kinsman-redeemer, and Boaz and Ruth are married. It is very significant that Ruth is received so completely into Israel that she is declared by the women of Bethlehem to be better than seven sons to Naomi (Ruth 4:15), and the narrative concludes with the family line of Boaz and Ruth: Boaz, Obed, Jesse,

and David (Ruth 4:17).[18] Against all odds, Ruth is treated with equality and justice, and receives the blessing of the covenant.[19]

These two narratives are probably sufficient to conclude that in the Old Testament God appears to be on the side of the marginalised and he treats them with justice and equality. The prophets—especially the Minor Prophets (see for example, Amos 2:6–7, 4:1; Mic 6:8; Hos 6:6[20]—with their focus on justice, or on the Sabbath commandment which provided Sabbath rest or household slaves and the "alien within your gates" (Ex 20:10), might have also been investigated with profit.

Justice and Equality in the New Testament

Any examination of the New Testament in regard to God's attitude toward justice and equality must begin with Jesus' attitudes. After all, Jesus is the incarnate expression of the person of God (see, for example, John 1:1–5; 10:30; and Heb 1:1–3). Luke records that Jesus began his ministry with the reading of the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. According to Luke, this was not a reading of Scripture chosen at random for when the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him, Jesus unrolled it and "found the place where it was written":

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:16–21; c.f., Isa 61:1–2).

With the eyes of the congregation fastened on him, Jesus said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). It seems obvious (at least from Luke's perspective) that Jesus takes this passage from Isaiah as his mission statement since Luke goes on to describe how, on being driven out of Nazareth, Jesus drives out an evil

18 Ruth is one of the few women named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5).

19 Significantly, the Book of Ruth is Scripture's clearest illustration of the role of the kinsman-redeemer although there are some hints in the Pentateuch: e.g., Lev 27:9–25; 25:47–55; Num 3:9–34; and 25:47–55.

20 M. Daniel Carroll underscores the significance of justice in the prophetic writings with his observation that "in a sense, the calling of the prophet may be described as that of an advocate or champion, speaking for those who are too weak to plead their own cause." See R. Daniel Carroll, "A Passion for Justice and the Conflicted Self: Lessons from the Book of Micah," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity,* 25 (2006): 172.

spirit possessing a man in Capernaum, heals Simon's mother-in-law and many others, calls his first disciples to give away their fishing in order to henceforth "catch men," heals a man with leprosy, and heals a paralysed man; all of this before he tells one parable or engages in a direct teaching or preaching ministry.[21]

Jesus' revelation of God's interest in justice and equality for the oppressed and marginalised in first-century Jewish society is illustrated in the starkest terms in Jesus' interactions with women. Hans Küng comments that

> In the time of Jesus women counted for little in society. As in some cultures today, they had to avoid the company of men in public. Contemporary Jewish sources are full of animosity toward women, who according to the Jewish historian Josephus are in every respect inferior to men.[22]

Küng notes that the writers of the four Gospels "have no inhibitions about talking about Jesus' relations with women." Rather, they portray Jesus as including women, showing no contempt for them, and being "amazingly open towards them."23

A couple of examples of Jesus' contact with women clearly demonstrate the truth of Küng's observations. The obvious prime example is Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman as found in the narrative of John 4. It is very significant that John places this incident near the beginning of his Gospel. In John's schema Jesus has just conversed with Nicodemus, the quintessential Jewish man (John 3:1–21); John the Baptist testifies that "He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:22–36); and then Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman, the quintessential outsider, at Jacob's well in the town of Sychar (John 4:1–38). A number of elements in this narrative are very significant: (1) contrary to Jewish practice at the time, in travelling from Judea to Galilee, Jesus chooses to go through the region of Samaria; (2) Jesus initiates a conversation with a Samaritan woman, something no Jewish man would do;24 (3) Jesus, for the first

21 In Luke Jesus relates his first parable (Luke 5:36–39) after being accused of eating and drinking with the tax-collectors and sinners (Luke 5:30), that is, those who were identified as being on the fringes of Jewish society.

22 Hans Küng, *Women in Christianity*, transl. by John Bowden (London,: Continuum, 2001) 2. Küng cites Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2, 201.

23 Küng, *Women in Christianity,* 2.

24 Jesus' request for water is met with shock on the part of the Samaritan

time, forthrightly reveals himself as the Messiah to this marginalised woman by saying, "I who speak to you am he" (John 4:26);[25] and (4) the woman becomes the first Christian evangelist with many of the Samaritans from the town believing in "him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39–42). So, here there is a woman, and a Samaritan at that, a person of doubtful morals, and a believer in an apostate offshoot of Judaism being treated with respect and equality by Jesus. Is God interested in justice and equality? To the disciples' surprise, he was and is (John 4:27).

Another, perhaps even more startling, example is the story of the Syrophoenician woman recorded in Mark 7. Again, Jesus is outside of his own territory, near Tyre. A Greek woman comes to Jesus begging that he drive out a demon possessing her daughter.[26] This time Jesus appears at first to treat the woman's request as any Jewish male might: "it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (Mark 7:27). The woman's feisty reply is that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28), and Jesus' response is that the demon has already left her child (Mark 7:29–30).[27] In the accounts of both Mark and Matthew (Mark 7:24–30; Matt 15:21-28) the story of this Canaanite woman's faith follows a discussion of what constitutes cleanness and uncleanness (Mark 7:14–23; Matt 15:10–20). Jesus is surely indicating that this "unclean" woman was truly part of God's kingdom of justice and equality.

Example after example could be cited from the ministry of Jesus in which he demonstrates divine mercy and justice being directed to the marginalised and the oppressed. However, perhaps it is Paul in Galatians 3:28 who sums up best the implications of the revolutionary ministry of Jesus Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Clearly, for Paul, God makes no difference between race, social status, or gender in regard to salvation: "You are all sons [and daughters] of God

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woman: "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)" (John 4:9).

25 This is in spite of Jesus' recognition that the Samaritan woman was living in an adulterous relationship (John 16–18).

26 Mark seems to go out of his way to indicate that this was a non-Jewish woman: "The woman was Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia" (Mark 7:26).

27 Matthew's version of this narrative has Jesus responding: "Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted" (Matt 15:28).

through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:27) and as such all who "belong to Christ … are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). In light of this affirmation, one might legitimately ask if all racial, social, and gender differences are now *passé* in the Christian community, yet it is other writings from this same Paul that appear to be the primary seedbed for the church's practice of treating women inequitably.[28] How are such biblical passages to be regarded in light of what has already been seen in terms of God's keen interest in justice and equality?

Two Faces of Scripture?

A persuasive case has been built for a positive answer: Yes, God is vitally interested in justice and equality. But is the case "watertight"? What of the passages of Scripture—in both the Old and New Testaments—that appear to support slavery, and why does the Bible contain no clear prohibition in regard to slavery? What about the texts that appear to justify the dominance of the male in church and society, and why does Scripture contain no clear direction on the ordination of women to the gospel ministry?

Some, like Marcion in the early church era, are tempted to reject the Hebrew Scriptures because they reveal a god different from the God of the New Testament. However, even Marcion himself found that it was also necessary to "edit" the Christian Scriptures in order to maintain their harmony, and in general the Christian church has resisted such a radical approach.[29] There is insufficient space in a single chapter to provide a complete coverage of this issue, but it is possible to illustrate the diversity of Scripture in regard to its attitude to slaves and women.

Slaves who were not part of Israel itself were considered to be the legal property of their masters and were listed as "property", as were cattle, gold, and silver (e.g., Gen 12:16; 20:14; 24:35; 30:43; 32:5;

28 Samuel L. Adams sums up his article with the following: "Despite arguments to the contrary, social justice and economic fairness are core themes in Scripture." See Samuel L. Adams, "The Justice Imperative in Scripture," *Interpretation* 69(2015): 399–414.

29 A convenient summary of Marcion's differentiation between the Creator God and the Redeemer God can be found in E. Ferguson, "Marcion," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 685–86.

Ex 20:17). In this regard the status of slaves in Israel was similar to that in other areas of the Ancient Near East. However, the Old Testament does contain legal instructions that ameliorate the situation of slaves, unlike anything in other ANE codes. For example, slaves were not to be required to work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:10); slaves born in the house of their master were to be circumcised in order for them to share in Israel's religious life (Ex 12:44; Deut; 12:12,18; Lev 22:11); and murder of a slave was considered a crime (Ex 21:20). If a master put out the eye of his slave or knocked out a tooth, the slave was to be granted freedom (Ex 21:26–27). In summary, "Hebrew law was relatively mild toward the slaves and recognized them as human beings subject to defense from intolerable acts, although not to the extent of free persons."[30]

In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament does not contain detailed legal material in relation to slavery. Instead there are prominent Pauline passages that provide instruction for Christian slaves and the Letter to Philemon is written as advice to him regarding his escaped Christian slave, Onesimus. It is noteworthy that the advice Paul directs Timothy to pass on to Christian slaves is that they respect their masters "so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered." And, "Those [slaves] who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers" (1 Tim 6:1–2). Again, Paul sends the escapee Onesimus back to Philemon with the request that he be treated "better than a slave [and] as a dear brother" (Philemon 16), but he resists instructing Philemon to release Onesimus. Eventually though, "The early Christian ideology undermined the institution of slavery, declaring an equality of all people in Christ."[31] However, the journey to that conclusion was far from smooth.

In spite of its largely positive stance toward women,[32] and with many women playing key roles as judges and military leaders, diplomats, and prophetesses in Israel,[33] the Old Testament also

30 Muhammad A. Dandamanyev, "Slavery: Old Testament," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* 6 vols., ed. David N. Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992) 6:64.

31 Dandamanyev, "Slavery," 65.

32 An outstanding example is to be found in Prov 31:10–31.

33 See Patricia Gundry's excellent chapter, "What Can Women Do?", in her *Woman be Free: The Clear Message of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977) , 89–104.

contains some "hard sayings" in its legal material. For instance, there are regulations pertaining to marriage with "beautiful" captive women (Deut 21:10–14); how to relate in polygamous relationships (e.g., Deut 21:15–17); the necessity of stoning for women who could not prove their virginity (Deut 22:13–21); and the "uncleanness" as a result of childbirth (Lev 12;1–8) and menstruation (Lev 15:19–33), to name just a few. Such passages pose difficulties for the modern mind, especially in regard to the divine attitude toward the equality of women and men. It comes across as small comfort that while a case can definitely be made that women within ancient Israel were treated with greater respect than in the surrounding nations, one is left wondering why God did not promote justice and equality for women more proactively.[34]

One of the prominent Pauline passages regarding the role of women in the church community is to be found in the same letter cited above in regard to slavery—1 Timothy.[35] As part of his instructions about worship, Paul states, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (1 Tim 2:11–12). The apostle then provides reasons for his position: (1) "Adam was formed first, then Eve", (2) "Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner", and (3) "women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety" (1 Tim 2:13–15). It must be admitted that Paul's reasoning here is quite unusual. The Genesis creation narratives provide no indication that the order of the creation of Eve implied any subordination. Neither does Paul's view that it was Eve who was deceived and sinned comport with Paul's own perspective found in many of his writings that it is "in Adam [that] all die" (1 Cor 15:22). Furthermore, what Paul meant by women being saved through childbearing remains a puzzle to most commentators.

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34 Perhaps Alden Thompson's *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989) provides some clues for us. See especially his chapter, "Strange People Need Strange Laws" (pp. 71–90).

35 In fact, the majority of this epistle is composed of advice: instructions on worship (chapter 2); instructions to congregational overseers and deacons (chapter 3); personal pastoral instructions to Timothy (chapter 4); and instructions about widows, elders, and slaves (chapter 5:1–6:2).

Perhaps an answer to such diversity is to be found in both the nature of Scripture and the nature of God. Much (perhaps all) of Scripture could be described as "occasional." Certainly, the Pauline epistles are written to particular church communities or to Paul's colleagues to deal with particular situations and issues. Sometimes it is impossible to determine exactly what motivated him to write as he did. For instance, what exactly lies behind Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding women in the church in Ephesus is unknown. Were the women abusing their Christian freedom? Were they speaking out of ignorance and lack of education? Were they "lording it over" the men in the church? Despite this uncertainty, it is clear that Paul wanted to make a statement to correct whatever the abuse was, and that he used arguments that may seem strange to us. Are Christians permitted to argue with Paul in terms of his reasoning while accepting his writings as inspired? Or, to phrase the question even more starkly: Is Paul's logic God's logic? Ellen White describes the Bible as

> ... written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.[36]

This position readily evokes nervousness. It is all too easy to "slip down the slope" so that the Scriptures which previously were seen as God's authoritative speech become at best good advice from which the reader might pick and choose. Scripture must continue to be seen as God's Word and, operationally, Christians should rightly come to it with an "inerrancy expectation."[37] In order to maintain this attitude of respect for the Bible, the Scriptures must be searched by the believer "as a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who handles correctly the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Understanding the Bible is not something for the faint-hearted or for the slacker. It requires deep study to detect Scripture's overall perspective and a constant listening

36 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 21.This statement comes from Ellen White's Manuscript 24, written in 1886.

37 I am indebted to Clark H. Pinnock for this description of how I personally come to the Scriptures. See Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1984), 77.

to the voice of the Spirit of God as he guides the church into all truth (John 16:13).

Again, Scripture portrays God as accommodating himself to the human condition. While this is certainly true in that God has "stooped" to meet us when "he prattles to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style"[38] and in "mean and lowly words"[39], perhaps this is best borne out by reference to the way that God chose to interact with the people of Israel at various times. Regarding divorce, Jesus says, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But this was not the way from the beginning." Jesus then goes on to say, "I tell you ... "(c.f., Mat 5:31–32). Paul, in Athens, argues that "in the past God overlooked such ignorance [i.e., that the divine being is an image fashioned by humans], but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).[40] So, while postmodern people might find themselves confronted by some of the diversity in regard to justice and equality in both Testaments, they can, at the same time, detect a distinct thread that clearly affirms God's interest in justice and equality. Georg Braulik has provided an example of this in his comparison of Deuteronomy and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). He concludes that there are "surprisingly many correspondences or at least common tendencies."[41]

Scripture thus contains a diversity of testimony on the topic of justice and equality. However, it contains clear indications that God is on the side of justice and equality. Furthermore, Scripture also indicates that God works within and even accommodates to the variations of time and place in order to maintain interaction with humanity. In light of these facts, how is the Bible best to be interpreted to aid the church to grow in understanding as a community of faith?

38 John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford L. Battles (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, ca. 1960), Commentary on John 3:12.

39 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 1.8.1.

40 Perhaps a similar theme is found in Heb 1:1–3 where God "spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." Of course, the supreme divine accommodation is to be found in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

41 Georg Braulik, "Deuteronomy and Human Rights," *Verbum et Ecclesia: Skrif en Kerk* 19 (1998): 207.

Plotting a Path Ahead

It may prove helpful for conservative Christians such as Seventh-day Adventists to consider the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"—a framework of authority composed of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—as at least one of the tools for the interpretation of Scripture; especially when the biblical materials show evidence of diversity. The Methodist theologian and historian, Albert C. Outler is generally credited with this description of John Wesley's approach to theology as critically and faithfully familiar with Scripture, cognizant of Christian history, logically analytical, and growing out of "a vital, inward faith that is upheld by the assurance of grace."[42]

Susan Elliott applies the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to the issue of women's roles in church leadership and the pulpit. She begins her survey by pointing out that John Wesley himself did not begin with a positive view in regard to the role of women, and this was in spite of the contributions of his own mother, Susanna.

While some conservative Christians might be concerned that tradition, reason, and experience could subvert the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, Elliott describes Scripture as "the inerrant Word of God, truth as the foundation of reason, tradition and experience." Obviously, in her view the "Quadrilateral" is not an equilateral parallelogram; Scripture always maintains the dominant position (and certainly this would have been the case for Wesley). So the task of discovering the breadth of the biblical perspectives on the justice of God and the equality of women has to be taken seriously. However, that is not the end of the task. Tradition, reason, and Christian

42 Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20 (1985): 7–18. It should be observed that in the same place Outler confesses some regret at having coined the term since it has been sometimes misconstrued. However, he concludes that the "conjoint recourse to the fourfold guidelines of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience may hold more promise for an evangelical and ecumenical future than we have realized as yet—by comparison, for example, with Biblicism or traditionalism or, rationalism, or empiricism." Note that a more complete coverage of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" can be found in Don C. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999). For a helpful introduction to the pros and cons of using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a hermeneutical tool from an evangelical perspective, see Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze*, 71–74.

experience need also to be taken into account, even if only to raise questions to send us back to the Bible for better answers.

Elliott points out that there is a wealth of tradition in the interactions of Jesus with women that should inform us in regard to the equality of women in the church. She cites the fact that Jesus constantly "challenged the traditional social norms about women and modelled equality of women." However Elliott considers that the fact that Jesus called only men as disciples and leaders cannot be ignored. She cites approvingly Kent Brower and Jeanne Serrao: "to our knowledge no ... group insists that all ordained leaders must be circumcised and Jewish. The Twelve are symbolic and representative of the whole, restored, holy people of God."[43] Church communities have a prime responsibility to take account of the new "tradition" inaugurated by Jesus Christ, not just the traditional understandings that have been passed down through Christian history.

What role does human reason play in the interpretation of Scripture? Again, on the equality of women, Elliott maintains that "the core of theological conflict on gender equality is grounded in human interpretation and application."[44] Everyone uses reason when coming to the Scriptures, even when claiming to accept the "plain" or literal meaning of the Bible. For example, Dennis Bratcher maintains that

> a "plain sense" reading actually takes far less notice of the actual story itself, and must read far more things into the text to make it all "work," than do other ways of interpreting the text. The main reason for this is because what the "plain sense" of the text says to us, it says in the context of a 21st century view of the world.[45]

Reason leads us to ask a variety of questions related to the matter of the ordination of women: If no watertight case can be made for ordination as it is practiced in most denominations, on what basis

43 Kent Brower and Jeanne Serrao, "Reclaiming the Radical Story," *Holiness Today* 11 (2009): 23, as cited in Elliott, "Biblical Gender Equality".

44 Elliott, "Biblical Gender Equality".

45 Dennis Bratcher, "The Problem of a 'Plain Sense' Reading of Scripture," available at http://www.crivoice.org/plainsense.html (copyright 2016), accessed on 8 June 2017. See also my own discussion in "Our Story as Text," in Ross Cole and Paul Petersen, eds., *Hermeneutics, Intertextuality and the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture*, (Adelaide, South Australia: Australian Theological Forum/Avondale Academic Press, 2014), 81–88.

can it be denied to women? If women are contributing positively to society in leadership roles, why would God deny them such a role in the church? At very least, such questions should send thoughtful Christians back to Scripture to ask whether the Scriptural perspective has not been misunderstood.

Elliott then turns to the role of Christian experience. She points to the fact that Paul repeatedly acknowledged "the importance of women in ministry and in leadership positions."[46] Yet, "([t]wo verses taken from the whole of scripture (proof texting) ... have created centuries of oppression."[47] The contemporary church might point positively to the experience of the many women engaged in pastoral ministry and even in church leadership. Surely the fruitful work of women pastors in the Republic of China and areas like the United States, Europe, and Australia should raise the question, "How is God not in this?", and force a re-examination of Scripture.[48]

The Jerusalem Council reported in Acts 15 provides a case study in how 21st-century Christians might wrestle through an issue that clearly involves biblical hermeneutics and church politics. In fact, this account provides a case study in how to do church and it is instructive that the four dimensions of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" were allowed to function creatively together. **Scripture** is certainly to the fore, since James says "The words of the prophets are in agreement with this ..." (Acts 15:15).[49] In this instance, the traditionalist party clearly had what would have appeared to be the "weight" of Scripture behind it.[50] **Tradition** and traditional understandings of Scripture were obviously under discussion. In fact, the Council would not have taken place except that "Some men came from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

46 Elliott ("Biblical, Gender Equality") cites Rom 16:1–16; Phil 4:2–3; and Acts 18.

47 Elliott ("Biblical Gender Equality") cites 1 Tim 2:11–12; and 1Cor 14:34–35, ironically both passages from Paul.

48 In Matt 12 Jesus points out that to attribute what is obviously of God to Beelzebub is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven (see especially Matt 12:31–32).

49 James cites Amos 9:11–12.

50 Circumcision was undoubtedly the sign of the covenant with Abram, the father of the Jewish race (Gen 17). However, Paul, for instance, picks up the concept of "circumcision of the heart" from such passages as Deut 30:6 and expands on it in Rom 2:25–29.

Reason and logic were also taken into account. James argued, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19) and the letter sent to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia stated, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you ... " (Acts 15:28). In addition the **experience** of God's Spirit working with Peter, on the one hand, and Barnabas and Paul, on the other, carried great weight (Acts 15:7–14).

From the perspective of the 21st century, it is difficult to grasp the revolutionary impact of this first church council. If a totally conservative position had been taken, it would have stymied the growth of the fledgling Christian church. If it had been too progressive it would have completely severed the church from its Jewish roots.[51] Perhaps even today, the implications of the position taken at this Jerusalem council, which made circumcision nothing, and uncircumcision nothing, are not completely understood. No longer was the mark of the covenant something that only pertained to males, rather "Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor 7:19; cf., John 14:15, 23).

What enabled the church to move on in regard to this issue? The weight of biblical evidence and tradition were on the side of the circumcision party. But the Spirit had been leading the community in a different direction and that caused the church to look again at the Scriptures, raising to prominence some passages that had been overlooked previously. In addition, the earliest church was blessed with courageous leaders such as Peter, James, Barnabas, and Paul who were willing to stand up—sometimes literally (Acts 15:7)—for a biblical and pragmatic solution to a divisive issue.

Conclusion

It may be concluded with great confidence that God is vitally interested in justice and equality. This is seen clearly in the manner in which God created all of humankind in his own image, irrespective of race or gender. It can also be observed in the way God dealt with the issues of race, slavery, and gender in the Old Testament. But the issues of justice and equality are given even greater clarity through Jesus' mission to provide freedom and healing to the marginalised

51 Note the cautiousness implied in Acts 15:21, "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

and oppressed. However, this divine interest is not merely to remain the domain of Deity. Rather God's attitude to justice and equality is to be played out in the way his followers interact with each other: "We are to adopt as our standard his law and precepts. We are to treat others justly and fairly (Amos 5:15; Jas 2:9) because that is what God himself does."[52] The Church's mission is to work with God in "repairing the world."[53]

Today a new paradigm is needed—one that will assist in breaking through the hermeneutical tangle that is dividing Church member from Church member and region from region. It is not enough to say that the Christian community should now ignore issues of justice and equality and focus on the mission and message of the church. For Jesus himself, there was no dichotomy or separation between mission and message; the two were actually one and the same. Preaching righteousness by faith without doing justice and righteousness is heresy(see, for example, James 2:14–26), preaching Sabbath sacredness without living out the freedom and equality it stands for is legalism (e.g., Mark 2:23–28), and preaching the second advent without helping the alienated and marginalised is downright dangerous (e.g., Matt 25:31–46).

Perhaps the "quadrilateral" of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience will provide an interpretive key and that might assist in breaking the impasse. And, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 may provide a model for "doing" church; even for dealing spiritually and pragmatically with issues of church party politics!

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52 Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 289.

53 For this idea, I am indebted to Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (London: W. H. Allen, 2015), 54, where she cites a rabbi's sermon on civil rights and *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase which means "repairing the world."