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The Biblical Doctrine of the Family

I have been helped in this area considerably by Mark Futato's analysis of the man/woman relationship, so far unpublished. I shall be repeating many of his ideas here, while mixing them shamelessly with my own.

He argues that when God says in Gen. 2:18 "it is not good for man to be alone," we should not take "alone" to mean "lonely," as is commonly done by evangelical writers. The Hebrew doesn't require that, although the translation is not in itself impossible. The point does not seem to be that woman satisfied the man's psychological loneliness; another man or another sort of creature might have done that. Rather, she meets a need, satisfies a kind of "aloneness," that no other creature could satisfy. What aloneness could that be? Futato suggests that it was the inability of man by himself to have children.

It is in this respect particularly (though not only in this respect) that woman is a "help" (same verse). Of course companionship is important too. Later we shall see that, for example, in Prov. 31. But the focus in Gen. 1 and 2 is on the reproductive complementarity of man and woman.

On that basis we can better understand a number of things in Scripture. For example, in Gen. 1:27f there is a correlation between human nature in the image of God and the "cultural mandate" as the distinctive and comprehensive task of mankind. God makes man "male and female" and then presents the task in two aspects: replenishing and ruling.¹ By reading the passage chiasmically we receive the suggestion that replenishing is especially connected with the female and ruling with the male, although of course we cannot derive any absolute distinction from this language. Thus it is natural that the "one flesh" union which defines marriage leads to offspring. Note also the emphasis of Mal. 2:15. This rough correlation continues into Gen. 3: Adam is cursed in his agricultural labor, Eve in childbearing. Each is cursed in his or her distinctive contribution to the divine mandate. Yet the curse does not overcome the blessing. Man's labor will keep the human race alive until the Messiah comes, and woman's childbearing will in time lead to the birth of the deliverer.

The name given to the woman in 3:20 is based on her function as mother.

Thus we can also understand the strong biblical blessings on childbearing, the cursedness of barrenness, the doctrine of children as "an inheritance from the Lord" (Psm. 127:3), Jesus' blessing of the children, the covenantal argument for infant baptism (God calls *families*, not just individuals). We can understand why adultery is such a terrible sin (treason against the *family* which is far more important to God than the state). We can understand why the education of young women in the church has especially to do with their work as wives and mothers, I Tim. 5:14, Tit. 2:4.

Thus there is a general division of labor between husband and wife, although again the division is not rigid. The husband works in the fields, serves as an elder in the gates (Prov. 31:23). The wife works primarily at home, bearing and nurturing the children, teaching them, providing a good environment for their early years. However it is also true that the woman cannot bear children without male "help" (nor raise them properly without male fathering), and the man cannot accomplish his cultural tasks without the help of the woman. Proverbs 31 presents a kind of balance: The woman focuses on the home as the major sphere of her activity; she does

¹ Note that God created us "male *and* female," not a male-female androgyny, as in modern feminist and New Age thought. Men and women are not interchangeable; their diversity is created into them. And we should not be surprised if they are given different tasks.

not "sit in the gates" as a ruler of the people, as does her husband (verse 23); rather she focuses on household tasks and the needs of her children. But she does also help her husband, not only by typical homemaker work, but also by contributing to the family's economic well-being. She earns money and purchases property (verse 16, 18). She works hard so that all her household have their needs met. Similarly, Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz to support herself and Naomi; but when her opportunity came to marry, she saw it as deliverance. Also, note the "busy at home" of Tit. 2:5. I don't think that proves that a woman should never work outside the home. Men too are to be busy at home in their work of family headship (cf. I Tim. 3:4f). But for women, the home is the focus of their distinctive labor.

This is not demeaning to women, nor is it the result of sexist oppression. The bearing and raising of children is as important to God as anything which is typically done by males. Our covenant theology indicates the centrality of the godly home and of godly families. We do not honor women by setting them free from the home, to do supposedly more important tasks; rather we honor them by honoring the tremendously important task which God has especially given to them.

Natural revelation confirms what we have said. Political correctness aside, it simply is the case that men are more suited than women to tasks requiring upper body strength. Thus in the ancient world, when most men worked in agriculture or other back-breaking tasks, the sexual division was a natural thing, one which brought benefits to women as well as men. In that time, too, wives had many more children than they usually do today, and they had less ability to carry on social relations during menstrual periods. Thus the traditional division of labor was virtually a physical necessity, though even in those days there were exceptions such as Deborah the judge.

Has the modern trend toward less physical labor erased the necessity for such a distinction? No. Recent studies indicate that women in the workforce are absent from their jobs more often than men, on account of illness, menstrual problems, family responsibilities. These facts are not negligible to employers. Doubtless, again, there are exceptions. But the physical differences between men and women still justify, in general, the traditional division of labor.

These factors must be understood when we consider the biblical principles denying church office to women and requiring of them subordination to their husbands in the home. But more significant than the physical limitations of women is their distinctive calling from God. The scriptural restrictions placed upon them exist, not because they are inherently less gifted than men (even as administrators), but simply because their distinctive work is so important. Here God's wisdom differs radically from modern intellectual (especially feminist) fashions. Indeed, the attitude of many in the church, who despise nursery service and teaching of children as second-rate ministries, also receives here a challenge from God's word. *Children are so important that God has reserved the best gifts of half the population for their virtually exclusive benefit.*

Why should we imagine that working for, say, General Motors, is more important than raising children? Is the former any more important to society, any more rewarding when carried out responsibly? Is it somehow more "liberating" to work in business than to work in one's own home? Or shall we compare homeworking to "positions of authority" such as political office and church eldership? Why should homeworking be considered less rewarding? Most people who are not in "positions of authority" don't realize how boring, how unrewarding, administrative work can be! We need to reconsider our basic values!

God wants to spread his kingdom, even today, not only through mission work, but through childbearing and nurture. He wants to raise up godly families to glorify him. A family is a father, a mother, their children, and, by extension, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.

The husband is the "head" of the wife.² The wife is to obey her husband; the children are to obey their parents.³

Does being under authority destroy a woman's dignity? Feminists would have us think so. But in God's economy, all of us are under authority. We are under divine authority, and we are under secondary authorities as well: family, church, state. None of us is a law unto himself. Men as well as women are subject to the authority of others. Jesus while on earth subjected himself to human authority, as well as the authority of his Father. Even the supposed "absolute rulers" like Nebuchadnezzar or Stalin must consider the desires of others. One false step and they will be toppled from their lofty posts.

And, indeed, if authority is a servant authority (Matt. 20:20-26), the "master" is really in service to the "servant." In that case, which has the most "dignity?" The question really has no application to the facts of the situation.

Although God offers special protection to widows and orphans, single parenthood is not the biblical ideal. Again, natural revelation concurs. Statistics show that children of single parent homes and homes where both parents work, especially "latchkey" kids, are much more likely to get into trouble (gangs, drugs, illegal activities) than children with traditional families and one parent remaining at home.

Yet our society and governments, more interested in being politically correct than in helping children, subsidize single parenthood through marriage penalties (in the welfare and tax codes), special benefits to working mothers (not given to those who remain home), subsidized day care, persecution of home schooling families and the like, not to mention creating economic conditions which virtually seem to require two incomes per family.

Many of our churches err here. Christian women often are tempted to want to escape the routines of child care and to spend their time in other ways. When churches provide organizations for women to spend their time in various activities, they often unintentionally lead them away from their proper responsibilities in the home. The biblical pattern for "women's organizations" is Titus 2. There, Paul tells Titus to bring certain messages to older men, younger men, and older women. Significantly (and Dennis Johnson has helped me to see this), he does not give Titus a message for the younger women. Rather he asks Titus to teach the older women, who in turn will teach the younger women.⁴ For obvious reasons, a male pastor ought not to devote himself to teaching young women. That job is given to older women, and Titus is to work through them. What are the older women to teach the younger? "To love their husbands and children, to be self controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God." A "women's organization" that functions this way will not take women out of their homes to do "more important jobs," but will help them with the distinctive task God has given them. The older women, rather than opting out

² "Head" refers to authority, not "source" as feminists like to claim. See Wayne Grudem, "The Meaning of @UN(Kephale)" in W. Grudem and John Piper, ed., @UN(Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood) (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), Appendix 1, pp. 425-468. But of course even if it does mean "source," we should remember that source in Scripture usually connotes authority: God is our source and therefore our authority. Fathers and mothers bring forth their children and thus acquire authority over them. Jesus is source and therefore authority over the church. And Eve was created from the rib of Adam, and must obey her source!

³ The woman's "desire" in Gen. 3:16 is to usurp her husband's authority; cf. 4:7. See Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God*.

⁴ Note that there is an important role for the teaching gifts of women in the church, even though women are denied the office of teaching elder. Indeed, besides being the principal teachers of children, women are charged with the major role in teaching about one fourth of the congregation (the "younger women").

of the world of children and homemaking, will be teachers in these areas, working alongside the younger mothers to make their job easier. So often in our churches today the younger women feel unsupported, as the older women, happy to be liberated from child care responsibilities, move on to other things and offer no assistance. That should not be. Older women should be taught a different system of values.

There is no more important need in our churches than for ministry to *families*. Most people in our churches have no idea what the biblical family is to be like, so inundated they are with modern anti-Christian ideology. They need to be taught concerning authority relationships, sex-differentiated tasks, and the need to create an atmosphere which saturates children in the word of God (Deut. 6:6ff) (cf. my essay on Christian Schools).

Churches committed to "church growth" are often tempted to ignore family ministry. It seems easier to minister to rootless individuals as individuals (especially in California!) and to push the children aside as distractions. But that mentality is short-sighted in my view. Besides neglecting important biblical priorities, it loses one substantial opportunity for church growth. Many families today are hungry for counsel. Having bought into the dominant modern thinking, and having seen its failure, they are looking for something better. They watch with broken hearts as their children are eaten alive spiritually by the public schools, the media, the peer-pressure. To these the message of Christ can come as the best news imaginable. Churches that minister effectively to families and children often experience substantial growth as more and more families seek their help.