

Reading the Bible

Written by Administrator
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by Simon Woodman

The recent conversations at Baptist Union Council on the leadership and ministry of women have demonstrated that this is far wider than a biblical issue. However, it remains important that we engage with the Bible in a way which does justice to the broad sweep of biblical witness on the relationships between women and men.

It is also important that we don't get bogged down in 'proof texting', and that we keep the big picture in mind.

The creation story describes a universe created in love and harmony, with men and women having a creative partnership. It goes on to describe a series of alienations: God from humanity, woman from man, brother from brother.

Fast-forward through to the ministry of Jesus, the cross and the resurrection, and we see humanity restored in Christ, united with God and with one another in a new creation. Paul also consistently presents this Gospel of alienation overcome in the cross, and it is vital that his specific comments on women in leadership are read in the light of this Gospel.

It is clear that Paul repeatedly affirmed the ministry of women, with 12 women being named as his co-workers in ministry. His programmatic statement of his grand vision for human equality is crucial here: Galatians 3:28 reads, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

In this verse we see Paul's conviction that the barriers of ethnicity, economic and social standing, and gender are overcome in Christ. It is clear that the churches Paul founded and pastored also caught something of this grand vision, and that the alienation between people was challenged in practice within those congregations.

But there were also clearly problems. Slaves taking authority over their masters and women

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speaking in public worship are a couple of examples of ways in which the practical outworking of Paul's grand vision caused cultural difficulty.

How did Paul the pastor respond to these complexities in his congregations? He did what many pastors do, and responded pragmatically to the practical problems before him. So, he asked some women to set aside their freedom for the sake of the public witness of the Gospel of Christ, just as he asked some slaves to set aside their own freedom in Christ.

But he doesn't lose sight of his grand vision, either. He marries his injunction to women with the instruction that they should also be educated - a radical suggestion! Here we see Paul's short-term response, and also his long-term plan. In the short term, there are freedoms that must be set aside for the sake of the Gospel. But in the long term, the grand vision is still what he is aiming for.

In this, of course, Paul is asking nothing of those in his congregations that he has not already asked of himself. He who considered himself free in Christ also said that he had become a slave to all for the sake of the Gospel. When asked whether it was permissible to eat food offered to idols, Paul replied that the freedom to eat the food should be set aside for the sake of the Gospel.

It seems to me that the important thing, when we read Paul on women, is to keep in mind his grand vision for human equality, and indeed the broad sweep of the biblical witness to a Gospel of alienation overcome in Christ.