Closing Argument: Is the “Women’s Question” Really That Important?

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A sister pointed out to me that this question is not (only) about theology. It is about people. It is about girls and women and their dignity and recognition. As a man, I look at this whole topic from the male perspective, which does not directly reproduce the voice of women, but speaks up for them.

I fear that this hierarchical religious structure (complementarianism) has wounded or destroyed something in many women. The few responses to my book confirm this assessment. The number of unreported cases will be higher, especially when I think of young women and girls who grow up in a society of equal rights but are “instructed” in their Christian church environment with ancient role models for the sexes. How are they supposed to deal with this ambivalence?

It Is Not About a Few (Forbidden) Ministries

To make this clear: It is not primarily about women not being allowed to preach, or to teach, or to lead. Many women have gotten used to this anyway and have lost sight of the possibility that anything about it could ever change. Often they regard these structures and rules as biblical truth for themselves and no longer question these theses themselves. But they should. I would call that a healthy wrestling for the knowledge of the truth, especially when one thinks this knowledge has stood unchallenged since early Christianity. After all, that is true of many topics in the Bible. Sometimes topics have to be spelled out again from the beginning.

The question in the title is an almost exasperated reaction to the fact that with my book (title: “Women, Forgive Us!” [“Frauen, vergebt uns!”]) and my articles I keep raising these (“feminist”) questions again and again. In my view, the question is meant to say, or to play down, the following: Sisters have so many tasks and opportunities to contribute and to develop their gifts in the church, in the kingdom of God, and in the family that it surely cannot be discrimination if they are not allowed to preach, teach, or lead. Everyone has his or her place and role, as the creation order has already laid it down.

But if one tries to see the whole picture, it is not about two or three ministries that supposedly do not belong to a woman. It is about the whole image of women that lies behind it. Behind this question of whether it is really so important stands the idea that the woman was created as a (subservient) helper for Adam and is hierarchically assigned, subordinated, or ranked below him. ***Here lies the root of the problem from which many (not all) women suffer***. Often imperceptible from the outside, there is an inner, deeply hidden insecurity, a feeling of injustice. When the woman as such is not respected equally with a man. When one is not free in one’s thinking, but has to think and act within legalistic limits (what am I allowed to do and what not) that are piously glorified. This view of the role of women leaves many sisters in the Lord with tormenting questions and with self-doubt. They ask themselves why God wanted it this way, as long as it is drummed into them that this is God’s plan. If God is good and perfect, why do women experience terrible things in Christian marriages, and in churches limits that cannot be understood with ordinary common sense? ***God’s commandments are always good,***

and he wants us to understand their meaning, which (at least in the New Testament) is always evident. But on this question there is no plausibility at all!

What Men Feel and Do Not Feel

This is a feeling that we men do not know in this way. Men are rarely the weaker ones. It is time to perceive this and to be sensitive to it. In the mental picture and thinking of some men, it seems impossible to understand these feelings of inferiority in women.

Is the real reason for the high emotions on this topic perhaps less faithfulness to the Bible than one's own pride, because one's leadership role, one's being the head, is being called into question? Perhaps only subconsciously? That suddenly the wife has the same rights and duties as the husband? If one has seen and lived it differently for decades, then this realization, if it comes at all, is like an earthquake. Not only admitting the error, but adjusting to a different life together. That takes strength. Insight first. But the biblical way leads to life. Always.

How Do We Read the Bible on the Women's Question?

I know of no topic that is so highly charged emotionally. As if it were a matter of life and death. With topics such as the person of Jesus, his deity, and his work of redemption, that would be understandable, but not with the question of whether women may pray and speak prophetically in the worship service (which Paul takes for granted, if one looks closely, pays attention to the context, and also to the big, overall biblical picture).

How do we read the Bible when it comes to the women's question? ***Do we see the whole topic through two (!) verses from 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14? What deformed doctrines would actually result if we read and judged the Bible on other important doctrinal questions as narrowly, through two verses? And not bring the whole biblical material into a healthy, plausible relationship and weigh it. After all, that is the only way sound doctrine comes about!***

Then we read like the scribes and think we find eternal life in the Scriptures, but miss encountering the one of whom the Scriptures testify: Christ (John 5:39). The Scriptures that we love so much testify of the one who led women into freedom, to learning, to confessing, bearing witness, and worshiping.

Let us begin to appreciate the whole picture the Bible gives of women, and not interpret it through two misunderstood words of Paul.

Intuition

Many women sense, when they read the Bible, when they see Jesus and how he treated women, that something is not right. It becomes even harder for them when they see how the men who are supposed to lead and be the head, or who want to, fail. Although it is precisely to them, as opposed to the women, that God has supposedly entrusted this role. Yet how often it is the wives who pull the chestnuts out of the fire.

That is my perception from the responses to my book. ***The title of the book seems to fill a vacuum that is enormous. Bigger than I thought when I decided on this title.***

Now I certainly know marriages – as far as that is possible even for those close to them – where this kind of hierarchy is lived out in love. But is that an indication that hierarchy is then right and holy? Certainly not. How many wrong things do we think and do that we consider right because they somehow work.

Yes, the "women's question" is absolutely important. For it concerns our image of God and our image of humanity. It is about eradicating and correcting every distortion and disfigurement of this image. May God be gracious to us and help us in this task, for the false images are rooted unimaginably deep and, on top of that, appear to many as divine truth. Yet it is a worldly behavior. It is the spirit of the age – not of the twenty-first century in our part of the world, but that of the past twentieth and nineteenth centuries.

If we men want to love our wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25), then we will love them out of this false and discriminatory role and grant and open up for them the place that is theirs in God's creation order.

For the women's question is, at its core, a men's question. We men must question ourselves! For who is responsible for the hierarchical and at times patriarchal reading of the New Testament? ***Men have appropriated supremacy in biblical interpretation and believe it is their very own field of expertise. What self-overestimation.*** The gifts of the Spirit are not distributed according to sex. Through this behavior, countless gifts in women have been forgotten, suppressed, switched off, overlooked, and dampened. Quenching the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19) is truly no small matter. After all, it is men who lead churches and set the course – women have no say there, and if they do, then only unofficially through their husbands, who, however, would never admit in their leadership circle that they are following their wife's opinion.

What I Am Not Concerned With

It is neither about modernizing the church (it is not about rooms and buildings) nor about being up to date. ***It is about faithfulness to Jesus – that is faithfulness to the Bible!*** Not modernization, but reformation on the women's question, to use this dubious phrase "women's question" one very last time.

It is not about winning a theological debate. The topic is not suited to that, since people (above all the sisters in the Lord) are directly affected, and one's view strongly shapes life, in the church, in the kingdom of God, and in marriage and family.

But still, only a debate, only objection, and only prophetic address can get this topic moving again. Without conversation and constructive dispute, everything here will stay as it was.

Grounds for Separation?

The high emotional level on this question tempts people to act quickly and decisively, which often ends in separation, division, and schism. For some, a divine boundary is being crossed that does not exist for others. What now?

Enduring tensions will work for a while, but since this question involves so much for both sides, in the end there will be no going on together. Unless one can bear whatever the custom in a particular church is. Yes, God also bears a great deal, more than we can imagine, without approving of what is bad.

And so each person must decide for himself or herself. In my opinion it is also difficult, in this tension, to agree on a middle way in which each side meets the other as far as it can in good conscience.

Forgive me if I cannot offer a solution on this topic. Separations are usually bad, but so can compromises be.

Women Must Stand Up

There are things in life that you can only do yourself. No one can do them for us. Women must set out, recognize their path, and step out of a misunderstood submission. In the large churches there are women who have woken up and recognized that something is seriously wrong in the gender question. Think what you will of these movements, but with Hosea 8:7 I say: ***Those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind.***

Nice Girls Don't Change the World – a true saying (the title of a book by Lynne Hybels, 2005). This topic is so entrenched and has become such an untouchable truth that a megaphone is quite appropriate for standing up against it. With other Christian truths that are considered relevant to salvation, people shout loudly too, don't they?

The other option is that everything stays as it is. Only to have to realize on that great day, in the light of his glory, clarity, and truth, that we were wrong, both sexes. The men with their insights and the women with their acceptance of these supposedly biblical truths. Then a great opportunity will have been wasted and lost, forever.

Neither men nor women may be cowardly now! It always costs something to stand up for the truth. ***If many courageous Christian women and men had not again and again in church history courageously stood up and swum against the current, everything would have gone down the drain.*** And we know that only too well. Every movement and current in Christianity, and we belong to one of them or another, began through courageous and praying women and men.

One Day and Now

In eternity this topic will no longer follow us. There will be no more emotion and no more accusations or insinuations. Man and woman will simply be like brother and sister; hierarchy and one-sided subordination will be history. The past of a fallen world and a disturbed creation order.

Let us already live now, as far as it depends on us, the freedom and the power of this new creation that we have become in the risen and exalted Messiah!