

## **SERMON: God's Equality Principle – Genesis 1. 26-31; 1Timothy 2.1-15**

Beloved Father, may we be guided by your Holy Spirit to truly understand your word. Grant us the wisdom to apply it well in the Body of Christ. Amen

Our Diocese in December 1992, was one of the first in Australia to ordain 11 women priests. However, last year Synod was provided a sobering report on the barriers women face in taking on ordained and lay ministry in our Diocese. As a result, the Women in Leadership Commission was set up and last weekend they submitted the first stage of a five-year strategic plan to reinvigorate women leadership. A fundamental element of this plan is establishing an Equality Principle at the heart of our Diocesan life. Synod strongly endorsed this principle which essentially seeks as far as is reasonably possible, to have equal representation of men and women on Diocesan decision-making bodies.

*[The equality principle requires that any person or body appointing or electing any person to be a member of a Board, Commission, Taskforce, Committee or similar body to ensure, and to take such active steps as are necessary to ensure, that such a body is, as far as is reasonably possible, composed of an equal number of women members and men members without compromising the need for such members to be capable, competent and suitable for the membership to which they are to be appointed or elected and subject to any mandatory qualifications required for such appointment or election.]*

The implementation of this Equality Principle, together with a range of other initiatives, including establishing a St Mark's study grant of \$30,000 to support potential female clergy, are important steps in promoting women leaders.

Given these actions it is timely for us to consider: "What is the biblical foundation for us to promote women as Christian leaders?" There are certainly different theological perspectives that can be taken to answer this question. The two most prominent are labelled egalitarianism and complementarianism. On the basis of egalitarianism many denominations, including our Diocese, endorse the equal involvement of men and women in the full range of both ordained and lay ministry. This view refers to the creation story in Genesis 1 where man and woman are presented as equal partners. On the other hand, complementarianism, argues that though God created males and females equal, they have different complementary roles to play in church ministry. This view refers to Genesis 2 where Eve is created from the rib of Adam and designated as his helper as the basis of these different roles. I would add that the term "helper" is used a number of times in the bible. Indeed, God is often referred to as the "helper" and the word never implies a subordinate role.

A short sermon cannot hope to cover all the intricacies of this issue, so I encourage you to study further on the subject.

Today, as I explore our Genesis 1 and 1 Timothy 2 readings, I will do my best to draw out some of the reasoning that underpins our Diocesan position on egalitarianism. In doing so I will rely largely on the theological analysis developed by Philip B Payne in his book “The Bible vs Biblical Womanhood” and by John Stott in the chapter “Women, Men and God” within the book “Issues Facing Christians Today”.

### **Genesis 1: 26-31 The Creation of Man and Woman**

The use of key words in Genesis 1 verse 26- 31 is critical to our understanding of the relationship God created between men and women.

Verses 26 and 27 declare:

<sup>26</sup>*Then God said, “Let us make humans in **our image**, according to **our likeness**, and let **them** have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”*

<sup>27</sup>*So God created humans in his image,  
in the **image of God** he created **them**;  
**male and female** he created **them**.*

Man and woman, male and female, together form the image of God. He gave both men and women the same authority over His creation. There is no mention of a gender hierarchy, with either a man or woman having greater dominion than the other. Indeed the exact opposite is explained in verses 28 and 29

<sup>28</sup>*God blessed **them**, and God said to **them**, “**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”* <sup>29</sup>*God said, “See, I have given **you** every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; **you** shall have them for food.*

Both man and woman are blessed by God. Both are given the instruction to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over His creation. Both are given every plant for food. God has made them in His image to work together in equal partnership to tend His creation. Then in verse 31 we are told that:

<sup>31</sup>*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, **it was very good**.*

God created the relationship of equality between woman and man and proclaimed it to be very good. So what went wrong? Genesis chapter 3

describes the tragic actions of Adam and Eve which led to the distortion of this ideal. Christians know this as the Fall of Man. The choices made by the first male and female broke the original blessing and covenant between humankind and God. So did God wash His hands of us? Did he give up on the ideal equal relationship for which He created man and woman?

Absolutely not! From Genesis to the final Book of Revelation we are told of the relentless efforts of our loving Creator to restore our proper relationships with Him and each other.

In the Old Testament Israel's history reveals that both male and female leaders were raised up by God. To name a few, there were women such as Deborah, a prophet and a judge, the highest leader in Israel (Judges 4.4-5); Queen Esther (Esther 7. 1-10; 9.1-32) and the prophet Huldah, whose spiritual leadership was accepted by all the male leaders of Israel (2 Kings 22.14-23.25; Chronicles 34.29-35.19)

In the New Testament Jesus affirms gender equality through his personal relationships with women, some of whom played significant leadership roles. First and foremost, the Son of God was born of woman, his highly honoured mother, Mary. Then throughout His ministry he was accompanied by a group of women whom he had healed and who then served him. He taught the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, who then evangelized her community. He saved the adulteress woman from being stoned to death, gently refusing to condemn her for her sin. He allowed a prostitute to wet his feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair and cover them with kisses. He taught both men and women God's truth. All this he did in public in breach of Jewish law. And indeed, it was a woman, another Mary, whom God used to witness and teach the other disciples about Christ's resurrection.

As John Stott states: *"All this was unprecedented. Without any fuss or publicity, Jesus terminated the curse of the fall, reinvested woman with her partially lost nobility and reclaimed for his new kingdom community the original creation blessing of sexual equality."*

The ideal of gender equality was further strengthened on the Day of Pentecost when the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all those present, men and women. Through the power of the Holy Spirit every person is able to receive any of the spiritual gifts. The New Testament tells us that those gifts include pastoring, leadership and teaching. There is no indication of gender limitation on the use of these gifts and once given each man and woman is called to use them for the building up of the body of Christ.

## 1Timothy 2.1-15

Based on Genesis 1 both egalitarianism and complementarianism accepts that God made male and female equal. Based on Genesis 2 there is also broad agreement that God made male and female different. I suggest that this is also our lived experience. I am reminded of John Gray's book: Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus! Hands up if you think men and women are identical in the way they think and behave?

So, if there's general agreement on these points, what's the problem? As John Stott puts it: *"It is when we try to elaborate the meaning of complementarity, to explain in what ways the two sexes complement each other and to define the distinctives of men and women, that we find ourselves in difficulties."*

1 Timothy 2 verses 8-15 are a case in point. How do we reconcile the God given equality of men and women with the instruction by Paul that women in church should dress modestly, without elaborate hairstyles and expensive jewelry and clothes (v 9); that they must learn in silence with full submission; and that they may not teach or have authority over a man? (v12). This is particularly so, given that Paul in other places celebrates equality. In Galatians 3:28 he proclaims: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

I cannot pretend to cover the volumes of material that has been written to try to resolve this conundrum. However, from an egalitarian perspective, it is suggested that errors of interpretation occur when Paul's specific instruction to one particular church is treated as though it is normative instruction to all churches at all times.

There is evidence that the church at Ephesus, where Timothy pastored, was plagued with false teaching, and that this false teaching was coming primarily from women in the church who usurped authority and taught wrong doctrine about the creation and sin of Adam and Eve.

In that context, Paul can be seen to be instructing these women in the church at Ephesus to focus on connection with God in prayer, without earthly distractions and to listen quietly in church so that may learn the true gospel message, humbly submitting themselves fully to God: not to man but to their Heavenly Father.

On the third and arguably most controversial topic raised in verse 12, Philip Payne suggests there are four key points:

1. The correct grammatical translation of the Greek verb translated as “permit” is “I am not permitting”. It does not imply a permanent state or a universal command like “I do not permit” wrongly does.
2. Similarly, the usage of the same verb “permit” in other Bible verses is never as a universal command, but instead indicates temporary permission for a specific situation.
3. The word translated “to have authority” is more accurately rendered as “to assume authority”. The NIV amended their translation to this in 2010.
4. This is important as we come to the final point. The grammatical structure of the sentence directly links “to teach” and “to assume authority”. Paul is not talking about two separate issues, “teaching” and “assuming authority” but their combination: “assuming authority to teach”

Putting these four points together the verse would read: *“I am not permitting a woman to seize authority to teach a man.”*

Payne argues that put into its proper specific context this verse means that: *“in the current ongoing crisis of false teaching in Ephesus, Paul is not permitting women to assume authority to teach if they do not have that authority.”*

For me personally this explanation helps resolve the conflict between this verse and rest of the bible’s teaching on equality. However, the fact that there are different views held on this crucial topic is to be respected. We all have a responsibility to prayerfully study and seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance on God’s truth and act in good conscience accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

John Stott concludes his commentary with an acknowledgement that for both men and women: *“our Christian doctrines of creation and redemption tell us that God wants his gifted people to be fulfilled not frustrated, and his church to be enriched by their service.”*

Our Diocese has accepted this egalitarian view for over 30 years and since that momentous decision has been deeply enriched by the gifts of the Spirit faithfully used by both male and female ordained and lay leaders. This has been and particularly continues to be so in our Parish. I give thanks and praise to God for all the leaders of both genders who have gone before us and to the ongoing dedicated ministry of all our ordained and lay leaders. Amen