

Gender Quality

Stefan Liston

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Acknowledgements

There are just a few quotes in this book, though I have drawn from lots of different authors, scholars, speakers and thinkers. There is an annotated bibliography at the end where I attempt to give credit where it's due. I doubt anything much here is original - however I do take full, personal responsibility for any bad jokes!

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Thanks

Thanks to my Davina. I love our Fridays, our friendship and our freedom. After 25 years, you are still a glorious mystery to me and you know what - I love that. We have been kept. We are being kept. We will be kept.

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Final thanks to our Great God, the Lover of my soul, my betrothed, my King. All to Jesus, I surrender - gladly and utterly. You are worthy of it all.

A Handful of Dedications

As one of my aims in this book is to articulate and display the high place in which God holds women, I'd like to dedicate this book to four women in my life.

Firstly, I dedicate this book to my mum, who is now with the Lord and having a great time.

Mum, no more tears, no more sighing and no more pain. You showed the most extraordinary resilience and strength over many, many years. Your deep humility and quiet confidence in God had way more impact than you will ever know. Your sausage rolls were great too. I miss you. I miss them too. And those cakes you used to make. Your brown-eyed boy.

Secondly, I'd like to dedicate this book to Davina. Early in our courtship one of your friends described you to me as 'all woman'. I couldn't agree more. You have been more forgiving and releasing than anyone deserves. Your resilience is beyond the pale. Your beauty gives me the zipperooos (I just made that word up). Never has there been someone so predictable and unpredictable exist in one human body; what a box of tricks you are. Your Stefi.

Thirdly, I dedicate this book to Daisy Dream. I know how much this book matters to you and for you. In some strange way and to some small degree, your future is wrapped up in it. I can see that Jesus has given you to His church. It's obvious. As Mum says, you are me but in a dress! What does all this mean? What are we to make of it? We are in deep waters - let's swim and see where He takes us!
Forever your loving and proud Dad.

Fourthly I'd like to dedicate this book to Melody Love. You are a leader, like it or not! You walk with God in no-non-sense truth. You may struggle reading the Word but I have rarely come across someone so fiercely dedicated to 'doing' the Word. You are genuinely the most excellent company - life bubbles out of you. I love your name but maybe we should have called you Matilda after all!
Forever your loving and proud Dad.

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Chapter One

Oiling the Cogs

Reading a book is a risky thing. If you don't see it through then it could end up as another unfinished book in a pile of many. If you do see it through, then you will essentially have listened to someone else speak for hours and hours on end with no chance of getting a word in!

Subjecting yourself to another person's thoughts in that kind of way requires discernment. Especially if they are very persuasive! One of the early church fathers (I think it was Tertullian) said that "heretics convince by persuasion, whereas teachers of the truth persuade by conviction". Now I'll be honest - I can be very persuasive! Because of this, I have deliberately decided not to use persuasion in areas of this conversation that are more ambiguous. My chief aim is to aid your own thinking about this vital subject, rather than simply let you know what I think and get you to agree.

Therefore, I would ask that if you start it, you finish it. Come on the journey. See it through and follow the arguments. Don't make assumptions, but grapple with the scriptures.

Humility needed

When speaking about this age and comparing it to the next, the apostle Paul said that we "know in part", so we should approach all matters with a blend of conviction and humility: conviction that the Lord will give us the light we need to find a good way through on important matters, and humility in that none of us are seeing the whole picture. But there's more to it. One of the most challenging scriptures I know says this:

Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.

JOHN 7 V 17

It's challenging because it shows me that what we want is often at the root of what we see or understand. Sometimes we don't understand or notice certain things because we don't want to. When it comes to a subject as emotive (in the West) as gender, let's be honest, there are certain things we simply do or don't want to see.

All of us will bring philosophical assumptions, personal damage, un-sanctified attitudes, nagging fears and sinful blind spots to this conversation. Better to acknowledge this near the start; that way we can

check ourselves as we work through the book rather than believing everything we think or feel! So before you read on, please ask yourself: what do I want this book to say? It will help you to take a moment to ponder your answer; maybe even write it down, so you can refer back to it as you read through the book.

Defining Gender

People often use the same word in different ways so it's smart to nail the definition early.

How do I differentiate 'gender' from 'sex'? I don't. When talking about gender I am simply referring to the fact that He made us male and female¹. There is a growing message in the evangelical world that sounds a bit like this: gender, being physically determined, is essentially that, and nothing more.

It's helpful in two ways: First, it resists the ideology that encourages people to define their gender by their feelings rather than by their physicality. Second, it resists unhelpful and unbiblical gender stereotyping, e.g., real men should like cars but not flowers, and vice versa for real women.

But there's a problem also. It's too reductionist, shrinking gender from multi-dimensional to one-dimensional. Our maleness or our femaleness (our gender) involves far more than differing sexual organs; it shapes us psychologically and, I believe, that it also means something spiritually.

More on that in a bit.

What's all the fuss about?

When it comes to the matter of sexuality, those of us in the West recognise that we are in the midst of a cultural revolution. This book is an attempt to help us figure out, from the scriptures, what God thinks about it all. At the time of printing there are the very live issues of gender fluidity, gender dysphoria, gender neutrality and being transgender, and alongside these there are the more familiar issues of sexual orientation and sexual lifestyle choices.

For the most part Evangelical Christians have clear and agreed beliefs on the above matters. While these are being challenged in certain quarters, the teaching in scripture is so clear on the above that those who hold to the authority of scripture as an absolute priority can't see how we can change our stance without the whole house falling down.

As a very brief interlude the church, we are told in scripture, is:

1 Genesis 1v 27.

...the pillar and foundation of the truth.

1 TIMOTHY 3 V 15

This means that part of the church's calling is to hold up the truth by faithfully championing God's revelation in scripture. If the church gives way on the truth, the truth caves in. Not in the sense that it's no longer true, but in the sense that she who was entrusted to hold it up has neglected her calling. Those who previously found shade under truth upheld by the church are now exposed to the scorching rays of multiple deadly ideologies that deceive hearts and destroy lives.

Back to the cultural revolution.

The more nuanced issues of male and female personhood, equality and differences, what it means to be a man or a woman, and what the implications are in the church and the home, well... evangelical Christians, for the most part, do not agree on these. Seemingly simple matters can be surprisingly complex, with every issue contested, but the search for clarity is surely worth it!

This book is an invitation to journey through the scriptures, searching for the meaning of male and female, and if we can find one, making sense of it together. We'll excavate down to the foundations as much as possible; the further we go down and see what's really there and what isn't, the better idea we'll have of how to 'build up' with maximum wisdom. The aim is to serve God's people well, from those in leadership who need to make decisions about these things, to those helping and supporting others, to those in the midst of their own personal struggles.

Heat or Light?

We need to proceed with care; outside the church there is far more heat being generated than there is light. Divisive arguments, acrimonious accusations, bitter mistrust and confusion - this isn't how we do things. Maintaining the unity of the Spirit is absolutely key to all we do - Jesus paid a huge price to bring us together, and so we ought to act like our togetherness matters.

It's no surprise that the outside world is confused, but we, as the church, have both the scriptures and the Holy Spirit, and so what we don't have is an excuse. We have not been left without a witness.

I hope to write in a conciliatory spirit and I'm going to assume that at the bottom of different perspectives on these matters is a desire to honour the Lord, serve people well and be faithful to scripture. Having said that, I hope it will be a searching book. I would hazard a guess that our perspectives on these matters are as much to do with the condition of our own hearts as they are to do with anything else. As I noted earlier,

if there is anything in us that wants the answers to matters of gender to fall a certain way, then we are immediately vulnerable; biased hearts create dark and dangerous blind spots.

There are so many different reasons for our various preferences and prejudices. Whether it's our own sense of personal value as a man or a woman, a knee-jerk reaction rooted in our own personal pain, misunderstandings around what the different perspectives actually believe, fear of being perceived in a certain way, or loyalty to our particular tradition or tribe, the list goes on. I am convinced that if we can get to the point where we are as objective as possible, where we are deeply submitted to the revealed will of God in scripture, then this will impact our progress significantly.

It's also important to note that the Bible, while interested in our gender, by no means emphasises our differences. Our shared humanity as men and women, our shared goals of growing out of childish ways and into maturity and out of old ways into Christlike ways are its true emphasis. When the Bible writers exhort their readers to 'act like men', it's not contrasting this with acting like women, but with acting like children. As men and women, we have way more in common than what separates us.

Terminology

Although there are numbers of different perspectives on the matter of male and female, in the evangelical² world, those perspectives, for the most part, fall into two main 'camps'. The first is known as 'egalitarian' as its emphasis is on the equality of men and women, and the second is known as 'complementarian' as its emphasis is on the complementary differences between men and women. It's a funny old game because egalitarians believe that men and women are designed in a complementary way and complementarians believe that men and women are equal!

Egalitarians believe, if you like, in an essential symmetry between men and women, a symmetry that - other than all of us looking to be more and more like Christ - leaves no other important things to say about how a man and a woman ought to conduct themselves in the church and in the home. Complementarians want to talk about the asymmetry between men and women and the various distinctive implications involved in this. When you really zoom in to the centre, you'll find the issues of authority and responsibility are where the sparks tend to fly.

2 The word 'evangelical' has become a bit of a dirty word among certain sections in the UK. It conjures up images of far-right, homophobic, hysterical religious extremists. I am using the word 'evangelical' to describe Christians whose general approach to the Bible is that it is authoritative for belief and practice. I use the word as a contrast to 'liberal'.

For the sake of integrity I feel it's important to briefly share my own church background and what's going on in my own heart on these matters. The family of churches that I was born again into are more along the complementarian line, and that has been my world for the past 30 years or so; essentially it's all I've ever known. The experience of over 25 years serving as a pastor in predominantly urban settings (where the majority of 'new' and 'progressive' thinking and perspectives arise), and shepherding congregations made up of people mostly in their 18-30s (those still young and bold enough to question the status quo), has made me stop and think really hard about all of this, especially during the writing of this book over the last few years!

I have wholeheartedly sought to understand the egalitarian perspective, and it has been a real eye-opener, shaping my perspective to a significant degree. Exactly where I've landed will become apparent as the book develops.

All the Single Ladies...

And all the single men! This book will, quite often, focus particularly on marriage. The principles that we will be exploring are much wider than marriage but they come to their zenith in marriage. This doesn't mean for one moment that I believe marriage is some kind of exalted state. While I would be the first to champion godly marriage, I also have huge regard for an unmarried life in the service of Christ. Both conditions are Biblically celebrated. In light of this, I would particularly ask those who are unmarried to remain engaged (pardon the pun) in these sections for good reason. God is a God of order and consistency. While the marriage relationship is a unique one, any fundamental and timeless truths we discover concerning male and female are relevant for all of us.

We may need to carefully consider what application looks like in various differing relationships, but the principles hold true. Hope that makes sense.

Confession time

There is definitely a part of me that wants to be egalitarian. There are a few reasons.

Firstly, I think that if there is something that is theologically ambiguous, it's best to fall on the side of whatever appears kinder and I think, at first glance at least, the egalitarian perspective looks kindest, simply because it doesn't involve anything prohibitive. Secondly, I think that it's always best, if a matter is unclear, to do that which will cause least difficulty in the wider world and will have the greatest chance of commending the faith to those looking on from the outside. Currently in the West, there is no question that that would be the egalitarian perspective. Thirdly, where our church has been complementarian, we know there have been people who have made the decision either not to join us or to leave us, based on

that doctrinal position - this is rarely a joy for a pastor. Finally, the complementarian position is increasingly associated with oppression and this is very hard to be associated with when we know that the Lord hates all forms of oppression.

There is also a part of me that wants to remain complementarian. Why? Again, there are a few reasons.

Firstly, it's all I've ever known and it would feel incredibly unfamiliar and disorientating to change now; I'm not sure I'd understand the implications until I was right in the thick of it. Secondly, loyalty is a big deal to me and I'm part of a 'tribe' that is complementarian; I am somewhat afraid of the response if I were to change. Thirdly, I feel indignant at the thought of the wider culture encroaching into God's Kingdom in the church, and I'm struggling to shake off the notion that the egalitarian perspective is a symptom of a church on the back foot, a church defeated by the ideas of the world, a church losing its defining markers and losing its grip on its story-telling power.

But notice that none of those reasons above (there are so many more, I just chose the first ones that came to mind) are decisive because none of them get us into the actual relevant texts. They are all about what I *want* and don't *want*; what I desire and what I fear. If I leave those desires and fears unchecked, that will be a recipe for really bad Bible study! We must all face our fears from whatever direction they come, we must fear God and not man, we must be willing to move into uncharted territory - we just need to know that in doing so, we are being faithful; that will make it worthwhile and eternally fruitful.

I will also say this. While I care that people reach the right destination on this matter, I care more that people engage the right process. I'd enjoy fellowship more with someone who saw things differently but had arrived there with theological rigour, openness of heart, reverence, the honouring of scripture, prayer and tears than someone who saw things like me but who had simply chosen the 'easier' option, or gone tribal, or ignored relevant interpretive criticism or was just lazy.

While I'm not adopting the post-modern stance of not caring about absolute truth, I am saying that you are much more likely to arrive at truth if you walk the journey in a manner worthy of the subject. And trust me, this subject matters.

Pencil, Ink and Blood

Someone once spoke to me about approaching various doctrines by asking the question, "Is this particular matter something that ought to be written in pencil, ink or blood?" What they meant was that different subjects carry different weight and we all have to decide what weight they carry, from 'pencil' being not that important, to 'blood' being something we'd go to the stake over. I think, in terms of where you land, this is an 'ink' issue; in terms of how you get there, well, I think that could be 'blood'. How so? If you arrive at

your conclusion by playing fast and loose with scripture or by ignoring ‘inconvenient’ Biblical truths, then your whole commitment to revealed truth is obviously questionable at best.

But this issue itself is, from my perspective, not a ‘gospel issue’, i.e. what you believe about it will not determine whether or not you are saved. But I do think it matters. I think it matters in terms of our faithfulness to the creation narrative, the faithfulness of how we tell the story of salvation, and the quality of our relationships.

Sorry

As I said earlier, complementarianism has been my world for over 30 years. If I’m to be really honest, I’ve become increasingly aware that for some (many?) women in that world, there have often been glaring inconsistencies in church practice, dismissive attitudes and postures towards women, poor communication and teaching on gender, and leadership that sometimes hasn’t followed through on agreed plans. As a church leader who’s inhabited a complementarian world for decades, I’d like to apologise representatively to any women who have been treated in ways that do not reflect their dignity as co-heirs with Christ and gifted members of His body. Please forgive us.

Selahs and Interludes



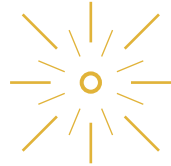
INTERLUDE



Throughout the book you’ll notice the occasional ‘selah’ or ‘interlude’. The selah is taken from the Psalms, where scholars suggest that the word is used to help us to pause for a moment and consider what we’ve just read. That’s what my selahs are there for too.

I guess the interludes are self-explanatory!

They are opportunities to either head off on a bit of a (relevant) tangent or dig deeper into something we’re looking at.



You've reached the end of this extract from Gender Quality by Stefan Liston

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