

Murph,

Your essay really made me think, and as I revisited some of the passages under discussion, I was reminded of why people can reasonably, I think, come to different conclusions concerning what Scripture says about gender roles.

When I go to asserting that the Bible positively endorses heterosexual gender roles for people living in light of Christ's coming kingdom, there are three passages in particular that cause me some hesitation:

First, Matthew 22:29-30. Thank you for bringing this verse up. I had not previously considered it in regards to the present discussion. But this is the challenge I see it presenting to would-be defenders of gender roles: 1) In God's future kingdom, there will be no marriage. 2) In the present, we desire God's kingdom to come as fully as possible into the world. 3) Therefore, we should not marry. If marriage does not have any special place in God's coming kingdom, then it also seems less likely that a conception of gender roles is important for present Christians.

Second, Galatians 3:28. The logic of the challenge seems somewhat analogous here to the logic of the challenge from Matthew 22. If, in the future kingdom, there's no significant male/female distinction, then why draw one now so long as we're trying to bring the future kingdom into the present world? Moreover, as you point out, in Galatians 2 Paul clearly states that there are sociological ramifications from the passing away of the Jew/Gentile distinction, not merely soteriological ones.

Thirdly, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul does seem to say that it is best not to marry at all. Clearly, he says that it is not a sin to marry. Also, he seems to suggest that a life of singleness isn't for everyone (1 Co. 7:9 – and this seems to echo what Jesus says in Matthew 19:11-12). However, he does say that marriage is merely a concession, which suggests that it is not the ideal. By de-emphasizing marriage, Paul at the same time, then, seems to be reducing the importance of a conception of gender roles.

Moreover, there are two further intra-Biblical considerations that I think speak in favour of doing away with gender roles. One is what one might call the "redemptive movement" dynamic that we see at play between the OT and the NT. (This is a phrase that I borrow from William Webb, in his book, Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals.) A "redemptive movement" hermeneutic says that the proper way to apply Scripture's moral principles shifts (or "moves") from the OT to the NT, and that this movement should continue to progress as we apply Scriptural principles to new cultural contexts. Thus, according to this

hermeneutic, the Scriptural principle of respecting women would mean that we progress from OT laws concerning women to the NT injunctions for husbands to positively love their wives, and that we should move further still beyond these NT injunctions to full undifferentiated gender equality in the present day. Because I certainly do believe that something like a redemptive movement dynamic happens the OT to the NT (see the Sermon on the Mount), I find the suggestion that we should go farther than Paul explicitly does plausible, but I remain uncertain if, in fact, we should go farther, and, if so, precisely how far.

The second consideration is wondering whether or not Paul's main motivation in saying many of the things that he does concerning the role of women (in both churches and marriages) is simply pragmatic: according to this line of thought, his main goal is to preach the Gospel, and he doesn't want to make any issues of secondary importance impede the preaching of the Gospel (eg., in Titus 2:5, it seems his main reason for wanting wives to be submissive is simply so that the Gospel wouldn't be "reviled"). But now, so this line of thought goes, if upholding traditional gender roles impedes the spread of the Gospel, then Paul would actually be in favour of discarding gender roles in our current context.

However, the above passages obviously occur within a larger Scriptural context, and we need to understand them within that context. The following questions remain concerning several of the texts that you deal with, and, to my mind, mean that they ought to be interpreted differently from the ways you suggest. Furthermore, when we interpret the following passages in the following ways, they would seem to restrict how far movement can go, even when acknowledging that some form of a redemptive movement dynamic is at play within Scripture. Finally, while Paul seems sometimes to justify gender roles on merely pragmatic grounds, at other times he seems to justify gender roles on much deeper, Scriptural grounds.

Genesis 1:27 I certainly agree that of the three readings you suggest, the "inclusive reading" is the most plausible. However, might we not say a "complementary reading" would be the most plausible of all? After all, immediately after saying that God had created them male and female in his image, he gives them a mandate that they are to carry out *together*, and at least one part of this mandate (to "multiply") clearly requires them to play complementary roles. A complementary reading of this passage would interpret it as stating that both men and women equally possess the image of God, and that they are to work together, in complementary ways, in carrying out the work that God has uniquely given to humans in virtue of their unique possession, among of all God's creatures, of the image of God.

Genesis 2 In 1 Timothy 2, Paul does, indeed, make an argument from primogeniture. However, the reasons for thinking that Genesis 2 prescribes gender roles don't, I think, have to do mainly or only with primogeniture. Rather, doesn't the fact that the woman is described as a "helper" for the man suggest that she complements him? Doesn't the language of being "suitable" for him or "fit" for him or "corresponding" to him imply that she is good match? It seems to me that this passage emphasizes sameness (as you point out), but also difference: the woman is the same as man in comparison to the rest of the created animals, but she is also different from man in comparison to the man himself. He is man; she is woman. He is the helped; she is the helper. He leaves his home for her; she receives him when he comes for her. They're clearly the same in many respects, but different in others.

As well, the question is raised as to why we ought take the pre-Fall account as normative. I think there are basically two reasons for this, at least in regards to this issue of gender. The first reason is that Jesus seems to treat it as being normative. In Matthew 19 and Mark 10, his bases for asserting that people ought not divorce are these passages in Genesis 1-2. (One other passage to bear in mind is Malachi 2:15; it also alludes to the oneness spoken of in Genesis 2, and also seems to interpret it normatively.) The second reason for taking the pre-Fall account to be normative is that the pre-Fall world was unmarred by sin; I think there is a strong sense in Scripture that the pre-Fall world was good, and, as such, it makes sense to pattern our behaviour after that good model and try to distance ourselves from sin.

The question then comes up, though, of what aspects of the pre-Fall world we should try and emulate. For instance, why take gender roles as normative if we don't take their examples of agrarian lifestyles as being normative? Or why not take bipedalism as normative? The best answer I think we can give to this question is that later passages of Scripture pick up on certain aspects of the pre-Fall world as being of normative significance, while Scripture does not pick up on others in the same way. So, for instance, we, as far as I can tell, receive no further instruction in the Bible that we all ought to lead agrarian lifestyles. On the other hand, we are clearly instructed that Adam fell into sin (Romans 5), and that we ought to try and flee from sin (lots of places). Similarly, it seems to me that the pattern of marriage and gender roles is a theme that is picked up by later Scriptural authors as being normative and transcultural. The passages I have in mind are those that we've been discussing, passages such as Matthew 19, Ephesians 5, and 1 Timothy 2.

Note two other things concerning Genesis 1-2. One is Paul's reference to them in Ephesians 5. There, in a sense, Paul certainly does emphasize sameness between men and women. The rationale for men loving their wives is the deep,

mysterious way in which a woman and man become one; by loving his wife, a man loves himself. But even though Paul recognizes this strong theme of sameness in Genesis 1-2, he demonstrably does not think that this entails a denial of gender roles, for a central part of his teaching in this Ephesians 5 passage is that women are to submit to their husbands and husbands are to love their wives.

Two, you suggest that Genesis 2 doesn't actually speak to the issue of marriage, but based both on Jesus' reference to it in Matthew 19 and Paul's reference to it in Ephesians, I think the most natural reading of it is to conclude that it does speak directly to the issue of marriage.

Genesis 3 Isn't it plausible to think that the specific curses assigned to each of Adam and Eve reflect specific roles that God had planned for them to fulfill? That is, my suggestion is that the curses meant that fulfilling the roles God had planned for them would be harder after the Fall than it would have been before the Fall (this aspect of the Fall's consequences – making the gender roles more difficult to fulfill – isn't the whole of the Fall's consequences, but a part of them). In the pre-Fall world, child-bearing, women following the leadership of godly men, and work would have been relatively painless. But in the post-Fall world, child-bearing is painful; women bristle under the leadership of sinful men; and work is hard. I think this interpretation of Genesis 3 is different from any of the interpretations you canvassed in your essay, but isn't it plausible?

You suggest that even if gender roles were part of the post-Fall curse, it doesn't mean we shouldn't try and undo the effects of the curse. Clearly, as you say, we try to, for instance, make child-bearing less painful and work less toilsome. I agree – we should try and undo the effects of the post-Fall curse. However, if the curse is not the existence of gender roles themselves, but a perversion of the way in which men and women fulfill these roles, then the solution is not undoing gender roles altogether, but helping people fulfill them in the way that God had originally designed them to be fulfilled. And that would be my suggestion, that the concepts of manhood and womanhood worth holding onto would be those that are carried out *in a Christlike way*. Men should give priority to leadership, protection, and provision *in a Christlike way*. Women should give priority to the home, family, and children *in a Christlike way*. It is by carrying out these roles in this way that the curse would be undone.

Galatians 3:28 As I said earlier, the challenge to the defender of gender roles presented by this passage is that a) male/female is listed alongside Jew/Gentile as an insignificant distinction in Christ, b) Paul recognized the insignificance of the Jew/Gentile distinction as having sociological implications, and so c) it seems

that the insignificance of the male/female distinction should also be recognized as having sociological implications, ie., the doing away of gender roles.

The problem with this argument is that Paul didn't actually recognize the insignificance of the male/female distinction as having the sociological implications that opponents of gender roles maintain. Just as Paul said that Jews should eat with Gentiles, couldn't he have said that gender roles should also henceforth be ignored? But he didn't. Rather, he seemed to say that there "being no male or female in Christ" is compatible with recognizing gender roles, as he does in various of his epistles. And isn't that conclusion very similar to the thought that hierarchical gender roles aren't necessarily inimical to equality?

1 Corinthians 7 Paul does soundly endorse singleness here. So perhaps his view is that every Christian *ought* ideally to remain single. That de-emphasis on marriage does seem to make any discussion of gender roles less important.

But does it wholly nullify the relevance of gender roles? Or does it mean that gender roles are morally inappropriate? I don't think it does. Consider that, even if Paul is holding up celibacy as ideal, if people do get married he seems to endorse only heterosexual marriage. Moreover, he does not seem to condone – here or in any other of his writings – sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage. So he still seems to think that there is something unique about femaleness and maleness, and the unique compatibility of these genders for marriage. Further, clearly Paul says that it is not a sin to be married (1 Co. 7:28, 36), and when people are married, Paul does seem to endorse gender roles within marriage (eg., Ephesians 5, Titus 2, Colossians 3). He also seems to endorse gender roles with the church (eg., 1 Timothy 2, 1 Co. 14). The point is simply that, even if Paul is endorsing singleness, he seems on some level to be retaining a place for gender roles.

If there is one main conclusion to draw from 1 Corinthians 7 in regards to our discussion about gender roles, I suggest that it would be this: even though we have role-specific responsibilities whatever our station be in life – as a husband or wife, as a child, as a slave or as a master, etc. – our overriding goal in life is to glorify God and live for the sake of the Gospel. So whatever we think about gender roles or lack thereof, Murph, we mustn't think that this issue ever eclipses (or even comes close to eclipsing!) the importance of living wholeheartedly for God.

[This last point makes me think of your most recent blog entry, on Breivik. That entry was very good. We Christians often do err by majoring on the minors, and minoring on the majors.]

Matthew 19 Thanks for directing my attention to an aspect of this text that I am apt to overlook – the fact that the context of this discussion of Mosaic divorce law is the Pharisees *testing* Jesus – but it still seems to me that the best and most straightforward reading of the text would interpret Jesus’ words here to be saying something important about marriage.

You suggest that the main point of the passage is that God demands an exacting moral standard of us, one that we cannot meet, and thus we need a Saviour. To interpret the passage in that way is, I think, to impute into the text content that isn’t there (although the message that we are sinners who can’t redeem ourselves is obviously one of the main messages of Scripture as a whole). Instead, isn’t the main point of the passage – in light of the fact that the Pharisees are *testing* Jesus – that Jesus upholds the Mosaic law, even when he seems to be impugning it, by upholding the true spirit of the law’s contents? The *test* is how Jesus will handle the Mosaic law on a controversial point. He handles it masterfully by showing that any controversy is caused, not by a flaw in the law, but a flaw in people – by the hardness of our hearts.

So I agree that divorce, in a sense, is not the main issue that Jesus is tackling here. At the same time, though, marriage and divorce norms are clearly in view, being the test case for how Jesus will handle the Mosaic law. And Jesus’ views on marriage and divorce seem to be clear: based on the norms of God’s original creation, marriage is a lifelong covenant between a man and woman. It is only due to people’s brokenness that divorces occur.

Furthermore, even if Jesus’ point is primarily about moral purity – I don’t think it is, but maybe you’re right – couldn’t he only make this point if, in fact, God’s design is for lifelong coventantal marriage between a man and woman? Even if his main point in the context is about moral purity, how could he make that point except by referring to a normative standard that people had failed to live up to?

So it seems to me that whether the main point is the one you cite or the one I cite, this passage speaks in favour of gender roles and heteronormativity.

1 Corinthians 11 I do find this passage generally confusing. In one breath Paul seems to be asserting the headship of men, and in the next breath seems to be asserting the interdependence of men and women. More specifically confusing, in verse 16 Paul says that “we have no such practice”, but what “practice” is being referred to? Is it the practice of men having long hair, or the practice of women participating in worship services with their heads uncovered?

While, as far as I can tell – maybe knowing the original Greek can resolve the issue – the issue is ambiguous, I think the most reasonable conclusion is that Paul is overall making a point about the headship of men in this passage and about how it should be exercised. This seems to make sense given how the passage starts – with a statement about headship – and how it finishes – with a rhetorical question implying that it is obvious that men shouldn't let their hair grow long and women shouldn't cut off their long hair. And if, in one breath Paul seems to assert headship while in the next breath he emphasizes equality and interdependence, wouldn't the best conclusion be that headship isn't antithetical to equality, and that we should retain a role for hierarchical roles while maintaining equal worth and complementarity?

Ephesians 5:22-33 Concerning this passage, you suggest that the main point is the church-Christ relationship, but is it? Isn't the main point of the general context instructions for how to live with each other? And isn't the main point being tackled in these verses the particular relationship of the husband and wife? It seems much more natural to read this passage as Paul invoking the church-Christ relationship to help explain the wife-husband relationship rather than vice-versa. I think, from God's eternal perspective, heterosexual marriage was instituted as illustrative of the church-Christ relationship – and in that way the church-Christ relationship is prior – but in this particular passage, the main point seems to be about the husband-wife relationship. And within that relationship, Paul seems clearly to state that there are roles to play.

1 Timothy 2 I think this is a tough passage all around. For example, the aforementioned William Webb, in his book Slaves, Women & Homosexuals, is an evangelical Christian who essentially concludes that Scripture does not prescribe any gender roles. However, he says that the weakest point of his argument is 1 Timothy 2, and is open to the possibility of his being wrong. At the same time, for those who would defend gender roles, neither of the rationales that Paul provides here are very palatable to modern minds: either an argument from primogeniture, or an argument seemingly made on the basis of the belief that women are generally more susceptible to falsehood than men (a belief that appears scientifically inaccurate). He seems to invoke this latter justification by illustrating his point with the case of Eve being deceived.

The way in which you interpret the passage, Murph, is new to me, and a very interesting way. I'd like to think more about it. For now, though, I think the best interpretation is one that interprets 1 Timothy 2 as prescribing gender roles, given a) that *prima facie*, it easily reads as defending gender roles (though perhaps, as you suggest, on closer reading it does not), and b) that what I understand to be the church's historic understanding of this text is that it

prescribes gender roles. (For more on the church's historic understanding of this text, there is an appendix in Webb's book.)

Lastly, **Matthew 22:29-30** This is a passage that, as you say, seems to speak in favour of discarding gender roles. I hesitate to attach too much importance to it, though, because I think so little is said elsewhere in Scripture about this issue of gender in heaven. (Perhaps that, too, speaks in favour of it being a non-issue in heaven?) Since Scripture says so little about it, I have to weigh it in the balance against all the things that Scripture positively does say about gender roles for those of us who are still in this present age of the earth. Basically, I'm cautious about Matthew 22 because I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill.

Based on this survey of the relevant Scriptures, my tentative conclusions are as follows (and I arrange them in order from the least significant conclusion to the most significant):

First (and of least importance), while singleness is the norm for the age to come, and should perhaps be upheld as an ideal for Christians even now in the present age, heterosexual marriage is a God-designed and morally permissible option for many Christians in the present age; given that we remain embodied as men and women (at least most people), with desires that have been designed to find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage, heterosexual marriage is a sensible choice for many people.

Second, especially within marriage (and within the church), God ordains gender-specific roles. To a lesser extent, gender roles are applicable to all women and men because our present world retains a morally relevant continuity with the pre-Fall world, even while we anticipate an altogether new heaven and earth.

Third, we should always seek to be a winsome witness to the world for the sake of the Gospel, and should pragmatically seek to remove obstacles that might bring the Gospel into disrepute, and do so in a way that is consistent with Scripture.

Fourth (and most importantly), the issue of gender roles is not nearly as important an issue as devotion to Christ.