

SESSION FOUR: SEXISM – MALE/FEMALE RELATIONS

Opening Prayer

Creator God, you have made us in your image – male and female you created us and called us good. Teach us to respect our own gender and that of our loved ones and friends. Amen.

Jumpstart

If possible, view a scene from the movie *The Apostle*, in which the evangelical preacher, Sonny, arrives at his son's softball game, strikes his wife's lover with a baseball bat, then grabs his wife by the hair and drags her and the kids away. Discuss how a minister might think such actions are justified by scripture.

Some Infamous Passages

Consider the following passages together:

- “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.” (1 Cor. 7:4a)
- “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife.” (1 Cor. 11:3)
- “For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man.” (1 Cor. 11:7)
- “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.” (1 Cor. 14:34)

Discussion Questions

? Looking only at these statements, how would you describe Paul's view of women? Of the proper relationship between men and women?

Read in isolation, these passages may seem more sexist than they really are. Paul held a fairly liberal view of women, noting in Galatians 3:28 that distinctions such as male and female are dissolved by our oneness in Christ. Women are mentioned among church leaders in Romans (16:1-15) and Philippians (4:2-3), and Acts refers to Paul's visit to the Philippian church, where he met with a gathering of women only (16:13).

Two important factors shape Paul's view of women and male/female relations. First is the freedom in Christ that was available to both women and men. In this patriarchal society, there were few places where women were treated as men's equals, yet Christ's liberating love is offered to all people. Second, Paul's advice on appropriate relations between the sexes was affected by his belief that the end times were near – a time when the risen Christ would return and human life would be completely transformed. These passages reveal specific advice Paul based on that assumption.

While according women a new freedom in Christ, Paul also encouraged a sense of order for the good of the whole community. At a time when men were the traditional heads of household, Paul urged Corinthian families to keep order within the family under the man as its head, just as the church submits to Christ as its head. Later epistles use even stronger language (Ephesians 5:21-24 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15). Although written in Paul's name, these later epistles were probably not by him. They deal with order in the church and in families that began to be a problem as church communities grew in size.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-16, 25-38

Paul allows for sexual relations in marriage mostly out of concern for self-control (vv. 2, 5, 9), and he suggests that married couples observe periods of celibacy, unless it would tempt them to sexual immorality (*porneia*, v. 2). His clear preference for singleness runs counter to the value placed on family at that time. He even urges widows to remain unmarried (vv. 8-9) in a patriarchal society where women needed to be under male protection.

Here Paul's advice reflects his belief that Christ would return within most people's lifetime; his suggestions were meant as temporary measures until Christ's second coming (vv. 26, 29, 31). Building up the community through marriage and having children was far less important than making sure your soul was right with God — a need that Christians of both sexes shared. Paul's advice to married partners relates less to gender roles and more to his view that the present world order was to end soon. Paul believed Christians should be single and celibate, or married and sexually active, whichever they would find less of a distraction.

Paul does suggest that marriage partners share equally in certain areas. In another radical departure from the patriarchal notions of his time, he calls for mutual submission within marriage, noting that both wife and husband have authority over the other's body. And he writes that either a wife or husband may provide the means by which a non-believing spouse comes to know Christ, again indicating the mutual importance of both spouses.

Discussion Questions

- ? How relevant are Paul's notions of celibacy to Christians today? What are the arguments for celibacy today?
- ? How would you like being in a marriage with the kind of mutuality Paul describes?

It's Greek to Me

kefale (kef-al-AY) = head

Metaphorically, *kefale* refers to anything supreme or prominent. In some cases it means "source." Paul uses the word 10 times in 1 Corinthians 11.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Paul is apparently responding to questions or concerns about women being veiled in church, and he bases his argument on the idea that man is the head of woman, just as Christ is the head of man.

Background Check: Did you know that there two different versions of the creation story in Genesis? Compare how each describes the creation of humans by taking a look at Genesis 1:26-27, and Genesis 2:18, 21-23.

Paul ignores the first creation story, in which both men and women are made in God's image. Instead, reflecting his concern for order within the community, Paul writes that only man reflects the image of God (v. 7) and notes that woman was created from man and for man (vv. 8-9). He does, however, try to even the score by saying that man comes through woman in birth (v. 12). In the end, though, it is all relative, since everything comes from God.

Scholars are not clear about some points of Paul's argument, especially the reference to angels (v. 10), and what some of the veiling customs might have been. He does seem to be saying that although men and women have equality in Christ, the Corinthians should still honor gender distinctions — distinctions that preserve patriarchal ideas.

Discussion Questions

- ? In terms of fairness to both sexes, how does this passage compare with Paul's comments on marriage in the previous passage?
- ? How important do you think gender distinctions such as hairstyles and clothing are to us today?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:34-36

This passage is often cited by churches that do not ordain women. However, the argument here is inconsistent with what Paul writes elsewhere. First, in the passage we just considered (1 Cor. 11:5), Paul says women should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy, so obviously women did speak in the Corinthian church. Second, Paul appeals to the law, although he writes elsewhere that we are freed from the law by Christ (Romans 7:6, 1 Cor. 7:18-19). Scholars offer the following possible interpretations:

- In verses 34-35 Paul is quoting from the Corinthians, and in verse 36 he is disagreeing with them.
- The passage prohibits a certain kind of speech that was common in this church, but not all speech.
- The passage applies to married women only, for they could consult their husbands at home.
- The passage reveals concerns of the later epistles and was probably added by

someone else — in fact the NRSV Bible puts these verses in parentheses.

Discussion Questions

- ? What do think is the best interpretation of this passage?
- ? Does this passage seem out of character for Paul? Why or why not?
- ? How do you reconcile this passage with the fact that women are ordained by most Protestant denominations?

What Does it Mean for Us?

Paul's advice on relations between the sexes is based largely in Christians' new-found freedom in Christ and in the tension of waiting for the end times. In many places today, women still do not enjoy equal opportunities, and although we may not be looking for Christ to return any day now, we should try to live as if we are. Divide into small groups of all males or all females. Talk about the following questions with each other, then share them with the whole group.

- ? How relevant do you find Paul's advice to your gender?
- ? Discuss how often men think about sex versus how often women do. Who do you think finds it more of a distraction? Why? How does such a distraction affect your faith?
- ? How do you see relations between the sexes? How different are things now than they seemed to be in Paul's day?

Consider the following question with the whole group:

- ? How can Paul's advice affect how you relate to the opposite sex?

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love.”

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.