

Double Image

THE BULLETIN OF MEN WOMEN AND GOD

GOD AND MAN AND WOMAN

by John Bell

If I say: I BELIEVE THAT GOD MADE MAN AND WOMAN OUT OF LOVE.....

I am probably making a statement which most, if not all members of MWG would agree with, and yet I am making a highly contentious statement for the simple reason that I am talking about three mysteries:

the mystery of God
the mystery of gender
and the mystery of love.

In fact, I am talking about four mysteries, because I began with the words

I believe

... and belief is also a matter of mystery.

The trouble with mysteries is that we either stand silent in the face of them - like Job, overcome by the insight God's words offer him into the creative process, or we try through language to describe and discuss them.

And when we describe a mystery - which is in essence undefinable by human language, we run the risk of our interpretation or our spin

taking the place of the *res ipsa*.. the mystery itself.

So.. my understanding of God - my theology, if you like - becomes definitive of God.. or my understanding of love.. based on limited experience and a few books... becomes - for me - the sum total of what love is.

And when I engage with someone else whose understanding of, whose description of, whose language about the mystery (be it God or love) is different from mine, I may be threatened and become defensive... especially if by dint of power or race or gender I am one of the dominant or privileged class whose security depends on not being contradicted someone I perceive as inferior.

I begin in this slightly philosophical or obtuse way because I believe that behind MWG is a history of a

"And glaring at us from the wounds of history is that the social body has not mirrored the twofold creation-in-the-image, women and men. ...this shrunken form of *imago Dei* left no space for the black community, for groups marginalized through disability, race, through sexuality, age and economic poverty. Together with these exclusions has come an absolutizing of structures that makes the social body impossible."
(Mary Grey p231).

dominant elite - male clergy in the main having their idea of God and of love and of gender tightly sewn up for so long that when other voices - be they women's voices or the voices of the marginalized suggest an alternative interpretation or description of these great mysteries, the dominant male religious culture feels threatened and defends not God or gender or love, but its hitherto unquestioned understanding of what these mysteries are about.

But let me now move quickly to something much more substantial... the Garden of Eden.

The trouble as well as the bliss starts in Eden. It is not for nothing that it comes at the beginning of the Bible and has been for centuries a war zone between 7 day creationists and their more liberal counterparts.

We discover two sources of endless dispute in Eden... the first that God is a person.

We know this because God is depicted as a peeping Tom who walks in the garden and much to Adam's displeasure engages him in a conversation about what he has just done.

For God (the first great mystery) to be a person, God - for human understanding - must have a gen-

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MEN WOMEN AND GOD



der or at least be spoken of in the third person. I and YOU or THOU is OK as long as we are talking to God or God to us, but if we want to talk about God objectively, we have to go into the third person... Unless we are speaking in, for example, an African language where the third person is the same for male or female, we have to settle for he or she for, most certainly, God is not an it.

But if the language culture is Greek or Latin, then the standards for talking about other deities will apply to this God. So, being a supreme deity like Zeus or Apollo, God becomes male. And even if... as in the case of the Spirit, the gender in the source language (Hebrew) is female... RUACH... when that comes into Greek and Latin and ultimately English, it is their gendering of the Spirit as male which prevails.

Now of course, it is not as simple as this. And yet, at the heart it is as simple as this... if God is a personal God who communicates... whose voice is heard, whose form is seen by a few, whose being is represented by angels - as with Abraham's visitors - then God will inevitably be given gender... gender being one of the normative attributes of all persons, with the rare exception of hermaphrodites who have both.

This, of course, suits patriarchal societies where men dominate. It is good to imagine that God has a hairy chest and a penis... then he's just like one of us, only bigger. His maleness (which is essentially a flag of convenience as regards language) will be invoked to buttress all that is dear to the dominant male establishment, be that on the battlefield, in the courts or in religion.

And what endorses and buttresses this perception of God is that in the dealings God has with humanity,

the dominant group will be keener to record the activity of God in terms which accord with their obsessions and engagements than in terms which would favour the oppressed class or minority groups.

It is interesting, in this regard, that in the more cerebral books of the Old Testament... in the Pentateuch and in the History books, there is virtually no allusion to God in other than masculine terms.

God is the architect and builder of the universe,

God is the warrior going in front of people smashing the enemy,

God is the judge and lawgiver who recreates in the celestial equivalent of the Atheneum,

God is the monarch who reluctantly allows others to sample kingship.

It is not until we come to the psalms and the prophets and the Gospels, that this academically correct male deity has correctives made as regards the divine personality.

It is as if God were saying, "I'm fed up with the logical, left brain thinkers having their way. I'm fed up being male". So to the imagination of poets and prophets other pictures are given of God... as the nursing mother holding the weaned child: as the woman who is panting and groaning with the onset of childbirth:

as the midwife who is not going to close the mouth of the womb when delivery is due.

And, stunningly, when we hear God spoken of by Jesus, the models for God... as the models for discipleship are not bound to one gender.

Yes, God is like the Shepherd who hoists the lost lamb on his shoulders, but God is also like the woman

who throws a party when she finds her lost coin.

When I imagined that God was my heavenly mother, the context in which I had an eating disorder changed. It is not an exaggeration to say the whole world became a different place. *Jo Ind Fat is a Spiritual Issue: My Journey 1993 quoted p108*

God - in the person of Jesus shows masculine rage in the face of the supercilious pharisaic cult, - yet also in the person of Jesus, God weeps on being deeply moved by the tears of the grieving Mary, sister of Lazarus.

Now, it is almost an unwritten law of human society that clubs are formed by people who are like or aspire to be like the founding members. The Rifle Association in the USA does not have many pacifists on its books, nor does the Mothers' Union have a queue of beer-swilling bricklayers wanting to join.

If the dominant culture... in state or religion can convincingly argue or imply that their ultimate superior is male... it is only natural (in the neutral sense of that term) that those who belong to the clubs of which the ultimate superior is founder and honorary chair should be of the same gender as him.

So, for most of the Judaeo-Christian period, the synagogue and the church have been seen as the places of belonging primarily to those who most resembled - in terms of gender - the mysterious Godhead who was commonly spoken of in exclusively male terms.

But back to Eden.

For as well as being the source of complication regarding God being a person and therefore not to be neutered, Eden is also the place where we learn something which plays a remarkably minor role in terms of biblical witness.

It is Eden... or more especially in Chapter 1 of Genesis which precedes the Adam and Eve story that we learn that both male and female were made in the image of God.

Now, though we might think otherwise, that is virtually the only mention in the whole of Scripture which indicates that we resemble our creator. It is quite exceptional and is mentioned in that part of Genesis which is closer to poetry than to verifiable history. Nowhere else in the whole Bible is the issue raised until in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul writes that we are being constantly transformed into the image of Christ with increasing glory.

I find this interesting from a theological perspective. It is as if we have been created in the image of God, but that image is something which only gradually comes to fullness... particularly when we are closest to resembling Christ. It is like saying that someone is a born artist... genetically that is his or her endowment and disposition... but it is not until s/he begins to be introduced to canvas and paints and study with a master that this inherent givenness begins to appear.

Paul (usually some might say) sees this progression into the full image of God as something which is not gender specific, in the same way as Genesis indicates that our imaging after our maker implies that God is imaged in both male and female.

But, as we know.. it has taken Christendom a long time to discover the meaning of this solitary verse and, again, because the Bible has been predominantly interpreted by, and the church organized by men, there emerged the notion that while all were created equally in the image of God, 49% of humanity were a better photofit than the others.

'More than a 100 Million Women are Missing'. This is the title of an article by the economist Amartya Sen, written in 1990. "It is often said, writes Sen, 'that women make up a majority of the world's population. They do not.'" We make this mistake because we generalize from the situation in Europe and North America, whereas 'in South Asia, West Asia and China, the ratio of women to men can be as low as 0.94, or even lower, and it varies widely elsewhere in Asia, in Africa and in Latin America.' The shortfall of women is over 100 million, and it is caused by unequal access to food and medical provision. The undervaluing of women literally kills them.
From J. Soskice 'Women's Problems' *Priests and People* 6 Quoted p. 103

And we, unwittingly have either bought into and perpetuated this or have been the victims of it. And I want to note some ways in which this has come about.

1) Old Testament biblical heroes to which children are introduced are invariably male whose strength or supposed strength is extolled:

Thus Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Samson, are seen as worthy men made in the image of God.

Two mistaken concomitants follow:
a) that they are paragons of virtue... so we don't ponder much on Noah exposing himself when naked, Abraham passing off his wife as his sister, David being a serial adulterer or Samson being a psychopath.

b) the more rounded male figures... like the prophets, or the more quirky males like Elisha are hardly given a mention in popular teaching.

2) Old Testament... and to some extent, New Testament women are invariably depicted as fallen or

inadequate, in need of a good man to keep them in check.

The procession of fallen damsels begins with Eve and includes Hagar, Tamar, Rahab, the woman at the well, the adultress in Luke's Gospel and a host of others.

The corollary to this is that any women of virtue are normally portrayed as the most submissive and anaemic of creatures.

Sarah is a jolly old grannie, not the conniving old harridan she could be. Ruth is a sorry victim of circumstances, not a risk-taker for the sake of the family tree.

The haemorrhaging woman is so placid that it's a wonder where she gets the strength to hijack a tight-packed crowd of male greybeards surrounding Jesus.

And when we come to the BVM (the Blessed Virgin Mary... for protestants) she is the eternally 16 year old doting icon of anorexia even when her 33 year old son needs a ticking off for being oblivious to the shortage of alcohol at a wedding reception.

I remember discussing this phenomenon with women from the East End of Glasgow. One of them, a very seasoned and tough woman said;

"I'll tell you why Mary is made out to be so timid:

Who is it who paints the Bible pictures?... Men

Who is it who makes the statues?... Men

Who is it who writes the hymns about her?... Men

There's a conspiracy going on. They makes Mary look like she wouldn't say boo to a goose And then expect their wives to be the same and not give them any trouble."

3) We have persuaded ourselves that the disciples of Jesus were predominantly male. Now, granted, the twelve who were the inner core were all men.

“Womanist” arises from: the Black folk expression of mothers to female children ‘you acting womanish,’ i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one ...Being grown up ...Responsible. In charge. Serious.
(Alice Walker *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 1984 quoted p. 114)

But in the Gospels there are as many women who are clearly stated as being among his followers, but because several of them are named Mary we tend to forget their existence. (There was a shortage of female names in those days!)

For example, in Luke 8, the chapter begins with
‘With Jesus were the twelve and a number of women he had set free from evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, known as Magdala from whom seven demons had come out, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, a steward of Herod’s, Susanna and many others.
These women provided for them out of their resources.’

4) Our understanding of Jesus’ engagement with both sexes is overshadowed by our negative associations of women in the Old Testament and in the writings of Paul.

If you read from Genesis to Zechariah and then go to Romans, while it is not a seamless web, there is a consonance in male headship and the silencing or subjugating women. Protestants particularly tend to read Jesus through the eyes of Paul, but I am more and more convinced that Paul had no idea of how Jesus felt or how Jesus reacted to certain social realities, one of which was the presence of women.

It is therefore interesting to note that while Paul is afraid of young widows gossiping and rules that

women should keep silent in church (though this is not all Paul says), Jesus is quite different.

If we look at what Jesus said to women, or about women, there is no occasion when Jesus gives a woman a dressing down or uses a particular woman to illustrate moral or spiritual laxity.

Instead he sees women as models of faith, love, forgiveness and generosity:

A woman, not a man is the first evangelist

Women, not men, announce the resurrection. (Why is it that male priests see reading the Gospel as their prerogative in some churches?)

5) I put responsibility for this unbalanced view of the equal imaging of male and female on male church leadership. And it has not all been done in innocence.

I was asked to preach at Evensong in Westminster Abbey. I asked for the lections for the day and discovered that the Old Testament reading for Mattins was the cry of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt to God. The evensong Old Testament reading was the call of Moses.

I noted that between these two was the story of five women; Moses’ mother, sister, Pharaoh’s daughter, and Shiphrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives who defied male authority in different ways in order that the child might live.

So when I came to preach I began by saying;

“Somewhere in the last five hours between Mattins and now, five female middle eastern conspirators have disappeared in the Abbey.” Later one kindly Anglican cleric admitted that if I looked through their lectionary, I would find very few stories which mentioned virtuous or defiant women.

My principal contention here is that the inclusion of males and exclusion of females as regards full participation in the community of faith is not something which has solid biblical foundations.

What we are dealing with is the exaltation of male ecclesiology and a masculinist theology to the status of divine truth, replacing the essential mystery of Gender.

When I began, I spoke of three mysteries... God, Gender and Love.

And I believe that in our attempts to correct the misapprehensions and bogus theologies of previous years, we must appeal to the potential in us all for responding to and in the third mystery of love.

For within the Body of Christ we are enjoined to love each other by command of Christ. If you love other human beings, you cannot treat one gender as if its distinctiveness was an emblem of inferiority, nor can you make your love for persons of that gender conditional on them either remaining passive or adopting the jaded outlook of their antagonist.

And if you love God, then you must love all that God has created and blessed. And particularly as regards God’s image residing in humanity equally in male and female, you cannot rewrite scripture to suggest that only one gender is endowed with the divine image... unless of course you have had a bite too many from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil like Adam... and Eve.

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Stronger Than Fiction

Nothing could be less like the ordinary type of Ranter than Dinah. She was not preaching as she heard others preach, but speaking directly from her own emotions, and under the inspiration of her own simple faith. (Adam Bede - George Elliot 1859)

There can be fewer more persuasive arguments from fiction for the ministry of women than that of Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*. In a story of great sadness, including as it does unwanted pregnancy, infanticide, unfulfilled love and transportation, Dinah the Methodist preacher is the rock from which others find strength in the depths of despair. The book is a classic, but in reality is much more than just a great story. The character of Dinah Morris was based upon a real woman and no less an amazing and courageous one than her fictional counterpart. George Eliot's real name was Mary Ann Evans, and she was the niece of Samuel and Elizabeth Evans, who was the model for Dinah in the story. Elizabeth was a great example of a woman who knew she had a calling from God and refused to let anyone prevent God's will for her life.

Born in 1776, Elizabeth was converted to Christ in 1798 and after speaking in prayer meetings and visiting the sick, she began preaching around 1802. She travelled around the East Midlands for a 16 week missionary tour, during which she faced much opposition. She did not return home to Nottingham despondent however since during her preaching at Ashbourne, Samuel Evans a Wesleyan local preacher heard her, recognised and affirmed her calling, and fell in love! They married in 1804 and began to exercise

a joint preaching ministry together, at Royston, then Derby before settling in Wirksworth in 1819. In each place many came to Christ and Methodist societies were formed. It was in 1826 that the 7 year old Mary Ann Evans came to stay with her aunt and uncle in their Wirksworth home, which still stands today on the Derby Road (now called Adam Bede Cottage) Her visit made lasting impression on Mary Ann, which sowed the seeds for *Adam Bede*, her first full length novel, some 30 years later.

One of the most moving scenes in the novel is when Dinah visits Hetty Sorrel in prison, who is about to be hanged for the murder of her child. On March 16th 1802, a young woman, Mary Voce, was hanged at Nottingham jail for poisoning her 6 week old baby. The father of the child was probably a local squire who had faced no consequences from the poor child's birth or death. In the book a last minute intervention commutes Hetty's sentence to transportation but no such reprieve was granted to Mary even though she was possibly as young as 14. The ferocious public outcry against the murder didn't stop Elizabeth

Evans from being with Mary in her cell the night before the hanging, offering her prayers and assuring her of God's forgiveness.

The novel mirrors life too in mentioning at the end of the story the Wesleyan Conference resolution of 1803 discouraging women preachers, an attempt to court 'respectability'. In the novel Dinah stops her ministry but in reality Elizabeth's sense of calling proved stronger than fiction, as she continued on the Cromford Wesleyan circuit preachers' plan until 1832. A clampdown then resulted in the couple leaving the parent body and joining the newly formed Arminian Methodists, where they continued to exercise their joint ministry. Elizabeth later rejoined the Wesleyans before her death in 1848. She was influential too in another of the variety of different groupings that made up British Methodism in the 19th century, giving a great deal of help and support to Hugh Bourne, one of the founders of Primitive Methodism. Bourne heard her preach in 1809 and recorded in his journal '*She got well into the power... very clear in Scripture doctrines and as fully devoted to God as any woman I have ever met*'. Elizabeth helped the 'Prims' with their open air camp meetings in Derbyshire during the early decades of the 19th century despite opposition from her own Wesleyan church, and the rapid spread of the new movement was bolstered by a number of women preachers, until 1861, when the drive for 'respectability' stifled the Spirit once again. Elizabeth would nevertheless have been proud that her grandson later became a Primitive Methodist lay pastor.

The
MWG
website
menwomenandgod.com
has
a discussion forum
and articles from back issues
of *Double Image*

Elizabeth worked collaboratively with enlightened men, not least of all her husband and exercised a ministry of proclamation and encouragement in the face of opposition. She placed denominational niceties firmly second to the work of the Kingdom. To these MWG values, we must add networking, as she was a personal friend to Elizabeth

Fry and other evangelical and Quaker women. She was liked and respected in Wirksworth and lies buried in an unmarked grave in the parish church yard, over which a copper beech tree was planted, which still flourishes today. There is a memorial to Elizabeth and Samuel Evans in the Wirksworth heritage centre, but her greatest

legacy is surely to be found in the pages of Adam Bede, and her inspiration echoes wherever Christian women and men refuse to allow mere convention to get in the way of the call of God on their lives.

Tim Woolley

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A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR WOMEN ELDERS?

A paper given by Valerie and Michael Griffiths at the MWG Regional Day in Guildford November 2005

PREAMBLE: While many larger Christian denominations have now accepted that there are no Biblical restrictions on spiritual gifts and abilities given to women, conservative minorities within those groups, and many independent groupings still genuinely and sincerely believe that Scripture forbids certain roles to one human gender, and exclude 50% of their membership from exercising certain spiritual gifts. Moreover, they think that those of us whose Biblical hermeneutic sees no restriction in the gifts the sovereign Lord gives to women are influenced by the spirit of the age and are Biblically “liberal”, disregarding what (to them) seems clearly stated in Scripture. Because of the variety of independent Christian congregations where this is an issue, it is not going to be easy to arrive at a satisfactory resolution. Even persuading such well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters that this is not cultural compromise but essentially an issue of Biblical interpretation is going to be difficult. However, the following Biblical Propositions may help to demonstrate that it is primarily a Hermeneutic issue and that no way are we Egalitarians denying Scripture because of changing contemporary cultures. Equally we may feel that there are cultural and socio-

logical presuppositions and patriarchal prejudices about women underlying their interpretation of Scripture, although many of them would hotly and sincerely deny it. This is emphatically not a difference regarding the reliability and authority of Scripture, but rather of different human interpretations of Scriptural passages. Ordinary human commonsense would suggest that when a church has plural leadership, that it would be rather foolish not to include women as well as men. However, sincere Christian brothers and sisters disagree, because they think this is contrary to Biblical teaching. We hope to demonstrate now that this is by no means so, and to show that a good Biblical case can be made for the inclusion of women in plural leadership. Similarly that there seems no Biblical evidence that the Holy Spirit’s distribution of gifts is restricted along gender lines.

1. BIBLICAL GRAMMAR. The Greek language of the New Testament lacks a common plural. It can produce male and female singular words, and plural words for groups made up only of males and only of females. Unfortunately it does not have a grammatical form for a mixed group of both genders, and therefore commonly uses the masculine plural form instead. Some obvious examples: disciples

(mathntoi), although the female form (mathetria) occurs in **Acts 6:36**; brethren (while words both for a singular brother and sister exist) the common form “adelphoi” could refer to a group made up only of male siblings, but addressed to churches means “brothers and sisters”. The same goes for saints (agioi); believers (pisto) **Acts 10:45; 16:1; 1 Tim. 4:10**; and Christians (Christianoi), which hopefully create no problem at all for any of us: because we believe women as well as men can be included among disciples, brethren, saints, believers and Christians. So also are eyewitnesses and servants of the word (**Lk. 1:2**) from whom Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, gained his understanding of the events he records (**Lk. 23:49, 55; 24: 1, 9-11, 22-24**). Clearly significant eyewitnesses were female.

However the plurals ‘deacons’ & ‘elders’ may challenge the preconceptions and prejudices of some. We meet plurals for “old men” (presbuteroi) and for “old ladies” (presbuterai **1 Tim. 5:2, Tit. 2:3**), but when confronted with “presbuteroi” in the sense of “elders” it could mean both a group of all male elders OR equally a mixed group of both men and women. Grammatically speaking, there is no difficulty in understanding “elders” to mean that the plural

leadership of local churches in the New Testament included Christians of both genders.

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 1.

__There are no grammatical reasons why women should not be included in plural church leadership. The plural word “elders” could refer to a mixed group.

2. BIBLICAL WORKING MODEL.

Unintentionally we may ignore Biblical evidence of Apostolic fellowship with devoted Christian women. **Luke 8:1-3; Luke 23-24; Acts 1: 14.** Our common stereotypical view is of the Lord travelling with a peer group of twelve **men**, and even more of just ten or eleven **men** with Him in the upper room at the time of the resurrection appearances. **Careful reading of the text shows that both of these impressions are false.**

Luke 8:3 clearly associates a substantial number of women, with the Twelve. The Lord Jesus himself allows these Galilean women to travel with the Twelve. Three women are named and then “**with many others also**” (having already named three) suggests near parity with the twelve men. The same group of women “who followed him from Galilee” become important in **Luke 23:49,55; 24:1, 9-11, 22, 23** as the only witnesses linking the three events of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Bauckham¹ has shown recently that before the availability of written New Testament scripture the oral testimony of female witnesses of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ made them of great importance as “**eyewitness and servants of the word**” (**Lk. 1:2**). Clearly the Lord Himself had no problem in allowing these women to share in His new *ekklesia* in process of formation. **Luke 24:33** speaks of the Eleven “and those with them”. (If this was in the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, as in **Acts 12:12** she would

have been one of them). **Acts 1:14** having listed the Eleven, shows that they also have no problem in including women with themselves in the praying (steering?) group waiting for Pentecost. **vs.15** (NIV) “believers” is actually “brethren” some 120 in number and addressed by Peter using the common plural. Recently Richard Bauckham has made a credible case that the Joanna of **Lk. 8:3 and 24:10** a witness of the resurrection may be the same person, if you Romanise her name, as the named apostle Junia of **Rom. 16:7**². The evangelical Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, an acknowledged Gospels scholar, made the interesting point at the recent Durham Men, Women and God (UK) and Christians for Biblical Equality (US) Conference that women witnesses of the resurrection actually fulfilled the conditions for apostlicity (**Acts 1:22,23**) before any of the men!

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 2.

The Lord Jesus Himself included women in his itinerant group (in numbers equivalent to and in the context of the Twelve), and that inclusion was continued by the Eleven after the Resurrection. Neither the Lord Jesus nor the Twelve had problems in associating devoted women alongside themselves. Including women alongside men in plural leadership, therefore, seems entirely in accord with dominical and apostolic practice, revealed to us in Scripture. Excluding them does not seem in accord with the practice of the Lord or his apostles. The model involves both men and women serving together.

3. BIBLICAL GIFTS. It is an instructive exercise to review Biblical lists of spiritual gifts, and to discover whether we can find named individuals of one or both genders exercising specific spiritual gifts. The New Testament lists

specific roles (i.e. apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, elders and deacons), **but only names a few males or females specifically exercising any specific spiritual gift.** Though we cannot always name women specifically exercising every one of these gifts, it is equally difficult to name male individuals exercising every one of these roles either.³

A. Instances of both named men and women who are called apostles, prophets and deacons.

Apostle We have the case of Junia named as an ‘apostle’ (**Rom. 16:7**) in the same sense wider than the Twelve used of Paul, Barnabas, Andronicus, Silas, Timothy, Titus. Junia may well be the Romanised name of Joanna of **Lk. 8:3**.⁴ See also Cranfield on Romans 16.⁵

Prophet we have Mary, Elizabeth and Anna, at the beginning of Luke, and Stephen’s unnamed prophesying daughters in **Acts 21:9** (compare also **1 Co. 11:5; 14:31**).

Deacon Phoebe in **Rom. 16:1; 1 Tim. 3:11ff** (use of the class marker ‘likewise’(*hosautos*) indicates parallel classes; the absence of possessive “their wives”, and no mention of bishop’s wives seems to show that female deacons, rather than deacon’s wives are intended here.

B. Instances of named men or women specifically described as evangelists, teachers, pastors or elders are much less common or are not found at all.

Philip is called “the evangelist” (**Acts 21:8**) while Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen and Saul are called as a group “prophets and teachers” (**Acts 13:1f**), without saying which of the five were which, and possibly implying that all were both. The close association of teaching with prophesying (**1 Cor. 14:31** “You can all prophesy in turn so that

everyone will be instructed...) suggests that if named women prophesied, then inevitably they must have also taught. Priscilla certainly explained things more clearly to the brilliant Apollos. No specific male nor a specific female is ever specifically named as being a 'pastor'. Plural 'elders' are a more complex issue as we shall see below.

C. A wide range of other nouns and verbs are used to describe the activity of men and women.

Verbs and other words are used of male individuals e.g. Clement (**Phil. 4:3**); Tychichus, Epaphras, Archippus (**Col. 4:7,12,17**); Philemon and Archippus again (**Philemon 1,2**) and female individuals like Phoebe (*prostatis*), Priscilla (fellowworker), Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis ('laboured in the Lord'); Lydia, Euodia and Syntyche (**Phil. 4:3,4** *sunathlountes, sunergetes*), seem to suggest that women did exercise significant active roles within early congregations. No named woman is specifically identified as an "elder", or presider (*prohistaminos*) though Phoebe (**Rom. 16:2**) is actually called by a cognate *prostatis* (the masculine form of which is used in Clement for Christ as "guardian" of the church). This noun is often edited out using the dynamic (non) equivalent "help" or "succour" but carries the stronger authority of benefactress or "patroness"⁶. Sociologically the same status may be accorded to other women in whose homes Christian congregations met: Mary, mother of Mark (**Acts 12:12**); Lydia (**Acts 16:15,40**), Priscilla (**Acts 18:18,19; Rom. 16:5, 1 Co. 16:19**); Phoebe (**Rom. 16:1**), Nympha (**Col. 4:15**) and Appia (**Philemon 2**). Did they merely serve refreshments, or were they accepted in some sense as leaders of the congregations meeting in their homes, and of which as citizens they were sponsors recognised by the authorities?

D. The specific issue of 'elder' is instructive in that while Peter calls himself an elder (**1Pet.5:1**) and it is assumed that 'the elder' (**II John:1; III John: 1**) must be John, that apart from these named apostles, most readers of the Bible would be hard put to name any others specifically named as elders. While, apart from the apostle Peter, and possibly John, not a single man or woman is ever specifically named as an elder, a consideration of the Ephesian elders summoned to meet Paul at Miletus becomes important. Can we find named individuals connected with Ephesus who might have met Paul at Miletus? Luke names several members of Paul's team in Ephesus (**Acts 18:19; 19:22, 29**), but Priscilla and Aquila were resident founder members of this congregation (**Acts 18:19**), where she subsequently put straight the gifted Apollos. In **Acts 20: 29,30** Paul had warned the Ephesian elders of the danger of wolves from without and doctrinally woolly sheep from within. How real was this danger? Paul was speaking prophetically, but by the time he was writing Acts, Luke knew it had actually happened: Timothy had been left behind in Ephesus to stop false teaching by certain **persons** (**1 Tim. 1:3** not just "men" as the original NIV translation for there would seem to have been women false teachers as well **1 Tim. 2:12**) and all that follows in that letter. The Letters to the Seven Churches (**Rev. Ch.2-3**) show that the survival of some congregations was threatened by false teaching, some given by women! The extent of the danger can be measured when we ask whether we know the names of any of these "elders" (**vs.17**) or "overseers" (**vs.28**)? Who were the elders listening to Paul's warning in his Miletus address? The Pastoral Epistles give names of excommunicated or otherwise criticised leading personalities in

Ephesus. **Hymeneus** and **Alexander** (excommunicated for false teaching **1 Tim. 1:20**); **Phygelus** and **Hermogenes** (who deserted **2 Tim. 1:15**); and **Philetus** (together with Hymeneus again "who have wandered away from the truth" **2 Tim. 2:17**). If these five were among the elders they do not seem a very promising lot! No wonder Paul had to give extensive guidelines for replacing them in **1 Tim. 3**. Fortunately we also know the name of **Onesiphorus**, a reliable good guy (**2 Tim. 1:16-18**). Unless they had already moved back to Rome, it seems probable that **Aquila** would also have served as an elder, as he had been a founding leader of the congregation since **Acts 18:19**. This then raises an interesting question. In view of the fact that Priscilla's name precedes her husband's on four of the six occasions their names are mentioned bracketed together (Aquila first in **Acts 18:2; 1 Co. 16:19** and Prisca first in **Acts 18:18, 26; Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19**), it raises the interesting possibility that Prisca may also have served in some such leadership capacity. It is a speculative question to which we can give no emphatic or dogmatic answer: but it seems clear from **Acts 18:18,26** that Priscilla was a moving spirit in founding the Ephesian congregation. We have no idea if she was ever actually called an "an elder" but she seems actively involved in some kind of congregational leadership from the outset. Could you have invited Aquila and left Priscilla out?

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 3. The Acts and the Epistles show that women exercised significant roles in the early churches. No woman is ever named as an elder, but then

"To be in vocation means to grow in a 'grace-full fitting of our dance to the larger movement of the core plot.'" (Fowler in *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* 1984 quoted p.250).

apart from the apostle Peter (and possibly John) no man is ever specifically so named either.

4. BIBLICAL CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE.

Because of conservative suspicion that it is a post-modern or feminist mindset that underlines Egalitarians Biblical hermeneutic, it always seems wiser to avoid using cultural arguments - e.g. 'women today are better educated', 'women today are the backbone of the church', or even to argue some kind of significant paradigm shift in Biblical interpretation from the highly significant **Acts 2:16-21**. However, we cannot deny that the New Testament documents come to us in the context of their contemporary cultural and historical background. Good Biblical exposition requires the faithful expositor not to ignore, but to take into account, cultural factors in first century Graeco-Roman world of which there is much evidence.

(i) Archaeological evidence: female leadership e.g. Plancia Magna in Perga.

(ii) Inscriptional evidence of named women leading synagogues in 1st century Asia Minor (Paul Trebilco)⁷.

(iii) Biblical evidence: Phoebe, Prisca, Junia, Mary, Persis, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche.

Andrew Perryman⁸ causes us to rethink our tactics in arguing from Biblical text alone.

Aristotle: "The male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (Politics 1254b2 [1.2.12] Loeb).

Josephus: "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man." (Against Apion 2.201, Loeb)

Plutarch: "Control ought to be exercised by the man over the woman, not as the owner has control of a piece of property, but, as

the soul controls the body, by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through goodwill. As, therefore, it is possible to exercise care over the body without being a slave to its pleasures and desires, so it is possible to govern a wife, and at the same time to delight and gratify her" (Moralia 142E, Loeb)

Paul is writing within a culture that shares these attitudes, and Scripture has to be read in that context. [To give an example, we assume people go to prison as a punishment, because they do in our 21st century culture, but the Romans only put people in prison either to await trial or await execution. So we must read what Scripture says about prison in the light of its first century context.] The same has to be true of what Scripture has to say about the role of women in the church and in leadership. Thus Perryman writes:

"(Paul) is not teaching them to be subordinate, but how to deal with the subordination that society generally expected of them. N. Baumert (1996:318) says, "The actual ethical-theological statement of the apostle is probably: "accept the position appropriate to you under the contemporary circumstances"

On this understanding Christian women have to find "in the Lord" what is appropriate in their culture in their own particular time and place. Cultural prejudices (and changes) cannot be ignored in counselling Christians on appropriate behaviour. [Christians living in Islamic areas may refrain from eating pork and bacon, and adopt the local dress codes.]

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 4.

N.T. Christians could not ignore the conventions of their cultures, and sub-cultures, any more than we can. So while exegesis must remain the controlling factor, we recognise that inevitably we cannot totally ig-

nore our contemporary cultures and political correctness either.

CONCLUSION - the Biblical case for excluding women from plural leadership begins to seem somewhat thin! Some Scriptures may be understood in such a way as to support the argument that congregational leadership groups ought normally to contain people of both genders. The great thematic statement of Peter's quotation from Joel in **Acts 2:17-18** would seem to support that from now on under the New Covenant, both genders "sons and daughters...menservants and maidservants" will be endowed with the gifts of the Spirit, and we should not silence those whom God Himself has gifted. There seems no Biblical support for the notion that spiritual gifts of administrations (**1Co.12:28**) and teaching are only given to men and never given to women. To forbid the exercise of spiritual gifts received by some women, purely on account of gender is to quench the Spirit. The churches should facilitate and liberate all the gifts given to its members, both men and women.

Valerie and Michael Griffiths have ministered widely. For many years they served with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Japan and then Singapore when Michael was General Director. Back in England Michael was Principal of the London Bible College and then they both lectured at Regents College in Vancouver. Valerie is a MWG trustee.

The book Valerie mentioned is the one by Richard Bauckham (see 1 below).

¹ Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels. (London: T & T. Clark, 2002)

² *ibid.*

³ Michael Griffiths, Serving Grace: Gifts without Inverted Commas. (London: MARC Europe, 1986) p.107ff.

⁴ Bauckham, 2002

⁵ C.B. Cranfield, Romans Vol.2, I.C.C. Series. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1959) p.788,9)

⁶ Wayne Meeks, The First Urban Christians. (London: Yale University Press, 1983) p.60

⁷ Paul Trebilco, Jewish Communities in Asia Minor. (Cambridge: CUP, 1991)

⁸ Andrew Perriman, "Speaking of Women - Interpreting Paul" (Leicester: Apollos, IVP: 1998) p.53

RE-TURN

Recovering the image

Are you among those of us who have bemoaned the sense that none of the younger generation seem to have taken up the mantle of championing gender equality?

No more!

One of the things that has energised me most in the last year is listening to those who make up Re-turn. Each month Re-turn offers an email loop. Here are a few tasters to whet your appetite:

March

Ben highlights a rally of 2,000 men in Bangladesh's capital protesting against acid attacks on women.

Go to www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/resources/downloads/men_masculinities_summary.pdf for more about Sandy Ruxton's book *Men, Masculinities, and Poverty* in the UK.

April

Rev. Philip Owasi, a pastor in an Assemblies of God church in Kenya believed that women should not be elders in the church until he did his Masters thesis on women's ordination...then proceeded to have quite an impact. Find out what happened in this inspiring story: www.cbeinternational.org/new/free_articles/owasi.shtml

June

Femicide in Latin America - www.cawn.org - The Central American Women's Network is UK based and has launched a project challenging violence against women in Latin America. In Guatemala 2 women are murdered each day because of their gender.

Karen Lowe's book on women of the Welsh Revival.

July

Synod's decision to back plans for women bishops
Object.org.uk - Object challenges the objectification of women by the media, porn and sex industries and their damaging messages about women's status and function.

If you want to join the loop or tell others about it the address is:

Ellenarmstrong@onetel.com

Re-turn is a network which aims to motivate and equip a new generation to engage with and live out a Biblical perspective on gender equality and justice.

"One human being has a unique consecration to carry the presence of God. ...God's people have the hopeful responsibility of being the presence, the findability of God upon earth."
(Helen Oppenheimer *The Hope of Happiness* 1983 quoted p 218)

BOOK REVIEW

Growing into God -

Exploring our call to grow into God's image and likeness.

Ed. Jean Mayland

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. 2003
£12.95

ISBN 085169-282-6

Women and men - how will we look when we are fully grown into God? What are the hopes and dreams that you have entertained as you've read the contributions in this issue so far?

You will have noted the various nuggets in the treasure chests. All of them are extracts from this book, which followed several consultations on our current understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God. It is a real treasure trove. There are a wide range of contributions reflecting our different Christian traditions including that of the Greek Orthodox. The religious advisor to the Evangelical Alliance offers his view on 'Homosexuality and Scripture' alongside Colin Coward's, "What do I want to say to the Churches about my God-given sexuality".

It seems to me that this ability to stay and talk to those with whom we may not agree is a vital sign of our growing into Godliness. I believe that conversation is a changing process. Alison Grieve's contribution which follows this book review is such a pertinent plea for a new urgency to really respect scripture more than our fears and prejudices.

Scripture calls us not to cast aside 'the other'.

Sue Howard

Sue Howard is a freelance consultant/facilitator and a member of the MWG Planning Group.

LOVE MERCY

"This is what the Lord requires ... act Justly, love Mercy and walk Humbly before your God " - so says Micah... a well known passage but one which continues to bite you in one comfort zone or another.

Act justly - well of course we all do that don't we? .. at work, at home and even at Church. We wouldn't dream of showing prejudice .. or discrimination. We will be impartial and balanced, be reasonable and thoughtful .. at least until we are challenged on our sensitive spots; until we feel uncomfortable on the ground we walk on and then we find the balance goes

and so does the reason and the judgement. I wish at the moment I could see more judgement and reason in our churches.

Love mercy - think of the Middle East, think of Iran and wonder is there anyone there who loves mercy. Pray for mercy for those caught in the cross fire and pray that they will in turn show mercy .. that mercy would breed mercy rather than hate.

Walk humbly before your God - who is walking humbly today in our churches? Not those who are so sure they are right that they would rather maintain the purity of their dogma than spend time in trying to find any way that they can bridge an ever widening chasm.

Where does it bite you?

I met a young woman from Uganda who had initiated a project (supported by Oxfam) to empower the women in her community in the eastern edge of the country, far from the cities. They are a despised group as they have been left behind in the developments elsewhere but she is trying to raise their confidence, their economic status and their voices in the community. And her name was Mercy....

Alison Grieve

Alison Grieve is chair of MWG Planning Group.

If we allow the Spirit's biophilic insurgency to redefine us as pilgrims and sojourners rather than wardens and stewards, our legacy to posterity might well be healing and life-giving, and not destructive of the hopes of future generations."

Mark Wallace *Fragments of the Spirit* 1996 quoted p 229

Called by Name

You have called me by name and not by gender, yet I am called as a woman of God, and a child of God, sealed with the divine imprint of your own approval, worthy of your calling.

How I need more of your grace and gracefulness, my Father, to love my brothers. These doubts that flood my cheeks with tears and assail me with unbidden fears are not of you.

How I need more of your love and loving kindness, my Saviour, to forgive my brothers. Help me as I am, unwilling and unable, which causes me to question if I'm therefore, after all, perhaps unworthy of your call.

Julia Murphy

The Revd Canon Dr John Rogerson, Emeritus Professor of Biblical studies at the University of Sheffield ... went on to challenge the whole concept of us being made and remade in God's image and put forward the basic thesis that the idea of our being made in God's 'image' must be thought of as a process. He claimed that the Old Testament narrative is the story of the 'Divine Project' to produce humankind in community, including in community with the natural order." (Introduction p7)

Apology

We do offer our sincere apologies to Gillian Hansford for printing her article in *Double Image* vol. 10.1, Summer 2005 with the wrong font for the Chumburung Bible translation. If anyone would like to receive a copy of the article with the correct font, please contact Valerie Griffiths by phone - 01483 560089 with your address or Email: valgriff@ntlworld.com.

MEN WOMEN AND GOD

Day Conference Booking form

Please complete the form below and send it to Sue Howard, 9 Priors Road, Hemingford Grey PE28 9BT.

I would like to book _____ places for the MWG day on October 7

I enclose £_____ (cheques payable to MWG) 20.00 per person or 10.00 for unwaged

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Tel: _____

Please tick here if you are not already a member of MWG but would like to receive a membership form.

NB While pre -booking is very helpful to us it is possible to pay on arrival on the day.

MWG SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL**Please subscribe, if possible, by Banker's Order**

Subscription enclosed (2 yrs) £15 / £10 unwaged

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Banker's Order enclosed (right) for £ 7.50 p.a.

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Branch Address _____

Account No. _____

Please pay on 2 January 2007 to Lloyds Bank, Baker Street, London, (30-90-39) the sum of
£ _____ for credit to the account of Men Women and God, a/c 0867301 and make similar annual
payments until cancelled.

Date _____ Signature _____

Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) _____

Please send subscriptions, gifts and correspondence to: MWG, 8 Ellis Avenue, Onslow Village, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7SR**Postscript:**

We do hope that we will be able to meet some of you at our day on October 7.

If you are unable to come for any reason but want us to hear your views on what you would like MWG to be doing please don't hesitate to email men.women.god@btinternet.com

or write to MWG at
8 Ellis Ave, Onslow Village,
Guildford, Surrey. GU2 7SR



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For information please write
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Surrey GU2 7SR

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A Day Conference with

MEN WOMEN AND GOD**Feminisation of the Bible? Feminisation of the Church?**

Explore the issues with

Julia Murphy

Poet

Mature Student training for the Ordained Ministry at Wycliffe Hall
and

Howard Marshall

Author

Emeritus Professor New Testament Exegesis
Honorary Research Professor University of Aberdeen

Saturday 7th October 2006

10.30am - 4.00pm
at

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Cost: £20 (unwaged £10)

Tea and coffee provided - please bring a packed lunch

For further details please contact: men.women.god@btinternet.com

MEN WOMEN AND GOD is an inter-denominational network of both men and women who share a concern that our churches should practice a genuinely biblical understanding of gender relationships. We seek to support and encourage one another mutually in furthering this aim.

From its inception in 1985 **MWG** has been affiliated to the Evangelical Alliance.