Gender, Equality and the Scriptures

A conversation about the risks of Biblical teaching on Gender causing violence

The following Biblical reflection, based on a premise of equality, was understood by some during the Micah Network strategic conversation on gender to be a sermon supporting gender-based violence in Christian households.

The notes following the presentation (below) identify some of the practical and communication issues which need to be negotiated when approaching the subject of ‘Gender, equality and the scriptures’

A presentation of Gender, Equality and the Scriptures

As in the case of so many political and social issues, there are scholars, and studied opinions on both sides. Some believe that the most important statement the Bible makes about gender is found in the words of the Apostle Paul when he writes that, in Christ, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Others argue that the same Apostle Paul encouraged wives to learn quietly in church (1Cor 14:34), and at home, to be submissive to their husbands, as unto the Lord (Eph 5:22). In another letter Paul adds, “I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1Cor 11:2)

Gen 1:26-28 men and women are created in the image of God and given dominion to rule over every creature made by him. Both were given authority. Gen 3:6 … She took of it fruit and ate; and also she gave some to her husband, and she ate … This disobedience resulted in curse in which the man rule over the women.

The heart of some theologians’ argument is that "...humans are created equal in God's sight... Adam was [Eve's] source but she was created to be his partner, his equal." With some qualifications. Male and female equally bear the image of God: "...God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27) But is this equality an absolute one? Scripture tells us that one of the significant differences in roles is that God made men to lead, provide for, and protect women--particularly their wives--in a humble and servant-like (i.e., Christ-like) manner.

Is male authority rooted in Creation or Fall?
Using the passage "...your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16b) to show that Adam's rule over Eve is God's curse on Eve neglects two important facts in Scripture. Firstly, "...it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve" (1 Tim 2:13). Secondly, Adam named both the animals (Gen 2:19) and the woman (Gen 2:23) whom God brought before him. The immediate context in which Paul calls the husband the head of the wife (Eph5:23) shows that the sense there is “authority,” and nothing in it hints at “source”

Does the Bible explicitly talks about that male and female are equal?
To me No, the whole story above is to indicate that the scripture never entailed inequality and supremacy of one over the other

Is it necessary to talk about the equality of both sexes from a Biblical point of View?
To me No, it is necessary to talk about equality of male and female we may talk the equality of social science and natural science which entirely serve different functional purpose.
Relationships between Biblical teaching on gender and violence

In response to the above presentation, the following common objection was articulated.

The use of the scriptures as above to outline difference results in oppression and violence in Christian families. Men of God, with very good intentions, believe that they must rule their wives. As a consequence, they live as oppressors in their homes.

There were many stories told. These include:

- Stories about wives of church leaders who wanted to commit suicide because of how they are treated,
- Stories of women performing the ‘functional’ roles attributed to men (such as women protecting men and also protecting themselves and their children),
- A story of a woman resolving to not marry when she saw the violent behaviour of her pastor, whom she respected greatly, towards his own wife,
- A story, which concluded, “If I was to follow the instructions of Paul, as interpreted by some pastors, I would not have been able to provide for my family.”

Lessons learned

*Bible teachers must be aware of the ways the Bible can be misunderstood, resulting in violent consequences.* Give time to issues which bear the risk of supporting oppression and violence (including issues such as the order of creation, and words which are rendered in English as ‘source’, ‘head’, ‘obey’, ‘authority’, etc.) The Apostle Paul’s instructions to women are brief in comparison with the instructions to men.

*Speaking of equality carries with it the question about difference.* The assertion that we are ‘all equal’ is more problematic in some languages than others. Advocates for gender equality are guided by an understanding that men and women must not be divided by inequity and injustice according to gender, but have equal value and rights as beloved creatures of God. We affirm and celebrate the biological, social and political diversity that women and men express in our various cultures, and do not suggest that equality means equivalence or sameness.

The Latin American participants in the strategic conversation expressed that the use of the word “igualdad” which is the literal translation of “equality,” in their understanding, doesn’t quite express the essence of what we want to say; and they prefer to use the term “equidad de genero” when talking about “gender equality.” The subtlety of what we want to communicate that make these two terms different is that “igualdad” may be confused with sameness—which is not the right way to interpret the term with relation to men and women—while “equidad” talks about justice in the relations between the genders.

Some emerging principles

*Expressing opposing thoughts is crucial.* Keeping quiet about conflicting thoughts and feelings would have been a negative outcome.

*Use non-judgemental language.* People who use scripture for exegesis object to people claiming that they are ‘mis-using’ scripture.

*Jesus is the reference point* for the interpretation of the Scriptures.

*Stress teaching which can resist violence.* There is a need for Bible teaching about non-violence, alternatives to violence in male-female relationships, including marriage.