

10 May 2026: Man & Woman: Vocation and Blessing

Readings: Genesis 1:26–31 & 2:15–25 and Ephesians 5:21–33

Text of sermon given by Richard Carpenter.

Introduction

Man & Woman: Vocation and Blessing - we have three strands to our readings today. There is the work we have been commissioned to do by God and then there is the way that men and women relate in doing so, looking at both Old and New Testaments. To set the scene, especially for the latter element, we have to reflect a little on church and cultural history....

The prevailing culture of Paul's day did not think much of women. To give just a single example, we find Aristotle writing...

"Females are imperfect males, accidentally produced by the father's inadequacy or the malign influence of the moist south wind."

Sadly, such views poisoned the early church which perpetuated them – the fourth century bishop of Salamis (Epiphianus) wrote that:

"In very truth, women are a feeble race, untrustworthy and of mediocre intelligence."

And for Thomas Aquinas some 900 years later, a woman was no more than a *"misbegotten male."*

And even through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many bible translators quite simply refused to accept what the text actually said about the role of women in the earliest church. As an example, we have Phoebe, described by Paul as a *diakonos*. Translators felt the need to render this as 'servant' for her even though the same Greek word was, almost without fail, translated as 'deacon' when referring to a man.

As an antidote, let's look at what we said just eight years ago...

"We particularly affirm the value of women's ministry in all roles and every level of the church." From St James parish profile 2018

Creation and role

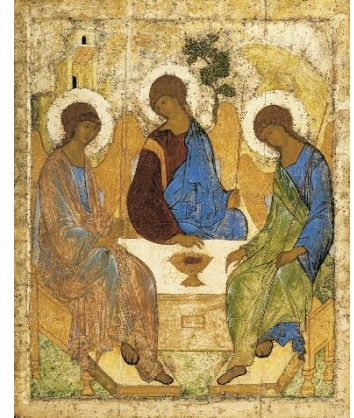
But to our readings; in the first we reach what is, surprisingly, just the third act of creation described in Genesis. For most of the 'days' of chapter one (stanzas) the author does not write that God 'created', it's usually 'made' or something similar. The universe itself is created as is sentient life. And now – in verse 27 – humanity. An intriguing insight given to the author.... Or just a minor literary device? Who knows?

With these verses we need to see what the text actually says about who is created. The Hebrew used in vv26&27 is *adam* – here in the sense of mankind, not just an individual and that mankind is made as both male and female. Both are equally the *adam* of the opening phrase. All equally in the image of God.

And this means that all of us – men and women – reflect God's character in a certain set of ways, that make us in His image; something of our mental, moral and social abilities allows us to

represent him on earth. It also does of course mean that all of us are of inestimable worth; intrinsically and inescapably. To exploit or abuse a fellow human is to desecrate that image.

I feel that this well-known painting gives us some insight here. Rublev's Trinity – it's often said that the members of the Godhead are arranged in the picture so as to leave a space to welcome us in. That relational aspect is surely a key part of being in God's image. We can know him.



It's a complex topic; one we could follow all morning. But that's not why we're here today. What matters in our context is that male and female are very clearly described in exactly the same way. We are both identically in the image of God.

A little human history

I've mentioned that these verses seem to point to the creation of 'mankind'. So, who exactly did God create? A little history may be useful.

We – that is Homo sapiens – are the latest in a line (or perhaps more correctly 'tree') of species that have evolved across the last 2½ million years or so.

As a species we first appeared some 300,000 years ago in Africa. Over time the whole planet was populated by modern humans; at times displacing earlier human species. Much of this movement was triggered by a group moving across the lower Red Sea around 70,000 years ago and only completed in the thirteenth century AD with the reaching of New Zealand.

It does therefore seem that the 'dust of the earth' from which God formed humanity may need be taken as being already existing humans – quite probably, those first Homo sapiens. The question is exactly when – and indeed, how. The short answer is that we don't (and probably can't) know.

An important issue is that – as Paul alluded to when speaking in Athens – is that: *"He made from one blood all nations who live on the earth"*. We have common ancestry.

You can relax; history lesson over

Men and Women: created for...

There are, when all's said and done, two key facts we gain here – we are, both male and female, equally in God's image. Secondly, all humanity comes from this single event.

These ideas were key in the fight against the Atlantic slave trade and apartheid both of which would often maintain that those of black-African descent are not fully human or merely sub-human as a way of justifying their practices.

Equally important is the charge given to us – to the whole of humanity. Both male and female are given equal charge to rule the earth. All of humanity has this role. God has blessed them in order to do this. I say 'rule' but it seems that something like 'steward' better gives the flavour of the text. And it's definitely not 'exploit'. I like the words from The Voice translation: *"I make you trustees of my estate."*

So, what does good stewarding look like... In short, it is about living more gently on the Earth; helping sustain creation in all its breadth and depth. Our group study notes this week will look at this aspect of humanity's vocation in more detail.

Helper

We now move on the second section of our reading from Genesis. It's important to note that we come to a separate element of the text describing the origin of the world and mankind's place in it. Separate enough that God has a different name here – Elohim in chapter 1, Yahweh here.

We read of Eve being made as the man's helper. And here 'man' is still probably the best translation of the Hebrew *adam*. Not until chapter 5 can we think of it unambiguously as a personal name.

Now, sadly, the word 'helper' has usually been associated with a lesser person. But that's not what the Bible says here. The Hebrew (*ezer*) does not imply any inferiority; quite the opposite. Most other usages of this word are of God as being a helper to his people. We're talking equality or superiority. Genesis 2 implies more the former – Adam's' response could be paraphrased as, "Hey, one like me."

It may be a little trite, but the old adage about Eve's creation seems apposite here: *"not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him..."*

So, in summary, these first chapters of Genesis describe equality and parity of men and women.

And as we enter the New Testament world, we find that women are acknowledged as apostles, they are called on to prophecy in the church (in fact the mandate of Pentecost is that they must), they are described as leaders of early churches.

It has been said that the earliest church seems to have had a greater number of women as leaders compared to later periods. As church became 'respectable' following its recognition by Constantine, and power became attached to church leadership then men began to takeover; to reinstate the patriarchy of the culture around them.

Household codes

Before we look in detail at the passage from Ephesians, I want to share a cautionary thought from the theologian Peter Enns who notes that *'we cannot read any passage of Scripture in isolation from its historical context'*. Without that context its words either lose their meaning or are distorted. As an example, many scholars would say that in the Greek and Roman culture of Paul's day, 'head' is only associated with prominence, or with life-giving, and not with its usual modern western meaning of 'ruling' or authority.

So where was Paul coming from when he wrote these words to those in the early churches?

Such codes were the norm of Paul's time

The traditional view of Ephesians 5 tends to see this as Paul writing a household code as though no one had ever done anything like that before. But that's not correct. Such codes were a standard part of Graeco-Roman culture. The Romans took family life seriously; they enacted legislation to ensure such codes were followed. Several were in circulation, that of Aristotle is perhaps the best known.

Aristotle sees the function of men 'ruling' over women as part of their nature—this is the way that men and women have been made, so it is non-negotiable. A superior role for one; a lesser, inferior

role for the other. Equally, the position of slaves and children within a household is, necessarily, wholly subservient. I stress that this is Aristotle, Graeco-Roman culture, not the bible.

Subversion, not support

Paul was realistic enough to know that early church behaviour shouldn't unnecessarily upset those around them. Several times he says that a particular approach should be followed, "for the sake of the gospel." So, he writes to the Thessalonians urging that they "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life" (1 Thess 4:11), people in Corinth need reminding (ch11 of first letter) that freedom in Christ is not freedom to dress like a prostitute.

So, what does Paul do here? He takes the cultural norm – the Aristotelian Household Codes – and reinvents it for life with Jesus. He's saying; culture may expect that, but life with Jesus requires this. Paul is not inventing this stuff, he's imagining Jesus within the existing codes and in so doing, entirely subverting them.

The question for us then is what happens when we take the cultural norms of our time and subvert them by putting Jesus at their centre?

The key is that verse which we too often find placed, for safety perhaps, as a conclusion to the previous section rather than being the opening of the household code: "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" (Eph 5:21).

The American Bible scholar, Craig Keener writes that – "*If wives submit to their husbands, Roman moralists and others could not claim that Christianity subverted pagan morals. But if the husband also submits, and husband and wife act as equals before God, Paul is demanding something more than Roman moralists typically demanded, not less.*"

Paul is saying that the love of the husband should be so strong that he will not seek to control his wife. He's not being conservative, he's being radical. His first audience would have recognised that. Why have we chosen to forget? He is being profoundly counter-cultural to the patriarchal system of his day; and that of our own. He is saying that with Jesus at the centre, the *pater familias* is dethroned.

Tom Wright puts it all this way:

"Pagan critics were poised to accuse the Christians of threatening the social order; Paul's resistance to this has nothing to do with 'patriarchy' as normally conceived and everything to do with mutual humble love.

Mutual submission is the order of the day, a somewhat different ethical basis from today's flattened and puzzling egalitarianism. His idea of male headship is modelled on the Messiah's self-giving love.

Wright ends by observing that:

Giving instructions to slaves and children, thereby treating them as responsible human beings, was itself revolutionary."

His mention of 'egalitarianism' reminds us that not all calls for 'equality' may be for the right reasons. Much modern thinking is as unbalanced as any patriarchal line – at least in terms of the 'why'. It's not that all should be able to win; the biblical approach is that all must be prepared to lose; even to choose to do so.

It's what we might call a 'plague on both your houses' scenario I think this is captured rather elegantly in some words from a writer called Mary Hayter – actually part of our church for a short while some decades ago: *“Museum-minded conservatism no more enables the dynamic truth of Scripture to challenge the men and women of our age than do the circumventions of liberalism.”*

As we reflect on this, it's worth remembering that in his letters, Paul sometimes answers particular questions of the day, how Christian faith should respond to issues of first-century society. At other times, he provides teaching for all time. To take an example of the former:

If you are invited round to a friend's for supper, you don't worry about whether or not the meat they serve has come from a temple sacrifice. It's just not relevant to the culture of today. But Paul had to advise the church in Corinth how to cope with that dilemma. His words on how Christians should respond to the household codes of Aristotle and the like are surely not far away from this type of thing.

Rather, our thinking should be how we might apply the principles of Christ to today's culture in the same way that Paul applied it to the culture of his day, not getting hung up on specific aspects of daily life from 2000 years ago. Aristotle's Household Code should not be problem for the church today.

And so...

A quick recap....

Recalling Genesis: the first thing we read in the Bible about women, and men too of course, is that we are all fully in the image of God. We are both fully (and jointly) charged to rule over God's creation. There are equality and parity from the very beginning.

And when we turn to Paul, he is taking the norms of his day and turning them upside down. It's Paul saying, 'We all know Aristotle, but this is how it should be for you'; this is what happens to the culture you live in when Jesus is moved to the centre; What happens when we truly act on the idea that *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* (Gal 3:28)

Fundamentally, this is about what it means to be human; human in relationship with God.

When the starting point is that all, and in all circumstances are able to *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*

