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Gender: Being Missional and the Reign of God
With Rev. Karina Kreminski



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Rev. Karina Kreminski
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GENDER, BEING MISSIONAL, AND THE REIGN OF GOD

People, usually Christians, will often say to me something like, 'Are we really going to start talking about the gender issue again?' 'Hasn't everyone basically made up their minds by now?' Or sometimes people say to me, 'Why talk about this topic? It just causes division. Let's just focus on the gospel'. Others chime in by saying, 'There is no issue with gender. We are just making a big deal out of nothing'. A couple of months ago I was even taken aside by a colleague and gently told, 'Don't you think all this talk about gender is affecting your reputation? Maybe you should post on Facebook less frequently about this topic'. I was too taken aback to ask then, approximately how many times a month posting on Facebook about gender would be deemed to be appropriate! When I do interact with social media around the topic of gender, I am usually surprised at how much this issue is still a hot topic for so many people. I now know that putting a statement out there on a gender-related issue will mean that pretty much everyone will take some kind of offence with what is said or at least have a very strong opinion on the issue. That's all fine but why is that? Why does this topic elicit from people such a strong reaction? Even if it elicits complete apathy or a negation that it is important at all, that is still a strong reaction. If we step out of the confines of the Christian community we see that gender is in fact a deeply debated

issue which people are still confused by and working through. These debates are occurring on a popular level where people express strong opinions and emotion on gender-related issues.

Late last year Micah Murray, a Christian blogger, wrote a blog called *This is how feminism hurts men*.¹ It was a satirical piece, making fun of the way in which some men claim that as women are empowered men suffer. It read, 'For men the rise of feminism has relegated us to second-class status. Inequality and discrimination have become part of our everyday lives. Because of feminism, men can no longer walk down the street without fear of being catcalled, harassed or even sexually assaulted by women. When he is assaulted, the man is blamed — the way he dressed he was "asking for it"... Because of feminism, women make more money than men in the same jobs... Because of feminism, it's hard to find a movie with a heroic male lead anymore. Most blockbusters feature a brave woman who saves the world and gets a token man as a trophy for her accomplishments'. And on and on it went. You get the idea I'm sure. However, the interesting thing for me was that, a few months later in January this year, this article was picked up by the popular, very secular, online gossip magazine, *Mamamia*, and it was published. The article sparked hundreds of comments around the issue of women in the workplace, gender stereotyping and strategies for gender equality. And yes, various people also got annoyed at the whole debate. One person said "**sigh* Why can't we all just be equal?'

¹<http://www.mamamia.com.au/social/how-feminism-hurts-men/>

I can see a glimpse of a longing for something beyond what this world offers us in that sigh.

In March this year Natalie Barr, Channel Seven TV presenter for the Sunrise show, caused a huge commotion by writing an article in *The Daily Telegraph* which was headlined, 'Working women must stop blaming men for their troubles, says Sunrise presenter Natalie Barr who has "never been discriminated against"'.² She proceeded to say how feminism carries the connotation of being male-hating. She says, 'In the past few weeks, though, I've felt there has been a growing tide of women attacking men in general. I'm starting to wonder if many of us need to find a better drum to beat than the one that blames men for most of our problems'. You can just imagine the reaction to that and the various comments that were flying around social media. Some supported Barr for what was seen to be her courage in expressing what many were already thinking; other comments ridiculed her and saw her as a privileged white female who had led a sheltered life. Many got annoyed because her comments could set back the feminist movement by decades. It was all quite fascinating for me to see the very high levels of interest that the general public was showing around the gender issue. Often the accusation is that discussions about gender are of interest only to academics and professionals, but many of the discussions I am reading circulate in popular blogs and

articles. From my basic exegesis of popular culture, people are very interested in and concerned about issues to do with gender.

In March this year singer Billy Bragg visited Australia and, in an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he talked about his confusion, soul searching and frustrations around the issue of masculinity. He tells of the 'Being a Man' festival that he went to in London recently and he says, 'As the event approached, I struggled to get a grip on what it means to be a man today. I think it's a mark of our progress as a society that most of the things that men once relied on to express their masculinity can now be done just as well by women... collecting coins and growing a beard were the only two things that I could come up with when trying to claim pursuits that were exclusively male'.³ If you have heard his song *Handyman Blues* you hear him there also lamenting that he has no idea how to be a handyman as his father was, and that makes him wonder about what 'maleness' actually is.⁴ As a result of some of the struggles that men face today, seen through alarming statistics on suicide rates and the increase of anxiety and depression among men, CALM (The Campaign Against Living Miserably) has declared 2014 to be the year of the male.

If we really want an insight into gender today, we can read and analyse an article by 18-year-old Jemimah Cooper who finished year 12 last year at Ravenswood School for

² <http://www.dailyleague.com.au/news/opinion/working-women-must-stop-blaming-men-for-their-troubles-says-sunrise-presenter-natalie-barr-who-has-never-been-discriminated-against/story-fni0cwl5-1226859496003>

³ <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/a-map-for-masculinity-20140227-33ixm.html>

⁴ *Ibid.*

Girls. The article is called 'Why feminist has suddenly become a dirty word'⁵ and in it she reflects on her struggles in calling herself a feminist because she may be perceived as a male-hater. In the article we get a glimpse into the minds of the next generation of men and women and their attitudes towards gender. It's not great. In fact it sounds like feminism has hardly made an impact if you just go by some of the comments in this article: girls saying things like 'Boys are studying so much harder, they have the pressure, since they have to get a good job'. Or boys telling women to 'cook for them' or girls wishing they were boys since girls are 'worth less'. If these are the daily thoughts and conversations of our younger generation of men and women, shouldn't we be concerned?

Through all of these examples, and as you can imagine I could have given so many more, we can see our world wrestling with issues of identity and gender. We see examples of brokenness, frustration, serious debate and confusion around this topic. So, are people in our society interested in gender? I think so! If we as Christians are 'over it' we may need to get over being over it because, in my opinion, this is an area that we can speak into from a missional perspective in order to speak into the longings and concerns of a broken humanity. By missional I just mean that we should have the view based on John 20:21 that, as God sent his Son into the world, in the same way we the church, the people of God, are sent into the world to join in with God's mission

to bring restoration and reconciliation to a broken world. This perspective sees that engagement with our world is of primary importance rather than getting caught up in the insular tendencies of church life. Recently at a conference I attended, Mark Scott, the director of the ABC who is a Christian, gently chided Christians for living in their 'echo chambers' rather than growing in the knowledge of how to engage in public debates and discussions on matters that the general population is genuinely interested in. Feminist, atheist and social commentator, Jane Caro, in a book called *For God's Sake: An Atheist, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim Debate Religion*, agrees with Scott. She says that those who follow religion '...seem to spend more time arguing with one another about the "correct" way of following their gods than they do arguing with atheists like me'.⁶ I agree with them both.

My opinion is that Christians have become much too obsessed in discussing matters around gender which circulate around whether, for example, women can preach in the church, whether they can lead men, whether we are complementarians or egalitarians, whether women can write songs and if that can be defined as teaching, whether women can teach men over 18 or not, the issues around the lack of men connecting with the church, and the perceived feminisation of the church. We all know about the minutiae of detail around these topics. I'm not saying that discussing those internal things is not important. We need to have those internal conversations

⁵ <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/why-feminist-has-suddenly-become-a-dirty-word-20131229-301ne.html>

⁶ Jane Caro, Anthony Loewenstein, Simon Smart, Rachel Woodlock, *For God's Sake: An Atheist, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim Debate Religion* (Macmillan: Sydney, 2013) 230.

too. I'm just asking whether our focus has become so inward that we have neglected to notice that there is a world full of people who are asking serious questions about and are struggling around the issue of gender. And not only a world out there but within the church — where people also are concerned with gender issues that run very deep, which touch the core of our personal identity. It's these deep issues that surface from the subconscious when Christians discuss the details of ecclesiology and gender that I mentioned before. I think we as Christians have a wonderful framework that we can offer our society which might help people realise that Jesus offers us hope in regard to gender and identity. Why are we not leading here but rather we are on the back foot of culture yet again?

The framework that we can present to our world, through which we can give people hope on the issue of gender, is the kingdom of God or the reign of God. I can't go into detail here about the kingdom of God as there is not enough time but hopefully it will become a bit more apparent what I think the kingdom of God is throughout this lecture. However, I do like theologian Scot McKnight's description of the kingdom of God as an alternate reality.⁷ My synopsis of the reign of God reflects this view. When Jesus preached about the kingdom of God I believe that he was presenting to people an alternative reality to this world. The entry point into the kingdom is through Jesus alone and his reign is an invisible sphere that has been growing on this earth since

the resurrection of Jesus. This kingdom is defined by values of truth, beauty, justice, mercy, reconciliation and the good news of the gospel which came through Christ to bring release from oppression, sin and death. This kingdom is now and not yet. We wait in hope for its full consummation at the return of Jesus, yet we join with God on his mission today as his workers to bring the kingdom to full manifestation now.

For the rest of this lecture I want to talk about gender from a kingdom-of-God perspective which primarily has a missional purpose to join with God on his mission to bring truth, healing and reconciliation to our world. Towards the end I will briefly outline several practical implications that this has so that we can apply this view in our society. A disclaimer that I feel I need to make is that I won't be engaging in detailed biblical exegesis in this lecture and I know that this might disappoint a few people. My focus here stems from a broad theological and cultural perspective rather than the exegesis of certain Bible passages. I will also be focusing on the categories of male and female rather than making a broader analysis of sexuality and gender. I think this is urgently needed but I have no space to do that here.

⁷ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/07/29/parables-as-imagination-1/>

Gender is a broken characteristic in humanity

A kingdom-of-God perspective on gender realises that we currently live in a broken world which Jesus came to redeem. God created us male and female so gender is part of our created identity. God does not share the created human characteristic of gender with us. As something that is created, that means that gender is one of the many characteristics in human beings that is broken and fallen. However we interpret Genesis 3:16–17 we can see that the woman and man were affected in different ways by the fall. God made humans male and female and we can see in these verses that, after the fall, something changed in what it now meant to be male and female. Moreover we see some kind of struggle predicted in the relationship between men and women in verse 16. If we take it as fact that gender has two broad aspects and they are biological and cultural, then we can say that sin has affected both. Theologian Cherith Fee Nordling says, ‘To assume that sex (“nature”) is good and gender (“nurture”) is fallen is a false dichotomy that does not account for God’s involvement in human existence ultimately manifested in Jesus’ lived experience.’⁸ The point that is being made is that sin has affected our biology as well as our cultural constructs of gender, that is, how each society at different times has constructed masculinity and femininity.

I think this is important to keep in mind because it reminds us that any beliefs we hold about gender which are not explicit in Scripture are assumptions that we make. These assumptions must be held to lightly and humbly since we know that they are tainted by our fallenness. For example, regarding the hotly contested issue of male and female roles, theologian R.K. McGregor Wright says that the Bible does not set forward any explicit doctrine of ‘universally and transculturally prescribed male and female roles’ and that ‘the idea of roles is a modern sociological notion and the Bible never mentions it’.⁹ If the modern notion of male and female roles is read into Scripture, then it must be realised that this is an assumption we have made which we have imposed onto certain parts of Scripture. Another important note on this view that gender is partly a social construct which is tainted by sin, is that it puts some responsibility on us to construct gender carefully. God, I think, is very interested in our cultural constructs of gender and whether they are in line with the values of the kingdom of God or whether they seek to perpetuate the values of our fallen world.

Where do we turn to in order to get guidance on how to construct gender along the lines of kingdom-of-God values? Theologian Miroslav Volf says that we should not, for example, look to the male and female characters of the Bible to find some kind of transcultural and eternal models of

⁸ Cherith Fee Nordling ‘Gender’, *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010) 500.

⁹ R.K. McGregor Wright, ‘God, Metaphor and Gender: Is the God of the Bible a Male Deity?’ *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, eds R. Pierce and R.M. Groothuis (IVP Academic: Illinois, 2005) 299.

masculinity and femininity which are divinely sanctioned. He says that those characters in the Bible ‘...are not divinely sanctioned models but culturally situated examples; they are accounts of the successes and failures of men and women to live out the demands of God on their lives within specific settings’.¹⁰ One caution here is given to us by the theologian Linda Woodhead regarding defining gender. She says that our culture’s anxiety and insecurity around the topic of identity lead us to sinfully try to control who we are and that the quest to find a neatly defined view of gender is a part of that. She says, ‘In the face of anxiety about who we are, our natural response is to seek an identity which is not hidden but clear, revealed, easy to grasp. It is this... which can underlie an eagerness to seek identity in gender, an identity which is immediate and apparent, easily recognised, written in our very flesh. Yet there is much in the Christian tradition which should make us wary of seizing hold of a graspable identity in this way.’¹¹ I wonder if it is part of our fallen nature which so strongly demands a precise definition of what it means to be masculine and feminine. Is it our sin which desperately seeks to try to control our identity, a part of which is our gender? All of this is to say that we need to establish that gender, both the biological and the cultural aspects, is a characteristic in human beings that is fallen, broken and tainted by sin.

Identifying cultural narratives

A kingdom-of-God view on gender, of course, is a theological perspective and what I’m talking about partly in this lecture is a theology of gender, albeit an incomplete one. I think it’s helpful, then, to identify which of our cultural narratives can contribute to this theological view and which are the narratives that we have listened to which are unhelpful in shaping a theology of gender. As Christians, our views on gender have been affected by some cultural narratives and so we need to try to discern what is of God and what is not in those narratives to help us build a kingdom-of-God view on gender.

I want to critique just two cultural narratives in this paper which I think have affected our theology of gender. Firstly, I’ll critique the narrative of secular feminism. Secular feminism has won many battles for women in the areas of equality, rights, freedoms and protection for women and we have a lot to be thankful for in regard to secular feminism. I would even go so far as to say that God has very much worked through the secular feminist movements of the past and present to bring about freedom for women in areas where the church has failed to step up. However, if we are looking at gender from a kingdom-of-God perspective, a theological grid primarily, then there are some things

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf ‘The Trinity and Gender Identity’, *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, eds C. D. Achison and A. Torrance (T&T Clark: London, 2003) 170.

¹¹ Linda Woodhead ‘God, Gender and Identity’, *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, 95.

that we would need to critique about secular feminism. We need to discern where, as Christians, we have taken on board some principles of secular feminism that have damaged our theological view or a kingdom view on gender. Linda Woodhead is a theologian who is egalitarian and has written a lot around the critique of feminism. She mostly critiques feminist theologians and she would say that some feminist theologians have lost their way due to replicating some principles from secular feminism.

She gives two broad criticisms of secular and Christian feminists. Firstly, she says that feminism is often, but not always, seen as a metanarrative that must be accepted as a total worldview which of course will rival a Christian worldview. She says on the question of whether commitment to Jesus is compatible with other commitments like feminism, 'If they are large scale commitments, commitments to another religion, or quasi religion, to a metanarrative or total worldview, then clearly they may be rivals to Christianity. And if in addition they are held as basic and foundational, then there is more reason to think that they may be incompatible with Christianity'.¹² She says, however, that feminism does not have to be this all-encompassing and it could be more like an ethical principle. I agree with that. I also agree with Woodhead that many forms of feminism and certainly some popular expressions of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s reveal an inclination to see feminism as a complete worldview through which everything else is framed.

This may be hard to believe today in our postmodern world which does not believe in metanarratives, but my suspicion is that it is this hardline view from decades ago which sits in people's memory of feminism today. As a result, the term today is rejected or feared to be appropriated. So, of course, if this is what it means to be a feminist then Christians cannot be feminists. Our worldview is the alternative reality of the kingdom of God initiated by Jesus, not any other system or worldview.

Woodhead's second critique relates to 'women's experience'. She believes that secular feminism has taken from the Enlightenment and judged that the experiences of women are the grid through which everything is interpreted. So 'women's experience' is crucial to women being able to discover and assert their identity in areas which have traditionally been male dominated. She says this about feminist theology which takes from secular feminism: 'The assumption is that women's experience is competent to judge and construe both revelation and God. Women's experience becomes the primary knowledge which trumps even what has been previously understood as God's communication of himself. In this way... women come to swap places with the Godhead'.¹³ I think Woodhead's criticisms are helpful and they encourage us to ask the question, 'Have we as Christians looked at gender from a primarily theological and kingdom-of-God framework or from another such as the secular feminist worldview?' I'm not denying

¹² Linda Woodhead, 'Spiritualising the Sacred: A Critique of Feminist Theology', *Modern Theology* 13:2 April, 1997, 196.

¹³ Linda Woodhead, 'God, Gender and Identity', *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, 87.

that the feminist point of view has a lot of helpful insights. I have said that already. I am simply making a critique that if it has become our interpretive grid, then we are also interpreting God through this grid and thus making something else a higher authority than God himself. What happens then is that we develop a distorted theology of gender.

The second cultural narrative to critique is that of the categories of premodern, modern and postmodern identified by theologian Elaine Storkey. Storkey does not contend that these are intellectual schools of thought or social movements but they are more nebulous concepts that relate to cultural narratives which convey certain attitudes and values of the day in society.¹⁴ Each category views gender in a particular way. Briefly stated, the premodern category is most evident in around the 1950s. Storkey says, 'The premodern is characterised by fixed order, fixed roles, and fixed explanations reinforced by accepted tradition. At its heart lies an essentialism, the idea that a certain "essence" defines the centre of our identity as human beings and as men and women'.¹⁵ The view here of gender is that women and men have fixed characteristics which are rooted in our nature. What is highlighted is the difference between men and women. The modern is characterised by a reaction to the essentialism of the premodern and it focuses rather on the similarities between men and women since the theory here is that gender is purely a social construct. The belief in the modern category is that, 'Being a man and

a woman is as much about learning to be masculine and feminine as it is about living with one's differences in chromosomes'.¹⁶ Lastly, the postmodern category, of course, deconstructs the two previous views and sees that there is no vantage point from which to view life. Essentialism and the notion of constructed gender identity are critiqued as metanarratives and the view here is that each person is left to construct their identity and gender themselves, based on their personal experiences without the need for worldviews to define them. I think Storkey's categories are really helpful for us because they help us see whether we have become captive to those cultural narratives. The categories help us to better discern what is useful from each but also what does not agree with a reign-of-God view of gender. How is essentialism helpful? How is it damaging to a view of gender? Where can we as Christians see that we have taken on an essentialist perspective that has not been biblical but cultural? What about the modern view? It has been helpful in that it taught us that gender is constructed. But does it focus too much on similarities between men and women while forgetting about differences? And what of the postmodern view? How is deconstruction helpful? How is basing everything on personal experience unhelpful for a theology of gender? I think if we are aware of these cultural narratives, we can better engage with a kingdom-of-God perspective, rejecting that which does not fit and accepting that which can merge with a theological view of gender.

¹⁴ Elaine Storkey, *Origins of Difference: The Gender Debate Revisited*, (Baker Academic: Michigan, 2001) 22.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 39.

A critique of hierarchical complementarianism

I want to add a brief critique of hierarchical complementarianism as a part of critiquing cultural narratives. Hierarchical complementarianism, I would argue, is based on an essentialist or premodern view of gender and sees that men and women have particular identifiable characteristics which are a part of the essence of who they are. These natures manifest in prescribed roles which are, that the role of the male is to lead and the role of the female is to show submission in everything. In the church this essentialism is sanctified through a particular reading of Scripture which leads to the assertion that there is such a thing as transcultural biblical masculinity and femininity. I'm focusing here a little on hierarchical complementarity because I feel that it exists not only in the church but in our broader culture. You can see old school essentialism re-emerge in popular books such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. And you can see hierarchical complementarity, generally speaking, in middle-class culture where the male is seen as the 'head' of the family and has the role of being provider, and the female is seen as the servant/nurturer who takes care of the family. The implication is that she takes a secondary role or a submissive role to the male. I think, in fact, the church often takes on the norms of the culture far too easily without critiquing them from a theological perspective. Cherith Fee Nordling quotes Kristina La

Celle-Peterson and says that she 'finds it both notable and disturbing that cultural assumptions in some conservative Christian circles about gender roles... bear striking resemblance to middle-class American gender mores'.¹⁷ The question for us is then: 'Are we critiquing culture or reflecting it?'

I'm not critiquing here what I call soft complementarianism, which is an expression of mutual yet defined roles that men and women together decide upon for their own marriage, for example. However, I do think that a hard hierarchical complementarity which gives a permanent role to the female as submissive and to the male as leader, and which is restrictive, controlling, stereotyping and oppressive does not belong in a kingdom-of-God paradigm. Sadly this view is sometimes sanctified by the church with the tag line, 'Equal in being, unequal in role'. My opinion is that this is actually a reflection of the darker side of our Western middle-class culture. The best essay I have read on this is by Rebecca Groothuis who claims that it is impossible to maintain that a person can be equal to another if they are in a permanent role of submission to another.¹⁸ Gordon Fee states that moving in this direction regarding gender can turn us into Pharisees who ask questions such as, "What constitutes wifely submission?" Or, "When a husband and wife come to a stalemate in decision making, who has the last word?" One wonders whether Paul would laugh or cry! The gospel of grace and gifting leads to a different set of questions: How does one best serve the interests of the other?

¹⁷ Cherith Fee Nordling 'Gender' *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, 502.

¹⁸ Rebecca Groothuis 'Equal in being, unequal in role', *Discovering Biblical Equality*.

How does one encourage the Spirit's gifting in the other? Questions like this cross all gender boundaries'.¹⁹ In my opinion hardline hierarchical complementarianism does not fit into a kingdom-of-God view of gender.

A kingdom-of-God perspective on gender

We can't look to our culture for a theological view of gender, though it can inform a kingdom-of-God view on gender. As I have argued, however, we need to be discerning about which cultural narratives we have accepted that are contrary to kingdom-of-God values. How can we then move past our obsession with complementarianism and egalitarianism which are problematic categories anyway? How can we present to our world a view of gender which comes from another reality beyond our broken world? As Carolyn Custis James asks in *Half the Church*, 'Is Jesus' gospel merely a kinder, gentler version of the world's way of doing things, or does the gospel take us to a completely different, long-forgotten way of relating to one another as male and female? When Jesus said, "my kingdom is not of this world", did he include relationships between men and women?'²⁰

What constitutes a kingdom-of-God view on gender? This would be a view of gender that reflects an alternate reality. This would be a paradigm where those who are not yet in the kingdom intuitively realise that this is

what they have always longed for. This would be a perspective that goes beyond the current polarisations and sometimes petty internal debates. I long for that. So given that the kingdom is an alternate reality which is growing today and that we live in the tension of the now and not yet, here is my attempt at expressing a kingdom-of-God perspective on gender.

I'll keep in mind Elaine Storkey's four characteristics of gender and descriptions of the relationship between men and women which stem from a biblical narrative. They are difference, similarity, non-hierarchical complementarity and union.²¹ So, firstly, Storkey says that men and women are different. In that sense she critiques the modern view which mostly tried to dissolve difference by highlighting that gender is a social construct and that there is no such thing as essentialism. Secondly, she says that men and women are similar. In that way she is trying to temper an essentialism which claims, to put it in popular terms, that 'men are from Mars and women are from Venus'. Instead, her point is that we share many similarities. Thirdly, she says that men and women complement each other. However, this does not necessitate hierarchy. Lastly, she points to the importance of union. What she means is that men and women together are the image of God and that there is an ontological union between them. I think her four characteristics are helpful for us as we think about what it means to have a theology of gender. The important point is that we need to hold these four characteristics

¹⁹ Gordon Fee, 'Hermeneutics and the gender debate', *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 380.

²⁰ Carolyn Custis James, *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women*, (Zondervan: Michigan, 2010) Loc 2121 Kindle.

²¹ Elaine Storkey, *Origins of Difference*, 129.

together rather than focusing on one or two. I think that has been one of our problems in the past. When we focus too much on difference we make the mistake of thinking that men and women live on different planets and that communication is impossible. When we focus on similarities we get concerned that we are abolishing differences, which somehow doesn't ring true for us experientially and biblically speaking. And her emphasis on non-hierarchical complementarity is really helpful I think. Men and women need one another but this does not require a hierarchy of power for healthy relating.

So keeping these helpful aspects from Storkey in mind, in my opinion a kingdom-of-God perspective on gender has three broad characteristics.

We are new creations in Christ

In her article on gender, theologian Cherith Fee Nordling says, “All things are yours”, writes Paul to the women and men of the church at Corinth, be it “the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (1 Corinthians 3:21b–22). Paul reminds them that because of God's self-giving generosity, there is no longer any need or place for division over leadership that would limit the gifts of the Spirit poured out equally on women and men alike. To do so would be to go backward to live as “old creation”. Rather, these diverse women

and men, reconstituted by the Spirit are “new creation”. They share eschatologically in all that belongs to the Son, who has guaranteed an embodied inheritance that does not prioritise gender, class, ethnicity, or anything else.²² What she is pointing to is Paul's theology which emphasises that we are a new creation in Christ and that this new status does away with various aspects of the old creation which we are no longer a part of. Those old ways might still tempt us, they might still exist, but they are fading as we put on the new nature we have in Christ. The kingdom of God is not of this world — why do we often act as though we are still trapped in it?

1 Corinthians 7:31 says that ‘the present form of this world is passing away’. If that is the case then we should engage with the values of the next reality which has already invaded our earth through Jesus. Gordon Fee applies this logic to Galatians 3:28 which says, ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’ He carefully exegetes this verse in his article ‘Male and Female in the New Creation’ and says that Paul is living out his view of the now and not yet of the kingdom by stating that, while the old order still exists, it no longer has power to constitute value and social identity in the new creation which is already present. He says, ‘That is, even though the categories themselves still function in the present, their significance in terms of old age values has been abolished by Christ and the Spirit.’²³ I don't think that what Paul is saying is that in the new creation

²² Cherith Fee Nordling, ‘Gender’, *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, 497.

²³ Gordon Fee, ‘Male and Female in the New Creation’ *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 179.

there is now no distinction between men and women. But he is saying that some aspects of what used to make men and women distinct are now cancelled out in the new creation. I think he is talking about the power and privilege, the division and the status that came with those distinctions, which are now no longer a part of the values of the kingdom of God. These things now do not define what it means to be male or female or in fact what it means to be human. What does it mean to be human, to be male or female? When we ask this question we are on the search for our identity and the Bible has a lot to say about who we are in Christ as a new creation. In a sense we can say that our new identity in Christ relativises our old identities. So in a sense our gender is not of primary importance because ultimately what matters is that we are new creations in Christ which is our new identity. That does not mean gender is abolished but only relativised in comparison to the new thing that Christ has given to us, our identity in him, which trumps all other definitions and distinctions. We should probably be placing more emphasis on our new identity in Christ and what that means, rather than making our focus trying to discover our gender distinctions. I found Linda Woodhead really helpful here when she writes about our identity in Christ. She says that there is a modern day kind of anxiety about our selfhood and identity and she feels that Christians have got caught up in that anxiety.

I have already quoted her and asked the question: is it our sin which causes us to want to control our identity and especially

²⁴ Linda Woodhead, 'God, Gender and Identity', *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, 96.

neatly define what is masculine and what is feminine? Instead, Woodhead quotes Colossians 3:3 which says that our 'life is hidden with Christ in God' and says that there is so much more to our identity that we cannot know now. She says that Christianity stresses that 'we are always more than we can know. Our identity in this life remains forever beyond our grasp. Our life is something which is hid with God, and which we can never fully know in this life'.²⁴ So we have glimpses into what our identity as new creations is like but to try to define our identity — and I would say to try to define our femininity and masculinity — is something that we won't fully be able to do until we see Jesus face to face. This is helpful because we can humbly say that, while we can know some things about ourselves, we can't know everything. This brings a bit of caution to us as we try to establish a theology of gender. We are new creations in Christ but our identity is not fully revealed now.

A trinitarian perspective on identity — mutual submission and surrender of power

A second factor in a kingdom-of-God view on gender is that it has a trinitarian perspective on identity which practises mutual submission and surrender of power. As we are talking about issues to do with identity here, we can look to the one in whose image we are made and, as we do that, we see that God is three persons in the one Godhead. This gives us clues as to how we can interpret our identity and that includes

our gender. Of course we need to be cautious about using the Trinity as a model because God is God and we are not, we can never expect to be who he is. However, I think there are characteristics which we can observe about God's identity that we can actually emulate and in fact I think we are supposed to. Miroslav Volf writes quite a bit from a trinitarian perspective and he applies this to the issue of gender. I agree with him when he says that there is no transcultural, eternal definition of manhood and womanhood that we can see from Scripture, so instead of trying to search for them we should instead 'let the social construction of gender play itself out guided by the vision of the identity of and relationship between divine persons'.²⁵ So one factor we can see within the Godhead is that there is distinction between each person. Applied to men and women, we can say that there is also difference between male and female. Even if we go back to Genesis 1, we read that God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. That points to difference between men and women. How that works out in terms of then trying to define masculinity and femininity is more difficult and this depends on cultural context which is a powerful factor in constructing these descriptions. Many people have tried to make lists of what it means to be masculine and what it means to be feminine but, I think from my reading, most have failed in this venture. Moreover, I think one fear that many women have, is that by emphasising difference, once again our old nature will rise

up and enforce division, privilege and status onto the male–female relationship, usually meaning that the woman is made invisible and subjugated by privileged male power. Kimball asks, 'When is difference a healthy complementarity and when does it become destructive and negatively influence both gender identity and relational interactions?'²⁶ Having given that caution, however, we don't want to go the other way and interpret the Galatians 3:28 passage as nullifying the distinction between men and women. Galatians 3:28 does not cancel out Genesis 1:28. What is being erased, I think, is the culturally coded forms of power, privilege, division and status which come with those distinctions.

As we observe the Trinity we also see a complementarity which exists between the persons. While we still maintain our selfhood and see that this is a gift from God, we realise that being human means being interdependent with others. The modern, Western notion of the self as autonomous, self-sufficient and highly individualistic does not seem to be the manner in which the Trinity operates. How does this apply to gender? I love what Volf has to say here. He says, 'We are neither masculine nor feminine from the start; we are made so through relation to the other gender. Men's identity is not and cannot be only men's affair, just as women's identity is not and cannot be only women's affair. Gender identities are essentially related and therefore the specific wholeness of each can be achieved only through the relationship to

²⁵ Miroslav Volf, 'The Trinity and Gender Identity', *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, 170.

²⁶ Cynthia Neal Kimball 'Nature, Culture and Gender Complementarity' In *Biblical Equality*, 468.

the other, a relation that neither neutralizes nor synthesizes the two, but negotiates the identity of each by readjusting it to the identity of the other.' I love that: men and women negotiating their identities together as new creations in Christ. We can see this complementarity in 1 Corinthians 11:11 where Paul says 'Neither is woman without man nor man without woman'. Paul seems to be describing an interdependence there.

Finally, as we observe the Trinity we also see a mutual submission and a self-giving love between the persons of the Godhead. If we apply this to the relationship between men and women it means that, instead of one gender having power over the other, as these roles and unhelpful privileges of the old order fade away, our new ethic as creations in Christ is self-giving love and mutual submission. We see this in Ephesians chapter 5 where the self-sacrifice of Christ is to be a model for relationships between men and women. The mandate is mutual submission. Written in a patriarchal culture where the submission of women was the status quo, wives are told to submit and men are told to love. What is radical there is not that Paul speaks submission to the wife, that would be radical in our culture which empowers women, but that he tells men to love. Moreover, in verses 25–26 he says that husbands are to give themselves up to their wives as Christ gave himself up to the church, nurturing and nourishing her, tenderly taking care of her. That was radical. This kind of surrender of power, living a cruciform existence, as applied to gender is fraught with risk in our culture which thrives

on power. Volf beautifully captures this and says, 'In a world of enmity self-giving is the risky and hard work of love. There are no guarantees that self-giving will overcome enmity and that the evildoers will not try to invade the space that the self has made and crush those willing to give themselves for the good of others. We will have to resist such evil doers without betraying the commitment to self-giving. But though self-giving has no assurance of success, it does have the promise of eternity because it reflects the character of the divine Trinity'.²⁷

Practising reconciliation

Lastly and just briefly, a characteristic of a kingdom-of-God view on gender is that it focuses on reconciliation. Colossians 1:15 and onwards tells of the supremacy of Christ and it repeats the phrase 'all things' several times. It says through Christ 'all things' were created, 'all things' have been created for him, he is before 'all things', Christ hold 'all things' together. Then verse 20 says, '... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself "all things", whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross.' I am sometimes asked, 'Why do you focus on gender so much? Shouldn't you just focus on the gospel?' My answer is that when I read that passage all of a sudden the gospel magnifies before my eyes. If the gospel is about bringing the good news of Jesus and his kingdom which has implications of setting free the captives and bringing release to the prisoners, if it is

²⁷ Miroslav Volf, 'The Trinity and Gender Identity', *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, 177.

about bringing the peace of God through Jesus by reconciling all things to himself, then everything matters, including gender. Where we see wars between the genders that perpetuate lack of unity and peace, suspicion, mistrust and division, Christ comes to bring restoration and healing. A kingdom-of-God perspective on gender believes that reconciliation, peace and unity are possible goals to aim for when it comes to relations between the genders.

Practical applications

To finish, I want to envision a few areas where we can practically apply this kingdom-of-God view on gender so that we can assume a missional posture in our world rather than an inwardness which sabotages our wider purpose as Christians to be light in our world. I'm going to apply this to our context here rather than more broadly because often people say to me that there are no problems with gender here, we are sufficiently advanced but it's more the majority world which still needs to work through various issues to do with gender and the relations between men and women. I don't doubt that there are many issues in the majority world which we need to be concerned about, some of which affect us through immigrants coming to our nation. However, I want to limit this practical application to our context while admitting that this does have its limitations.

Equality

One issue that we can speak into from a theological point of view is in the area of equality. Equality from a kingdom perspective means that men and women are equally released to serve in our world for its benefit together. If we look at Genesis 1:28 we see that the mandate was to the male and female to subdue and have dominion over the earth together. In this sense men and women share a similarity rather than difference according to Scripture. How then can we speak into our culture on these terms when it comes to areas like equal pay in the workplace, better childcare, paid maternity or paternity leave? In an article written last year Anne Summers points out the pay gap which still exists in Australia between the genders. She says that on average male law graduates are paid \$70, 300 pa and females are paid \$63,500 pa. She states, 'Justice Mary Gaudron, the first woman to be appointed to the High Court, famously said in 1979: "Equal pay was 'won' in 1969 and again in 1972 and yet again in 1974." And she added, "we still don't have it."²⁸ How can a theology of gender speak into this kind of inequality and others that exist in our society?

Domestic Violence

Another area that we can speak into is the area of domestic violence. An article that

²⁸ <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/gender-pay-gap-still-a-disgrace-20130104-2c8o6.html>

came out just two months ago, ironically on International Women's Day, and that caused a stir was called, 'The women we failed'. It focused on the issue of domestic violence in NSW.²⁹ The terrifying statistics revealed that three quarters of all women killed in NSW die at the hand of their loved ones. Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione stated that the issue of domestic violence is 'one of the biggest issues that modern society has to face'. It was also stated in the article that even though other crimes had decreased domestic violence figures had not. How do we speak into this as people from an alternative reality that is characterised by peace, kindness, justice and self-giving love? This is obviously an issue that men and women need to work on together and the characteristic of interdependence is obvious in this matter. How does the practice of mutual submission and giving up power speak into this? How does honouring one another speak into this?

Objectification of girls and women

We can also contribute theologically as people of the kingdom on the topic of our society's sexualisation and objectification of girls and women. Once again this is something that relates to men and women together. If we are interdependent and, as Volf says, we help to construct our gender identities together, how are we doing that from a kingdom perspective? Are we constructing our masculinity and femininity according to the values of kindness,

mercy, honour and freedom? We see the objectification of women in the media consistently; more worryingly we see this starting to happen at a younger age. Melinda Tankhard Reist is an activist who is alerting us to, usually shocking us with, the images of young girls who are being exploited right before our very eyes. Yet we seem to have become accustomed to this process of the sexualisation of young girls.

Identity

How can we speak into our culture in the area of identity? I mentioned at the beginning Billy Bragg's lament that he does not know what it means to be masculine today and the article by 18-year-old Jemimah Cooper who is confused about the victories of feminism but is still unsettled by the way boys perceive girls today. I think there is a resurgence today of interest in what it means to be masculine and feminine that goes beyond the church. Our culture is asking these questions, how will we answer? Theologian David Fitch, who believes that women should participate with men in every way in our world and in the church, critiques Christian egalitarianism for taking too much from a Western democratic discourse and therefore failing to provide adequate answers to the issue of the differences between men and women, and moreover failing to provide an alternative narrative that stems from the biblical narrative.³⁰ In a culture that constructs men as tough, non-relational, providers and emotionally

²⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/revealed-the-women-we-failed-20140307-34cs2.html>

³⁰ <http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/conversation/2007/08/postmodern-word.html>

bankrupt and women as servants, objects and inadequate, how can we, from a kingdom-of-God perspective, speak into our world to construct something better?

Gender wars

The gender wars exist today. Women feel disempowered by men; men are beginning to feel disempowered also, saying that feminism has given a language for women to express their oppression but men don't have any way of expressing their marginalisation.³¹ I read an article recently about 'Gender contamination'.³² This is a marketing term which describes the process by which products are rejected by men once those products are perceived to be feminine. There is still a deep suspicion and I wonder if there is sometimes a suppressed hatred there between the genders. How can the reconciliation of Christ through the cross bring peace to the gender wars? Not only that, public perception is that religion contributes to these gender wars. Atheist and feminist, Jane Caro says, 'Maybe religions are like Marxism — they sound lovely in theory but once they interact with real flesh-and-blood human beings they mostly create oppression and misery'.³³ She is referring to, of course, the way in which religions like Christianity are perceived to oppress women. How can we better counter those claims made by our society?

Conclusion

Gender remains a hotly contested topic in our society. We may be 'over it' today in the church as we nitpick over details to do with our ecclesiology. While some of these internal discussions are necessary, have we forgotten our missional status as a group of people sent out into the world to join with God on his mission to reconcile our world to Christ? Sometimes I even wonder if we will resolve our differences to do with ecclesiology until we look at a better theology of gender. As we walk in our new-creation status in Christ, and as we practice mutual submission and reconciliation, I believe that we can be the light and salt that Jesus called us to be in our broken world. I believe that we can envision this alternative reality that Jesus called the reign of God which, though invisible, we long for. And we long for it even with others who have not yet entered into it. I think it's time to shake off that old nature and walk more fully in what Christ has bought for us through his death on the cross and his resurrection to new life.

³¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/31/traditional-masculine-values-camille-paglia>

³² <http://www.forbes.com/sites/hbworkingknowledge/2013/11/13/gender-contamination-why-men-prefer-products-untouched-by-women/>

³³ Caro, Loewenstein, Smart and Woodlock, *For God's Sake*, 230.

Notes

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