

# What Is Biblical Equality?

*A simple definition needs further discussion, not least because of misunderstanding.*

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*Just what does Christians for Biblical Equality understand to be the scriptural teaching about the equality of humankind? Wishing to make available a more complete statement than that already available in CBE's published materials on basic beliefs and values (see, for example, p. 23), Prof. Alan Padgett here provides a fuller description of these beliefs and understandings. In this article he reviews CBE's beliefs and gives a comprehensive explanation of them. This article is also being made available in a brochure that can be passed along to others, as well as accessed at [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org).*

**W**HAT IS BIBLICAL EQUALITY? IT IS THE BELIEF THAT ALL people are equal before God and in Christ. All have equal responsibility to use their gifts and obey their calling to the glory of God. God freely calls believers to roles and ministries without regard to class, gender, or race. We believe this because the Bible and Jesus Christ teach it to us. That is biblical equality.

This simple statement needs further discussion, in no small part because of misunderstanding. Many people misunderstand the teaching of the Bible regarding issues of gender, race, and class. Others misunderstand the definition of equality and what that means for the way we live our lives. In this short essay, we hope to clarify the meaning of biblical equality in some degree, and we invite you to read and reflect further on this important topic.

The principle of biblical equality can be developed as three ideas:

1. *Human equality.* All people are equal before God, and are equal in church, home, and society.
2. *Equal responsibility.* Race, gender, and class are not barriers to Christ. Membership, ministry, and mission are open to all in his kingdom, based upon our personal vocation, moral and personal qualifications, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
3. *Mutual submission.* Christian love is the heart of life in the Spirit. Mutual submission is Christian love in action, treating each person with dignity.

Let us consider more fully each of these important biblical truths.

The Bible is the inspired Word, the revelation of God to the prophets and apostles within human history and human language. As such, the Bible is the highest written authority for faith and practice in the Christian church. Of course, the Bible is only important to us because we love and believe in God. He has given us this book to help us better know, love, and serve the One who has created us, and who has saved us from our sins. Biblical equality is committed to biblical authority.

Many women and men have long struggled for justice, equality, and peace in this world. We value their efforts, but we cannot always agree with their philosophies. As Christian believers, we must submit our thoughts to Christ as we seek to know the wisdom of God. After serious and sustained study, we believe the Bible does teach human equality, but it does so in its own terms.

## Equally made in God's image

*Human equality.* All human beings are created alike in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–28). All of us are made “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8), and have equal dignity as children of our Father in heaven. For this reason every human being deserves our respect and is the object of the love of God. The teachings of Jesus make this clear. The greatest commandment is to love and worship God, but the second greatest is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). The neighbor can be anyone—whomever God brings into my life. The ethic of Jesus even insists that we love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. Why? Because our Father in heaven makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:43–48). All people are equal before him.

Equality in this sense—moral, spiritual, and political equality—does not mean all people are the same. This is a common mistake. Jesus notices the difference between good and evil, between just and unjust people. There are Jews and Gentiles, women and men, parents and children, and they are not all the same. But they are all equally made in the image of God, and Jesus reaches out to them all.

There are no barriers to the gospel of Christ, nor to the love of God. Jesus ministered to all people, and he accepted as his disciples many women and men who were at the margins of his society, those who were overlooked or oppressed by others. Poor people, tax collectors, prostitutes, even Gentiles were welcomed by Christ into his fellowship. Jesus accepted women disciples as no other rabbi did in his time. He criticized the wealthy and powerful, but the humble and poor he welcomed in the name of his Father.

The church has not always understood true biblical equality, nor acted upon it. Christian leaders have tolerated slavery and racism; they have welcomed the wealthy and powerful while neglecting the poor. They have taught the inferiority of women and promoted sexism in the name of God. These are terrible sins, which are not yet fully overcome. We pray that the Lord of the church will cleanse these sins from his Body, and teach each of us the truth by

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his Spirit. All of us are one in Christ, whether Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal. 3:28).

Some Christians have made the mistake of teaching racism, and they have defended slavery by appeal to the Bible. For example, the curse on Ham (son of Noah, Gen. 9:22–27) was applied to all blacks and Semites (Arabs and Jews), arguing that their races were inferior to Europeans. This interpretation of Genesis is completely false, and it is rightly rejected by church leaders and Bible scholars today. The Bible does not support racism.

Some Christians have made the mistake of teaching a false gospel of wealth or class privilege. They have defended political injustice, corrupt rulers, greed, or consumerism by appeal to the Bible. For example, some see the prayer of Jabez (1 Chron. 4:9–10) as teaching that Christians can and should pray for greater wealth and material goods, and that God wants to make us all rich. This interpretation is completely false, and rightly rejected by church leaders and Bible scholars. The Bible stands against greed, the love of money, and class prejudice. The prophets and Jesus alike condemn those who oppress the poor, the orphan, and the widow. The Bible does not support a false gospel of wealth and class.

In both of the above cases it is important to see particular Bible passages in their context. The context of a passage includes the book it is in, the social and historical background to the text, and the place of that passage in the whole of the Scriptures. When seeking the wisdom of God, we must seek to understand the whole of scriptural teachings on this or any topic. Passages taken in isolation can often be misunderstood. The church should read the whole Bible together, with Christ at its center.

The points that we have made about biblical equality in the areas of race and class are widely accepted today. But such is not the case with issues of gender equality. Some Christians still teach that women are created inferior to men. We deny this, and affirm that God created all people equal. The narratives in Genesis have often been understood to teach the inferiority of women, but a careful reading of them teaches something different.

Man and woman are alike created in the image of God and are given equal responsibility for the stewardship of the animals and plants, and for creating new life (Gen. 1:26–30). The word *man* can mean *human being* in Hebrew, as in this sentence: “So God created humankind [*adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created him [human-kind], male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). True, in the next chapter, Eve is created after Adam and made from his side. But this was because the male alone is “not good”: the first not-good thing in the story! Adam learns that he needs Eve to be fulfilled, and he rejoices in her creation. For this reason, the man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife (Gen. 2:24). Note that the man needs the woman: Does that make her inferior? Together they become “one flesh,” and together they are in the image of God, and create new life through love and unity. Does this

sound like inferiority? Yes, the woman is made as a “helper” who is to be the man’s partner (2:18). But this Hebrew word *helper* is used only of help from an equal or superior, as in “God is my helper.” It does not imply inferiority, as English translations sometimes do. The domination of women by men is a result of sin and the work of the snake, according to Genesis (3:16). It was not so in the beginning, in paradise, where they were one. Taken as a whole, the Bible does not teach the inferiority of women.

### **Husband and wife alike are equally responsible to Christ**

*Equal responsibility.* As adult human beings, women and men have equal responsibility in the home, the church, and the larger society. The ministry and service a believer takes up is not restricted by race, gender, or by social status. The basis for this is soundly biblical. First of all, every Christian is already a priest, part of a holy people. Christ is our High Priest, and all who are members of his Body are living stones in the temple of the Holy Spirit, and priests in the new people of God (1 Peter 2:5–9). Second, every believer has a particular ministry in the body of Christ, and in the mission of the church. Our particular ministry is based upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and upon the calling of God. Worldly categories such as class, race, or gender are no barrier to the call of God and the gifts of the Spirit. For these reasons, the ordained minister (or priest) is no different from any other believer. Rather, her or his vocation is to be a servant and to work within the church itself in the office of pastor. The Bible does not restrict women from service as ordained ministers, nor teach that their ministry is legitimate only in submission to a male authority figure.

Husband and wife alike are equally responsible to Christ, the true center of the Christian home. True, Paul does tell wives to submit to their husbands and says that men are the “head” of women. But these statements must be read in context, and interpreted in their own times. In the longest section on men and women in his letters, Ephesians 5:21–33, Paul begins with the duty of all Christians to submit to one another in the fear of Christ (v. 21). Those who focus only on what Paul has to say to women and slaves often misunderstand this point. The passage as a whole begins with mutual submission.

What is mutual submission? It is nothing less than love in action. I see the need in my sister or brother and meet it from my own strength and gifting from God. Most of what Paul has to say in this passage is written to the husband, who must love his wife and give of his own life and power, just as Christ sacrificed himself for the church. The word *head* in Paul, when not pointing to a literal head, means the one who is “first” in some way, not some kind of authority or power figure. This point is often misunderstood. We must allow Paul to use the word in a variety of ways.

In this passage it means being first in loving service. “The husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the

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***Man and woman are alike created in the image of God and given equal responsibility.***

head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior" (v. 23, NRSV). Paul extends this teaching later (vv. 28–32) in the heart of this passage. Overall, he insists that husband as "head" cares for and loves the wife as his own "body." *Head* in this chapter does not mean the man dominates and rules over the woman. True, wives are taught to "submit in everything to their husbands" just as the church does to Christ (v. 24). But this is in the context of mutual submission of all to Christ (v. 21). The force of the passage as a whole is calling husbands to self-giving sacrifice for their wives; that is, it is calling husbands likewise to submit to their wives (without saying it in this exact way).

We sometimes hear teaching in the churches today that the man is the "priest of the home," or that women need the "spiritual covering" of a husband in order to be fulfilled. There simply is no biblical basis for this teaching. Women and men are both priests in Christ, as has already been stated. Men are not spiritually superior to women in the Bible. This is simply another form of traditional male domination of women—common to Western civilization for thousands of years—being read into the Bible by traditional, conservative Christian leaders. It is time the church told the truth to women about such lies.

There are two passages in Paul's letters, out of the whole of the Bible, that are cited by those seeking to perpetuate the rule of men over women in the church. They ignore or dismiss all of the passages where Paul teaches the equality of women and men (such as Gal. 3:28, 1 Cor. 11:11–12, 1 Cor. 7:3–4, and the women leaders he commends in Rom. 16:1–7). Instead, they focus on the verses in which he calls women to silence and submission in the church.

What about those passages? While we cannot in this short essay fully deal with these passages, the general rule of careful reading, research, and attention to context will bring clarity to these two passages. The verses in question are 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12. For different reasons, Paul tells particular women in that time and place to submit and be silent.

In Corinth, he tells three disruptive groups to be silent, and to obey the order and structure of the Christian worship service. Those who would speak in tongues must do so in order, not all at once, and only if there is an interpreter; otherwise, they must be silent (14:27–28). Those who prophesy must also do so in order and not disrupt the service; otherwise, they must be silent (v. 30). Finally, women who interrupt the service by talking to their husbands should be silent (v. 34). Women are told to submit, not to men (as some think), but to order and decency in the worship service. This is hardly a universal command for all women all the time!

The passage in 1 Timothy 2 is the memory verse for those who seek to limit women's ministry in the church. At first glance, 1 Timothy 2:8–15 might seem like a universal principle, grounded in the creation story of Adam and Eve, for women never to have teaching authority over men.

This is not the view of a growing number of Bible scholars today. Like all of the Letters of Paul, this passage is written to a particular church, in its own special situation. These verses are written to a particular group of wealthy women, who were causing dissension and anger among the men by their false teaching (vv. 8–10). Like Eve, these women had been deceived by the "snake" (false teachers) and had therefore fallen into sin (v. 14). The emphasis is upon silence for these women—not for all women all of the time—while they submit to sound teaching. They are called to learn sound theology in silence and full submission (v. 11).

The submission in this verse is not to men, as is commonly thought, but to sound doctrine. Implied here is submission to the teachings of Paul and Timothy rather than to the false teachers who were leading the women astray (2 Tim. 3:6). Understood in its own time and context, and read with Christ at the center of the whole of the Bible, Scripture does not limit the leadership of women in the church. Women and men of all races and classes are equally responsible to the call of God on their lives in society, home, and the fellowship of believers.

### **The Christian ethic of love, within human institutions**

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### ***The ethics of the Christian life is love. Mutual submission is love in action.***

*Mutual submission.* The ethics of the Christian life is love. Mutual submission is love in action, within human institutions. Jesus clearly teaches the ethics of self-giving and spiritual love as the true goal of Christian life. According to him, the two greatest commandments are to love God with all we are and have, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In his ministry on earth, Jesus lived the ethics of love, and therefore of mutual submission, to the full. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In this very chapter Jesus lays down before his apostles the basic principle of mutual submission: "You know that among the nations those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you: whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the servant of all" (vv. 42–44). Jesus followed the way of love, the way of service, and of care for others in need, even submitting himself unto death for "the ransom of many." The Christian way of love is also the way of the cross.

Mutual submission is the Christian ethic of love within human institutions. Mutual submission means caring for my neighbors, meeting their needs from my strengths and gifts. All of us live within certain human institutions and organizations, which make up our society and commonwealth. Examples would be our family, schools, work, government, and local churches. Within the social structures of this age, Christians freely and equally participate in the roles and ministries that God has called us to.

There is no limit to what God can do with a humble and

contrite servant, no barriers from gender, class, physical handicap, or ethnic background. All freely participate as joint and equal heirs of our King and Savior. This means the believer lives out an ethic of love in cooperation with other members of the group, Christian and non-Christian. The ethic of love is not an open door for foolishness or naiveté. Mutual submission means entering into the group with a servant's heart, but also with a wise head that knows sin corrupts every person and human organization.

The Christian ethic of love serves our family members, neighbors, and fellow citizens in a wise and intelligent manner, meeting their real needs as God allows us to understand them. This also means understanding one's own strengths and gifts, for only from strength can we serve others. It is God's Spirit, of course, that gives us the strength, hope, and gifts for service and mission. We do not, and cannot, serve the world for Christ in our own strength.

Some Christians are even now teaching that women must always take subordinate roles in the family and in the church, saying men must be the final authority figures. This teaching is completely out of line with the model and teachings of Jesus. The ethic of mutual submission and love that Jesus teaches is utterly contrary to all "lording it over"

in the name of masculine superiority. It is also the end of the privilege of class, wealth, and racial background. Worldly priorities like these come from human sin and the lies of Satan, not from God's Word.

### **True biblical equality**

We have set forth in brief compass the Christian teaching concerning biblical equality. Biblical equality is rooted and grounded in our Savior, Christ the Lord, and in his book. We have seen that biblical equality means human equality of all in the image of God; equal responsibility for all believers without regard to wealth, class, gender, or race; and mutual submission to one another in the name of Christ. May our beautiful Savior, in the power of the Spirit, instruct us all in the truth of the gospel and lead us all in ministry, as it may please him, to the glory of God the Father. n



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