

Abuse of Scripture and Its Consequences in Gender Inequality

Dr. Manfred T. Brauch

Dr. Manfred T. Brauch, former president and professor of biblical theology at Eastern Baptist (now Palmer) Theological Seminary, has recently published *Abusing Scripture: The Consequences of Misreading the Bible* (InterVarsity Press, 2009). In the paragraphs below, he briefly introduces us to several abusive readings of biblical texts and of Scripture as a whole—dealt with extensively in the book—which contribute to what he calls “the heresy of gender inequality.”

Part One

To abuse Scripture is to do violence to its message and meaning so that its redemptive truth regarding God’s intention for the absolute equality of men and women in all areas of human life is twisted and distorted.

One such abuse is “*the abuse of selectivity*.” This abuse does not consist of an outright distortion of the meaning of given texts, but entails ignoring or rejecting other parts or passages of Scripture that support a different teaching, present an alternate perspective, or advocate an opposing view. Thus, supporters of gender inequality claim the authority of biblical passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 or 1 Timothy 2:11-14, where the voice of women is restricted, but close their minds and hearts to the clear teaching or implication of biblical texts that show women as the first carriers of the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to his male disciples (Luke 24:1-11); as active participants in leadership in the early church (Rom. 16:1-7); as gifted by the Spirit for the authoritative proclamation of the Word of the Lord (Acts 2:17-18); and as partners with men in the work of the gospel (Phil. 4:2-3).

The “*abuse of words*” has contributed significantly to the perpetuation of gender inequality within Christian communities. This abuse happens when words or expressions in the biblical text are “decoded” in ways that are not faithful to the original “encoding” by the biblical authors. A clear example is the way in which the designation of the woman as man’s “helper” (Gen. 2:18, 20) is traditionally understood as “assistant” or “servant,” designating someone in a secondary, subordinate position. However the Hebrew word for “helper” (*ezer*) does not carry this meaning at all. The term is used throughout the Old Testament *exclusively* as a designation of God who upholds, redeems, strengthens, and rescues Israel. It is clear from these texts that God is not depicted as Israel’s “assistant.” Thus, the word “helper”—rather than indicating a subordinate status—implies strength. In Genesis, woman is presented to the man redemptively, to save him from “aloneness.” She is “fit for him” (his partner). There is no hint of secondary or subordinate status.

“*Theological contexts*” are all too frequently abused in the interpretation of texts and this happens when the larger theological perspective of an extended passage (such as Eph. 5) is not considered in the interpretation of a specific text (such as Eph. 5:22-25). Ephesians 5:22-25 can be used to require the submission of wives only when the larger theological thrust of the entire chapter is ignored. Chapter 5 concerns an admonition to “be imitators of God” and to “live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” These passages celebrate Christ’s servanthood, which is the larger *theological context* for all human relationships, including that of male-female, husband-wife. That is why 5:22-25 begins with the specific expression in 5:21, where Paul states that one of the evidences of the Spirit’s presence in our lives is “subordinating ourselves to one another in awe of Christ.” It is this “mutual self-subordination, modeled on Christ’s servanthood, which determines the husband-wife relationship articulated in 5:22-25. It is “in awe of” Christ’s self-giving, that husbands and wives are to “give themselves over to one another in servant love.”

Several other abusive readings which lead to a patriarchal (over-under) understanding of the male-female relationship are the *abuses of literary, historical, and cultural contexts*. What I seek to show throughout my book is that the cumulative weight of these various abuses of Scripture are an offense to the God who created man and woman in his image; called them into equal and complementary partnership; and in Christ came to set them free from the cursed, demeaning, and lessening reality of hierarchical bondage. The continuing denial of this absolute, essential, and functional equality in large sectors of the Christian community worldwide continues to contribute to, abet, and reinforce the widespread abuse of women, and is therefore a major roadblock to the advance of the gospel.

Part Two

In Part One, I argued that the “abuse of words” often does violence to the meaning and message of Scripture. I illustrated this by showing that the designation of the woman as man’s “helper” (Gen. 2:20) does not show her as a subordinate person, but rather as a person of strength and vitality, whose creation rescues man from his aloneness. In this column, I want to place this insight into the larger literary and theological context of Genesis 1-3. For it is the abuse of this context in Scripture that continues to undergird a patriarchal understanding of the male-female order.

In Genesis 1:26-27, human beings, in male-female polarity, are created in the image of God. In that male-female polar complementarity they are, *together*, given the mandate to exercise responsible sovereignty within and over the rest of the created order. These affirmations are powerful theological convictions that stand radically against the cultural religious environment within which Israel’s faith traditions were being shaped. For in that environment, women were largely held to have been created from inferior material.

This *general* male-female nature and structure of humanity, presented in Genesis 1, is now articulated in Genesis 2 in terms of its particularity in the man-woman relationship (Gen. 2:18-23) as the grounding for the covenant relationship of marriage (Gen. 2:24-25; cf. Mk. 10:5-9). Viewed from the theological perspective of Genesis 1:26-27, the reason why the animals cannot be man’s “suitable helper” is because they are not created in the “image of God.” They are not the man’s equal, cannot correspond to him “face to face” (“fit for him”), and cannot be his partners in exercising stewardship over the earth.

Further, the woman’s creation from the man (Gen. 2:21-22), as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23), signifies that she is made from the same essence and substance, a further confirmation of the Genesis 1:26-27 affirmation of their equality—both before God (as God’s co-image bearers) and in relationship with each other.

These literary and theological connections—together with the meaning of “helper” as having redemptive, rather than subordinate connotations—make it impossible to interpret the Genesis 2 narrative of man and woman in terms of either essential or functional inequality. The concept of a creationally intended male-female hierarchy (superior-inferior, leader-follower, authority figure-assistant) is the result of the abusive reading of Scripture, and, as such, is contrary to the order of creation.

This literary and theological unity of Genesis 1-2 provides the overarching theological anthropology for our hearing of the male-female relationship that is a result of the fall in Genesis 3. The “rule of the man over the woman” (Gen. 3:16) must be seen as a dramatic departure from the order of creation. The Creator’s good design and intent for the man-woman relationship has become twisted and distorted. The hierarchical over-under condition of the male-female relationship is bondage to sin. It is, therefore, *not prescriptive* (as God’s intention for the man-woman relationship) *but descriptive* (the nature of that relationship when marred by sin). It is God’s creation design, *not its distortion by sin*, that must function as the normative paradigm for this relationship.

Within the larger literary and theological context of the whole of Scripture, the human condition—in its distorted, cursed existence—is the object of God’s redeeming and transforming work. This work culminated in Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial servanthood liberates humanity from its bondage to sin—including the cursedness of male-female hierarchy.

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