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A Call for Courage on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

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For too long, those who hold to traditional understandings of manhood and womanhood, deeply rooted in both Scripture and tradition, have allowed themselves to be pushed into a defensive posture. Given the prevailing spirit of the age and the enormous cultural pressure toward conformity, traditionalists are now accused of being woefully out of step and hopelessly out of date. Now is a good time to reconsider the issues basic to this debate and to reassert the arguments for biblical manhood and womanhood.

The most basic question in this controversy comes down to this: Has God created human beings as male and female with a revealed intention for how we are to relate to each other? The secular world is now deeply committed to confusion on these matters. Denying the Creator, the secular worldview understands gender to be nothing more than the accidental byproduct of blind evolutionary process. Therefore, gender is reducible to nothing more than biology and, as the feminists famously argued, biology is not destiny.

This radical rebellion against a divinely-designed pattern of gender has now reached the outer limits of imagination. If gender is nothing more than a biological accident, and if human beings are therefore not morally bound to take gender as meaningful, then the radical gender theorists and homosexual rights advocates are correct after all. For, if gender is merely incidental to our basic humanity, then we must be free to make whatever adjustments, alterations, or transformations in gender relationships any generation might desire or demand.

The postmodern worldview embraces the notion of gender as a social construct. That is, postmodernists argue that our notions of what it means to be male and female are entirely due to what society has constructed as its theories of masculinity and femininity. Of course, the social construction of all truth is central to the postmodern mind, but when the issue is gender, the arguments become more volatile. The feminist argument is reducible to the claim that patriarchal forces in society have defined men and women so that all the differences ascribed to women represent efforts by men to protect their position of privilege.

Of course, the pervasiveness of this theory explains why radical feminism must necessarily be joined to the homosexual agenda. For, if gender is socially constructed, and therefore differences between men and women are nothing more than social convention, then heterosexuality becomes nothing more than a culturally-privileged form of sexuality.

The utopia envisioned by ideological feminists would be a world free from any concern for gender—a world where masculinity and femininity are erased as antiquated notions, and an age in which the categories of male and female are malleable and negotiable. In the postmodern view, all structures are plastic and all principles are liquid. The influence of previous ages has molded us to believe that men and women are distinct in significant ways, but our newly liberated age

will promise to free us from such misconceptions and point us toward a new world of transformed gender consciousness.

As Elizabeth Elliot once reflected: “Throughout the millennia of human history, up until the past two decades or so, people took for granted that the differences between men and women were so obvious as to need no comment. They accepted the way things were. But our easy assumptions have been assailed and confused, we have lost our bearings in a fog of rhetoric about something called equality, so that I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to belabor to educated people what was once perfectly obvious to the simplest peasant.”

In response to this, secular traditionalists argue that the historical experience of the human race affirms important distinctions between men and women and differing roles for the two sexes in both the family and in the larger society. The secular traditionalists have history on their side and their claim to authority is rooted in the accumulated wisdom of the ages. For evidence, these traditionalists would point to the consistent pattern of heterosexual marriage across cultures, and the undeniable historical reality that men have predominated in positions of leadership and that the roles of women have been largely defined around home, children, and family. Thus, these traditionalists warn that feminism poses a threat to social order and that the transformed gender consciousness that the feminists demand would lead to social anarchy.

Clearly, the traditionalists come to the debate with a strong argument. They do have history on their side and we must acknowledge that the historical experience of the human race is not insignificant. Some of the most honest feminist thinkers acknowledge that their very aim is to reverse this historical pattern and much of their scholarship is directed at identifying and excising this patriarchal pattern in the future. The problem with the secular traditionalist is that their argument is, in the end, essentially secular. Their argument is reducible to the claim that the inherited wisdom of human experience points to an oughtness and a moral imperative that should inform the present and the future. In the end, this argument, though powerful and seemingly meaningful, fails to persuade. Modern individuals have been trained from the cradle to believe that every generation makes itself anew and that the past is really past.

The modern ethic of liberation, now so deeply and thoroughly embedded in the modern mind, suggests that the traditions of the past may indeed be a prison from which the present generation should demand release. This is where biblical traditionalists must enter the debate with vigor. We do share much common ground of argument with the secular traditionalists. Biblical traditionalists affirm that the historical experience of mankind should be informative of the present. We also affirm that the enduring pattern of differing roles between men and women, combined with the centrality of the natural family, does present a compelling argument that should be understood as both descriptive and prescriptive. Nevertheless, the biblical traditionalist’s most fundamental argument goes far beyond history.

In this age of rampant confusion, we must recapture the biblical concept of manhood and womanhood. Our authority must be nothing less than the revealed Word of God. In this light, the pattern of history affirms what the Bible unquestionably reveals—that God has made human beings in His image as male and female, and that the Creator has revealed His glory in both the sameness and the differences by which He establishes human beings as male and female.

Confronted by the biblical evidence, we must make a vitally important interpretive decision. We must choose between two unavoidable options: either the Bible is affirmed as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, and thus presents a comprehensive vision of true humanity in both unity and diversity, or we must claim that the Bible is, to one extent or another, compromised and warped by a patriarchal and male-dominated bias that must be overcome in the name of humanity.

For biblical traditionalists the choice is clear. We understand the Bible to present a beautiful portrait of complementarity between the sexes, with both men and women charged to reflect God’s glory in a distinct way. Thus, there are very real distinctions that mark the difference between masculinity and femininity, male and female. Standing on biblical authority, we must critique both the present and the past when the biblical pattern has been compromised or denied. Likewise, we must point ourselves, our churches, and our children to the future, affirming that God’s glory is at stake in our response of obedience or disobedience to His design.

For too long, those who hold to the biblical pattern of gender distinctions have allowed themselves to be silenced, marginalized, and embarrassed when confronted by new gender theorists. Now is the time to recapture the momentum, force the questions, and show this generation God’s design in the biblical concept of manhood and womanhood. God’s glory is shown to the world in the complementarity of men and women. This crucial challenge is a summons to Christian boldness in the present hour.

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