

On Femininity

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What is femininity?

What does it mean to be a Christian woman? From my teen years, I've been faintly dissatisfied with the answers I've received. Whether in person, on a blog or in a book, I've found that explanations either lacked a holistic theological framework or failed to provide coherent ideas about what femininity looks like in practice. I've wondered whether there might be a femininity common to God's design for all women, across all genders and life stages but found answers to my musings elusive. In my search, various ideas have bounced around my head. This paper is an attempt to draw some of those together, partly for my own benefit and partly, I hope, for your edification.

One of the great dangers of writing about femininity is that you get lost in endless disclaimers about what *men* should be doing. I wonder if this happens because biblical femininity seems to leave women in a particularly vulnerable position, so both men and women have challenged men to sort themselves out, so that women might be empowered. This is a noble motivation, although it often leaves women with a clear idea of masculinity but still in the dark about their own gender identity. Most troubling of all, it can also lead to a conditional obedience of God's word: 'I'll

follow God's plan for femininity when he follows God's plan for masculinity'. A holistic humanity, with a robust understanding of both masculinity and femininity is certainly desirable but surely women should live out biblical femininity from love for, trust in and obedience to God, not because the men are holding up their end of the bargain. I seek in this paper to address women about femininity, even if it feels uncomfortable.

The first question is how to define femininity. Dictionary.com defines *femininity* as 'the quality of being feminine; womanliness' and *feminine* as 'having qualities traditionally ascribed to women, as sensitivity or gentleness'. Christians have often assumed this idea—that femininity is just about *characteristics*—and have simply gone on to use the Bible to fill in the blanks.¹ A good summary of this approach could be Elizabeth Elliot's 'godly, gentle, gracious, giving'. This may provide the *what*, but it does not explain *why* or *how*. After all, some of these characteristics could equally apply to masculinity, so in what sense might they describe femininity? We'll have to go a little deeper to work out that one.

1. Male, Female or Human?

Is there a sense in which you can speak about yourself as simply a *human*, a being with no gender distinction attached? Or is it only fitting to speak of human *men* and human *women* because gender is fundamentally tied to being human? In *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference*, Larry Crabb answers in favour of the latter, citing intuitive reasons ('deep down we all know men and women are different') and experiential reasons ('men and women approach things differently') alongside theological reasons. This argument is interesting in an anecdotal way but suffers from the criticism that it merely describes a *gender construction* rather than giving evidence for *innate gender differences*. I'm convinced that if we're going to understand gender, we need to look at how humans were *created*.

Without having to go into too much detail, I think it's significant that when God creates humans, he creates them as both male and female (Gen 1:27). Even before

1. Patricia Ennis, from the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), lists the following as biblically feminine characteristics: helping (Gen 2:18), exhibiting graciousness (Prov 11:16), living a pure life (1 Pet 3:1-2), dressing modestly (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3), developing a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Pet 3:4), submitting to her husband (Eph 5:22), teaching the younger women (Titus 2:3-5) as well as, from Proverbs 31, being 'virtuous, trustworthy, energetic, physically fit, economical, unselfish, honorable, lovable, prepared, prudent, and God-fearing'.

Eve is created, Adam is not some kind of androgynous human, but a man—in fact, it is not good for there to be just one type of human (Gen 2:18) but rather in the two that there is great celebration (Gen 2:23). Gender is crucial to creation and to humanness. I am created as a woman, saved as a woman, redeemed as a woman, set free to live for Jesus as a woman.

The thing is that, in this life, I will never be a perfect woman. Genesis 3 heralds the corruption of the created order. Humanity fell, including both manhood and womanhood. In a very real sense, then, we are all now sub-men and sub-women. We no longer live out the fullness of what it is to be a woman or a man. God has redeemed us but our renewal, while assured, is yet to reach its consummation. I take it that's why it's so hard to work out masculinity and femininity, because our fallenness permeates our being. That said, this is worth working at because we are new creations who have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16-17).

2. Do 2 Adams = 2 Eves?

The Bible never gives an explicit definition for femininity or masculinity. However, those who have emerged recently to teach on gender have found a great model for understanding masculinity in Jesus, the new or Second Adam and the model of a perfect *man*. Mark Driscoll and others are keen on recapturing an authentic Jesus, recasting the hippy Jesus as the warrior Jesus, the kind of man whom men want to worship and be like.² It's not illogical for women to ask who *their* model is. Who is the Second *Eve*? The likes of Irenaeus in the second century saw Mary the mother of Jesus as the Second Eve, the perfect model for women. The biblical evidence for that is pretty scarce, though. I've also read Bette Boersma, who says that 'if Jesus is the Second Adam, we, the bride of Christ could be called the Second Eve'. However, she arrives at this through some pretty interesting gymnastics with the text.³

2. For example, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwH4LIW_OEM; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_bZh65vjtU&feature=related; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31glVmGO3ns&feature=related>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10gW61frccQ&feature=related>

3. Boersma develops parallels between Eve and the church using scriptural *imagery*, although at no point does Scripture itself make such connections. For example, says Boersma, just as the first Eve emerged from the wounded side of the first Adam, so we the church, the Second Eve, emerge redeemed from the wounded side of Jesus, the Second Adam. While there is some poetry in this argument, I fail to see how it comes to terms with Romans 5 and 6. Firstly, that passage doesn't speak about the *church*

The key to working out where femininity fits is to understand how Jesus is the Second Adam. In Romans 5, Adam is not just a representative of men but of *all people*. Sin came not just to men but to all people through Adam (5:12). Jesus is likewise the one man through whom justification comes to all. Romans 5 is about Jesus being the start of a new *humanity*, the instigator, the first in a whole new people. He's not just a new *man*, with women trying to work out who the new woman is. Rather, he's the one into whom both men and women are incorporated as new humans.⁴ This is why Jesus is an example to all people, as in Philippians 2. There may be a special sense in which men can emulate Jesus, for example in Ephesians 5, but if women want to know who they ought to be like, they need go no further than Jesus. Being human, whether male or female, is found in that incorporation into Christ. Being a female human will only be fully understood in the context of relationship with Jesus. We'll explore this more as we continue.

3. Role vs. Relationship

In the absence of an explicit exposition of femininity in the Bible and the confusion of trying to find an explicit female model, those who recognise and affirm differences in men and women tend to understand this either in terms of *role* or *relationship*. Naturally, the two are not mutually exclusive.

Those who emphasise *role*, such as the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), see that men and women have been created for different (complementary) purposes. It is often argued that men are made to lead, protect and provide while the role of women is to follow, help and nurture. Deviations from

as some kind of Second Eve. Rather, the church has been incorporated into the Second Adam, Jesus, by his death and resurrection (Romans 6:4-7). I don't see a Second Eve on view or even necessary in this passage. Secondly, while this image may explain the symmetry of creation and redemption, it fails to help me work out my own gender identity within the church. Boersma argues that being part of the Second Eve is the primary understanding that humans are to have of themselves and she seems to believe that gender is made redundant in this redeemed humanity. She does this by arguing, from Ephesians 2, that God has 'made the two one'. This is quite a leap in logic, since Ephesians 2 is talking about Jews and Gentiles. At any rate, she reduces men and women to androgynous humans. Not only is her argument inconsistent with Romans 5 and 6, it also offers little pastorally.

4. To speak of humankind in this way, as a *humanity* rather than male or female, may seem contradictory to my earlier point about how fundamental gender is to an understanding of humanness. However, that was not to say that there is nothing that male and female humans share. On the contrary! Adam's celebration in Genesis 2 ('bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh') observes how like Eve is to him. Male and female humans share a great deal with each other, a commonality, even a oneness in purpose (1:28). But they are treated differently in Genesis 2-3.

these roles are said to be the result of human fallenness. Those who don't fit into these roles are therefore encouraged to conform themselves to the specified roles. Although this idea is relational in the sense that the roles feed and affirm each other, it is primarily concerned with what men and women are *doing*. It sees certain actions as irrevocably tied to particular roles, relationships and attitudes. For example, CBMW prohibits a woman from being the CEO of a company because it makes it more difficult for her to affirm male leadership if she is leading men.⁵ The appeal of this position is that the distinctions between men and women are clear-cut. The weakness is that it can fall into legalism.

On the other hand, emphasising *relationship* downplays 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours and instead prefers to think of masculinity or femininity as expressed in ways of communicating and relating. An example of this is Larry Crabb, who says,

Womanhood must never be defined in a frivolous way that makes it necessarily 'unfeminine' to be fully competent and highly respected as a physician, corporate executive, or biblical scholar. Nor should femininity be somehow essentially connected to cooking, sensual clothing or a sweet, subservient demeanour. Womanhood, like manhood, has more to do with a woman's attitude toward herself and others as she involves herself in relationships.

The strength of this position is its focus on the heart, attitude and motivations. The weakness of this perspective is that it is normally applied only in a specific situation, marriage, leaving one to wonder if there is anything more to being feminine than being a wife.

Those focusing on *role* also fail to come to terms with femininity outside of the context of marriage. In 'My Credo as a Christian Woman', CBMW's Rebecca Jones gives twenty points on femininity.⁶ Only nine of these can be applied to women who are not married. She explains why: 'I believe that God appointed marriage and the family as the most fundamental human social building block'. I couldn't help but wonder whether *woman* and *wife* are synonymous for her. It's not hard to work out why this might be the case. After all, in the Bible, 'woman' and 'wife' are often used interchangeably, presumably because singleness was not then the cultural phenomenon that it is now (although there are certainly passages which speak specifically to widows and other single women). Trying to work out femininity

apart from wifedom is indeed a tricky thing to do. However, considering femininity according to how a woman *relates*, rather than what role she is in, offers a chance to work out femininity *as a whole* rather than limiting it to being a wife and/or mother. Relationships will of course have implications for roles. However, the biblical evidence persuades me to pursue a universal femininity from the *starting point* of relationships.

4. What the Bible says

I don't have room here to consider every passage in the Bible that speaks to femininity. I'll take two that I think are representative and work from there, drawing in other material as necessary. The two passages are Genesis 1-3 and 1 Peter 3:1-6. I've chosen the first because of its role in explaining the foundations of creation and Fall and the second because I take it as the most thorough passage applied directly to women in the New Testament.⁷

In Genesis 2, Eve is created as a helper for Adam (2:18, 20-21). Her purpose and role is, even before the Fall, dependent on Adam in some sense. A helper isn't much good without someone to help! There's an order set down here. Whatever the man is to do, the woman is to be his helper. Now, it is vital to work out what we mean by *order*. Much of the discussion about Genesis 2 or about order has been cast in terms of hierarchy. This is both unhelpful and, to some extent, irrelevant. It's unhelpful because in Australian society, 'hierarchy' is practically a swear word and, no matter how much certain groups attempt to re-define, temper or explain it, the term is likely to meet an unsympathetic audience. But it's also a red herring. Genesis 2 is not about who is higher or better. It's explaining 'the way of things'. This is what I

7. Some have argued their position of femininity according to biblical *theme*, in particular, that of the Trinity. For example, Crabb argues for non-reversible order in male-female relationships because he sees non-reversible order in the Trinity. In Driscoll's 'Trial: Women and Marriage' sermon, he likens the appeal a wife makes to her husband to Jesus' appeal to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. I'm not opposed to arguing from biblical themes but I am conscious that such themes be carefully applied. Although I'm yet to read extensively on it, I'm not convinced that the connection between Trinity and gender is a strong case. I do think it's possible to make a case for non-reversible order. But I think you'd make a stronger case out of it from 1 Corinthians 11 than from trying to apply a biblical theme in a way the Bible never does.

I know that many women see Proverbs 31 as a vital plank in building a theology of femininity. It is a well-loved passage for its detailed description of the 'wife of noble character'. However, I think it is a descriptive rather than prescriptive or definitional piece of writing and so I have chosen not to include it here.

5. See John Piper and Wayne Grudem's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p51.

6. <http://www.cbmw.org/Blog/Posts/My-Credo-as-a-Christian-Woman>

mean when I use the term order. Genesis 2 is like a blueprint of how things ought to be, that whatever the man is given to do, the woman is to help him. This is critical because it changes the question from ‘where do I stand in relation to him?’ to ‘how can I help him?’ It is once we put aside this sense of ranking that women are empowered to truly help. The discussion becomes one of empowering the other, not one of putting anyone in her place. This is primarily other-centred and servant-hearted, and true complementarity and true partnership can be lived out in this context.

The thing is, since Adam and Eve are not just husband and wife but representative of men and women in general, we must ask whether this blueprint is established generally for *all* men and women or just specifically for marriage. The New Testament helps us here. Ephesians 5 sets up a sense of order for marriage but 1 Corinthians 11 speaks of men and women more generally. In Genesis 2, we are given a model both for men and women generally and marriage specifically. Each has a different application. The Genesis 2 order will look different in society from how it looks in marriage. Before discussing this, though, it is important to see that this Genesis order or blueprint is primarily *relational*. It’s about aloneness being not good for the man and the celebration of the two being together.

1 Peter 3 is helpful in thinking through the relationships on view in Genesis. In speaking to men about their wives, women are referred to as the ‘weaker vessel’ (3:7). It has been suggested that this refers to physical strength. This may be, but considering the context of the passage, we can go further. The passage earlier speaks about women *not fearing* (3:6). Now, the person in a position of strength does not fear; it is the weak who fear and the weak who are vulnerable. History tells us that this is women, as does Peter’s very command to bear with the weaker partner. Though I don’t like to admit it, if I’m honest, I see far more women being exploited, for example for sex, not because they are weak willed but because there’s an emotional vulnerability present as well. There’s a need for acceptance or a desire to please that men can prey upon, whether it be for sex in the specific or power in the general. Peter couches his call to women in terms of relationship as well—they are to trust their husbands. We’ll return to that in a moment but, for now, there is at least an indication in this passage, evident in our own experiences, that women are not only vulnerable physically but also on an emotional or societal level.

We see this vulnerability exploited in our fallen world, but this does not mean that it is necessarily a result of the Fall. Peter certainly addresses results of the Fall, such as lack of submission to husbands and fear. Nonetheless, he *assumes* a weakness or vulnerability in women and tells husbands to be generous in the light of it. I suspect this is tied to the helper role in Genesis 2. To be a helper is to be vulnerable in some way. For a start, it means that you don’t set the agenda. You’re also limited by the quality and direction of the person you’re helping. Indeed, implicit in the helper role is the notion of vulnerability. In our modern context, we understand vulnerability negatively because with it comes the possibility (and often eventuality) of exploitation. However, this need not be the case. To be vulnerable to someone who will care for you is actually very freeing, for you have nothing to hide from them, as well as nothing to fear. This is the kind of vulnerability on view in Genesis 2. Being a helper is not about incompetence; after all, God himself is described as Israel’s helper and Eve is given great value by God. Yet, there is a sense in which being a helper means there are always others to relate to. Autonomy is not an option.⁸ You are in some sense dependent on someone else and with that comes vulnerability. It requires you to trust the one you are helping and to trust God that this way of things is good.

This theme of *trust* is precisely the direction 1 Peter takes in speaking about femininity. The gentle and quiet spirit is what marked out the holy women of the past such as Sarah (3:5) and wives become her daughters if they do right and do not give way to fear (3:6). This feminine quality, this ‘gentle and quiet spirit’, is connected with *not fearing*. Unpacking that a little, if you don’t fear, it’s because you trust someone. Trust is on view here as a key to femininity. Who should the women in this context trust? Strikingly, it’s their non-Christian husbands to whom they are to be submissive (3:1) and it is *God* in whom they are to put their hope (3:5). Femininity is ultimately found in your relationship with God, your willingness to be vulnerable enough to trust him and to express this in relationships. The kind of vulnerability we’re talking about here should not immediately bring with it the negative connotations our society applies to the word. We’re not talking about seeking out opportunities to be abused. We’re talking about recognising a difference

8. Of course, autonomy is not an option for men either. After all, it was not good for Adam to be alone! Nevertheless, Eve was created for Adam as his helper. Adam is not independent from Eve but neither was he created to be her helper in the same way as she was his. We could explore Adam’s role at this point but I’ve chosen not to since this paper is about femininity, not masculinity!

that already exists (to varying degrees, since none of us are ‘real’ women) and, rather than trying to minimise the difference, having the courage and the strength embrace it because you *do not fear*, for, like Jesus, you entrust yourself to one who judges justly (2:23). This is radical vulnerability founded in a sense of security in God’s protection, laughing without fear of the future (Prov 31:25). This femininity can be true of any woman, at any life stage. Trusting God should be a quality of all women, regardless of marital status, parenthood or occupation. Whatever situation you find yourself in, to trust God and express that in relationships is to express your femininity.

At the beginning of this study, I said that some attributes of women could equally be applied to men. Is this not the case with trust? Aren’t men to trust God also? Isn’t this the key to their identity too? Of course it is! However, 1 Corinthians 11 helps us to see that there is a different way in which this plays out for men and women. Here, man is for the glory of God and woman for the glory of man. This is not about significance or value, for neither men nor women are independent of each other (11:8-9). However, there’s a sense in which women’s orientation is not just towards God’s glory but also to men’s. Whatever this means, there is a distinct relational complexity for women and certainly a greater trust in God’s goodness required. When looking at this passage, I often hear women ask, ‘who is living for *my* glory?’ It’s a natural question. After all, it looks like women are at the bottom of the food chain. Of course, they’re not, for Christ has rescued and redeemed them from darkness—they are of immeasurable value because the Most High has given his life for them! But there’s no doubt that they look vulnerable in this passage. There is certainly greater trust required from those in this kind of position. Passages like this convey trust as a unique and essential quality in femininity.

In examining what this trust looks like in practice, some clear delineations are vital. The first distinction is between the general and the specific. The second is between role and relationship. While a relationship can be easily expressed in a role within a specific relationship, this becomes more complex on a general, societal level. If the general level means maintaining an overall relational order, this may not translate into that order being specifically played out in every role between every man and every woman. The following is a consideration of how *relationships* should look, generally and specifically, and how *role* should work, generally and specifically.

5. Application: Relationship

The first question is how women are to *relate* to men, in general and in the specific situation of marriage. At the general level, there’s 1 Corinthians 11: though men and women are not independent from each other, man is for the glory of God and woman is for the glory of man. Whatever this means, women ought to affirm men, not to compete with them—to help men, not to replace or displace them. In terms of our attitude, this means that women ought to celebrate manhood, not denigrate it. More than that, this means that women should be typified by the gentleness and trust we spoke of earlier. It means that women do not grasp at their own rights. I am not suggesting that women never ought to have a say, but I think we can all tell the difference between a tempered appeal and an hysteric clutching at power. Women who trust God can speak out—not because they need to assure their own safety but rather because they trust in God to provide for them through his creation order.

This level of feminine relationship to men applies to all women and ought to be expressed on a general level to all men. That doesn’t mean that it ought to be expressed with *every man*, but we’ll get to that next. Before we do, we need to consider this relationship in the specific context of marriage. In Ephesians 5, this relationship is characterised by submission. In 1 Peter 3, submission is exemplified by Sarah obeying her husband. So, what does it mean to submit? You’ll note that I have this part in the ‘relationship’ section, not the ‘role’ section. That’s significant, because I think the Bible speaks of submission *in relational terms*. It’s easy when you look at 1 Peter 3 to think that submission is about obedience like Sarah. That may or may not be the case, but we need to see the thrust of the passage, which is towards *not fearing*. The point is trust rather than obedience. Submission is therefore about your *attitude* towards your husband. In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Piper and Grudem describe submission as ‘an inner quality of gentleness that affirms the leadership of the husband’. Their reference to inner quality is helpful because it implies that submission is about relationship and attitude. However, I don’t believe the second part of the definition presents a clear enough challenge to women. I would recast it in relational terms: submission is an inner quality of gentleness *that empowers a woman to trust her husband*. Submission is choosing to trust the fallen man who is your husband, having that attitude without fearing because, in entrusting yourself to this man, you entrust yourself to God’s keeping.

6. Application: Role

There are two ways of speaking about role. On one hand, role may be your wiring as a woman, which you should therefore live out. On the other, role may mean living out the situation that God has ordained for you, even though you're not necessarily good at it. In the case of gender, role involves both of these. There's a sense in which God has indeed created men and women with different ways of relating. That will have a natural flow-on effect to your role. However, in our fallen world, we sub-women shouldn't necessarily expect these roles to come naturally, just as the relationships don't come naturally. Yet, as we are made new, we ought to expect that we will be changed and equipped by the Spirit of God to better live out the roles that come from our relationships.

We've said already that the defining relationship of femininity is 'helper'. That's why vulnerability and trust are so vital. That's where affirming men comes from. But what does that mean for what you actually *do*? In Genesis 2, there's little explanation of role. Both Adam and Eve are to fill the earth and subdue it. Do they both till the ground or does the helper have a different role? Genesis 3 may shed more light on this. The punishment given to Adam reflects his role, that is, tending the garden. It makes sense, then, to infer that the punishment given to Eve reflects her role. This is not to say that her role is the result of the Fall but rather that Genesis 3 shows us the falling of something already present, a domain of childbearing and relationships. There is a sense in which the helper was to operate more naturally in this dimension than the man. This is how she complemented him pre-Fall. This makes me intensely uncomfortable. I'd love to say that what matters is relationship, that sense of trust, that role is secondary to that. However, the Bible holds both relationship and role on view. I am not free to emphasise relationship over role.

If indeed the helper is to operate in nurturing roles, women ought to seek out these opportunities. Some, like John and Stasi Eldridge of *Wild at Heart* and *Captivating* fame, have suggested that this is an inherent desire that comes naturally to all women. I'm unconvinced by this. The instructions in Titus 2:4, that the older women teach the younger women, show that this role may be something that women need to grow into. I suspect that whether this comes naturally or unnaturally, women are to work towards embracing this part of femininity. Further examination of Titus 2:3-5 will help us to see what this looks like in practice.

Much has been made of the command in Titus 2:5 for wives to be 'busy at home', and it has been supposed that women are to find their role in the domain of the home. While this fits very nicely into the nuclear family model of conservative modern America, I'm yet to be convinced that such a model is anything but an invention of the last 400 years of Western thought. The passage is about being kind and reverent, not slanderous. It reads to me like 1 Timothy 5:13-14. The emphasis is on avoiding sin, like being a gossip and busybody. The directive is therefore to 'be busy' rather than to be 'at home'. The passage is not concerned with the rightness of marriage and family for a woman (in fact, this comes across as a concession—see 1 Tim 5:12). In other words, these passages are more about *how* women are acting than *where* they are. This is good news for single women—a vision of femininity not solely found in marriage and family.

When it comes to role, a woman ought to act on her nurturing mantle wherever she is. Now, this application may seem immediately obvious for women who are wives and mothers and have their 'own' families. Yet, *family* in the New Testament is broader than the modern nuclear family, encompassing the wider family of the church. Single women ought to play out their role in this greater family. How might they do this? I've heard it suggested that single women should baby-sit other people's children, but this is far too narrow. A vital part of Christian community is the nurturing presence of older women. Single women have a unique opportunity to develop special relationships with children of married people, to mentor and nurture them in ways their parents may not be able to and in ways that the children will certainly appreciate. This 'aunty' role will take on a whole variety of shapes. It may include making choc-chip cookies with children; outings to the Lego museum; discussions about science with an undergrad uni student; considering the benefits and pitfalls of 'Babywise' with a new mum. The point is to express a nurturing role—involvement with people of different ages for their growth and benefit. This applies to married couples that don't (yet) have children, as well as to women who have adult children. However, this is not the only avenue for nurture. This unique aspect of femininity is to be expressed in work and other spheres of life. I suspect that any line of secular work is open to a woman, as long as she can fulfil that role in a feminine way.⁹ A woman can be a CEO of a company, as long as she doesn't have

9. The church is God's family, full of people who are being made new. These are the people on their way to being real men and real women, the ones whom we ought to expect will live out God's order. The same requirement may not apply to a secular context although they certainly apply to Christian

to power-dress and act like a man to do so. Women who work in stereotypically male-dominated workplaces need not abandon their jobs in favour of ‘nurturing’ jobs like teaching or nursing if they can work out how to express a sense of nurture in them. For example, a woman can be a boss of male employees but a boss known for her kindness rather than her desire to dominate. Her focus in her job ought to be building others up, not fighting for advancement of her own status.

For married women, I suspect that there is less flexibility. One of the reasons marriage was given was for the creation and upbringing of children so, God willing, child rearing is an expected part of the marriage package. Once you have a family in this sense, it becomes the primary focus of your femininity. I suspect that the ‘at home’ in 1 Timothy 5 flows from this framework. No longer are mothers of dependent children free to mentor other children before their own, or to see their job as a first priority, even if it involves a stereotypically nurturing role such as nursing.

Conclusion

When it comes to femininity, relationship does not trump role, nor is role superior to relationship. One of the passages I’ve found most helpful in thinking this through is Judges 4-5. It’s the story of Deborah, much discussed when it comes to gender. At the time, the prophetess Deborah is leading Israel (4:4). Some have argued that because she held court in an obscure place, she only exercised this leadership privately. This idea is tenuous at best, considering that the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided (4:5). Deborah was clearly a public figure and the writer of Judges has no problem presenting that or describing her role as one of ‘leadership’. That said, she seeks to empower Barak to do God’s bidding (4:6-9, 14). There’s a very interesting verse in which she tells Barak that because of the way he has responded to God, he won’t be given the honour of killing Sisera, their enemy. Rather, that honour will be given to a woman. It seems that this is God’s judgement on Sisera. However, that woman is Jael, not Deborah. Jael’s killing of Sisera is God’s judgement on Barak, rather than Deborah’s leadership being a judgement on Israel. Deborah’s leadership role is neither commended nor condemned but Deborah herself is upheld for her stalwart faith and unwavering trust in God (5:6-9).

She is defined by her relationship with God. However, this is not a license simply to ignore any sense of ‘feminine role’. Order is also on view in this story. Barak, not Jael, should have killed Sisera, for that is God’s normal way of things. This important story presents Deborah’s relationship with God as primary to her role, yet there is a clear statement of a gendered ‘way of things’. We have both role and relationship on view in the same story. Both are upheld as important.

Leon Bloy wrote, ‘the holier a woman is, the more she is a woman’. Indeed, to be feminine is to be like Christ—to entrust oneself to God; to choose to serve others before your own interests; to make yourself vulnerable that God may be glorified in his vindication of you. It is in this relationship with God that femininity will be found. It will be expressed in relationships with others on a broad level and, for married women, in their specific marriage context. This relationship will flow over in roles appropriate to your stage of life but never separated from being a Genesis 2 helper, trusting God for his good plan and living it out.

There are things I don’t like about this definition of femininity. It seems horribly risky! What if I embrace my vulnerability only for men to oppress women, or for my husband to hurt me? If history is anything to go by, they will! But God’s heart is not to see that happen. The great challenge for women is whether we will believe that. Is our trust in God robust enough to know that even in our vulnerability, God seeks our good? This is where trusting God gets gritty. Even when a woman is hurt, a truly feminine woman will trust that the God who rages against injustice will take even her hurt and work it out for her good (Rom 8:28). God is the one to whom women can entrust themselves with confidence. What we must choose to believe is that whatever happens—famine, hardship, persecution, nakedness, danger or sword—*nothing* can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. True femininity is found in choosing to trust him. It is in him that we hope and to him that we cry, ‘Come Lord Jesus!’