Equality, Identity and Unity: Basic biblical thinking about human relationships

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The purpose of this paper is briefly to examine three somewhat overlapping terms — equality, identity (in the limited sense of sameness), and unity — and to consider the way the Bible treats the concepts indicated by these terms, in order to argue for greater clarity and care in our use of them when speaking about the way men and women relate to each other and exercise Christian ministries in partnership with one another. It suggests that while the Bible does treat the treasured ideal of equality between the sexes, and even speaks at points of identity, its primary concern is with the unity that comes from our created complementarity and our common sharing of the Spirit of Christ.

One of the most treasured values of our time is the *equality* of all. Yet for such an important value it is curiously imprecise. What does 'equality' mean? Philosophers sometimes speak of 'equality' as an incomplete predicate. It needs to be filled out to make sense. Equal to what? Equal in what respect? Equal for what purpose? Thomas Hobbes famously (or infamously) argued that we are all equal in the sense that it is always possible for one of us to kill or be killed by another. A great man is just as susceptible to being killed as an ordinary man. He was writing just two years after the execution of Charles I and his point was that even kings can be killed.[1] Today we rightly speak of the fundamental equality of value and dignity native to all human beings and especially the equality in that sense of women and men. I for one would not want to resile from that for a moment. But what do we actually mean when we talk like that? How does this concept help us as we seek to model godly partnership in Christian ministry? More specifically, how secure is our appeal to the Bible in support of that idea?

If equality is the unchallengeable ideal of the modern West, *unity* is almost as highly prized. Spooked by the damage division has caused internationally, nationally and in local communities — especially in the last couple of years — the language of unity has wide appeal. We look for leaders who can unite

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Crooke, 1651), 60.

the country and overcome our divisions. We invest a great deal of energy (and money) in the *United* Nations as a visible demonstration of our commitment to live together on this planet. Christians have a particular investment in unity, of course. Jesus' prayer 'that they may all be one' (Jn 17:21) has been the cue for the modern ecumenical movement and much more besides. Paul's phrase 'all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28) has been the banner of innumerable Christian conferences. But once again there seems to be quite a deal of confusion about what we mean by unity. Where does such unity come from? How is it anchored? How is it nourished? Does real, enduring unity require the abandonment of diversity? Does it require institutional expression? Once again, when we come to think about men and women in ministry, how helpful is the idea of unity? What does it look like?

Between equality and unity stands a third term, one perhaps even more open to misunderstanding. Is there anything about us all which is *identical*? Is there any sense in which we are all 'the same'? Philosophers have long debated the relationship between the one and the many, between universals and particulars. Individuality and distinctiveness are highly prized by our contemporaries. We rightly resist being pressed into a cookie cutter or being described as just another cog in the machine. Relationships thrive on particularities — those things that differentiate us from every other human on the planet. Men and women are demonstrably different, and not just at the level of anatomy and biology. At the same time, though, strong cultural forces in our own time seek to minimise these differences and emphasize a generic humanity. The differences, we are told, are incidental and ultimately unimportant. The boundaries are much more fluid than we have taken them to be. We have been trapped in binary thinking and any differentiation of role or function is merely conventional and manufactured. In fact, it is ultimately oppressive or serves the interests of the oppressors. A basic identity characterises the human race, and at heart men and women are fundamentally the same and interchangeable. We must be allowed to move across all boundaries, even the biological ones. But might not more careful consideration help us to rejoice in the differences, rather than sublimate them?

As we continue to think about the way we can work together in partnership as women and men in ministry we will undoubtedly encounter much talk and much writing about *equality*. Almost as certainly, we will come across debates about the extent of the differences between men and women

— some arguing that the differences are merely incidental and have no direct bearing on how, when and where we serve Christ's people; others arguing the differences are critical for an effective and biblically appropriate ministry. But I suspect we will hear less and read less of the nature and value of the *unity* between men and women — the way this unity is itself a testimony to the wisdom and power of God, the glory of the gospel, and the miraculous work of the Spirit among us. One of the tragedies of the long debates about women's ministry all over the world is the way it has seemed so often to invert the priorities expressed in the Bible. Even a superficial examination of the Scriptures reveals that much more space is devoted to unity than to the other two concepts (though they are not ignored altogether). And too often the values we happen to cherish or feel need emphasis are in fact read *into* particular passages of Scripture rather than read *in* them.

There is certainly scope for fresh, detailed thinking on these aspects of what it means to be human. In the burgeoning field of theological anthropology one can expect these concepts to be re-examined with renewed vigour. After all, all three concepts play an important role in the Christian understanding of God: the *equality* of the Son to the Father is amply demonstrated on the pages of the New Testament (Jn 5:18; Phil 2:6); Jesus spoke repeatedly of the *unity* he shared with his Father (Jn 10:30; 17:11, 21); and an *identity* of being between the Father and the Son is not only the conclusion of the early church in the Nicene Creed, it too reflects the New Testament witness (Jn 1:1–5; Phil 2:6). This is undoubtedly significant. A theological approach to the questions I have raised, precisely because it is a *theological* approach, finds its ultimate anchor in the person and purpose of the triune God. However, considerable care is needed at this point. Any move from the triune life of God to human experience must respect the Creator-creature distinction and any move in the opposite direction must respect the analogical nature of theological language. That would require a paper in and of itself. This paper has a much more modest aim though: to sketch a Christian understanding of how these three terms are used in Scripture of the relationships between human beings, and to suggest how clarity in what we are affirming might in fact further our understanding of how men and women honour God as they walk and work together as disciples of his Son enabled to do so by his Spirit.

1. Equality:

The Old Testament

It is sometimes suggested that there is no single word in biblical Hebrew which means what we mean today by 'equality'. That is not entirely true. In Isaiah 46 the LORD questions his wayward people who have been the object of his constant care: "To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?" and follows that with a scathing critique of Israel's idolatry. The word translated 'equal' in verse 5, *shavah,* is often used, as here, in a negative context. There is no one who is the LORD's equal and it is ludicrous to act as if this could even be possible (see also 40:25). It is also used in the sense of 'making level' as in levelling out a field (Isaiah 28:25) and as a synonym for 'to liken' (Lam. 2:13). The word is not used, as far as I have been able to discover, to describe any kind of equality between human beings.

Nevertheless, it is true that more often when ideas such as numerical equality are intended, more paraphrastic constructions are used rather than a single word. We find this when the recipe for the special incense to be used in the Tabernacle is given in Exodus 30:34, or the measurements of the Temple are prescribed in 1 Kings 6:3, or the unsurpassed value of wisdom is praised in Job 28:17. In one other instance where it might appear that an equality of *persons* is on view in the Old Testament, the expression used are certainly not unambiguous:

> *But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.* (Ps. 55:13)

The reference is to the shocking truth that it is not an enemy who taunts the psalmist but a companion who otherwise has stood with him, one he valued as a friend. There is no particular stress on equality of value, dignity or status in that context, but rather intimacy and fellowship.

Nevertheless, the lack of a distinct and consistent vocabulary of equality in the Hebrew Old Testament does not mean the concept is absent. Two relatively recent and fascinating studies of equality, one from a Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh and the other from a Professor of Tanakh at Bar-Ilan University in Jerusalem, both found extensive material in the Old

Testament.[2] Forrester, the Scot, argues that '[t]he narrative framework of the Bible suggests that equality is 'the original, the final, and the proper condition for human beings'.[3] The critical integrating concept according to him is, unsurprisingly, the image of God —

> First, *all* human beings are created in the image of God, they all share equally in this crucial, definitive characteristic. There is no question of some being more and others less involved in the *imago Dei* as far as the created order is concerned … The *imago Dei* is not some abstract quality that each human being possesses, but relates to the capacity for relationship. Human beings are essentially relational, made for loving. It is in human relationships of love, solidarity and equality that the image of God is manifest … Equality is ascribed by God in the work of creation; it is not a human achievement or an empirical characteristic of human beings.[4]

There is a great deal of insight in these observations, but even here it seems that the concept of equality is read into the account rather than read in it. A common description of the man and the woman as in 'the image of God' is stretched to emphasise 'sharing equally', then Forrester concludes that the image is itself manifest in 'human relationships of love, solidarity and equality', and that 'equality is ascribed by God in the work of creation'. But Moses and the Scot evidence different concerns. The equality of each member of the human race is not in fact the focus of attention in Genesis 1 & 2. Rather, that focus is on the relationship the first man and woman share with God: a relation of origin, fellowship, and accountability. It highlights what is *common* to the man and woman ('the image of God' in Genesis 1 and 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' in Genesis 2) rather than addressing questions of quantity, extent, or proportionality (how much each is in the image of God, for instance). Equality is, at best, a reasonable inference from the way the text summarises the creation of the race:

> So God created man in his own image
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

But it remains an inference.

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[2] Joshua B. Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible broke with ancient political thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM, 2001).
[3] Forrester, 82.
[4] Forrester, 83–84.

The plurals throughout this passage are instructive, once again highlighting what is common to both the man and the woman. Together they are given dominion (v. 26), together they are blessed (v. 28), together they are sustained with 'every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit' (v. 29). Oliver O'Donovan's conclusion is perceptive but once again imports the language of equality: '[t]he equality of human beings is an aspect of the doctrine of creation' he says. 'It locates every human being equally to every other as one summoned out of nothing by the Creator's will, one whose life is a contingent gift, created for fellowship with others and answerable to judgment'.[5] The interdependence of human beings, and especially of the man and the woman in this context, is clear. Both are described, without qualification and without any question of how far, or to what extent, each is created in the image of God — as if such a question could make sense in any case. The image of God is something they hold in common. They *are* this in common. Yet, even prior to the Fall, there is a relation, and a relation requires distinction. The narrative of Genesis takes the necessary time to unpack this. So, without the slightest hint that this suggests inferiority, Genesis 2 speaks of the woman being created from out of the man, of God taking her to the man, and the man rejoicing that at last here is 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' and so naming her 'woman'. Sharing the image of God, sharing the blessing of God and sharing dominion conferred by God — with all the dignity and worth which this implies — does not do away with a number of critical differences, some of which will later be picked up by the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 2:13).

Our contemporary context keeps intruding into our reading of this biblical text. The American Declaration of Independence, with its insistence on inalienable rights conferred by the Creator by the very act of creation, has a different interest from that of the Book of Genesis. A long history of oppression and shameful treatment of other human beings, including abusive expressions of patriarchy, leads us to pursue a critique based on the biblical text even in places where this is not quite explicit. It is important for us to acknowledge where our questions and interests are different from those of the biblical writers and the Spirit who moved them to write (2 Pet. 1:21). That difference of interest might itself be a critique we need to hear.

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[5] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 41.

It is worth noting too that the fundamental truth about human beings, a common dignity together with a mutual dependence of the man and the woman on each other in a way that delights in rather than erases the differences between them, is all put under enormous strain by the Fall. Fear, shame and a struggle for dominance now become part of their experience of life together in the world. Forrester suggested that inequality and subordination is one consequence of human sin and disobedience.[6] He was writing in general terms rather than specifically about the relationship of men and women, and even then he is stretching the evidence a little in the service of his argument. However, it seems undeniable that, while the extraordinary significance and value placed upon all human life by the very act of creation was not undone by the Fall, what entered human experience at that point was behaviour which denies this truth. Recrimination and manipulation emerge in the relationship of the first man and woman. The differences which bound them together in delight at the end of Genesis 2 have an altogether different complexion at the end of Genesis 3 and in the ensuing narrative. The impact of sin is pervasive and touches the relational core of human existence. Of course, as the narrative of Genesis unfolds it becomes clear that it is not only the relationship of the man and the woman which is disrupted as a consequence of human rebellion (e.g. Gen. 4).

Joshua Berman, the Jewish professor, followed a slightly different route to Forrester because of his particular concern with the Bible's subversion of pagan political structures. He picked up the pervasive theme of covenant as indicative of a biblical commitment to the equality of human beings. He endorsed the suggestion of Yohanan Muffs, an American Jewish scholar who taught in New York:

> The new idea in the Bible is not the idea of a single God—a notion that apparently had existed in Egypt in the fourteenth century B.C.E.—but the idea of God as a personality who seeks a relationship of mutuality with human agents.[7]

This 'relationship of mutuality' is discernible, Berman suggests, in the covenant which God establishes with his people. Unlike the treaties made by Hittite kings, in which the other party was invariably the conquered ruler who from that point on would be a vassal of the one who conquered him, God made a covenant with the entire people of Israel, in which a status of honour was conferred

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6 Forrester, 83.
7 Berman, 46. Yohanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Society of America, 1992), 45.

and God committed himself to the nation's care and protection. Honour was bestowed upon each member of the people while at the same time the covenant called for a recognition that honour was due to the Lord as their God. That is where Berman sees a 'mutuality'. The covenant paradigm is, he concludes, the 'ideological underpinning for an egalitarian order'.[8]

> Thus we may posit that to some degree, the subordinate king with whom God forms a political treaty is, in fact, the common man of Israel; that every man in Israel is to view himself as having the status of a king conferred on him—a subordinate king who serves under the protection of, and in gratitude to, a divine sovereign … Covenant, it would seem, leaves the king out of the picture—the covenant was between God and the people of Israel.[9]

It might seem that the picture so far is somewhat overdrawn and and it is interesting that even he cannot avoid language such as 'a subordinate king'. After all, the covenant between God and Israel is hardly one between equals. The unilateral character of the covenant as God's unmerited gift, motivated by his determined love, needs further development. The Creator/creature distinction remains intact on both sides of Genesis 12 or Exodus 19 or 2 Samuel 7. God is still God and Israel remains his created, redeemed and tragically wayward people. As the Old Testament unfolds, a particular relationship with the anointed king emerges, and this complicates the picture of mutuality which Berman wishes to paint for us. Again, to be fair, Berman's book is largely restricted to a study of the Pentateuch and so the unique place of the Davidic monarchy in God's purposes is beyond its purview. However, even within the Pentateuch, Berman observes, the idea of covenant is deepened somewhat by the use made of marriage imagery to speak of the relation of God and Israel. Here again he stresses mutuality, as honour is bestowed by each party on the other. But when the imagery of marriage is used in this way (and at this point Berman does step out of the Pentateuch to cite Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea), it is 'collective Israel' who is the bride rather than each individual Israelite.[10]

Forrester and Berman both drew attention to the contrast between life in Israel under the Old Covenant and the structured inequities of life among the nations. Life as God's covenant people involves a concern for the vulnerable and powerless, especially the poor and the alien living in their

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[8] Berman, 40-41, 48.
[9] Berman, 41, 47.
[10] Berman, 45.

midst. However, for the most part this is not explicitly justified by an appeal to the equality of all human beings. The Leviticus 19 injunctions about how each Israelite was to care for his or her neighbour are grounded instead on the relationship of Israel and her God: 'for I am the LORD your God' is the steady refrain (vv. 10, 12, 14, 16, 18). However, two features of this chapter provide further pause for thought. Anchored in the lordship of God is the command: 'You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour' (v. 15). That there will be poor and great in Israel is assumed. There is no attempt here to level such distinctions. However, such distinctions in social standing or economic firepower are not to compromise a scrupulous impartiality when it comes to applying the law. Righteousness appears to involve an equality of accountability when it comes to the law of God.[11] Further, it is in this same section of the Levitical code that the command is given: 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (v.18). Such love would seem to require a recognition that the Lord who bestowed dignity and worth on you as a human being and as a member of his holy nation has bestowed the same dignity and worth upon your neighbour. To that extent, no matter what differences there are in circumstance or achievement, some kind of equality is implied. Søren Kierkegaard made much of this:

> … the 'neighbour' is the absolutely true expression for human equality. In case every one were in truth to love his neighbour as himself, complete human equality would be attained. Every one who loves his neighbour in truth, expresses unconditionally human equality. Everyone who, like me, admits that his effort is weak and imperfect, yet is aware that the task is to love one's neighbour, is also aware of what human equality is.[12]

There is much more that could be said that bears upon any understanding of the equality of human beings arising from the Old Testament. The election of Israel might be presented as a piece of counter-evidence, suggesting a fundamental inequality in the human race between Jew and Gentile. However, the election of Israel has a wider purpose right from the beginning. Through Abram's seed 'all the families of the earth will be blessed' (Gen. 12:3). Furthermore, Moses goes to great lengths to make clear that Israel was not more worthy than the nations around them. From the beginning Israel was a weak and stubbornly rebellious nation (Deut. 7:7; 9:6). Similarly, some might point to the

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11 Michael Jensen, 'The Christian Revolution 2: Equality', *Churchman* 122/3 (2008): 248.
12 Søren Kierkegaard, 'Concerning the Dedication to "The Individual" 1846', in *The Point of View for My Work as An Author: A Report to History* (trans. by Walter Lowrie; repr. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 118.

existence of slavery within Israel as a powerful challenge to any thought of human equality. However, slavery in Israel was a peculiar phenomenon. It was dramatically unlike slavery in Egypt, and unlike the modern experience of slavery by black men and women in England and America. It did not entail any suggestion that the slave was inferior to his or her master. Most tellingly, slaves were to be released after seven years and provided with the means to begin life again as a free person. Only if they expressed their desire to remain as a slave — in somewhat dramatic terms, it must be said — could they continue in the same household for life (Deut. 15).

What is clear enough through this brief survey, though, is that human equality is most often an inference rather than the explicit teaching of the Old Testament. This is because the chief concerns of the Old Testament lie elsewhere, in the relationship God has established with his people and the responsibility this entails for one another. Where it is to be inferred, though, equality almost always has to do with the worth God bestows on every human life, irrespective of the circumstances in which they live and the role or functions they perform.

The New Testament

But what about the New Testament? Here, many have argued, is a much more explicit embrace of human equality. After all, Jesus challenged all notions of worth based on position or achievement or power. So, Jesus told his disciples not to be like the religious leaders of his day: '… you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers' (Mtt. 23:8). As Leon Morris remarked when commenting on this verse: 'Brothers are equal, and they cannot be arranged in a hierarchy. Over against Jesus they all hold inferior rank, and none of them is in a position to lord it over the others.'[13] This is not egalitarianism pure and simple; it is a valuing of each other as fellow disciples of the one teacher. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus had made the point even more sharply. Following the request of James, John and their mother, and the ensuing arguments among the remaining ten disciples, Jesus explained:

> You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your

[13] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 576.

> servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mtt. 20:25–28)

The preparedness of the Son of the Father to humble himself and serve fractious, rebellious human beings (cf. Phil. 2:5–8) is the chief incentive for a new way of treating others in which service is more important than status. The washing of the disciples' feet on the night Jesus was arrested, and his surrender into the hands of those who would put him to death, drove the lesson home. He is the Son of Man, he is truly their teacher, he is the one sent from the Father and anointed by the Spirit, and yet he humbles himself, not merely to become the equal of those around him but to serve them. This is Jesus' own testimony in response to the request of James and John for precedence and honour: not 'Stop it, you are all equal' so much as 'Stop it, discipleship is about service not the pursuit of honour'. 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

Of particular relevance to us in this conference is the way in which Jesus crosses the barriers imposed by his culture to embrace women and others who were marginalised. They too are those he came to save. On a number of occasions Jesus stuns his disciples by the way he includes women in his mission and extended conversations with women such as Martha (Luke 10, John 11), Mary (John 11), Mary Magdalene (John 20), the Samaritan woman (John 4) and the woman from Syro-Phoenicia (Mark 7) are noteworthy in the Gospels. These women rejoice in a salvation they embrace in common with the male disciples. They come to Jesus on precisely the same terms. They have no privilege or status to plead and they are utterly dependent upon his mercy, just as every male disciple was and is. In this sense there is an equality of access to Jesus and the salvation he came to accomplish. This remains critical throughout the rest of the New Testament, grounding the participation of women alongside men on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and in the mission to the Gentiles (Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18).

The apostle Paul gives this eloquent expression in his letter to the Galatians: 'For as many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.' (Gal. 3:28–29). It is of particular importance that

this statement of Paul's is grounded in the doctrine of salvation, specifically the doctrine of justification by faith, rather than the doctrine of creation. That is not to say that the doctrine of creation is unimportant in this connection, and Paul will certainly have recourse to it on a number of different occasions (e.g. Acts 17 and 1 Timothy 2). But the point being made in Galatians and coming to its climax in Galatians 3:28 is that precisely because none of us have any claim to preferential treatment from God, and all are saved on the same basis, namely the death and resurrection of Christ received by faith rather than religious performance, any attempt to create or preserve a hierarchy in the matter of salvation in fact does violence to the gospel. That is why Paul was so insistent against Peter in Galatians 2. Sure, salvation is to the Jew first and then also to the Greek, as Paul wrote in Romans 1, but this is a biblical theological statement, a matter of God's timetable, his unfolding plan where Abraham and his descendant have a special role in God's blessing of 'all the nations of the earth' (Gen. 12:3). No Jew can claim to be more saved than a non-Jew nor can he or she claim privilege over against a Gentile. The same is true in reverse of course. Furthermore, Paul makes clear that by extension this also applies to slaves and freemen/freewomen, and male and female. Justification by faith is the great leveller. The logic of the epistle to the Romans makes this clear: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 3:23–24).

Now I've somewhat laboured the point on equality (and I am not going to spend anywhere near as much time on the others) because of its standing as a value in our contemporary culture. The language of equality is used so frequently without much content as if it is self-evident and self-evidently biblical. The point I've been trying to make is that time and again where people appeal to the Bible for a concept of human equality, radical or otherwise, it is read into the biblical text rather than read in it. The value of every and all human life is most certainly affirmed. Certain commonalities are highlighted at various points. Time and again we are called upon to love our neighbour *'as yourself'*. We might add the prohibition against favouritism in James 2. The poor person from whom you cannot hope to gain anything is worthy of honour just as is the rich man who we are perversely often more excited about (think of the celebrity who fronts up at church). But what is more than a little interesting is the biblical anchor for such affirmations and injunctions. It is rarely, if ever,

because of a principled equality of persons. Rather, we are not to lord it over each other because the one who is Lord over all of us is a servant (Phil 2; Mark 10). We are not to create a salvation hierarchy because we are all sinners saved by grace; none of us has anything to plead over against another; we are all saved, not by anything in us but by what Jesus has done for us (Rom. 3; Gal. 3). And that is a deeper, richer and more powerful basis for the proper treatment of each other than an abstract principle — an incomplete predicate as we saw it at the beginning — of 'equality'.

I want to move on to treat the other two concepts a little more briefly before trying to tie this all together and make one or two observations about the significance of what we have seen.

2. Identity (sameness and interchangeability)

The Old Testament

The term 'identity' can be used in two senses. The most popular, especially in the past few decades, is the sense of individual identity which is my expression of who I am. My identity is my choice, my preference, my reality. There is a lot that can and has been said about 'identity' in that sense. However, in this context I am more interested in another, distinctly different use of the term: the sense in which two or more things are said to be 'identical'. The term 'sameness' is a synonym when identity is used in this sense. When it is, it often entails a kind of interchangeability. To put it simply, because we are the same in all the most important respects, I can and should be able to do everything you do. It doesn't matter if you do it or I do it. We can stand in for each other and even replace each other. After all, we are the same. The two uses of the word 'identity' can be confusing, since they tend to point to polar opposites: my identity is what distinguishes me from others at one end and identity which means sameness on the other. As I said, I am chiefly interested in the latter. My question is how prominent is such an idea of 'sameness' in the Old Testament and how is it used?

Two key words are used in the Old Testament to convey the idea of 'sameness'. The first, אֶחָד *echad*, is used in Genesis 11:1 of the one and the same language spoken by the entire race. It is also often used in the descriptions of the tabernacle furnishings, where curtains, for instance, were to be of the same size, (Exodus 26:2). Intriguingly, it is used when in Leviticus 24:22 the Lord commands that "you

shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native" with reference to the reparation for injury or the taking of a life. The second word, the particle *ken*, is used to describe the way the Egyptian magicians were initially able to copy what Moses had done in the first few plagues in Exodus 7:11 and of how the procedure for accepting lifetime service by a female slave was to be the same as that for a male slave in Deuteronomy 15:17.

So there is a clear concept of sameness referring to objects or to behaviours. However, it is considerably more difficult to find it referring to people in a way that approximates to what we mean by 'identical'. Ecclesiastes comes close when the preacher pronounces that 'the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice' 'It is the same for all' (Eccl. 9:2). There the word is once again ʾ*echad* and what is on view is the same experience (death) not some kind of interchangeable identity.

Very often when English translations add the word 'alike' in a context like this, it is an interpretative addition that has no direct correspondence in the text. However, a significant exception to this is Numbers 15:15, where the Lord tells Moses and the Israelites 'For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who soujourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner *shall be alike before the Lord'.* In that case it is the preposition *ke* which is used and the emphasis is on a common accountability before the Lord God.

There are clearly points at which the experience of human beings in the world God has created, and their treatment by the Lord God, is in some sense 'identical' or 'the same'. The man and the woman in the Garden have the same Creator, they share the same delegated and contingent dominion over the rest of creation, and they are recipients of the same blessing. What is more, as we have already noted, there is a certain sameness that Adam recognises when presented with Eve: 'this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' — an expression which recognises both sameness and difference (I'm pretty sure that part of Adam's delight was that Eve was not a carbon copy of him in every particular). However, from very early on it is also clear that the Lord differentiates and delights in diversity. What is common to those who play a significant role in the Old Testament is not some trait

of personality or some family background but the choice of God to use them: Abram the wandering Aramean from moon-worshipping Ur of the Chaldees, Moses the Hebrew refugee raised as an Egyptian prince, Samuel the boy raised in the tabernacle, or David the shepherd boy chosen above his brothers who at least at first glance seemed more impressive. The idea of identity and interchangeability which some champion in our own context does not appear in the Old Testament.

An interesting case study in this connection is the suffering servant of Isaiah 52 and 53. At least in Isaiah, does his vicarious suffering arise from the fact that he is 'the same' or 'identical' with his people? There are points at which his deep connection with those he will save is given expression: '*he* has born *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows' (v. 4) and 'as for *his* generation, who considered he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people' (v. 8). Yet his bearing of the sins of the people is not at this point anchored in his 'sameness' with those he would save. He was not solely and simply interchangeable with another or even the entire people and so able to stand in or them. It was 'the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief' (v. 10). He certainly stands in the place of the people: 'he was wounded for *our* transgressions; he was crushed for *our* iniquities' (v. 5) but this was not first and foremost because he was just like us and could stand in our place but rather 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (v. 6). It is only when we move into the New Testament, in the Book of Hebrews that we are told Jesus 'had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God' (Heb. 2:17). His saving work has a deep ground in a genuine incarnation of the Son of God, but this is not 'identity' in the modern sense.

The New Testament

When we move into the New Testament, there are points at which identity in the sense of sameness is not only acknowledged but insisted upon. Notably, it is of considerable importance that it is precisely the same Spirit who was poured out on the Day of Pentecost who was received by Cornelius the centurion. Peter recognised it first: 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people', he asked, 'who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (Acts 10:47). Standing before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem he declared 'And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having

cleansed their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:8–9). The whole point of that argument is that it is the same, one might say the identical, Spirit who was given to both Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's words, 'there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him' (Rom. 10:12). The same Saviour, the same salvation, the same Spirit, the same access to the Father — at this level sameness and identity in an absolute sense, is a significant part of the New Testament message.

Yet, and this is crucial, when it comes to those who are saved, this common experience finds room for difference as well, and indeed delights in that difference. This is most obvious in 1 Corinthians 12:

> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. (1 Cor 12:4–6)

In fact the argument of this chapter is that variety is essential for the proper functioning of God's people as the body of Christ. There is a fundamental identity — it is 'one and the same Spirit who apportions to each individually as he wills' (v. 11) — but the variety of gifts and ministries is indispensable. Indeed, 'if all were single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body' (vv. 19–20). This common salvation, common membership of the body of Christ and common endowment by the Spirit, manifests itself in a magnificent and entirely necessary diversity.

This interplay of identity and distinction, oneness and diversity, is seen again in Ephesians 4. Paul insists 'There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (vv. 4–5). When he proceeds to provide a list of word gifts, 'apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers', the whole point is that there is diversity even at this point so that 'the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love' (v. 16). In this critical sense, sameness and diversity belong together and reinforce each other as we recognise the same Spirit at work in each.

There is no call for recognise we are the same and the inherent interchangeability that seems to go along with it, in the New Testament. It really matters who does what. A God-given diversity of gifts and ministries is valued as necessary for the health of the body. And this is anchored, significantly, in the singularity of our common salvation and the one Saviour.

That singularity is seen in the insistence upon a single unchanging gospel. There is only one gospel, as Paul insists at length in Galatians 1, and any addition to it or subtraction from it involves a distortion which is damnable: 'if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed' (Gal. 1:8). The gospel given to us by Christ is extraordinarily precious. It is something Paul understands himself to have been 'entrusted with' (Gal. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4). It is the same gospel for the Gentiles as for the Jews: there is only one name under heaven 'given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

So it is clear that believers are not expected all to be the same. Our common salvation does not mean we are entirely interchangeable. Yet there is one point at which sameness is enjoined upon us. Once again it is the apostle Paul who is the agent of that call. As he commenced his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote,

> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. (1 Cor. 1:10)

Paul was addressing the divisions and party spirit in the struggling church in Corinth that had been reported to him by Chloe's people. He was all for diversity (he will write 1 Corinthians 12 after all) but there is something about which there was no real room for diversity. Have 'the same mind and the same judgment'. The language is emphatic in Paul's Greek at this point: 'that you all say the same thing', 'in the same mind' and 'with the same judgment'. In his first letter, the apostle Peter will coin the word *homophrones*, 'those of one mind' (1 Pet. 3:8). It does seem there is no room for what some have called a 'generous orthodoxy' here, where each is encouraged to have their own opinion and their own take on the gospel which others are simply called upon to respect that as somehow 'authentic'. Generosity and graciousness to people most certainly; generosity to variety of belief most certainly not. There is a truth and a perspective the apostle expected us all to share, and cherish and

uphold. There is also falsehood which is not only untrue but dangerous. At the crucial point of the gospel there is no room for diversity: Jesus *is* Lord, he *did* die for our sins, he *did* rise again in defeat of death, he *is* seated at the right hand of the Father, and he *has* promised to return. Denial of these things is not simply a variation on the gospel, it is an absolute denial of it. Our salvation is entirely dependent upon Jesus the Christ and we are bound together as his people in the light of this. There is no room for difference at these critical points. Paul uses the same emphatic language in the introduction to the great Christological hymn in Philippians 2:

> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (Phil. 2:1–2)

So it seems clear that it is of paramount importance for us to identify is the same and should always be the one and the same, and when an absolute insistence on sameness obscures a key biblical truth. Instead of insisting we are the same in every respect, perhaps we should seek clarity on just what is the same and what is not.

Thirdly, then, and once again very briefly, unity.

3. Unity

The Old Testament

The great Old Testament expression of the significance of the unity of God's people in his purposes is found in Psalm 133:

> Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew on Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

Unity between God's people is highly desirable. It is fascinating that the first comparison is the anointing oil used in the consecration of Aaron the priest. This unity and God's provision of a priest and later a temple are linked in an extraordinary way. It is a unity worked out from salvation, anchored in that salvation, which is always God's wonderful gift.

This unity rarely rises to the surface in the Old Testament and so the hope of all God's people, those descended physically from Abraham and those from the nations whom the Lord has gathered for himself, remains in the future. It awaits the arrival of the deliverer and the gift of the Spirit to unite all who come to him. So we move very quickly into the New Testament.

The New Testament

We have already touched upon the starting point, Jesus high priestly prayer in John 17. Jesus, you'll remember, prayed for the unity of his disciples, 'that they may be one, even as are one' (v. 11), and then prayed the same thing for those who would believe in him through the words of the apostles, 'that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (v. 21). It is not so much an injunction on believers to achieve a unity of mind and purpose and life, as a prayer to his Father that he might establish that unity among us. In other words, the unity that Jesus is praying about is a unity that is given. It is a unity that is created by the Spirit of God as he unites us to Christ and to the Father through him. Later in his first epistle, John will speak about the fellowship that we have now with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). It is a spiritual unity. Again and again this has been misunderstood by those preoccupied with its institutional expression. The ecumenical movement insists that only by joining together in one global institution will this unity be manifest on earth. But the reality is that this unity already exists and is already manifest, when Christians of various stripes and colours, in different contexts and different denominations, experience a spiritual unity with their brothers and sisters that transcends these things. It is important to realise that the unity Jesus was talking about between himself and his Father did not obliterate the distinct personhood of Father and Son. Jesus is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. Yet their unity is deeper and richer than we can imagine. One in being, as the Nicene Creed would put it. Unity exists and actually can be nourished by distinction. That the Father does what the Father does and the Son does what the Son does is an expression of their profound unity of being. Distinctions between believers can disrupt our unity, of course, if we value them above the things that bind us together, but they need not do so. Distinctions and the joyful celebration of our differences can actually enhance fellowship and indeed enhance our unity.

We saw that a moment ago when we thought about the diversity of gifts working together to build up the body of Christ. Our unity is nourished by our diversity as each seeks to use the gifts and opportunities given to them for the welfare of the others. We do not have to be the same to be united. We do not even have to have had equal opportunity, or equal access to resources to be united. The key is a preoccupation with the gospel growth and welfare of our brothers and sisters and 'loving our neighbour as ourselves'.

Unity among God's people is an ongoing concern of the apostles. As we've seen, it is recognised as a gift of God. It is God who so builds in each of us that other-centred love that supports and nourishes true Christian unity. It is a unity focussed on a single gospel and a common mission. It is interesting, did you notice, that John in his letter joins the *proclamation* of the eternal life that comes from the word of life, Jesus himself, and the *fellowship* we enjoy with each other and with the Father and the Son. It is a **preoccupation** with the gospel and the powerful way it reorients life and nourishes faith, a **presentation** of the gospel to those who already know it but cannot grow tired of hearing it, and **proclamation** of the gospel to the world where sinners are lost, facing judgment and need to hear of the Saviour, that builds and strengthens our unity. Paul speak of it as a 'unity of the Spirit' (Eph. 4:3) and a 'unity of the faith' (Eph. 4:13).

The ongoing apostolic concern for unity leads to injunctions calling upon all who are Christ's to act in ways which reflect and strengthen that unity rather than undermine it. 'Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace', Paul wrote to the Ephesians (Eph. 4:3). He expanded on this injunction in his letter to the Colossians

> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. (Col. 3:12–15)

Human sinfulness will always work against the unity which Christ established by his saving work and by the gift of his Spirit. This will not only be the case in the world but in the churches as well. I take it that is why the great chapter on love is sandwiched between the chapters on spiritual gifts and how you behave in church, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13). I take it, too, this is

why there are so many injunctions to avoid quarrelling (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 3:3; 1 Tim. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:24; Titus 3:2; James 4:1) and useless arguments (1 Tim. 6:4; 2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9) and a contentious spirit (Rom 16:17; Phil. 2:14). Unity matters. It flows out of the gospel of grace. When our attitudes or behaviour challenges that unity it raises questions of whether we have understood that or perhaps have forgotten that. Of course, there will be times to contend and we cannot simply be conflict-avoiders (Gal 2:11–14; 1 Cor 11:19; Jude 3). But quarrelsomeness or pugnacity is destructive of fellowship and so roundly condemned by the New Testament. So too is the desire to assert ourselves, to seek recognition or honour for ourselves. That caused dissension among the first disciples even during Jesus' earthly ministry (Luke 22:24). In that context Jesus taught about service.

It is important, especially in some contexts, to be clear that the unity we are talking about is a proper consequence of the gospel and not the gospel itself. The gospel is first and foremost 'the gospel concerning God's Son' (Rom. 1:3). It is because we have been saved by him, because each one of us was lost and unable to save ourselves and needed to be saved by him, because the Spirit he has given to me is the same Spirit he has given to you, that we can recognise each other as brothers and sisters. And I hope you have had the joyful experience of that recognition being instantaneous, even with people you have never met before.

Conclusion

So what are we to make of all this? Our world prizes equality and has witnessed a disastrous collapse of unity on a number of levels. Often what is meant by equality is left undefined, or it is defined in ways which leave massive questions unanswered. Must I be able to do all that you do in order to be equal to you? The second concept we considered, identity, plays into that confusion. In order to be equal to you in some sense I need to be interchangeable with you: I am the same as you so I have a right to everything you have; I must be allowed to do everything you do. And the more this is played out and every boundary is erased, even biological boundaries, the more the confusion and the frustration and dissolution of unity gathers pace.

The Bible stresses the value of every human being. We have all been created in the image of God, no matter our background, our level of education, our place in society, our sex or gender. We all stand in need of forgiveness and we all have only one Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we all have direct access to the Father in the Spirit.

At critical points the Bible also stresses the importance of identity in the sense of sameness, an identity that remains fixed across time and space. There is only one gospel. It is the same gospel for Jews and Gentiles, for first century Roman citizens and twenty-first century citizens of any country on earth. The gospel mission remains the same: making disciples all over the world until the end of the age. But that sameness is strengthened by the distinctiveness and diversity of each one of us, our personalities, our backgrounds, the gifts we have been given. We don't have to be identical in order to serve the one and only gospel and participate in the one great gospel mission. We don't have to all do, or be allowed to do, the same things in order to fulfil God's purpose for us as his people. The contemporary push for sameness in the sense of interchangeability is wrongheaded. But we do need to have the one mind, to all be directed in our thinking by the person and example of Christ.

As we've looked at these three concepts, though, it has been very clear, at least to me, that our preoccupations are at odds with the preoccupations of Scripture. Unity in the gospel, unity arising out of the gospel, is writ large over the pages of the New Testament, in particular, in a way that neither equality nor identity/sameness/interchangeability is. Such unity delights in our distinctive contributions in the service of the one gospel and expressions of following the one Saviour: a single mind and perspective, unique and valued diverse contributions to that mission, and a unity that is richer and deeper and more fulfilling than abstract social constructs.

Now how might that impact the way we operate as women and men in ministry together? How do we encourage the valuing of one another as indispensable complements to each other in the service of the gospel? How do we show that we don't have to be the same to be of equal value and dignity as creatures in the image of our Creator and fellow-heirs with the Saviour? How do we help each other avoid the missteps we see happening all around us in the 2020s? Part of the answer is, I think, to ask the hard questions as we read and study the Bible together. It is too easy to read our culture into the

Bible rather than allow the Bible to read and critique our culture. We might not be popular when we take that second course, especially in a context where dissent is censored or ridiculed or decried as evil and destructive, but then neither was Jesus when he challenged human sinfulness in his day.