

Claire Smith on God's Good Design

Claire Smith is a writer and women's Bible teacher who has recently published a book, *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women* (Matthias Media, 2012). The book explores a range of issues on the subject of gender within the church.

Claire holds a PhD in New Testament studies from Moore Theological College. Her doctoral thesis examined the place and practice of educational activities in three early Christian (New Testament) communities, with a special focus on gender issues.

Claire is married to Rob, who lectures in theology at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, and they have an adult son. She and Rob live in Sydney and attend St. Andrew's Anglican Cathedral. She was interviewed recently by Peter Hastie, the principal of the Presbyterian Theological College of Victoria.

Claire, after thousands of pages of ink have been spilled on the subject of women's rights and ordination to the ministry, why another book? Is there something special in what you have to say?

Actually, I hope there's nothing special about what I have to say, because the Bible hasn't changed and, in a sense, what I am saying in the book is what Christians have been saying for centuries; that is, that men and women are created equal by God, equally loved by Him, equally in need of salvation, and equally saved. We're equal in all those ways and yet we're created differently as men and women with different roles and responsibilities. So I don't think I'm really saying anything new at all.

However, discussion on this matter has dragged on for several decades now and so it's helpful to have new voices in the debate. While the book may not say anything that hasn't been said before, it's a fresh new voice, and a woman's voice, and more importantly too, I think, an Australian voice. This is not a voice from either the United Kingdom or America and I think Australians have their own distinctive contribution to make to this debate.

So what's distinctive?

I sometimes get the impression that books written overseas have a certain cultural perspective to male and female roles that is different from the way we see these issues here. Some of the literature that I have come across from the US context has a certain *Leave it to Beaver* association where women have certain clearly defined cultural roles, especially in the home and kitchen. Of course, I am not saying that Australian women writers don't have their own baggage. In fact, feminism is part of our cultural baggage at the moment. Nevertheless, I think there is a place for a distinctively Australian Christian voice to be heard.

How do you believe feminism has shaped the way we think about women and what impact has this had on relationships such as marriage?

Well, the most obvious word that comes to mind, I think, is 'confused'. I think that's the major effect that feminism has had on the way we think about men, women and marriage. And I think that confusion has two sides, and it happens simultaneously. On the one hand there is a view that 'gender is everything'. So you have affirmative action, anti-discrimination legislation, and all those

TV ads that I call 'all men are idiots' ads, where men are always portrayed as incompetent and clueless. If any advertiser dared to portray women in the same way, they'd be in real trouble.

Have you got any particular ones in mind?

There are just too many to know where to start. Usually dad's sitting on the couch playing the video game, and mum's doing all the work – or something along that line. Once you start looking for it, you see it all the time. Men are often portrayed as inadequate, wasting time, clueless as to what to buy, incapable of doing basic things like working the TV remote or whatever, and the implication is that they need a woman to work it out for them. So that's the 'gender is everything' view.

Then there's the 'gender is nothing' view. This is the belief that women can do anything men can do so there should be no differences between the sexes, no roles, that is, distinctive roles, and that, in turn, leads inevitably to the introduction of same-sex marriage and gender plasticity. So there are two views: 'gender is everything', and 'gender is nothing', and depending on which card you want to play, you can play one of those two things. And that's why we have massive confusion today about gender.

And what kind of impact do you think it's having on us?

I think people are having significant identity issues. People are confused about what it means to be a man or a woman. They're confused about how to make marriage work. They're confused in the work place – is there an appropriate level of contact between men and women or should there be none at all? Can you put your hand on the shoulder of someone without it being sexualised? So, there is confusion right across the spectrum.

I saw a news clip from the US a couple of months ago where there was a classroom of six year olds and a man in the front of the class room with a white T-shirt that said, 'Family' across the back. He was telling the children they were free to decide whether they wanted to be a boy or a girl. He said that some people feel like a boy, and others feel like a girl, and some feel like both. His message was: "That's okay!" He was at a public school, telling six year olds that gender doesn't matter. The irony was that he had this T-shirt with 'Family' printed across it. So, in other words, this is family. There is neither male nor female. You can decide, day-by-day, what you want to be.

How do you think feminism has changed our perceptions of God? Has it had any impact?

I think it's had a deep impact. I believe it's happening in two areas. The first is outside the Christian tent. What's happened there has been the divinising of the feminine. So the feminine has assumed divine status. You see that in things like the extreme agenda of the Green movement, in witchcraft and Wicca and so on, and in movies like *Avatar* where you have this feminine earth spirit. So we have the divinising of the feminine outside the church.

However, what you have within the church is the feminising of the divine. So you have God the Father now being called God the Father/Mother, or even our Heavenly Mother. Or you have Jesus who is supposedly fallible, who had to learn from women. Some suggest that the Syrophenician woman taught Jesus that the Gentiles were going to be included in God's purposes. Others say that we should refer to the Holy Spirit as 'She'. So, yes, the effect has been profound, and, more recently in the world of evangelical thought, there's been discussion about the order within the Trinity and what is meant by the Son's submission to the Father.

After several decades on, how do you think we should assess feminism?

I think the first thing to realise is that feminism is now mainstream. It's the dominant mind-set of our society. This means that if we want non-Christians to get what we are talking about, we need to recognise that they don't have the language or the mental building blocks to understand it.

But some things that feminism has brought have been good. For example, rape in marriage is now an offense. Women are educated and can have bank accounts and so on. However, it's a shame that feminism had to be the vehicle to bring about those changes. Still, those changes are good because they're in line with God's purposes for justice and equality between men and women.

But, as I said, on the downside we have confusion about what it means to be a man and a woman. This has led to family breakdown, abortion on demand, the same sex agenda, the assumption of dual income households, all of which flow out of the feminist agenda. So, while feminism has precipitated several urgent and needed changes, it has also opened a Pandora's box of problems too.

When Christians come to read the Bible today, do you think we're predisposed to read it now in ways that would have been unthinkable fifty years ago?

Yes, I think so. We are more deeply influenced than we might imagine by the feminist agenda. We need to realise that we all read the Bible with certain presuppositions – we don't come to the text with a blank slate.

The way we are meant to read the Bible responsibly hasn't changed from the very beginning. Even as we read it, we should let the Bible speak on its own terms. The Bible should set the agenda. Obviously, since the Bible was written in a historical context, historical information from that period can be useful in helping us to understand its message. However, it shouldn't be used in a way that contradicts the clear reading of the Bible text.

One of the problems facing us today is that although we have more historical information about the first century Greco-Roman period than ever before, people often use it to silence the Bible. We must allow the Scriptures, as our ultimate authority, to speak to us before we hear what other disciplines such as linguistics, history, and science have to say. It is also important for us to understand how our own personal and cultural blind spots affect us at this point.

Beyond that, we need to pray for the Spirit's enlightenment and see how the saints throughout history have understood these texts, and then read and re-read them. It is also important for us to read the whole counsel of God and resist the temptation to manipulate particular texts to conform to our expectations and preferences.

What's the best place to start in getting a proper view of a woman's identity in her relationships, especially within the church?

Well, obviously there are some foundational texts in the Bible that we need to begin with. In my book I look at key passages like Genesis 1-3, because that is so determinative for interpreting later texts. The teaching about the role-relationship of men and women in the opening chapters of the Bible is like the bulk of the iceberg that then pops up above the surface in the New Testament. So Genesis 1-3, Proverbs 31, 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2, and then 1 Peter 3 are all important texts. They're the passages where we see the delineation of the differences between the sexes most clearly. It's also where we see the different responsibilities of men and women in the church and family most clearly articulated.

Why did you begin your book by looking at 1 Timothy 2?

I started there because it provides the clearest outline and answer to many of the issues we are facing. It's short, it's clear, and as with the other Pauline passages, it's firmly grounded in Genesis 1-3. If people are wrestling with the issue of how teaching should be undertaken in the church, then this is the text that they usually remember.

I mention an episode in my book some years ago when a journalist interviewed me during a debate about the ordination of women. She asked me, 'Is there part of the Bible that says what you're saying?' And I said, 'Oh, yes', and she said, 'What is it?' And I recited 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 and she wrote it down. Then she looked at me and said, 'That's what it says?' And I said, 'Yes', and I thought she was going to say, 'How ridiculous'. But she said, 'Well, what's the all argument about then?' As a non-Christian she had heard these texts and had understood my position about women not being teaching elders in our church.

Paul has certainly come under attack for his comments in that passage, where he says, 'a woman is to learn quietly with all submissiveness'. How should we understand these words? Are they as sexist as they appear to be?

The place to start with these questions, indeed with all questions about what Scripture means, is with our doctrine of God. So, what is God like? If this is God's Word, what is He like?

We know in Christ that God is good and all-powerful. So this reminds me that God can teach me accurately in His Word all I need to know to please Him and what is good for me. So, in a sense, the first part of call is, 'Who is God? If this is God's Word, what is God like?' Now, beyond that, the question that you've asked is, 'Is this sexist?' Well, in one respect, yes, it is sexist, if by that word you mean, 'Does it make a distinction between men and women?' It certainly does differentiate men from women.

If, however, you mean, 'Is it sexist in that women are inferior to men?' then it's not sexist. This is not a statement about worth. It's a statement about our participation in the congregation and in one limited aspect of what happens in our congregation involving teaching and authority. In fact, not even all teaching, but a particular sort of teaching: the ongoing, authoritative, formal instruction of the congregation. So, it's saying, 'Women are to be submissive in that they are not to have a formal teaching role with respect to men in the congregation.' They are not to engage in that sort of teaching.

Well, is there any area of responsibility for teaching and leadership that a woman may have within the congregation?

Yes, there is. We see in Titus 2:2 that the older women are to teach the younger women what is good – that is, how to conduct themselves faithfully in their homes, in their marriages, with their children, and in their private lives. This will certainly involve them in teaching God's Word to other women and children.

The research I did for my doctoral thesis looked at the vocabulary of 'teaching' in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. What I discovered is that there were many activities in the early church that people learned from – that 'taught' people. People may not have been teaching through a sermon, but they still taught one another. So you have prophecy, prayer, singing, imitation and rebuking others - all those sorts of things. This means that men and women who aren't official teachers in the church can contribute to the common good. I think we're doing that more and more.

It's not just a one-man show; we are brothers and sisters encouraging and teaching one another. I think people often get stuck on this one thing that happens for twenty minutes in the pulpit, and forget that we're together for a whole lot longer than that, and there are many different ways we can encourage and teach one another.

How important is the way that God made the first man and woman in determining the role and relationship between men and women today? Does it have any relevance today given the fact that human marriages will be superseded in the age to come?

I think that if the New Testament hadn't reiterated what was in Genesis 1-3, we might have reason to think, 'Well, that was back then, and it doesn't have any relevance today'. However, the fact that when the New Testament writers deal with the relationship between men and women they go back to Genesis 1-3 tells us that, yes, how we were originally created and what we were originally created for does have a bearing on how we are to live today. When you think about it that makes perfect sense, because God made us for a purpose, and you would expect that how He created us would have a bearing on how we are to be faithful to Him today.

Of course, it's true that marriage will not continue in the new creation, but that's because the marriage relationship will have fulfilled its purpose in bearing witness to the ultimate union between Christ and the church. In the age to come Christ will have received His bride and so the human signpost of marriage will no longer be needed. I am not exactly sure what this means for male/female relationships in the new age, but I believe that our sexual distinctions will remain. Moses will still be Moses and the same goes for Elijah. I think we see that in the Transfiguration: we don't lose our basic identity.

Is the idea of male headship a result of the fall, or is it something that existed prior to the entry of sin into the world? And does it make any difference?

The headship of the husband with his wife and leadership of men in the church is not a result of the fall. The way it's exercised is impacted by the fall, but the relationship itself is not a result of the fall. And we see that in lots of ways. When you look at Genesis 2, quite clearly, the man has a role that is different from the woman. He has a priority in that he was made first. God addresses him with a specific command before the woman is made. He names all the creatures, even the woman, and he is the source of the new family. So the man in Genesis 2 is clearly leading. He has a responsibility of leading and headship.

The woman, on the other hand, is made *after* the man. She is made *from* him, and Paul makes these points in 1 Corinthians 11 that she is made *from* him and *for* him. She is made as his helper. So yes, there may be post-Genesis 3 elements to the way that headship is exercised today, but headship in and of itself is not a consequence of the fall. As men, when husbands and church leaders exercise their headship they are being transformed into the image of Christ, and so they're putting off what is tainted by sin and putting on what is good and godly exercise of authority. And so we should rejoice when we see it well demonstrated.

Paul seems to suggest in 1 Timothy 2:15 that the proper role for women today is to be mothers. Is that a fair reading of his words?

It's certainly a text that commentators and preachers wrestle with. There are several grammatical challenges with the verse but I think the best explanation is that Paul is saying that a woman's faith will be preserved - in the face of false teaching and temptation - if she continues in her God-given role. So it's being used as a sort of short-hand, in a sense, of the woman's role.

The particular context when Paul wrote it, of course, is in Ephesus, where there were false teachers who forbade marriage. And you can understand the women thinking, 'Well, I shouldn't be getting married, I shouldn't be having children', and so wondering how can they be saved if they're married and they've had children, and so on. And Paul is saying, no, you should continue in the feminine role that God has given you, as wives and mothers, and you are to do that faithfully and with self-control, and so on, and you will be kept safe from the dangers of going off-track. As a footnote, I should just say that this passage is not saying that all women must be married or that all women must have children.

Paul also runs into trouble with many people today when he says 'the husband is the head of the wife', from Ephesians 5:23. What does he mean? Is he actually denying that women are equal to men?

When Paul says, 'the husband is the head of the wife', he qualifies it by then saying, 'as Christ is the head of the church'. So what informs the headship of the husband and the wife's submission to him is the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ as head lays down His life for His bride, the church. And the church, in submission to Christ, follows and submits to Him, and accepts His sacrificial leadership by accepting the salvation that He provides. So really, we can't wrench the headship of the husband and submission of the wife from the relationship of Christ with His church, because that's what Paul uses to inform the relationship of marriage.

And so, when you ask, 'Is Paul denying that women are equal to men?' the answer is, 'Well, no, because the church that is saved by Christ contains men and women, who are equally helpless to save themselves, and equally in submission to Christ.' That's there in Ephesians 5. And if you zoom out, and you take in the whole of Scripture, it's perfectly clear that men and women are created equal before God, equally loved by Him, and equally equipped for service in His church, though the service is different in some aspects. So there is no hint of inequality.

The mistake that feminism makes is to say that for two things to be equal they must be the same. But that's not the case. It's not the case with our children, who we love equally – but they're not the same. This egalitarian argument breaks down all over the place. You know if I had two right hands I would be in trouble. Feminism gets it wrong when it insists that for two things to be equal they must be the same.

What does Paul mean when he says women should remain silent in church services, in one Corinthians 14? Do you think that's rather anachronistic in an age where women are newsreaders and comperes on TV shows?

When the Bible talks about the relationship between men and women it does so in two particular contexts. It talks about it in the church and the family. And so, what happens on news or TV shows is not so much anachronistic as going beyond what Scripture explicitly addresses.

God has told us how husbands are to love their wives in the family. Again, He has told us that in the church family – His household – He wants male teaching elders. So it is within the family and the church family that these relationships are being worked out. The Bible is not saying who can be Prime Minister, Governor General, or chairman of the board. There may be implications for our broader relationships, but it speaks specifically to family and church life.

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