

Men, Women, Helpers, Subservience and Equality in Relationships

HELP

“Help” or “help meet” is NOT a term of subservience. “help” is the noun and “meet” is the verb, as in meeting needs, or suiting a need. Eve was created suitable for Adam’s needs, a help, meet for him, Genesis 2:18 and 20.

After Genesis, these are some other relevant verses.

- “For the man is not of the woman, but the woman is of the man, neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man”, 1 Corinthians 11:8, 9.

- “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord”, 1 Corinthians 11:11.

- “For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also of the woman, but all things of God”, 1 Corinthians 11:12

NOT A HELPMATE

Note: In the context of creation Eve is NOT a “help mate”. “Helpmate” is a compound noun, with a subordinate role. If we go there, “helpmate”, we enter into the old Gnostic ideas of creation order, first God, then “woman as God’s helpmate”, called “Sophia/Wisdom”. Then there follows the Gnostic teaching that “man was created subordinate to woman”.

The reason that Paul addresses the argument of creation order, I believe, in 1 Timothy 2:13, is that Paul needs to refute the Gnostic teaching of “woman first created”. Every Jew knew that Adam was “first formed”. So why does Paul make such a comment?

To have that doctrinal argument in Paul’s answering letter to Timothy must mean that creation order of man and woman was in the question. Because it was right and necessary to refute the Gnostic doctrine, Paul suggests that these “women learn in silence, with all subjection”. “I suffer not a woman to teach, usurping authority over the man, but to be in silence”, 1 Timothy 2:11, 12. Paul rightly refuted the Gnostic teaching in his adamant reply to Timothy, for “Adam was first formed, then Eve”, when he was told those women were expounding these Gnostic ideas in the new ecclesias. So “helpmate” a subordinate role, is not under discussion here. That is another subject.

HELP MEET

“Help meet” is NOT a compound noun. “Help meet” is a noun, connected to a verb. The old English “meet”, AV, is translated “fit” in the RSV. Some men refer to their wives as a “help meet”. Eve was a “help” suitable to “meet” the needs of Adam. Eve, “the woman ...of the man”, was created to be a help, to suit, or to meet, Adam’s needs, Genesis 2:20. However, nowhere is the subordinate, or “sub” of inequality, introduced into this creation description, or of any roles in marriage, or in NT ecclesial teaching.

EVERYONE IS A HELP MEET FOR THE OTHER

It does not say, in this Genesis context, that Adam is also to be a help, meet for Eve, because the subject is the creation of Eve. It does say so in other Scriptural texts, where the man is a help, meet for the woman, but we need not quote them. The argument is better served by showing that God is a help, meet for all of us. God serves our every need and “shall help thee”, from above, Genesis 49:25. The sub serve argument does not come into that Divine relationship, and so neither does it into the gender relationship. Then each is a “help”, meet for the other, as God is for us.

CHRIST AND GOD AS HELPERS

To help someone is to serve, not to sub serve. It is a Christ like action, like washing feet. That was the action of a King! If God and Christ are a “help” for us that endorses that it is not a sub serve role. Hebrews 4:16, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we might obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need”. So that God becomes our “help” or “help, meet for us” in our time of need, and He is not made subservient to us in that service to us.

Made “in His image”, Genesis 1:26, refers to God’s moral character - not “in His shape”. Man and woman are both made in God’s moral image, an imitation of Him. So in this sense also, “help” becomes a valuable attribute. We are all “made in His image”, and God is helpful.

“Succour”, “protect”, “aid” are all good words and concepts, as both succour each other and God succours them, in their particular and individual needs. It does not imply weakness, it means each does a job, meets a need, which is a “help” to the other.

COMPLEMENTARY ROLES IN RELATIONSHIPS

It is the companion role, or the complementary role in the marriage relationship, which is ideal in the Lord, to each other, whenever the need arises. Scripture does not imply that the “help” role is confined to the woman in unequal subservience. Neither does scripture claim an equal role, for saints are never equal, but complementary to each other. In marriage, they are “one flesh”, neither is more important, or boss of the other, they can only be complementary, as the image of “one flesh” implies. It is a nonsense to say “in the one-flesh marriage relationship, there are two roles, one subservient to the other”. The “one flesh” married couple description Genesis 2:24, has no connotation of equality, or inequality.

God never made us equal, we are all unique, but we are complementary each to the other. God rightly divides. He never equally divides. He it is, who does the differences, and He asks us to build upon the boundaries of the gifts which He gives to us, gender, skin colour, place of birth, status of birth. He does not ask others to forbid us our expression or passions to be like Him, within the boundaries and gifts which He has gifted to us.

I am a help, and meet/fit for my husband’s need of direction, if I use the map, when we drive. He is a help, and meet/fit for my needs, when he drives me somewhere that I need to go. We complement each other, never attempting to be equal. (We should exercise care never to use the word “compliment” for it gives quite the wrong connotation)

There are several concepts in Scripture which go to show our complementary roles in Christ, rather than equal roles, particularly in marriage. “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord”, 1 Corinthians 11:11.

NO EQUALITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

It is not good to have discussions on equality in gender relationships, because subservience then comes into it. Yes, I have equal rights as a human being in the eyes of God, and even in my right to exist, in race/ethnicity, and freedom/slave status, and gender. We are, in that sense, all “equal in Christ”, Galatians 3:28.

But it is futile to bring equality into the discussion on roles of brothers and sisters, because of our history, and because of our culture of gender imbalance. We immediately tip into the subservience discussion, subservience required of one for the other, or not. So we ought not to speak of equality or not, in the teaching of Scriptural roles of relationships, in marriage, or with our brothers and sisters, or in worship.

We ought to guide the discussions of relationships of brothers and sisters, and particularly discussions of marriage, to “complementary” roles, and then subordination never comes into it. “For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also of the woman, but all things of God”, 1 Corinthians 11:12.

HEADSHIP

The “head” discussion in Scripture in 1 Corinthians 11 needs some clarification. “Head” does not mean that man is always superior as “boss” and it does not always insist on subservience by women.

“That the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God, 1 Corinthians 11:3.

“For the man is not of the woman, (in creation) but the woman is of the man (in the present natural order)”, 1 Corinthians 11: 8.

“For as the woman is of the man, (in creation) even so is the man also of the woman, (in the present natural order) but all things of God”, 1 Corinthians 11:12.

Here “head” must mean “source”. These are not headship verses, in the sense of control. “For the woman is of the man”, refers to the first creation - woman from the side of Adam. “The man is of the woman” refers to the second creation - in the birth of Christ from Mary, and actually of every man since creation. So that “head” has no sense of control here, it must be speaking of “source”.

Paul does not make distinctions for husbands to be head of the family and Christ like, and consequently wives are not required to be head or Christ like. That is a nonsense. Paul understands that sometimes wives are head of the family, and in whatever role is appropriate at the time, wives are always expected to be Christ like. And as well, no other brother is “head” of me, only my husband, when in our marriage, we decide that.

Now that we are living much longer, and dementia is a factor in some marriages, I know of wives caring for husbands, who are failing, and falling into dementia. Some of those husbands are still trying, so hard, to be “head/boss” when they lose their driving licenses and the wife has to drive, or when they use a stick to walk in their frailty, and lash out at their wives when she will not do what he says, as “head” or boss. This indicates there was a non understanding of the role, and that behaviour is now unacceptable. It is a very sad circumstance.

Headship is something decided upon in a marriage, according to time, circumstances, situations and culture, in any good complementary relationship, with Christ and the church as the model.

SUBMISSION

It is the same with the submit argument.

Everyone submits to the other, Ephesians 5:21. Paul does not make a distinction that wives submit, subserviently, and husbands love, verses 22-29. That is a nonsense.

Obviously, husbands and wives both submit and love in a complementary relationship. Each imitates the Christ like relationship demonstrated by Christ to his church. Paul does not advise husbands to be more Christ like than wives. And, as well, I am not in submission to all brothers,

for all sisters and all brothers are each in submission to each other, Ephesians 5:21, out of reverence to Christ.

Submission, also, is something decided upon in a marriage, according to time, circumstances, situations and culture, in any good complementary relationship, with Christ and the church as the model.

PAUL IS NOT MANDATORY ABOUT RELATIONSHIP ROLES

That is enough for me to understand that Paul is not being mandatory about male “headship” or female “submission” for every occasion, in marriage, or in the church. And here is a final thought.

HELP AS A SPIRIT GIFT

In 1 Corinthians 12:27 Paul lists “helpers” or “the power to help” (Greek) as a special gift of the spirit, given to the leaders of the church in the first century.

It is a spirit gift, not a gender gift, and certainly not a subservient role.

Bev Russell, December 2006