

Chapter 6.

Contested Equality

"And God said...have dominion...over every living thing..."

The dominion of man (male and female) gives purpose to the earth with all of its beauty and fruitfulness. Without humanity to appreciate and appropriate it, the earth would appear to be without significance. When mankind improperly controls the environment, the result is chaos and disaster. We were made to reign over the earth, to enjoy, appreciate, and maintain it, with sound judgment and commitment, under the sovereign wisdom of the Creator-God.

In a similar way, the dominion of God gives meaning to mankind. Godless philosophy deprives mankind of both meaning and worth. If our existence is traceable only to chance, we can destroy, or be destroyed without import. Why should issue be made of our rights as persons, our fulfillment and relationships, the structure of our society, if, indeed, we are creatures without design and destiny?

The revelation of the Scripture and a basic tenet of Christian faith is that earth was made for mankind and mankind was made for God; that earth was made to serve us, and we, in turn, to serve God. In it all, God is the ultimate Resource. In all the universe he is the only no-need Being. We worship and serve him, not to meet his need but because to do so is appropriate and therefore fulfilling to our humanity.

In God's Manifesto of Human Liberty, the Ten Commandments, he clearly outlines the boundaries of our humanity, beginning with our need to worship only God, and describing appropriate human relational attitudes and actions. We learn that in giving to God first priority, every other relationship and commitment becomes an act of worship to him.

Worship is a human need, which is met only in the worship of God. Our equality with every other person makes it futile and meaningless to worship others or ourselves. Such misdirected worship is a refutation of our equality with others and our creature relationship with God.

Self-worship is god-playing. It is the human effort to simulate God's attributes. We imagine ourselves all-wise, all-powerful and perfect in performance. In this illusory frame of mind, we become demanding, domineering, manipulative, critical, aggressive, and possessive. And all of these are symptoms of our own insecurity, because when we try to be what we are not and what we cannot be, we hate ourselves; so that in the end we lose our sense of worth and identity.

This is not differentiated by male or female; it is true of all, characteristic of our fallenness. It is sheer folly to claim, as some do, that were women dominant in the family, church and society, the female presence would assure peace and equity. Woman-to-woman power struggles are as prevalent and malignant as those experienced among men. We are, indeed, equal sinners!

God-playing has a predictable effect on our relations with others. It produces defensiveness, abdication of responsibility, withdrawal, insecurity, hostility, bitterness, resentment, and sometimes even sexual deviations. God-playing is using others to accommodate to our ideals, tastes, physical and emotional needs; it is the vain attempt to find our identity in human relationships.

Aggression and dominance result from thinking we have rights over another. This too is a denial of our equality. Only God has prior claim over every person, male and female. We affirm our equality by recognizing

God's prior claim in our lives as well as in others. Since we are mutually God's persons, we may not be possessive of one another. We are not to consume one another with self-interest, nor to exploit one another for selfish pleasure or prestige.

Each individual has the God-given freedom to make choices. We share this mutual responsibility and privilege with every other person. It is imperative that we respect that duty. This disqualifies manipulating, domineering strategies. It is God who works in us, both to will and to do of His good pleasure. (His pleasure, His image, His work, not ours!) And He will continue to perform that work until the day of Jesus Christ (see Philippians 1: 6).

Equal rights seem easy enough to work out on paper, but the simple fact is that none of us can maintain that perspective under the pressure of our own self-centered interests and demands. From that motivation our responses are confused and immature, with the result that we are both threatened and threatening. We fear exposure, rejection, and challenge, and we produce the same fear in others. Our equality is subject to competition, jealousy, and rivalry, as we vacillate between attitudes of inferiority and superiority.

But God has a plan for the survival of both our identity and our equality! Ironically, the very plan by which God intends to establish and mature us into whole and healed persons is the one which is misused and misinterpreted in such a way as to eventually destroy us. One way to test whether we have grasped God's loving and healing intent, and the perfection of his plan for us, is to simply state it as "headship-subjection" or "authority-submission," and observe the emotional response!

If the words "submission" and "subjection" threaten our concept of identity, it is because we misunderstand the true implications of this God-given design. This negative, often hostile, response is culturally conditioned. We react to the abuses of God's design and therefore accept the connotation of injustice and inhumanity which those words have come to suggest.

Thus threatened, we may usurp the dominant headship role, but there we sense the intolerable weight of responsibility, the exposure of our inadequacy and the contradiction to our basic femininity. We are uneasy and insecure in either role; neither seems suited to our human need, so we may settle into a medley of resentment or open hostility, pussycat manipulation, and power-plays, either overt or subtle.

In the male-female relationship, submission makes woman vulnerable, and thus becomes the means by which man is exposed as a tyrannical sinner or a redeemed lover. With Christ as the example, man is to serve the woman in his headship role. As Christ's position was not jeopardized, neither will be the man's. Thus the headship-submission role becomes the test of mature manhood.

It is likewise the test of mature womanhood, by revealing the woman as either a manipulative sinner or a redeemed love-servant. In her submissive serving, Christ is also the Model. As His submission to the Father's will made his serving redemptive, so the woman's submission, "as unto the Lord", will be redemptive in His hands.

Every encounter between persons puts human equality under stress. If we are seeking to establish our identity in any role, or in any human relationship, we will always be threatened. And when we are threatened, we react in ways which threaten others. We must learn who we are in terms of who God is and what is his creative and redemptive purpose for us. If we fail to learn that basic truth, we will be insecure in any situation and in every relationship.

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