

All Are One in Christ Jesus

BY ROBBIE FOX CASTLEMAN

Like my brother, my gendered personhood in Christ matters. Our equality in Christ Jesus is not a thing to be grasped at, fought over, proven and made the standard-bearer of our rights for women or for men—not if we are talking about the kingdom of God and our partnership in the gospel.

For many years I have enjoyed being a Bible teacher. I have taught the Scripture for Sunday schools, Bible studies, women's conferences, university classrooms, and Sunday morning services.¹ I do not care if I am up or down, in the pulpit or down in the basement. I do not care if someone calls what I do teaching, preaching, sharing, or just talking. As a woman, I have been criticized by some for settling for a music stand on the floor in a church where only men are in the pulpit; and I have been criticized by others for teaching Scripture (yes, and preaching) in the pulpit by those who prefer women to only teach other women, children, or the lost on the mission field.

To all critics, I reply with three basic points. First, my gift of teaching the Bible is given in service to God's people and I am willing to make far more of the message than the messenger. Secondly, the exercise of one's gifts is never a "right" for men or women. The opportunity to edify the Church with what God gives is always a privilege of the call. The exercise of a spiritual gift is always a response to an invitation—by God, and by God's grace through God's people. And thirdly, I am free to promote the ministry

of others and their gifts, but not my own. I can, with the mind of Christ, work for the benefit of others while continuing in my own life and work to sit in the lowly place. That has never been popular, but it is one self-emptying way that Paul recommends in order to regard others as better than oneself. It is the mandate of Jesus and the advice of James. What would happen if men and women in the church – whether egalitarians, complimentarians, or hierarchials in regard to women’s service roles – actually began to “have the mind of Christ”?



As a woman, I have tried to avoid writing or publicly speaking out much on “the women’s issue,” not because it does not concern me, but because I do not want to end up in “women’s studies” or on a panel rehashing old arguments. As a scholar, I like to teach New Testament hermeneutics from a Trinitarian, covenantal, quasi-Vanhoozerian framework² and have little patience for one more argument about Paul’s use of *kephalē* (usually translated “head”) in Ephesians 5:23. I am amazed that some brothers who will not give sisters even an inclusionary pronoun in Ephesians 5:21 (“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”) that does no violence to the intention of the biblical text, will still preach with a straight face a call to losing one’s life to find it to the whole congregation. I am not amused when the same people who would quickly and accurately point out the historical and theological distinctions between evangelicals and fundamentalists fail to see how carefully Bible translators work to treat language pertaining to God and language pertaining to humanity very differently.

I have been considering lately the implications of Paul’s precise language in Galatians 3:28 that hinges on the change of a conjunction and speaks to “the women’s issue” in an interesting way. The Greek sequence of *oude, oude, kai* is telling: “In Christ, there is neither Jew *nor* Greek, there is neither slave *nor* free, there is neither male *and* female.” That last phrase echoes the language of the creation story, where “male and female created he them” were designated to bear the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27). The Apostle is making the point that gender distinction is a God-created identity, essentially good and right, before the fall. Certainly, after the fall, male and female relationships manifest sin in a myriad of ways and must be redeemed, like all sin, in Christ. Gender distinction is not a manifestation of fallenness, but part of God’s very good creation both in the beginning and in Christ eternally.

I think this *oude, oude, kai* reality should be increasingly manifest in the life of the church. Our identity in Christ, and our suitability to serve the Church has nothing to do with our racial, socio-economic or gender identities. Paul’s admonition in Galatians 3:28, “there is neither” (*ouk eni*) is repeated three times in the Greek sentence to emphasize the unity needed in

the Church for all believers to bear together the image of God in the work and mission of the Church. Nevertheless, both egalitarians and complementarians can probably find a way to use Paul's language in Galatians 3:28 for their own benefit, and this is precisely where I get tired of the argument that wages over my feminine head.

I have often thought how the man born blind (John 9) must have felt

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when yet one more rabbi and his disciples hovered over his head (I might be blind, but I can hear!) to make him the foci of yet another theological debate about "who sinned." It is easy to forget that theology matters to, and actually affects, real people. It is easy to wage a war over words and never honestly ask what is being said about a little over half the people

that have ever populated our planet. For some, it can be a triumphant rush to see oneself as a defender of biblical inerrancy, to be one of the important few who stand fast on biblical authority (and yet gloss over in a variety of ways the counter-cultural advocacy for and inclusion of women in the ministry of Jesus and Paul). I am weary of hearing the point and counter point of *kephalē, authentēin* (Does it mean "to boldly usurp another's authority" or exercise "any authority at all" in 1 Timothy 2:12?), Junia (Is the fellow prisoner described in Romans 13:7 as "prominent among the apostles" a man or a woman?) and the dispute over *anthropos* (Should it be translated "man" or "human being"?) that a first semester Greek student should have settled. I want Jesus to come by, spit in the mud, treat me like a person in whom God is at work, and end the debate that rages over my life as though I were unaffected by the argument. Paul's careful *oude, oude, kai* tells me, like my brother, I am not invisible and my gendered personhood in Christ matters. Our equality in Christ Jesus is not a thing to be grasped at, fought over, proven and made the standard-bearer of our rights for women or for men — not if we are talking about the kingdom of God and our partnership in the gospel.



To have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5 ff.), to think like Jesus, to be like Jesus, to engage in ministry like Jesus does not mean to fight for one's own right to exercise one's own gifts — it means to notice and open doors for the exercise of another's gifts for the benefit of the Church and the good of the world. To have the mind of Christ means to be a self-emptying person

for the sake of the other. When taken seriously, kenotic theology is bound to be unpopular because, as Paul clearly shows throughout the Philippian epistle, all must lose in order for Christ to truly win. Paul challenged the church in Philippi, and in particular Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3), to count it all rubbish, to count it all loss like he had learned to do (3:7-11). This may be particularly costly for women in the evangelical church today. As a Trinitarian theologian I staunchly affirm that God's self-revealed identity as Father and Son and Spirit are non-negotiable terms. I also assert that gender-accurate translation regarding the human family honors the Lord, the text, and the Church. (Holding these two ideas together in one's life and discipline is akin to being a womb-to-tomb pro-life advocate. One is rendered politically homeless in the United States, but it does foster a watchfulness for the kingdom to come.)

What would a community of faith (or a marriage!) look like if it gave itself to Paul's kenotic mandate for ecclesial life and really reflected the *oukeni* and *oude, oude, kai* pattern of Pauline scripture? What would happen if people championed each other's gifts, worked for the other's benefit, and heralded each other's opportunity? What would the excellence of our ministry look like if we stewarded our invitations as surprising privileges instead of negotiated rights? What would happen if our language reflected all whom God intended to hear and obey? We just might make Paul's joy complete, become a community of real saints, be filled with the Spirit, look like Jesus, and bless the Father's heart! We might actually be able to get on with the mission of the Church in the world if we quit arguing over our own turf!

For the many brothers and sisters who think there is too much to lose in risky kenosis, the gospel itself has a resounding reply to such fears. How dare we evangelicals who defend the foolishness and weakness of the Cross and explain the humiliation of the Incarnation better than anyone, consistently forget or intentionally eliminate the implications of kenotic theology in the turf wars that consume "the women's issue"? Brothers protect their power, and sisters want their share. And either nothing changes or things get worse because no one is willing to risk the very challenge of faith: to die to ourselves that we might truly live *in Christ*.

I am grateful that the benediction my husband and I chose for our wedding has also been the commitment of our marriage. I think it reflects Paul's longing for Philippi and the churches in Galatia, and God's hope for the Body of Christ. I commend it as both the starting point and the end result of our current conversation.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:5-6

NOTES

1 Parts of this essay are borrowed from my paper “Gender, Grace and a Greek Conjunction,” *Themelios: An International Journal for Theological and Biblical Studies* 32:1 (2006), 57-59. I thank the editor for permission to use the material.

2 I refer to Kevin J. Vanhoozer, the Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, who was research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 1998-2009.



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