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Gender matters: A biblical-theological hermeneutical and conceptual framework

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This article proposes a reconsideration of the contemporary conceptualisation of gender and gender roles prevalent within the church. It argues that a biblical-theological framework, namely the realisation of God's eternal creation purposes in Christ, provides the proper hermeneutical and conceptual framework for a biblical understanding of gender and the roles of men and women. This thesis is demonstrated in two ways: (1) the hermeneutical framework operative within Scripture is examined to formulate a properly biblical hermeneutic regarding gender questions; and (2) by relating a biblical conceptual framework regarding these matters.

Contribution: The article argues that a biblical-theological framework provides the contemporary church with biblically based hermeneutical and conceptual tools for faithfully discerning and applying biblical teaching concerning gender matters.

Keywords: biblical theology; biblical interpretation; biblical-theological approach; worldview; conceptualisation of gender; gender roles; contemporary church.

Introduction

The need: A biblical approach

Doriani (2003:19) observes that most people understand gender according to the customs of their own time, which appear to them self-evident and even sacrosanct. That is, we tend to conceptualise gender in terms of intuited and pre-theoretical conceptual frameworks – those unexamined elements of our thinking that we take for granted (cf. Sire 2015:60). These elements are often deeply rooted in the contemporary social imaginary.[1] Pearcey (2005:44), however, cautions that all conceptual frameworks are accompanied by conceptual tools of analysis. These tools may be inconsistent with or even at variance with a biblical conceptual framework and its corresponding conceptual tools of analysis. For this reason, she advocates the deliberate development of a biblical conceptual framework with appropriate biblical tools of analysis.

The unconscious assimilation of a conceptual framework, together with its accompanying analytical tools that diverges from a biblical one, it is argued here, underlies the contemporary church's replacement of the biblical conceptualisation of gender with one informed by the contemporary social imaginary. Chesterton's (2021) influential idea, *Chesterton's Fence*,[2] together with his well-known observation, 'It isn't that they can't see the solution. It is that they can't see the problem', is particularly relevant. Both the statement and the principle form part of Chesterton's recurring theme: moral, philosophical, or social confusion arises not from a lack of intelligence but from a lack of clarity about reality (Microsoft Copilot 2026a). This article therefore seeks to clarify how the Bible itself defines reality regarding gender. To this end, it proposes a properly biblical hermeneutic and develops a biblical conceptual framework – with its accompanying biblical tools of analysis – for addressing matters pertaining to gender. In doing so, it calls for a reconsideration of the contemporary conceptualisation of gender and gender roles prevalent within the church.

In his description of 'the rise to cultural normativity of the expressive individual self, particularly as expressed through the idioms of the sexual revolution', Trueman (2020, 2022) explains that these idioms of the sexual revolution have become 'deeply embedded in all aspects of our culture' (Trueman 2022:29). Doriani (2003:19) similarly notes that 'the tenets of commonsense feminism are old and widespread enough that they seem beyond question in our culture'. Yet this has not

1.For a concise overview of the term 'social imaginary' see Trueman (2022:26–29; see also Sire 2015:59–63).

2.The principle that one should not remove or change an existing structure, rule or custom until one understands why it was put there in the first place.

always been the case. Using a helpful analogy[3] that illustrates how historical awareness (at least to some degree) can guard against uncritical assimilation of the assumptions of one's own age, Lewis (1949:51) reminds us 'that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain … is merely temporary fashion'.

For this reason, a reconsideration of the conceptualisation of gender and gender roles prevalent within the contemporary church is necessary. To this end, the article makes a case for a biblical-theological approach to the question of gender and the roles of the sexes. It is argued that such an approach can equip the church with a properly biblical hermeneutical and conceptual framework, together with the corresponding biblical tools of analysis required for this task.

The methodology: A biblical-theological approach

A biblical-theological approach to matters pertaining to gender seeks to discern the hermeneutical framework operative within Scripture itself for a properly biblical hermeneutic regarding gender questions. It further seeks to articulate a biblical conceptual framework in order to provide the church with 'biblically based conceptual tools' (Pearcey 2005:44) for the contemporary task of faithfully discerning and applying biblical teaching regarding matters pertaining to gender and gender roles.

In pursuing a biblical-theological approach, the Reformation hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture is followed. Blocher (2013) states that:

> The *norma normans* rules, and we truly hear the Word of God in Scripture when we interpret aright. The axiom of sound hermeneutics – 'Scripture is its own interpreter' – entails that Scripture itself must determine our interpretation. It implies that the character of Scripture should govern our way of reading it. (p. 513)

Thus, the first task is to ascertain the hermeneutical framework operative within Scripture itself in order to formulate a properly biblical hermeneutic regarding questions pertaining to gender. It will be argued that Ephesians 5:31–32 is what Gibson and Gibson (2013:40) call one of the 'exegetical parts [*that*] indicate the content of the theological whole'. They (Gibson & Gibson 2013) point out that:

> Some of the exegetical parts themselves indicate the content of the theological whole. Analysis of [*which*] offer a panoramic view of salvation and, because of their scope, they unavoidably point toward overall theological frameworks. They help establish a part-whole hermeneutical dialogue whereby we learn to read each of the different parts of the biblical narrative as enveloped within the Bible's own way of looking at its whole story. (p. 40)

The Apostle Paul's quotation of Genesis 2:24, followed by an explicitly hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:31–32, establishes the fulfilment of God's eternal creation purpose in Christ as the hermeneutical framework for understanding God's good creation purposes for men and women.

Having demonstrated the hermeneutical framework regarding gender questions operative within Scripture, the next task is to articulate a biblical conceptual framework for the contemporary task of considering matters pertaining to gender. In explaining the operation of this conceptual framework, it will be argued that a biblical-theological framework provides the church with 'biblically based conceptual tools' (Pearcey 2005:44) for the contemporary task of faithfully discerning and applying biblical teaching.

These two tasks enable the formulation of a thesis[4] that will subsequently be demonstrated. In adopting this approach, the article proposes the opposite of the reading strategies often employed in contemporary interpretations of biblical passages dealing with gender questions. Such strategies tend to isolate so-called 'problem' passages and apply a deconstructive hermeneutic.[5] Yet passages are deemed problematic – or not – largely in terms of one's overarching worldview or conceptual framework. Köstenberger and Köstenberger (2014) observe that:

> Your hermeneutic, or approach to the Bible, in conjunction with your overall worldview, will largely determine your conclusions regarding the interpretation of a particular passage, which is why it is so important to know what a correct hermeneutic is. How we read shapes and affects what we read. (p. 324)

It will therefore be argued that a complementarian view of gender roles is indeed warranted by biblical theology (Köstenberger & Jones 2010:270).

A biblical hermeneutical framework: understanding God's creation purposes for men and women

Three themes, developed throughout the Epistle to the Ephesians, are central to the hermeneutic the apostle Paul[6] sets out in Ephesians 5:31–32 when concluding his directives regarding gender roles: (1) the mystery; (2) being members of one body; and (3) the proclamation of the fulfilment of God's creation purposes in Christ. The operation of these three themes will be demonstrated below. For the present, it suffices to note that these themes are brought together in Ephesians 5:22–33, where Paul gives gender-specific directives to husbands and wives within the church, the body of Christ.

3.'A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age' (Lewis 1949:51).

4.Thesis in this article refers to 'a reasoned proposition advanced for examination and defence within a shared framework of rational argument' (Copilot 2026c).

5.It is beyond the scope of this article to engage the broader biblical, socio-historical, and contemporary social issues surrounding the gender debate, or to address specific contributions by feminist and/or egalitarian scholars. For critiques of the prevailing contemporary conceptual framework regarding matters of gender that engages historical, theological, and sociological studies, see Trueman (2020, 2022), Pearcey (2023), Eberstadt (2012, 2023), and Köstenberger (2008).

6.The scope of the article does not allow an in-depth discussion of the authorship of Ephesians. However, in his commentary Sproul (2011:15–17) notes and addresses three objections to attributing Pauline authorship to the Letter to the Ephesians.

The instruction to husbands concerning how they are to nourish and cherish their wives 'just as Christ does the church' (Eph 5:29 – ESV)[7] concludes with the reason for the directive: 'because we are members of his body' (Eph 5:30). What Paul does next is crucial. He quotes the conclusion of the creation account from Genesis 2:24 (in verse 31) and then adds this explicitly hermeneutical comment (in verse 32): 'This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church' (Eph 5:32). In other words, he digresses[8] into a hermeneutical remark that reveals the theological basis or foundation for his directives. His hermeneutical comment indicates that the creation account of male and female is to be understood as a reference to Christ and the church.

In Galatians 3:16 the apostle Paul similarly provides an explanatory comment concerning his hermeneutic. As in Ephesians 5:32, where he states that the quoted text from Genesis 'refers to Christ and the church' (Eph 5:32), he likewise explains:

> Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings', referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring', who is Christ. (Gl 3:16)

In both instances Paul clarifies the hermeneutic he employs: the Genesis text ultimately refers to Christ. Thus, by quoting Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31[9] and following it with an explicit hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:32, Paul establishes the fulfilment of God's eternal creation purpose in Christ as the hermeneutical framework for understanding God's good creation purposes for men and women.

The hermeneutic articulated in Ephesians 5:31–32 is foundational to the New Testament conceptualisation of gender and to the directives concerning gender roles in Ephesians 5:22–33 and elsewhere, as will be demonstrated below. According to Paul's argument, the great or profound mystery – Christ himself – provides clarity concerning God's creation purposes for humanity. This is because Christ's relationship with his bride serves as the blueprint for God's creation of humanity as male and female. It is in Christ that we fully understand God's good creation purposes for men and women that were established at creation and ultimately revealed in Jesus.[10] In this respect, Ephesians 5:31–32 functions as an exegetical part that indicates the content of the theological whole (cf. Gibson & Gibson 2013:40). This hermeneutic therefore has important implications for the conceptual framework employed by the church when considering gender matters and the roles of the sexes. These implications will now be considered.

A biblical conceptual framework: Creation, fall, redemption, and consummation

Pearcey (2005:44–46) proposes a biblical framework consisting of the major scriptural movements of creation, fall, and redemption as the conceptual framework for thinking through any subject.[11] Johnson (2007:245) refers to this as the 'grand drama: creation, fall, redemption, consummation'. He observes that the relationship between Scripture's divine authorship and God's sovereignty over history profoundly shapes the way in which the biblical message is proclaimed. This involves two key relationships: that between individual texts and the overarching biblical 'grand drama', and that between this drama and history itself. These relationships are purposeful, reflecting 'the manifold wisdom of God' and revealing his unified redemptive plan (Johnson 2007:245). Gender-specific directives therefore cannot be detached from this framework, for the lives of Christian women and men are embedded within – and themselves proclaim – the grand drama of redemption that is plotted in Scripture and enacted in history.

Drawing on Geerhardus Vos's biblical theology, Köstenberger (2023; see also Köstenberger & Köstenberger 2014) likewise proposes a biblical-theological framework consisting of the four major scriptural movements of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation for the development of a biblical theology of gender.[12] Such a biblical-theological framework provides the biblically based conceptual tools of analysis necessary for addressing the question of gender within the contemporary church (cf. Pearcey 2005:44, 127–128).

Having proposed a biblical hermeneutical and conceptual framework regarding gender questions, it is now possible to formulate a thesis.

Formulating the thesis

A biblical-theological framework, namely the realisation of God's eternal creation purposes in Christ, provides the proper hermeneutical and conceptual framework for a biblical understanding of gender and the roles of men and women. This may be expressed in the following four statements, which relate the major scriptural movements within a biblical-theological framework:

- In Christ we fully understand God's good creation purposes for men and women, as witnessed in the biblical creation account (Gn 1–2).

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

8. The πλὴν of verse 33 also indicates that the apostle Paul has digressed into a hermeneutical comment but is now returning to the gender-specific directives that are grounded in this hermeneutic.

9. Interestingly, Paul follows Jesus's rendering of Genesis 2:24 as witnessed in the Synoptic Gospels 'the two shall become one flesh' (Mt 19:4–5; Mk 10:6–9), rather than the Masoretic text's reading, 'they shall become one flesh'.

10. In Luke 24:27 the Evangelist likewise bears witness to Jesus's application of what may here be described as a biblical-theological framework when interpreting the significance of his own person to his disciples after his resurrection: 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.' Dolce (2022:12) explains that 'Jesus is the interpretive centre of the Scriptures and biblical theology helps us to see that. It takes us historically and chronologically across the pages of Scripture to reveal the "big picture" of God's work through his Son.'

11. She condenses the movements of redemption and consummation into a single movement in order to work with a simplified threefold worldview grid (Pearcey 2005:44, 127–128).

12. For an accessible and helpful resource that applies a biblical-theological framework to human sexuality see Gordon (2022). Rogers and Tarwater (2022) similarly applies this framework to the question of private sexuality.

- The account of the fall (Gn 3) bears witness to the corruption of God's good creation purposes for men and women.
- In Christ the redemption of God's good creation purposes for men and women is accomplished.
- God's good creation purposes for men and women will be fully realised at the consummation of all things.

Demonstrating the thesis

To demonstrate the thesis, the structure of the biblical-theological framework previously outlined will be employed. This framework will be applied in a constructive reading that engages the relevant New Testament texts that specifically reference the creation account.[13] Through this approach, the fourfold biblical movements – creation, fall, redemption, and consummation – will be traced as operative within Scripture, shaping its conceptualisation of gender and the roles of the sexes.

Creation

Hughes (2001) observes that:

> The mystery of marriage … was God's plan from the beginning. So if you want to understand the New Testament teaching on marriage, you must begin with the Genesis account of creation. (p. 146)

Two aspects of the creation account, namely creation order and creation purpose, are particularly referenced in the New Testament in relation to gender-specific directives given to the church. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.

Creation order: Genesis 1:26–2:17 referenced in 1 Timothy 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 11:8

Both 1 Timothy 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 11:8 refer to the creation order recorded in Genesis (particularly 1:26–2:17)[14] as the basis for the directives concerning gender roles for men and women within the church community. In both cases the textual-grammatical indicator is γάρ, which Louw and Nida (1996:779) define as 'a marker of cause or reason between events'. The textual-grammatical indicator γάρ [for], thus signals that the creation order bears directly on the question of teaching and exercising authority within the church. It is, in fact, presented as the reason for the directive. Accordingly, in both 1 Timothy 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 11:8 the creation order is cited as the basis[15] for the gender-specific directives regarding teaching[16] and the exercise of authority in the church.[17]

Creation purpose: Genesis 2:18–20 referenced in 1 Corinthians 11:9

In 1 Corinthians 11:9 God's creation purpose, as recorded in the Genesis creation account (particularly Gn 2:18–20), is added to the creation order as a foundation for the directives concerning gender roles given to men and women within the church community. In this case the textual-grammatical indicator is (καὶ γὰρ οὐκ +) ἀλλά which Louw and Nida (1996:793) define as 'a marker of more emphatic contrast'. God's creation purpose, in other words, also bears upon the question of exercising authority within the home and the church. This becomes even clearer when considering the reference, in the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,[18] to headship (of which women's head coverings are a symbol)[19] (cf. 1 Cor 11:10; see also Eph 5:22–24).

In biblical teaching there is a strong interconnection between headship and familial order: the firstborn functions as the representative head and represents the whole body under that head. For instance, in Colossians 1:18 Jesus being 'the head of the body, the church' is closely linked with his being called the 'firstborn' (see also Rm 8:29). In other words, both headship and firstborn status point to his authoritative leadership.

God's creation purpose for the woman to be 'a helper fit for him' (Gn 2:18) is referenced in 1 Corinthians 11:9 as the foundational reason for the directive concerning women's participation in public worship. That is, each of the sexes has been created with particular purpose in view. As will be demonstrated in the sections below dealing with redemption and consummation, God's good creation purposes for men and women are inextricably bound to the realisation of God's eternal creation purposes in Christ. Therefore, Paul's

13. In this analysis one could also follow the structure of the Genesis account, in which the corresponding biblical-theological movements occur in a different order: creation (Gn 1:26–2:18), redemption (Gn 2:19–23) and consummation (Gn 2:24–23), before finally the movement of the fall (Gn 3). This is possible because the biblical-theological movements are anticipated, as will be demonstrated below.

14. At least two textual markers indicate that Genesis 1 and 2 should be read together rather than as two separate creation accounts. Firstly, both chapters mention fruit-bearing trees that are good for food. Secondly, the repeated phrase 'And God saw that it was good' in Genesis 1 is echoed in Genesis 2 when God declares, 'It is not good that the man should be alone.' Whereas Genesis 1 provides a broad panoramic account of the creation of humanity as male and female within the larger framework of God's creation, Genesis 2 offers a more detailed account of the creation of male and female (Kassian 2017). For this reason, Genesis 2 is more frequently referenced in the New Testament when gender-specific directives are given, as will be demonstrated below. Thus, when addressing how men and women are to live out their creation purpose – each in a distinct way – Genesis 2 is more often referenced in the New Testament.

15. It should also be noted that the man is not created as a sovereign authority but is himself subject to God's authority and accountable to God for the way in which he exercises his authority.

16. The prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 does not constitute a command for absolute silence, precisely because 1 Corinthians 11:5 assumes that women or wives will pray and prophesy. Praying and prophesying, however, are clearly distinguished from teaching or exercising authority in terms of the gender-specific directives for participation in the church's public worship.

17. The context of the directive that women are to 'learn quietly with all submissiveness' (1 Tm 2:11) includes the exhortation in 1 Timothy 2:8 that 'men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling' and the discussion of the qualifications for office-bearers in 1 Timothy 3:1–16. In other words, godly, self-sacrificial, Christlike male leadership is the context of this directive (see also Eph 5:22–33).

18. A discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 can easily become entangled in numerous controversial issues. For instance, the question of the cessation or continuation of prophecy, the phrase 'because of the angels' in 1 Corinthians 11:10, or the question of whether women should wear head coverings in the contemporary church. These questions are all worthy of consideration. The focus here, however, is on how the creation principle functions as the basis for the gender-specific directives given to men and women.

19. When applying the teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 to the contemporary church context, two aspects of the symbol of head coverings must be distinguished. The first concerns the creation order and creation purpose, which constitute the enduring theological principle underlying the other, which is the 'practice' (1 Cor 11:16). While the symbol or practical expression of the principle may vary across cultures, the contemporary church is called to 'maintain the traditions even as … delivered' (1 Cor 11:2) as the abiding theological principle. The focus here is therefore on that abiding theological principle. This distinction does not diminish the importance of the socio-historical context. It is essential to distinguish between these two aspects and to successfully navigate the differentiation carefully, lest we elevate socio-historical practices to the level of abiding theological principles in the contemporary church. Conversely – and perhaps more commonly, given the pervasiveness of the contemporary conceptions of gender matters that diverse from the biblical conceptualisation – we risk dismissing enduring theological principles as merely socio-historical practice in our application of these matters within the contemporary church.

affirmation must also be emphasised that both sexes are indispensable in the ministry of the church – albeit each according to their distinct creation purposes: 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God' (1 Cor 11:11–12). Men and women both glorify God – though in different ways – when each fulfils the good creation purposes for which God created them.

The biblical-theological movement of creation anticipates the biblical-theological movements of redemption and consummation, as will be demonstrated below. By way of preview, men and women are purposefully created to fulfil God's eternal creation purposes – each in their own distinct way: men for headship, representing Christ, and women as the helper fit for the man, representing the church. Both sexes are therefore indispensable in the ministry of the church because they point to the relationship between Christ and his bride.

This becomes even more significant when considering that the fall bears witness to the corruption of God's good creation purposes for men and women. This will be considered next.

Fall: Genesis 3:1–24 referenced in 1 Timothy 2:14

In 1 Timothy 2:14 the Genesis 3 account of the fall is referenced as yet another foundational reason for the gender-specific directives given to men and women within the church community. The fall bears witness to the corruption – though, as Köstenberger and Köstenberger (2014:41–56) point out, not the obliteration – of God's good creation purposes for men and women. Genesis 3 and the narrative that follows recount the tragic history of how sin distorts human living according to God's purposeful creation intentions for men and women.[20]

The apostle Paul has been accused of being biased and harsh in pointing out Eve's sin in 1 Timothy 2:14. Yet in both Romans (5:12–21) and 1 Corinthians (15:21–22, 49) he acknowledges Adam's failure to assume the spiritual responsibility assigned to him: 'Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come' (Rm 5:14). In fact, Paul places the responsibility for humanity's fall squarely on Adam's shoulders, precisely because he is the representative head of the whole human race. Adam, so to speak, sold his birthright in Genesis 3, and men are in danger of doing the same when they fail to assume the responsibility of godly, self-sacrificial, Christlike leadership within the church and the home (cf. also Eph 5:25–30).

Women, on the other hand, transgress the creation order and their creation purpose when they appropriate to themselves God-given male authority within the church and the home. This, however, does not mean that women possess no authority. Later in the same letter, in 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul describes a woman's responsibility using the term οἰκοδεσποτεῖν, a derivative which Louw and Nida (1996:520) define as οἰκοδεσποτέω [to command and give leadership to a household – to direct a household, to manage a home]. Created in the image of God, women share in the responsibility and authority associated with the cultural mandate.

In giving gender-specific directives for the participation of men and women in the public worship of the church community (and elsewhere for the roles of husbands and wives within the home), the reality of sin is acknowledged; in a fallen, post-Genesis 3 world, humanity – male and female – sins. The last Adam, Christ, however, redeems the ruin and wreckage of sin and the havoc that women and men inflict on one another as a result of Genesis 3. The redemptive community – the bride of Christ, the church – is:

> [*T*]o bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, [10]so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. [11]This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:9–11)

In this way the biblical-theological movement of the fall anticipates the biblical-theological movements of redemption and consummation. These will be considered next.

Redemption and consummation: Genesis 2:21–25 referenced in Ephesians 5:22–33 and Johannine bridal language

Three themes, developed throughout the Epistle to the Ephesians, are central to the hermeneutic the apostle Paul sets out in Ephesians 5:31–32 when concluding his directives regarding gender roles: (1) the mystery; (2) being members of one body; and (3) the proclamation of the fulfilment of God's creation purposes in Christ. Paul's quotation of Genesis 2:24, together with his hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:31–32, brings these three themes together and indicates that God's good creation purposes for men and women are inextricably bound to the realisation of God's eternal creation purposes in Christ.

The theme of the mystery

The first theme is that of the mystery, which in fact refers to the divine plan. Louw and Nida (1996:357) define οἰκονομία, ας *f*: as: 'a plan which involves a set of arrangements (referring in the NT to God's plan for bringing salvation to mankind within the course of history) – "purpose, scheme, plan, arrangement"'. Merkle (2018:102) points out 'which in Paul's usage refers to the plan of God once hidden but now revealed in Jesus (1:9; 3:3; 6:19, Rom. 16:25)'. This theme is developed further in Ephesians 3:9–11 but is first introduced in Ephesian 1:9–10:

> [9]Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ [10]as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:9–10)

According to the development of this theme, the great or profound mystery – Christ himself – provides clarity

20.For an exposition of the theme of sexuality and sexual relationships as witnessed in the book of Genesis, see Robertson (2002).

regarding God's creation purposes for humanity. Moreover, it is through Christ that God's eternal purpose for humanity is realised. In Christ we fully understand God's good creation purposes for men and women that were established at creation, revealed in Jesus, and will ultimately be fulfilled at the consummation of all things. In other words, Christ has all along been the blueprint. God's creation of humanity as male and female points to this reality.

The theme of being members of one body

The second theme is that of being members of one body. This theme is already implied in the statement 'to unite all things in him' (Eph 1:10). The biblical-theological movements of redemption and consummation are restorative in that they proclaim the restoration in Christ of the division and hostility that arose in the wake of sin. In Ephesians 2:13–16 the plan of the mystery is applied to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the church, the body of Christ:

> [13]But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14]For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [15]by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16]and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph 2:13–16)

In Ephesians 5:22–33 the plan of the mystery is applied to the relationship between husbands and wives within the church, the body of Christ. The division and hostility that arose as a consequence of sin are 'broken down in his flesh … through the cross' (Eph 2:14, 16). Christ reconciles not only Jews and Gentiles but also men and women 'that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two' (Eph 2:15).

In developing the theme of being members of one body, specifically as applied to husbands and wives, the Apostle refers to Genesis 2:21–25, particularly the poem that the man joyfully pronounces when:

> The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. [22]And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. [23]Then the man said,
>
> 'This at last is bone of my bones
>
> and flesh of my flesh;
>
> she shall be called Woman,
>
> because she was taken out of Man.'
>
> [24]Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.[25]And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Gn 2:21–25)

The argument in Ephesians 5 echoes the flow of thought in Genesis 2:23–25:

> [30]Because we are members of his body. [31]'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' [32]This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:30–33)

Clowney (2013) asks:

> Can the foundation of marriage in the creation account be a type of the relation of Christ and the church? Yes, because the principle respecting marriage enunciated in Genesis 2:20–25 is fulfilled in Christ. (p. 26)

Merkle (2018) similarly concludes that:

> Paul's argument cites Christ's relationship with the church as the template after which human marital relationships are patterned, not vice versa … God created human marriage so that his people would have a category for understanding the relationship between Christ and his church. (p. 102)

Articulated differently, the creation of male and female and the institution of marriage may be understood as a shadow of the ultimate reality – the relationship between Christ and the church, the members of his body, his bride.[21]

The theme of the proclamation of the fulfilment of God's creation purposes in Christ

The third theme is the proclamation by the church of the fulfilment of God's creation purposes in Christ, as mentioned when describing the content of Paul's ministry in Ephesians 3:9–11:

> [9]To bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, [10]so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. [11]This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:9–11)

According to the development of this theme, it is through the church that the manifold wisdom of God is made known 'to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'.[22] The 'now' of verse 10 indicates a 'salvation-historical reference point' (Merkle 2018:59). Paul's quotation of Genesis 2:24 and his hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:31–32 indicate that Christ's love for the church – the members of his body, his bride – is the blueprint for masculinity, femininity, and marriage. These were created and instituted to point to the biblical movement of redemption.

21. Lewis's (1949) explanation of the relationship between a sign and the thing signified – what might be described as a lower-dimensional representation of a higher-dimensional reality – is helpful here:

> [*T*]he word symbolism is not adequate in all cases to cover the relation between the higher medium and its transposition in the lower. It covers some cases perfectly, but not others. Thus the relation between speech and writing is one of symbolism. The written characters exist solely for the eye, the spoken words solely for the ear. There is complete discontinuity between them. They are not like one another, nor does the one cause the other to be. The one is simply a sign of the other and signifies it by a convention. But a picture is not related to the visible world in just that way. Pictures are part of the visible world themselves and represent it only by being part of it. Their visibility has the same source. The suns and lamps in pictures seem to shine only because real suns or lamps shine on them; that is, they seem to shine a great deal because they really shine a little in reflecting their archetypes. The sunlight in a picture is therefore not related to real sunlight simply as written words are to spoken. It is a sign, but also something more than a sign, and only a sign because it is also more than a sign, because in it the thing signified is really in a certain mode present. (p. 23)

Paul's hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:32 indicates that God's purposeful creation of humanity as male and female, together with the institution of marriage (Gn 2:24, cited in Eph 5:31), functions as a lower-dimensional representation or sign of the higher-dimensional reality signified, namely Christ and his bride. The biblical-theological movement of redemption and consummation is therefore already anticipated within the biblical-theological movement of creation.

22. The interpretation of the phrase 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' is important. For the purpose of the present argument, however, whether it is understood to refer to spiritual or human powers, whether evil or good, the development of the theme concerns the church's proclamation of God's manifold wisdom to these authorities (however the phrase is interpreted).

The church's proclamation of God's wisdom regarding gender matters therefore operates on two levels. By living faithfully according to God's creation purposes, men and women within the church proclaim God's goodness:

- In creation: God purposefully created man, male and female.
- In redemption: Though God's good creation purposes for men and women were corrupted in the fall, in Christ the fulfilment of God's creation purposes is accomplished and will be fulfilled at the consummation of all things.

Moreover, this occurs 'according to the eternal purpose that he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Eph 3:11). For this reason, a properly biblical conceptualisation of matters pertaining to gender is crucial; the church must therefore get this right.

It is therefore evident why the gender-specific directives to wives in Ephesians 5:22–33 centre on headship and submission (as the church submits to her head, Christ), while the directives to husbands centre on love, nourishing, and cherishing (as Christ loves his bride and cares for the members of his body, the church):

> [22]Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. [23]For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. [24]Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.
>
> [25]Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, … [28]In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. [29]For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, [30]because we are members of his body … [33]However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:22–25, 28–30, 33)

The biblical-theological movement of redemption, in turn, anticipates the biblical-theological movement of consummation. Although God's good creation purposes for men and women were corrupted in the fall, they are redemptively restored through Jesus giving 'himself up for' (Eph 5:25) his bride. The reconciliation of the sexes within the body of Christ is meant to point to and serve as a foretaste of the consummation of all things – when all things will be united in Christ. This has already been implied in Ephesians 1:9–10: 'according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'.

It is therefore no coincidence that the apostle Paul employs bridal language in his call to husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church:

> [25]Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26]that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27]so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25–30)

A bridegroom, after having secured a wife for himself, returns to his father's house in order to prepare a dwelling for his future bride. When everything is ready, he returns for his bride and takes her to himself (ed. Youngblood 1995:804). Paul's development of these themes is thus brought together in Ephesians 5:22–33 using bridal language.[23]

The Johannine corpus likewise contains rich references to bridal language (although several subtle references could also be explored, only a few of the more explicit ones will be considered here). Early in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist describes his ministry in terms of the coming of the bridegroom:

> John answered, 'A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. [28]You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, "I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him." [29]The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. [30]He must increase, but I must decrease'. (Jn 3:27–30)

In John 14 Jesus comforts his disciples with the promise of his return using bridal language[24]:

> Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. [2]In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3]And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (Jn 14:1–3)

Bridal language and bridal imagery also underlie the cry of 'The Spirit and the Bride [*who*] say, "Come"' (Rv 22:17) and the descriptions of the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19:6–9 and the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. John testifies that he:

> Saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3]And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God'. (Rv 21:2–3)

History will culminate in the fulfilment of Jesus's promise that he will return for his bride at the consummation of all things. Christian marriages and churches are therefore intended to be a foretaste of the fulfilment of God's eternal creation purposes, which will be fully realised at the

23. There is a subtle, though important, distinction between the terms 'bridal language' and 'bridal imagery' (Microsoft Copilot 2026b). The distinction is significant in this context.
Bridal language refers to the words, titles, metaphors, and relational terms used to describe the relationship between Christ and his people.
It is linguistic and relational – not visual. Its purpose is threefold: (1) it establishes covenant identity, (2) it communicates intimacy, faithfulness, and unity; and (3) it defines eschatological expectation in relational terms within a biblical-theological framework. In short: Bridal language defines the relationship. Bridal imagery, on the other hand, refers to the visual, symbolic, and descriptive scenes that depict the eschatological reality. It is picture-based and symbolic. Its purpose is to: (1) depict the eschatological reality in symbolic terms; (2) it emphasises glory, beauty, fullness, and transformation; (3) it connects prophetic and/or apocalyptic symbols to the marital theme. In short: bridal imagery depicts the eschatological reality symbolically. The distinction matters as eschatological hope is conveyed both in terms of covenant relationship (language) and a transformed creation (imagery). The focus here is on bridal language as an expression of covenant relationship because, as Merkle (2018:102) observes, 'Christ's relationship with the church is the template after which human marital relationships are patterned, not vice versa'.

24. This is also the language used by Jesus in his parable of the 10 virgins in Matthew 25:1–13.

consummation of all things. The bride of Christ – the church – thus proclaims, through faithful adherence to the biblical conceptualisation of gender and biblical gender roles, both the accomplishment and the final fulfilment of God's eternal creation purposes in Christ.

Conclusion

The replacement of the biblical conceptualisation of gender with one informed by the contemporary social imaginary necessitates a reconsideration of the conceptualisation of gender and gender roles prevalent within the contemporary church. To this end, a case has been made for a biblical-theological approach to the question of gender and the roles of the sexes. This was done, first, by demonstrating the hermeneutical framework operative within Scripture itself in order to formulate a properly biblical hermeneutic regarding questions pertaining to gender. It was argued that Ephesians 5:31–32 is what Gibson and Gibson (2013:40) call one of the 'exegetical parts [*that*] indicate the content of the theological whole'. The apostle Paul's quotation of Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31, followed by his explicitly hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:32, establishes the fulfilment of God's eternal creation purpose in Christ as the hermeneutical framework for understanding God's good creation purposes for men and women.

Having demonstrated the hermeneutical framework regarding gender questions operative within Scripture, a biblical conceptual framework was then articulated. It was argued that a biblical-theological framework provides the church with biblically based conceptual tools for the contemporary task of faithfully discerning and applying biblical teaching concerning matters pertaining to gender and gender roles.

This in turn enabled the formulation of the thesis: that a biblical-theological framework, that is, the realisation of God's eternal creation purposes in Christ, provides the proper hermeneutical and conceptual framework for a biblical understanding of gender and the roles of men and women. The thesis was subsequently demonstrated. In doing so, it was argued that Paul's quotation and hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:31–32 indicate that the Genesis creation account anticipates the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. This anticipation, it was argued, constitutes the blueprint and very reason for God's creation of humanity as male and female and for the institution of marriage.

The demonstration of the hermeneutical framework regarding gender questions operative within Scripture, together with the articulation of the biblical conceptual framework, warrants (Köstenberger & Jones 2010):

> A complementarian understanding of gender roles [*that*] is borne out, not just by a few isolated problem passages, but by biblical theology as a whole. Apart from their joint stewardship the married couple has an important witnessing function in the surrounding culture and ought to understand itself within the larger framework of God's end-time purposes in Christ. (p. 270)

As image bearers (Gn 1:26–28), men and women are called to partner in the joint mandate given at creation. According to the apostle Paul's quotation of Genesis 2:24 and his hermeneutical comment in Ephesians 5:31–32, they are also to proclaim the gospel by imaging the relationship between Christ and his bride. This relationship is the template for marriage and the eternal purpose for which God created humanity as male and female. What remains is for men and women within the church to live in the obedience of faith, to the glory of the only wise God through Jesus Christ:

> [25]Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages [26]but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith [27]to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Rm 16:25–27)

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Anneke Viljoen: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely her own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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