CO-WORKERS IN THE LORD: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF PARTNERSHIP*

JEANENE P. REESE
Abilene Christian University

Men and women work together in various contexts every day in the church, yet Christians pay too little attention to what Scripture has to say about how and why these important relations are formed and conducted. Partnership between men and women is central to God’s design and will be examined in this article from three central perspectives: (1) a theology of partnership from the creation account in Genesis, (2) partnership as found in the OT narrative, and (3) the establishment of a new order in the NT.

The Creation Account in Genesis

A natural starting point for developing a theology of partnership is an examination of the Genesis account of God’s original intention for men and women. The creation account in Genesis indicates that God made all humankind in his own image—both male and female. Bilezikian states, “Femaleness pertains to God as fully as maleness.” Fleming notes, “Woman is specially and carefully made by God’s hands, created from the very material of man.” God blessed the newly formed human beings and gave them work to do. They were jointly to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and share dominion over all things. Van Leeuwen identifies these commands as a “cultural mandate” to the woman and man that gives them a great deal of “latitude for creativity and variety” within the parameters God has set. 

* Special appreciation goes to Ian A. Fair, without whose partnership my work in the Center for Women in Christian Service at ACU would never have been possible.

1 Gilbert Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman’s Place in Church and Family (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 23.


adds, “Instead of teaching the subordination of woman to man, Genesis 1 and 2 tell of the beauty and the uniqueness of mutual interpersonal relations.”

In the Genesis account God made the woman to be a helper/partner to the man. Yet God commanded Adam to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife (2:24), a directive that “counteracts a patriarchal culture, which would command the wife instead.” Evans notes that the word “cleave” used in Gen 2:24 “is used almost universally for a weaker cleaving to a stronger. It is used of Israel, cleaving to God (e.g., Josh 23:8; Ps 91:4), but never the other way around.” From the beginning, strength and equality were implied in the role of woman as helper/partner to the man from whom she had come. As God surveyed his creation at each phase, he declared that it was good. When he evaluated the creation of male and female in his image, he called it “very good.” The only time something was pronounced “not good” was when the man was alone and no helper/partner had been found suitable for him. Adam appeared to have no knowledge of, or participation in, the creation of Eve, yet when he awakened from the surgery, he marveled at God’s handiwork and recognized her as his flesh and bone. Tucker well says, “They are alike, and it is this likeness—not their differences—that he finds so striking.”

The role of helper/partner is critical to the overall design of God’s creation. In this context the role is one of co-working and co-leading—a partnership. This understanding is consistent with the use of ezer (Heb. “helper”) in numerous OT passages to describe God’s help to his people:

1. “My father’s God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.” (Exod 18:4)
2. “May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion!” (Ps 20:2)
3. “We wait for help from the Lord; he is our help and our shield.” (Ps 33:20)
4. “Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.” (Ps 54:4)
5. “Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God, you are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay.” (Ps 70:5)
6. “Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me.” (Ps 86:17)
7. “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.” (Ps 145:5)

---

Hunt and Hutcheson further note that “God helps his people by protecting, supporting, shielding, delivering, comforting, giving hope and blessing. God’s ministry of help is described in connection with action words indicating strength. Being a helper is neither a lesser role nor a weaker one. Helping is certainly not a passive role.”

Dawn further emphasizes that the title of helper “contradicts a patriarchal culture by elevating woman’s imaging of God, the Helper Superior. The woman is called a Helper Corresponding, imaging the care of God in a human, rather than divine, way.”

From a Trinitarian perspective, another important dimension of the mutuality of the helper/partner relationship between women and men results from the mutuality, harmony, and unity that are innate to God. His character, person, and function as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are uniquely and distinctly three yet also always one. “The Godhead gives us an example of differences in function but equality in existence. . . . Ontologically (relating to existence) there is equality in the Trinity, but economically (relating to function) there are different roles.” Likewise, even though men and women may be different in person and function, they too can experience mutuality, harmony, and unity in service and leadership within the kingdom of God.

In Genesis the entrance of sin into the world, when Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit, shattered the perfection of God’s creation and his intentions for it. Yet even in the face of sin, God’s providential love and mercy are evident. Understanding this larger picture is important for understanding the pronouncements made in Genesis 3. The effects of sin are broad and devastating—nothing God created is unaffected—but they are also profoundly personal. The disobedience of God’s command went beyond the simple act of eating forbidden fruit; it was a matter of intention, attitude, and relationship. Eve and Adam were unwilling to trust God completely and live in perfect relationship with him. Rather, they chose their own desires, sought their independence, acted on their self-determination, and faced the consequences. Sin radically altered the relationship between Adam and Eve as husband and wife, as man and woman; it sullied the relationship with, and between, their children with hatred, jealousy, and murder. The whole world was impacted by the sin that was unleashed in the garden.

When examining God’s pronouncement on his creation in Genesis 3, one must ask whether these words are prescriptive or descriptive. Those who understand them as prescriptive see the results of the fall still in existence today—in a sense this has become the new norm for life and, therefore, is the will of

---

9 Ibid., 29.
10 Dawn, Reaching Out, 100.
11 Hunt and Hutcheson, Leadership, 29.
God. Those who see them as descriptive recognize that the ramifications of what happened in Eden are far-reaching but not endless. Dawn acknowledges that

The rest of scripture demonstrates . . . how the brokenness of the world is manifested in all sorts of human inequalities and oppressions: Then the New Testament particularly emphasizes that the new order brought by Jesus eliminates race, class, and gender distinctions so that once again, as in God’s original design, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.12

Understanding God’s words in Genesis 3 as descriptive rather than prescriptive is consistent with what he reveals about his true nature and his response to sin in other OT passages. For example, in Exodus 20 the second commandment instructs Israel to have no other gods before him and to make no idols of any kind. He then gives a rationale that flows from his character and person: “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love and keep my commandments” (Exod 20:5b–6; cf. also, Exod 34:6–7, Num 14:18, Ps 103:8–14).

In keeping with God’s promise for the effects of sin to be felt through the third and fourth generations, Eve’s family suffered for her sin and Adam’s until their grandchildren, the third generation, were born. Then “people began to invoke the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26).

In Genesis 3 God pronounced two curses—one on the ground and one on the serpent13—although the first man and woman also obviously felt the effects of these curses. God spoke to the woman about her increased pain in childbirth and the desire she would have for her husband. He told the man that he would have to work harder and suffer in that labor. Both of these represent a reversal of God’s original design.14

Adam became subject to the soil from which he had been taken. Eve became subject to Adam from whom she had been taken. . . . As a result of Satan’s work, man was now master over woman, just as the mother-ground was now master over

---

12 Dawn, Reaching Out, 100.
14 Westermann sees these pronouncements by God as descriptions of the difficulties of life as it would be lived now between Adam and Eve. He states, “. . . the clause in Genesis 3:16 expresses only one side of the relationship of man and woman, whereas in 2:21–24 man and woman are equals, and no trace of subordination is to be found. In contrast to the temporary subordination of the woman stands the permanent relationship between man and woman: the difference between them is a part of human existence that will always remain.” Claus Westermann, Genesis: A Practical Commentary, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 26.
man. For these reasons it is proper to regard both male dominance and death as being antithetical to God’s original intent in creation.15

Much attention has been given to what it means for a woman to have increased pain in childbirth and to have a greater desire for her husband who will rule over her. In light of the foregoing theological understandings, I offer a different interpretation here. Instead of increased physical pain of the woman in childbirth,16 the pain Eve experiences is grief and shame over her own sin and its effects on the lives of her children and grandchildren. Julia Kristeva understands the nature of the pain women suffer through childbirth. She writes, “One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, it is continuous. Obviously you may close your eyes, cover up your ears, teach courses, run errands, tidy up the house, think about objects, subjects. But a mother is always branded by pain, she yields to it.”17

Likewise, the desire that Eve felt toward her husband also has been greatly misunderstood. God does not seem to be describing a sexual desire that Eve would have for Adam, nor an emotional longing for his companionship when he was away at work, nor even a vengeful wish to dominate him instead of being dominated (all three interpretations offered by contemporary scholars). Rather, Eve’s longing appears to be one of sorrow and regret that her sin and Adam’s had sullied the mutual, harmonious, and unified wholeness of the relationship God intended for them. She would always long for her past relationship with her husband.

Adam, on the other hand, was destined to till the ground in hard labor alone. Not only had the sin of the first man and woman caused their expulsion from Eden; it had also disrupted their relationship. Bilezikian says, “The ruler/subject relationship between Adam and Eve began after the fall. It was for Eve the application of the same death principle that made Adam slave to the soil. Because it resulted from the fall, the rule of Adam over Eve is viewed as in origin, no less than is death itself.”18 Adam and Eve felt the effects of their sin in their relationship with each other, in their offspring, and in future generations.

Yet even as God punished sin and allowed humans to feel its consequences, he also acted consistently with his redeeming, merciful nature in, among other ways, pronouncing judgment of the woman and simultaneously offering a remedy for their sin by relating redemption to motherhood.

15 Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles, 49.
16 Neither of the Hebrew words normally used to describe pain in childbirth is used here. Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15 (WBC 1; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 81.
18 Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles, 58.
The woman’s offspring will crush the serpent who is the embodiment of evil. . . . The three aspects of this redemptive motherhood revealed in the account of God’s response to the sinful disobedience of the man and woman are characteristic of the overall biblical paradigm for prophetic ministry: struggle, suffering and servant-hood.\textsuperscript{19}

Enmity between the serpent and woman are characteristic of the classic struggles between good and evil, life and death. As later Christian tradition consistently understood the promise of Gen 3:15, through the painful process of giving birth, the woman will suffer to offer hope as she eventually bears the redeemer of the world. Also,

\begin{quote}
The redemptive servanthood of the mother is readily seen in relation to the word to the man, that he must work hard to feed himself and his family because the soil is cursed: A partnership [emphasis mine] of redemptive servanthood emerges—the mother labors in childbearing while the father labors as breadwinner, both towards the end of serving human needs.
\end{quote}

Finally, even though the effects of Adam and Eve’s sin were felt for several generations within their lifetime, God offered them immediate hope of renewed life in their descendants. At the birth of Seth (Gen 4:25), Adam recognized that it was God who had given him another son.

The Old Testament Narrative

The OT witnesses is to the continuous disharmony resulting from sin, but it also speaks of God’s repeated efforts to redeem humanity and mitigate the effects of sin. Yet it also bears testimony to great men and women who powerfully influenced the lives of those around them. Several partnerships between women and men appear in the OT. Prominent pairs include Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Elkanah and Hannah, and Ruth and Boaz. The recognition of the first woman created as a helper/partner to man and these examples of great husbands and wives tempt readers to place shared leadership/partnership in the context of marriage only. Other women in the OT, however, stand out among God’s people as strong, capable, and godly leaders. They share partnerships with significant men who are not their husbands. For example, “Miriam’s ministry skills [were] not only recognized and confirmed, but she [was] accorded the same respect Aaron and Moses received.”\textsuperscript{21} Deborah served as a deliverer in Israel and was named prophet and military leader (Judg}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[19] Cheryl J. Sanders, \textit{Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth and the Poor} (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 46.
\item[20] Ibid.
\item[21] Linda L. Belleville, \textit{Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 44.
\end{footnotes}
3:4). 22 The Moabite Ruth, ancestor to David and eventually Jesus, served as the breadwinner of her family by gleaning in the fields. She was said to be “better . . . than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). 23 Esther stands out as a national figure whose bravery and fortitude served God’s purposes for his people well.

Huldah and Noadiah were two female prophetesses who exercised leadership in Israel (albeit negatively in the second case). Certain females also were referred to in Hebrew Scripture as “wise women” who conducted diplomatic missions (see 2 Sam 14:1–21; 20:14–22). Also, the figure of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs functioned as a paradigm in Prov 1:6; 9:10; and 31:30. As “the ideal wise woman of Proverbs 31, . . . [her] children call her blessed and . . . [her] husband praises her because of her wisdom.” 24 The Song of Songs abounds with expressions of mutual relationship and high esteem. In short, then, the OT knows of male/female partnerships that transcend the boundaries typical of patriarchal cultures.

The New Order in the New Testament

With the coming of Jesus Christ and the eventual establishment of his church, the NT emphasizes a new order. Several images emerge in Scripture to describe this new order; one is that of a new creation. Paul writes to the Corinthian church, reminding them that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). Peter says that God is establishing for himself a new people, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Luke describes what happens to the first Christians as they are formed into the new Israel,

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles: All who believed were together and had all things in common. . . . Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people (Acts 2:43–47b).

“Before Pentecost, circumcision was the sign of membership in the community of God’s people. . . . After Pentecost, baptism became the sign of entering the community of believers.” 25 The sign of the covenant relationship with God,
once available only to men, is now open to everyone. “All believers in Christ are new creatures who are called to be God’s ambassadors.”

The mutuality, harmony, and unity of relationships experienced by the first believers reflect the beauty of God’s original design, the joy of life lived in Jesus Christ, and the transforming power available to all believers through the Holy Spirit.

All the Gospels, but particularly Luke and its companion volume, Acts, serve as testimonies to the significant roles women played as helpers, leaders, and partners in the coming of the kingdom. The Pauline epistles are full of examples of women’s participation in the establishment of, and service to, the church.

Although male leaders were more numerous, women also served in virtually every ministry (the exception is overseer/elder, but individual men were not identified specifically by name in these roles either). Women served as teachers, apostles, deaconesses, patronesses, prophets, evangelists, and ministering widows. Several key examples show women’s participation in these kingdom events and the new community:

1. Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast seven demons; Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward, Chuza; Susanna and many others provide for the disciples from their means (Luke 8:1–3).
2. Mary and Martha, two sisters from Bethany, and their brother, Lazarus, open their home to Jesus and serve his needs in a very personal way (Luke 10:38–42).
3. A poor widow gives all that she has, two coins, and is commended by Jesus to his disciples, and ultimately to all of us, for her faithfulness and generosity (Luke 21:1–4).
4. Women are the last at the cross and first at the tomb (Luke 23:55, 24:1–10).
5. Tabitha, a faithful disciple who leads/serves a group of widows and orphans, dies, and the group is so distraught that Peter resurrects her so she can continue her good works (Acts 9:36–41).
6. Lydia, a wealthy merchant, is gathered with a group of God-fearers in Philippi worshipping God when she meets Paul. Upon hearing the gospel, she and her whole household—she is the head of it—are baptized (Acts 16:14–15, 40).
7. Priscilla and Aquilla teach Apollos sound doctrine and continue to serve in the kingdom as co-workers, co-leaders with Paul and each other (Acts 18:24–28, Rom 16:3–4, 1 Cor 16:19).
8. Philip, the evangelist, has four unmarried daughters who prophesy (Acts 21:9).
9. Phoebe is commended as a deaconess, and her service to the kingdom is extolled, and Junia is mentioned as prominent among the apostles (Rom 16:1, 7).

---

27 Belleville, Women Leaders, 50–69.
10. Euodia and Syntyche are listed as Paul’s fellow-workers and urged to agree in the Lord (Phil 4:2–3).
11. Lois and Eunice are commended as grandmother and mother to the envoy, Timothy, for how they have developed and influenced his faith (2 Tim 1:5).

The emphasis in these passages is on faithfulness, unity, surrender, discipleship, mission, blessing, giving, serving, learning, healing, sharing, giftedness, honoring, teaching, partnership, mutuality, and prayer. Truly, “Jesus was a friend of women. He vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women in terms of both value and function, and He left us this example [to follow].”

Jesus essentially establishes a new paradigm for our world. Our Lord liberated men and women from their bondage to the social orders that violate God’s intention for human life-in-community. Jesus freed males from the role of domination that belongs to the fallen world, in order that they can be truly male. On behalf of women Jesus acted as the model human standing against the patriarchal system, bringing women into the new order where sex distinctions no longer determine rank and worth.

This new paradigm, however, has not always been realized. From mainline Protestant churches to obscure fundamentalist groups, from Roman Catholics to Pentecostals, Christians for the past two thousand years have dealt with men and women of all ages, classes, and ethnicity who struggle with issues of the new order. Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld examine church history from a woman’s perspective and identify several discernible patterns that signify the continual struggle over issues of mutuality, harmony, and unity throughout the history of Christianity.

This ironic failure to attend to the Bible’s interest in the partnership of men and women, which has plagued the church for the last two millennia, first appeared in the difficulties facing Pauline churches in the first century. Paul wrote to instruct the women in Corinth who were praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered and causing all kinds of disturbances to conduct themselves with greater propriety (1 Cor 11:3–16). He also addressed some Christian women who were causing disturbance in the assembly, instructing them to be quiet (1 Cor 14:33–40). The church in Ephesus was the target of false teachers, and the witness of the church was threatened by misconduct on several fronts. Paul wrote specifically to the women there about how they were to dress, how they were to learn, and how they were to live holy lives that reflect their salvation (1 Tim 2:11–15).

---

29 Grenz, Women in the Church, 209.
In most discussions about gender issues in Christian ministry, these three texts become the focal point. Careful and faithful exegesis has not always led to a clear-cut interpretation upon which most Christians could agree (see the proliferation of works on this topic in any Christian bookstore). As Groothius notes, “a myopic fixation on a handful of biblical texts will not ultimately resolve the gender debate.” Although discussions on women’s roles in worship and ministry are significant and should be conducted within the church, attention should also focus on how men and women might serve together as co-workers in godly partnership. A broader view of the entire biblical witness can help us acquire a deeper understanding of this relationship.

31 Groothius, Good News, 231.