

TOWARD A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Equality.

The notion that all humans are equal is a widespread idea. This study shows that the traditional stance in Christianity in regard issues of gender and other forms of equality has many a time fallen short of the human rights ideal, and justifiably asks whether “equality” ought to be a Christian imperative. A quick overview of biblical principles however provides solid ground for the affirmation that all humans are created equal and therefore “equality” ought to be a preoccupation of the Church. The study concludes with a proposal on the implementation of such a perspective.

Keywords: *Equality – biblical teaching; gender – biblical teaching; image of God; justice; relating rightly.*

Equality – the problem

We live in a complex, complicated world,¹ in contexts that are no longer resembling the homogenous communities we have been accustomed to until just a few decades ago. Nowadays ours are multicultural, multi-reli-

1 The material presented here rehearses and combines ideas I have previously published as: Marcel Măcelaru, “Jednakost u ubrazovanju – relacijska perspektiva”, in Marcel Măcelaru and Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija, eds, *Obrazovanje za rodnu jednakost*, Tenja, Ženska udruga „Izvor”, 2010, pp. 18–21; Marcel Măcelaru, “The Practice of Equality and the Problem of Religious Liberty”, in Nelu Burcea and Thomas Schirrmacher, eds, *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Bucharest, Editura Universitară, 2013, pp. 603–621; Marcel Măcelaru, “Equality in Human Rights Talk and Jeremiah’s Principles of Truth, Justice and Uprightness (Jer. 4:2)”, in Marcel Măcelaru and Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija, eds, *Demokracija, dijalog i dar-al salam Međuvjerski dijalog i praktično djelovanje – Zbornik radova*, Osijek, Evanđeoski Teološki Fakultet, 2012, pp. 39–52; Marcel Măcelaru, “Equality – A Christian Perspective”, in Corneliu Constantineanu, Georgeta Rață and Patricia Runcan, eds, *Christian Values vs Contemporary Values*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2014, pp. 75–82.

gious, multi-ethnic societies. Within this world, the fundamental elements of our identity, our very way of life, comes under scrutiny. Concepts such as culture, nation, religion, dignity, and freedom are dominating our talks and impact the way we live more than ever before. Beyond these, the notion that all humans are equal has become a widespread idea – a concept integral to civic education in all established democratic societies. Of course, this is not a newly discovered ideal, for over the centuries, the demand for equality has taken different forms: from law codes regulating social behaviour in the ancient world to the “liberty, equality and fraternity” slogan of the French Revolution and from the abolishment of slavery in the United States to the emergence of feminism and modern talks of equal rights for underprivileged groups. However, the current preoccupation with equality and its place as a fundamental concept in the modern formulation of what a free society is all about can be traced back to the historic December 10, 1948 meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. This document begins with recognizing that “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” are the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.² Little did the original signatories of the declaration know that, more than half a century later, talks about equality would not only not cease, but become increasingly relevant and necessary for we live in a world where such ideas are yet to find felicitous widespread implementation. Admittedly, laws to this effect, which expand, apply and regulate the principles expressed in the Declaration, have now been adopted, even within Eastern Europe (e.g., Romania in 2002 and 2007³; Croatia, in 2003⁴; Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2003⁵) for the implementation of such laws has become one of the principal determinants in a country’s bidding to join the international club of “democratic” nations. However, the issues emerging are far from being settled, as such stipulations are yet to find practical expression in our contexts.

A telling example in this regard is the issue of gender equality, or lack thereof, that continues to be a matter of concern in most of our societies. Even the most cursory glance at the current statistics will show that inequ-

2 See The Universal Declaration of Human Rights [online]: available at: <URL:<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>> [accessed 16 November 2010].

3 *Monitorul Oficial* 150, 2007.

4 *Narodne novine* 116, 2003.

5 *Službeni glasnik BiH* 16, 2003.

ality between me and women is still the norm in most countries around the world, at various levels and in different areas of life. Undoubtedly, within the Western democratic world women have attained the right to play major roles in food production, income generation, community organization and domestic responsibilities. Still, the norm continues to be that women “have fewer rights, lower education and health status, less income, and less access to resources and decision-making than men”⁶

Within the Church, the problem of equality does not fare much better. In the traditional Christian understanding, women and men have played specific roles within the community, most of the times mirroring the cultural context within which such communities were established. The history of Christianity records numerous examples where church teaching, attitude and practices have been informed by the surrounding cultural stances on the issue rather than by the teaching available to us in the Scriptures. One cannot but recognize that the Church bears witness to a long history of biblical misinterpretation, hermeneutical domestications, and abusive implementations of fallacious opinions on roles and responsibilities different members of the community ought to play, especially in regard with the place of women (and children) in the church. Since in religious contexts of this kind membership is established on the basis of adherence to a particular set of beliefs, contradictions and incompatibilities are bound to appear as soon as the implementation of equality may impede one’s freedom to act on the basis of such beliefs. In such situations, it is inevitable that a hierarchy is established whereby one will have to decide whether a particular doctrine or custom is more or less important than the principle of equality being promoted.

Equality – what it is and how it functions

At the most basic level, “equality” is a mathematical concept that expresses complete equivalence between quantifiable variables: it shows something as corresponding perfectly to something else. When talking of human beings, however, we need to consider the relationship between variables of ordinal nature. Thus, whereas, in the first case, equality would refer to something measurable such as weight, height, quantity, etc., correspondences between variables of ordinal nature compare non-measurable characteristics, e.g.,

6 United Nations Women, available online at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures>, accessed 17 October, 2022.

beauty, ability, smartness, etc. I argue that as a human right, “equality” ought to address both types of variables. Thus, at an incipient level, one may talk of equality in terms of age, funding, or resources, i.e., things that can be easily quantified. At a more advanced level, however, such correspondences are not as easily definable. When we consider issues such as intelligence, talent, preferences, or family context, we are touching on characteristics that make us unique. As such, a holistic approach to equality may entail the facilitation of a context within which achieving is not impeded by gender, race, class, nationality/ethnicity, social status, disability, or any other such issues. In other words, creating a context within which one’s uniqueness is not a hindrance.

Equality – the biblical basis

The Bible contains some of the most incisive affirmations of equality. It states from the very beginning that man *and* woman were together created in God’s image: “So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). No hierarchical order between man and woman exists here, for the text makes clear that both are “participating cooperatively in reflecting the image, and both [are] fulfilling jointly the tasks of rulership and dominion without the necessity of a structure of hierarchy between them.”⁷ As Friedman has shown,⁸ this perspective is dominant throughout the Old Testament, up until the Talmudic period. Both women and men are actively participating in all the aspects of community life, be it religious, economic or political. In fact “aside from serving as priestess in the Temple, a role from which she was debarred for obvious reasons, there was no sphere in public life in which a woman’s participation was not an everyday occurrence.”⁹

The one deciding factor in the Old Testament perspective is the divine emphasis on justice.¹⁰ The nation of Israel is called to do justice (e.g.

7 Gilbert Bilezikian, “A Challenge for Proponents of Female Subordination to Prove Their Case from the Bible”, available online at: <https://godswordtowomen.org/bilezikian.htm>, accessed on 19 October, 2022.

8 Theodore Friedman, “The Shifting Role of Women, from the Bible to Talmud”, *Judaism* 36, 1986, pp. 479–487.

9 Friedman, “The Shifting Role of Women”, p. 480.

10 See Marcel Măcelaru, “Truth, Justice, Uprightness. Human Flourishing in Prophetic Perspective”, in Robert Petkovšek and Bojan Žalec, eds, *Truth and Compassion. Lessons from the Past and Premonitions of the Future*, Wien, Lit Verlag, 2017, pp. 53–54.

Jeremiah 4:2), following the example of her divine Father (e.g. Psalm 72; Isaiah 11:1-9). Justice describes the way God acts, it reflects God's very nature. As such, God's people are called to act in similar fashion among themselves, for the divine manner sets standards of conduct for all God's people. In fact, the divine comportment becomes the primary guideline for interpersonal behaviour, for only by acting justly the Israelites can ensure that fairness and honesty will rule within the community. As such, justice becomes an encompassing description of what relating rightly to one another is all about.

In the New Testament, the general teaching is that one ought not to be preoccupied with attaining status and authority but with the wellbeing of the other. Thus, a strong case is made for love, humility, respect, service, mutual submission and self-giving (e.g. Mathew 20:25-28; 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-45; Romans 12:1-13; Ephesians 5:21-33; Philippians 2:3-11; 4:8; 1 Peter 3:8-9). The motivating factor is God himself, for he is neither partial nor is he acting out any form of discrimination. Believers are called to follow the same pattern, that is, to treat everyone equally and not preferentially (cf. Acts 10:34-35; Romans 2:11; James 2:1-9).

Beyond the general statement above, it is worth noting within the context of this discussion on equality that both Jesus and Paul speak and act in a revolutionary way towards women when compared with the contemporary ethos of their time. For instance, Jesus speaks privately to the Samaritan woman (John 4) and offers private instruction to Lazarus' sister (Luke 10:39, 42). He is surrounded by women who accompany and support his ministry (Luke 8:2-3). He receives the praise and repentance of a sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50), and he heals women when prompted to do so (Luke 13:11-16). Furthermore, it is worthy of note that after resurrection Jesus shows himself first to women and tasks them with spreading the good news of his victory over death (Mathew 28:7-10; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:9, 23; John 20:17). All these show an attitude of appreciation and respect, of assigning an equal status to members of society who were generally regarded as inferior.

Apostle Paul has a similar attitude as he has women listed as his co-workers. In Galatians 3:28, a verse often quoted within discussion on equality, Paul states his case strongly: in Christ, there is to be no inequality, neither of gender nor of any other kind. The idea conveyed is that God has but one family, and this is composed of all who are "in Christ". No other criteria – be it ethnicity, social status, or gender – is valid, for the

only ground of inclusion and the only measurement of one's value is Christ and his work on behalf of his followers. Thus, if in the Old Testament women would relate to God's covenant through men (either father, husband, brother or son), in the New Testament a revolutionary change takes place. Now every person, whether man or woman, has direct access to God, through the covenant of, in Christ. There are no privileges, no discrimination of any kind, no dominant social and political platforms to puff up one's status and position within this community of Christ followers. Undoubtedly, distinctions between its members are not obliterated, so equality is not automatically attained. Rather, as a member of this community "in Christ", one ought to behave in such ways as to promote harmony and good life within the community.¹¹

Taken together, the texts listed above strongly support the egalitarian vision of Galatians 3:28.¹² What counts is not ethnicity or gender but grace. Men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles share freely and equally in the same status as members of the new community created by God through Christ's sacrifice. One ought to ponder, therefore, what would this vision entail in practice, in terms of ministry roles and responsibilities. Throughout the New Testament one finds numerous examples of female ministry: teachers (e.g. Priscilla), deaconesses (e.g. Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2); prophetesses (e.g. Acts 21:19; 1 Corinthians 11:4-5); and last but not least, Paul names a woman a "notable apostle" (Romans 16:7).

These have increasingly become significant issues in recent discussions on equality, and the debate on the role of women continues. At the opposite pole, the traditional view refers to two instances in the New Testament which seem to indicate that women have a subordinate role in the church: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, where women are to be silent in the church, and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where women must not teach or have authority over men. Although good hermeneutical practice would require that these texts be treated as contextual occurrences and as such their normative power should not surpass the general New Testament teaching on equality, it is imperative that one does not easily dismiss the affirmations these texts make if one is to remain impartial to the task of establishing

11 Cf. N.T. Wright, "The Biblical Basis for Women's Service in the Church", *Priscilla Papers* 20-4, 2006, pp. 5-6.

12 Cf. Kenneth E. Bailey, "Women in the New Testament. A Middle Eastern Cultural View", *Theology Matters* 16-1, 2000, pp. 1-11.

a biblical basis for the discussion on equality. Having said that, it should be emphasized that both texts address specific situations in the church, and they ought to be interpreted in harmony with the affirming passages recounted above. This, I believe, directs our attention to a principle often ignored – that of cultural relevance. Without claiming a definitive answer on the matter, I suggest that adequate hermeneutical practice ought to pay attention to both the context within which a text was written and the context within which it is received. On the case in view, if such an interpretive stance is employed, both the general social and cultural emphasis on equality and the ecclesial understanding of gender roles ought to be considered. Of course, whether this will result in establishing a common ground, remains to be seen.

Biblical equality – a synthesis, in lieu of a conclusion

If anything, the discussion thus far makes visible the need for drawing a set of principles on which any further discussion on equality implementation is to be carried out. In lieu of a conclusion, I suggest three such principles.

First, it is most evident that the biblical teaching on the matter endorses the view that all human beings are created equal. All are created in the image of God and therefore equal before God. All share the same moral, spiritual and social responsibilities and therefore all have the right to equal treatment and equal access to resources and decision-making. Equality, nevertheless, does not imply that all are the same. As pointed in the definition given above, a healthy view on equality has space for the uniqueness of each individual. As such, one ought to follow Christ's example when one ponders as to how will the principle of equality be worked out in practice. I argue that as Christ has accepted *everyone* into his fellowship, so are we to ensure that no member of our community is marginalised, left out, forsaken. In other words, the principle that should govern our behaviour is inclusiveness.

Second, the discussion above has also touched upon the issue of equal responsibility. If we are to follow the biblical model, we ought to have in view the fact that membership, ministry roles, and mission activities are not to be restricted by race, gender or social status. Rather, such issues are to be decided on the basis of such concepts as the priesthood of all believers, the charismata imparted by the Holy Spirit to all the members of the

Church, and the call of God to ministry each one receives. Since in the biblical teaching none of these are restricted by human classifications and barriers, no such limitations should inform the discussion on equality.

Third, it seems that the most important aspect of equality, when approached from a biblical perspective, is the notion of mutual submission as Christian love in action. As illustrated by Christ, this has to do with an ethos of love and self-giving. Jesus said: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In the light of this statement, mutual submission is ought to be at the heart of our teaching on equality, for the way of the cross, in this perspective, is to treat each person with dignity, at home and in public, in the church and the market-place, in all spheres of life.

In conclusion, I suggest that the discussion above makes clear the fact that a relational approach is necessary if the principle of equality is to gain ground. Ultimately, it seems that in the biblical view “equality” is a matter of relating rightly. It is about a shift in focus, from oneself to the other, from one’s “rights” to the neighbour’s needs. Such an understanding reveals the fact that the implementation of the principle of “equality”, in practice, is the responsibility of individuals as they interact with each other, rather than the institutionalisation of that tends to characterise contemporary discussions. In this way, the result will no longer be the assurance that the minimum necessary is in place so that the best compromise is attained – the position usually taken in institutional implementations of equality, but rather an outcome in which each individual’s specific needs are taken into account and provided for in the best way possible. This, I believe is what Jesus meant when he commanded us: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

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