

Dialogue

God Transcends Gender and Other Thoughts

Brian Porter
Hope College

A response to “God the Father: The Author of Gender Differentiation, Gender Purpose, and Gender Beauty —Men and Women in the Realm of Employment” by Richard Chewning

Richard Chewning, revered elder of the CBFA, has written a provocative manuscript of (his interpretation of) the Bible’s instructions regarding gender in three arenas — worship, family, and work. Chewning discusses numerous issues making various claims prior to reaching his final exhortation which can be paraphrased as: family, principally children, are more important than work, and it is sinful to prioritize employment over family, particularly when it is detrimental to the children and the justification is the accumulation of additional (excessive) material possessions. I agree with Chewning that children and family are significantly more important than outside employment and materialism is endemic. However, I have concerns with many of Chewning’s other assertions, including his premise that teachings of the Bible are clear and obvious. There are several of his positions that demand a response. The necessary brevity of this rejoinder does not allow me to offer all my differing perspectives in depth, but I will discuss the ones of most significance.

Tone and Style

Certainly not Chewning’s intention, but his tone and self-assured style come across as scornful and pejorative. Chewning commonly uses phrases that can be construed as condescending and disrespectful to one that disagrees with him, such as:

“the revelation of Scripture is clear”

“the Bible’s clear revelation”

“The ‘Trinity Principle’ that is operative in the home—1) Christ, 2) husband, 3) wife—is clear from a biblical perspective”

“the revelation of Scripture is clear”

“...God has revealed to us His mind regarding a ‘family structure’ and a ‘church structure.’ It is amazing, however, how many people want to alter God’s declared structure and set up a different one in the name of ‘modern thinking’”

“the biblical evidence is consistent”

Chewning’s unwavering assuredness is troubling — interpretations of the Bible are beliefs influenced by presuppositions, no one is objective. It is misguided of Chewning to suggest that if one disagrees with him then one is wrong, ignorant, or even worse, a heretic that does not fully understand the will of God. The Bible is rarely as clear and unambiguous as Chewning claims. Multiple interpretations exist as evidenced by the numerous denominations¹ and Christian practices.²

Chewning tends to be dismissive of those who think differently. One example is his disparaging of postmodern thinking as evidenced by comments as “enough of the postmodern perversions,” “Postmodernism, rooted in secular humanism, has raised its head,” and “Postmodernism would prevail....” Chewning’s tone disregards the insight offered from thoughts that differ from his. Postmodern posits that “all knowledge is rooted in some narrative or myth” observes the faith-commitments inherent in all knowledge-claims (including science), not just religious ones. Myron Penner comments that “such a brand of postmodernist discourse, instead of closing off faith commitments, provides Christian thinkers with a philosophical context for a truly Christian philosophy that does not have to begin by denying that it is Christian” (Penner, 2005). C.S. Lewis, renowned Christian thinker, might have dis-

agreed but David Downing and others have linked the logic expressed in Lewis's writing to postmodern thinking (Downing, 1998). It may not be Chewning's intention to imply that he has the lone unbiased understanding of God, but occasionally it can be read in this fashion.

God Calls Us Forward and Scripture is Dynamic

As is customary for Chewning, he provides ample Bible passages to support his positions but few additional sources. Quoting Scripture is relevant, but relying solely on the Bible as a foundation of one's positions can be weak. The Bible offers profound life-changing truths; yet, it can also be misconstrued to support almost anything one wishes. Unfortunately, history is replete with people justifying insidious acts such as slavery,³ racism,⁴ oppression of women,⁵ and killing⁶ with Scripture. It is indeed possible to quote the Bible to defend an idea that is the exact opposite of the intent and purpose of that very Scripture.

Chewning's traditionalist mindset of Scripture is that the writers of the Bible fully comprehended the will of God (i.e., they were the mouthpiece of God) and it is our task to decipher their timeless writings. This is one approach to the interpretation of Scripture, but possibly not the best. For many, a more logical understanding is that the authors of the Bible wrote within the context of their culture and time. In various ways, their knowledge was limited. Almost two thousand years later, our knowledge is still imperfect, but we do know more, and it is our role to advance the interpretation of Scripture (Robinson, 1963). God is infinitely in front of us tugging us ever forward. As our knowledge develops through the ages, we should be able to comprehend God more fully and deeply. By predominantly looking back and placing God in the historical context two millennium ago, we are not moving closer to God; we are regressing and dropping farther away. Chewning does not look favorably on this revisionist concept that interprets Scripture in the light of changing culture, condemning it as "theological cancer."

The role of women is one example that clearly contrasts Chewning's *stationary historical* perspective with a *dynamic cultural* perspective. Chewning vehemently argues that women should not have leadership roles in the church on the basis that the Bible only describes men leading the church. Chewning claims that Scripture is constant and that the treatment of women should not progress beyond what was described in the Bible centuries ago. According to Chewning:

It is simply not enough to say that Christ ministered to women on a higher plane – elevated their

value – than they were six centuries prior to His incarnation and then assume that His "elevating of women" was intended to continue rising and rising after the close of the Canon. That is a presumption and presupposition for which there is no biblical warrant. It is eisegesis: saying what the Word does not say....

The biblical evidence is consistent throughout; both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) bear witness to God's exclusive use of men in the leading of those in the wilderness, those in the OT synagogues, in the temple, and in the NT church. The councils of the Pharisees and Sadducees were all male. The NT church was given detailed instruction regarding the selection of male leadership – the overseers / elders.

In contrast to Chewning's stagnant historical interpretation of Scripture, a dynamic progressive perspective postulates that God is pulling us onward. For instance, in light of today's culture, the teaching of Deuteronomy 21:10-14 (instructions for marrying a captive woman) are barbaric. Yet, in the context of that time (around 2,700 years ago) this was a radical progressive step of the treatment of women. Rob Bell (2013) writes, "What is a shocking and offensive cultural practice to us was a groundbreaking advancement at that time." It is imperative to recognize that irrational passages such as those instructing wives to be subordinate and slaves to obey masters "do not mean the author is teaching the proper order of society"; rather, "given that order, the author is telling readers how to behave so as to grow in holiness" (Ralph, 2003). Surely today we are more enlightened. Bell describes this dynamic understanding of the Bible as follows:

What we see in these passages is God meeting people, tribe, and cultures right where they are and drawing and inviting and calling them forward, into greater and greater shalom and respect and rights and peace and dignity and equality. It's as if human history were progressing along a trajectory, an arc, a continuum; and sacred history is the capturing and recording of those moments when people became aware that they were being called and drawn and pulled forward by the divine force and power and energy that gives life to everything. (Bell, 2013)

This reexamination of Scripture has occurred throughout the centuries. Augustine interpreted Scripture differently than Paul, as did Luther and Calvin. Regardless of whether Chewning recognizes it, he, too, accepts this progression of the Christian faith. An example is

Chewning's belief in the holiness of the 27 books of the New Testament. The canon of the New Testament was decided on by humans, among many sacred books, more than three centuries after the life of Jesus (Ehrman, 2000). Another example is that Chewning is clearly a beneficiary of Luther's repudiating centuries of Roman Catholic interpretation and putting the Bible in the hands of the people, which did not happen until 1522.

Homosexuality

Chewning is adamant that homosexuality is a sin (practicing homosexuals/lesbians should not be eligible for leadership positions in the church) and that "God has only sanctified 'marriage' between a man and a woman, not other gender combinations." Again, Chewning states his belief as certitude, directing the reader to accept it without question. The truth is, Chewning's idea that homosexuality is a sin may still be a popular opinion (though it's becoming less popular), but it is not undisputable. A strong argument can be made that Chewning's opinion is erroneous and may not reflect the ideas of God. Theologian James Brownson (2013) examines the scant passages (only seven) that are found in the Bible addressing homosexuality from both a "traditionalist" and a "revisionist" perspective. Brownson concludes that the appropriateness of committed same-sex relationships is best considered in light of contemporary culture.

Historian John Boswell (1980) states that there is little evidence that the early church condemned homosexuality, and it wasn't until the 12th century that an intolerance of homosexuality commenced. Boswell conjectured that some Christian churches even blessed same-sex unions during the first millennium of Catholicism (Boswell, 1980; Von Drehle, 2013). Semantically, the word homosexuality did not appear in the English language until 1892 and does not occur in any of the original manuscripts from which the English Bible is descended (Gomes, 1996). Theologian Jeffrey Siker (1994) observes that the Bible neither explicitly condemns nor endorses homosexual relationships. Overall, the Bible says little regarding homosexuality, particularly as it pertains to Christianity in today's culture.

In their book *What God Has Joined Together*, psychologist David Myers and Letha Scanzoni (2005) make a compelling Christian case for gay marriage. Some major points include:

1. The Bible has very little to say about same-sex sexual expression.
2. The few verses that speak of same-sex marriage must be examined in their context — condemnation of idolatry, lust, promiscuity, and exploitation.
3. Translations have been difficult. Behaviors in ancient cultural context are not easily expressed in modern English.
4. The Bible does not address naturally disposed same-sex orientation or loving, committed homosexual relationships.
5. Nowhere in the Gospels is it recorded that Jesus said anything about homosexuality, but Jesus spoke extensively about loving our neighbor, being humble, avoiding judgmentalism, and caring about people who were hurting and regarded as outcasts.

God, Women, and Men

Chewning writes that "God has ordained specific roles for the male and the female within the context of the family and the church" and that God prohibits women from church leadership roles and women (mothers) should be hesitant to be employed outside of the home. It has already been discussed that Chewning's perspective regarding women in the church is predominantly based on his traditionalist interpretation of the Bible. According to theologian Malcolm O. Tolbert, it is a fundamental mistake to assume the structures and systems described in Scripture, particularly the New Testament, are sacred and authoritative as the principles it affirms. It is wrong to use the word of God to affirm and maintain human privilege. It was wrong when chattel slavery and the persecution of Jews could be regarded biblical, and it is unequivocally wrong to impose first-century social standards on the women in the life of the church as the authority of Scripture, preserving the status quo favorable to those already in power. Tolbert comments that the pattern of male dominance reflected in the Bible is not an expression of God's will, but a reflection of the culture in which Jews, Christians, and pagans lived (Gomes, 1996).

Rather than classifying God as having a gender (male), another viable understanding is that God transcends gender. God is neither female nor male⁷ or God is both female and male. In affixing God a gender, we limit our understanding of an infinite God who is boundless. It implies that men are more like God and women less like God (Japinga, 1999). For many, confining God to a male father figure creates a daunting barrier. Those that have never known or have had tumultuous relationships with biological fathers may have difficulty thinking of God as a father and it may prevent an intimate understanding of God.

Chewning begins his discussion of the employment of women with what he considers a very disturbing statistic: 73% of all married women are employed because their husbands want them to work. Unfortunately, Chewning does not provide the source of this data; it would be interesting to know if similar information exists on the percentage of married women that expect their husbands to be employed. Surely this is even higher, yet Chewning would probably consider this normal and appropriate. According to Chewning, husbands, but not wives, have the opportunity to seek a calling outside of the home and procure its benefits (self-actualization, remuneration, fulfillment, etc.), and mothers, not fathers, have the rewarding joy of sharing more time raising their children.

I agree with Chewning that employment is necessary for parents (raising children requires money⁸) and that it should not consistently take precedent over family. However, I differ with Chewning that God's clear role is for women to be at home and for men to be employed. Research in psychology and sociology affirm that employment is more than a means of livelihood. It is also a significant contributing factor to an inner life. The personal and social meaning of work is as important as its financial value. People chose to work not just for remuneration but because work plays a crucial psychological role in the formation of human character (Gini & Sullivan, 1987). Women that work for pay are typically less depressed and anxious and have fewer illnesses than women who are full-time homemakers (Moen & Roehling, 2005). According to Matt Ward (1996), Scripture teaches that work is central to who we are as human beings. To dictate that the biblical mandate is for women to work at home and men to be employed is unfounded and it denies, should they choose, women the personal, social, and spiritual benefits of employment and men the fulfillment of being significantly involved with their children.

People are different and complex, rarely fitting neatly into preconceived stereotypes. Chewning's traditional family, with the father the breadwinner and the mother the stay-at-home wife, exists in only 16 percent of American families. Moreover, approximately 40 percent of women earn more than their husbands (Williams, 2012). Women can be great providers and men inherent nurturers (many women and men are both). Children can benefit when both parents are employed, share equally in domestic work, and are integrally involved in their lives. Mothers that work demonstrate to daughters that they, too, can strive for fulfilling careers and need not compromise for a husband that confines them to a spe-

cific (subordinate) role. Sons learn that men should share household chores and that fathers are vital in raising a family. Sons also acquire respect for women, understanding that women (and their future spouse) are not limited to traditional stereotypes.

Final Thought: The World and Family

Chewning observes that children, more than any other creature on earth, have a longer need for bonding, training, learning, and maturing, and "inappropriate rearing can damage and pervert any of the "life-giving-promoting" inner-connective stages of human development." Chewning comments that parenting requires time and the world has no interest in what is best for the family. I mostly agree with Chewning, but would qualify that some areas of the world demonstrate a greater interest in what is best for the family. For example, while most developed countries offer paid paternity leave to both mothers and fathers, the USA is the only developed country that does not even guarantee some form of paid leave to new mothers (Hanes, 2012). Once parents return to work, subsidized daycare is practically nonexistent in the USA and is more generous in other developed countries. The USA is also the last developed country in the world to implement national health care (and it still is not comprehensive), making prenatal and child health care less accessible. Moen and Roehling (2005) observe that Europeans recognize the risks of contemporary careers to the family and provide the appropriate safety nets while in the United States policymakers are lowering the nets or else doing away with them altogether. Surprisingly, the country most identified with Christianity in the developed world, may well be the least proactive in what is best for a family. Rather than using the Bible to justify gender roles, which can be misconstrued and limiting to women, it might be better to focus attention on biblically improving society for all, regardless of gender.

REFERENCES

- Bell, R. (2013). *What we talk about when we talk about God*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Boswell, J. (1980) *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: Gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Brownson, J. (2013). *Bible, gender, sexuality: Reframing the Church's debate on same-sex relationships*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

- Downing, D. (1998). C.S. Lewis among the Postmodernists. *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/1998/novdec/8b6036.html>
- Erman, B. (2000). *The New Testament*. Oxford University Press.
- Gini, A., & Sullivan, T. (1987). Work: The process and the person. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 6(8), 649-655.
- Gomes, P. (1996). *The good book*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.
- Hanes, S. (2012, Dec. 26) Parental leave global comparison: US still among least Generous. *The Christian Science Monitor—Modern Parenthood*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Family/Modern-Parenthood/2012/1226/Parental-leave-global-comparison-US-still-among-least-generous>
- Japinga, L. (1999). *Feminism and Christianity*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Moen, P., & Roehling, P. (2005). *The career mystique*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Lillittlefield.
- Myers, D., & Scanzoni, D. (2005). *What God has joined together: A Christian case for gay marriage*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Penner, M. (Ed.). (2005). *Christianity and the postmodern turn — six views*. Grand Rapids, MI; Brazos Press.
- Ralph, M. (2003). *And God said what? An introduction to Biblical literary forms*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Robinson, J. (1963). *Honest to God*. Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press.
- Siker, J. (1994, July) How to decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and gentile inclusion. *Theology Today*, 51(2), 219-234.
- Tuttle, Brad. (2012, June 26). Million dollar babies. What it really costs to raise a child comments. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://business.time.com/2012/06/26/million-dollar-babies-what-it-really-costs-to-raise-a-child/>
- Von Drehle, D. (2013, March 28). How gay marriage won. *Time*, 16-24.
- Ward, M. (1996, Fall). Toward a Biblical understanding of the work ethic. *The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 6-15.
- Williams, A. (2012, Aug. 10) Just wait until your mother gets home. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/fashion/dads-are-taking-over-as-full-time-parents.html?pagewanted=all>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Catholic, Baptist, Reformed, Pentecostal, Mormon, Presbyterian...
- ² Baptism, roles of women and men, heaven and hell, communion, speaking in tongues...
- ³ 1 Peter 2:18, Colossians 3:22, Ephesians 6:5.
- ⁴ Genesis 9:21-27.
- ⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, 1 Timothy 2:11-14.
- ⁶ Deuteronomy 17:12, Exodus 22:18-20, Leviticus 20:13, Exodus 21:15.
- ⁷ Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
- ⁸ According to the Department of Agriculture the cost is \$234,900 to raise a child to the age of 18. However, including the cost of college and forgone wages, some estimate the cost to be closer to \$900,000 to raise a child to the age of 22 (Tuttle, 2012).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brian Porter is a professor of management at Hope College. His primary areas of research are personal finance, faith integration, and the music group U2. He hopes that by offering a different emerging Christian paradigm on gender, it demonstrates the CBFA's inclusiveness and that the CBFA is welcoming of those uncomfortable with a traditional perspective. Brian and his wife (also a full-time professor) share domestic work and are equally involved in raising their two sons.