

Aim of lesson

To enable the students - young men as well as women - to compare conventional wisdom with God's truth and to understand what the Bible really says about the relationship between brothers and sisters.

Bible background

Genesis 1-3; Galatians 3:27-29; 2 Corinthians 6:17-18; Ephesians 5:21-33.

Preparation required

The Bible appears to imply that men have a wholly pre-eminent role to play, and that women should, as it were, recede to the background. As with other Biblical topics and issues, we need to look at the whole of scripture and consider in the context of the time when these things were written. On the other hand, worldly wisdom tells us that women can do everything men can do and should aggressively pursue roles which have been traditionally the preserve of men. This can be a sensitive issue, and especially so if you happen to be male. You need to think through the issues to be clear in your own mind how to lead the discussion whilst allowing the students to speak freely on the issue.

Note that this topic is about ecclesial, not family, life. While of course there is much in common, and some of the same principles apply, there are also differences. The subject of relationships between husbands and wives is discussed in Part 2 (Family Life - Principles).

Suggested outline of lesson

Look up with the young people the relevant passages and draw from them first of all the principles that are clearly laid down from Genesis onwards. Sometimes it will be obvious what the verses are saying. In others you may have to help a little. When they are happy about the meaning get them to fill in a short précis in the students book. The gist of the argument is as follows:

Principles

The Garden of Eden

From Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2: 21-24 and Genesis 3 we can build up the picture that Adam and Eve were both created in God's image, they both were given dominion over the earth, they both knew the rules, they both received a curse and

they both had a way of salvation opened to them. Eve was created from Adam's side suggesting a partnership and in marriage they were to become one flesh.

On the other hand we can see from 1 Timothy 2:12-14 that as Adam was created first he had been given greater authority and because he was not deceived, should have used his authority and made sure they did not sin. The curse on Eve, that her husband would rule over her, reflects the fact that this did not happen.

The Law of Moses

Exodus 35:21-22; Numbers 5:5-7 & 6:2; and Deuteronomy 31:11-12 show us that in many respects men's and women's services to God were on an equal footing. As is common in modern usage, the pronoun 'he' is used to cover either sex.

Other passages, however, make a distinction; get the young people to look at Exodus 13:2,12, Leviticus 12:3, Exodus 23:17. From these passages we can also see that first born males were the Lord's; boys were to be circumcised and there were times when the men were specifically instructed to appear before the Lord. Note however that this did not exclude the women. It is clear from Nehemiah 8, for example, that women shared in the feast of Tabernacles; and from Luke 2 that Mary accompanied Joseph when they went to Jerusalem at passover time.

Numbers 30:2-15 describes an area of male authority. Men and women were equally at liberty to take a vow, but a woman's father or husband was allowed to overrule her. This would seem to show that a man was to take overall responsibility for what went on in his house. Note that a widow took responsibility for her own actions and was, in this respect, in the same position as a man. A woman is subject to her father, and then to her husband, but she is not inferior.

In Deuteronomy 1:13 Moses appointed judges over the people. While they had this responsibility, they would in turn be subject to the priests and to Moses; ultimately, of course, all were subject to God. So we begin to see a hierarchy developing among the people, not in importance but in responsibility.

New Testament

Galatians 3:27-29 and 2 Corinthians 6:18 both tell us that in Christ men and women are still one. They still work together to serve their Lord. Luke 10:38-42 shows how Jesus wanted both Martha and Mary to listen to him.

Ephesians 5:21-33 and 1 Peter 3:1,7 are principally talking about married couples but we are told that the family unit in a Christian household should mirror the relationship of the church to Christ so they are relevant. We see that wives should submit to their husbands, in the same way as we should all submit to Christ. This is not because men are superior but as a mark of love and respect, and out of a desire to serve Christ. Ephesians 5:21 is included because it shows all should submit to each other.

In summary, therefore, the teaching of scripture is not that women are subordinate to men, while men are free to take all the decisions and expect their wives to obey them. While a wife is to be subject to her husband, both are subordinate to Christ, and should obey, serve, and try to emulate him.

In ecclesial life

Get the young people to look at 1 Timothy 2:8-13 and 1 Peter 3:1-7. What are these verses saying about the role of women? The word for 'silence' is the Greek word 'hesuchia', and there is in the students' notes an extract from Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words which would indicate that the word has to do with meekness of spirit and disposition. Also in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 (a passage directed at men) the word is translated 'quietness' in the AV and 'settle down' in the NIV. The general conduct of believers should be as Psalm 46:10 says 'Be still and know that I am God.'

Now get the young people to look at 1 Corinthians 14:28-35, where a different word - 'sigao' - is used several times. This time it really does mean being quiet, as the extract from Vine's shows. Once more another question is raised. Are sisters actually to be utterly silent throughout a service, not singing, for instance? There again, in what situations do these words apply? Is it only between an opening hymn and a closing prayer, and as soon as the voluntary is over they are allowed to speak? If so, what is the scriptural justification for such a view?

It is instructive to look at the word 'speak', used in verse 34 and 35. Vine's lists all the other verses in this chapter where the word is used, and the clear meaning seems to be of teaching, addressing the church.

The context is helpful. In the church in Corinth their services were being reduced to chaos by brothers, and sisters, addressing the church simultaneously, some in tongues which nobody could understand. Paul's solution was to insist that one person should speak at once, and that sisters should be silent.

So what are we to learn from all these passages?

- Both brethren and sisters should behave respectfully, ensuring that the conduct of the church is orderly.
- Sisters should not take a leading role in the ecclesia. It is for men to have the formal responsibility of leading the church.
- Sisters should not address the ecclesia, or have a role of teaching brethren, in the sense of having authority over them.

A notable passage in this context is Acts 18:24-26. By the time Apollos came to Ephesus he was already a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures, who was teaching boldly in the synagogue. It would have been wrong for Priscilla to have stood up in the synagogue and put him right, but there was

nothing wrong in her sharing with her husband in completing his understanding of the gospel in their home.

Now turn to 1 Corinthians 11:1-5. The teaching about modest apparel, which we have already considered in 1 Peter 3, and the wearing of hats which is mentioned here, also reflects the attitude of a sister to her understanding of these principles. If a woman wears flamboyant or sexy clothing it shows she has other things on her mind than the service of her Lord. It is also important for sisters to realise why they are covering their heads. It is to show that they understand the hierarchy described in 1 Corinthians 11:3, and recognise the principles of authority intended from the beginning. In this context it is instructive to consider the example of Rebekah in Genesis 24:63-65. Rebekah covered her head when she met Isaac; clearly she had not previously felt the need to do so in the company of Abraham's servant.

After discussing these issues get the young people to write in their books a brief statement about what they have learnt.

So what can sisters do?

This is the most important part of the lesson because all the young people should feel positive about what they can do.

Paul became aware very early on in his ministry that women could exert influence for good and evil. Acts 13:50 tells us that there were 'devout and honourable women'. These women together with the chief men of Antioch were able to create persecution and great hardship for the church. Contrast the work of those women, with that of Eunice and Lois in 2 Timothy 1:5. Timothy was described by Paul as his 'own son in the faith', but was quick to acknowledge that his mother and grandmother were originators of the 'unfeigned faith' that characterised him.

Ask for suggestions from the group, bearing in mind the principles we have agreed on. The young people may come up with a list like:

1. Teach in Sunday School or be a CYC leader.
2. Write letters, give practical help and visit those in need.
3. Teach, for example by CBM correspondence courses, or teach in the isolation league Sunday School.
4. Take part in home Bible reading groups. In the sort of environment in which Priscilla taught Apollos with Aquila, this teaching may include women as well as men.
5. Organise events.
6. Talk to friends and neighbours about what you believe.
7. And, yes, sisters may make the tea.

There are some grey areas where ecclesias have interpreted the teaching of scripture in different ways. You may like to take the opportunity to discuss one or two of these with the young people, and maybe explain why your ecclesia operates as it does.

The most important underlying point is that this is not a matter of drawing up lists of things sisters may or may not do. The fundamental lesson of scripture relates to a sister's attitude, which should not be domineering or aggressive, and to her role, which should be one of helpful service. Bearing in mind that brethren are equally called to the same values in their service of their Lord, the difference is not that great.

Roles of brethren and sisters

Of course many of the things above can be done by brethren as well as sisters. When the angels visited Abraham it was he who prepared and served the meal. In different ecclesias things will be organised in a different way depending on differing talents. This is what working together is all about.

We do have to recognise though that God has made men and women differently and for a purpose. If we are honest, most women are better than men at preparing an ecclesial supper, talking to children and old people etc. and men are, in general, better at most of the more leading roles. We should all delight in what we can do and get on with it.

There is no recorded evidence of women addressing a congregation. There is however much evidence that women played an active role in introducing the faith to individuals. Sisters play an active part in the preaching of the gospel, and it is often the case that individuals are introduced to the faith through the example and conduct of a sister. The Bible does not portray women as 'shrinking violets'. Conditions for believers like Lois and Eunice were not easy. They were frequently persecuted, and exhibited considerable courage. It was the women who first approached the tomb of Jesus when the disciples had long fled. It was through the courageous intervention of Esther that God's people were saved from slaughter.

It is also important for the young men in the class to realise that they have duties in this area as well. Their role in ecclesial life, as well as at home, places on them a great responsibility which they have to take seriously; it is not a matter of sitting back and letting their mother, (sister, girl friend, wife) do all the work while they sit around doing nothing.

Relevance to our lives

As followers of Christ, we need to be aware of our status - that of servants. We all, men and women, should be endeavouring to respond to the commandments of God and the teachings of his Son on his terms. There is no way that any of us should assume authority or boast of achievement or ability. Neither should we be in any way partial in our treatment of one person above another (James 2:1).

Scripture teaches us that we are all members of one body, and interdependent upon one another.

Now more than at any other time, girls and boys are taught to be assertive and have high aspirations in the work place. These values contradict the Christian teaching of meekness, godliness, self control and contentment.

We read that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God (1 Corinthians 3:19). It follows that as we struggle to become more godly and conform to the example of our Lord, we will find ourselves questioning modern values in society.

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank you for making us all with different talents and abilities. Help us in our service together to make the most of what we can do and understand your greatness, the greatness of your Son and our comparative insignificance and be grateful that you still want us to work for you. Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

1. The role of women in the family. Proverbs 31:10-31. Notice that she makes decisions and has authority – she goes out and purchases land. The family depends upon her judgement and competence. She is honoured and greatly valued.
2. There are some further questions you might like to discuss. Can an experienced sister teach a young newly baptised brother? What if a brother is wrong (consider Ananias and Sapphira)? What if a brother and sister disagree? When should I wear a hat?