# Case Study Two: Southern California Group Findings Arising from Discussion of the Gender Questions

# From John Goldingay

1. The Bible tells stories about a cultural context that is patriarchal; the women can be treated as objects. But the stories portray women often working within the system and sometimes subverting that culture. A number of the passages testify to the inventiveness and resourcefulness of the women and to the responsibility they exercise. There’s no downplaying of the patriarchy or even agonizing over it; it’s just the way it is. Change comes from below, from the grassroots, rather than by the undertaking of advocacy on their behalf. It’s undertaken by individuals responding to their circumstances, though the individuals are not left without support. But this support comes via something like the nuclear family and raises questions about a culture in which people live and function as isolated and independent individuals. So how advanced should the church be?
2. One usefulness of the way it tells the stories is that it may help to avoid people taking for granted the ground that has been gained. This may be especially significant at a time when there is a backlash over issues such as women’s involvement in ministry.
3. The Bible is itself sometime patriarchal but is sometimes more egalitarian. In our culture and in the Bible it’s common to blame the woman for irregular sexual encounters. In our culture it’s common to blame the woman for getting raped and to protest the planned parenthood centers where women go when they are pregnant rather than taking up questions with their men. But Genesis 38 notes Judah’s admission that Tamar is more righteous than he is.
4. It’s easy to misconceive the nature of egalitarianism in Scripture and in our context. We are the victims of a cultural assumption that what happens out in the world counts for more than what happens in the home; hence the sense that women need to be active in the world if their work is to have value. But in the South of the United States, the fact that boys cut the grass and girls do indoor chores does not imply a differential of values. Likewise in Israel the fact that men work in the fields and women at home does not imply a differential of values. The value of the woman’s work surfaces again in the story of Lydia in Acts 16.
5. In the Bible’s culture having children is crucial to being a woman. But actually this often seems to be the case in Western culture; hence the efforts women put into having children when they seem to be infertile.
6. Knowing who is the father of a child is important in our context as in the Bible’s context. Hence the concern about the strange woman/the loose woman. The concern about intermarriage in Nehemiah raises related issues. If identity is traced through the women, it is important that the community’s children are born to the right women.
7. The question of who accepts responsibility for or gives a home to people without the means to look after themselves is an important one in Western culture (in the context of a recession) as in the Bible’s culture.
8. We have to be wary of assuming that the values of our culture are necessarily right because we are obviously enlightened (!). We are then in danger of being stuck in our own value system. It is when the Bible presupposes attitudes that are different from ours that it becomes interesting and important, not merely when it validates attitudes that we are inclined to take anyway.
9. On the other hand, we also need to note that in our world attitudes can be pretty patriarchal. On the day we were discussing Genesis 38, the King of Saudi-Arabia had announced that he was granting women the right to vote in 2015 (but they still can’t drive).
10. Why does Genesis 38 come where it does? It is part of a wider story and a key aspect of its significance is that it shows how Judah is a flawed character. This would speak to the later clan of Judah. Such considerations draw our attention to the fact that we are interested in the story for different reasons from those that led to its being told and included in Genesis. Our approaching it because of our interest in gender questions is not wrong, but we need to be wary of absolutizing our agenda.
11. On the other hand, perhaps the appearance of women such as Tamar in Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew indicates that the NT is doing what we do, though out of yet another interest in the stories.
12. We need to be wary of thinking we can devise the perfect system/bring in the reign of God. God needs to do that.
13. Proverbs 31 holds together the religious and the mundane. Your belief in God and your activity in relation to your household are connected. A woman who prepares food and reveres God is a powerful person. That revering of God is of key importance. The women’s work is just as important and indispensible as anyone else’s. There is thus a contrast with the idea that developed in the West, that what happened out in the world outside the home was more important than what happened in the home. If the women do not prepare the food and make the clothes, the men are helpless; there is no supermarket or Gap down the street for them to go to.
14. The Tamar story shows how sexual abuse bleeds out; its effects are not confined to the immediate victim. The presence of the story helps us recognize its reality (e.g., in church life) and thus to deal with issues – except that in practice we operate in light of the dictum the story quotes = “Don’t tell anyone!” It also helps us to sympathize with people who have had shameful things happen to them. The story humanizes the Bible; the Bible helps us face how people actually are. There are few new sins. But the trouble is we don’t read the Bible, and particularly stories of this kind.
15. In Nehemiah, a tricky question is seeing where the issue lay. The concern about language implies a concern about something else. Is the concern simply cultural, or is it also religious, or does that question presuppose a Western split of concerns that would belong together? If the Jewish community had gone out of existence through assimilation, Jesus would never have been born. It can take only two generations for this process to happen, as Korean and Chinese communities in the United States show. If the community stopped speaking Hebrew, would it still pass on the Bible story? We have the Bible because people continued to speak Hebrew (we can’t very well understand Canaanite stories such as those in Ugaritic because there has been no community continuing to read them). There is a tension over being set apart; the Old Testament presupposes that the object of being set apart is to be a blessing to the whole world.
16. In Matthew 15, Jesus reaches across cultural lines, but only because he is forced to do so. The focus of Jesus’ ministry is Israel; reaching out to the Gentile world will come later. If the story is outrageous and offensive, this reaction of ours presumably means we have to ask what is wrong with us that we see it that way. In her persistent faith the woman suggests she has done her homework and she shows how smart she is. Her boldness is the same boldness as appears in the psalms. She knows how prayer works.
17. In Luke 2, Mary treasures but then scolds as she plays mom. She understands, but she doesn’t understand. The space given to Anna is much shorter than that given to Simeon, but the few words about her are powerful. She is a person, not a stereotype. Whereas Simeon speaks only to Mary, Anna speaks to everyone. She is the climax of the chapter. There is a difference between the way she is treated as a prophet and the way the girl with a gift of divination is treated in Acts 16. In her case, it is more obvious that the story isn’t really interested in her in her own right.
18. The contrast between Galatians 3 and 1 Timothy 2 raises sharply questions about how we deal with Scriptures we like and Scriptures we don’t like. Is Galatians radical and universal and does it therefore gives us basis for effectively ignoring 1 Timothy? Do we maximize the significance of Paul’s speaking in terms of “I do not permit” – is he saying what he does but not implying that everyone must, or is Paul not someone who would underplay the significance of his view in this way, so that he expects people to follow his example?
19. Do we read too much into Galatians passage because it can be made to support our views? Or does the stress in 1 Timothy on one God and one mediator imply that it also sees itself as radical and universal? In this connection note also the way it quotes scripture to support its point, though the way it quotes scripture raises problems in itself.
20. Given that 1 Timothy is in Scripture, what do we learn from it? How do we treat is as having authority? How do we submit to is? (We assume that the possibility that it was not written by Paul doesn’t make much difference to this question.) Is it because it models the need to be adaptable, not to insist on being radical when it would cause too much trouble in a social context? Does this approach help us with the question of taking different attitudes to same-sex relations in (e.g.) the West and Africa?
21. Or do we simply say it’s wrong? More than one of us has heard Episcopalian preachers simply say that the text they were presented with by the lectionary is wrong. Can we make such a statement without having turned ourselves into the authority?
22. Does our focus on the gender question make us mis-focus the point of the text (indeed, of both texts)? Is 1 Timothy more concerned with prayer, worship, submission to God, with the ease with which we can lose our reverence for God by giving authority to some other human beings, and with the problem of false teaching in Ephesus?