

Someone has said that the battle of the sexes can never be won because there is too much fraternizing with the enemy. A love-hate relationship marks the role of gender in many societies of the world today. Women protest male harassment, abuse, and violence. Men respond by retreating into their inner selves, the workplace, or the sports field.

In many societies an uncertainty seems to grip men and women as to their roles. On the one hand, women, having won their right to the workplace after being excluded for centuries, feel stressed out from the pressures of trying to be “superwoman”—breadwinner, parent, housekeeper, activist. On the other, the female role shift has forced men to redefine their own. The 1970s witnessed men attempting to develop their feminine side—the “soft male”—to counter the emerging tough women. But women, while demanding and savoring equal rights with men, still want men to be masculine, to “wear the pants in the family,” and be the primary providers.¹ Meanwhile, men seek to recover their masculinity—even as they nurse the wounds inflicted by the feminist movement.² In the midst of such male-female conflicts, a wistful longing for the good old romantic days still occurs: “We used to fall in love, remember?”³

And yet it shouldn’t be surprising that trying to define male-female roles and relationships in the current atmosphere is close to treading a minefield. At the risk of losing an arm or a leg, I wish to share what I have discovered from the biblical “image of God” paradigm. It seems to me that in this paradigm we can see a complementary role for the male and the female. It is also possible that by observing how the members of the Godhead relate to each other, we can understand better the male-female relationships. Since my study leads me to embrace both feminist and traditional values, I expect—like the undecided Civil War soldier who wore pants of blue and coat of grey—to get shot at from both sides. Still, I propose to take the risk in the hope of opening up some new perspectives.

God splits the Adam

Let us begin with Genesis 1:27: “So God created man [Hebrew, *adam*] in his own image, in the image of God he

created him; male and female he created *them*.”* The Hebrew for man is *adam*. The passage, rich in meaning, indicates that God split *adam* into two complementary beings who together would reflect His likeness. God Himself is not a loner, but a loving family. God (Hebrew *Elohim*, plural) says, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Here’s conversation within the Godhead—three Persons, consulting,

Another Look at the Battle of the Sexes

Male and Female in Biblical Perspective

by
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creating, and working together in harmony. God in relationship created the human in relationship. One part of the image of God is this relationship of the male and the female.

At creation, male and female formed a unity. This togetherness in a way reflects the divine image.⁴ On both the divine and human levels, oneness is a kind of relationship in which different persons complement each other, forming a unity.

True, God cannot be considered in terms of gender, but He has shared with the male and the female particular attributes that reside in Him. In His creative activity, when He split Adam into male and female, He divided some of His own special qualities between the two. To the man He gave His power and

strength. To the woman He gave the nurturant, life-giving attributes of His nature.

Little boys revving up toy engines, bigger boys careening down ski slopes or blasting through city streets with sirens screaming remind us that males love speed, noise, excitement, and risk. Yet they but faintly reflect the “*machoness*” of the God who blows up stars as big as solar systems and then shrinks them into deadly black holes that suck up everything in their path. God is awesome in His “maleness.”

Little girls cuddling baby dolls, bigger ones mediating arguments and kissing away bruises remind us that gentleness also images the nature of God. The Bible compares God to the suffering of a woman giving birth (Deuteronomy 32:18; John 16:21, 22) and the tenderness of a mother nurturing her child (Isaiah 49:15; Hosea 11:1-4).⁵ God is soothing, gentle, nurturing in His “femaleness.”

God described all His creations as good, but when He saw the man, He said, “not good”: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). The man was incomplete until God made “a helper suitable for him.” God created woman to be a helper, a counterpart to man. “Helper” or “help” are honorable titles in the Old Testament, applied to God Himself (as in Psalm 46:1). “Helper” indicates that the man and woman were to work together in life’s endeavors. Society is impoverished when a single sex group functions alone, for such singularity reflects only part of the full-spectrum of personhood.⁶ The creative purpose of God in splitting Adam is that men and women may grow together toward unity, an attribute of God Himself. He values harmony, interdependence, and unselfishness.⁷

Complexity in the divine image

Generally history and tradition have partitioned separate roles for males and females. Boys were trained as protectors and providers, encouraging an underlying biological predisposition of males to be dominant and aggressive. Girls were trained to be nurturant and domestic, in harmony with their childbearing role. The husband was to be the head; the wife, the heart.⁸ But God’s creative purpose is not quite so simple. Neither is human nature.

Along with the dominant characteristics of each sex, there also exists a “shadow self” containing elements of the opposite sex. The physiological evidence for this assertion is that each sex secretes small amounts of hormones of the opposite sex. Thus women are capable of aggressiveness, courage, and leadership, and men of tenderness and sensitivity to beauty. The “shadow self” has several functions. It gives males and females overlapping areas of common ground with each other. While total opposites have the most to contribute to each other in a relationship, they also have the most difficulty relating because of their differences. The “shadow self” provides areas of similarity where they can meet.

In addition to the “shadow self” of the opposite gender, human beings have dominant and auxiliary functions through which they perceive reality and make judgments. Some of these functions are gender-related. For instance, most men tend to make decisions based upon logic and objectivity, while most women tend to make decisions based upon feelings, intuition, and the perceived consequences of their choices upon others.⁹ Whatever our dominant and auxiliary functions, we feel more comfortable with the dominant one. Being forced to rely on the auxiliary function produces tension. Thus, if men and women take on roles that are not natural to them, they will feel pressured and stressed. For this reason, many people experience relief in reverting to traditional roles. Discomfort can also result from negative pressure by family and friends when men or women act in non-traditional ways.

Though men and women should first fulfill the tasks belonging to their own gender, the complexity of their nature indicates that they should not be bound by gender stereotypes. Women have become outstanding religious leaders, presidents of corporations, and heads of state. Men have excelled in emotional expression, as in music and poetry, and as empathetic counselors. Human creativity and potential, derived from the image of God, are limitless and unpredictable. Gifts should not be suppressed, but valued and encouraged. God Himself is complex; so is humanity, since we are made in His image.

The impact of sin

The atomic blast of sin split apart “Adam,” and this split had its inevitable impact upon the male-female union. Sin profoundly altered male-female relationships. Selfishness swallowed up love; suspicion swept aside trust; and competitiveness took the place of complementarity. God predicted a changed relationship between men and women. “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). With the entrance of sin came the abuse of love—the female manipulation to get what she wants from the male, and the male use of force to dominate the female. Two-become-one changed into one-become-two. Individuality, separateness, and self-seeking replaced complementarity. The harmonious duet turned into a shouting match.

With sin entered a string of abuses—domination, repression, the seclusion of women, manipulation, seduction, free love, the veiling of the female form or the unveiling and exploitation of it, adultery, pornography, and sexual violence, to name a few.

Sexuality, as a gift from God, was intended to be good. It is diffused through the whole human personality, every cell of the organism being genetically male or female. God gave the gift of sexual expression for two purposes, procreative (“Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” [Genesis 1:28, KJV]), and unitive (“they will become one flesh” [Genesis 2:24]). The unitive purpose must be dominant, because it is only within the unity of married love that children can develop and flourish. God designed sexual union for the purpose of completing the mental and spiritual

harmony that a couple sense in each other, producing the greatest ecstasy humans can experience.

Human perversion seeks the ecstasy of sex without the oneness, commitment, and enduring love. Anything short of commitment makes human beings disposable; people are used for a limited time and then discarded. That's why forcing sex on an unwilling subject causes intense humiliation, violation, rejection, and loss of self-worth. For the same reason, sex out of marriage can be devastating to the human psyche. It is one of the great ironies of contemporary life that our society, even as it screams against sexual abuse, pursues sexual excitement outside of marriage.

Human relationships in the image of God

Once we understand that sin has diverted the male-female role from the oneness of the divine image toward the divisiveness of the demonic, the issue of restoration of gender equality and role becomes one of returning to the original biblical locus. I believe both sexes can arrive at this locus if they examine relationships within the Godhead, which they were meant to reflect. The process can be both surprising and inspiring. Here are some biblical positions that provide insights for male-female relationships.

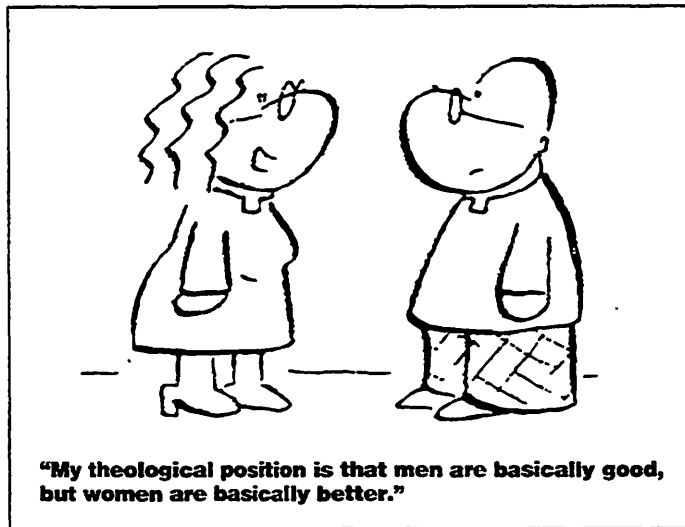
1. The Pauline assertion that "the head of the woman is man" (1 Corinthians 11:3) is not very popular today. Women resent the idea of male headship; often the word has been misinterpreted and misused, leading to abuse of women, physical and sexual violence, demeaning of personal worth and dignity, and restrictions that have prevented women from developing and exercising their gifts. But what is often forgotten is that the same apostle also said in the same place that "the head of every man is Christ," and "the head of Christ is God." The context of the three statements where headship is mentioned does not permit dominance of one over the other that results in violence, abuse, or denial of self-worth and dignity. The succeeding points

illustrate the true nature of headship.

2. Even though Paul speaks of God being head of Christ, the overwhelming biblical teaching is that the Father and Son are equal in all respects. Similarly, when it comes to humans, Adam and Eve were to exercise equally lordship and dominion over the created order (see Genesis 1:28).
3. Father and Son consult with each other regarding goals and strategies. There is complete openness in all their transactions: "The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:20). They enter fully into each other's plans. Headship in no way indicates either superiority or inferiority of one or the other.
4. Members of the Godhead act jointly with each other (see John 5:19). Statements of Jesus that He did nothing on His own authority (see John 5:19, 30) do not indicate a subordinate position, but suggest that He worked in concert with His Father. The Father likewise worked in harmony with the Son (see John 5:22). In an ideal marriage there are no unilateral decisions. Decisions are made when consensus is reached.
5. The members of the Godhead find fulfillment in doing the will of each other. Jesus' derived great satisfaction from doing the will of

His Father (see John 4:34) and accomplishing His rescue mission (see John 17:4). We human beings routinely seek satisfaction through fulfilling our personal needs. Jesus demonstrated the joy that comes from fulfilling the wishes of another.

6. Each affirms the others. The members of the Trinity continually glorify each other (see John 8:54; 13:31; 16:14). Husbands and wives need to learn the art of expressing appreciation. A good marriage is a mutual admiration society.
7. The Godhead is a model support system. The members empower each other in the fulfillment of their shared goals. Jesus in His human weakness was empowered by the Father and the Spirit to succeed in His mission (see John 1:32; 14:10). Our feelings of inadequacy would be soothed if we as men and women affirmed and empowered each other. Neither sex should seek to dominate the other. The tendency of male coercion and female manipulation illustrate the perverse human assumption that power is in short supply and must be fought over. In the Trinity we see the opposite principle: power is abundant and is freely shared.¹⁰
8. Leadership roles are interchangeable. The Father put all things in Jesus' hands (see John 3:35) giving Him rule over this world until the



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war is won; then it will be returned to the Father (see 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). Likewise, in a good marriage, leadership is interchangeable, each partner leading out in his or her areas of expertise.

9. There is oneness in the Godhead, such closeness that the pain of separation is unendurable (see Matthew 27:46). Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). There is not only oneness, but *inness*: "I am in the Father, and... the Father is in me" (John 14:10). Love is the force that binds them together. Human beings are invited to experience intimate oneness with the Godhead (17:21). Through union with God husbands and wives can reach sublime heights and depths of love in their relationship with each other. God has given them a unique way to express "*inness*" through the sexual embrace. A couple who are one with God and one with one another experience a level of ecstasy unknown to, and unavailable in, casual sex. Moreover the fibers of love that bind them together build a sturdy nest for the young. Where parents are genuinely in love with each other, children develop secure personalities.

Some argue that the relationship in the Godhead is not a suitable model for humans because of our fallen condition.

They maintain that authoritarian modes ("he will rule over you," Genesis 3:16) are most appropriate for sinners. But the goal for Christians is to reach "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Though we fall short of the divine ideal, we should always keep it before us and strive to reach it.

The Creator endowed us with exciting gifts of gender meant to complement each other. We find fulfillment when we develop these gifts and explore the relationships we were made to experience. There is no limit to human potential as it develops within the divine image. □

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Notes and References

*Except as otherwise stated, all Scripture passages are from the New International Version.

1. Willard F. Harley, *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-proof Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming F. Revell, 1986), p. 116-117.
2. See Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 2, 63.
3. Lance Morrow, "Men: Are They Really That Bad?" *Time*, February 14, 1994, p. 57.
4. V. Norskov Olsen, *The New Relatedness for Man and Woman in Christ: A Mirror of the Divine* (Loma Linda, Calif.: Loma Linda University Center for Christian Bioethics, 1993), p. 49.
5. For more female images of God, see Virginia R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).
6. Donald M. Joy, *Bonding: Relationships in the Image of God* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), p. 19.
7. W. Peter Blitchington, *Sex Roles and the Christian Family* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1981), p. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 71.
9. Myers-Briggs psychological typing describes a person's dominant and auxiliary mental processes, and how they relate to gender. See Gordon Lawrence, *People Types and Tiger Stripes: A Practical Guide to Learning Styles* (Gainesville, Fla.: Center for Applications of Psychological Type, 1979), pp. 17, 20.
10. For this concept I am indebted to S. Scott Bartschy's paper, "Issues of Power and a Theology of the Family" (Consultation on a Theology of the Family, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984). See also Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: Norton, 1969), who identifies five kinds of power, one of which is beneficial—the kind that empowers others.