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THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

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"Dear Dr. Grenz," the letter began. "Please excuse the notebook paper and my handwriting. I would have used my computer and printer to write to you but due to my demise, financially, I've had to sell my printer to put food on the table. . . . Several weeks ago I was browsing the book shelf of a local Christian book store, when your book *Betrayal of Trust* [which deals with clergy sexual misconduct[1]] leaped off the shelf into my soul thirsty hands."

My correspondent then proceeded to pour out a shocking story of abuse and betrayal. She spoke of how one of the ministers of her church and his wife convinced her to divorce her husband and move in with them, how with the blessing of the minister's wife she began to sleep with the clergyman, but then how the wife soon grew tired of the arrangement and turned on her. Publicly parading their rekindled love for each other, the ministerial couple galvanized the support of the senior pastor and the congregation to hound the unsuspecting woman out of the church. No longer able to carry out her job-related responsibilities in the aftermath of this trauma, she soon found herself dismissed from her employment as well.

The woman has since returned to her former husband and found a new church fellowship that is supporting her on the rocky road toward spiritual healing. Nevertheless the scars linger. "Somedays I do well. Somedays are more of a struggle," she acknowledged. In fact, the fallout from this experience may never settle. In what for me was the most tragic statement of her letter, the woman stated matter-of-factly, "I don't trust clergy at all."

Our first reaction to this tale of woe might be to excuse it as a bizarre situation or to discount it as the ranting of a jilted lover. In fact, however, the woman's story indicates what can all too readily happen when relationships between women and men go awry. Indeed, we all know from firsthand experience that our relationships are often not what they could or should be. Although not necessarily in as blatant a manner as this woman experienced, in a multitude of overt or covert ways we display through our fundamental femaleness or maleness the uncanny human knack to exploit each other for our own ends. In the words of Paul Jersild and Dale Johnson: "As sexual beings we are capable . . . of reducing another person to an extension

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[1] S. J. Grenz and R. D. Bell, *Betrayal of Trust: Sexual Misconduct in the Pastorate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995).

of ourselves. . . . It is precisely as sexual beings that we are most vulnerable to the desire to possess another person and to reduce him or her to the object of our desire."[2] Or as Lawrence Kubie noted: "Men and women are infinitely ingenious in their ability to find new ways of being unhappy together."[3]

Is there any hope for this situation? Can we overcome our debilitating tendency? Is it possible to build godly relationships between women and men? As Christians we boldly declare that the breach between the sexes can be healed. The gospel, we assert with Paul, is the power of God for our salvation. But how does this happen? How can the gospel transform relationships between men and women? Listen to the ancient story once again: "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness. . . .' So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:26, 27, 31). "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. . . . But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called [female] for she was taken out of [male]' " (2:18–23). "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:1–2). In the Biblical narrative we find three insights that assist us in our quest to build godly relationships between women and men.

I. THE FOUNDATION FOR GODLY RELATIONSHIPS: THE MUTUALITY WITHIN THE TRINITARIAN GOD

The first creation narrative begins with God: "And God said, 'Let us make. . . .' " In this manner the story points to what the Bible everywhere assumes: God is the foundation for human existence, including existence as male and female. Even more significantly our human relationality as sexual creatures finds its source in the divine reality. But what is it about God that provides the foundation for godly relationships between women and men?

For much of its history, Christian theology has been dominated by an emphasis on the oneness of the transcendent God. This view pictures God as the powerful, solitary sovereign over the world. God is characterized by the supposedly male traits surrounding designations such as Lord and King. This characterization has tended to lead to a conception of human relation-

[2] P. T. Jersild and D. A. Johnson, *Moral Issues and Christian Response* (4th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988) 50.

[3] L. S. Kubie, "Psychoanalysis and Marriage: Practical and Theoretical Issues," *Neurotic Interaction in Marriage* (ed. V. W. Eisenstein; London: Tavistock, 1956) 15.

ships that gives prominence to the male and fosters a hierarchy of male over female. According to this model, men represent God whereas women symbolize creation.

The twentieth century, however, has witnessed a renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for the Christian understanding of human relations. Simply stated, the doctrine declares that the eternal God is not an undifferentiated reality. Although one, God is nevertheless a unity in diversity. The one God is the social Trinity, the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Consequently God is fundamentally relational. Hence it comes as no surprise that when God fashions the pinnacle of creation, a unity in diversity—humankind as male and female—emerges.

Contemporary Trinitarian theologians find this idea latent within the enigmatic words of the first creation account: "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image.'" Of course we would be overstepping exegetical propriety were we to claim that the plural divine reference means that the Biblical writer was somehow a crypto-Trinitarian. Nevertheless, reading the narrative in the light of the entire canon does indeed suggest that the One who stands at the genesis of the plurality of humankind as male and female is internally a plurality. And consequently we can look to the dynamic among the Trinitarian persons for the clue to understanding what characterizes godly human relationships.

But what is this fundamental dynamic within the Triune God? In a word, mutuality. This mutuality is evidenced in what provides the best window into the divine dynamic—namely, Jesus' relationship to the one he called *Abba* ("Father").

Some theologians, in contrast, argue that the life of our Lord demonstrates anything but mutuality. Did Jesus not declare, "The Father is greater than I"? And did he not live in total obedience to—even dependence upon—the Father? Advocates of a top-down ordering of human relationships find in our Lord's demeanor the confirmation for a hierarchy of male over female they believe is likewise operative in God's relationship to creation. These thinkers argue that women ought to reflect the same kind of subordination to men that characterized Jesus' relationship to his heavenly Father.

This interpretation, however, goes beyond what the Biblical texts in fact assert. Nowhere does the NT declare that the Son's obedience to the Father is a model of how one gender (women) should relate to the other (men). We would do better to see in Jesus' obedience to the One he called *Abba* the model as to how all human beings—whether male or female—should live in obedience to God. And we ought to find in Jesus' example a grand illustration of the proper attitude that all Christians, female and male, should demonstrate toward one another. Rather than encouraging the establishment of lines of authority and submission, Jesus' life calls us to mutual submission to one another. Indeed, Paul instructed the Ephesian believers to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21).

The life of our Lord offers a model of the mutuality that ought to exist between women and men. But we have not yet arrived at the goal of our journey to the divine foundation for godly human relationships. We must take

our considerations of the relationship of the earthly Jesus to his heavenly Father one step farther. We must probe the divine dynamic lying behind it and then tease out more clearly the implications for us of the Christian understanding of God as Triune.

At the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity is the declaration that God is an eternal dynamic. According to the theologians of the ancient Church, the primary movement within the Godhead is the eternal generation of the Son. As the Church father Origen declared, from all eternity the Father begets the Son in one eternal act.

On the basis of this ancient Christian assertion, some theologians construct a linear or asymmetrical model of the Trinity in which authority flows from the Father to the Son (and finally to the Spirit). This linear conception, in turn, provides the transcendent foundation for an asymmetrical model of human relationships. These thinkers claim that just as authority flows from the Father to the Son, so also men have authority over women, and whatever authority women have derives from men.

Such a conclusion, however, fails to see that the dynamic Origen referred to as "the eternal generation of the Son" moves in two directions. As the Church father Athanasius realized, this dynamic not only generates the Son but also constitutes the Father. In that the Son is none other than the eternal Son of the eternal Father, the Son is not the Son without the Father. But in the same way the Father—being the eternal Father of the eternal Son—is not the Father without the Son.[4]

Allow me to illustrate this seemingly opaque idea. The generation of my firstborn son Joel not only marked him as the son of his father but also constituted me as father or, more specifically, as the father of my son. Indeed to call me "father" is a shorthand way of designating me as "the father of Joel" (and subsequently "the father of Corina" as well). My situation reminds us that there is a reciprocal relationship inherent in human generation.

Of course, this illustration has an obvious shortcoming and therefore ought not to be pushed too far. Human generation is temporal. It always happens at a point in time. As a result I know of a time before I was Joel's father, and I can speak of myself as a person apart from my role as the progenitor of my son. Not so with God, the ancient theologians declared. The generation of the Son—the act that constitutes the Father as Father—is an eternal dynamic, so that the Father never was apart from the Son.

Despite the limitations of the analogy, the point ought to be clear. The idea of generation within the Triune God means that we must balance the subordination of the Son to the Father with the dependence of the Father on the Son. In short, the eternal generation of the Son indicates that the first and second persons of the Trinity enjoy a mutuality of relationship. In a certain sense, each is dependent on the other for his own identity.

What is true within the eternal divine dynamic (or what the theologians call the immanent Trinity) is in turn visible within salvation history (that is, the economic Trinity). At the heart of the Biblical narrative is the recounting

[4] Athanasius *Apologia Contra Arian* 3.6.

of how Jesus willingly submitted himself to the One he called *Abba*. At the same time, however, the story also suggests that in the sending of Jesus the Father made himself dependent on the Son.

Our Lord himself declared: "All things have been committed to me by my Father" (Luke 10:22; cf. Matt 11:27). Of course in its context within the synoptic gospels Jesus' statement refers primarily to his role as the one who reveals the Father. But reading our Lord's bold assertion in the context of the entire gospel narrative suggests that the principle he announced here is applicable to his ministry as a whole. With these words Jesus offered a profound truth about the nature of his vocation. In sending the Son into the world the Father entrusted to the Son the entire divine program, which focuses on the establishment of God's reign and hence sets forth the Father's own deity.[5] The patristic theologian Athanasius rightly perceived the significance of Jesus' mission for the one who sent him: "Since the Father has given all things to the Son, he possesses all things afresh in the Son."[6]

Considerations such as these suggest that we cannot appeal to the example of Christ's subordination to the Father alone and hence an asymmetrical model of God as definitive for male-female relationships. Rather, the foundation for godly human relationships lies in the subordination of the Son to the Father together with the dependency of the Father on the Son. The application of this transcendent mutuality within the divine dynamic to the human sphere leads quite naturally to an emphasis on the interdependency of and mutuality between male and female.

Hence Paul's words to the Corinthian believers: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. . . . In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God" (1 Cor 11:3, 11–12).

This brings us to our first conclusion: Godly relationships between men and women find their foundation in, and therefore are to be patterned after, the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. Whatever else ought to characterize our life together, we must take seriously the fundamental mutuality exhibited between Jesus the Son and his heavenly Father.

II. THE GOAL OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS: REFLECTING THE VERY CHARACTER OF GOD

Three years after breaking up with Irving, the comic-strip character Cathy finds that her former boyfriend has been hired by her firm to engineer its downsizing program. After her encounter with Irving, Cathy complains

[5] W. Pannenberg is an important contemporary proponent of this idea. For a summary statement of his position see S. J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford, 1990) 50.

[6] Athanasius *Apologia* 3.36.

to the receptionist: "Even when there's no way to get to you, men get to you, Charlene. . . . They're some deranged, mutated species all their own!" Cathy then offers a theological conclusion: "God created women. Men invented themselves."

In addition to providing the foundation, the Biblical narrative indicates the goal of godly relationships between women and men. As the curtain on the Biblical narrative rises, the spotlight focuses appropriately on God. But the flow of the plot quickly moves to humankind as the divine speaker declares: "Let us make human beings in our image." This phrase, "in our image," indicates the goal of the creation of humankind. God intends that humans be the *imago Dei*. But how are we the image of God? And are men and women equally the bearers of the divine image?

Our initial inclination upon hearing this second query may be to wonder whether such a question even warrants mention. How could anyone assert that one or the other sex is not created in the image of God? While some might agree with Cathy that "men invented themselves," more common in the Christian tradition is the assumption that women reflect the divine image only in a derivative sense. Many theologians have in fact concluded that in the final analysis men more completely reflect the divine image than do women. Such treatments often attempt to construct an understanding of the image of God from a prior view of God's lordship, defined by concepts such as control and authority. This line of reasoning then concludes that men are more completely God's image-bearers and thus are a more appropriate expression of the divine sovereignty.

In the words of one proponent: "As a vassal lord, Adam is to extend God's control over the world. . . . He has the right to name the animals, an exercise of authority in ancient thinking. . . . And he is to 'fill' the earth with his *presence*." What comes through here in a somewhat subtle manner is stated more directly by another apologist for the primacy of the male: "The image of God is in man directly, but in woman indirectly."

In contrast to statements such as these, egalitarian thinkers affirm unequivocally that both male and female are fully the image of God. They see clear indication of this in the first creation story, in that God gave to both sexes the responsibility of multiplying and subduing the earth. Or stating this in Reformed theological terms, the Creator charged humankind—male and female—with the cultural mandate.

Although it offers a better interpretation of the creation story, the egalitarian position often shares a debilitating liability with the viewpoint it seeks to refute. Both readily assume that the divine image is something we possess as individuals. In contrast to this view, I would argue that the image of God is primarily a relational concept. Ultimately we do not reflect God's image on our own but in relationship. Thus the *imago Dei* is not primarily what we are as individuals. Rather, it is present among humans in relationship. In a word, the image of God is found in human community.

The creation narratives themselves point to the communal nature of the divine image. Implicit in the first creation narrative but more explicit in the second is the idea that God makes the first human pair so that humans

may enjoy community with each other. More specifically, the creation of the woman is designed to deliver the man from his isolation. The narrative indicates that Adam's solitude arose from a void that could not be filled by his companionship with the animals or, interestingly enough, even by the presence of the solitary Adam before God. The appropriate antidote for this situation was the creation not merely of a human counterpart but more specifically of a female counterpart.

This indicates the sexual nature both of Adam's solitude and of his awareness of his solitude. The void in his existence was sexually based, for he was fundamentally incomplete. And his sense of incompleteness gave birth to the cry of joy when he was introduced to his sexual counterpart: She is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23).

In this manner the Genesis story reminds us that as humans we can only exist as male or female, as sexual beings. To be sexual creatures entails being incomplete in ourselves. Our sexuality not only participates in our incompleteness but also allows us to sense this incompleteness. Indeed, as we are confronted with the other who is sexually different from us we are reminded of our own incompleteness. Our sexuality, then, is a sign that rather than isolated entities existing solely unto ourselves we are fundamentally social beings. And rather than finding fulfillment within, human completeness arises from outside the individual self. Hence our fundamental sexuality gives rise to the desire to come out of our isolation and enter into relationship with others.[7]

In Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen's poignant words, "we are so unshakably created for community that we cannot even develop as full persons unless we grow up in nurturing contact with others. Moreover, the fulfillment of our sociability depends on fellowship with the opposite sex."[8] Similarly on the basis of his work with mentally challenged persons Jean Vanier drew a similar conclusion: "Each human being is incomplete; our bodies are incomplete: man has need of the woman, woman has need of the man. . . . Each is made for the other."[9] In what sense? "Man and woman are as mirrors to each other; their differences reveal to each other who he is or she is. These permit each one to be himself or herself in his masculinity or her femininity."[10]

Our fundamental incompleteness as isolated individuals means that in ourselves we simply cannot live according to God's design for our existence—namely, that we reflect the divine image. To live out fully God's purposes for humankind requires that we be in relationship with each other, for the fullness of the *imago Dei* is present only in community. This is reflected not only in the creation narrative but also in the vision that concludes the book of Revelation. According to John the seer, God's will is the establishment of a human society in which God's children enjoy perfect fellowship

[7] A corresponding relationship between loneliness and community is presented by D. H. Small, *Design For Christian Marriage* (Westwood: Revell, 1959) 30.

[8] M. S. Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 41.

[9] J. Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 8.

[10] Ibid. 57.

with each other, all creation and the Creator: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with human beings, and he will live with them'" (Rev 21:1–3).

From beginning to end, therefore, the Biblical narrative draws from a relational understanding of the image of God. But this observation does not tell us why the *imago Dei* is relational. For the ultimate answer we must return again to the eternal divine reality. The doctrine of the Trinity makes clear that throughout eternity God is the fellowship of the three persons. No wonder, then, that God's image-bearers best reflect the divine nature in their relationality. The first creation narrative asserts that when God made humankind he built into human existence as male and female the unity in diversity that characterizes the eternal divine reality. For this reason neither the male as such nor the isolated human is the image of God. Humans in relationship ultimately are the *imago Dei*. Such human community illustrates what is present in a prior manner within the divine reality.

But we must take this a step farther. In our task of showing what God is like, we are designed above all to reflect the divine character so essential to God's own nature. What is this character? John speaks for the entire Biblical tradition when he offers the seemingly simple yet profound answer: "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Just prior to this statement the Biblical writer asserts that "if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (v. 12) and then explains how this can be: "We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (v. 13). In this manner our quest to determine what it means to be the image of God leads to the Holy Spirit.

The connection between the divine character (love) and the Spirit arises out of the observation that the divine character is concretized in the third person of the Trinity. This conclusion, in turn, is the extension of the interesting manner in which the Bible speaks of God's essence as "Spirit" (John 4:24) and then uses this word to delineate the third Trinitarian person. To understand how the Spirit is the concretization of the divine love we must unpack the second movement within God, what the patristic thinkers called the "procession" of the Holy Spirit.

The great theologian Augustine perceived that the Spirit is the love binding the Father and the Son.[11] As a consequence he—and the western tradition after him—spoke of the Spirit as proceeding from the Father and from the Son. Throughout all eternity, the great theologian explained, the Father loves the Son and the Son reciprocates the Father's love. This unique bond is the personal Holy Spirit.

[11] Augustine *The Trinity* 6.5.7; see also 15.17.27; 5.11.12; 15.19.37. For the connection of this Augustinian idea to the Greek tradition see Y. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury, 1983) 3.88–89, 147–148. For a contemporary delineation of this position see D. Coffey, "The Holy Spirit as the Mutual Love of the Father and the Son," *TS* 51 (1990) 193–229.

As a consequence, the pouring out of the Spirit in our lives facilitates our sharing in this eternal love. Hence it is this particular love—the divine love concretized in the indwelling Spirit—that God intends to be in evidence in our relationships. As we love one another we show forth the divine essence and thus are the *imago Dei*. Hence with good theological reason Paul exclaims: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

According to the Genesis narratives the social nature of our creation in the divine image emerges in the relationship between women and men: "So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." In what sense is this the case? The obvious answer is through marriage, as man and woman become husband and wife. Indeed, the second narrative concludes with this very point: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Subsequent Biblical texts utilize marriage as a fitting earthly picture of the divine love. Marriage is a reminder of God as the One who loves. More specifically it presents the exclusive nature of the divine love.

The second creation narrative hints as to the sense in which marriage can be a metaphor of the divine love. The narrator presents marriage as the joining of two persons who share a fundamental sameness as "flesh of one flesh" and yet differ from each other as male and female. This human dynamic reminds us of the dynamic within the Triune God. As we noted earlier, the divine life entails the relationship between the first and second persons who share the same divine essence but are nevertheless differentiated from each other. The bond uniting them is the divine love, the third Trinitarian person, the Holy Spirit. As marriage incorporates its divinely-given design to be the intimate, permanent bond arising out of the interplay of sameness and difference, this human relationship reflects the exclusive relationship of love found within the Trinity, the unique relationship between the Father and the Son concretized in the Holy Spirit.

Marriage not only represents the relationality within the eternal divine life but also reflects God's great love for creation. Here again marriage speaks of the holiness or exclusivity of the divine love. As is indicated by the OT prophets and reiterated in Ephesians 5, marriage is a fitting picture of the kind of relationship God desires to share with God's people. The marriage bond—that is, shared love—binds together a specific man and a specific woman in an exclusive relationship that each of them is to honor. In a similar manner God's love for us creates a bond that is exclusive and holy. God desires that we honor no other gods and that our relationship to him be threatened by no rival loyalties.

Understanding the metaphorical significance of their marriage ought to motivate each couple to live out in the various dimensions of their life together God's desire that their relationship be an ongoing witness to the character of the eternal God and an appropriate picture of the glorious connection that binds Christ and the Church. As this occurs, their marriage can

become a godly relationship between this man and this woman that brings honor and glory to God.

Marriage, however, is not the only relationship through which men and women can reflect the divine love. Most of the bonds we form are nonmarital. Perhaps the most obvious type of nonmarital bond is the relationship formed among single people, which unlike marriage is neither necessarily permanent nor exclusive. The nonexclusive nature of all nonmarital bonds provides a powerful image of another dimension of the divine love. Whereas marriage is by its nature intended to be exclusive, the nonmarital bond is expansive, unbounded, always open to the inclusion of others. As a result it is an appropriate representation of the openness of God's love. Nonmarital relationships remind us that the loving God continually seeks to include within the circle those yet outside the boundaries of God's covenantal people.

> The love of God is greater far
> Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
> It goes beyond the highest star
> And reaches to the lowest hell.[12]

Although the OT elevates marriage as the primal bond uniting man and woman, in the NT we discover an even more theologically important relationship. Drawing from the words of Jesus himself, the NT writers present as the primary relationship into which humans can enter the covenant with God in Christ that in turn leads to membership in the covenant community, the fellowship of Christ's disciples. Consequently within this relationship we become most completely the *imago Dei*. And hence within this context godly relationships between men and women ought to emerge in the most pronounced manner.

To summarize our second conclusion: Godly relationships between men and women emerge as we direct our life together toward the highest human task—namely, reflecting the divine character and thereby being the image of God. God's goal for us arises out of the procession of the third Trinitarian person, the Holy Spirit who, as the concretization of the divine love, is the one who creates that character in us. God's loving character becomes visible as we love one another, whether as partners who share the exclusive love relationship of marriage or as participants in the more inclusive nonmarital bonds that bring persons—both male and female—together within the context of Christ's fellowship. Within this fellowship our task is to help others, in the words of Vanier, to "grow toward wholeness and to discover their place, and eventually exercise their gifts, in a network of friendship." This requires, he adds, "the integration of one's sexuality in a vision of fellowship and friendship. It implies that each one, man or woman, in his or her sexual being, must learn to love others, entering into relationships of communion . . . , tenderness and service, using their genital sexuality only in that particular covenant which is blessed by God."[13]

[12] F. M. Lehman, "The Love of God" (1917).
[13] Vanier, *Man and Woman* 97–98.

III. THE MEANS TO GODLY RELATIONSHIPS: EMPOWERING THE OTHER

The movie *When Harry Met Sally* raised a question we continually face: Can men and women enjoy being companions and friends, or are they condemned to think of each other solely as potential "lovers"? The male lead (played by Billy Crystal) concluded that nongenital relationships are impossible. "Men and women cannot be friends," he said matter-of-factly to his female co-star. "The sex thing always gets in the way."

We have noted that the primal Biblical narrative moves from the chief acting agent (God) to the product of God's creative action (humankind). The narrator then adds one additional crucial detail, the purpose of the differentiation of the sexes: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'. . . Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man" (Gen 2:18, 22).

In response to the perceived loneliness of Adam, God created another human being who would deliver Adam from his solitude, not only by being a sexual partner but also in all dimensions of their existence.[14] The creation of the woman with which came the differentiation of the sexes, therefore, arose as the Creator's desire to make a suitable helper for the man. In this third observation we find the means to nurturing godly relationships between men and women. Our task now is to determine what this entails. More specifically we seek to understand what the creation of the woman as a suitable helper suggests for godly relationships between men and women.

Many theologians conclude from this aspect of the Genesis text that God outfitted men and women to fulfill different functions. In the words of the Danvers Statement of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart."[15] And what are these distinctions? One widely held suggestion asserts that man is equipped to lead, whereas woman is created to support; man is to initiate, woman to enable; man is to take responsibility for the well-being of woman, woman to take responsibility for helping man. In short, godly relationships emerge as woman serves as man's assistant.

Despite its long pedigree in Christian tradition, the assertion that strict gender roles are rooted in creation actually runs counter to the point of the narrative. Alvera Mickelsen has pointed out that of the twenty other OT appearances of the Hebrew term translated "helper" in this text, seventeen refer to God as our helper.[16] To speak of God in this manner is to acknowledge God as our strength or power. On the basis of an examination of all the

[14] The broader interpretation of "helper" is offered by many exegetes of Gen 2:20; cf. e.g. S. L. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 10–11.

[15] Advertisement in *Christianity Today* 33/1 (January 13, 1989). See also G. A. Getz, *The Measure of a Family* (Glendale: Regal, 1976) 41–43. Getz attempts to chart a middle position by concluding: "Woman's submissive role to man, then, *antedates the fall*, but was *complicated by the fall*" (p. 43).

[16] A. Mickelsen, "An Egalitarian View: There Is Neither Male nor Female in Christ," *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (ed. B. Clouse and R. G. Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 183.

OT uses of these words, Semitic-language specialist R. David Freedman concluded: "When God creates Eve from Adam's rib, His intent is that she will be—unlike the animals—'a power (or strength) equal to him.'"[17] Rather than requiring that we view the woman as man's assistant, therefore, the narrator intends that we see her as the one who rescues the man from his solitude. Far from being cast in a subservient role, she is thereby elevated in the narrative as the crowning achievement of God's saving intent for life in the Garden.

The Genesis narrative does speak about a hierarchical arrangement of male-female relationships traditionalists find in the text. But rather than being part of God's creative intent, in the narrative such a hierarchy arises as a consequence of the first sin. God's statement, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16), is not a prescription of what is morally necessary for godly relationships but a description of life after the fall.

A clue as to why the fall led to male rather than female dominance is found in God's words to sinful Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (3:17–19). The research of anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday indicates that in addition to biological sexual distinctions the nature of the environment in which a society emerges determines the type of relationships between the sexes that develop. A hostile environment readily leads to male domination, whereas relative equality between the sexes is most frequently found when the environment is beneficent.[18]

The most widely held theory today explains that male/female roles developed in the prehistoric hunting and gathering societies in response to women's need to be protected during pregnancy or nursing children.[19] Obviously these conditions are no longer operative in western culture. As tasks related to procreation and rearing offspring lost their determinative influence over gender roles, the door was opened to the assumption of new social functions especially for females.

These considerations led some theorists in recent decades to throw out completely the traditional view. At the foundation of this revisionist position is an idea known as androgyny, which declares that apart from obvious differences in reproduction no fundamental sexual differences exist between male and female. In the words of Roman Catholic scholar George Tavard:

[17] R. D. Freedman, "Woman, a Power Equal to Man," *BARev* 9/1 (January-February 1983) 58.

[18] P. R. Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance* (New York: Cambridge University, 1981) 172. Sanday's study is noted by L. S. Cahill, *Between the Sexes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 95.

[19] This theory is based in part on the studies of anthropologist G. Murdock. For a helpful presentation of the theory see P. DeJong and D. R. Wilson, *Husband and Wife* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 68–75.

"Men and women are complementary in sexual activity, yet identically human in everything else."[20]

In contrast to the traditional model of fixed sex roles, proponents of the androgynous understanding call for the eradication of all such roles. To this end they draw a sharp distinction between sex and gender, arguing that gender is a social construct:

> Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female," the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex. Gender is the amount of masculinity or femininity found in a person, and, obviously, while there are mixtures of both in many humans, the normal male has a preponderance of masculinity and the normal female a preponderance of femininity.[21]

Although this proposal may have provided a needed corrective to the traditional view with its focus on inherent gender roles, it overlooks the important distinctions that do exist between the sexes. Lisa Sowle Cahill offered this helpful summary of one recently proposed, albeit controversial,[22] trajectory of anthropological research:

> It appears that different physical characteristics, deriving at least in part from their reproductive roles, may create in men and women a tendency toward certain emotional (nurturing, aggressive) or cognitive (verbal, visual) capacities, which may in turn influence the ways they fulfill various social relationships.[23]

Others point to a more psychological foundation for role distinctions—namely, in the emergence of gender awareness in early childhood in contexts in which the mother is the primary caregiver. In such a situation, to develop a sense of gender identity young girls need only to continue to stay close to and model the behavior of their primary caregiver. Little boys, in contrast, become aware that they are not like this seemingly powerful person and that to build their gender identity they must detach themselves from her so as to identify with their less involved male parent.[24]

Whatever the reason, men and women do seem to view the world differently, and they bring differing skills to the task of living. Awareness of this has led to a mediating position between the static roles advocated by traditionalists and the total fluidity of roles arising out of the idea of androgyny.

[20] G. H. Tavard, "Theology and Sexuality," *Women in the World's Religions, Past and Present* (ed. U. King; New York: Paragon, 1987) 78–79. See also *Woman in Christian Tradition* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1973).

[21] R. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968) 9–10.

[22] For a critique of the attempt to reaffirm gender differences on the basis of scientific findings see B. L. Benderly, *The Myth of Two Minds: What Gender Means and Doesn't Mean* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

[23] Cahill, *Between* 91.

[24] Cf. e.g. M. S. Van Leeuwen *et al*., *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 397.

The mediating position calls for what proponents call "role flexibility."[25] Based on biological findings Milton Diamond, for example, offered this advice: "A goal for our culture might be to recognize and accept that generalities can exist simultaneously with allowable deviation from the typical."[26]

Diamond's advice has found echoes among evangelical thinkers as well. Kaye Cook and Lance Lee have advocated what they call an "identity-flexible" model of gender roles, which "finds a breadth of appropriate roles and functions for the biblical woman or man." This position "is less interested in asking 'What is the appropriate behavior for a man or woman?' as it is in asking 'How can both genders most creatively fulfill their potentials in the effort to glorify God?' "[27]

The newer theory of gender roles offers helpful direction for our search for the means to nurturing godly relationships. It suggests that such relationships come neither through static sex roles that view women as subservient to men nor through the denial of any sex-based distinctions between men and women. Instead, godly relationships emerge as men and women offer their unique perspectives as gifts to each other, so that together they might become the community of persons God intends humans to be.

And what are the unique gifts of each gender? Drawing from the psychoanalytical view of gender distinctions, Celia Allison Hahn has offered one model. She concludes that by working together the sexes present a "life-giving tension between connection and separation, commitment and personal boundaries."[28] In this tension, masculinity contributes the emphasis on separation from others whereas femininity offers the complementary focus on connectedness with others.[29]

Whatever the distinctive contributions of women and men may in fact be, one conclusion runs throughout the various proposals: Men and women exist to empower each other and hence need to discover expressions of their fundamental interdependence that empower both sexes.[30]

Indeed, this is the final lesson found in the Biblical narrative. As we noted above, sexual distinctions remind us of our fundamental incompleteness. Whether male or female, we need each other and are dependent on one another. This is the point of the narrative of God's creation of the female to be the counterpart of the male, which finds echo in Paul's declaration: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman" (1 Cor 11:11). If we do indeed need each other, then we dare

[25] A call to move in this direction was issued already in 1968; see V. Packard, *The Sexual Wilderness* (New York: David McKay, 1968) 360, 361–379, 392.

[26] M. Diamond, "Human Sexual Development: Biological Foundations for Social Development," *Human Sexuality in Four Perspectives* (ed. F. A. Beach; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977) 58. His understanding is developed further in M. Diamond and A. Karlen, *Sexual Decisions* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980) 441–461.

[27] K. Cook and L. Lee, *Man and Woman: Alone and Together* (Wheaton: Victor, 1992) 49.

[28] C. A. Hahn, *Sexual Paradox: Creative Tensions in Our Lives and in Our Congregations* (New York: Pilgrim, 1991) 26.

[29] Ibid. 15–16.

[30] Cf. e.g. S. B. Boyd, *The Men We Long to Be: Beyond Domination to a New Christian Understanding of Manhood* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995) 203.

not view our fundamental masculinity or femininity as the means to gain power over the other or as a vehicle through which to enhance oneself by using the other. Instead, God has entrusted our fundamental masculinity and femininity to us for the sake of serving each other.

For this to occur requires that we come to grips with what power is meant to be. We must eschew the widely followed assumption that we live in a context of competition and therefore that power primarily entails the ability to dominate the other. Instead, we must embrace an understanding that focuses on effectiveness in assisting the other. We must see power as power for others rather than power over them. And rather than believing that it is a scarce commodity that must be hoarded for ourselves, we must come to realize that such power for others actually increases as it is given away.

For a consistent example of this understanding of power as empowerment we need look no further than to Jesus of Nazareth. The gospels are replete with stories in which Jesus not only related to men but also interacted as a man with women. In each case he consistently refused to view women as occupying a lower place in the social order and hence as those over whom he needed to exercise dominance. Instead, our Lord used his power to empower each woman he encountered. In each situation he modeled his own countercultural teaching: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42–43). But the greatest illustration of this principle came at the end, as our Lord fulfilled his own prediction: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (v. 45). His death on our behalf opened the way for him to pour out the Holy Spirit, God's personal presence empowering Christ's community for their divinely given task.

Our Lord's example takes us back once again to our starting point in the eternal dynamic within the divine life. In his own life and above all in his death, Jesus of Nazareth revealed the divine way of life. For in the end the mutuality and love shared among Father, Son and Holy Spirit entail an eternal empowerment by each of the others, an empowerment that binds them together as the one God. Hence Jesus' life indicates that in the Father's love for the Son he empowers the Son to be the Son of the Father. By reciprocating the Father's love, the Son in turn empowers the Father to be who he is—namely, the Father of the Son. And as the divine love shared between Father and Son, the Holy Spirit empowers them to be who they are and is thereby empowered to be who he is—namely, the personal concretization of the divine character, which is love.

The practical implication of all this seemingly heavy theological reflection is profoundly simple. Larry Crabb put it this way:

> Beginning with the data of divine relationships rather than our experiences with each other, we can come close to defining a good relationship. A good relationship is one in which *each member willingly and actively devotes whatever he or she has to give to the well-being of the other*. In such a relationship, the

> highest criterion for deciding what to do at any moment is a person's understanding before God of what would be the greatest service he or she can offer to the other.[31]

This is the key to nurturing truly godly relationships between women and men, regardless of the context of those relationships. Let us therefore pledge ourselves anew to reflect in our life together the kind of godly mutuality, love and empowerment that reflects the eternal dynamic within the Triune God as we journey toward the glorious new Jerusalem that awaits us in God's eternal community.

[31] L. Crabb, *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 109.