

what's the
difference?

Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible

Foreword by Elisabeth Elliot

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Foreword

For years I have noted with growing disquiet the pollution of many Christians' minds by the doctrine of feminism. I believe it is a far more dangerous pollution than most have realized, and I (with what seemed to me pitifully few others) have tried to sound the alarm in every way I could. It is a relief to me that John Piper has done what was badly needed—clarified the fundamental distinctions, defining them not fashionably but Biblically and with good common sense. He has done more—he has cut through much of the confusion that arises through a careless reading of the “difficult” Bible passages, and shown us the true liberation that comes with humble submission to God's original design. I think his thesis rings true to the manliness or the womanliness in each of us.

—*Elisabeth Elliot*

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What's the Difference?

When I was a boy growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, my father was away from home about two-thirds of every year. And while he preached across the country, we prayed—my mother and my older sister and I. What I learned in those days was that my mother was omni-competent.

She handled the finances, paying all the bills and dealing with the bank and creditors. She once ran a little laundry business on the side. She was active on the park board, served as the superintendent of the intermediate department of our Southern Baptist church, and managed some real estate holdings.

She taught me how to cut the grass and splice electric cord and pull Bermuda grass by the roots and paint the eaves and shine the dining-room table with a shammy and drive a

car and keep French fries from getting soggy in the cooking oil. She helped me with the maps in geography and showed me how to do a bibliography and work up a science project on static electricity and believe that Algebra II was possible. She dealt with the contractors when we added a basement and, more than once, put her hand to the shovel. It never occurred to me that there was anything she couldn't do.

I heard one time that women don't sweat, they glow. Not true. My mother sweated. It would drip off the end of her long, sharp nose. Sometimes she would blow it off when her hands were pushing the wheelbarrow full of peat moss. Or she would wipe it with her sleeve between the strokes of a swingblade. Mother was strong. I can remember her arms even today thirty years later. They were big, and in the summertime they were bronze.

But it never occurred to me to think of my mother and my father in the same category. Both were strong. Both were bright. Both were kind. Both would kiss me and both would spank me. Both were good with words. Both prayed with fervor and loved the Bible. But unmistakably my father was a man and my mother was a woman. They knew it and I knew it. And it was not mainly a biological fact. It was mainly a matter of personhood and relational dynamics.

When my father came home he was clearly the head of the house. He led in prayer at the table. He called the family together for devotions. He got us to Sunday School and

worship. He drove the car. He guided the family to where we would sit. He made the decision to go to Howard Johnson's for lunch. He led us to the table. He called for the waitress. He paid the check. He was the one we knew we would reckon with if we broke a family rule or were disrespectful to Mother. These were the happiest times for Mother. Oh, how she rejoiced to have Daddy home! She loved his leadership. Later I learned that the Bible calls this "submission."

But since my father was gone most of the time, Mother used to do most of those leadership things too. So it never occurred to me that leadership and submission had anything to do with superiority and inferiority. And it didn't have to do with muscles and skills either. It was not a matter of capabilities and competencies. It had to do with something I could never have explained as a child. And I have been a long time in coming to understand it as part of God's great goodness in creating us male and female. It had to do with something very deep. I know that the specific rhythm of life that was in our home is not the only good one. But there were dimensions of reality and goodness in it that ought to be there in every home. Indeed they ought to be there in varying ways in all mature relationships between men and women.

I say "ought to be there" because I now see that they were rooted in God. Over the years I have come to see from Scripture and from life that manhood and womanhood are the beautiful handiwork of a good and loving God. He designed

our differences and they are profound. They are not mere physiological prerequisites for sexual union. They go to the root of our personhood. This essay is an attempt to define some of those differences as God wills them to be according to the Bible.

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Let me say a word about that phrase, “according to the Bible.” The subtitle of this little book is “Manhood and Womanhood Defined *According to the Bible*.” What that means is that I have made every effort to bring the thinking of this book into accord with what the Bible teaches. At the same time, however, I have not tried to include a detailed exegetical argument for every assertion.

There are two main reasons that seem to justify this approach:

First, for the purposes of this little book, it seemed best to present the Biblical vision of manhood and womanhood as clearly and concisely as possible, and to leave the comprehensive technical discussion for other publications. Thus this little book was originally written as a chapter in a larger collection of essays, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (published in 1990 by Crossway Books; edited by Wayne Grudem and John Piper), and this longer work provides detailed exegetical support for the vision of this smaller

work. I have also tried in articles,¹ sermons,² and unpublished papers to give a credible account of the Biblical foundations of what I say here.

Second, I have tried to include enough Biblical argumentation in this essay, especially in the footnotes, to show why I believe this vision of manhood and womanhood is in fact “*according to the Bible.*” I hope it will be obvious that my reflections are not the creation of an independent mind, but the fruit of a tree planted firmly in the soil of constant meditation on the Word of God.

Third, experience has taught me that there are two ways to commend a vision of manhood and womanhood. One way has to do with rational argumentation concerning factual evidences. For example, an evangelical Christian wants to know, Does the Bible really teach this vision of manhood and womanhood? So one way of commending the vision is by patient, detailed, careful exegetical argumentation.

But there is another way to commend the vision. A person also wants to know, Is the vision beautiful and satisfying and fulfilling? Can I live with it? This is not a bad question. Commending Biblical truth involves more than saying, “Do it because the Bible says so.” That sort of commendation may result in a kind of obedience that is so begrudging and so empty of delight and hearty affirmation that the Lord is not pleased with it at all.

So there is a second task needed in winning people over

to a vision of manhood and womanhood. Not only must there be thorough exegesis, there must also be a portrayal of the vision that satisfies the heart as well as the head. Or to put it another way: we must commend the beauty as well as the truth of the vision. We must show that something is not only right but also good. It is not only valid but also valuable, not only accurate but also admirable.

This little book is meant to fit *mainly* into the second category. Not merely, but mainly. It is designed to show that our vision of manhood and womanhood is a deeply satisfying gift of grace from a loving God who has the best interests of his creatures at heart. The vision is not onerous or oppressive. It does not promote pride or self-exaltation. It conforms to who we are by God's good design. Therefore it is fulfilling in the deepest sense of that word.

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The tendency today is to stress the equality of men and women by minimizing the unique significance of our maleness or femaleness. But this depreciation of male and female personhood is a great loss. It is taking a tremendous toll on generations of young men and women who do not know what it means to be a man or a woman. Confusion over the meaning of sexual personhood today is epidemic. The consequence of this confusion is not a free and happy harmony

among gender-free persons relating on the basis of abstract competencies. The consequence rather is more divorce, more homosexuality, more sexual abuse, more promiscuity, more social awkwardness, and more emotional distress and suicide that come with the loss of God-given identity.

It is a remarkable and telling observation that contemporary Christian feminists devote little attention to the definition of femininity and masculinity. Little help is being given to a son's question, "Dad, what does it mean to be a man and not a woman?" Or a daughter's question, "Mom, what does it mean to be woman and not a man?" A lot of energy is being expended today minimizing the distinctions of manhood and womanhood. But we do not hear very often what manhood and womanhood *should* incline us to do. We are adrift in a sea of confusion over sexual roles. And life is not the better for it.

Ironically the most perceptive thinkers recognize how essential manhood and womanhood are to our personhood. Yet the meaning of manhood and womanhood is seen as unattainable. For example, Paul Jewett, in his very insightful book, *Man as Male and Female*, argues persuasively that maleness and femaleness are essential, not peripheral, to our personhood:

Sexuality permeates one's individual being to its very depth; it conditions every facet of one's life as a person. As the self is always aware of itself as an 'I,' so this 'I'

is always aware of itself as *himself* or *herself*. Our self-knowledge is indissolubly bound up not simply with our *human* being but with our *sexual* being. At the human level there is no 'I and thou' *per se*, but only the 'I' who is male or female confronting the 'thou,' the 'other,' who is also male or female.³

He cites Emil Brunner to the same effect: "Our sexuality penetrates to the deepest metaphysical ground of our personality. As a result, the physical differences between the man and the woman are a parable of psychical and spiritual differences of a more ultimate nature."⁴

After reading these amazing statements concerning how essential manhood and womanhood are to our personhood and how sexuality "conditions every facet of one's life," it is stunning to read that Jewett does not know what manhood and womanhood are. He says,

Some, at least, among contemporary theologians are not so sure that they know what it means to be a man in distinction to a woman or a woman in distinction to a man. It is because the writer shares this uncertainty that he has skirted the question of ontology in this study.⁵

All human activity reflects a qualitative distinction which is sexual in nature. But in my opinion, such an observation offers no clue to the ultimate meaning of that distinction. It may be that we shall never know what that distinction ultimately means. But this much, at least, seems clear: we will understand the difference— what it

means to be created as man or woman— only as we learn to live as man and woman in a true partnership of life.⁶

Surely this is a great sadness. We know that “sexuality permeates one’s individual being to its very depth.” We know that “it conditions every facet of one’s life as a person.” We know that every I-Thou encounter is an encounter not of abstract persons but of male or female persons. We know that physical differences are but a parable of male and female personhood. But, alas, we do not know who we are as male and female. We are ignorant of this all-pervasive dimension of our identity.

But what about Jewett’s prescription for hope in the face of this stunning ignorance of who we are? He suggests that we discover who we are “as man or woman” by experiencing a “true partnership” as man *and* woman. The problem with this is that we cannot know what a “true partnership” is until we know the nature of the partners. A true partnership must be true to who the partners are. A true partnership must take into account the sexual reality “that conditions every facet of their life.” We simply cannot know what a “true” partnership is until we know what truly “permeates [our] personhood to the very depths.” If we are really ignorant of what true manhood and womanhood are, we have no warrant to prescribe the nature of what *true* partnership will look like.

The sexual turmoil of our culture is not surprising when

we discover that our best Christian thinkers claim not to know what masculinity and femininity are, and yet acknowledge that these are among the most profound aspects of personhood that “condition every facet of one’s life”! How shall parents rear daughters to be women and sons to be men when even the leading teachers of the church do not know what manhood and womanhood are?

The conviction behind this essay is that the Bible does not leave us in ignorance about the meaning of masculine and feminine personhood. God has not placed in us an all-pervasive and all-conditioning dimension of personhood and then hidden the meaning of our identity from us. He has shown us in Scripture the beauty of manhood and womanhood in complementary harmony. He has shown us the distortions and even horrors that sin has made of fallen manhood and womanhood. And he has shown us the way of redemption and healing through Christ.

To be sure, we see “through a glass dimly.” Our knowledge is not perfect. We must be ever open to new light. But we are not so adrift as to have nothing to say to our generation about the meaning of manhood and womanhood and its implications for our relationships. Our understanding is that the Bible reveals the nature of masculinity and femininity by describing diverse responsibilities for man and woman while rooting these differing responsibilities in creation, not convention.

When the Bible teaches that men and women fulfil different roles in relation to each other, charging man with a unique leadership role, it bases this differentiation not on temporary cultural norms but on permanent facts of creation. This is seen in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 (especially vv. 8-9, 14); Ephesians 5:21-33 (especially vv. 31-32); and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 (especially vv. 13-14).⁷ In the Bible, differentiated roles for men and women are never traced back to the fall of man and woman into sin. Rather, the foundation of this differentiation is traced back to the way things were in Eden before sin warped our relationships. Differentiated roles were corrupted, not created, by the fall.⁸ They were created by God.

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This leads me then to attempt at least a partial definition of manhood and womanhood. This is risky business. Every word we choose could be misunderstood. Unsympathetic readers could jump to conclusions about practical implications that are not implied. I would simply plead for the application of that great principle of good criticism: Before assessing an author's position, express an understanding of it in a way the author would approve.

I would commend the following descriptions of masculinity and femininity for consideration. It will be very important

to read them in the light of the subsequent comments. These are not exhaustive descriptions of all that masculinity or femininity mean. They are an attempt to get at the heart, or at least an indispensable aspect, of manhood and womanhood.⁹

AT THE HEART OF MATURE MASCULINITY IS A SENSE OF BENEVOLENT RESPONSIBILITY TO LEAD, PROVIDE FOR AND PROTECT WOMEN IN WAYS APPROPRIATE TO A MAN'S DIFFERING RELATIONSHIPS.

AT THE HEART OF MATURE FEMININITY IS A FREEING DISPOSITION TO AFFIRM, RECEIVE AND NURTURE STRENGTH AND LEADERSHIP FROM WORTHY MEN IN WAYS APPROPRIATE TO A WOMAN'S DIFFERING RELATIONSHIPS.

Notes

1. Between November, 1983 and May, 1984 I carried on a debate concerning this issue with my friends and former colleagues Alvera and Berkeley Mickelsen in our denominational periodical, *The Standard* (of the Baptist General Conference). In these monthly articles I tried to lay the exegetical foundations for how men and women are called by God to relate to each other. The names of the articles are: "Male, Female and Morality" (November, 1983), pp. 26-28; "Satan's Design in Reversing Male Leadership Role" (December, 1983), pp. 33-35; "Jesus' Teaching on Men and Women: Dismantling the Fall, Not the Creation" (January, 1984), pp. 32-34; "A Metaphor of Christ and the Church" (February, 1984), pp. 27-29; "Creation, Culture and Corinthian Prophetesses" (March, 1984), pp. 30-32; "The Order of Creation" (April, 1984), pp. 35-38; "How Should a Woman Lead?" (May, 1984), pp. 34-36.
2. The cassette tapes of seven sermons on manhood and womanhood can be ordered by writing to Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, P.O. Box 1173, Wheaton, IL 60189.
3. Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), p. 172.
4. *Man as Male and Female*, p. 173. The reference is to Emil Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1933), p. 358.
5. *Man as Male and Female*, p. 178.

6. *Man as Male and Female*, p. 187f.
7. The teaching in 1 Peter 3:1-7 concerning the differentiation of roles is not based explicitly on the order of creation, but neither is it based on convention. Rather it is rooted in the example of “holy women who hoped in God” (v. 5). Sarah is cited as an example of submission, not because she complied with Abraham’s wish that she pose as his sister (Genesis 20), which is the amazing example of submission we might have expected Peter to use, but rather because she said “my lord” when speaking offhandedly to herself about her husband. This seems to suggest that the root of Sarah’s submission was a deep allegiance to Abraham’s leadership that expressed itself without coercion or public pressure.
8. This is developed and defended exegetically in two extensive essays by John Sailhammer and Ray Ortlund Jr. in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway Books, 1990).
9. The limitation of this essay is seen, for example, in that I will say very little about the capacity of a woman to bear children, and the special role that she has in nursing and nurturing them. Nor do I say anything about the man’s crucial role in nurturing healthy, secure children. My focus is on the significance that manhood and womanhood have for the relational dynamics between men and women and the implications of these dynamics for the roles appropriate for each.
10. The fact that a Christian wife and church member, according to Acts 2:17, may “prophecy” implies, at least, that she may often have ideas and insights that a wise and humble husband and pastor will listen to and adopt. On women and prophecy see Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy: In the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 215-225.
11. This understanding of masculine responsibility will be developed, for example, from the way God comes to Adam first after the fall, implying his special responsibility in the failure even though Eve had sinned first. This accords with other pointers in the early chapters of Genesis before the fall that God meant for Adam to have a special responsibility for leadership (establishing a pattern of initiative) in relation to Eve. The sharing of initiatives within that general pattern