

# Male and Female

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## Male and Female

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).*

Few things are more endlessly fascinating than the fact that human beings come in two basic varieties, male and female, and both are made in the image of God.

Much of the world's poetry and music and literature and myth is about the sexes and the relations between them. From the beginning of the human race, no doubt, women and men have asked one another the question my daughter posed to her brother one day: "Tell me about your people."

People are different, and some of the differences tend to run along gender lines. That seems self-evident to most of us, but in some circles even that claim can be controversial.

In my short lifetime, our culture has seen three ways of thinking about men and women. When I was a child in the 1950s and early '60s, the dominant view was that women and men are *different and therefore unequal*. Arguments that would make most of us cringe today claimed that the proper place for women was with home and family, or in nurturing roles like teaching and nursing, while men were to be out doing things in the world – which also meant that men get to run the world. Biology is destiny, people said. Gender-specific roles were determined by nature, and ultimately, for religious people, by the God who created nature.

The late '60s and 1970s saw a revolution in thinking about sex and gender. At places like Yale, where I spent the '70s, the new orthodoxy was that women and men are *equal and therefore not different*. Any differences between the sexes, other than incidental details of anatomy and plumbing, were purely social constructs. If boys and girls grew up with somewhat different interests, attitudes, and ambitions, that was entirely because they were raised that way, and because society imposed images that forced children into stereotypical patterns. If you gave little girls trucks and jet planes to play with, and little boys

baby dolls and houses instead of G.I. Joes and toy guns, and were careful about the images they saw, gender differences would disappear. The French may say “*Vive la différence*,” but there is no *différence* according to the dogma of the 1970s where I came of age.

But then in the 1980s, women like Carol Gilligan, with PhDs from places like Harvard, began to say that, based on their academic research, it appears that women and men, on the average, tend to see some things differently. Most of the grandmothers in the country said, “Well, duh! Do you really need a PhD from Harvard to figure that out?” But in some elite circles this third notion – that women and men might be *different and still equal* – was extremely controversial.

Louann Brizendine, a neuropsychiatrist who published a book called *The Female Brain* a few years ago, recalls how “it was politically incorrect even to mention sex difference” at the University of California in the 1970s. The fear was, and still is among some people, that if you start acknowledging deep-seated differences you’ll slide back down the slippery slope to inequality. After decades of increasingly sophisticated brain scanning and biochemical research, though, Dr. Brizendine says, “The biological reality ... is that there is no unisex brain,” and “pretending that women and men are the same, while doing a disservice to both men and women, ultimately hurts women.”\*

The emerging view is that we ought to be able to acknowledge differences where they exist, and honor the differences, without imposing artificial constraints on the opportunities available to girls or boys, women or men. Having lived through all three ways of thinking – *different and unequal*, *equal and not different*, and *different but still equal* – it seems to me that the emerging view is the healthiest and best fits the evidence. But there is an important qualification to all this, which is that people are, above all, individuals, and individuals are different, and they may or may not fit neatly into generalizations about gender or any other category.

The last point is crucial, because so many of our cultural food fights these days are about trying to fit people into either/or categories. We’re used to seeing political maps about “red states” and “blue states,” as if those binary options told the whole story. In fact, if you color the map according to percentages who vote one way or the other, most states turn out to be some shade of purple.

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\*Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 160f.

Some people like to label everybody “liberal” or “conservative,” as though opinions had to be either blue or red, black or white. It may be easier to think in simple dichotomies, but reality is often more complicated than that.

We’ve done a lot of painting in our house in the three years since we moved in, and I’m always amazed at the color charts they have in paint stores. When I was a child, I had 16 colors in my *Crayola* box: red, green, blue, yellow, black, white ... the obvious ones, and something called “burnt sienna,” which I never understood (I didn’t know what sienna was, or what it would look like if it wasn’t burnt). My friends who had the big 64 crayon box had colors like light blue and dark blue, forest green and Kelly green, and that seemed pretty rich. But now you go to the paint store and ask for blue, and you get whole books of blue – dozens and dozens of shades of blue, with names like “morning mist” and “gentle aqua.” Go shopping for a new computer and the box says it comes with 16 million colors. Really? Sixteen million? I thought 64 was a lot. Then I started to pay attention, even to the shades of green in the trees as the sun goes down, and suddenly all nature was a witness to nuance and complexity. As Albert Einstein said, contemplating the fundamental nature of reality, “The Lord is subtle.”

The point about sex and gender – about being male or female, masculine or feminine – is that human beings are made with gender as an ingredient, but gender is more like a continuum of mixed pigments than a binary choice between blue and pink. We all know people who are stereotypically masculine or feminine, and people who are not. To claim that there is no such thing as gender differences flies in the face of everyday experience and scientific evidence, but so does insisting that all boys and men have one set of attitudes and interests and all girls and women have the opposite. Nature is more subtle than that, and even what nature predisposes plays out differently in the way we are nurtured. Strict dichotomies between masculine and feminine – and between nature and nurture, for that matter – are the result of our tendency to oversimplify, because it’s easier to think in either/or terms. Einstein again said that our explanations should be as simple as reality, but not more simple.

All of this has implications for the way we understand ourselves, and how we raise our children. Lots of people carry around emotional scars from wounds inflicted by somebody’s idea of what a man or a woman is supposed to be, and how they didn’t measure up. Lots of anger and depression, and unhealthy behaviors, and conflicts in marriages go back to gender issues and expectations. The role models we hold up for our children, the expectations we lay on them,

or the freedom we give them to discover for themselves who they really are – all those things depend on a healthy sense of what it means for each of us to become a woman or a man in our individual way. Coming to terms with all that is one of the most important challenges of life.

And for Christians, the way we think about ourselves as male and female, made in the image of God, is an important part of our spiritual life. It affects our understanding of God and our relationship with God. Somebody once asked a number of religious leaders to describe their image of God, and Billy Graham said, “I don’t have an image of God. God is beyond my ability to imagine.” Part of what he meant was a classic insight of Reformed theology, and the reason why our sanctuary has very few images in it: namely, that God is so far beyond our comprehension that any pictures in our heads are bound to be misleading.

Young children, who think concretely because their minds haven’t yet developed a capacity for abstraction, may picture God as a man sitting on a chair above the clouds, but no one older than about 12 should imagine God that way. William Blake’s *Ancient of Days*, the old white man with a flowing beard, stretching forth his compass from the sky, evokes something artistically about who God is, but Blake would be last one to take his own painting literally.

The recent bestseller *The Shack* impressed lots of people by portraying an incarnation of God as a black woman, but for anyone who’s thought much about it, that should come as much less of a shock than it apparently was. Of course God is not a man or a woman, not white or black or any other color. God is personal, in the sense that God is someone we can relate to, and because every other person we know is either male or female, of one ethnicity or another, it’s natural for us to picture God in some human image. But thoughtful adults for many centuries have known better than to think that’s what God really is. God is not some guy in the sky, and neither is God some woman in the sky – which is why all the Goddess talk that’s fashionable these days is equally misleading. Replacing one misleading image with another is hardly where our theology should rest.

Genesis says human beings are made in the image of God, male and female. That’s a clue from the Bible itself that God is neither a man nor a woman. Lots of people had bad experiences with their fathers, so thinking of God as “our Father in heaven” is actually a barrier to belief for them. If that’s the case, then by all means they should think of God in another way: think of God in more typically feminine images; or think of God more abstractly, as the Holy Spirit,

who is neither masculine nor feminine, yet still deeply personal.

Like everything else in this fallen world, every image we have of God may lead us astray, and can do a lot of damage, used in the wrong way. Ultimately it's better not to have any picture of God at all, as though God were some thing we could actually see.

And yet, God is revealed to us in all kinds of metaphors and analogies, so that we can know God and relate to God as our Creator and Redeemer, and even as our Friend. The best way we know God is in Jesus Christ. But the Bible says we are also made in God's image, where the image is obviously not the way God *looks*, but something about the way God *is*. Whatever it means to be masculine or feminine – captured loosely in our being male and female – the best aspects of those qualities point to something in the nature of God.

So God is powerful and strong and able to make the earth tremble, and God fights enemies and defeats evil, and God even knows in Christ what it means to be killed in battle to win the great war in heaven and on earth. And God is gentle and kind and nurturing, giving birth to all of life, and gathering up God's brood, Jesus says, like a hen gathering her chicks under her wing. All those images point to what God is like, but they point to a reality far beyond our ability to imagine.

Even the best in us, and the best we can imagine, is but a shadow of God's reality – and yet, it's enough to lend great dignity to our lives, and a sense of adventure. One caricature of the church is that it's insipid, all about being nice, and more congenial to the spirit of women than of men. But contrary to such distorted stereotypes, I've found church at its best to be one of the great adventures of life, for men and women alike. When I was at Yale, Bill Coffin was the chaplain. He had been in the OSS, precursor to the CIA, in World War II, and he had a kind of swashbuckling presence, always fighting for the right and for social justice as he understood it. I did my student ministry with Hank Yordon, a Congregational minister who was a sailor and a hiker who dragged us younger people up Mt. Monadnock at a pace we could barely keep up; while back in the city he was a champion for civil rights and the poor, as well as for the need of every individual to get his or her soul right with God. What greater challenge could a man or a woman want, than to take on the evils and injustices all around us, and in our own hearts, and try to be an agent of God's redeeming love and power in the world?

## Male and Female

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You and I are made in the image of God. Male and female, we have a destiny that is eternal, reflecting the greatness, and the subtlety, and the complexity of our Creator. We need to focus less on trying to cram everyone into simple human stereotypes and more on becoming sons and daughters of God in the individual ways, and for the great purposes, that God has made each one us.