

How the Church Needs to Redefine Male and Female Relationships

“Do not rebuke an elder, but exhort him as a father, the younger men as brothers, the elder women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, with complete purity” (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

I’ve been thinking for the last few weeks how evangelicals have lost the mentality of family that Paul exhorts here, at least in our public conversations around gender and our actions between genders. For a while, really more than a decade from my perspective, gender conversations among evangelicals have been primarily focused on husbands and wives (or some version of that focus)—encouraging healthy marriages, discouraging relationships outside of marriage, discipling men to be good husbands, discipling women to be good wives, and so forth. I think many of these conversations have been valuable to the church. What does marriage that is in Christ between image-bearers of God look like? Believers must be discipled on this!

But note that Scripture talks of husbands and wives singularly, “the husband of one wife.” The global application of the marriage relationship is only between Jesus and His Church, never between men and women in general. No analogy from the marital relationship transfers to average male/female relationships. In contrast, Scripture speaks of fathers, daughters, mothers, sons, brothers and sisters as categories applied generally outside of biological family.

The average Christian woman knows and interacts with hundreds of men in her lifetime, maybe more, but in most cases only ONE of those men will ever be her husband. Many in conservative

evangelicalism respond to that fact by encouraging and discipling women in ways that support only that one relationship with that one man. Instead, women (and men) need to be discipled to keep Christ in the myriad of other opposite-gendered relationships they have.

Mark 3:35 says, "For whoever does the will of God is My brother, and My sister, and My mother."

In my experience, men and women in the conservative church are mostly encouraged not to have any of those relationships at all beyond a superficial level. The fear that an inappropriate relationship between the sexes will develop justifies for many the avoidance of any male/female relationship outside of marriage. **I'm afraid that in an effort to avoid inappropriate relationships between men and women, we have forgotten to foster appropriate ones.**

As one friend said, we focus so on the word "purity" in I Timothy 5 that we forget that the context is a familial relationship in which such purity is the norm. We should seek to be consistent with the example of Scripture, particularly in the ways the book of Acts and writings of Paul speak of relationships in the New Testament Church between genders. Consider both Paul's outright instructions to Timothy and his own example of how he related to women in the Church.

Paul had a relationship with Phoebe. He knew Eudodia and Syntyche well. They worked together, and he spoke of them as sisters. He exhorted Timothy to think of the women around him as family as well. Paul shows us that the default mode between genders in the Church is familial—moms and sons, dads and daughters, brothers and sisters.

Romans 16:1 says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church at Cenchrea."

Capitulation to Culture While sex outside of marriage has

always been a fairly common sin, we live today in a sex-crazed culture. On steroids. And Christians, particularly conservative ones, have allowed an increasingly sexually obsessed culture to infiltrate the church. Even when it infiltrates in its negative sense (when we prohibit sex outside of marriage and teach against looking at another woman with lust), it still infiltrates.

We try to protect our families from sinful sexual relationships. **But we have still kept a sexual axis as the primary issue between genders and just tried to move the church in the opposite direction.** We don't need more fences. We don't need a stronger negative push against sinful sexual relationships. We need to foster a different mindset altogether. The church needs to plow a counterculture. It needs a new axis on gender, orthogonal to the sexual one, that equips us to live affirmatively in male/female relationships in the body of Christ.

Our culture in Christ should be that of FAMILY.

Watching the Duggar family struggle through their scandals the last few months helped solidify this in my mind. No family had better fences against a sex-crazed culture. But the fences didn't work. Instead, sexual attraction entered the very family relationships that should have been the most immune to them.

When young men are taught to guard themselves from all women, that the primary sin issue to be wary of with the opposite sex is sex itself, don't be surprised when that teaching infiltrates relationships between brothers and sisters. Josh Duggar should have learned a different kind of relationship with his sisters, a healthy one in which sexual temptation was anathema. Then from practicing healthy family relationships with the opposite sex, he would have a foundation for treating other women as sisters. Instead, the opposite happened. Hyper

focus on sexual temptation resulted in temptation entering a relationship in which it should have never been named.

Rather than pushing back on the sexual axis, how can the church plow a counterculture on gender? How do we frame the conversations between men and women on a different axis altogether from our sex-crazed secular culture? I don't fully know, and I'm willing to admit that.

I do know that I have practiced this mentality without knowing I was doing so. In particular, I have known my fair share of handsome pastors and elders with engaging personalities. I highlight the role of pastor and elder because that's been a personality type with which my heart naturally resonated.

In my twenties and thirties, I felt some temptation at times to lust. Women don't tend toward physical lust nearly as much as emotional and spiritual lust. When those feelings started to crowd my mind in relationship with someone, I disciplined myself.

"That's inappropriate," I would tell myself. "He's my brother!" There is only ever to be ONE relationship with the opposite sex in which we have anything other than that mentality. Lust should feel dissonant in any other relationship. But we need to be disciplined in that mentality.

Perhaps the first step to establishing this better axis for male/female relationships in the body of Christ is simply awareness. In fact, I think meditating on this axis and teaching on this axis may be the primary thing the church needs to do to reclaim it in the body of Christ. I already see growth among mature believers on this topic and have several arenas in which I see healthy male/female brother/sister relationships in the Body of Christ.

I enjoy talking with my brothers and sisters in Christ. I am willing even to disagree with them. But I also love them and seek their benefit in our conversations. I hope to contribute

to health in their marriages, joy with their children, or hope for their future relationships if they aren't married now.

Because that's how the family of God works.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books, including The Gospel-Centered Woman. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*