

Setting the Foundation for Godly Relationships Between Men and Women in the Church

God created two genders when He made humans in His image, and He clearly intended these two genders to work together in His kingdom. I have been burdened for some time about problems in male/female relationships in the body of Christ, particularly about how evangelical ministries disciple the two genders to work out this truth. I have experienced healthy relationships across genders, but I've also experienced unhealthy ones.

Unhealthy relationships keep the body of Christ from working as God intended, and I would like to spend the next three posts on this blog discussing this. I hope you will consider my points and enter the discussion with me or with others in your area of influence.

This first post will set up a simple biblical foundation for male/female relationships in the body of Christ and then look at healthy ones. The next two posts will focus on two particular disabilities, the first between men and pretty women and the second between men and "desperate" women. These are broad generalizations, but I hope they'll get us to start thinking through male/female interactions in the church so we can affect change with a discerning eye. Though we have some ugly defaults we go to in male/female relationships in the church that need to be explored, I hope that starting off with a look at good and healthy relationships will be encouraging.

What was God's purpose in creating two genders to work together to image Him out into His kingdom? For a time, conservative evangelicals simplistically set up marriage as the ultimate purpose for the creation of two genders, particularly around Genesis 2:18.

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him.'"

However, if you embrace Jesus as the key to understanding all of Scripture, then Jesus' words on marriage in eternity give us necessary clarification on the purpose of the creation of two genders in Genesis 1 and 2. God's purposes for interactions between the two genders in this first sinless perfection in Eden is informed by glimpses of the second. In Luke 20, the Sadducees ask Jesus a question about whose wife in heaven a woman would be if she had multiple husbands on earth.

In His answer, Jesus is clear that in heaven we do not marry. (Actually, we do marry, but Jesus is the groom.) Jesus teaches us that the ultimate goal in perfection for men and women is not human marriage to each other.

But then, what is left for perfect male/female relationships if not human marriage? Well, a TON is left. But we are warped as a society away from valuing the vast wealth of human male/female relationships that don't involve sex.

Man and woman were created for a variety of relationships—marriage is certainly one primary form of relationship, but it is not the only one. What is clear in Genesis 2:18 is that it is not good for man to be alone and isolated. Man made in the image of God needed others. Married or single, we do too. God created us for community with both Him and others—others of the same gender and others of the opposite gender.

If you believe that Jesus' words on eternal perfection give insight on God's design for the first perfect relationship between man and woman, then marriage isn't the end of all gendered relationships. We know this in reality, right? Sons have mothers. Mothers have sons. Brothers have sisters, and sisters have brothers. Daughters have fathers, and fathers

have daughters. But think beyond biological family relations. Paul had Phoebe, Euodia and Syntyche, none of whom were his biological sister, mother or wife. Jesus had Mary and Martha, as they had him. Paul relied on Priscilla as he did Aquila.

There are many gendered relationships in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament, that are not marriage or biological-family based. But they do seem more like biological family relationships than marriage relationships, and this fits the whole of Scripture. We, male and female in the body of Christ, are brothers and sisters called to work together for the family kingdom under our *pater familias*, God Himself. Paul even instructs the church at Rome in Romans 16:1 to greet his "sister Phoebe."

There is one singular gendered relationship in the life of believer that has a different bent, that of husband and wife. In our evangelical covenant view of marriage, that happens with one person. Period. All other relationships within the church are to have biological family undertones to them. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

I have been in churches where this family dynamic is the tone of relationships. In fact, the vast majority of my experience over the last few years has been dominated by loving, serving brother/sister relationships in Christ. I will start with this healthy perspective, since I want to deal in the next two posts with unhealthy perspectives that I have also experienced, and I think it's better to start with the good and hopeful rather than the bad and discouraging.

In my healthy experiences of gendered relationships in the church, I note a few things.

1. Men who aren't threatened by me. I have two main areas of experience in evangelical Christianity that have produced good male/female relationships. I have met men online through The Gospel Coalition, Christ and Pop Culture, my books and my

blog. Consistently, I have experienced healthy, charitable communication with them, even when disagreeing on something.

I have also established relationships with men, including elders, deacons and pastors, in person through my church and ministry experience in Seattle. These are the men I have seen and rubbed shoulders with in person for years, and I have felt welcomed by most all of them in the church. I have felt free to share my opinions, whether it's on theology or sports.

Why are these men secure? Why do they welcome my knowledge and opinions? I think the answer for men is the same as the one for women—knowing our identity in Christ. We call it sonship. I perceive that these men know who they are in Christ. They have an identity secure in Him, and a woman with opinions on politics or theology (or sports) who disagrees with them doesn't really throw them for a loop. Their manhood is secure ... in Christ. And men who relate to women from their secure vantage point as sons of the Most High are equipped for healthy relationships with the opposite gender.

These men aren't threatened by my knowledge. They also aren't threatened by my sexuality. I'm not a walking temptation by any means, but regardless of whether I find them handsome or they find me pretty, I find them my brother in Christ. Any thoughts toward them outside of that framework would just be inappropriate and weird. It would be creepy. It would be like spiritual incest. When men and women relate as brothers and sisters in Christ, inappropriate things become distasteful. I will discuss this point more in the next post.

2. Men who value my contributions to the church. These men, secure in their sonship in Christ, are kingdom focused. They know the Word of God and are committed to serving God as He has gifted them. So when a woman comes along, they either are burdened for her growth in Christ or, if she already shows a maturity in faith, they recognize their need for her in

kingdom work.

Again and again, ministry-minded men who value work in the kingdom of God have welcomed my contributions. Several have been the primary ones to discern how God has gifted me for kingdom work and encouraged me to live out those giftings.

Men in the body of Christ need women in the body of Christ, and vice versa. From our secure foundation as sons and daughters of the Most High, we are free to relate to each other without suspicion for the mutual work of building up the kingdom. As Paul valued and used his sister Phoebe, who was no biological relation to him but rather was his sister in Christ who valued the work of God's kingdom and was equipped to aid in it, may sons and daughters of the Most High value their spiritual siblings and work in unity for the glory of God.

*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.*