

How Gender Wars Affect Your Marriage

Both men and women are giving up on commitment to one another, let alone an ideal marriage. What can we do to reverse this growing trend?

The gender wars are not new. They have just changed form.

Part of the result of Adam and Eve's attempt at independent power from God was His pronouncement that there would be a power struggle between the woman and the man.

In Genesis 3:16, God says, "'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you'" (NIV). The word for "desire" is not a sexual one in this passage. It is a term that has to do with power. In other words, the curse of the woman is that she will have a constant temptation to think of her relationship with the man in terms of power. And the curse of the man is that he will be concentrating on problems at work! (See Gen. 3:17-19.)

Put that against the original intention that the man and woman "become one" (see Gen. 2:21-24), and there you have the real war. The war is not about gender.

The real war is about refusing dependence instead of building intimacy.

My wife, Becky, is author of a book called *Being Good to Your Husband on Purpose* () and has taught groups of wives in four countries. Her basic theme has been, "How you can have a great marriage by being respectful and supportive of your husband."

Now, what could be a less controversial message than that? But the responses have surprised us both: ranging from laughter (Did you just say don't tell our husbands what to do?), to

disbelief (You don't fight with your husband?), to disdain (Other people already tell him that he's great. I need to pull him back down to the real world).

To be fair, many women did want to learn how to have better relationships with their husbands. But what was evident in all these groups was the growing skepticism that a male-female relationship can be made great, then get better still. Problem is, if even Christian wives find the prospect of ideal love hard to believe, where does that leave women in general?

And what of the men? Are men any more optimistic about their prospects? Not if what I am hearing as a pastor is typical of men's expectations.

Recently, a young, never-married Christian doctor confided in me, "I just don't think I will ever find a wife who wants to spend her life loving me that way." He is in the process of resigning to a more distant type of relationship within marriage.

Several books describe the new gender wars. Two of them I read recently are, *Mismatch: The Growing Gulf Between Women and Men* by Andrew Hacker and *The Decline of Males: The First Look at an Unexpected New World for Men and Women* by Lionel Tiger. I mention these two books because they are representative of a common, growing theme:

Both men and women are giving up on commitment to one another, let alone an ideal marriage. Citing the divorce statistics and the growing number of people who choose cohabitation over marriage, both authors have concluded, "Brides and grooms are less embarking on a journey together, than on a trip with two separate itineraries and destinations."

What changed in the gender wars? The downward trends, in my view, seem to be in three areas:

From general equality to personal suspicion. Four decades ago,

the gender wars were about equality. They, appropriately, had clear goals of rectifying the injustices of a male-dominated system. The issues seemed to be no-brainers: equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities for boys and girls in sports and leadership, and so on. I would be surprised to find anyone who values justice regretting that part of the feminist movement.

Lately, though, the goals of both sexes have gone far beyond equality to complete independence. The questions women are asking even in their marriages have changed from, "Why would we not be equal?" to thinking, "How can I be prepared if he leaves?"

In a "which came first the chicken or the egg?" dance, the men are sensing the women's new striving for independence and matching it with a new disengagement. Feeling unneeded and overwhelmed by having to negotiate new roles in relationships, many men are simply saying, "Whatever" and withdrawing (even more) emotionally.

In preparing for a possible breakup, women are focusing on stockpiling their own resources, and the men are turning to pornography instead of their wives.

From role rehearsal to role reversal. In terrorist wars, one of the main strategies is to disguise oneself as the other side in order to confuse the enemy. The roles God gave us were, in the beginning, complementary, and, therefore, good in their differences. But fewer people want to see clear roles anymore, lest someone be too limited. The result is indeed confusion.

Men are reluctant to take the traditional male roles (of providing, protecting and making a decision if the family is stuck about what to do) lest they appear dominating. The women are reluctant to take traditional female roles (of nurture, keeping the family together and engineering everyone's

improvement) lest they appear second rate. So what are the new roles?

No one seems to be able to describe how men can be tender without having to become like women or how women can be strong without having to become like men. Gloria Steinem's now-famous quote rings true, "Many of us [women] are becoming the men we wanted to marry."

From active aggression to passive aggression. As most battle experts know, wars can only be won when the conflict and goals are apparent to everyone. As most counselors know, the most frustrating type of fighting battles in which no one wins is when one or both parties refuse to participate openly.

Like terrorism, the new gender wars are made up of little ambushes from those who will never bring out into the open what the problem really is.

Men, for the most part, are not motivated toward the relational work of negotiation and problem solving. Women, for the most part, are frustrated, feeling like they are the only ones who will try to actively work on the problems. So they resort to complaint. The result is that fewer battles are being waged in the open, and more injuries are being caused by cutting humor that can't be confronted, and cynicism that smolders until it explodes.

We knew a woman once that wore a T-shirt that said, "The more I know about men, the better I like my dog." She is, not surprisingly, divorced now.

Christians have a distinct advantage if we will be doers of the Word and not hearers only (see James 1:22). We can do three things to bring wholeness and peace in the new gender wars.

First, we must fight the temptation to do life and work alone. The only instance in creation that God pronounces "not good"

is man being alone (see Gen. 2:18). We were made to live, work and love together, and we must never give up on that ideal with the ones God has brought to us.

Second, we as men must not back off from the biblical mandate given to husbands. That mandate is to love our wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

Scripture does not give us the option, let alone the permission, to drop out of a marriage relationship emotionally (see Eph. 5:25).

We must fully and openly invest ourselves in protecting our families, in sustaining a growing intimacy and in sacrificing ourselves for the sake of our wives. That means hunting down and working on the problems that are sabotaging our relationships. And, if you are single, that means having honorable, open and respectful relationships with women.

Third, we do not need to fight the culture's way. Recognize a spiritual battle when you see one. Satan, the ultimate terrorist, wants us to see others as the problem and our own behavior as good enough. But, as God told Cain (see Gen. 4:7), the solution is in our hearts. We can improve our offering instead of harming the ones we are supposed to love.

Ultimately, we are commanded to love no matter what the response. Individuals will never be satisfied by attempts to "get the most out of a relationship." We are commanded to give, especially when it hurts, so that we can "follow in His steps" (see 1 Pet. 2:21).

Role – REVERSAL?

Is popular culture emasculating American men and contributing to the new gender wars? You decide.

The Graduate: Dustin Hoffman is seduced by a middle-aged woman.

I Love Lucy: Lucille Ball plays a pregnant woman in a TV series.

G.I. Joe: Cartoon commandos prove their military staying power against formidable odds.

NBC (1984): Popular TV sitcom *The Cosby Show* affirms traditional family values.

Romancing the Stone: Michael Douglas woos a female novelist.

Tarzan the Ape Man (1932): The Jungle king protects Jane.

Barbie and Ken (1961): America's favorite doll hooks up with the man of her dreams.

Tootsie: Dustin Hoffman dresses like a middle-aged woman.

Junior: Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a pregnant man in a movie.

G.I. Jane: Demi Moore proves her military staying power against formidable odds.

NBC (2004): Popular TV sitcom *Will & Grace* challenges traditional family values.

Disclosure: Michael Douglas sues his female boss for harassment.

Tarzan (2003): Jane protects the jungle king.

Barbie and Ken (2004): America's favorite doll breaks up with the man of her dreams.

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