Gender Wars: Biology Offers Insights to a Biblical Problem

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Men and women struggle to understand each other and to thrive together as God intended. God’s design of an Edenic relationship where the male and the female together nurture and steward the earth rarely seems to happen. Women often suffer worldwide from assumptions that they have less status and purposefulness than their brothers.1 Men often suffer from being alone at the top and alone in the struggles of life’s battlefields.2 Children can suffer the consequences of the ongoing acrimony between parents.3 Gender wars are destructive.4

The problem is theological, not secular. It began in the Garden, not in the 21st Century. Genesis 1–2 describes God’s intention for males, females, and their relationship, and Genesis 3 describes the source of the dissolution. Interpretations of the passages range from those who support subordination to those who support mutuality. Surprisingly, deciding between the interpretations depends not only on one’s underlying theological views, but also on one’s biological assumptions about the nature of gender. An inadequate view of these passages can, therefore, stem from two sources, the one theological and the other biological. And, as we will see, a synthesis of recent biological discoveries on the essence of femaleness and maleness provides an opportunity to understand more clearly God’s intention in Genesis 1–2 and the impact of the fall in Genesis 3. This leads to suggestions for ameliorating the division between males and females that move beyond certain polarizing hierarchicalist and egalitarian views.

Genesis 1–3: The Rift in the Garden where the Wars Begin

Scholars approach the struggle between men and women by observing the tension first in Genesis 1–3. In Genesis 1–2, God’s intention in creation is stated, and in Genesis 3 the breakdown of God’s intention is described. In Genesis 1:27, God created men and women to reflect God’s image: “And God created Adam in his image, in the image of God he created him, a male and a female he created them.” The image of God is male and female. God’s image is the “us-ness” of maleness and femaleness together.5 Men and women have much in common with each other. Both genders have the capacity to think, feel, relate, and respond to each other and to God.

God told them both to be fruitful and multiply. They are responsible for children and families together. God told them both to have dominion over all living things on the earth. In Genesis 1, the only hierarchy implied is between God, humanity, and other living things. To be in community and bonding relationally is the substance of God’s and the substance of our nature.6 To nurture and govern according to God’s nature requires a unity of maleness and femaleness to execute God’s charge.

In the second creation narrative, Genesis 2:18 clarifies the nature of the woman’s relationship to the man: “And the Lord God thought it was not good for Adam to be alone, ‘I will make for him a helper as if in front of him.’” The term for “helper,” ēzer, implies someone who has the capacity to rescue. Also, she is strong enough to be “as if in front of him,” the more accurate understanding of kĕnegdô.7 Her nature, her reflection of God’s image, allows her to protect him differently than the manner in which he would protect her. Her power is unique, but necessary to the security of the man, as the man’s is to the woman. The man leaves his family, and they cleave together and become one flesh. They are one unit. Together they have an intimate connection and together they thrive.

Nothing is said about authority. Adam named the animals, but he called, that is “recognized,” the woman. Naming gives authority over something or someone, while calling implies an equality of relationship.8 To suggest that because Adam was created first he is, therefore, in authority over Eve is a weak argument in light of the progression of creation in Chapter 1.9 Therefore, before the fall, the text does not suggest a male position of power over the female, nor does it suggest that the female was less capable than the male.

The collapse of the pre-fall relationship is described in Genesis 3:1–17. Even though Eve initiated the disobedience, Adam was most likely present, and, clearly, he consented to it. One can argue that, if Adam were theologically and morally superior, he would have refuted the lies and resisted the temptation, but in fact both were tempted to “be as gods knowing good and evil.”10 After breaking God’s command, they both saw their nakedness, were ashamed, and hid from God. The first result of disobedience was hiding from God, and the second was hiding from responsibility. Adam blamed Eve for his failure, and Eve blamed the serpent for her failure.

However, God treated them as equally responsible and spoke to them as a pair, describing their new reality. They would both experience pain, the man in bread-winning labor and the woman in child-bearing labor. Both would return to the ground in death. More importantly, the perfect union was broken, with God and with each other. The harmonious balance between men and women was lost, as described in the enigmatic phrase, “Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16d). One could argue here that the text describes the husband as bending toward prominence and domination and the woman as bending toward a loss of her distinctiveness.
in subservience to her husband's needs. He begins to rule over her. Through subordination she begins to seek the lost intimacy which she had with him. He becomes more. She becomes less. Their sin creates a rift in their unity and in their wholeness as individuals.

**Interpreting the Rift: Differing Perspectives and Assumptions Concerning Biology**

Among subordinationists, the woman bears responsibility for the consequential damage of the fall because of her innate weakness. She is said to have sinned by stepping out of her natural order and engaging in theological warfare with evil. Her place was under the protection of the man because her mind was less equipped for logic and argument. The man sinned by allowing the woman to influence him. His weakness was in succumbing to Eve's initiative rather than using his authority and intellect to refute her and protect them both. God's punishment was to banish them from the garden. God also clarified the natural rule of the man over the woman and the woman's yearning for her lost relationship of trust.11

For subordinationists, early biological understandings of the differences between men and women concurred with this view. Women were smaller and weaker. They served as caretakers of children and homes. Their minds were seen as less developed and had less capacity for logic and understanding. Their brains were smaller. They were more emotional and less able to endure the toughness of the working world. Generally, men were bigger, stronger, smarter, and physically designed for authority and power. Men defended the home and country and provided food and shelter for women. Women then provided a comfortable and loving home for the man and a nurturing place for children.12

This traditional understanding of the scriptural and biological differences between men and women made any other interpretation of Scripture difficult. The entrenchment of female subservience is not simply an interpretation issue, but also a biological identity issue. Our experience tells us that males and females are different. In most cultures of the world we observe that men are “naturally” superior and women prefer the safety of the home and female companions.

Among egalitarians, however, the responsibility of the fall belongs to the man and woman equally. Both were held accountable because both had the moral capacity and the moral responsibility to obey God's laws. The coming of the kingdom, which was brought about through Christ's death and resurrection, restores the pre-fall intentions of God. The Holy Spirit gives us the power and the discernment to begin overcoming the consequences of sin and injustice that infest the world. However, our perception of the biological differences between men and women creates a stumbling block. Therefore, many egalitarians have chosen the opposite view on gender differences, based on the belief that men and women are equal in all spheres of life.

Egalitarians argue that men are naturally in positions of leadership because culture nurtures them to believe so, not because they are wired that way. It is the ramification of the fall that the curse described. Cultural values are played out in the home. Boy babies are treated differently than girl babies, so boys grow up dominant and girls grow up submissive. Boys are nurtured for leadership, competition, and rational thinking. Boys are given toy trucks and footballs and opportunities to lead. Girl babies are talked to more and adults are more emotionally expressive with them. Girls are given dolls and encouraged to play house and help mother. These socializations indelibly imprint role meanings into the little girl and the little boy.13 Therefore, some egalitarians discount or minimize the gender differences between the sexes and focus solely on the equality of males and females before God and in relationships.

Discounting the impact of the biological nature of maleness and femaleness can lead to different kinds of problems. Many women believe that to succeed they must compete like a man in the workplace. In the same way that women were minimized in previous generations, they are minimized again. Instead of finding the unique gifts and qualities that women bring to business, home, and church, the male gifts and qualities are considered normative and are therefore emulated. The opposite can also happen. Ultra-feminism elevates the female as normative and demotes the male as inferior. Males are seen as slow to "get it" and as lacking empathetic and relational skills. Male-dominated systems and cultures that favor competition and aggressiveness are dismissed as archaic or immature.

Simplistically, some subordinationists use Scripture and some evidence from biology to support their view of males and females, and some egalitarians do the same. Both stances have weaknesses from a biological perspective. Some subordinationists see the female as the weaker species, needing physical protection and moral "covering." Some egalitarians may sometimes dismiss the biological argument as evidence of the power of socialization to form us. By dismissing the differences, the distinctiveness of female and male strengths in creating balanced and healthy homes and church cultures can be lost.

Therefore, with the advances in biological research, more and more is known about maleness and femaleness. I am coming to believe that maleness and femaleness are distinctive and that shared distinctiveness creates a mutual strength. Dismissing the capacity of our biological makeup to shape our nature or relying on outdated biological evidence distorts our perceptions of gender relations. Women's bodies, brains, and hormonal systems are indeed different from men's. Biological research confirms the differences estrogen and testosterone have on our systems and confirms the differences between the male and female brain and its workings. Current biology demonstrates that females are a gifted and powerful species and different from their brothers, and that males are also a gifted and powerful species and different from their sisters.
We are insufficient in life without the benefit of both. We are insufficient in community and in the church without the fully functioning strengths of both men and women. The nature of the female and the nature of the male are each a reflection of something unique and powerful in the Godhead, and biology may give us a clue as to what that is.

Another View of the Rift: Insights on Biology as It Impacts Gender Differences

Biologists recognize that maleness and femaleness in individuals falls along a lengthy continuum. At each end of the continuum are the biological characteristics of two types of human beings. However, males and females can fall anywhere along that continuum. For instance, at one end of the continuum, testosterone influences aggression and, at the other end, serotonin influences impulse control. If the testosterone levels are tested in a mixed group, it is possible that one woman in the group may have more testosterone than one man. That woman might act in an aggressive manner, while a man with less testosterone might act in a more circumspect manner. This does not mean that a circumspect man is not male, nor a risk-taking woman not female. A male person can actually have a “female” functioning brain with less testosterone than a female counterpart who might actually have a more “male” functioning brain with more testosterone. Human beings are quite complex.

Historically, the church has added value judgments to the behaviors of men and women when they exhibit behavior outside the culture’s norms. Aggressive women are viewed as un-feminine, and circumspect men are viewed as un-masculine. This is an unfortunate and dangerous simplification of the wonders of our biological complexities. The variation in maleness and femaleness is a result of factors such as personality, home and national culture, and biological development. Biology does not dictate identity. Biology may influence tendencies. Therefore, though we can describe biological “male” tendencies and “female” tendencies, they are not determinate for how all men and all women will act.

At present, scientists believe that the core locus of maleness and femaleness is related to the hormonal structure and brain structure of the individual. Males have the XY chromosome and the male hormone testosterone. Males generally have 20 times more testosterone than most females. The hormone testosterone influences persons toward aggression, risk taking, a higher sex drive, and independence. Aggression is the desire to compete and attain whether in sports, academics, or computer games. Aggression does not mean a tendency toward violence. Testosterone also increases tension and irritability. Persons with high levels of testosterone find relief in doing things that challenge them and encourage them to take risks. Winning without risk is not satisfying for persons with high levels of testosterone.

The male brain is 10% larger and makes more connections in the right hemisphere, which makes it easier for males to be spatially oriented and to move more quickly to closure in problem solving, but less adept at expressing emotions. On average, males can take seven times longer to process their feelings than females take. Males need more space and move from one thing to another fairly rapidly. Generally, they have less serotonin, which is an aggression inhibitor. Therefore, they have more difficulty sitting still, and their eyes are often going from one thing to another. Although males are biologically equipped for more aggressive and risk-taking behaviors, they still seek out relationships. But they prefer to relate to each other in groups. They seem to thrive on sacrificing or exerting effort for purposes which test their character and abilities.

The female brain grows more quickly and takes in more sensory details than a male’s. The female brain secretes more serotonin and oxytocin. Serotonin is directly related to impulse control and oxytocin is related to caring. The corpus callosum, the bundle of fibers connecting the right and left hemisphere, is 25% larger in females than in males, making verbalization and cross talk between the brain hemispheres more natural in females. The blood flow between the hemispheres is 15% greater so that female brains process more. The blood flows upward more from the limbic to the neo-cortex than it does in males, so thought, especially relational, is more complex.

The frontal lobes in female brains are more active, so females tend to think more carefully about consequences of actions. The occipital lobe in the female’s brain allows her to read more accurately the emotions of others. Female brains have stronger neural connections which lead to better listening and memory storage. The thalamus, which regulates emotional life and a sense of physical safety, processes information more quickly in females than in males. Girls are equipped to process complex relational information. The female system bends toward paying attention to relationships, particularly dyadic ones, and creating closeness and safety.

An early experiment by Erik Erikson, later repeated by Elizabeth Mayer, found that young male and female children play differently. When given blocks in an open space, boys liked to build tall structures and girls liked to build enclosed structures. Erikson concluded that boys focused on the dimension of high-low and girls focused on open-closed. Though Mayer further found that, as the children grew older, girls still preferred the enclosed structures and boys would sometimes choose other types, the general distinction between boys as high-low and girls as open-closed remained. Boys talked about building towers to be noticed and to be the best, while girls talked about closed enclosures as being like houses and rooms. Girls liked the feeling of intimacy and community within enclosed spaces.

Biologically, then, “male” and “female” possess tendencies toward differences. On one end of the continuum, an individual moves toward achievement and significance and, on the other, toward intimacy and community. Human beings have in them the capacity to reflect both. The continuum does not describe a hierarchy of humanity, but the ability of the differences to create a foundation for the stewardship and nurture of the earth. Both ends of the continuum contain necessary attributes for humankind to thrive and for the church to be the church, the body of Christ.
Closing the Rift

Taking these biological insights into consideration, Genesis 1–3 can be viewed in a fresh way. In Genesis 1:27 we read that males and females are created in the image of God. Therefore, there is something about the nature of God which is reflected in maleness and femaleness together, not in being a male or a female separately, or being more male than female. If purposefulness and sacrifice are male tendencies, and relational connection and intimacy are female tendencies, then the Godhead is sacrificially purposeful and intimacy seeking. It would be profane to suggest that one of the tendencies, for instance what is reflected in maleness, is more like God than is the other. Neither would maleness and femaleness be construed as role designations. Because a male seeks significance does not mean that he could not find it by caring for his children. Likewise, if a woman seeks connection, it does not mean that she could not find connection-making in academics or business.

Since God is in a Trinitarian relationship, to be truly human is to experience both male and female tendencies. In other words, humanness is the combination of femaleness and maleness. When a man and a woman cleave together as one flesh, it is more than a sexual and covenantal relationship. Therefore, in any relationship between males and females, whether married or not, humanness is expressed through the relational dynamic and interplay of males and females together. Only then do we understand what it means to be human and made in God’s image.

Genesis 2 confirms the unhealthiness of the male being alone. He needs a companion. But, not to misconstrue the female’s value, she is presented as someone strong enough to stand “as if in front of him.” In other words, the female tendency toward intimacy is imperative for the male to thrive as much as the male tendency for significance is imperative for the female to thrive. There is no hierarchy of need or value. Maleness and femaleness together as a unit lead to balance and wholeness.

In a hierarchical culture, when the church directs males to assume authority and power over women, and encourages women only in roles as homemakers and supporters, several outcomes occur. Being unmarried is considered less natural. Often, the single woman feels that she has less significance and finds the church a lonely place. Something is wrong if a woman is unmarried and she struggles to be taken seriously in the community. Likewise, the man who stays home to care for his children is considered less of a man and he is pressured to return to work.

Further, because women’s value is seen as in the home and not in the workplace, the female perspective is not present at the higher decision-making places of the church. The hierarchical church structure leaves itself open to relational difficulties because the voices of those who pay attention to connection and intimacy are less often heard and supported. Few in this church system would stop everything to resolve a breakdown in staff or congregant relationships as they would stop to give focus to a building campaign or an evangelistic goal. Few of these systems create structures to support self-care: spiritual, physical, emotional, and professional. Therefore, burnout, depression, and moral failure may be more readily overlooked. Creating small groups and shepherd ministries is not enough to preserve the health of the community. The church needs a guardian of its relational soul, and God created a biological unit equipped to provide that vigilance.

In an egalitarian culture, when the church nurtures equality and mutuality without regard for the distinctiveness of the sexes, other problems can occur. In one such church, a little boy was labeled as a troublemaker because he was rambunctious and aggressive. His mother and father were reprimanded for failing to create a more peaceful or harmonious home. In another, a man felt embarrassed to share that he enjoyed hunting. There can be a distrust of maleness. Nurture becomes the primary focus of the church. A church overly focused on connection and warmth is sometimes unable to make tough decisions or create a sense of direction. In an attempt to accommodate and honor all persons, unhealthy individuals are given more voice than they should. At times, things like goal-setting, vision-casting, and strategic planning are dismissed as corporate and worldly.

Egalitarianism does not intentionally reject goal-setting or tough decision-making. However, sometimes egalitarian communities value harmony and equality over other things, and the pendulum swings to one side. Because gender distinctions for males and females fall along a continuum, it is even possible to have all males, all females, or a combination of males and females in the highest offices of a church and still have a balance of gifts in a faith community and culture. A big step toward closing the rift between the sexes is to value the differences enough to give equal authority and honor to both ends of the continuum. Putting a male or female in a role does not mean that gender wars will cease. Honoring equally the differing perspectives is the beginning of a peace treaty.

The hostility and division between genders is a continuation of the fall. Because of the fall, men’s and women’s tendencies were disrupted to move against each other rather than to serve one another. If male tendencies lean toward a life of aggression and risk-taking, those tendencies need to be balanced (since they are not inherently wrong) by female tendencies, since that natural male tendency turned toward domination after the fall. Female tendencies lean toward a natural ability to create relationships. After the fall, that ability corrupted to women subsuming their value under the identity of males. When women and men find redemption in Christ, then a natural outcome is redemption of their biological tendencies as well as their relationships together. In other words, overvaluing or undervaluing maleness and femaleness leads to distortion of God’s vision for humanity. Women and men are each biologically equipped to contribute toward creating healthy, enduring relationships. These contributions are significant for the church and the family.
Conclusion
The gender wars began in the Garden, but they should end at the cross. Christ redeemed us from our fallen state and into God’s kingdom, God’s rule today. Intimacy experienced in love and significance found in respect are shared human needs. To want meaning in life is not simply a male characteristic. Women long for meaning too. A longing for human community and fellowship is not only a female characteristic; men long for human intimacy too. God provided us with strengths as men and women, and gave us relationships in order to nurture and steward the earth, our holy calling.

To return to the redemption of God’s design for men and women is to return to mutual nurture and mutual dominion. I do not believe humanity remembers what that looks like or how to do it. In a hierarchical culture, women do not understand their unique strengths and often do not know how to use them well. Some women find comfort in being timid, naive, and less responsible outside the home. By becoming so, they do not risk losing what intimacy and identity they have managed to find. Other women adopt typically “male” strategies for becoming successful in the business and church world. Men, on the other hand, can be fearful. Even though domination is unrighteous, at least it assures significance in their lives. Sometimes men do not know how to create space for women in a way that men will continue to feel safe. Women do not know how to help them. In the egalitarian culture, men and women are uncomfortable with aggression and can overly accommodate unhealthy individuals. At times, creating space for diversity and pluralism leads to lack of clarity about the church’s identity and purpose.

True community requires a communion of purposefulness and connection. The place to start is to embrace and name our differences while honoring those differences in each other. We begin by listening to each other and asking God to teach us about healthy maleness and femaleness in community. We include males and females in leadership structures and learn to value what each brings. When healthy, spiritually mature women’s voices and healthy, spiritually mature men’s voices are heard and valued, we can create homes and churches that are places of mutual trust, shared power, and connected intimacy. Then, I believe, we can make peace as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Endnotes
4. Even on the Internet there is a phenomenon called “Online Gender Wars.” Janelle Brown writes, “If you thought real-life gender wars were bad, just wait until you get online. Every resentful, angry, dumped on, and altar-jilted man and woman seems to have a homepage these days. And they are all out for revenge. God help us all.” [“Online Gender Wars,” Wired News, July 14 1997, accessed October 20, 2004]. Available from http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,5165,00.html.
5. Aida Besançon Spencer demonstrated how the name Adam and the clauses, “he created him” and “he created them,” indicate the unity and diversity of God’s image in Beyond the Curse (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985), 21–23.
7. Phyllis Trible clarified the Hebrew significance of these words in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1978), 88–90. See also Spencer, Beyond the Curse, 23–29.
8. This point is addressed by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen in Gender and Grace (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990); Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Discovering Biblical Equality (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 87; and Trible, God and the Rhetoric, 88–94.
11. Some examples of these thoughts: John Piper wrote, “To the degree that a woman’s influence over man is personal and directive it will generally offend a man’s good, God-given sense of responsibility and leadership, and thus controvert God’s created order.” (“A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible” in Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem [Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 1991], 51); Raymond Ortlund wrote, “Eve usurped Adam’s headship and led the way into sin. And Adam…stood by passively, allowing the deception to progress without decisive intervention” (“Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3,” Piper and Grudem, RBWM, 107).
12. Historically, women have been viewed this way from the early church fathers to some hints in contemporary writings. Leonard J. Swidler collects the positive and negative assessments of women’s value and general weakness with quotations from early Jewish rabbis and church fathers (Biblical Affirmations of Women [Louisville: Westminster, 1979]). Martin Luther himself wrote, “God has created men with broad chests and shoulders, not broad hips, so that men can understand wisdom. But the place where filth flows out is small. With women, it’s the other way around. That’s why they have lots of filth and little wisdom” (quoted in Merry Weimer, “The Death of Two Marys,” Disciplines of Faith, ed. Jim Obekaiha, Lydal Roper, and Raphael Samuel [New York: Routledge & Kegan, 1987], 295). Wayne Grudem wrote that ‘Peter does not specify how he understands the woman to be the ‘weaker partner,’ but the context would make it appropriate for him to have in mind any kind of weakness that husbands would need to be cautioned not to take advantage of. Those would certainly include physical strength... [also] women are weaker in terms of their authority in the marriage... [and also] a third weakness...greater emotional sensitivity.” (“Wives like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them: I Peter 3:1–7,” in Piper and Grudem, RBWM, 206).
15. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen describes the complex biological process in utero where the fetus goes through six stages determining the intensity of “maleness” and “femaleness” in a boy or girl (My Brother’s Keeper, 73–76).


18. Kevin Giles develops the historical and theological implications of the Trinity for understanding the nature of God and of humanity in *Trinity and Subordinationism* (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).