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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Gender co-operation: some implications of God's design for society

by Michael and Auriel Schluter

The strategy of the renaissance is unstable in the long run ... because it has thrust aside one half of the human race, it has deprived our civilisation of the gift that only women could bring to it. In doing so, it has discarded one whole aspect of human life ...

Paul Tournier¹

Every society which has tried to engineer sexual symmetry and destroy gender role differences has failed ...

Melanie Phillips²

Summary

There is much tension and unhappiness in contemporary gender relations. This was not God's original design. Men and women were not intended to be separate or to compete but to co-operate. Despite the tensions resulting from the Fall, gender co-operation creates immense opportunities since men and women were designed to be interdependent. Gender distinctives are highlighted by the men and women esteemed in biblical narratives. Gender co-operation in a fallen world can be promoted through a culture based on commitment to strong mixed-gender households and communities rather than individual rights. This requires re-ordering of many areas of public and private life, for example localising government and organisational decisions, changes in the long-hours work culture, and a return to 'modesty'.

Introduction

There are many signs of strain in gender relations. The complications of singles in search of connection with the opposite sex are humorously depicted in recent films.³ Many women with children find the pressures of home and job responsibilities almost unbearable. The growing number of young men alienated from society can be seen in crime and suicide statistics. At a policy level, there are concerns about the high divorce rate, homosexual adoption, growth in numbers of single-parent households, and declining birth rates in all Western societies.

At a personal level, many men feel that their role in the family is no longer recognised.⁴ The traditional jobs which rely on sheer physical strength are fewer, and women can generally do the new jobs as well or better. Women can now have children without a husband or a male partner. In divorce cases men are seldom given custody of the children, even if it was the wife who left home to go with another man. Too few men have a clear idea about what they uniquely bring to a marriage, or about the nature of masculinity.⁵

Many women equally feel that 'the system' works against them. They resent what they regard as hidden barriers to their promotion in the workplace. In the home they often feel that the gender revolution has passed them by, as they still do almost all the housework and are expected to hold down a job as well. Outside the home they often feel both psychologically and physically intimidated by the way men treat them. According to Shalit: 'All the unisex revolution has achieved is equal opportunity rape, stalking, beating...and greater opportunity for women to be taken advantage of.'⁶

In public life, gender conflict is concerned primarily with perceived equality and leads to a struggle for influence or control over political and business decisions, both in terms of who makes those decisions and in whose interests (gender-wise) those decisions are made. Issues that would in previous generations have been interpreted in regional, ethnic or class terms are now analysed for their impact on gender.

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1 *The Gift of Feeling*, (tr. Edwin Hudson), SCM Press, 1981, p.122.

2 *The Sex Change Society*, The Social Market Foundation/Profile Books, 1999, p.197.

3 E.g. *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001); *About A Boy* (2002).

4 E.g. see the newsletter of the lobby group Families Need Fathers, available from 134 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3AR.

5 E.g. see Anthony Clare, *Masculinity in Crisis*, Chatto and Windus, 2000.

6 Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, New York: Touchstone, 2000, p.44.

It is difficult to know whether gender relations historically have always been so fraught. Certainly there were tensions in the first century AD in the Graeco-Roman world, or Paul would not have found it necessary to address the subject in his letters in such detail. In more recent British history, it seems that the industrial revolution severely upset the existing pattern of gender relations, in particular by making it difficult for women to fulfil domestic roles as well as have the opportunity to participate in economic activity. As men's identity came to depend more on their work than their family, so women became less significant in their estimation. The Enlightenment with its emphasis on individual rationality also reduced the importance attached to gender co-operation. Although subsequently women's education, women's franchise and technological change have brought some balance, in Van Leeuwen's view, the 1960s feminist movement has upset the rhythm of the jointly paddled canoe.⁷

Against this background, we shall seek to explore what the Bible teaches about gender relations, both in terms of God's original design and the situation that prevailed after the Fall.⁸ We shall argue that there are differences between men and women which are clear from the created order and from biblical teaching. Such differences provide the basis in God's design for the two genders to co-operate for their mutual benefit. Without such co-operation, individuals and society are impoverished. Space does not allow more than the briefest discussion of some of the key theological, biological and sociological arguments involved.

Inferences from the created order

The first place to look for God's intentions is in creation itself which He made 'good'.⁹

We may infer from nature that men and women were created to have different responsibilities. The woman has the task of bearing children, protecting them and nurturing them in the early years. The mother-child biological bond is stronger than that of the father-child since the former starts in the womb, and is strengthened further through breast-feeding. Over the years when a mother is taken up primarily with this bearing and caring for young children, the father's special tasks are to ensure protection and provision.

The differences in these primary tasks around the procreation and raising of children go hand in hand with many of the gender differences which can be observed in behaviour and communication skills between men and women. In general women are effective at the nurture of small children in a home environment, with their communication skills and ability to develop close, intimate relationships, whereas men's physical strength and focus on achievement helps them fulfil in the wider world their special responsibility of protector and provider.

Social science supports these broad generalisations even though the 'nature or nurture' debate remains unresolved. Socialisation has been traditionally understood as 'the set of processes whereby each generation of adults passed along to the upcoming generation of children the fund of knowledge, beliefs, and skills which constitutes the culture of the social group. The socialisation processes occurring in childhood have been seen as largely anticipatory: as a matter of preparing children for the roles they will need to play as adults.'¹⁰ In the past some have even suggested that babies' minds are 'blank slates' which become culturally and sexually conditioned by interaction with the surrounding culture's ideals and norms.

Schlegel and Barry reported the 'culturally invariable gender difference that adolescent girls spend more time in settings of multigenerational females and that adolescent boys spend more hours in the company of peers. The consequence of these social-

ising experiences may be that girls learn more social responsibility and boys learn to compete as equals.'¹¹ Girls' interactive styles (facilitative and enabling) may also be functionally adaptive, to make them more sensitive and effective as carers in society, just as a competitive style might be useful to boys in their adult social roles.

Deborah Tannen, a linguistics expert, has argued that much miscommunication between men and women can be traced to different gender styles of language. 'Women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence.'¹² She points to the fact that gender differences in ways of talking have been described by researchers observing children as young as three.¹³ The popularised stereotype of 'Mars and Venus' responses reflects the reality of the frustration engendered.¹⁴ These differences can become a major source of gender conflict if each imputes to the other some malicious intent.¹⁵ Tannen concludes that both men and women could benefit from learning each other's styles. Many women could learn from men to accept some conflict and difference without seeing it as a threat to intimacy, and many men could learn from women to accept interdependence without seeing it as a threat to their freedom.¹⁶

Social studies also point to differences in the way men and women approach work; physical differences lead to psychological differences. Hakim suggests that paid employment is not as important to women as it is to men. It does not have such an important role in defining their identity.¹⁷

Brain function studies also reveal differences between the genders. Functional imaging experiments during emotional arousal show that men and women activate different neural circuits.¹⁸ Ovarian steroids also have widespread effects in the brain including changes in synapse turnover and cognition.¹⁹ This has implications for observed gender differences in the symptoms of some illnesses.²⁰ Recent studies have also found that beyond the effects of hormones there are also genetic differences within the brain.²¹ Other highlights of gender distinctions include differing patterns of language use and visual recognition.

In summary, 'A biosocial perspective does not argue that there is a genetic determination of what men can do compared to women; rather, it suggests that the biological contributions shape what is learned, and that there are differences in the ease with which the sexes can learn certain things.'²²

Gender interdependence and responsibility

God created humanity male and female (Genesis 1:27). Relationality and the difference in creation of male and female is not accidental but is an external expression of the relationality of the triune God. Our capacity for relationship is a mark of our belonging to God. Therefore, authentic humanity without others is impossible. What we find out about the image of God from this verse is threefold: it is expressed firstly in plural persons, not a

- 7 Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Fathers and Sons: The search for a new masculinity*, IVP, 2003.
- 8 Gen. 1-3.
- 9 Gen. 1:31.
- 10 Eleanor E. Maccoby, *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together*, Harvard University Press, 1998.
- 11 Schlegel, A. and Barry, H., *Adolescence: An anthropological inquiry*, New York: Free Press, 1991.
- 12 Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, Virago Press, 1992, p.43.
- 13 Ibid. pp.44-45.
- 14 John Grey, *Men are from Mars, Thorsons*, HarperCollins, London, 1993.
- 15 Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheilah Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most*, Michael Joseph, 1999, p.45.
- 16 Ibid. p.294.
- 17 Catherine Hakim, 'Women's Role and Social Policy; A New Perspective from Preference Theory', *European Studies*, 1(1), 1999.
- 18 Turham Canli et al., 'Sex differences in the neural basis of emotional memories', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, vol. 99, 23 July 2002, pp.10789-10794.
- 19 B. McEwen, 'Estrogen actions throughout the brain', *Recent Progress in Hormone Research*, 57, 2002, pp.357-84.
- 20 E.g. M. L. Rao and H. Kolsch, 'Effects of estrogen on brain development and neuroprotection-implications for negative symptoms in schizophrenia' (1), *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 28, Suppl. 2, 2003, pp.83-96.
- 21 R. J. Agate et al., 'Neural, non gonadal, origin of brain sex differences in gynandromorphin finch', *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 15 Apr 2003, vol. 100(8), pp.4873-8.
- 22 Rossi, A., 'A biosocial perspective on parenting', *Daedalus*, vol. 106, Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1977, pp.1-31.

singular person; secondly, not in the opposition of male and female but in their harmony; and thirdly, in differentiation which implies equality rather than hierarchy.²³ Schmidt makes similar points about the Genesis 2 account:

Adam is not given a mirror-image companion, he is given a *her* (Genesis 2:18), and he delights in her *correspondence* to him (Genesis 2:23), which resides in her likeness (human) and her difference (female). The couple are, literally and figuratively, made for each other. Because union is the remedy for incompleteness ('for this reason', Genesis 2:24), humans possess a drive to 'leave and cleave' in marriage.²⁴ (author's italics)

Men and women are designed to be interdependent. This is one important aspect of the way in which they reflect the image of God. Within the Godhead, each person is identified by their relationship to the other two. Through the Son the Father makes himself known. The Son's authority is derived from the Father and the Father sets the agenda for all the Son's activities. The Spirit is sent by the Father at the request of the Son and brings glory to the Son.²⁵ Similarly God made humanity asymmetrical such that their fulfilment would depend on co-operative mutual support. The tasks of procreation and stewardship of the world's resources belong to both of them jointly.²⁶

Both men and women, in their equal standing before God, are accountable primarily to him for their relationship with each other. For example, Paul's understanding of male responsibility in the context of marriage is derived from man being given authority in his relationship with the woman in the Genesis narrative. He uses three arguments for this.²⁷ First, primogeniture: Adam was formed before Eve. Second, origin: the woman was taken out of the man; and thirdly, purpose: man was not created for the woman, but woman for the man.²⁸ Having authority here is about obediently accepting the responsibility of such a position. As Paul argues elsewhere, a man's responsibility in marriage requires him to love his wife as his own body, sacrificially as Christ loved the church, to 'feed and care for' his wife, not to command and control her.²⁹ Both Paul and Jesus challenged the entrenched social codes of their day which subjugated women.

There is less in Genesis about the woman's responsibilities, except use of the term 'helper' which is also often used of God in relation to Israel.³⁰ Woman's role as 'appropriate helper', therefore, does not carry with it an implication of subordination to the man, yet within marriage she too must be obedient to God's calling to 'submit', following the example of Jesus' willing submission to his Father.³¹ Within the mandate jointly to 'fill the earth', women have specific responsibilities in bearing children despite the physical and emotional pain that this involves.

Biblical discussion of gender does not set out roles for men and women in any systematic way, nor does it set out attributes for men and women to which all must aspire. Rather, the Bible seems to accept that in both genders there will be a wide spectrum of character traits, albeit with some more associated with one gender than the other. However, biblical teaching provides examples of behaviour which is praised and people who are commended. These cases highlight gender distinctives which are to be expressed, valued and esteemed by the community.

Esteemed women

The most frequently cited model for women is the 'wife of noble character', of Proverbs 31. Her works are to be publicly praised; she is worth 'far more than rubies'. She is commended, as a wife, first for the benefits she brings to her husband and then for her hard work, her business acumen, her generosity to the poor, her strength and dignity, her wisdom and instruction in the covenant theology of Israel,³² and her household management. This is not a woman who is tied to the home, nor one who neglects domestic responsibilities.

Peter in his epistles appeals to Sarah, the wife of Abraham, as an example of submission in marriage and hope in God bringing about an inner beauty.³³ Mary of Bethany is commended by Jesus for her discernment of priorities, and later for pouring out expensive perfume which Jesus describes as a 'beautiful thing';³⁴ where Jesus' male disciples saw Mary's act only as financially wasteful, Jesus recognises the love and spiritual insight which inspired her action as preparing him for burial. Mary the mother of Jesus is another woman remembered in the biblical narrative for her faith, her song and her reflection on God's ways.³⁵

The story of Ruth commends her life of loyalty and self-sacrifice. Other women in the Old Testament who are shown to act with theological understanding, discretion, integrity and loyalty include Deborah, Hannah, Huldah, Abigail and Esther. In the NT epistles women's 'good works' are listed as including mothering, hospitality, practical service and helping those in trouble.³⁶ Dorcas is exemplary for 'always doing good and helping the poor',³⁷ as are the women who accompanied the men on their travels to provide practical support,³⁸ and Phoebe is especially commended for her service to Paul and in her diaconate role in the church at Cenchrea.³⁹

Esteemed men

The positive examples of manhood can first be seen in the analogies of God as the archetypal father, husband and king.

The link between heavenly and human fatherhood is twice made explicit in the New Testament. Like God, men as fathers are expected to discipline their children as a sign of love for them.⁴⁰ Also, as God the Father provides for the material needs of his children,⁴¹ so it is a man's responsibility to provide for his household. God is also a source of strength and comfort to Jesus in Gethsemane, where Jesus prays to God as 'abba' (the intimate family word for father); so, too, fathers as well as mothers should be a source of strength and comfort to their children in times of difficulty.⁴²

God is described as 'husband' to Israel both in Jeremiah where he 'leads them by the hand' out of slavery,⁴³ and in Hosea where the prophet speaks about and acts out the many initiatives that God as husband makes to recapture the love and attention of his wayward wife, Israel.⁴⁴

Thirdly, God as 'King' has a deep concern for justice and righteousness. Isaiah describes the coming Messiah as one who, 'with righteousness will judge the needy, and with justice will give decisions for the poor of the earth'.⁴⁵ The same emphasis is there in Psalm 72, where human kingship is modelled on God's kingship. The writer of Proverbs points to the security of kings lying in their hatred of wrongdoing and their commitment to truth.⁴⁶ In the Deuteronomic law, God is concerned to ensure that

32 Prov. 31:26 in Hebrew.

33 1 Pet. 3:5.

34 Luke 10:42; Matt 26:13.

35 Luke 1:38, 45–55; 2:19, 51. Contrast with Zechariah (Luke 1:18).

36 1 Tim. 5:10.

37 Acts 9:36; cf 1 Tim. 5:10.

38 Luke 8:3; 1 Cor. 9:5.

39 Rom. 16:1–2.

40 Heb. 12:7; Prov. 3:11–12.

41 Matt. 6:25–34; Luke 11:13.

42 Mark 14:36; Isa. 66:13.

43 Jer. 31:32.

44 See, for example, Hos. 1:2; 2:16; 3:1 etc.

45 Isa. 11:4.

46 Prov. 16:12–13.

23 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) SCM Press, 1992, pp.18–19. We would not necessarily endorse all her subsequent argument.

24 Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow?*, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1995, p.44.

25 Col. 2:15; John 1:18; 5:27; 5:19–20; 14:16; 16:12–15.

26 Gen. 1:28.

27 Paul does not appeal to the fact that Adam named Eve. This occurred *after* the Fall (Gen. 3:20); when Adam calls his partner 'woman', he is celebrating the remarkable fact that she is like him yet different (Gen. 2:23).

28 1 Tim. 2:13; 1 Cor. 11:8, 9.

29 Eph. 5:25–28.

30 Hebrew *ezer*, e.g. Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7; Ps. 20:2; 33:20; 70:5 etc.

31 John 14:31; Luke 22:42.

emotional responses, however appropriate, do not cloud just action.⁴⁷ When Jesus the king finally comes, it is not surprising to find him deeply concerned about issues of justice.⁴⁸ These passages on kingship give men a model for leadership in public affairs.

There are also commendations of the characteristics of men in leadership throughout the OT, for example Abraham's faith, Moses' humility, David's heart for God, and Ezra's commitment to observe and teach God's law.⁴⁹ Men's faith expressed in administration of justice, bold leadership and personal acts of courage are recorded and commended.⁵⁰ In the New Testament, Peter, James, Paul and Barnabas are noted for their encouragement, courage and single-mindedness.⁵¹

By noting qualities for which men and women are particularly commended we gain some insight into the co-operative process. In bringing together these strengths Christians can fulfil those things God requires of them – justice, mercy and humility before him. Is it then that righteousness and peace can truly 'kiss each other'?⁵²

Case studies of co-operation

For lessons in gender co-operation we turn first to the Song of Songs, which is a celebration of the deepest intimacy between a man and woman, seen by some as allegorical for God and his people, where the man is depicted as a tree and a gazelle, and the woman as a lily and a dove. His strength and speed respond to her beauty and tender calling. Another analogy here is that of the woman possessing a 'garden', her womb, into which she allows the man first for pleasure and then as co-owner to bear fruit together. This is co-operation at the most intimate level. In this book we see mutual longing, mutual attraction, mutual need and mutual purpose which appears to be driven in part by difference; the girl and her beloved are not identical. Crabb understands mutually satisfying sexual union as a metaphor for the way men and women are meant to co-operate in other areas of life.⁵³

The co-operative partnership of Esther and her uncle Mordecai is used to save the Jewish people from annihilation under the Persian Empire. It may be no coincidence that gender confrontation is highlighted in the first chapter of the book, prior to the example of gender co-operation which follows. Both Esther and Mordecai have essential roles in the saving of the Jews; neither could have succeeded without the other.

Our third case study is derived from a combination of references in the book of Proverbs to the relations of husband and wife with each other and with their children. Father and mother are assumed to speak with one voice to the child.⁵⁴ A husband is urged to be not merely loyal but ardent towards his wife, and a broken marriage vow is seen as a sin against a long-standing partner.⁵⁵ At the same time, the woman is seen as the making or undoing of her husband; she is a God-given boon, his 'crown', or the rottenness in his bones.⁵⁶ On her constructive womanly gifts depends the family's stability. Her influence spreads far beyond the home, but her achievements are valued most of all for their contribution to her husband's fortune and good standing. There is trust between husband and wife; 'her husband has full confidence in her'.⁵⁷

The Fall and gender relations

The most significant aspect of the curse for gender relations following the Fall is this: 'Your desire shall be for your husband and

he will rule over you.'⁵⁸ Various interpretations of this verse have been put forward but all highlight in some way the breakdown of gender co-operation and entry of conflict.⁵⁹

The Fall leads each gender into sins which are the antithesis of their positive characteristics. Men, in a variety of ways, fail to fulfil their responsibilities. In marriage, men are often disloyal to their wives, and fail to control their sexual appetites. Abraham is prepared to let his wife be taken by another man because he fears for his own safety. Amnon rapes his half-sister out of sheer lust. The many warnings to young men against adultery in Proverbs indicate their inclination to use sex for self-gratification rather than intimacy.⁶⁰

The temptations for kings to misuse strength, passion and law are anticipated⁶¹ and so it turns out. Saul is constantly losing his temper in the competition for power, as he perceives it, with David. Solomon becomes obsessed with women and wealth. Rehoboam seems more concerned for his status than for the welfare of his people so that Israel is split in two. The dreary list is endless. Proverbs also warns men specifically⁶² against laziness, violence, hot-headedness and ruthlessness,⁶³ perhaps drawing attention to a particular character vulnerability in men.

Women's ability to form close relationships has also been distorted by the Fall leading to bad influence in place of good. Proverbs warns repeatedly against the seductions of the adulteress. There are also five warnings in Proverbs about the 'quarrelsome wife'.⁶⁴ God warns his people repeatedly against the potential idolatrous influence of foreign wives, of whom Jezebel is probably the most notorious. Rebecca manipulates the family inheritance in favour of her favourite son Jacob, Peninah taunts Hannah out of rivalry, and the NT church is not free of quarrelsome women.⁶⁵ Finally it is a woman, seductive even in trade, who in John's Apocalypse is depicted as the 'mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth'.⁶⁶

Tragically, the Fall means that until Christ's return, there will be gender conflicts in every society. Even among Jesus' disciples, men's ability to lead is distorted into a concern for external position rather than being focused on inner attitude and responsibility.⁶⁷ Women, too, fall into the trap of externalising and trivialising the deep mystery of their feminine beauty.⁶⁸ There is collusion between the genders to their detriment, rather than a co-operation for their good. In parallel to humanity's struggle in relation with God, men and women have opted for a battle of wills and the misuse of their bodies rather than a truly satisfying engagement of minds and hearts.

The negative and destructive effects of the Fall can be redeemed through the gospel but the church on earth does not reflect a perfected model; both polarisation and competition can be observed within it. However, the more the true internal dynamics are understood the more co-operation will be celebrated.

From co-operation to ultimate harmony

The co-operation theme in Scripture starts with two individuals but anticipates all humanity. The picture of Adam and Eve in the garden shows the need for co-operation at three levels. Firstly there is recognition of fit as whole beings, 'bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh', which leads to intimacy not available else-

58 Gen. 3:16.

59 E.g. to quote just two interpretations, Hurley (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, IVP, 1981, p.219) understands this verse to mean, in the light of Gen. 4:7, that 'She will come to desire to overthrow her husband, but that he will rule over her.' Tribble (op. cit. p.128) understands the verse to mean that 'The man will not reciprocate the woman's desire; instead he will rule over her.'

60 Gen. 20:1-18; 2 Sam. 13:1-20, and e.g. Prov. 5.

61 Deut. 17:16-18.

62 These warnings use the Hebrew word *ish*, meaning man or husband, rather than using the Hebrew *adam* which could be translated man or person.

63 Prov. 6:6; 10:4-5; 4:17; 15:18; 19:19.

64 Prov. 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15-16. There is also one against the quarrelsome man: Prov. 26:21.

65 Gen. 27; 1 Sam. 1:6; Phil. 4:2.

66 Rev. 17:5.

67 Mark 10:35-45.

68 1 Pet. 3:3-4.

47 Deut. 19:6-13.

48 Matt. 23:23.

49 Heb. 11:8-19; Num. 12:3; 1 Sam. 13:14; Ezra 7:10.

50 Heb. 11:32-34.

51 E.g. 2 Cor. 1:3-11; Phil. 3:2-11; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22.

52 Mic. 6:8; Ps. 85:10.

53 Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*, Navpress, 1988, cited here from Scripture Press Foundation edition, Herts, UK, p.208ff.

54 Prov. 1:8, 9; 6:20 etc.

55 Prov. 5:19; 2:17; Mal. 2:14.

56 Prov. 18:22; 19:14; 12:4.

57 Prov. 14:1; 31:11, 12, 23.

where in creation, and acceptance of equality of personhood. Secondly, there is collegiality as co-workers in God's world, as rulers over the rest of creation. Thirdly, physical intercourse leads to the procreation of children to fill the world. But this co-operation breaks down after the Fall as all three areas are affected. The recognition of equal status falls victim to competitiveness, the woman's help as co-worker is not enough to offset the toil of labour, and the man cannot protect the woman from the pain involved in procreation. Thus, the co-operation itself becomes flawed and brings pain amid the joy.

This strain on their relationship is due to sin, so God set boundaries on how each gender behaves with the other in his laws for individuals, couples, families and society. These take into consideration the fallen nature of humanity without negating the original patterns given to men and women. In the Law, God also puts in place a culture governing family, finance, property, law, and education which helps create the preconditions for co-operative gender relationships in society.

In Jesus we see not only God made man but the 'second Adam', the final resolution for humanity. We see him victorious over the tempter, able to maintain a right relationship with God and with others, including women. As well as being the Son of God, in the world he is the perfect son, brother, teacher, and friend. He has perfect understanding of both men and women; he sees the heart.⁶⁹ In each encounter he responds appropriately.

After Jesus' life on earth, the model of co-operation moves onto a different plane. It is the co-operation of the divine with humanity in redemption. In the context of salvation men and women have identical places in Christ.⁷⁰ Jesus is the bridegroom and his disciples collectively the bride. The lover of the Song of Songs wants to be welcomed into his spiritual garden to enjoy fellowship and to cultivate the life he has planted. But in this redeemed community there is still need for structure and boundaries as the 'bride' is not yet perfected; she is not integrated within herself, there is non-co-operation within her, not least between the genders.

In contrast to the abominable seductress, the final episode in Revelation has the bride as a perfect city built out of the most valuable and precious materials to perfect proportions. She is now ready to receive her Lord who comes to receive due honour, having already sacrificed himself completely. We have moved beyond the conflict. Here at last there is perfect harmony.

The rights-based approach to mitigating gender conflict

Since the Second World War Western culture has pursued the goal that men and women should have exactly the same rights and opportunities. This has resulted in much that can be applauded.⁷¹ However, it has contributed to individual interest being favoured over group interests. Gender differences are regarded as a false consciousness which has been individually or socially constructed. On this view it would be preferable if pregnancy, for example, could be distributed randomly between men and women! The main focus for eliminating gender conflict has been on opportunities in public life, using reverse discrimination to correct gender imbalances in education, jobs, political positions and civil service appointments. The emphasis on individual rights has also been associated with the removal of most restraints on sexual behaviour, acceptance of divorce in the interests of personal freedom, and perhaps a less than successful effort to re-educate men to share domestic chores more evenly.

Despite the benefits of this approach for women's employment opportunities, the consequences for gender co-operation, as well as for vulnerable individuals, have been negative in other respects. A growing proportion of young people are unwilling to

commit themselves in marriage. Divorce rates have increased sixfold between 1969 and 1999.⁷² These divorces have had painful consequences for children, who have greater psychological and emotional problems than other children, and who do not perform as well educationally.⁷³ After divorce, some single mothers with children find themselves hopelessly overworked, and some fathers separated from their children are angry that they are permitted so little contact, yet feel they are pursued relentlessly for money.⁷⁴ Among older people, there are now large numbers without a network of support.⁷⁵

The biblical alternative: a co-operative culture

Biblical laws are the expression of God's character and will for society,⁷⁶ given in a particular historical and geographical context. By studying the intention of these laws, and taking the principles embodied by them, we can seek lessons for our society today. There are three important caveats to this procedure. First, it is essential that the laws are looked at as a whole, as a social vision; it is too easy to pick out a principle from a law which is misleading because it is taken out of the context of the whole. Second, because Israel was a covenant community, and modern societies are not, New Testament teaching on religious liberty has to replace Old Testament teaching on ceremonial and exclusivity issues.⁷⁷ Thirdly, to understand and apply the true intention of a law, and its ultimate fulfilment, we often need to study the life and teaching of Jesus, who fulfilled the law.

The approach of biblical law is not to concentrate on individual rights, although some laws do protect rights. Rather it is to create a social structure and culture characterised by strong, supportive, mixed gender relationships which are the foundation of true co-operation. The heart of biblical law is not a concern for gender 'equality', but for 'relational proximity', in which 'parity' is but one of five component parts.⁷⁸ A more general closeness of personal relationship provides connectedness, participation, security and opportunities for friendship and intimacy which make the issue of strict equality apparently a lower priority. This is still evident in many African and Arab communities today.

In early Israel, the core of social relationships was the extended family and local community; areas of public policy such as property ownership, finance, criminal justice and education were designed to reinforce these social bonds. The system of punishment for offenders, in particular, was designed to communicate what constitutes right relationships.⁷⁹ The 'covenant' context, expressing the values of faithfulness and long-term commitment, provided an appropriate framework for this pattern of co-operation.

The strength of extended family and local community was achieved through multigenerational, mixed gender households being the primary point of reference for a person's identity. Permanence or rootedness in a locality with the extended family was achieved through the Jubilee legislation. The patriarchy of early Israel might appear disadvantageous to women as men acted as heads of households and few women lived on their own; marriage was expected and the heads of households were responsible to ensure young women under their roof were able to find suitable partners. However, under these arrangements, greater opportunities for secure relationships and recognition within larger, mixed-gender households seems to have compensated for restrictions on women's freedom.

72 Office for National Statistics, *Social Trends*, No 33, 2003, chapter 2.

73 Rebecca O'Neill, *Experiments in Living: The Fatherless Family*, London: Civitas, Sept. 2002.

74 See the newsletter of the lobby group Families Need Fathers, available from 134 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3AR.

75 Office of National Statistics, *Census 2001*.

76 Deut. 4:6-8.

77 Julian Rivers, 'Multiculturalism', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Dec. 2001.

78 'Parity' is defined in terms of mutual respect, participation in decisions and a fair sharing of risk and reward in the relationship. See Michael Schluter and David John Lee, *The R Option*, Cambridge: Relationships Foundation, 2003.

79 Jonathan Burnside, 'The Signs of Sin: Seriousness of Offence in Biblical Law', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Series 364, Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, p.24ff.

69 E.g. Luke 5:22.

70 Gal. 3:28.

71 For a Christian critique of rights language, see Julian Rivers, 'Beyond the Morality of Rights', in Michael Schluter (ed.), *Christianity in a Changing World*, Marshall Pickering, 2000, pp.126-137.

Family and local community were strengthened by being given important roles in the welfare and criminal justice systems. Political power was decentralised to give communities the greatest possible say over the decisions affecting their lives. Localising political decisions maximised opportunities for mixed gender engagement; even if decisions were made locally by male elders, women had the opportunity to influence them. By contrast, centralised power forces men and women to choose between participation in distant national decisions and playing a significant role in the family, and also leans towards hierarchies of decision-making outside the family which favour masculine patterns of relating.

The economic system also helped to reinforce family and local loyalties. The ban on interest, and debt cancellation every seventh year, would have prevented the development of anonymous money markets; money flows would have been mainly among people who knew each other. The Jubilee laws on property were designed to ensure continuity of relationship in extended families and local communities.⁸⁰ These were powerful institutions to keep business local, and prevent the accumulation of capital leading to relational distance, emergence of excessive hierarchy, and thus to the marginalisation of women.

An agenda for change

These features of the 'relational' culture of biblical law meet many of the concerns about contemporary culture expressed by feminists such as Carol Gilligan.⁸¹ In individualistic Western culture the gifts that are valued most, she argues, are those associated with masculinity: a capacity for autonomous thinking and clear decision-making. The Western tendency to split love and work assigns the expressive capacities to women, while placing instrumental abilities in the masculine domain. Gilligan comments,

Yet looked at from a different perspective, these stereotypes reflect a concept of adulthood that is itself out of balance, favouring the separateness of the individual self over connection to others, and leaning more towards an autonomous life and work than towards the interdependence of love and care.⁸²

To increase a sense of interdependence, our culture needs to move away from one of individual rights to one which stresses the possibilities of inter-gender co-operative connectedness, each person being part of a mixed gender community while still being free to enjoy single sex groups.

At the level of government, the trend towards centralising decisions, whether to Westminster or Brussels, needs to be reversed. Legislation and policy could give higher priority to relational considerations, or at least not work against gender co-operation. A few examples must suffice. In the area of personal finance, government could promote small mutuals rather than individual autonomy. Resources to support marriage and parent-

ing are pathetically small; income tax policy even makes it a disadvantage to marry. In education, the emphasis on individual technical competence minimises time for activities like music and drama which foster co-operation. Where proven, the academic advantages of single sex schools need to be weighed against social disadvantages. Greater flexibility in higher education would make it easier for young people to avoid delaying marriage and family. In criminal justice policy, use of imprisonment severely inhibits cross-gender contact, and leaves released offenders poorly equipped for life in mixed gender households. Since work for men is a more significant factor in their sense of identity, there needs to be greater public commitment to ensure employment opportunities for men up to retirement.

At an institutional level, many organisations could be smaller, or structured to put more emphasis on the sub-units within them. The rigid employment practices and long-hours culture of British business make it difficult to initiate and sustain broader long-term relationships on which family, households and communities are built.

In terms of popular culture, as Shalit argues, there needs to be a 'return to modesty' to prevent women from sexual harassment.⁸³ Respectful attitudes were encouraged in the past by codes of conduct, for example in dress and courting rituals. New codes for today might make a start with curbs on pornography and the advertising industry. Christians might also want to challenge the secular wisdom of the late marriage, late parenting culture but without questioning the legitimacy of calls to singleness.

In an age when gender issues have become so critical to social wellbeing, Christians have a unique opportunity, as well as a mandate, to model for wider society recognition of personhood, collegiality and creative purposes in gender co-operation. This calls for an urgent review by the churches of their subculture, examining primarily not the contentious 'equality' issues associated with ordination and preaching, but the wider 'proximity' issues associated with building close relationships of mutual respect and trust across the whole mixed gender community. As well as arguing for the kind of changes in national policy and organisational behaviour listed above, it is vital that as Christians we are seen to 'practise what we preach' in our own communities.

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⁸³ Shalit, *op. cit.*

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⁸⁰ As an example of the impact of the Jubilee laws on the outlook of peasant households, see 1 Kgs. 21:1-3.

⁸¹ See Carol Gilligan, *A Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Second Edition, 1993.

⁸² *Ibid.* p.17.

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