

“Christianity and Being Male”

Genesis 3:14-19

3/19/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

As far as my boyhood went, it wasn't much. Through those early years, my ego was hammered out with cowboys and Indians, baseball, climbing trees, sneaking out of the house and a multitude of fudgesicles. I had my share of fights in the neighborhoods and at an early age, I developed the technique of hitting hard, on the first round, and running away with unmatched speed – a technique historically rooted in the tactics of the ‘Minutemen’ during our nation’s revolution. My efforts at being a boy earned me scarred knees from falling from bicycles, trees, tops of fences and garage roofs. With my willowy frame, however, it was a wonder that I could remain upright on windy days.

The other gender of my species eventually attracted my attention and I pursued it as clumsily as an elephant trying to do figure skating. I can remember when a friend and I conducted surprise raids on the girl’s part of the playground. They kept us separated during recess. We’d sneak over to the girl’s playground and steal scarves from their heads and then, in view of everyone, run the full length of the playground – proudly waving the scarf we happened to capture. And we were sure to notice, over our shoulders, the smiles on the faces of the owners of those scarves.

Through no fault of my own I reached adolescence. Back then, it was the boy who had to ask the girl out on a date – a frightening enough prospect until it occurred to me that she might say “no!” That meant risking my ego (which was about as substantial as a tissue-paper raincoat in a tropical rain forest). I had to hang myself out there in the silence of her scrutiny to be judged, accepted or rejected.

It wasn't fair, I felt. Who was she to sit back, like a queen, with the power to create joy by her consent or destruction by her denial? But that was the way it was.

But if she should say “yes,” that was only the beginning because I felt as if I had to come up with an agenda on where to go, what to do and appear as if I were relaxed – happy to be with her and fully confident that we both would have an enjoyable evening. At the thought of that circumstance, I could sweat out an entire shirt and produce at least seven new blemishes on my face within five minutes. I can remember doing role playing with a friend of mine, practicing the words I'd use to ask for the date. And little did I know that the girl had asked him to help me in preparing this question because she had a

crush on me. This was the seventh grade.

At the party, of course, there were the wine bottles being passed secretly and reverently between the boys and a record player with an insatiable appetite for the Beatles.¹ The boys were gathered on one side of the room and the girls on the other. There were always a few couples who'd come to the party for the sole purpose of lashing their bodies together on the dance floor – dancing to their own music (even before the record player was plugged in).

It took a little longer for others, like me, to get started. But no one matched my talent for standing by the punch bowl. After what would seem like several hours of wondering whether I was going to die, ... I imagined the newspaper headlines: “Philip Siddons, a fifteen year old, died at a party last night, ... a half-eaten Ritz cracker in one hand and a potato chip (dipped in a pimento-onion tasting spread) in the other: cause of death: failure to be a real man.”

But I would pass by the girl with whom I really wanted to dance. If I was going to be refused, let it be by someone I didn't particularly like. Unfortunately, there weren't many in that category. I had more crushes than I had pimples. But finally, only after what must have been direct intervention of the Deity, I found myself on the dance floor with a girl, ... and it was nice.

All of us can remember the awkwardness and holy terrors of adolescence and the socially expected polarization between the sexes. We think back through our lives and laugh at the endless complication of social customs and taboos. We wonder how we *ever* came to the point of being able to relate to someone romantically. Perhaps this polarization is merely an echo of the occasion when Adam and Eve first became embarrassed and resorted to wearing clothing – alienated from one another for the first time in life.

By the time I went off to college I had little experience in relating to women. I could count on my hands the actual number of dates I had and with only a number of torrid crushes behind me, my ability to cultivate a true friendship with a woman was seriously lacking. I was steeped in the romance-or-nothing mentality.

I got a crush on a young woman, in my first year of college, and I could hardly think of anyone but her. We dated a lot but she, being more mature than I, wanted to

¹ For some of you it might have been Johnie Mathus or Frank Sinatra.

date others as well. With my emotional retardation, that didn't work with me. I expected her to date only me – I was obviously possessive and insecure.

I can distinctly remember being so angry with her for dating someone else that when we went on our last date, only because I had already bought the tickets, I didn't even speak to her the entire night. I still occasionally wish I could find her and apologize for being so stupid. But as we parted our ways, it was the beginning of the realization, for me, that perhaps women have wishes of their own – occasionally different from my own agenda. Pretty late to begin to realize that, I know, but I hadn't had the socialization.

The college I attended was a so-called “Christian liberal arts college” and as you would expect, they had more than their fair share of rules than exist in real life. Certainly the women and men were in their separate dorms. I began to reflect on the dating syndrome. I wondered why there were so few casual circumstances where men and women could just be together socially, ... without having to arrange a date. I wondered why we had to have a planned, dressed up, limited social agenda – where you would try to impress each other rather than just *be* yourself. After putting these reflections in an article, suggesting that maybe there should be co-ed dorms (where there are separate wings for each gender but at least common lounge areas), ... and after that article appeared in the school newspaper, I was kicked off the varsity soccer team. I was also spoken to by a member of the school administration – almost as if I had questioned the authority of the Scriptures. Ironically, the school did what I originally suggested four years later and created co-ed dorms with common lounge areas.

I learned a few things from those experiences. I had discovered, within myself, that through the years I had come to the false conclusion that the male should somehow call the shots in the relationship. And when that young woman left me, with all of my controlling and possessive stupidity, the foolishness of that self-centeredness became obvious to me. Sometimes we have to experience loneliness before we are jolted out of our egocentrism.

It became clear to me that even in college, and later in adult life, men and women are still staring at one another across the chasm of social polarization – a distance and fear separating us not unlike that in early adolescence. And the ability to relate to the other gender as a friend, rather than *only* romantically, is seriously lacking in most people's experiences.

In Boston, when I was in grad school, Linda and I played volleyball with others in school. Trying to

be more competitive at the start of the game, I began to organize our team – suggesting we alternate men and women to compensate for height differences. And on that occasion, one woman got angry with me and really told me off – basically for forcing my agenda on her and the others.

I was embarrassed but with the pain of that social experience, another lesson was learned. Who gave me the right to impose my agenda on her, ... even if I was male, even if I happened to be more athletic, ... even if I wanted the team to win and thought this would help? But I learned some other things in that school.

It happened that I was studying to be a minister and the denomination (I was in at that time) did not allow women to be ministers. Out of a casual interest and hope to understand that position of my denomination (at the time), I started studying the Bible to see why they excluded women from the pastorate.

In my studies I discovered the opposite direction in the life of Jesus and the gospels. I found myself encouraging women to be all that they choose to be in their careers, in or outside of the home. I became amazed with myself that I had been so self-centered that I never before questioned women's right to do anything they choose to do – especially as I sat next to other women in the classes and the library who were working on their graduate degrees – equipped with as much or more church experiences and intellectual capabilities than I.² But there were further lessons to be learned.

In another graduate school in Rochester I had the experience of being in a class which dealt with the changes in men's and women's social experiences. And since there was a combination of reading and sharing in the class, I heard some things from women I never heard before. I heard feelings expressed about how alienated some of the women were from their husbands or male friends. Because of assuming and dominating attitudes and behavior of the men, in their lives, I heard how they distanced themselves from certain men. I heard how some of these women had come to the point of feeling that their relationships were without hope of change. I heard and felt their plummeting despair.

These women were intelligent, capable, socially-enjoyable and productive women in society. They were not just sitting around depressed and complaining. And because these women took the risk of sharing their feelings with me and the other males in the class, I came in touch with one of the most frightening of realities.

² And my conclusions were summarized in the book ‘Speaking Out For Women.’

I began to realize that the culture has been so powerful in conditioning a self-centeredness in males, ... in me, ... that it is possible for women to be so totally alienated by us (without us even knowing it) that they would consider some of us to be “the other” and feel a profound distance from us as people. That reality was profoundly sobering to me.

Since those experiences, I have remembered the several occasions when I have approached life as if I am the center of the universe – with my agenda as number one. And I can remember sensing how deep and depressing that alienation was for those women, ... and how painful I perhaps had made it for others when I acted self-centered – even in casual social circumstances. Are you inflicting pain on others without even knowing it? As Genesis sadly predicted, one of the many social results of the loss of what we were originally made to be is this: “God said to the woman ‘You will desire your husband and yet he will try to make you subject to him.’”:

“Original sin,” ... the first error humans made was to make themselves the center of the universe. And to symbolize that selfishness was the garden myth of how people placed themselves over and above God’s rule about the tree and did whatever they wanted – making themselves autonomous.

Today we would have to admit that throughout the centuries, it has been taught and perceived as “a man’s world.” The socially prescribed roles have dictated that one person has more say in decisions, more power, more autonomy, ... and that person has usually been the male. Since the end of the Neolithic cultures, men have had the power and have interpreted the world in a hierarchical way.³ And when you interpret the world around you as some being above others in worth and power, you want to be among those above and have more control.

The late Erma Bombeck always noted that with humor. She quips that just once, she would like to get a virus that everyone in town (and at work) hasn’t already had. She’d like a virus that would bring on some sympathy – the kind of sympathy that she regularly exhibits as a mother and wife. She would *not* like to be told, like most adult females in North America, that “there is no cure for the bug you’ve got, so you might as well stay on your feet and work it off.” And she wonders why her husband is bedridden for three days after he has his teeth cleaned.

³ For an excellent treatment of a cultural-anthropological survey of this issue, see Riane Eisler ‘The Chalice & The Blade’ (New York: HarperCollins, 1987)

She’s obviously exaggerating, but as in all humor she has a serious point. We all have lived on the stage of life where the plays we have been in have shown us some tight scripting – particularly in the roles of our parents.

Probably, like you, I grew up seeing my mother do most of the personal sacrificing in the family and for her giving I am grateful. It was she who woke up in the middle of the night to calm my fever. It was she who did the tasks around the house that involved the greater boredom and physical effort in cleaning. And even though she was a full-time teacher, she was relegated to these more boring and laborious tasks, while for some unknown reason, my father’s script dictated that he had more free time for reading and leisure.

But back in those days we thought that there were no other scripts to follow. And I grew up being taught, by life, that women were to be the nurturers and men were to pursue their careers to the fullest. It’s no wonder that we men, socially, expect more nurturing and more sacrificing from women than we do from ourselves. It’s no wonder that women feel these unrealistic expectations in their home and their professional lives. The standard joke among women pursuing post graduate degrees is that what they need most is a wife.

By now, I’ve done a substantial amount of marriage and divorce counseling and have often found women and men dealing with tremendous pain. But the women most frequently have pain because the script they are living out (on the stage of their lives) has left them with a part where their character is not being developed. They are not the subject of the novel of their lives – they are only supporting characters for someone else.

On top of that disappointment and heartache, there are now new complexities in our time because the values in our culture have changed. If you take a look on the back of your sermon transcript, you will see a chart comparing the traditional script of marriage with the new set of expectations. What people are expecting now, as they enter an intimate relationship, is a companionship style.

Our culture has shifted over from a one-vote system (where one person has more power to decide) to a two-vote system (where decisions are jointly made by the woman and man). The roles are more fluid – more equality is expected. And with these changes in expectations, there is more conflict with which to deal, ... more complexity, more work, more anger, ... because it is more complex for *two* people to grow than for only *one* person to grow.

Today, those of us who are males are finding that we are on a playing field where the rules have changed. We have to behave differently or the whistle will be blown, the action will be stopped and when it is, we will be

embarrassed and sometimes angry. “What do women really want from us?” men in frustration ask.

Part of the answer comes from the writer Jane O’Reilly. She says:

“What do we want? I want to share my life. I want to have a place in someone’s life and to have him have a place in mine. “I want stability, cooperation and commitment.

I do not want to be given an identity, ... to just have my dog walked. I don’t need someone else to give me security. “I want a man to discuss his feelings but not get so turned into *his own* feelings that no one else’s matter.

“I want my son brought up not dismissing people because of their sex, color, class or religion (in a hierarchical manner). I do not want my son to think that women have been placed on earth only to serve him. I want him to take responsibility for his own life and to be able to share it.

“I hope he will be able to love and know that love is something that involves faith, reciprocity, honor and commitment – something that grows as it is used. I would like my son to rise, without thinking too much about it, and go into the kitchen and start making lunch – even if it is the other people in the house who are hungry – even if some of them are women). And I would hope that he would approach the same degree of spontaneity about laundry and shopping. And I hope,” she says, “that he doesn’t think children are interesting only after they are toilet trained, ...” and she goes on.⁴

If you check out your own feelings, at this point, you may sense anger. It is frustrating to hear the new rules, these new expectations, because they directly imply that we must personally change, give something up or we’ll end up in conflict with what is around us, ... and that makes some of us angry.

But anger has always been present when the values have changed. Reflect on the radical change Jesus brought with His life-style and teachings. Remember how angry the religious leaders became to the point of murdering Him.

Reflect on the radical changes Paul brought in his inclusion of women as leaders and primary workers in the first churches. This was met with so much anger that the writer of Timothy said that “women should never teach or have authority over men in the church” – a strong reaction to Paul’s contrasting views.

But in the values changes that have come upon us, if

⁴ Jane O’Reilly ‘When He Won’t Take Yes For An Answer’ ‘Ms.’ 2/79 p.27-28.

we look at them closely, we see that their roots are in the changes brought about by Jesus’ teachings. It took eighteen centuries for us to get around to applying Christ’s teachings to (finally) abolish slavery. It took us until half way through this century to connect Jesus’ teachings about equality and self-sacrifice to redefine men’s and women’s roles in marriage and society.

We can see in Jesus that we men can learn self-sacrifice and compassion. We can learn to treat the less powerful in society with caring as if they were our own brothers or sisters. We can see this because Jesus’ life stood in great contrast to the rather sexist first century society of His time.

There are a few practical areas in which we, as men, might be wise to reevaluate. Check out the accuracy of these things by asking the women in your life if they agree.

❶ First, look at the lines of power in the relationship you have with a woman. Does one person sacrifice more than the other and does one have more freedom to choose than the other?

❷ Secondly, examine the feelings level of the relationship. Do the feelings of one person dominate the climate of the relationship?

❸ Thirdly, where, in your relationship, are you going to experience growth? Are you exposing yourself to the feelings and thoughts of others? Where, in your experiences, are you opening yourself to learn from others? Are you reading books or attending classes which help you explore these complex issues? In short, what are you doing to actively improve your relationships?

I’ve had an amazing number of significant emotional experiences in my life and I’ll likely try to write about them in the future, ... but at the core of my belief system is this. I believe that there is nothing in life worth much of anything at all outside of our relationships with those around us. And unless we work at getting ourselves out of our self-centeredness, ... to love and cherish those closest to us, fairly, we will experience the loneliness and the despair that no words can adequately describe.

Jesus answered that loneliness. He showed us men and women new ways of relating to others. And I believe we are living in a new era where we men are experiencing liberation from the ancient chains and shackles of our preoccupation with ourselves. And I believe it is the Holy Spirit Who is teaching us these new values.

So don’t look for sacredness in religious symbols and church altars. Look for the sacredness in your relationships. Make your greatest fear the time when you stop being open to learning from those near you. I suggest that you look for the sacred in your connectedness with

God's Spirit within you and within those near you.
Ruining that sacredness would ruin your soul.

We all need each other to be all that we were meant to be. So "remember God in all that you do and who you are with others and God will show you the right way. If you do, it will be like good medicine, healing your wounds and easing your pains."⁵ ■

⁵ Proverbs 3:5-6

This sermon benefited substantially from the life and work of the following authors:

D. David, R. Brannon (ed) *The Forty-Nine Percent majority* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1976).

David Mace, *Close Companions* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

Jane O'Reilly, "When He Won't Take Yes For An Answer" *Ms.* 2/79, pp.27-28.

Riane Eisler, *The Chalice & The Blade, Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987).

Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand, Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine, 1990).

Mary Francis Berry, *The Politics of Parenthood* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

Alfonso Montouri and Isabella Conti, *From Power To Partnership: Creating The Future Of Love, Work and Community* (New York: Harper, 1993) "Inspired by the principles of acclaimed social theorist Riane Eisler, the authors present a model that explains the fundamental changes happening in the world today and the choices that are ours to make. Engaging, provocative and witty interviews with artists, activists, executives, scientists and entrepreneurs reveal the partnership paradigm in action." (from the cover).

Philip Siddons, *Speaking Out For Women* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1980).

Comparison of Traditional and Companionship Models of Marriage

Traditional	Companionship
One-vote system – husband makes most of the major decisions	Two-vote system where decisions are jointly made by husband and wife where who is more influential in one matter changes in other matters, depending on abilities, interest, commitment and personal values related to each matter
Fixed roles – husband's and wife's roles are clearly defined by gender	Fluid roles – roles are based on personal choice and competence with little emphasis on gender difference
Husband provider – wife homemaker	Flexible division of provider and homemaker functions
Husband initiates sex, wife complies	Sex initiated by either husband or wife or both
Basic concept = marriage is a hierarchy	Basic concept = marriage is an equal partnership
Issues settled with reference to legalistic principles and rules	Issues settled with reference to personal and interpersonal needs
Wife close to children while husband is considered the disciplinarian and authority figure	Husband and wife are both close to the children but both represent authority
Husband assumes role of religious head of family	Religious functions of family are shared by husband and wife
Further education is important for the husband but not as important for the wife	Further education is equally important for both husband and wife
Husband's vocation decides family residence	Family residence takes account of both husband's and wife's vocations equally

Table from David Mace *Close Companions* p 16 (see bibliography above this chart).