

## **The Partnership of Males and Females in the New Global Equilibrium**

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Would you take \$20 for your fishing net?" The Kashmiri fisherman paused from his early morning work, smiled and excitedly handed us his dripping, smelly net. We had traveled to Kashmir, spent the night on a houseboat, rowed across Dal Lake, watched fishermen work who inspired us with their teamwork, and finally arrived at the place where we equipped a group of church planters plagued with internal disunity. As we taught about the power of unity and reconciliation, the filthy net powerfully symbolized how God desires the men, the women, the young, the old, the urban, and the rural to work together, each holding their part of the net to bring in God's harvest.

Jesus described the kingdom of God as a net "that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish" (Matt. 13:47). Contrasted to individualistic fishing poles, the nets Jesus described required many people working together to bring in the full catch. In the same way, fulfilling the Great Commission requires the participation and service of all who claim allegiance to Christ. Simply put, God calls people to Himself (salvation) and then sends them into the world (service) working together as one Body, equipped with spiritual gifts to extend His reign on the earth.

Despite the urgent need for the Church to equip, empower, and release more laborers for the countless millions in need of a Savior, many questions and barriers remain regarding the partnership of men and women. These barriers require the Church's attention and reflection: Does God distribute spiritual gifts based on one's gender? Does God also give leadership gifts to females or only to men? Can a woman only lead children and other women? How does Christ's crucifixion and resurrection heal and redeem God's ideal purposes for males and females? Does restricting or releasing women into spiritual leadership impact the Great Commission?

The Lausanne movement, begun by Billy Graham, has affirmed that men and women are gifted by God and that their partnership is needed for world evangelization. The Manilla Manifesto, produced by Lausanne's second major world Congress in 1989, proclaims (Affirmation 14, 1989), "*We affirm that the*

*gifts of the Spirit are distributed to all God's people, women and men, and that their partnership in evangelization must be welcomed for the common good."* Summary Affirmations from the 2004 Lausanne Forum for World Evangelization, hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, include, "We call on the Church around the world to work towards full partnership of men and women in the work of world evangelization by maximizing the gifts of all" (Claydon:205).

We present this paper with a basic understanding of partnership. Partnership means that each party invests themselves in accomplishing a shared goal, with an opportunity to experience freedom and encouragement to contribute based on their giftedness, regardless of their external characteristics. Each partner brings both supernatural gifting and natural talent given by God for the fulfillment of the goal.

In spite of global movements that encourage the vital participation of both males and females, women in both the West and the East have felt restrictions placed upon them, not only by the world, but also often by their Christian brothers and sisters. Due to space limitations, this paper does not delve into the exegesis of key biblical texts – namely 1 Cor. 11, 14; 1 Tim. 2, 3; and Eph. 5. Rather this paper seeks to demonstrate the biblical and missiological worldview of those who believe God can (and does) equip both males and females with leadership and teaching gifts to be used in completing His mission.

The Apostle Paul instructs Timothy to "entrust (Paul's teachings) to reliable *people (anthropos)* who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2). Therefore, we believe that God gives leadership/teaching gifts not only to men but also to women and that releasing women to use leadership and teaching gifts positively impacts the Great Commission.

A few years ago, we were asked to teach a seminar to 100 Indian pastors about male/female relationships in the home and the church from a strong biblical perspective. A few weeks after the conference, we received an email from two married participants. "Praise the Lord! [The husband] went to one unreached village, preached the Gospel and 35 people accepted Christ! Praise the Lord! [The wife] went to another unreached village, preached the Gospel and 315 people accepted Christ!" In both villages, house churches were planted. Both husband and wife used their God-given gifts to bring spiritual fruit and transform unreached villages with the Good News.

Though we rejoice with the above story where both husband and wife were released and productive in ministry, other Christian traditions limit the involvement of gifted women in leadership. While reasons for the limitations vary (biblical viewpoint, cultural bias, social acceptability, practical issues) the Great Commission is impacted on both an individual and a corporate level when we restrict the gifts of women. An American woman in her thirties stated, “I always knew I was smart, talented, and gifted. I just figured that God didn’t really need me because I was a woman.” A ten-year old girl who attends a Christian school asked with a furrowed brow. “Does God love boys more than girls? I felt like it when the teacher told the Bible story. The boys said they were better than girls and used the Bible to ‘prove’ it.” Juliet Thomas, an Indian Christian leader, states:

Women have regretfully testified ‘that though their leadership qualities are sought after and used in the secular fields, they shrink into insignificance when they are in the church.’ In a world where women serve as prime ministers, ambassadors and business executives, as well as carry out their responsibilities in their home, some are rightly questioning the Church on the prescribed limits within which women must often serve (Thomas 2005:189).

As we write this paper, we affirm our solid love for Jesus, our deep devotion to the Word of God, and our firm commitment to the Great Commission. We are certain that other Christian brothers and sisters also share a similar love and outward focus though they may disagree with the presuppositions and applications of male/female partnership outlined in this paper. Paul Hiebert states, “We must approach our study with humility and with a willingness to learn from Scripture, experience, and one another” (Hiebert 2008:308). It is our prayer that Christ-like humility and teachability on this issue will result in multiplying Christian co-workers exponentially!

The following pages highlight briefly the topics of the Trinity, the Kingdom of God, and justice which form the basis for our understanding male/female relationships and their partnership in the Great Commission. We pray the Church reflects the God’s image, God’s kingdom, and God’s justice, so that all ethnic groups can experience the transforming power of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection!

## **Partnership between males and females reflects the non-hierarchical Trinity**

While most Christians believe that God creates both male and female in the God's image (*imago Dei*) and that God is not a "male deity" ("God is Spirit." John 4:24), some contemporary evangelical theologians have, in the past 35 years, promoted the idea that the Trinity is arranged in a hierarchy such that the Son and Spirit are eternally subordinate to the Father. This position was developed to promote "male leadership" and "female subordination" in the Church and home.

We disagree with a "chain-of-command" view of the Trinity. The Athanasian Creed states, "In this Trinity none is before or after, none is greater or less than another" (Kelly 2004:79). Athanasius worked tirelessly to express the mutuality in the Persons of the Trinity while fighting against the Arian heresy. All Christian creeds and confessions recognize "that the three divine persons are inseparable in operations or functions and indivisible in power and authority" (Giles 2006:30). In particular, with the Nicene Creed of 325 and the Nicea-Constantinople Creed of 381 "the church declared that there are no graded levels of God-ness in the Trinity" (Scorgie 2005:43).

We recognize the mystery of the Trinity. Yet Scripture as a whole reveals the nature of the Persons of the Trinity and the character of God.

1. Jesus submitted himself to God during his 33 years on the earth. This fact discloses two primary truths. First, Jesus revealed the true character of the Triune God by his words and actions. "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father" (John 14:9). This means that when Jesus loves, He shows that God is a loving God. When he heals, forgives, or shows power; He demonstrates these characteristics about God. When Jesus submits, this reveals a humble and submissive, yet infinitely powerful Triune God. Second, Jesus showed humans how to relate to God - with humility, love, and submission.
2. Jesus stated, "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) which some have read back into his deity overlooking that Jesus also said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Therefore, there is no lesser or greater in authority or power in the Trinity. We must not confuse his limitations during His time as a human with his limitless power as the Lord God Almighty!

3. While the Father sent the Son (John 3:16), the Son also humbled himself and made himself nothing (Phil 2:6-8).
4. Jesus tells his disciples in Matt 28:18 that “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” Therefore, when Jesus turns over universal authority to the Father in 1 Cor. 15:24-28, does this not display a sharing of power and authority, an unselfish empowering of the other, a reciprocal and mutual exchange of power? (For more on this parallel, see Pannenberg 1991:312-313.)

These statements reveal that each Person of the Trinity seems to defer and honor the others over themselves, displaying a *perichoretic* relationship. Initially coined by the Cappadocian Fathers, *perichoresis* describes the interpenetration and inseparability of actions of the Trinitarian Persons, so that when one Person acts, the Others also act. That is, none of the divine Persons act independently from the Others. When the Father creates, the Word speaks and the Spirit moves (Gen. 1). When the Son sacrifices himself, he commits his Spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46). When the Holy Spirit lives inside believers, the Father and Son make their home as well (John 14:23). These brief truths help us understand that the Trinity exists as co-eternal, co-equal, and inseparable without differing levels of authority, power, or will.

By realizing the mutuality within the Trinity, humanity can better reflect God’s image. The Persons of the Trinity, differentiated as Father, Son, and Spirit remain united as One Being. Humans, differentiated as male and female, can also remain united with the same goal of accomplishing God’s will on earth. Shared action within the Trinity thus foreshadows the shared and coordinated attitudes and actions of redeemed people created in God’s image (the *imago Dei*).

Just as the differentiation and integration of the Trinity does not structure the Father, Son, and Spirit in hierarchical terms, God does not create humanity with hierarchy. From our reading in Genesis 1-2, in God’s ideal paradise, male “headship/leadership” is neither explicit nor implied in the text. In these two chapters, *rosh* (Hebrew “head”) or *kephale* (Greek Septuagint “head”) cannot be found. We do find that the man alone is “not good,” and as he searches for a partner, God graciously creates the woman as an “ezer k’neged,” meaning equal/corresponding strength. In Genesis 1, God gives the man and woman the same blessings and responsibilities in subduing the earth by using two plural pronouns (“God blessed

*them* and said to *them*"); five plural verbs in Gen. 1:28 (Be fruitful, increase, fill, subdue, rule); and by using the plural "you" in Gen. 1:29 (I give *you*...they will be *yours*).

The Triune God serves as the original and the ultimate model for community-in-relationship between males and females. God built into the male and female "the unity-in-diversity and mutuality that characterize the eternal divine reality...Humans-in-relation or humans-in-community ultimately reflect the *imago Dei*" (Grenz 1994:171). As bearers of God's image, redeemed males and females reflect the Triune community as they share dominion, steward the earth, and extend the kingdom of God to all people groups.

### **Partnership between males and females reflects the kingdom of God**

Because reconciliation between people and God remains the most vital need of the human condition, as Redeemer, Jesus restored broken relationships by his sacrifice on the cross. "The reconciling work of Jesus extends to human relationships today. On the cross, he destroyed the barriers dividing human beings (Eph. 2:11-22)" (Grenz 1994:348). The broken Jesus carried in his Body the brokenness of the world. The mission of God (*missio Dei*) climaxed at the death and resurrection of Jesus. At this juncture, Jesus restored the possibility of a redeemed humanity. The cross of Christ offers a challenge to all believers who desire to live in a reconciled community between males and females.

What our Lord proclaimed in his teaching and modeled in his life – that the fullness of community lies in the giving of one's life – his death gloriously displays. Not only is he the Revealer of life-in-community, Jesus is also the effector of that community. As the one who opens the way for us to participate in true fellowship, our Savior authors among us the divine design for human life (Grenz 1994:351).

Jesus' broken body challenges both males and females to lay down their lives in order to live out a community based on God's ideal in Genesis 1-2. With a kingdom mindset, a man can humble himself, serve out of his giftedness, empower others, and realize the need for a relational partner to co-rule with him. In the same way, a woman of the kingdom can humble herself, not give in to fear but serve out of her giftedness, and realize that God desires for her to engage not only in relationships but also to share in governing the earth.

When redeemed males and females live God's ideal in regard to male/female partnership, they send a powerful and prophetic message to the world. However, "Where the gospel has lost this prophetic voice, it is in danger of being wedded to beliefs and values that distort its message" (Hiebert 1985:56). The question then arises, has the Church demonstrated a male/female relationship that influences the culture prophetically, or have fallen cultures influenced the Church's understanding of male/female relationships? On Delhi University campus, a young woman approached us. "I have two questions for you. In my culture both Islam and Hinduism state that men are "higher" and women are "lower" (she used hand motions). In your religion, what does your God believe about men and women? What do followers of your God practice?"

As redeemed males and females demonstrate the prophetic message of the Kingdom by simply operating out of their full giftedness, their partnership will thoroughly impact society as yeast works through dough (Matt. 13:33). "The transforming work of the Prince of Peace is to create a community that would not be humanly possible, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave owner nor slave, as the tangible evidence of the in-breaking kingdom" (Guder 2000:69). May your kingdom come, Lord Jesus!

### **Partnership between males and females displays God's justice**

A few years back, a Christian brother told Chad, "These arguments about what women can and can't do in the church don't need to exist. They distract from Jesus. Women just need to be happy they are a part of the Body of Christ and not worry about what they are allowed to do in church." Chad looked at the man and said, "Say your statement again but this time instead of the word *woman* use the word *African-American*. That's why the issue matters."

Throughout the world, most people recognize the injustice of limiting what a person can do based on his/her ethnicity. Many in the Church, however, have been slow to see and address the injustice that continues for spiritually gifted women. A Western woman shared with us, "Sundays are the saddest days of my life. I feel unaccepted and of little value when I walk into the church." A highly qualified South Asian woman sought out for her input and expertise on the governmental level exclaimed in despair,

“When I come home, I am nobody! And I am silenced in my church! I would have given my life to serve the church, but I am not allowed to speak or participate in anything” (Thomas 2005:693). One sister shared that she attended a global conference without her husband. While riding with a group to the airport a man asked about her ministry that she shared with her husband. When she told him, he responded, “So what are your husband’s spiritual gifts that enable him to do this?” Another time she sat at a table with a leading apologist. Again, her husband was not present. Again, after sharing about her ministry with her husband, the apologist remarked, “So I need to meet your husband. What are his spiritual gifts?” In both of these instances, she felt “invisible and excluded” in the Body of Christ.

The Church’s embrace of women (and all redeemed peoples in its midst) has the potential to demonstrate the power and truth of reconciliation to a broken world, while exclusion – based on issues of ethnicity, gender, or social class – simply mimics the injustice of a fragmented world.

Some theologians encourage women to “not think about what they *cannot* do, and instead focus on what they *can* do.” However, the discussion of how a woman can serve in the home, church, and society cannot remain in a sterile, academic arena because it involves an issue of justice for over half the Body of Christ and strikes deep at their personal identity. Keeping the discussion in a theological ivory tower avoids the issue of injustice and identity (causing the pain to remain), does not take into account the gifting of the Holy Spirit (who gives gifts without bias to gender), and slows the task of the Great Commission (causing fewer laborers to operate in their giftedness).

In the current conversation about how males and females should function in the home, church, and society, the word *roles* often surfaces. However, neither the Old Testament, nor the New Testament, neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor any other biblical writer used “role relationships” or “different and equal” vocabulary to describe how God can empower men and women for His purposes.

Since the 1970’s this “role” vocabulary has been used by some Christians to substantiate the *essential* equality between males and females (equal), yet maintain a *functional* hierarchy (different). Those who hold this position often seek to ground their perspective in an eternally subordinated Trinity. However, we believe that the vocabulary of “equal and different” and “roles” is not sufficient for describing either the male/female relationship or the Trinity.



The doctrine of the Trinity establishes that nothing (not roles or functions, not attributes of power or authority, or willing) distinguishes the persons except their own personhood and the relations intrinsic to them: Fatherhood, Sonship, and Spirithood...these are all that distinguish the persons (Deddo 2008:7).

Prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960's, most biblical commentaries simply stated that men were created first and are therefore "primary or superior," while women were created second and are therefore "derived, lesser, or inferior." The innovative "roles" vocabulary allowed certain Christians to speak of the equality of men and women, while maintaining a soft patriarchal structure. Interestingly, from multiple research interviews in 2007-2008, we found that Muslim imams in North India use the same terminology when expressing the differences between males and females in Islam. "Males and females are equal...with males one degree above" (ref. Sura 2:228).

Just as the Trinity is not differentiated by roles, so humans should not differentiate themselves on the basis of roles that derive from gender. Some may oppose this position, saying, "So you believe there are no roles or functions specifically for women or men?" We would answer, "Of course there are certain obvious biological processes that only women or only men can do." However, beyond the basic biology, we believe the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives gifts to both males and females, and pressing the "roles" vocabulary further often results in stereotypical conclusions. Additionally, throughout the Bible, we find that God equips and utilizes women in a variety of tasks and offices including that of: prophet, teacher, apostle, deacon, evangelist, business woman, house church leader, and worship leader.

A partnership model that endorses both males and females to use all their gifts in the capacity in which God calls them requires a different understanding and a different vocabulary. Clearly humans are differentiated as male and female, and we in no way endorse androgyny or homosexuality. Men and women are not "the same;" they are gendered as male and female which makes them clearly distinct. However, these distinctions do not determine how God can gift or use them in His global enterprise. We believe that the entire "roles" discussion begins and ends with a misplaced focus on authority, with an emphasis on human bodies determining human position and action. Instead, action in the Church and home should begin with God's clear calling, God's gracious gifting, and God's strong empowerment.

## Conclusion

As millions wait to hear the message of the kingdom, the Church must mobilize and release more laborers. According to ethicists Stassen and Gushee, gender as a foundational point on determining one's service in the Church fades when one looks at the enormous task for the church to complete world evangelization. "The criterion for who may pursue these precious kingdom goals is simply the whole body of Christ, with specialization directed by spiritual giftedness" (Stassen and Gushee 2003:323).

So how can global leaders practically release and empower more laborers, both men and women, for the harvest and facilitate a new global equilibrium?

1. **Open doors of opportunity.** Recognize gifted women and make opportunities for service possible.
2. **Do not oppose.** When godly and gifted women rise up with God's blessing, both men and women should recognize and support the work of the Holy Spirit.
3. **Educate, empower, equip, and release.** All leaders, men and woman alike, need training, mentoring, and affirmation. Make certain that women, who often receive less training, have opportunities to grow and develop.
4. **Fan into flame.** If the Holy Spirit has indeed gifted a person, then work to "fan into flame" those gifts. Do not extinguish the small flicker of a flame in someone's life.
5. **Give power away.** Do not spend time and energy defending and maintaining power.
6. **Appreciate marriage and children.** Encourage husbands to share in housework and childcare so that women can also pursue and use their gifts. Both husbands and wives should encourage their spouse to use all their spiritual gifts. Both husbands and wives should care for children, and women should not be limited to their biological function.
7. **Lift up single women.** Because women in the Body of Christ outnumber men, a great number of Christian women will remain single. Do not place the burden on them that only married people experience fulfillment and find happiness or assume that they must be married to be in ministry leadership.

The partnership of males and females using all their gifts impacts the Great Commission. As an atheist in the nation of China, Ms. G. came to know Jesus Christ. Though her husband and children ridiculed her for years, eventually they also believed. Ms. G., a gifted teacher, gathered people in her home and shared the Scriptures. Before long, their church grew to over 200 people. Her husband, a great cook and wise counselor, served the fellowship wholeheartedly.

The church grew until a Western man attended the service and noticed the structure of Ms. G.'s group. He approached Mr. and Ms. G., "You are not doing church in a biblical pattern. It is not right for Ms. G. to teach and lead. It is not right for Mr. G. to cook, serve, and only give wise counsel. You are not following the biblical mandate for a man and woman's roles." Heartbroken that they had disobeyed God's rules, Ms. G. stopped teaching and Mr. G. began to teach. Eventually, the church dwindled in size.

Finally, another Western couple enabled Mr. and Ms. G. to look at Scripture through new eyes and understand how God expects gifts to be used. Ms. G. began teaching again, and Mr. G. began to serve again with hospitality and wisdom. The church now has over 1,000 members and has sent their own workers to unreached areas of China.

We stood onstage at the Lausanne 2004 Forum for World Evangelization held in Pattaya, Thailand. We gave a five-minute summary of Issue Group 24's work during the Forum on the topic of empowering men and women to work together for the Gospel. On the stage with us stood six women and four men (representing the sixty percent females and forty percent males in the world-wide Church). Each held onto our large fishing net from Kashmir, India. We said, "Some believers seek to restrict women in their use of their God-given gifts. The results? Women, drop your net!" The women onstage dropped the net and weights hanging from the net hit the floor with a thud. The audience gasped, and we said, "Fish are lost!"

N.T. Wright claims, "We must think and pray carefully about where our own cultures, prejudices, and angers are taking us, and make sure we conform, not to any of the different stereotypes the world offers, but to the healing, liberating, humanizing message of the gospel of Jesus" (Wright 2006 20.4:9).

It is time for men and women who follow Christ to lay aside worldly stereotypes and instead reflect God's original intent of strong partnership and the full supernatural gifting of God's grace. Males and females reflecting the *imago Dei*, living out the Kingdom of God, and displaying justice toward others and in their relationships together will co-labor powerfully with God and with one another to complete His mission among all people groups!

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