

The Difference between Men and Women

What is the difference between men and women? If there are differences, what could they mean? In a “politically correct” society like ours, such questions are virtually anathema. Differences are downplayed, while what is emphasized is “equality.” Such a mentality is the result of a flawed understanding of equality and a dualistic anthropology.

A Flawed Understanding of Equality

Our society suffers from an acute inability to conceive of *equality* apart from *identity*. In other words, the logic goes that for two things to be equal, they must be the same. Accordingly, if men and women are equal, they should be equally represented in every sort of occupation, they should all score identically on standardized tests, and their domestic roles should be completely interchangeable.¹ Since men and women are identical, same-sex relationships are as natural as heterosexual ones.

But “equality” only has meaning in relation to some quality. If I say “Your house and my house are equal,” the statement is meaningless by itself. I may mean that they are of equal price, or equal size, but I *certainly* cannot mean that they are the same house! The same is true of men and women. The concept of the equality of the sexes is essentially a Christian one founded upon the creation of both in God's image (Gen 1:27). But this equality is primarily one of *dignity* with respect to our bearing God's image. It is not identity. A man is not a woman, and a woman is not a man. Without difference, equality becomes meaningless. It is like saying “I am equal to myself.”

A Dualistic Anthropology

The basis for the above error is a problem in anthropology (the understanding of the human being). The problem of dualism – radically separating the body and the soul – is a hallmark of gnosticism, a form of religion present in the first few centuries AD. Dualism was not a real problem during the middle ages nor in the renaissance, but in the 17th century it made an unfortunate return with the philosophy of Descartes. Cartesian dualism basically separates the mind or person from the body. In this case, the mind *is* the person; the body is simply something that the mind can manipulate as it desires.

This dualistic view has obvious repercussions for an understanding of sexual difference. Since the most obvious differences between the sexes are physical, they are considered to be inconsequential. If the person is merely a spiritual or mental entity, then men and women are identical, apart from their unfortunate biological disparity.

The Christian view, however, is and has always been one of unity. The body is not a machine operated by the soul, rather, they together form a unity in which each influences the other in the deepest ways. In this view, then, our creation as the image of God has as much to do with our bodies as with our souls. Thus the sexes are different not only on the physical plane, but on the spiritual as well (since body and soul intersect).² The person is not soul alone, but a composite of soul *and* body.

1 There are, however, real differences between the sexes, many of which are observable on the biological level. Not only do men and women possess different bodies with different hormones; their brains function differently as well. Some examples: among newborn infants, baby girls spend more time looking at faces, while boys tend to be more interested in objects. And later on in life, boys tend to score higher on tests of spatial ability (like Calculus) while girls consistently outperform boys in verbal skills. Men tend to be more interested in things, while women are more interested in relationships.

2 St. Thomas Aquinas called the soul the “form” of the body. It is the principle that organizes and gives the body its form. This can explain why even though your body is composed of different atoms than it was a year ago, it is still the same body. It also means that the souls of a man and woman will be different, since they are the forms of two different material realities.

Masculinity and Femininity

What, then, is the real meaning of masculinity and femininity? It would be impossible to state the answer in terms of simple roles, since many of these are culture-dependent. At their core, however, masculinity and femininity mean *donation* and *receptivity*: two characteristics that are most clearly emphasized in the sexual act.

At the heart of masculinity is the capacity to give oneself away to another, to subjugate one's own will and power for the sake of love. The supreme model of this is Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church, who gave his life for his bride (Eph 5:21-33). Masculinity is most fully realized in a husband's gift of himself in marriage, and in fatherhood.³

Femininity, on the other hand, lies in the ability to accept the other, and to receive the gift. It is not a mere passivity, but an active receptivity. Of all the saints, Mary is the greatest example of true femininity in her choice to receive God's gift of his very self into her womb. This receptivity has made possible our salvation. It is also at the heart of what it means to be human: being receptive (feminine!) toward God our Bridegroom, receiving his gift of himself, and bearing fruit into the world. We use masculine imagery for God because all humanity is feminine *in relation to him*.

In the Image of the Trinity

The deepest meaning of the sexes, however, lies in their imaging of God as Trinity. The fact that God created humanity (in his image) as a community – male and female – indicates that God is community. It is not surprising then, that we should find both giving and receiving within God. The Father is the source of the Trinity. In an act of complete divine giving, he pours out his entire being to the Son. The Son, in turn, receives this gift of the Father. This offering and receiving is what love is. The love between Father and Son is so real and complete that it is personified; it is the Holy Spirit. In other words, the love between Father and Son is fruitful.

It is not overly hard to see the parallels on the human side, especially within the human family. The husband offers himself to his wife. She receives his gift, and new life is brought forth. Their love is fruitful, there are no longer just two but there is a third. But the wife is in no way inferior to her husband; her receptivity is no less important than his offering since both are always essential for love to exist.

Of course, the analogy breaks down if pressed too far. The husband is certainly not the source of his wife. Yet the two are, like the members of the Trinity, of the same substance and co-equal (in dignity). Also, within any man-woman relationship, neither member is giving or receptive all the time – there is a dynamism. Yet at its core, the relationship should be based on the man offering himself and the woman receiving the man's offering (inadequate as it may be!).⁴ This idea is the centre of the ancient concept of chivalry.


3 Naturally, a celibate man also lives his masculinity in an authentic way since he makes a gift of his sexuality for the sake of the kingdom of God. In the case of priesthood, he also becomes a spiritual father through his charism in the Church.

4 The main reason we have such a hard time understanding this today is that receptivity is seen in a negative light. In Nietzschean style, giving is seen as representing power, whereas receptivity signifies weakness and neediness. This probably draws its roots from Aristotle's view that the man represents *act*, while the woman is mere *potency*, passively waiting to be acted upon. In reality, however, the woman is not passive but possesses an active receptivity; a power to generate new life. In the world of theology, both Hans Urs von Balthasar and John Paul II have spoken eloquently of this. If we see receptivity in Trinitarian terms (as the Son is receptive to the Father), then we are forced to admit that it is in no way inferior to giving. Such a Trinitarian view is essential to appreciate male-female equality.

Difference and Love

The foundation of love is difference. If love is making a gift of oneself and accepting someone else, then one cannot simply love oneself; there must be another. The fact that God is Love (1 Jn 4:8) presupposes the Trinity. A solitary God (as in Islam or Judaism) cannot be “Love” in a concrete, ontological⁵ sense. Bearing God's image, the two sexes (and the differences between them) are a visible sign that God is not mere identity and solitude but difference, and therefore communion.

Our contemporary culture seeks to erase differences in the name of equality. Yet the only way true equality of dignity can be achieved is by recognizing that actual difference exists. Attempting to annihilate difference can only have dehumanizing effects, for it is an integral part of who we are as God's image. So what is the Christian response? To recognize that man and woman, while different, are complementary, both reflecting the divine image. With this knowledge, we can begin to live our lives as Christian *men* and *women* following our Lord and growing more and more into the trinitarian likeness.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Fletcher', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patrick Fletcher

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⁵ “ontological”: Of or relating to essence or the nature of being.