

THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

By Ron Kirkegaard, M.S., L.M.F.T.

I know there are indeed differences between men and women other than the obvious physiological ones. I also have to admit that I am having trouble coming up with hard, fast characteristics that are applicable to *all men* or *all women*. For example the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator has a dimension that measures whether an individual is a “thinker” or a “feeler”. According to Kiersey and Bates in their book *Please Understand Me*, 60% of women prefer making a decision on the basis of personal impact or “feeling” and 60% of men prefer to make decisions on the basis of principles (logically and objectively) or “thinking.” This is the only scale out of four that indicated any sort of gender difference and the percentage gap is not that wide.

In an article entitled “Are you man enough? Exposing the Male Myth” (Gary J. Oliver, *Christian Counseling Today*, Winter 1995, p.15-18), Dr. Oliver comments:

“Many men’s issues come from cultural expectations and myths that have imprisoned men, shaped their perception of what it means to be a man, and set them up for emotional and relational problems The most devastating loss men have suffered by accepting these distortions is the loss of their hearts – the ability to feel, to be tender as well as tough, to be whole people.”

The focus in this article is mainly on the definition of masculinity – primarily because much more has been done in the area of helping women break out of the confines of stereotyping in the past. I think the men’s movements (Promise Keepers, for example) have attempted to help men to open up to each other and to their wives and children. There seems to be, however, a “neutralizing” effect when we begin to reinforce with men that they are “from Mars” and women are “from Venus” or that “his needs” are radically different than “her needs”. We seem to validate that the majority of men do not need to be relational and aren’t really capable of being emotionally vulnerable unless there is something to be gained from it (be it respect, sex, or whatever). To illustrate how upbringing and socialization impact a man’s view of masculinity, Dr. Oliver discusses the differences between how girls and boys are trained to think about relationships at a very young age.

“In childhood, girls are encouraged to develop relational abilities but boys are pushed to develop a competitive and independent spirit. As they grow up, learning to build friendships is difficult because they have never learned to communicate on an intimate level. Some may view close relationships as a threat, as evidence that they might be gay, or as something that could reveal their inadequacies and weaknesses. As a result, men tend to have fewer skills for developing close relationships and many feel lonely.”

In my opinion, it would be far better to help men and women understand what *healthy relationships* look like, and how their different *personality types* can complement one another in a marriage relationship rather than solidifying the “battle lines” that already exist!

What *do* healthy relationships look like and how do we let our differences complement one another and promote unity rather than division in the context of a relationship with the opposite sex?

I had the privilege of sharing some of these ideas with a group of men that had gathered at Kelly Walsh High School in Casper, Wyoming for a “Christian Men’s Rendezvous” sponsored by Rocky Mountain Men of Integrity. It was a great experience to share with them the concepts from these articles, to hear their opinions, and receive their feedback. They all understood and agreed that we have to be careful about using survey data to determine how men and women are “hard-wired.”

In taking the focus off of the differences between men and women, I would like to present something I think is more helpful in understanding each other and building a healthy marriage. First, if we look at marriage from a somewhat “old fashioned” perspective, it is all about becoming “one” – not accepting that women are emotionally fragile “shopaholics” and that men are unfeeling, unromantic clods who wouldn’t bother to come home if they couldn’t anticipate getting their sexual needs met! “Oneness” in a healthy sense of the word does not imply the “Jerry Maguire Syndrome” (“you complete me”) or that I am emotionally dependent on you or that we no longer have distinct and unique personalities, gifts, and perspectives. No – *oneness* really means that we learn to *complement* each other in a functional way that brings out the best in both of us! We

understand each other's strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities and they understand ours. It takes two complete individuals to make a healthy marriage. In marital counseling sometimes we are faced with the challenge of helping a couple become "two" first so that they can become "one" in an emotionally, psychologically and spiritually healthy manner. In their book *Boundaries in Marriage*, Henry Cloud and John Townsend have listed basic human requirements of character that both partners must have individually in order to be complete and that cannot be "borrowed." Each partner must have the ability to: connect emotionally, be vulnerable and share feelings, have an appropriate sense of power and assertiveness, say no, have initiative and drive, have at least a minimal amount of organization, be real but not perfect, accept imperfections and have grace and forgiveness, grieve, think for oneself and express one's opinion, learn and grow, take risks, grasp and use one's talents, be responsible, be free rather than controlled by external factors, be sexual, be spiritual, and have an intellectual life of your own. Cloud and Townsend propose that everyone possesses these characteristics although not everyone can or chooses to express them.

To illustrate why I believe that this "oneness" approach works better than the "differences" approach, let's look at a hypothetical couple, John and Marsha. John is in management with a very large corporation. His job is extremely stressful – although he loves the challenge, performs well and is extremely successful. He was raised in a family where men do not allow emotional intimacy but are highly sexual. When John is angry, he is not explosive but rather withdraws and escapes into his work projects that he brings home, television or surfing the internet for good deals on boats, fishing gear, and computer paraphernalia. Marsha is a wonderful hostess and loves to entertain and help John in hosting his business associates. Marsha, however, is unhappy and although she appreciates that John is an excellent provider, she is devastated by loneliness and a desire to have a sense of being valued and an emotional connection between her and her husband and between the children and their father. She is very reticent to have sexual intimacy with John.

A "differences" approach to counseling this couple would look something like this: The therapist would help Marsha to understand that her husband is wired differently – women need to use words, men aren't as verbal. Therefore, she should allow John his "cave time" and realize that when he does come out of his cave, she should get right to

the point with anything she desires to communicate with him. He could easily get overloaded with her wordiness. John would be reminded that sex (a man's number one need) begins outside of the bedroom and that if he desires sexual intimacy with his wife he should spend some time talking to her and listening to her.

A "oneness" approach would be something like this: The therapist would help John examine his belief that sex is only a physiological experience, that vulnerability is weakness and should be avoided, and that he doesn't need intimacy (what is he afraid of?). Then to help Marsha explore the possible insecurities she might face: low self esteem, negative attitudes toward sex, why she may have picked an emotionally unavailable man and how to be patient with him and herself as they attempt to become "two" and then "one."

I hope this article has given you food for thought and that you will take cultural definitions, social learning, family history, and a number of other factors into account as you attempt to define masculinity and femininity and as you pursue oneness in your marriage. I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that anyone avoid reading materials related to marriage and relationships or seminars and workshops that address these issues. I know from experience that there are very positive results when couples invest in learning more about relationships and about each other and I respect the work that has been done by every author, teacher, therapist and minister to promote a better understanding of the differences between men and women and how they affect a relationship with the opposite sex. I am merely suggesting that we use caution when attempting to define masculinity and femininity in a rigid, stereotypical manner without considering the context in which these ideas and concepts were formed.

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