

2000

# Masculinity and Femininity: Origins and Implications (Chapter Two of Growing Strong Daughters)

Lisa Graham McMinn

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/lang\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/lang_fac)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

---

# MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY: ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS

So God created people in his own image;  
God patterned them after himself;  
male and female he created them.

—Genesis 1:27

GOD COULD HAVE MADE one sex, but he chose to create two distinct image-bearing creatures. Articulating conclusions about how women and men bear God's image differently is difficult, perhaps because we believe we must first figure out which differences to attribute to environment and which are knitted into our beings at conception.

That men and women see the world and behave differently is not so much the debate. Rather the controversy is over the extent to which our differences are biological, thus coming from nature, or learned, thus coming from how we are nurtured. This distinc-

tion has important implications. If our differences are embedded in our nature, we ought to accept them and let what is *natural* dictate our roles and behaviors. Women then would perform womanly work and men would perform manly work; women would act in feminine ways, men in masculine ways. However, if our differences are learned from society, then we can rightly challenge gender-based roles and behaviors and encourage both men and women to participate in what has traditionally been considered manly or womanly work, or masculine or feminine behaviors. Men can become compassionate nurturers; women can become protective providers.

Differences can be overemphasized ("boys are hardwired to be competitive and girls are hardwired to be compassionate") or ignored ("all differences are created by one's social environment"). In both cases we build boxes around our daughters and risk limiting or distorting God's image as expressed through maleness and femaleness. Our culture errs in both ways.

---

## NATURE OR NURTURE?

In the 1960s, the penis of eight-month-old John was destroyed during an operation intended to repair some fused foreskin. John's parents were counseled to have additional surgery to reconstruct John's anatomy to that of a girl's and to raise him as one. John successfully became Joan for the five to eight years she was initially observed. Thus, the nurture side concluded: Gender behaviors are learned; they are *not* biological.

Yet, quip the nature folks, those who checked up on Joan later found that by early adolescence she was having extreme difficulty coping with life as a girl, even though she was receiving hormone treatment to help with details like breasts (desirable) and facial hair (undesirable). At fourteen, Joan learned the story behind her confusion and opted to have the surgery necessary to return to her previous male state. John is now happily married to a woman and has adopted children.

Furthermore, continue the nature folks, the fact that the courts accept premenstrual syndrome (PMS) as a defense for irrational criminal behavior in women shows that women are influenced by their hormones, causing them to become unpredictable, temperamental, and highly emotional. Likewise, higher testosterone levels show that men are more aggressive than women are. The proof is self-evident; gender differences between men and women are indeed biological!

The nurture folks, however, argue that PMS is not present in all cultures. In cultures that see menstruation as an honorable blessing PMS is *absent*, suggesting how much a culture values (or devalues) menstruation affects how women respond to it. Furthermore, male aggression studies have tended to overlook social factors for aggression and have misidentified aggression in women. For instance, in one study, observers were shown a baby startled by a jack-in-the-box; the baby becomes agitated and finally begins to cry. Observers who were told the baby was a boy described the baby's response as anger. Those told the baby was a girl described the baby as frightened. Thus, attributes such as anger can be identified according to what one *expects* to see. Thus, the nurture camp concludes, societal influence has much more to do with gender differences than biology.

And so the battle rages. Whenever we see a long-standing debate a couple of considerations are in order. First, long-standing arguments are long-standing because the issues are complex and cannot easily or definitively be resolved. Second, a good question to ask in long-standing debates is: What underlying values are at stake to create such a passionate debate? Rather than relive more of the battle,<sup>1</sup> let me summarize the noncontroversial pieces of the argument, move into a consideration of the values at stake, and then address the social implications of this debate for our daughters.

### The Noncontroversial Pieces

Men and women have different distributions of body fat and hair. They also have different body shapes and different genitals. Females bear the children and are able to feed the newborns. Males



are needed to impregnate the females. Males tend to be larger, stronger (especially for tasks requiring upper body strength), and thus more capable of performing physical tasks requiring strength. Females better resist disease, starvation, and have more long-term endurance. Males have more male hormones (e.g. testosterone) and women have more female hormones (e.g. estrogen), but both males and females have both testosterone and estrogen. These pieces are not controversial. The behaviors one associates with being male or female are what define the battle lines. Are men biologically more logical and less emotional than women? Are men biologically more aggressive than women and therefore better suited to be leaders, protectors, and warriors? Are women biologically more intuitive than men and better at noticing and responding to subtle nonverbal forms of communication? Are women biologically more social and therefore more suitable for nurturing children than men are?

Cross-cultural studies from anthropology,<sup>2</sup> as well as hormone and chromosome studies, suggest that the issues are complex and cannot be reduced to simple answers. There are enough exceptions to how men and women behave in other cultures as well as exceptions to the effects of hormones and chromosomes on behavior to merit one staying tentative about one's conclusions. In most cases it is very difficult to separate out behavioral differences from learning. Is Sam more aggressive because he has X and Y chromosomes and testosterone or because he was raised in an environment where he sees male aggression reinforced? Is Julie more nurturing because she has two X chromosomes and female hormones or because she was raised in an environment where she sees nurturing reinforced for girls? Whether nature or nurture has the strongest influence over Sam and Julie will not likely be answered to everyone's satisfaction.

### What Is at Stake

What is at stake on the surface of this debate is the power to define legitimate roles or choices for women and men. What is at stake more fundamentally is the value a culture places on masculinity and femininity. In most cultures the failure to recognize or legitimize women's ways of being, knowing, and doing have resulted

in women's contributions being devalued. For women to contribute in a way that "counts," they have had to prove that, given a chance, they can function just like men.

The surface argument suggests that if women are biologically more sensitive, less competitive, and more intuitive, then women are best suited for roles that don't require rational, competitive, or logical abilities. But if women are more sensitive and intuitive because they are *taught* to be that way, then girls can be socialized to be more like men and doors will open for them to enter spheres traditionally reserved for men. The unspoken subtext of this argument is that sensitive responses are worse than rational ones, cooperation doesn't get one ahead as much as competition, and intuition is much less reliable as a way of knowing than logic. Some will read that comparative list and think, "Well, yes, but those things are true, aren't they?" This question will be addressed in a minute. But asking the question shows that we have been socialized well to devalue, or at least question, the ability of things feminine to contribute meaningfully to stewardship responsibilities over the earth.

### Where the Devaluing of Things Female Came From

Women historically occupied a sphere of life that revolved around reproducing babies for the next generation. A woman bore and nursed children, clothed, fed, and taught them the rules of society. In many cases she also gathered berries, worked in the rice fields, or sewed garments in a sweatshop, but, nevertheless, her life necessarily revolved more around children than her mate's did. Men had not needed to invest much in the reproductive process and so had more time to invest in the making of things. They crafted tools for hunting and war (from spears to atomic weapons), tools for communicating (telegraph systems to computers), and ideologies to help us organize our social lives (political and religious systems). These inventions of men came to be seen as more valuable than reproductive tasks—after all, it is these kinds of inventions that set humans apart from the rest of creation as thinking, creative beings. Thus, those who participated in these activities were demonstrating a natural superiority over those who did not. This was not a



male conspiracy. Rather, male domination resulted from what was initially a convenient division of labor; women labored too but fashioned their labor around the producing and nurturing of offspring. Men's labor more directly resulted in the development of civilizations. Once the pattern of dominance was established it was easy to maintain through traditions and laws passed down through the generations.

Things masculine came to be seen as separate from and superior to things feminine. Indeed, a boy who is a sissy is a worse offender to his gender than a girl who is a tomboy. However much she is made fun of for being a tomboy, she at least can be applauded as one who recognizes the value of maleness and desires it for herself.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the devaluing of things feminine was embedded in early Greek ideas about women that then influenced early interpretations of New Testament passages about women. If those interpretations had been built on the values and beliefs about women in Sparta, who were renowned in the Greek world for their social and legal freedoms, instead of Athens or Rome, perhaps we wouldn't need to read books about growing strong daughters.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Greek philosopher Socrates argued that being a woman was a divine punishment, since a woman was only halfway between a man and an animal.<sup>4</sup> His student, Aristotle, who believed women were actually a deformity, thought that equality between the two would be hurtful and was very critical of the situation in Sparta. In Rome, women were perceived either as objects for men's pleasure or sources of temptation.<sup>5</sup>

Church fathers like Tertullian, Augustine, and Aquinas were heavily influenced by these and other Greek philosophers, and brought their ideas into early interpretations of Scripture regarding the proper relationship between men and women. While these men established important theological groundwork for Christianity, they were not flawless, nor were they able to transcend the culture that influenced them. Our Christian ideas about women were built on an ideology that, at its core, held women and all things feminine in disdain. Tertullian saw women as the curse that led to God having to die, Augustine viewed marriage as the advent of death for men, and Thomas Aquinas's careful and good

work also solidly tied Greek ideas about devaluing women into Christian theology.<sup>6</sup>

The erroneous and damning conceptions of females we inherited from our western tradition need to be corrected and given context. Even given the possibility that the value of female characteristics in our culture *could* be raised, to gain any voice or credibility, doubt needed to be cast on the argument that gender traits were primarily biological, and that to be female was to be misbegotten and thus inferior. Consider the following quotes that speak to our deeply ingrained ideas about women:

There are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment. . . . All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women . . . recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man.<sup>7</sup>

The next quote, from 1970, demonstrates that even one hundred years later women battled against biological arguments that constrained their involvement in the public sphere.

Even a Congresswoman must defer to scientific truths. . . . There just are physical and psychological inhibitors that limit a female's potential. . . . I would still rather have a male John F. Kennedy make the Cuban missile crisis decisions than a female of the same age who could possibly be subject to the raging hormones and curious mental aberrations of that age group.<sup>8</sup>

Why don't we wonder whether or not we are safe with men's decision-making ability during a crisis—men who are subject to their raging testosterone level *every* day of the month?

The first step in reclaiming women's full participation as image-bearers of God commissioned to be co-stewards over creation involved challenging the assumptions upon which statements that devalue femaleness are based. Doubt has effectively been cast on the biology-as-only-explanation-for-gender-traits theory. The social sciences, as well as large segments of our society, recognize



there is an interaction between nature and nurture that influences gender behavior and characteristics. Even so, we have had less success effectively casting doubt on the assumption that females are biologically inferior to males and that female characteristics are less desirable than male characteristics. Whether Jim's rational decision-making style is a result of his being born male or his exposure to an environment that fostered rational thinking for boys may be important. But it is less important than recognizing that rationality is considered a male trait and is more highly valued in our society than intuitive thinking, which is considered a female trait.

## THE PREFERENCE FOR THINGS MALE

The Michigan Board of Education researched elementary-aged students' perceptions of what it was like to be female in our society. When asked how life would be different if they were the opposite sex, almost half of the girls talked about advantages of being a boy. Only 7 percent of the boys saw any advantage to being female. Almost 20 percent of the boys responded with extremely negative and debasing comments about being female. A number said they would commit suicide if they were girls. One boy wrote, "I would *kill myself right away* by starting myself on fire so no one knew."

Since being female is worse than being male, attributes associated with being female become inferior or undesired for males, while attributes considered male have positive connotations and are valued. Rationality is more valued than emotion; logic is a better way to arrive at truth than intuition; competition yields more profit than cooperation. We have been exposed to this bias so much that most of us assume things male *are* better than things female. I saw this bias as a student in seminary classes. Several times authors of texts or professors called arguments *intuitive* or *emotional* to debunk them as foolish, though I never quite saw what was intuitive or emotional about them. Conversely, the *logic* or *rationale* of an argument was offered to show its strength.

But think about these characteristics. Do we respond to God primarily through logic or emotion? We may come to a logical

understanding of God, yet ultimately our response to the amazing grace of God is an emotional one. Do we understand each other better on the basis of what is rational or what is intuitive? Those who try to understand others rationally often ignore, or don't trust, the clear, gut-level messages that are trying to inform them and so bungle up their relationships. Even if competition yields more profits, is "profit" always the best end product?

By valuing what we have labeled as male attributes more than female attributes, we have devalued the feminine characteristics of God as expressed in humanity. Furthermore, when this devaluing of certain traits is combined with an exaggeration of whatever real differences exist between males and females, our ability to effectively partner as co-stewards, fully reflecting the feminine and masculine traits of God, is also diminished. The losers? Women, men, our societies, and the created order.

Women have attempted to fulfill their stewardship role by showing men they could partner alongside them by functioning just like them. We have met such a woman, or heard of one. She plays the ruthless game by the men's rules and becomes a top executive. She can be as cutthroat and backstabbing as the best of them. In the process she alienates every friend she has. But that doesn't matter much, because she is self-reliant, and nonemotional—just like a man. She has her job (and happily works the eighty hours a week her job demands), her six-figure paycheck, and an apartment that overlooks the bay. This caricature is meant to be unattractive. Perhaps stories like this are intended to discourage women from trying to compete with men. On the other hand they speak a truth about a woman who rejects anything "feminine" in herself in order to gain access to the power, prestige, and wealth that men have. And they speak an equally powerful truth about a man who denies anything feminine in himself in his effort to gain power, prestige, and wealth.

If we encourage our daughters to try to be "just like men" (competitive, rational, nonfeeling), we are joining the ranks of those who value attributes ascribed to males over attributes ascribed to females. Instead, we need to balance two goals.



One goal is to encourage women and men to regain some of what they deny in themselves because they believe a particular human attribute (for instance, sensitivity) belongs primarily to one gender. This perspective has limited the ways men and women perceive themselves and play out their roles. Yet David's view of God in the Psalms shows much more flexibility in attributes we consider male or female. For instance, while the deliverer, provider, and refuge-making roles are often assigned to the father, David consistently uses mother images to depict God in these roles. David frequently refers to God as a large bird, an eagle perhaps, sheltering, protecting, delivering from harm, and providing for her young (see Pss. 17, 61, 91). David also presents God as the father who is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, and compassionate (see Ps. 103:8–13), attributes more often assigned to mothers.

In addition to encouraging each other to embrace characteristics perceived to belong to only one sex, the second goal is to step away from the trend that sees progress as eliminating differences between the sexes and, instead, find ways to embrace those differences. Our daughters can only become confident in who they have been created to be when the value of femaleness is recognized as equal to the value of maleness and when the representation of femaleness in society is seen as necessary to reflect the fullness of God's image. A fairly recent shift in feminine thought shows how some are beginning to think differently about women and success in a man's world. Cultural feminism seeks to overcome sexism and patriarchy by fundamentally shifting the way people think about female and male qualities. Cultural feminism celebrates women's unique characteristics—ways of thinking, being, and doing—as being equally useful as men's ways. This shift acknowledges that some fundamental differences between men and women exist but challenges the rules of the game. Must women become like men to be successful? Can we assign greater value to qualities seen as particular to women and so benefit from encouraging the expression of those qualities in public arenas? Not until the feminine aspects of God's image are valued as much as the masculine aspects

of God's image are will women stop working to gain credibility by being "manly."

---

## EMBRACING THE DIFFERENCES

The approach that says women have to become like men to gain equality is reactionary and ultimately devalues the uniqueness of femaleness. The alternative way to empower our daughters is to embrace the differences by recognizing their value. Following is a sampling of characteristics women appear to demonstrate more than men in our culture. I am not addressing whether these differences come primarily from nature or nurture. I want to move beyond that debate to examine the differences *as we see them* and what might be valuable about them. By focusing on raising the value of attributes ascribed to females, we ultimately free our daughters, our sons, and even ourselves, as fathers and mothers, to experience and benefit from feminine characteristics.

### Intuition

Intuition at its best is an incorporation of a woman's own history and experience, a trust in the inner voice that speaks to her emotions and feelings, and an evaluation of the input of others' experiences and opinions. Women who trust their intuition bring all of their being to bear on how they evaluate and judge people, events, and ideas. Intuition is thus a voice of reason, though often cast off as utterly emotional and illogical. Women have intuitions about others' intentions, about a danger their child is entering, about the truth claims of some ideology, about the consequences of a potential decision. Neither intuition nor logic is always accurate. Intuition is a holistic way of feeling and thinking through and about issues, events, and people. While logic is given more credibility in our society, some situations are best determined on the basis of intuition as a way of knowing and evaluating, especially situations full of ambiguity.



### Nonverbal Cues

Part of what gives women strong intuition is their ability to attend to nonverbal cues. Some anthropologists ascribe this ability to generations of caring for infants who could not describe their needs.<sup>10</sup> Women more often than men notice particulars at a social gathering—such as when someone is uncomfortable in a conversation, or bored, or offended, or who is coming on to whom, or how the hierarchy of power plays out.

### Sustained Attention to Detail

It has long been assumed that women are better than men at staying on task for menial, repetitive, detail work because women have less need for change than men and can attend to detail for longer periods of time. Again, perhaps this comes from generations of attending to the needs of infants and small children. However, this ability to attend to detail means women are not only great assembly line workers, but they also make superb brain surgeons.

### Value Given to Life

Historically, women have been seen as life-givers and sustainers. Many ancient cultures worshipped goddesses—a recognition of the esteem given women because of their godlike ability to create life. Women tend to be more opposed to war than men, more likely to favor gun control laws and, although many women support the death penalty, support the death penalty to a lesser degree than men do.<sup>11</sup>

### Sensitivity to God

Women are more religious than men are.<sup>12</sup> Women attend religious services more, report religion as being more important, and have more confidence that God (or their religion) can answer the problems of the day than men do. Some church traditions have used women's greater sensitivity to God to support the belief that men need to be leaders in the church and home. To keep men active

in religion, these traditions argue that men must be given the leadership of the church, otherwise men would drop out altogether. Other traditions approach the issue differently. If women are more receptive to God than men, perhaps women ought to be the ones leading and mentoring—not only other women but also men who recognize a need to emulate this greater receptivity and sensitivity to God.

These few examples recast into strengths characteristics typically ascribed to females that are sometimes perceived as weaknesses. If we can embrace female characteristics as necessary in our stewardship role over the earth, then we will move toward the restoration of balance that comes with reflecting all of God's character in our stewardship responsibilities. If it is our broken culture, rather than God, that has limited women's participation in stewardship roles, then we are partnering with God when we work to restore that which our culture has broken. As Christian parents we shouldn't wait for our culture or even our churches to begin to value these traits. We can do it by identifying and reinforcing these attributes when we see them emerging in our daughters.

---

## EMBRACING DIFFERENCE WITH EQUALITY

An assumption in some of our churches is that men are to be image-bearers of God in the public sphere and women are to be image-bearers in the private sphere of home. Many would say they consider these roles to be equal, just different. And thus the conversation ends. Traditional roles are embraced, and we teach our daughters to be good wives and mothers and our sons to be good leaders and providers. We teach our sons to look for wives who are committed to staying home and our daughters to look for men who exhibit strong characteristics of leadership. Certainly women are image-bearers in private spheres, but difference with equality does not mean that women only or primarily serve God in private spheres, nor that men primarily serve God in public ones. Indeed, most Christians would argue that men should also be active leaders and participants in their homes. If God didn't limit men to par-



ticipate only in one sphere, has God limited women to only participate in one, or is that a message from our broken culture?

### Competition on the Job

Several male-dominated fields have come under scrutiny in recent years. Women who want to fight fires are challenging the right of men to dominate a field on the basis of superior physical strength, but the fear of dumbing down the standards for women has some of the public disconcerted. If one needs to be hauled out of a building, one generally wants to be sure the firefighter can do the hauling. If the job requires being able to handle a heavy ladder or fire hose then the public wants people capable of doing so—as do the women firefighters who can meet the male standards. They don't want standards reset for women either. If that means only a few women are capable of handling the job, then so be it.

Women who have the upper body strength to be firefighters can be just as effective at fighting fires as men. However, because upper body strength is more common to males, firefighting may be *generally* more suited for males. But what about police officers? Are women capable of carrying out patrol duty effectively? Some have argued that women are *better* patrol officers than men.

The truth is that the vast majority of police situations call for tact, flexibility, and the ability to read a touchy situation. [Male police officers] are more likely to produce or to escalate violence. Women . . . may have greater success in cooling down violent situations. (This last statement has been supported by police studies).<sup>13</sup>

A partnership linking together male and female traits may yield the strongest team for police work. However, other male-dominated fields may be more suited for females. If women are better communicators, are better able to read nonverbal cues, are capable of making intuitive judgments of character and events, and are more committed to peaceful alternatives than men, then they may be better suited for high level jobs dealing with foreign affairs and national security. Again, a team that is blending the best of what men offer with the best of what women offer will yield the most balanced

outcomes. A cabinet dominated by women will come to have its own set of weaknesses, as have our cabinets dominated by men.

Whether or not women should be fighting in the military is perhaps the most heated of the debates regarding differences in men and women and beliefs about what constitutes men's work versus women's work. War, in most cultures, has been a man's job, and resentment about women gaining entrance where they are not wanted has made headline news in ways the military would never desire. Perhaps the most infamous example was the Tailhook Scandal, where eighty-three women and seven men were assaulted at a naval aviators conference in 1991.

Yet if one believes men and women are to be ruling the earth together, then perhaps women ought to be engaged in the business of war (that is, assuming *any* of us should be engaged in war). Inasmuch as women tend toward life-giving and preserving characteristics, they ought to be involved in discussions of war. Yet female perspectives are rarely valued in this arena. Carol Cohn quotes a male physicist who tells this story:

Several colleagues and I were working on modeling counterforce attacks, trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities that would result. . . . At one point, we remodeled a particular attack . . . and found that instead of there being thirty-six million immediate fatalities, there would only be thirty million. And everybody was sitting around nodding, saying, "Oh yeah, that's great, only thirty million," when all of a sudden, I *heard* what we were saying. And I blurted out, "Wait, I've just *heard* how we're talking—*only* thirty million! *Only* thirty million human beings killed instantly?" Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn't even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.<sup>14</sup>

Part of what it means to be a man discussing war is that men less often contemplate the personal reality of the dead during calculations of war. While soldiers who are sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers, or civilians who are mothers, fathers, and children may be in the background of one's mind when one is discussing casualties of war, they are not brought to bear in professional discussions. This physicist violated that rule, and by emotionally "blurting" out his realization, he acted like a woman.



What gets left out of discussions about war is another perspective. Women might bring an uncomfortably passionate voice that insists on talking about the eighteen-year-old soldiers whose legs are blown off by land mines, and the children whose skin is burned off their bodies by chemical warfare. To bring this concrete and personal reality to the table would make it more difficult to contemplate only the abstract calculations of anticipated casualties. But perhaps making war more uncomfortable and difficult to pursue is a *good* thing. War is perceived to be a man's job, and women, and women's ways of knowing, are believed to have no place in it. Yet on this issue of women's participation in the military, John Arnold, a Vietnam veteran, had this to say:

During my tour in Vietnam, I was astounded at my peers' capacity to do exactly what was most likely to make enemies of the people we were there to help. Malicious desecration of shrines, limitless sexual harassment, destruction of people's livelihoods and other forms of inappropriate behavior were routine. Ultimately, it didn't matter how many battles our macho forces won because off-battlefield macho behavior eroded away every gain. The lesson of Vietnam should be this: regardless of who is piloting that jet or firing that rifle, if their efforts are not to be in vain, whoever is in command of them should be a woman.<sup>15</sup>

Arnold's experience in war gives power to his perspective. Perhaps having an intelligent, capable woman (who acknowledges the emotional side of war, that is, the concrete reality of the dead and maimed) making decisions during a military crisis is a good thing. Perhaps she could bring balance to an intelligent, capable man who may be more concerned about honor than life or is driven by an aggressive and competitive nature that enters too quickly into battle.

At this point in our history, women who want to join the military are generally resented. Nowhere are charges of sexual harassment higher than in the armed forces. Piloting an aircraft may be one of the jobs that women are better suited for than men because of their smaller body size and ability to attend to detail for extended periods of time. When a man crashes a plane, all male pilots are not discredited. However, when a woman crashes a plane, all women

pilots are discredited. Colonel Cadick, a retired Marine fighter pilot, wrote a *Newsweek* opinion piece that said women were genetically unsuited for lengthy combat. His piece drew many letters in response, one from Manny Kiesser, a fellow Marine that had served with Cadick. Kiesser first highlighted Cadick's own crash during an air show that lost the military a thirty-million-dollar F-18, and then identified Cadick's opinion piece as a second public embarrassment to the Marine Corps.

To imply that chest-thumping barbarianism is the appropriate character for those involved in a dangerous undertaking insults the intelligence of marines. To further imply that as a male pilot I would not trust or fly with a female pilot adds to that insult. . . . Some of the finest marines I served with were women. Given the chance, they would have made excellent fighter pilots, and I would have proudly flown with them.<sup>16</sup>

This is a very heated debate, not to be solved here. Not all arenas are so fraught with disagreement. Women's intuitive nature, ability to read nonverbal cues, and communication skills make them well suited to be lawyers, judges, surgeons, administrators, professors, and counselors. Many occupations that were once dominated by men have come to benefit from the contributions of women.

### Competition at School

Certainly our daughters will still feel devalued on the playground and in the classroom. The words *sissy* and *wimp* are used primarily to demean boys who act like girls—who cry, are not good athletes, are timid, or are not adventurous daredevils (a trait some refer to as intelligence!). By implication girls are all these things. One of our daughter's young and inexperienced physical education teachers tried bonding with the boys in the class by mimicking how one of the girls ran. The girls were not impressed. Neither were the parents who heard about it. Our daughters are taught subtly and not so subtly to devalue things feminine.

Our youngest daughter is a distance runner. Although the runners only competed with their own sex, during middle school track meets boys and girls of the same grade ran the mile at the same



time. I felt sorry for the boys the girls beat—not because I believe the boys *should* be able to beat girls but because I know our culture *expects* boys to be able to beat the girls and mocks them if they cannot. Until we can eradicate this competition between boys and girls, and women and men, some men will continue to feel threatened and resent the accomplishments of women. These men will continue to devalue the feminine characteristics, seeing women not only as different but also as inferior. Our first challenge is to examine how we as parents, teachers, and youth leaders unknowingly participate in and communicate this devaluing of things feminine to those we parent, teach, and lead. Our second challenge is to seek to celebrate and value differences between men and women, remembering God chose to create two distinct image-bearers—males and females.

---

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Connecting abstract ideas to concrete action is often challenging. Following are several suggestions for how we can begin to challenge the messages girls receive that devalue traits considered feminine.

### 1. Celebrate Typically Female Attributes

At church when a woman stood up and shared during prayer time, I used to cringe if she started to cry. “One more peg in the coffin of female credibility,” I would think. Yet to cringe is to deny the sensitivity to God and others that characterizes women. It is to accept the culture’s value of emotionless rationality over expressive sensitivity. Similarly, it is good to celebrate typically female attributes when seen in men. If men are willing to be vulnerable, to cry, it is a sign of affirmation that things typically considered female are not anathema to things male. Parents affirm female characteristics in their daughters when they give legitimacy to expressions of them.

### 2. Encourage the Development of Intuition

As we encourage the development of logical and rational thinking in our sons and daughters, we should also encourage the development of intuitive ways of thinking. Intuition is undervalued, underrated and underdeveloped. Megan is very intuitive. In an almost uncanny manner she can read a situation for what it is. In fourth grade she picked up on and identified the subtle racial prejudice of a librarian attending to one of her classmates. She has often identified how someone is feeling in incredibly insightful ways. As we acknowledge the trustworthiness of our daughters’ insight and intuition, they are encouraged to use and trust it.

### 3. Explore Atypical Applications of Gifts

Encourage daughters in fields for which they have aptitudes, whether or not these fields are dominated by males. Encourage the notion of partnerships between men and women rather than competition, where women and men bring balance to fields typically dominated by one sex or the other.

### 4. Do Not Neglect the Androgyny Principle Entirely

Androgyny focuses on how men and women are more similar than different. Thus an androgynous person is one who exhibits both male and female characteristics—emotional and logical, cooperative and competitive, nurturing and aggressive. While God created us with some differences, our culture and church have overemphasized these differences and put us into boxes based on our sex. We should not neglect the point of androgyny. Boys can be taught to be nurturing and cooperative, and girls can be encouraged to be strong and competitive. Our biology does not preclude us from making these choices.

When we release ourselves from the boxes that constrain choices on the basis of typically assigned female and male characteristics, we experience humanity more fully. By drawing such stark (and at times arbitrary) lines between that which is masculine and feminine, we close off half of the human experience to ourselves. Men



who have allowed themselves to become nurturing fathers and to cry with friends should not feel "sissified" for doing so, because they are richer in their experience of what it means to be human. Women who can maintain a logical position on an emotional argument, who can compete effectively against competitors, should not feel like they are denying their womanhood by doing so, but feel richer in their experience of what it means to be human. Differences should be seen as general tendencies, not moral codes that define what we can and cannot do, feel, or be. A narrow focus erodes our ability to consider how God created us.

---

## SOME CONCLUDING DISCLAIMERS

I conclude this chapter with two disclaimers. First, this book only focuses on daughters. Certainly a discussion of our sons' unique capabilities would also be appropriate. Its omission here is not intended as a devaluation but rather an attempt to focus on those characteristics attributed to our daughters, though not often valued.

Second, later in the book I will make a case for active parenting from both mothers and fathers. When I talk of careers and encourage us to encourage our daughters to think broadly about their capabilities, it is with recognition that life is much longer than the years we invest in our children. If the average family has two children and spreads them two to three years apart, this means, on average, parents spend seven or eight years in intense parenting of small children, plus another ten years parenting them through school until they leave home. Depending on when the process started, this leaves the average person twenty-five to forty years of life to fill with meaningful activity.

We need to attend to our children. As a society we are letting children fall through the cracks as both men and women pursue their own dreams. Both parents are equally responsible for parenting their children. Families will certainly play this out differently. In some cases, mothers will stay home with small children; in a few homes, fathers will stay home with small children. For the major-

ity, both will be working, and the challenge is most pressing for them. Mothers and fathers bring different dimensions of maleness and femaleness into parenting. Children need to receive from each of them. Together, mothers and fathers are to steward in this realm as well. These issues will be discussed in later chapters. For now, suffice it to say this chapter's dialog is not meant to suggest that all women should go out and get careers. Rather, it is to open the horizons for how our daughters think about their femaleness and how God may intend to use them to reflect his image in the world.