

The Beauty of Difference

Difference and Male Privilege in the Male-Female Relationship

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Preface

It has been a privilege and a joy, joint with much hard work, to have taken part in the Master program 'Christian Studies of Science and Society'.

First of all I want to thank my professors who have truly been inspiring and skillful in teaching mastership in the field of philosophy: Govert Buijs, Jan van der Stoep and Gerrit Glas, each in their own field of expertise have shared invaluable content. They are an example to me, not only because of their comprehensive knowledge, but also because of the wisdom and faith embedded in their personal lives.

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My family and friends have also warmly supported me throughout this year and endured my absence patiently. My husband George has been the most wonderful counterpart, believing in me and making it possible for me to finish this year.

This project has a long history which started many years ago with Loren Cunningham as the director of a large missionary organization (YWAM): his explicit affirmation of women in leadership lit a fire in my heart which has continued to burn and enabled me to step beyond the limits I experienced because of being a woman. It is my desire that this thesis may bring more understanding for men and women and pave the way for other women who need such encouragement.

Introduction

The topic for this thesis may seem quite outdated in the progressive, Western culture of Europe. The freedom and recognition of women in our contemporary society is unprecedented: never before have women been so actively involved in all spheres of life and this is a trend which has not reached its climax yet it seems. Why then is it necessary to write about the topic of male/female difference and dominance, when so many women have achieved the freedom millions who have gone before, could never even dream of?

Ciska Dresselhuys, a prominent Dutch feminist, claims that feminism has completed its mission for the main part: women now have the same legal and social rights and the necessary economic independence. But what is still needed she points out, is a 'Third Wave of Feminism': what is lacking in society is a '*valuation of the feminine*'. Women are still measuring everything by the male standard and are not able to express who they are in a predominantly masculine environment, is what she contends.¹ This is an issue worth exploring even though much has been written about it: women comprise half of humankind and in fact this topic involves all of humankind as women cannot be seen apart from their relationship with men.

Another phenomenon I have witnessed, personally coming from a Christian background, is the way Christian women have struggled with their role and position in marriage, in the church and in society, because contradictory opinions were clashing regarding who they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do as women. I have travelled the journey from the elation of the unsurpassed freedom of the 'unisex theory', brought to women in the 1960s, to after having become a Christian, being exposed to severe teaching of 'male headship' and the need for women to submit to (any) man, just because they were women. Man was superior to woman for a number of reasons (theological, traditional, sociological) it was claimed, which is the predominant theory of 'sex polarity'. Throughout the ages many varieties between the opposite theories of 'sex unity' and 'sex polarity' have been proclaimed in society and in the church, and finding a way in this tension has been part of my personal quest for truth and justice. During my work amongst women in the media, in missions and in the church, I met many who were insecure and felt inferior because of their gender. For women of the Christian faith who have been uncertain about their value and unique contribution, my desire is that this

¹ Thooft, Lisette (2006), 'Een diepere duik in jezelf', in: *Opzij*, oktober.

research project may contribute to a theoretical foundation for the equality and dignity of women.

Thirdly, my hope is that this thesis will contribute to the lives of women in those parts of the world who are struggling even to survive in an environment of female discrimination, oppression and violence, and who are dealing with rejection and inferiority on a daily basis. I have worked in such countries and have felt the fear and restriction these women experience firsthand. I hope to discover if trans-cultural, trans-religious premises exist which can contribute to the valuation of women.

My experience is that it is possible to have a fruitful and productive relationship with men; I have a very dear relationship with my father, brothers and husband and have worked closely together with strong and sensitive male leaders on the mission field as well as in the church. But I have also witnessed that this is more the *exception* than the rule: that a meaningful male/female relationship is fragile indeed.

Thus, fourthly I want to investigate why at certain moments in history men and women have come into a relationship of mutuality and equality; what were the premises which lead to a male/female relationship of sex complementarity, the view in which women are different and equal to men? What were the underlying philosophical assumptions which undermined the value of equality at such crucial points? A feminist scholar I spoke with about the significant accomplishments of the feminist movements, said: 'It only takes another war and it will all be gone; we will have to start all over again'. It seems to me that this period of freedom and equality women experience is a 'window of time'; a window which will 'close' in times of crisis, recession, war, and new philosophies. As long as the *underlying foundations*, the deeper convictions of male/female differences have not been addressed and replaced by new ones, the recognition which women enjoy at the time is easily displaced