

## **Biblical Principles on Navigating Male-Female Relationships**

*A White Paper*

*Approved by the Elders of Memorial Park Church*

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While current events demonstrate many examples of how male-female relationships should not be conducted, the Bible teaches how male-female relationships should be. When studying scripture, it becomes apparent how these examples reveal the current climate of gender relationships, fraught with deep personal and systemic cultural dysfunction, as being rooted in sinful attitudes and behaviors. This brief paper's intent is to set forth, as best we can, principles from the Bible describing God's view of proper male-female relationships that promote unity and understanding between men and women. In doing so, this white paper will attempt to address current cultural division and uncertainty by describing principles and practices we can apply to individual and communal attitudes and behaviors that will assist in addressing the dysfunction, division, and pain, which seem to be so pervasive in contemporary male-female relationships.

### **Principles on Male-Female Relationships**

1. God created humanity, male and female, to be fruitful in His image by exercising dominion and care for his creation.
  - a. *Reference:* Genesis 1:26-31
  - b. *Application:* Men and women should care for creation and each other in fruitful living as the foundation of human society.
2. God created men and women as mutual helpers for the benefit of the other.
  - a. *Reference:* Genesis 2:20b-25; Romans 12:10; Ephesians 5:21-33
  - b. *Application:* Men and women are to love, support, and defend the other in holy submission, and to glorify God by displaying the benefits of holy relationships.
3. Christians are called to be salt and light in a corrupt and spiritually dark world.
  - a. *Reference:* Matthew 5:13-16
  - b. *Application:* The church is to be a positive influence on culture at large by preserving truth, living righteously, and exposing wrongdoing.
4. Christians are called to carry God's gospel and truth with both humility and mercy.
  - a. *Reference:* Micah 6:8; Romans 2:1, 3:10
  - b. *Application:* Since Christians are merely sinners saved by God's grace, Christians must act humbly and mercifully to all people, including both the abused and abusers.
5. Christians are warned not to judge others lest they be found guilty of hypocrisy.
  - a. *Reference:* Ecclesiastes 12:14, Matthew 7:1-5, Romans 2:1-3,
  - b. *Application:* Christians must avoid the temptation to judge others before considering the Spirit may convict them of similar or worse transgressions.
6. Christians are called to care for the injured and abused.
  - a. *Reference:* Proverbs 31:9, Matthew 25: 34-46, Luke 10:25-37
  - b. *Application:* Christians cannot be passive in the face of evil or the effects of evil doing. Christians are called to take action to care for those who have been injured and abused.
7. Christians are called to be peacemakers and life-givers.
  - a. *Reference:* Matthew 5:9; John 10:10, 14:12

- b. *Application*: Christians are called and empowered to restore unity, harmony, and life where evil and sin have created division, discord, and destruction.
- 8. Christians are called to unity within the church.
  - a. *Reference*: 1 Corinthians 1:10, Ephesians 4:2-6
  - b. *Application*: Christians must move beyond the divisions of the secular world into the unity of those who have been redeemed through the person and works of Jesus Christ, forbearing with each other in humility and love.

**Synopsis:**

As the Elders of Memorial Park Church, we believe that Christ’s church has the opportunity and obligation to teach Christian disciples how to live exemplary lives of love in which men and women respect and support each other. Through communication of how Biblical truth carries the solutions for difficulties in relationships between men and women—and between all peoples—we can facilitate a dialogue that promotes better understanding and reconciliation between aggrieved persons. Taking action to support mutual respect and justice in society as a whole will move toward preventing harm to those who might otherwise be at risk in current and future generations.

In current culture, the topic of male-female relationships is both complex and emotionally charged; thus, we suggest approaching the underlying issues and application of Biblical truth by: agreeing that where injustices have been done, Christians should care and want to take action<sup>1</sup>; applying Godly perspectives rather than looking at the issues from a personal, human point of view; working to promote understanding between men and women; and fostering a setting where emotionally charged issues can be respectfully addressed.

The topic of male-female relationships should also be addressed in a way that avoids: judgment or blame without first taking a prayerful look at ourselves; judgment of the merits of particular or personal claims, which may lead us to the judgment of others; and approaching the topic as an argument or two-sided conflict based on gender or political views.

We are called to a way of life in which each person is treated with honor and respect. In this way, our Biblical view of the ideal in male-female relationships is built on humble, just, and loving treatment of the other. We encourage all our MPC family to work towards improving relationships with one another as an expression of the life of Christ within us.

**The Biblical Principles Guiding Male-Female Relationships:**

Contemporary perspectives of male-female relationships in the national and international spheres highlight a widespread problem of inequality in both relative power and standards of behavior. Whether in the workplace or outside of it, the standards of what may have been socially acceptable behavior—yet in a better light seen as abusive or harassing sexual behavior—between men and women frequently is better understood as an abuse of a difference in power <sup>2</sup>. In 2017, millions of women reported widespread sexual harassment or abuse by men in the workplace, which is only one arena wherein a person in a position of power uses that power to sexualize the environment, make sexual advances, or coerce sexual activity from the person in a position of lesser power. Continuing studies in 2018 show that 81% of women and 43% of men have experiences some form of sexual harassment or assault over their lifetimes.<sup>3</sup>

In light of these statistics, the re-examination of standards of behavior between men and women is necessary. Similarly, a willingness for all parties to seek God’s grace as we communicate, learn, and change together is imperative

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<sup>1</sup> See Proverbs 3:19

<sup>2</sup> Yonack, Lyn. "Sexual Assault Is About Power." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, Nov. 2017, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychoanalysis-unplugged/201711/sexual-assault-is-about-power](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychoanalysis-unplugged/201711/sexual-assault-is-about-power).

<sup>3</sup> Chira, Susan. "Numbers Hint at Why #MeToo Took Off: The Sheer Number Who Can Say Me Too." *New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 24 Feb. 2017.

to this discussion of complex issues and developing a mutual understanding of attitudes and behaviors. Through the examination of scripture, we can find clear principles and practices that form a framework for creating better relationships between men and women.

## What We Believe

At Memorial Park, in the grace-filled tradition of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), we believe that the principles guiding relationships between men and women are a matter of Biblical interpretation, not Biblical fidelity. Our understanding of these relationships is a “non-essential,” which does not mean that our view is unimportant, but rather that we can agree and disagree on important matters of interpretation with grace, humility, and love. Good people with the same high view of scripture may differ in their beliefs about male-female relationships.

## Theological Basis for Male-Female Relationships

The phrase *ezer kenegdo* is used to describe the creation of Eve; appearing in over 200 other places in the Old Testament the term is translated in Genesis 1 and 2 as “helper,” and describes an aspect of the character of God as well as God’s intention for the partnership between men and women. The term *ezer* is derived from root words meaning “to rescue,” or “to be strong.” The word *kenegdo* translates to “equal” and appears in the Bible only in Genesis 2:18. While modern translations interpret the Hebrew *kenegdo* as “appropriate helper,” in examining the etymology of the word, we can see a better translation could be “equal strength” or “equal power.” Eve is the equal partner to Adam, both created in God’s image and reflecting God’s power.<sup>4</sup> We should use this Biblically based understanding of equality in male-female relationships when considering the Scripture that guides our interactions with one another.

## Cultural Norms versus Biblical Truth

Cultural norms about men and women are driving factors in the justification of attitudes about male-female relationships. Norms based on non-Biblical misconceptions form the basis for sinful actions, most notable in current culture as sexual discrimination and harassment; however, examination of scripture properly informs us of the Godly way in which we should think and act towards one another.

The Bible tells us that evil works frequently by questioning or distorting God’s truth, or through outright lies.<sup>5</sup> Since cultural values are based on widely held beliefs, examining where lies are commonly manifested in cultural beliefs is helpful, particularly in this discussion of relationships between men and women. These cultural distortions in beliefs about women and men, relations between women and men, and sex in society are often the basis for the sinful attitudes and behaviors involved in sexual harassment or abuse.

One such overarching belief is that women are sexual objects rather than people. Treating women as if they are sexual objects more than human beings makes rationalizing disrespectful behavior easier. In truth, the Bible shows us that women are created as persons in God’s image.<sup>6</sup> As man was created in God’s image, so was woman, which entitles both men and women to the same respect due to them as sons and daughters of God.

Similarly, across various cultures many believe that women are objects to be possessed and exploited. Treating women as objects ignores their inherent value as humans made in the image of God. Objectification also makes rationalizing wanting to use or even own women easier. Behaviors such as paying a woman for sex or consuming pornography both constitute extreme sinful actions of using women for selfish reasons. Women are to be honored and empowered by recognizing women as God’s blessing to man of a different, but equal partner in humanity—made in the same image of

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<sup>4</sup> Freedman, R. David. “Woman, a Power Equal to Man.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, vol. 09, no. 01, Jan. 1983.

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 3:1-4; Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 1:27

God as a “helpmate.”<sup>7</sup> This allows humanity to best benefit from the God-intended, fruitful expression of His divine nature. In other words, treating women with respect and as equals is in man’s best interests.

An area of current discussion in male-female relationships is the standard of how women may dress (or should dress). Cultural expectations support the belief that women have the right to dress any way they like, even if the intent is to emphasize sexual attraction. While we understand that we have the power of choice in our lives, we also believe dressing in a way that overly emphasizes sexual attraction in a public setting is a distraction to others from thinking noble, pure, and admirable things<sup>8</sup>. Dressing in a provocative manner causes temptation to the sin of lust, which works against God’s commandment that we not “put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (*New International Version*, Rom. 14:13). Another common belief is that a woman’s provocative dress justifies her harassment; however, this idea is another attempt at deflecting male responsibility for sinful behavior onto a victim. We are called to “learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed,” (Isa. 1:17) and work to live out God’s truths so injustices can be righted. Physical beauty manifests itself in many parts of creation, not the least of which is the beauty of women. While dressing attractively is not inherently wrong, the Bible teaches the primary importance of the beauty of inner character as being of worth to God and humankind: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” (1 Pet. 3-4). The Bible also teaches the importance of humility and not drawing undue attention to oneself.<sup>9</sup> A woman can dress attractively yet modestly, which honors both herself and God. Although the scripture passages cited on this topic are oriented toward a woman’s appearance, the concept of modesty in dress also applies equally to men.

Yet another common underlying belief is that a woman’s “no” in response to sexual advances often means “maybe” and can therefore be ignored. This belief assumes that a woman is bound by honor to resist sexual advances and fuels the sinful male rationalization that a man may persist in sexual advances until the woman gives in to the advance as what she truly wants but is not permitted to admit. However, an essential part of human dignity is the power of choice.<sup>10</sup> An important manifestation of this power to choose is a woman’s right to accept or reject sexual advances. The Bible teaches men to be respectful of women<sup>11</sup> and that sexual union is to be confined to marriage.<sup>12</sup>

This common cultural viewpoint leads to another misconception regarding sex and marital fidelity. Many believe that sex is a physical act of a base, animal nature, and as such something that is dirty, to be hidden or suppressed. Alongside this belief is the idea that marital relations are not enough, and that sex outside of marriage or the use of pornography<sup>13</sup> are normal. These cultural beliefs distort the understanding of and intention for sexual intimacy laid out in scripture. God tells us that sex is a spiritual act, not just a physical one. Our human bodies are created for the noblest of purposes as “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and when man and woman come together in sexual expression in the sanctity of marriage, this becomes a spiritual union for good<sup>14</sup> or for ill<sup>15</sup>. While scripture indicates sex should remain private within marriage, this does not indicate that sex should be hidden as a shameful behavior. Two of God’s purposes for marriage are to unite man and woman into one spiritual being<sup>16</sup> and to create children.<sup>17</sup> The Bible richly

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<sup>7</sup> See Genesis 2:18

<sup>8</sup> See Philippians 4:9

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 14:11

<sup>10</sup> See Deuteronomy 30:19

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Peter 3:7

<sup>12</sup> See Genesis 2:24-25, 1 Corinthians 7:2, Hebrews 3:4

<sup>13</sup> “Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement.” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, December 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/pornography>)

<sup>14</sup> See Genesis 2:24-25

<sup>15</sup> See 1 Corinthians 6:16

<sup>16</sup> See Mark 10:6-9

<sup>17</sup> See Genesis 9:7

illustrates the beauty and pleasure of this physical union<sup>18</sup>, perhaps as an echo of God's pleasure in His creation.<sup>19</sup> Within the covenant of marriage, sexual intimacy can be an abundant joy and more than enough, contrary to the belief that men are naturally polygamous and cannot be sexually satisfied by one woman. The book of Proverbs<sup>20</sup> teaches us the wisdom of finding joy in one's own marriage: "may your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth" (Prov. 5:18).

While God tells us of the joy and pleasure He desires for us in marriage, we are also shown through scripture that sex outside of marriage is harmful. In Genesis, after woman is created, we are told "for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24), ultimately showing God's intention for us: monogamous marriage. 1 Corinthians 7:2 is yet another example of the sanctity of sex within marriage and illustrates that it is a guard against sexual temptation: "since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband." Sanctification through sexual morality is emphasized again in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God.

These verses attest to God's wish for those called to marriage to engage in marital fidelity, honoring and loving one another. The use of pornography, while prevalent in society<sup>21</sup>, is seen as a result of lust, which Jesus equates with adultery. "I tell you," we read in Matthew 5:28, "that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Not only is the use of pornography adulterous, but it also harms the user and those involved in producing it. Not only does the Bible warn us of the negatives of looking at another's nakedness outside of marriage,<sup>22</sup> but prominent research observed that pornography usage negatively alters both sexual attitudes and behavior, creating threats to individuals, marriages, families, children, and communities at large.<sup>23</sup>

A particularly troubling common cultural belief regarding sexual harassment and abuse is that men are powerless before a woman's attraction and thus not responsible for their behavior, or that such behavior is simply "men being men." Both beliefs excuse sinful behavior as an inevitable result or place blame on the victims. However, Jesus taught that we are to, "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). While the idea may seem obvious, we cannot love God at the same time as we participate in harassing, debasing, or demeaning behavior towards another person. Likewise, we are unable to love a woman as we do ourselves while participating in these same behaviors. A powerful example of man's power over his behaviors is seen in Genesis 39—the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife—which supports God's promise seen in 1 Corinthians: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). As seen in both Genesis and 1 Corinthians, man is responsible for his own actions, can avoid sin, and through faith in God and obedience to His instructions, male-female relationships can flourish as they were meant to without dismissing responsibility.

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<sup>18</sup> See Song of Songs 7:6-12

<sup>19</sup> See Genesis 1:31

<sup>20</sup> See Proverbs 5:15-21

<sup>21</sup> Kinnaman, David. "The Porn Phenomenon." *Barna Group*, 20 June 2016, [www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/](http://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/).

<sup>22</sup> See Leviticus 18:7, Habakkuk 2:15

<sup>23</sup> Fagan, Pat. "The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community." *Family Research Council, FRC*, Mar. 2011, [www.frc.org/issuebrief/the-effects-of-pornography-on-individuals-marriage-family-and-community](http://www.frc.org/issuebrief/the-effects-of-pornography-on-individuals-marriage-family-and-community).

## Godly Perspectives and Practices

In addition to revealing God to us, the Bible gives us God's instructions for living. The principles and perspectives provided to us in the Bible are not only relevant to everyday life, but also when seeking guidance in navigating sensitive issues such as male-female relationships. When considering your actions and beliefs about men and women, we believe that keeping these Godly perspectives in mind is important.

God has given us the choice to obey or disobey. We learn through the prophet Moses in Deuteronomy 28:1-14 that obedience to His commands will bring many blessings and abundance. Conversely, disobedience will bring curses.<sup>24</sup> We must strive for obedience to His Word, as we are commanded in Deuteronomy 30:19: "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

We must also keep an attitude of humility, extending mercy since God has shown us mercy. We should realize that we are all sinners<sup>25</sup> needing God's grace for salvation and the power to live in a way that pleases God. Such realizations will protect us from sins of pride as we consider those who have committed harassment or abuse. Having received God's mercy, we are called to act mercifully to all. We should extend God's mercy both to the abused<sup>26</sup> and those who may have been abusers rather than fall into the temptation to appoint ourselves as God's judges.

Harassment and abuse are injustices; examples of a violation of rights and abuse of power (and more) based on inequitable treatment. If injustice is based on unequal treatment, we should seek to eliminate it through promotion of justice in equal opportunity and treatment. God has told us, "'For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity'" (Isa. 6:8). Promoting justice is essential to eliminate conditions in which injustice and injury will be supported in the future. Yet we must be mindful that we do so in a grace-filled way, coming from a place of love. God tells us love is kind, humble, honorable, selfless, and always protects.<sup>27</sup> Showing Godly love will help us understand what constitutes abuse and how we can work to eliminate those behaviors.

Promoting healing, reconciliation, and Godly living for both men and women is a continual effort. We should all "be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Rom. 12:10). By continuing to teach our children and one another Godly principles that honor both men and women, and the beauty of healthy sex within marriage; respecting one another as we navigate the changing norms; taking reports of abuse seriously and taking action to promote justice in the workplace, and stepping in when we see or learn of borderline or unacceptable behavior, together we can promote a positive change.

## Summary

The issue of inequality in male-female relationships is pervasive in national and international spheres and is reinforced by faulty cultural perceptions and normative behavior. The Bible teaches us that women were created as equal partners to men, and the relationship between men and women should be one of love, support, and should glorify God by displaying the benefits of holy relationships.

Cultural perception of women has long been a driving factor in the justification of the negative, non-Biblical attitudes and behaviors within male-female relationships. These misconceptions form the basis for sinful views and actions like discrimination, sexual harassment, and abuse; however, examination of scripture properly informs us of the Godly way in which we should think and act towards one another. Women should be treated as an equal partner to men, with

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<sup>24</sup> See Deuteronomy 28:15-68

<sup>25</sup> See Romans 3:11, 21

<sup>26</sup> See Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 25:35-46

<sup>27</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

respect; as a person created in God's image and not merely as sexual objects. Women should dress modestly, their voices should be respected, and relationships between men and women should be honored. Men should take responsibility for their actions and avoid casting blame onto others or dismissing sinful actions based on widely accepted cultural norms or expectations as normal. Sex should be seen as a spiritual act within the sanctity of marriage, where we should remain faithful.

God provides principles and perspectives in the Bible that instruct us how to live, which we can apply to our everyday interactions, as well as our efforts in navigating the sensitive issues surrounding male-female relationships. These Godly perspectives should be first in mind when considering our actions and beliefs about these relationships.

Promoting healing, reconciliation, and Godly living for both men and women is a continual effort. We should all make an effort not only treat one another as God instructs, but also call attention to and take action against the sinful behaviors of sexual harassment and assault.