



Between Rhetoric and Reality: Women and Men as Equal Partners in Home, Church, and the Marketplace

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When Nancy and I were married in 1971, I assumed that at least three things would be constant in our relationship: that I would be the primary wage earner in the family; that if there was a difference of opinion in such things as buying a car, for example, I would cast the deciding vote; and that I would be the most widely known person in the public arena, except perhaps in our local congregation. None of these things are true today. Since being squeezed out of the executive job I had held for 13 years, Nancy has provided the primary income. Her recent promotions combined with my inability to get comparable work has made that reversal seem permanent. Over the last several years, because she travels extensively with her work, Nancy has not been able to participate actively in our church. Among her work colleagues, I am "Nancy's husband." I respect the work she has done, but social gatherings are still awkward because people are more interested (and rightly so) in her work than mine. Because it turned out that Nancy's financial instincts were better than mine, I seldom have the last word regarding major decisions in the household. Most of the time the decisions

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Role equality at home, at work, and at church requires women and men to recognize the uniqueness of the other, to make negotiable promises, and to add justice to love at the core of marriage.

are collaborative, but sometimes I defer to her business sense. I am, however, curious about the frequency with which I tell people it does not bother me that Nancy earns twice as much as I do. (Charles Witte)¹

THE STORY OF CHARLES IDENTIFIES ONLY A FEW OF THE MANY CHANGES THAT have revolutionized the roles of men and women at home and at work. Men are not only less able to presume dominance; they are more likely to be involved in parenting and maintaining the household. Men are eligible to take time away from the workplace to care for children, and fathers may be given custody of children in a divorce court. The result of this revolution has been a multiplication of role possibilities for both women and men that will not be reversed. These new patterns of relating will continue to be modified as information technology makes it possible to do some kinds of work from almost anywhere and as we explore further the implications of the democratization of marriage and family roles. Nonetheless, what Charles understands as a permanent change in his relationship with Nancy is still an unrealized reality in many marriages today. The aim of this article is to explore options for greater role equality between women and men at home, at work, and at church as we create acceptable alternatives to previously gender-specific family patterns.

I. ORIGINS OF THE PRESENT DILEMMA

These changes have not happened overnight. Patterns of family living that began with industrialization have continued to evolve under the influence of the free-market economy in the twentieth century. The movement of men from the home to the world of work as a consequence of industrialization has been paralleled in this century by the move of women from domestic labor at home to wage labor outside the home. As a result, there is greater equality for women and men in both the public and the private spheres of human life. For women, this push for equality has been forged by a convergence of American individualism and greater economic independence. When the internal relations of a family are no longer maintained by social and economic imperatives, when women no longer need to stay in a marriage for economic reasons, the binding element of a marital bond is mutual affection. That is to say, intimacy and communicative affection has become the primary basis for sustaining bonds in the modern marriage. This companionate understanding of marriage is not, however, something that we set out to create. It simply evolved over time as a consequence of other changes that happened as work and home became separable spheres of influence.

Although the split is no longer absolute between the private world of family presided over by women, and the public world of work, leisure, and church, dominated by men, traditional expectations that give primacy to public roles continue to influence the worlds of family, church, and work. As a result, changes in role patterns for women and men within the privacy of family happen slowly.

¹Though a hypothetical character, Charles tells a story common to many in the late twentieth century.

Moreover, there is a fundamental difference in the perception of the changes that have in fact occurred. In 1993, for example, the Families and Work Institute surveyed dual career couples regarding the division of parenting responsibilities. "We share it 50-50" was the response of 43% of the men and only 19% of the women. This discrepancy of perception is not simply because men are myopic; it reflects their insufficient understanding of parental tasks. Rhona Mahony argues persuasively that what is needed is a reformation in the sexual division of labor in the home that is negotiated by the two people who live together. It is possible for everyone to change, but it is difficult. The sad truth, Mahony observes, is that by the time the sun sets on the typical woman's wedding day, "she has already done nearly all the negotiating over chores and child care that she will ever do."² In this sense, changes in role definition for women and men in marriage are often more rhetoric than reality.

Despite her pessimistic observation, Mahony believes that practical equality between women and men is not a dream anymore, but women, she says, have to make it happen. I agree with Mahony's hopeful analysis of the current situation but not her future plan. Men today do more housework and parenting than they used to, but it is not equal and it is still described by both genders as *helping women with the housework*. Moreover, as long as the responsibility for change in the family remains with women, maintaining a marriage and parenting children will be a woman's thing to do. Women feel guiltier than men about work-related absence from the family and therefore are more likely to choose to cut back their careers. If, however, children are not getting enough time from parents, that is a family issue for men and women alike. The movement from rhetoric to reality in the practical equality between women and men is and must be as much the responsibility of men as it is of women.

Couples who are determined to work towards an equal division of household and parenting responsibilities often find themselves torn by the limits of time. Even when the intent is to establish equality, there is simply too much to do and not enough time in which to do it. Sometimes we are caught in tensions of our creation because we have programmed too many activities or too much enrichment for our children. In order to meet all of our appointments, children are expected to accommodate themselves to adult schedules. Some couples run out of time because they need to work two, three, and four jobs to afford a house they never have time to enjoy. The application of cost-benefit analysis from the economy is perhaps the most pernicious factor undermining our best intentions to realign the gender distinctions between the public and private spheres and establish equality of responsibility between women and men at home as well as at work. The "cost" of attending a daughter's soccer game or taking a son's scout group to a baseball game is compared with the "benefit" of meeting a new client. Even when we do not consciously ascribe economic value to human interactions, the fact

²Rhona Mahoney, *Kidding Ourselves: Breadwinning, Babies, and Bargaining Power* (New York: Basic, 1995) 5.

that we schedule family time like work time makes it easy to confuse them and then measure them both according to cost-effective market standards.

II. IS YOUR FAMILY WRECKING YOUR CAREER?

Perhaps the most disturbing observation about the tension between work time and family time has come from German sociologist Ulrich Beck. He has observed that a free-market economic model presupposes a society without families or marriages. "The market individual is ultimately a single individual unhindered by a relationship, marriage or family....[In fact] a fully realized market society is also a society without children—unless the children grow up with mobile, single-parent mothers and fathers."³ According to Beck, and I am inclined to believe that he is right, the crisis of the family today is built into the organization of modern, industrial, market-driven societies. It is not surprising, therefore, that the family is a constant juggling act of disparate, multiple ambitions, requiring maximum mobility on the one side with the obligations of being married and raising children on the other side. A society that rewards people for selfishness should not be surprised that it faces a crisis in families. If both women and men are equally devoted to the marketplace and its demands, children will obviously suffer. But so will the marriage, even if there are no children.

A recent article illustrates this tension between family and work. Families are a liability in the corporate world. Several studies indicate that well-educated men with working wives are paid less than men whose wives stay at home. The ultimate male status symbol today may be a wife that does not work. You must be very talented to overcome the damage to your career that comes from having a family or a wife who works. "In a world built on just-in-time, the ideal employee is the one who's always available, not the one who's constantly torn. In a world that's a village, the corporate hero is the one free to fly to Singapore on a moment's notice, not the poor schlep who has to get home to relieve the nanny."⁴ Although changes have occurred, like flextime, job sharing, or personal leaves, the old demands for single-minded devotion by the corporation have not changed even though both women and men are in the workplace. As long as parents are the only ones making choices about balancing work and family, children will suffer.

If having work that demands too much of men is a problem for some families, not having work at all continues to be a dilemma for others, black men in particular. While the percentage of black women in the work force has continued to grow in recent years, middle-aged black men are often out of work because a factory closed or moved or because they cannot translate their skills into today's jobs. Many service jobs require skills these men do not have. Nationally, more than twice as many black men are out of work as white men. The instability created in families when men cannot work is magnified in the black community. In the new

³Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992) 116.

⁴Betsy Morris, "Is Your Family Wrecking Your Career?" *Fortune* (March 17, 1997) 72.

economy, emerging poor black men are worse off than black women. It is difficult to insist that black men take responsibility for supporting their families when they can't get jobs.

As we see, achieving greater equality in gender roles in marriage is a complicated task. Although we have declared as a society that children benefit from two parents who are actively involved in their lives, we have not created an economic environment that makes such a parenting ideal easily achievable. Even when husbands and wives are determined to work towards a just marriage, there are contending forces in the larger society that continue to whisper old patriarchal themes. The family simply does not have the clout to demand what it needs in the face of current economic pressures and political realities. Robert Bellah is correct to observe that the "task of restoring family life, whatever form the family may take, cannot be the family's alone."⁵ The future of the family and the future of the society are the same agenda. In the same way, society's change cannot be separated from individual and familial transformation.

I propose three changes that need to occur in men in order that men might help transform to reality the rhetoric of equality in marriage: *recognizing the other in marriage; making negotiable promises; and adding justice to affection at the core of marriage*. From a Christian perspective, these changes are possible if couples learn how to *practice reconciliation* in daily family living.

III. RECOGNIZING THE OTHER

Marriage is sustained by paradox. The central paradox of marriage is found in holding in vital tension the human needs for intimacy and for autonomy. One manifestation of this paradox is suggested by Rainer Maria Rilke's observation that "a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they (the couple) succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky."⁶ Distance makes intimacy possible, but it does not guarantee that it will happen. Living side by side does not always make for clear seeing of the other. Couples may rather see what they would like the other to become or a mirror image of themselves or the other as an object to be used. Couples who are able to love the distance that exists between them are more likely, however, to see clearly the uniqueness of their partner. Each person in a marriage may be a fully defined self, but the recognition of that unique self by the other is necessary for a marriage to work.

The experience of being recognized is not only a prerequisite for community; it is fundamental for human growth and identity. Recognition precedes empathy and is a prelude to mutual respect. What begins in infancy in the interaction between a newborn child and its mother is a lifelong need for human folk. Marriage becomes a context for growth if two people are able to see one another

⁵Robert N. Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1991) 260.

⁶Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties*, ed. John Mood (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975) 28.

“whole and against a wide sky.” Jessica Benjamin suggests that “recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self.”⁷ When we are recognized by someone on whom we depend for the validity of the self, we are confirmed in our identity and encouraged to act as a subject. Marriages that endure and flourish have achieved a kind of mutual recognition between husband and wife that honors the spouse as a unique and separate subject. Charles Witte discovered Nancy’s business sense because he was able to see her clearly. When each partner is able to see the particular gifts of his or her spouse, domination is diminished and the possibility of equality is increased. In order to increase the possibility of equality for women and men in marriage and at work, husbands need to practice recognizing their wives in order to see them “whole and against a wide sky.” Once the distinctive gifts and abilities of women are recognized, they can be actualized and honored both at home and in the marketplace.

Remembering Babylon, a novel by David Malouf, is about the unexpected visit of Gemmy, a shipwrecked British cabin boy raised by aboriginal people, who wanders into a British settlement in northern Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. To the people of the settlement, Gemmy was not a black person, but he was not a white person either, rather an unsettling combination of “monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness.” One of the people most affected by Gemmy was Jock McIver. Because of his encounter with Gemmy, the tall grass through which he had always walked now had “tips beaded with green” that he had not seen before. He also sees himself, his neighbors, and his wife more clearly than ever before.

He had turned his full gaze upon her—that is what she felt. He wanted to know now what her life was beyond what he saw and had taken for granted, a shift washed and shaken to make it soft, food on the table; to inquire into her affections. It was amazing to him—that is what his tentativeness suggested—that he had known so little and had not looked.⁸

Even when they were first courting, Jock had not seen her so clearly, this woman he loved so dearly. Like Jock McIver, many men know little about the women we live or work with, and yet we do not look or ask in order to understand more. Because men do not always see their wives and other women clearly, women easily become objects rather than subjects, people whose uniqueness is covered over by role definition and stereotypes. Recognition is a prelude to equal regard between men and women because it helps us see the gifts each gender brings to our common life and work together.

In order truly to see one another clearly, however, we must begin with the presumption of equal worth. This presumption overcomes fear of the stranger, engenders curiosity about the other, and promotes the kind of disciplined listening

⁷Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) 12.

⁸David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (New York: Vintage, 1993) 108-109.

to one another that leads to understanding. This willingness to see the other “whole and against a wide sky” also carries with it the possibility of surprise. Instead of imposing preconceptions on the women with whom they live and work, men will need to be prepared to receive something new, something unexpected, some unthought-of possibility. Marriages that endure and flourish have achieved a kind of mutual recognition in which husbands and wives each honor the other as a separate and unique subjects, worthy of respect and equal regard.

IV. MAKING NEGOTIABLE PROMISES

It is a truism to say that we live in a time of rapid change. Scientific discoveries about the mysteries hidden in genes and the dissemination of information through technology have changed how we think about human beings and how human beings think. It is difficult to imagine that the present trajectory of change will diminish in future decades. We need to be prepared to adapt patterns of action to new knowledge of the world in which we live. In one sense, the changing roles of women and men comprise simply one small dimension of change in our time. Changes in the way we think about women and men in marriage, in the church, and in the workplace nonetheless evoke strong emotional response because they challenge long-standing assumptions about the gender-specific nature of social roles. Charles Witte continued to be curious about his inability to accept the fact his wife Nancy was the primary breadwinner in the family. In response to that change, Charles may continue to rage against the loss of male privilege, or he may come to understand that being the breadwinner is not a male right. While men have always been protectors of the hearth, they have not been the only providers.

One of the gifts of this time of rapid change is that it has sensitized us to the ordinary change that continues to be part of daily family living. Families change because people change and because the social context changes as well. Sometimes those changes are negative and destructive; other times they are inevitable and constructive. Most of the time, however, change in a family’s patterns of interacting is messy and disruptive. Families or individuals that spend time and energy resisting change or railing against it are not likely to plan for the kind of accommodation or adaptation that is necessary to adjust to the demands of modern family living. The family has a future in part because it has always been able to change its patterns of interaction in response to changes in the larger society. And because the family continues to change, it will always be characterized by a lot of “controlled disorder” and some grief. When families are unable to mourn the ordinary losses that come from ordinary changes, they are more likely to insist on remaining rigid and inflexible in order to maximize continuity.

The kinds of changes that once marked shifting family forms and functions over long periods now occur within the lifetime of a marriage. Because we can regularly anticipate changes in roles and disruptions in living that will destabilize the family, we need to understand that renewing our mutual promises will be necessary in order to keep the marriage covenant alive. “Promising again is an act of *creative fidelity* because we see and understand implications and dimensions of

the initial promise we could never have anticipated when we first made it.”⁹ When my wife and I married, she thought she was marrying a parish pastor. For myself, I did not imagine I was marrying someone who would become a national leader in theological education. Even when the gender roles in a relationship continue to follow traditional patterns, people are less likely to stay in the same occupation for a lifetime. Changing jobs is itself a destabilizing factor for many families, because new work routines disrupt established patterns of daily living.

In order to accommodate the inevitable and sometimes necessary changes that occur in marriage, couples need to practice making promises that are time-limited, situational, circumstantial, and frequently renegotiated. Obviously, these promises build on the primary promises of love, respect, and mutual recognition that are foundational for marriage. If one parent agrees to stay home with young children so the other can invest fully in a career opportunity, that is a situational promise that need not last for the duration of a marriage. If one spouse accepts a major volunteer assignment at their church to head up the building fund drive, the couple may agree to forgo certain social activities for the length of the campaign. When one partner sets aside his regular golf schedule while the other recovers from surgery, that is a time-limited response to a particular circumstance. If modern marriages are to move toward greater equality of roles and work opportunity for both partners, couples will need to develop the capacity to negotiate, modify, and then give up circumstantial promises.

Finally, however, in order to survive the kind of fundamental changes that occur in marriage and the workplace today, we need to discover the possibility of transformation that moves beyond adaptation. Promising again and again is an intentional, relational act that defines the self and honors the other. It is an act of mutuality that rests on the willingness of two people to recognize each other as people of worth, each with particular gifts and a unique story. Both mutuality and adaptability are necessary in order to live through the changes that are inevitably a part of modern family living. Adaptation, however, is not enough. Transformation is necessary. Transformation, change in a deeper and more enduring sense, is grounded in the conviction that the continuity of a family is in God’s ongoing creation. “Transformative change unites the soul of a marriage with a longing for the new thing that God is doing.”¹⁰ It presumes the possibility of a radically different way of perceiving, thinking, and interacting within a family.

V. ADDING JUSTICE TO LOVE AT THE CORE OF MARRIAGE

Seeing the other in marriage clearly and seeing role changes for women and men in the home and workplace as a sign that God is doing something new will require that the marital promise include not only a commitment to love one another but also a commitment to be just with one another. Pauline Kleingeld has

⁹Herbert Anderson, David Hogue, and Marie McCarthy, S.P. *Promising Again* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 27.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 122.

proposed that we view marriage essentially as “*not only* a matter of love, *but also* of justice. On this view, married couples ideally would think of themselves as sharing at least two overarching aims: a loving marriage and a just marriage.”¹¹ What Kleingeld is proposing fundamentally changes the framework for negotiating role equality in marriage. It is not simply that two people who love one another seek to work out some arrangement regarding role responsibilities that is acceptable, beneficial, and even fair for everyone involved but that the commitment to work for justice for each partner in the relationship is part of the marital bond. Seeking justice is not antithetical to loving one another. It is the shared goal of life together.

The positive changes made in the larger society and in many marriages today have not eliminated injustice from marriage or eradicated injustice toward women in the church and at work. We all know stories of pain and disappointment. Household labor studies consistently show that women continue to do more housework than men. Women are paid less than men for the same or equivalent work. Men whose wives do not work outside the home have higher salaries and are promoted more quickly in top management positions. Men are themselves sometimes penalized in the workplace if they attempt to balance their work responsibilities with child care. Still, unless men do assume more responsibility at home, greater opportunity for women in the workplace may make it seem like women are taking over everything. It is necessary to continue to work for laws and policies that will make it easier for justice to prevail in the workplace and in marriage, but that is not sufficient. Just laws do not guarantee just action. Husbands and wives will work together toward a just division of household responsibilities only if both partners in a marriage care that their marriages are just. As Kleingeld argues, “If justice is to be an important aspect of marriage, it needs to be able to unite spouses instead of structurally pitting them against each other as separate individuals looking out for their own interests.”¹²

This commitment to justice does not eliminate the need for sacrifice. But the deeper meaning of sacrifice is not about giving up our freedoms or our preferences but giving them over to a larger reality. That larger reality is a marriage of love and justice. If both partners in a marriage are committed to a just relationship, then no one person will do all the accommodating. Within a marital bond committed to justice, the admonition from Paul about sacrifice becomes one appropriate way to work toward justice: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). If both husband and wife are committed to forming a just marriage, then the willingness to set aside our needs for the needs of others becomes a positive expression of a common bond. Sacrifice deepens a marital bond as long as each person in a relationship is committed to

¹¹Pauline Kleingeld, “Just Love? Marriage and the Question of Justice” (unpublished paper, used by permission of the author). I am grateful not only for her critical insights into the marriage dilemmas of our time but for her generosity with those insights.

¹²*Ibid.*

justice. When one partner does all the accommodating or when the sacrifices are not evenly distributed over time, the marriage is not just.

Working toward justice for women and men in marriage is not easy. It presumes trust, clear communication, and a shared, equal commitment to a just marriage. It depends on the capacity of each partner to articulate his or her own wishes and desires and hear clearly the hopes and dreams of the other. Misunderstanding creates pitfalls. Occasional egoism may prompt one partner to present needs in a distorted way. The absence of empathy impedes the willingness to make common cause with one's partner for a deeper vision of a just relationship. Preoccupation with rights fosters hostility and separation rather than a deeper commitment to justice. Building a just marriage depends on seeing one another's gifts clearly while working simultaneously for a just relationship. In the final analysis, however, justice in marriage is not something we achieve. It is something we discover. "What makes justice different for those who follow Christ is that it is something that is given rather than earned. For Christian persons in marriage, it is impossible to separate justice from gratitude."¹³

VI. THE NEED FOR ONGOING RECONCILIATION

The struggle for a just marriage is complicated by a social reality in which the constraints and conventions that have kept marriages together are increasingly dissolving. In this society, the myths supporting the vision of a father who works outside the home and a mother who works to keep the home and raise children have been challenged by the feminist movement of the last decades and undermined by an economic environment in which it is less and less possible to support a family on one income. The decline of job stability for those whose salaries were sufficient to support a family further erodes the possibility of sustaining traditional roles for women and men either at home or in the workplace. Around the globe, traditional functions for men have ordinarily included providing meat through hunting, protecting the village, and initiating young boys. In most traditional societies today, hunting is not permitted, police protect the family or clan, and boys are educated in schools. It is important not to overlook the profound grief that accompanies these changes as we consider new role patterns for women and men at home and in the workplace.

Joel Anderson has observed that seeking to return to traditional role patterns for women and men at home and at work is not really an option in modern industrial societies. "Aside from the fact that returning to more traditional approaches would involve unconscionably disproportionate sacrifices from women, it would not actually eliminate the need to make complex and conflict-ridden decisions."¹⁴ When a couple picks the traditional male-breadwinner/female-

¹³Herbert Anderson and Robert Cotton Fite, *Becoming Married* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 154.

¹⁴Joel Anderson, "Is Equality Tearing Families Apart?" in *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach*, 2nd edition, ed. Larry May, Shari Sharratt, and Kai Wong (New York: Prentice-Hall, in press). His critical evaluation of the marriage dilemmas of our time has been particularly helpful in formulating this essay.

homemaker pattern today, the modern understanding of mutual and just respect requires that it be a choice made by equals. Couples who make a commitment to form a just marriage will inevitably experience unexpected conflicts and unseen rocky shoals that will require a wide array of skills and virtues that must be developed and practiced. These include recognizing the other, empathic listening, the ability to postpone gratification, clear expression of wishes, renegotiating previous promises, and a short-term memory that does not always keep score.

Because conflict and disappointment and grief will be inevitable dimensions in the life of a couple who seek to establish a just marriage, men and women will need to learn how to practice reconciliation in advance. Reconciliation, as I mean it here, is more than restoring relationships broken by conflicts over contending views of what is just: it is a way of living and thinking that seeks to promote a peaceable environment in which husbands and wives might sort out very complex and competing demands on their time from work and home. Within a peaceable environment, bonds of trust can be safely rebuilt. Such reconciliation cannot be achieved in haste. It does not ignore past or present injustice. If, however, women and men tend towards reconciliation and justice, it is possible that they will find new ways to work together for the common good at home and at work.

Seeing the other whole, making negotiable promises, and loving justly all require radical changes in our views of men at home and work. In order to see in a new way, we need to be prepared for surprise. In Malouf's novel, Jock McIver was surprised to see the tips of grass beaded with green. He had been among the tall grass before, but it was as if he were seeing it for the first time. In order to see new roles for men at home and at work, we will need to be transformed by God. That transformation is most likely to occur when we live gently with the contradictions of our lives. ⊕