



Male and female he created them

A Bible study on God's loving gift of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female

Lesson #4: The partnership of selfless leading (head) and selfless yielding (helper) in the world

Introduction

Imagine that the chairman of your congregation's board of elders is also an elected judge. One day he realizes that the first case in his courtroom is a man from his congregation who is suing his wife for divorce, claiming irreconcilable differences. As the suit is presented, much to the dismay of the man's believing wife, it becomes clear that the irreconcilable differences are that he's unwilling to continue as her husband despite her evident faithfulness to him. However, because the petition has been handled according to the law of the land, the judge grants the divorce.

But at the end of that day, that judge removes his judge's robe and heads to church to preside over the elders' meeting. With sadness he informs the other elders about the divorce proceedings that their brother in Christ had kept hidden but had now become public record. Now, not as judge, but as elder, he offers to be the first one to approach that man, one on one, to call him to repentance for separating what God had joined together.

How do you explain what seems to be such utter inconsistency? In the morning the judge bangs his gavel and declares the man legally divorced. By evening the judge prepares to knock on the man's door and call him to repentance for a divorce granted in his own courtroom. Does he or does he not respect God's principle of marriage as a lifetime union between one man and one woman?

Yes, he does. And he is not being inconsistent, either. No more than was Moses (really the LORD through Moses) when, because of the stubbornness of sinful hearts (Matthew 19:8), he permitted Israelite husbands to write a bill of divorce and send their wives away (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

The key to the matter is to consider the different callings from God that man has as judge and as elder. As God's representative in government, his sworn duty is to uphold the constitution and the law of the land (even laws he may personally dislike). For the judge to disregard the law in

his courtroom would undermine the very purpose of maintaining order in his world for which God instituted government.

However, as God's representative in his church, as an elder, his calling from God is quite different. As a brother in Christ to the man who sued for an unbiblical divorce, his calling is to be God's tool to lead that man to repentance, forgiveness, and a new direction that honors his Savior's will for his life. God's principle did not change in either calling, but as judge or as elder (or as husband) the application made of that principle in the unique setting of each of his God-given callings was different.

God's principles, written into our hearts and woven into our very creation, define for us what it means to love him and our neighbor as ourselves. God's principles in themselves never truly contradict each other. Yet as we live and work in the midst of the mess of a fallen world, that world is often neglecting or ignoring many of God's principles at the same time. And the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female may be suffering from some of the greatest abuse and neglect.

That's why, as we live out our God-given callings in a fallen world, the responsibilities of our various callings can present us with challenging situations where it may seem impossible to honor outwardly all God's good principles simultaneously. While the new heart the Spirit has planted in us honors all God's good principles, much like that judge, the responsibilities of our callings may make it hard to act in the world in such a way that honors all God's principles simultaneously. The goal is never merely to look outwardly pristine and pious (the Pharisees were good at that), but to actually discern in every setting and situation what it truly means to love as ourselves the neighbors whom our callings impact.

This lesson presents us with the most challenging area in which to apply the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Living as citizens of two kingdoms

Part of what may help us walk through many challenging situations in life is to grasp the biblical doctrine of the two kingdoms, or two realms, both of which are under the rule of our triune God. Sadly, this doctrine is rarely taught clearly (or at all) outside of Lutheran circles, and all too frequently it is not even taught or understood well by Lutherans. Failing to grasp what is meant by these two kingdoms can cause us confusion as we live our callings out in the world and can, in fact, unintentionally do harm to the cause of the gospel we long to further.

What is meant by these two kingdoms? We speak of God's ruling in his world by his almighty power as he keeps his universe and its natural laws operating as he created them. In particular, just as he worked from formlessness and emptiness to a well ordered creation during the six days of creation, so even in a now fallen world God still is at work to preserve outward peace and order and to provide for the outward earthly needs of all who live on the earth, both believer and unbeliever (Matthew 5:44,45).

Sometimes this work of God to maintain the outward order and provision for his world and his creatures is referred to as God's kingdom of power. As we noted in lesson 1, ever since creation God partners through human beings as he gives us an important part in promoting outward peace and providing for the outward needs of those in this world. We see God's kingdom of power at work through human beings most evidently as God works through his representatives in government. In addition to government, we would also see God at work in his kingdom of power in other focused-on-this-life institutions such as the workplace. Martin Luther was fond of calling God's kingdom of power "the kingdom of God's left hand." The goal of the kingdom of God's left hand is to maintain as much outward peace as possible in a sinful world and to provide for the necessities that preserve the life (the time of grace) of the residents of this world.

And that leads us directly to God's other kingdom (or realm). God's other kingdom is his kingdom of grace. This is what is meant when we read in Scripture about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. It is God's gracious activity in his world through his gospel (and his law as he calls sinners to recognize their need for the grace of his gospel). In the kingdom of grace, God isn't focused primarily on the outward, but God's Holy Spirit is at work to win hearts to repentance and faith. Then, once God has accomplished by his gospel that change of heart from unbelief to faith, he then also works to renew that heart day by day so that the believer lives and reflects his saving grace in the midst of an unbelieving world. Luther was fond of calling this "the kingdom of God's right hand."

As Christians, while our true citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven (Philippians 3:20), yet as long as we live in this world, we will always hold a dual citizenship. In God's earthly kingdom, the kingdom of his left hand, we live under the God-established authorities in a particular country, and within that country we participate in other institutions of this world such as the workplace. As we live out our callings in the kingdom of this world, we work for the outward

peace and bodily welfare of our neighbors. In the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of his right hand, we live under Christ as our head and seek to advance the cause of his saving kingdom.

And God has given us unique tools fashioned in his wisdom for the work of each of his realms. In the kingdom of grace, the kingdom of his right hand, the tools we use to operate are God's law and gospel, his revealed Word and sacraments. Our focus—like God's—is primarily on people's hearts and how God changes such hearts by the power of his gospel. Then, once God has won a heart to faith through the gospel, we also seek to direct believers with God's law and empower them with his gospel to walk worthy of our high calling to faith as sons and daughters of God (Ephesians 4:1).

But we have different tools from God to carry out his different purpose in our callings that are part of the kingdom of his left hand (government, workplace, etc.). When we are operating in our callings within God's kingdom of power—where God is at work to promote outward peace and provide for people's earthly needs—there we operate according to conscience and reason. Reason and conscience are the tools God has given us when we are serving in a calling where he is seeking to bless people with earthly peace, order, and provision.

It is very important that we do not confuse the tools God has given us by failing to ask ourselves in which kingdom which we are serving as we carry out a particular calling in life. While it is true that the Christian's conscience and reason have a huge advantage because they are instructed by God's revealed Word and empowered by his gospel, yet, when we are carrying out the duties of our callings in the kingdom of his world, the kingdom of his left hand, we operate by reason and conscience, not by quoting chapter and verse of the Bible.

Why is that? When we are operating in the kingdom of God's left hand, if we use the Word of God as a tool of outward coercion, we unintentionally end up distorting the chief purpose for which God gave his Word. God did not give his Word primarily to get us to do the right outward things (that is Pharisaism). Rather, he gave his Word to lead hearts to repentance and faith in his Son. If Christians in their assigned tasks in their kingdom of power callings (for example, in government or in positions of leadership in the workplace) try to use the Word to compel an unbelieving world to outward obedience to God's will, we are in grave danger of teaching unbelievers that what God is most concerned about is their outward compliance with earthly laws. We would be operating in God's kingdom of power (where outward peace and earthly blessings are the goal) with the tool God designed to be used in his kingdom of grace (where the emphasis is on imparting to our hearts his eternal blessings).

Yes, it's true, we do hope that as we model Christ-like selfless love for neighbor in our kingdom of this world's callings, the unbelievers around us will take note and ask us about "the reason for the hope that [we] have" (1 Peter 3:15). But as we speak of that hope, it's important to note that we are then carrying out our calling as royal priests of God—a task of his kingdom of grace. But that doesn't mean that suddenly the revealed Word of God has become the tool we wield in our assigned tasks in the kingdom of power callings God has permitted us to have. Since God is at work through our kingdom of power callings to provide outward peace and earthly provision, we

use the tools God designed for our duties in our for-this-life callings: we use reason and appeal to conscience.

That's also why, as we carry out our callings in the kingdom of God's left hand, we will often need to swallow hard as we serve in the midst of institutions that have turned much of God's will upside down. It is a confused, sinful world. As Christians, we know in our hearts that things are vastly different in many ways from what God designed this world to be. And we know that the structures of this world that deal only with the outward things of this life never will get to the heart of what truly troubles us. Yet, that doesn't mean we retreat from taking part in government or the other structures of this world just because they are messy. God has called us to be salt and light in the midst of the darkness and decay of the world. When we involve ourselves in callings from God in the kingdom of his left hand, we are doing godly work as his representatives by preserving as best as possible in a sinful world a semblance of order and seeing to it that greed and corruption don't rob people of having their earthly needs met. And through it all, Christians know something else: we know we are preserving peoples' time of grace and enabling a climate in which we can carry out the even more important work of the kingdom of God's right hand (see the relationship of the two kingdoms at work right next to each other in 1 Timothy 2:1-4).

So, if we love God and our neighbor, we do not hide from the messiness of taking part in the callings of this world in the kingdom of God's left hand. We take part, even though we know it will often be very difficult to know how to do that wisely and well. It will not always be easily or immediately clear to us in those difficult situations what the most loving course of action would be. (In a perfect world, there would be no such challenges brought on by sin.) In fact, part of the messiness may mean that, in our responsibilities in our callings in the kingdom of God's left hand, we may seem for a time for our neighbors' good to be acting in a way that is in violation of a particular principle of God's will. We do that even though in our hearts our Spirit-created new self still delights in that principle.

In regard to the topic of our Bible study, that means when living out the responsibilities of our callings in the kingdom of God's left hand, we may find ourselves wondering precisely how we can best honor the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female. In fact, we may at times act in a way that seems to work counter to that principle. When we are in the Christian home and our Christian churches, where the Word of God has already won other hearts to faith, we know even there it can be difficult to know precisely how to honor the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female. But at least there we have brothers and sisters in Christ who are partnering with us and whose hearts have been won to treasure the saving Word of God. But in the world, we may often find that few around us care about this aspect (or any aspect) of God's will for their lives or ours.

When it comes to wrestling with every part of what it means to love God and neighbor, not just the principle that is the focus of our study, we will often find ourselves praying for sanctified wisdom, seeking wise counsel from others, and then acting in faith in the way that best seems both to honor God and, in that situation, love the specific neighbors he himself has put around us in the responsibilities of that calling. We do this knowing that God delights for us to be salt and light in this messy world. As mentioned above, the goal is never merely to look outwardly

pristine and pious (the Pharisees were good at that), but to actually discern in every setting and situation what it truly means to love as ourselves the neighbors whom our callings impact.

END OF THE FURTHER STUDY

Part 1: Why do we seek to make application of the principle in the world?

While many visible Christian churches have long ago given up on teaching anything at all about the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female, some churches that still seek to hold on to the principle refuse to speak at all about how to apply this in the world. In fact, some go a step further: they deny that this principle has any application beyond the home or the home and church.

So, as difficult as this is for both male and female Christians, why do we even attempt to wrestle with such a challenging issue? Why not just focus on home or home and church as if those were the only places for which God fashioned us uniquely for this partnership?

Some Christians will maintain that since Scripture makes no direct and specific application of the principle to our callings out in the world (government, workplace, etc.), that is evidence that we should not wrestle with such applications. While that statement seems to have a ring of truth to it, here is additional evidence that this conclusion does not stand up under careful pondering of Scripture.

1. In 1 Corinthians 11 we see Christians being urged to honor a custom of their pagan culture (head coverings for women). By honoring their culture's custom, they were really honoring the principle that their Creator wove their uniqueness as male and female deeply into their creation.
2. In Isaiah 3:12, as God was tracing evidence that his Old Testament people had forsaken him, the LORD says this through his prophet: "*Youths oppress my people, women rule over them.*" Clearly, the LORD is describing something turned upside down from how he had created life to be. While in the context it is clear that many Israelite women had abandoned humble faith and hope in the LORD (3:16,17), the root cause also seems to be the brutal lovelessness of the unbelieving men who had lost any concern to offer selfless leading (3:13-15).
3. It is also important to point out a caricature we have noted earlier. Also in our homes and in the church, God gives few applications of the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female. Having woven this into our creation, he leaves much to our sanctified Christian wisdom when it comes to making applications. It is not all that different out in the world. The only difference, as we step out into the world, is that those around us will often not be concerned about this principle (or any other principle of love for God and neighbor).
4. Some would like to use Old Testament figures like Deborah (a judge and prophetess in Israel) and Huldah (a prophetess in Israel) as evidence that God does not intend the principle to have such broad application to society as we are suggesting. However, unless

we deny or cast doubt on the inspired reliability of Scripture by claiming it shows a patriarchal or misogynistic bias, the reality that Deborah and Huldah are quite rare exceptions in both Old and New Testaments actually gives evidence that God did take seriously how he uniquely designed male and female to function in this interdependent and complementary partnership. Also, even in the cases of Deborah and Huldah, there is strong evidence given by the inspired narrator that Deborah and Huldah went about their callings as those who were aware of this principle.

5. If we claim the principle has application only to believers in the settings of their home (or home and church), that would put us back into the place of God's minor children (Israel) who had many such laws in the Old Testament both in their worship life and in daily life that did not apply to the rest of the world. These laws marked them as God's special children from whom he would bring the Messiah into the world for all nations.

However, all such barriers between the Jewish and Gentile worlds were various types of shadows that pointed to the Messiah who was to come from Israel. They were part of the Old Covenant that ceased in its purpose once Jesus had come to live, die, and rise again for the world. Those distinctions of the Old Covenant—often a source of hostility and contention between Jew and Gentile—have been nailed to the cross with Christ (see Ephesians 2:14-16 and Colossians 2:16,17).

With all such distinctions of the Old Covenant gone, it would hardly be helpful to tell Christian males and females that they have one way of living their partnership in the home (or home and church) while a completely different way of operating functions out in the world where everyone can do as they see fit in their own eyes.

6. Because a sinful world ridicules or ignores all of God's good principles, it is often difficult in the world for the Christian to know how to make consistent application of those principles. At times, it seems the world takes special delight in making us squirm in situations in which the complexities of living our God-given callings in a fallen world confront us with what appears to be unsolvable conflicts. But it is not just the interdependent and complementary partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding that is hard to apply in that world. That is true for every good principle of God. All of this is part of bearing the cross as we seek to honor our Creator and Savior's will for our lives. To get rid of any principle of God that is difficult to apply in the world would soon leave us with no principles at work to guide us. Instead, we should expect that seeking to honor what the world is ignoring would make us stand out as different! That's why the apostle Peter speaks at length in his first letter about the reality that we live as "God's elect strangers in the world" (1 Peter 1:1).

What did you find helpful in those six points? What questions did those points raise for you?

Part 2: Practical guidelines to assist us in applying the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in the world

Here are some practical guidelines as we seek to honor the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in the midst of a sinful world.

1. ***No application crystal ball is available.*** We don't know exactly what the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female would have looked like as a perfect world began to fill with people.

- a. Since it "was not good for the man to be alone," that suggests that this interdependent and complementary partnership would have functioned in all the structures of society that would have developed in a perfect world.

Leader's guide: We have no authoritative list from Scripture of the positions men and women would have held in all these structures as they worked together under the principle of head and helper in a perfect world. Our window on a perfect world closes quickly as Adam and Eve fall into sin.

- b. What we would expect to have seen in a perfect world (men and women partnering in all of the structures of society), we would also expect to see operating in all the structures of a fallen world (though distorted by sin from God's perfect intent).

2. ***Don't be confused by overstated caricatures.*** Beware of overstatements by which some try to make it look foolish to apply the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female in the world.

- a. Scripture does ***not*** teach that this partnership makes every female subject to every male she meets, nor, in reverse, does it make every male the head of every female he meets.
- b. While God did indeed lovingly weave this principle into us as he uniquely fashioned us as male and female, the principle finds its application not in broad abstractions but in concrete, specific God-given callings in which male and female find themselves partnering for the good of others (home, church, workplace, government, etc.).

3. ***Refuse to pass judgment on disputable matters.*** Since God has not seen fit to provide specific application for this principle to every situation, our goal is not to claim to know

for ourselves or others the divinely-given only-right-answer to each situation (Romans 14:1).

- a. On the one side we avoid telling ourselves or other Christians that the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female has nothing to do with our lives at work or in government or elsewhere in the world.
 - b. On the other side, we also avoid giving the impression that every believer's conscience as it wrestles with the principle—and all God's other good principles that may be in play in any given situation—will always lead every believer to the same conclusion in every similar situation.
4. ***Remember this principle doesn't function in isolation.*** While how we were uniquely created as male and female is not left behind anywhere we go, there are also many other principles God has given us to ponder that can come into play in any God-given calling in which we might find ourselves as Christian men or women.
- a. The principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female is a helpful gift of God as we consider in every area of life how we can most wisely partner with one another in this world. We fall into the ditch on one side of this truth (under-application) if Christian men or women don't even allow this principle to be part of how they make decisions about how they are called in their vocations to love their neighbor as themselves in the world.
 - b. Yet nowhere in Scripture is this principle listed as that which trumps all other good principles of God. Many principles of love for God above all things and love for our neighbor as we love ourselves are often in play as part of how we operate in our God-given callings in the world. We fall into the ditch on the other side of this truth (over-application) if Christian men or women fail to take into consideration other principles that are also in play in their vocations for how they are to love their neighbor as themselves in the world.
5. ***Be prepared to bear the cross.*** We can always expect that seeking to honor the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female will mark us as different in this world (as will honoring any part of what it means to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves). This is part of bearing our cross (Matthew 16:24,25)!
- a. In a perfect world there would have been no such apparent conflicts between equally good principles God has woven into his world. In a fallen world, such apparent conflicts confront us regularly with every principle of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. Be prepared to be considered foolish for wrestling

with what the world has long ago discarded as a useless or even damaging relic of a bygone era.

- b. A key element in bearing our cross is to crucify our sinful nature that is turned in on itself and away from God and neighbor. Often when confronted with challenging options in life, it can help clarify what may be the wisest path by asking ourselves: “Is a certain choice before me appealing because it serves primarily for my personal benefit or for worldly praise and honor from others? Is there an option before me which most clearly serves the most good for the neighbor or neighbors God has given me to serve or witness to in this calling (even if that means that option brings with it a personal loss as the world would define it)? How will this decision impact my other God-given callings? How will this decision impact my witness to the world or to my fellow Christians?” Such questions can help protect us against justifying a self-centered course of action.

6. ***We are not left alone in these decisions.***

- a. God never fails to hear and answer his people as they pray for wisdom (James 1:5). His promise, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5), is at work for us also in the midst of these decisions.
- b. Part of how God answers our prayers is by putting mature Christian brothers and sisters around us who can help us make a wise choice in difficult situations. We can learn to treasure the sanctified advice of our brothers or sisters who may themselves have prayerfully and carefully wrestled with similar difficult decisions (even though we may not all reach identical conclusions—see, again, Romans 14:1).

7. ***We act in faith as those who stand in grace rather than allowing fear to paralyze us into inactivity.*** Having prayed and considered the advice of those who love us in Christ, we then act as those who stand in God’s grace (Romans 5:1-5). We trust that God delights as we follow his loving encouragement to be preserving salt in a decaying world and godly light in a confused world (Matthew 5:13-16). On the night before he died, Jesus didn’t ask his Father to take us from this world but to protect and strengthen us in his saving truth so that we might live his restored image amidst the fallen world for which he died (John 17:15-19).

- a. We recognize that there will be times when our sinful hearts may still temporarily confuse us. No one this side of heaven will ever perfectly understand the motives of their own natural hearts (Jeremiah 17:9).
- b. Yet in these decisions, we are *not* under the burden of trying to make God pleased with us by finding the perfect answer (which may not exist in this

fallen world). Instead, we prayerfully make our decisions as those with whom God is already well pleased. His grace has already washed us in Jesus' blood and clothed us in his perfection (Galatians 3:26,27). Even if it should later become clear that our sinful hearts blinded us to selfish motives, here too our confession of that reality simply finds that "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

What in these practical guidelines do you find most helpful? Is there anything that could be stated more clearly? Is there something missing from this list that could be added?

Here's how the proposed restatement of our synod's doctrinal statement on male and female seeks to summarize the beauty of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female as Christians seeks to live it out in the world:

God wove into his creation the interdependent and complementary partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding as a blessing for males and females wherever they would partner in his world. Dearly loved children of God in Christ seek to discover what it means to be unique blessings to each other as male and female while simultaneously seeking to use their God-given gifts and aptitudes to love God and their neighbors in their God-given callings in the world (Genesis 2:18, 1 Corinthians 11:3).

Just as in the home and church, God provides male and female with an unchanging principle but leaves much to sanctified Christian wisdom when it comes to application. He treats us as free sons and daughters and not as minor children. This leaves room for Spirit-worked faith to bear fruit in ways that make the most of the unique gifts given to each believer, in applications that may change from setting to setting, from culture to culture, and from age to age.

Two elements combine to make it challenging in the unbelieving world to apply the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female. The unbelieving world either ignores this principle or so distorts its applications to make the principle seem repulsive. In addition, Christians living out their callings often wrestle with how to honor multiple good principles of God that may appear to be in conflict.

However, God does not want such challenges to paralyze his children. He delights when his children are actively engaged in the world as salt and light. He invites believers to pray for sanctified wisdom so that they might know how to honor the heart of what is behind all the principles of God's law: to love God and neighbor selflessly. They trust that the principle of the interdependent and complementary partnership of male and female is a good principle from God. They understand that other godly principles may also need to be considered as they decide how to serve. They weigh the unique

responsibilities God has given them in each of their callings. Finally, they act in faith and not fear, trusting that God knows how to bless them as they wrestle with decisions.

Christians wrestling with such difficult decisions are wise to seek the counsel of other spiritually mature Christians to guard against being deceived by the motives of their own hearts. Christians are also wise not to rush to judgment on applications made by other Christians as they also wrestle with how best to love God and neighbor in their callings.

Christians will also want to remember that it is a confusion of law and gospel to seek to compel unbelievers and an unbelieving world's institutions into outward conformity with God's will (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). Proclaiming the truth of God's law and gospel is the task God has given his church. If Christians use the Word to compel outward obedience, they have lost sight of the Word's God-given purpose to win hearts to repentance and faith and to empower believers to be salt and light in a dying world.

Where do these paragraphs help you understand the partnership of selfless leading and selfless yielding in the world? What further questions do these words raise for you?

Soli deo gloria!