

**AIMEE BYRD**

**WHY**



**WE BE**

**FRIENDS?**

**AVOIDANCE IS NOT PURITY**

With this book, Aimee Byrd has done a great service to the church. At a time when society at large is questioning the meaning of friendship in general and the legitimacy of friendship between men and women, Aimee challenges her readers to test their responses and determine whether they are dictated by Scriptures or by culture and tradition. The answers might surprise you.

Read this book even if you think you are already the best of friends. You will find many unexpected questions and insightful recommendations. If you have children, it will help you to establish in them, from an early age, good habits of friendship and sibling relationships.

—**Simonetta Carr**, Author, *Broken Pieces and the God Who Mends Them* and the Christian Biographies for Young Readers series

Jesus was willing to break through ethnic, political, religious, and gender barriers like a wrecking ball. There was not a man-made obstacle to forgiveness and spiritual growth that he would allow to stand in his way. Aimee Byrd's book on friendship will be a rich resource for believers to consider how they might follow in Jesus' steps. Read it to help you think, reflect, and develop personal convictions for Jesus-centered relationships.

—**Dan DeWitt**, Director, Center for Biblical Apologetics and Public Christianity, and Associate Professor, Applied Theology and Apologetics, Cedarville University

Aimee Byrd's thought-provoking treatment of cross-gender friendship in the family of God is at once rich biblical theology and piercing cultural critique. Eschewing the reductionistic, fear-based, and eroticized views of the other sex that too often typify even those within the church, she answers the question "Can men and women live as sacred siblings in the church?" with an emphatic "Yes, they can—and they must!" . . . if we are to truly follow in the footsteps of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

—**Michael R. Emlet**, Faculty Member, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation; Author, *CrossTalk* and *Descriptions and Prescriptions*

Aimee has not written a rule book full of dos and don'ts for friendships between women and men in the church. She has not drawn a neat little diagram of what is and isn't allowed. What she has done is to give men and women of faith a book that answers the question of *why* there should be vibrant friendships between male and female siblings in Christ; and, in doing so, she gives us the tools to decide how this will be accomplished in a God-honoring way. Beginning at the heart of our identity as children of God, Aimee builds a strong case for why our current approach to male/female friendships misses the heart of what God has for his children.

—**Jasmine Holmes**, Blogger, [jasminelholmes.com](http://jasminelholmes.com)

To be honest, I hate that this book had to be written. But since it is undeniably necessary, I am so thankful that Aimee Byrd took up the task. She writes not merely from experience but with a deep theological orientation and informed pastoral concerns. She reminds Christians to be less influenced by *When Harry Met Sally...* than they are by Jesus and Paul.

Too often as Christians we actually sound no different from non-Christians in our assumptions. Why can't we—as the household of God—be courageous in our concern, affectionate in our love, and wise in our practices? Rather than being driven by fear, let's follow biblical expectations for what it means to be in the family of God.

Thankfully, Aimee calls us to be faithful siblings who are soaked in the love of the Father, strengthened by Christ our elder brother, and empowered in the Spirit of holiness. By God's grace, let us learn to live more like a healthy family.

—**Kelly M. Kopic**, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia; Author, *Embodied Hope*

The apostle Paul never called his closest associates "friends"; they were brothers and sisters in Christ. Expanding on his insight, Aimee Byrd explains friendship between males and females in the church as a sacred-siblings calling to love, sanctification, and celebration. Too many people today guard their hearts with rules motivated by fear, concern for reputation, or gross misunderstandings of who we are instead of

by theology. *Why Can't We Be Friends?* ushers us into the deep spaces of Christian theology in a way that rearranges our relationships. If we will be siblings in the kingdom, it's time we accepted our future for the sake of our present. This is the best book I have seen on this subject.

—**Scot McKnight**, Julius R. Mantey Chair of New Testament,  
Northern Seminary, Lisle, Illinois

Have you ever wondered whether there's more that God intended for men and women to experience in their friendships with one another this side of heaven? With winsome candor, extensive research, and a vibrant love for the church, Aimee Byrd urges readers to confront the stereotypes that limit friendship between men and women by seeking above all else to *promote holiness* in one another. Her words awaken a desire to richly enjoy the brother/sister relationships to which our elder brother, Christ, calls us. Her life bears this out. Thank you, Aimee, for such a courageous and timely gift to the church!

—**Dave Myers**, Elder, New Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church,  
Frederick, Maryland

In our hyper-sexualized culture, there is a very real danger that the church will unconsciously allow the world to set her priorities, if only by way of overreaction, and will thereby ironically lose sight of important aspects of biblical teaching. Nowhere is this more likely than in the sphere of relationships between the sexes. Thus, Aimee Byrd's plea for a recovery of such friendships in the church, through the rediscovery of the significance of the biblical use of sibling language, is timely. The church is to be a place of love and hospitality where we are to take seriously the transformation of our identities in Christ. A provocative but irenic breath of fresh air on a contentious topic, this book shows how we can and should do that. Highly recommended.

—**Carl R. Trueman**, William E. Simon Visiting Fellow in Religion  
and Public Life, Princeton University; Professor of Biblical and  
Religious Studies, Grove City College

Too often, Christians swear allegiance to the cultural belief that platonic relationships between the sexes are unthinkable. In the interest

of avoiding adultery at all costs, we segregate men and women from one another within the church. But *one another* is precisely what we lose when this is the case. Aimee Byrd calls us back to the Bible's vision of believers as the family of God—a family of spiritual brothers and sisters who actually believe they are capable of and called to loving *one another* deeply, from the heart (see 1 Peter 1:22). I can't think of a more countercultural message or a more compelling witness to the gospel than a church marked by men and women who trade the fear of adultery for the freedom of appropriate sibling friendships as they partner to advance the kingdom. Aimee shows us this better way.

—**Jen Wilkin**, Bible Teacher; Author, *Women of the Word* and *None Like Him*

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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To my biological siblings,  
Luke, Brooke, Eli, and Brody.  
Being your big sister has shaped me  
and all my other relationships.  
And it's been one of my greatest honors in life.  
Praise God that you are my spiritual siblings as well!

And to my brothers and sisters in Christ at New Hope OPC.  
You bring out the beauty of our great expectation.





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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One event above all others spurred me to answer the notorious question about relationships between the sexes: “Why can’t we be friends?” Four years ago, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals invited me to join Dr. Carl Trueman and Rev. Todd Pruitt in cohosting a podcast called *Mortification of Spin*. I was pleased to be able to contribute a laywoman’s perspective alongside two godly pastors, one of whom was an accomplished academic as well. And I fit in easily as we bounced ideas off one another, engaged in theological conversation, and enjoyed a sibling-like banter that came naturally to us. But, to my surprise, some listeners soon warned of the dangers of having a woman interacting with two respectable men. Some of the “warnings” were terribly demeaning: I was an affair waiting to happen, a possible career ender, perhaps Satan’s strategy to bring down another pastor and church. Even if I was a positive addition to the podcast, it wasn’t worth the risk. The underlying message was that we shouldn’t model this coed dynamic to the church. Even if our

relationships and interactions were godly, coed friendship is not something everyone can handle. Don't try this at home.

We were all surprised. Had we done something wrong? All of a sudden, our sexuality was an elephant in the room. We had to address it with one another, with our spouses, and with our boss. I am glad that none of us believed the spin. I want to thank Catriona Trueman and Karen Pruitt for not looking at me in this reductive way. I want to thank the Alliance for risking the loss of donors in order to keep me on the program. And I want to thank Carl and Todd for all the razzing, humor, support, protectiveness, friendship—and did I mention razzing?—that I should expect from older spiritual brothers. Friendship isn't a profession; our coed dynamic on the podcast works so well because we are friends with one another in real life. And so this book is appropriately a mortification of spin.

I have wonderful friends. That's why the research for *Why Can't We Be Friends?* was particularly joyful work—the more I uncovered, the more my heart grew thankful for the people in my life. I particularly want to thank my parents for raising my siblings and me in an atmosphere that promoted brother and sister relationships of faith, love, honor, trust, healthy competition, humor, and solidarity. And I want to thank my church, New Hope OPC, which showcases a household full of loving siblings in Christ. Both the household I was raised in and the household of God that my family worships in testify to our Lord's great mercy in giving us a taste of what is to come. The beauty of our siblingship that we enjoy now is like the sparkling morning dew that refreshes the hope we share together for the new heavens and the new earth.

One particular brother in Christ has been pivotal in this project. So I want to especially thank my elder, Dave Myers, for all his encouragement and interest, for reading my chapters critically, and for the many great insights and questions that

## *Acknowledgments*

helped to improve the manuscript. The footnote credits to you that are peppered throughout the book make me smile; they testify in a practical way to God's gift of friendship between the sexes and to the fruit of the ministry in local churches.

Thanks are always in order to my husband, Matt, who continually models in action all the big ideas that I like to theologize about. You make it look so simple. Thank you for blessing me with twenty years of loving marriage. You are the type of husband and friend who gives great credibility to the words I write. You lay your life down for mine every day and still manage to be a loving friend to others. Our marriage blesses our friendships, and our friendships bless our marriage.

And many thanks to the P&R team for all they have put into this book. I appreciate the support from Ian Thompson and Amanda Martin, who encouraged me to write on this topic, as well as all the work poured into its fruition. And I always appreciate the work of Aaron Gottier in my final stages of editing.



# INTRODUCTION

## What's at Stake

This is a book that I didn't want to write—until I really wanted to write it. I couldn't *not* write it.

The strange thing is that I know this will be a controversial book. I'm going to make the case that men and women can and should be friends, along with describing a biblical theology that answers why and how we can pull this off. In fact, I will argue that Christian men and women are more than friends—we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we need to act according to who (and whose) we are.

Already, after reading these few short lines, you may have formed a strong opinion of me. Maybe you think it's crazy to even have to write a book about something so obvious, or maybe you think I'm completely naive about how men and women think and what leads to affairs. That's why I didn't want to write this book.

My own view on this issue has changed throughout the twenty years of my marriage. In the past, I would never have flat-out stated that men and women can't be friends at all. I



don't expect most of my readers think that either. But I had a big pile of caveats that made me wonder. Does friendship hurt marriage? Does marriage hinder friendships?

I see these questions in others as well. Most Christians who wonder if men and women can be friends are passionate about purity and faithfulness in our marriages. We want to be smart. We don't want to be naive about sin or to cause anyone to stumble. We want our marriages to last, affair and pornography free, and we want our sons and daughters to be chaste. We expect the church to be a safe place amidst a sex-obsessed culture. But we have watched high-profile, respected pastors become involved in devastating sexual scandal. We have seen friends fall into sexual sin. Some of us are children of divorce due to affairs. And some have been victims in our own marriages. Sexual sin is painfully destructive. When we think of the power of temptation and the ramifications of sexual sin, it seems natural to ask whether men and women can be friends. Many people caution that attempting friendship is just playing with fire. Why risk it?

Over my years of blogging and social media experience, I have discovered that some topics bring out the fighters on both sides. Sometimes I've been surprised at the divided responses to things I have written about—things like women's bathing suit choices, gluten, the Trinity, and who can teach Sunday school. Sure, I expect people to have strong convictions. But we also need to be discerning about which hills we are actually going to die on. Some topics, like the Trinity, are worth duking it out over—but I've decided that I don't want to provoke unneeded controversy on an issue such as gluten. It's just not worth losing friends over. I've learned to pick my battles.

Well, friendship between the sexes is another hot button that provokes passionate interaction. It's an issue that the

church has often stubbed its toe on. And I'm just foolhardy enough to write a book about it! Why, Aimee; *why*?

## **Our Relationships**

I wrote this book because I want us to be biblically faithful in a very important area: our relationships. I want marriages to be better. I want singles to have more meaningful relationships. And I want the next generation to grow up with a better understanding of how men and women view each other.

What is the quality of your relationships? How would you describe your relationships in the home? In the workplace? In the church? In the neighborhood? If you're single, how's that going for you? What about if you're dating? If you're married, how is your marriage? Do you tend to be jealous or suspicious? Scared? Guilty? Superior? Are you lonely? Unsatisfied? Maybe you're just stressed trying to live a life of purity and not really sure what that looks like from day to day. What do you do when you're attracted to someone? What happens when you suddenly have teenagers who are at dating age? Is that even a thing? If you're married and have to work closely with the other sex,<sup>1</sup> how hypervigilant do you need to be? Can you drive to a meeting or share a lunch break with a person of the other sex? If you're a pastor who wants to shepherd your whole congregation well, is your office off limits to half (or more) of your congregation? What about email? Can men and women email?

You see, a lot of questions fall underneath the broad

1. Thanks to Matt Vos, professor of sociology and chair of the sociology department at Covenant College, for pointing out to me that by using the language "opposite sex" we frame one another as opposites when in reality men and women are more alike than they are different, we predispose one another to push away the other sex, and we perpetuate the notion of "woman as other," which leads to abuses.

question of whether men and women can be friends. We assume that we know the meaning of friendship in that question, but I have discovered that many people do not.

In this book, I am going to argue that men and women in the church should not only be friends, but actually be more than friends. Unfortunately, as eager as the conservative church is to speak out against the sexual revolution and gender identity theories, she often appears just as reductive as the culture surrounding her when it comes to representing our communion with God in our communion with one another. But Scripture tells us over and over again that Christian men and women are more than friends—we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul tells Timothy to treat gender distinction in a familial way. He petitions him to appeal to the older men as fathers, “the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:1–2). This says it all. Paul doesn’t give Timothy a bunch of details on how to treat a father or a sister; we already know how to do that. It’s a respectful way to relate to one another—and, when we relate this way, we remove the possibility of sex.

We have lost the beauty of brotherhood and sisterhood—distinction between the sexes that doesn’t reduce them to sex alone. The way that we relate to one another sends a message—to one another and to the watching world—about who we are. We are God’s people! And in his Word, we can learn a lot about the types of relationships he wants us to have in his household.

When we start talking about whether a man and a woman can be friends, we begin to question God’s plan for human sexuality. Is our sexuality to be ultimately expressed in the union of one man and one woman in marriage? Is sex the fundamental expression of our sexuality? Will we be sexual beings in the new heavens and the new earth? If so, how will we

express our sexuality in eternity, and how does that affect the way we relate to one another now?

## Our Theology

These questions can't be hashed out 140 characters at a time on social media threads. They can't be answered well in a series of blog posts or on a conversational podcast. And I am convinced that there's too much at stake—both theologically and practically—for me to keep watching them be argued in magazine articles and Twitter threads. I can't take it anymore. I want to address what's behind the “Why can't we be friends?” question. And I want to do it in a reasonable tone so that those on both sides of the issue can come together and engage with me. We have the same concerns, and we all need to be sharpened.

Many of the current prescriptions for appropriate behavior for men and women have skipped over the foundational thinking that helps us to grow in wisdom, discernment, and fruitful relationships. Four theological categories underlie the answer to this friendship question, and I'll need to use some theological terms for the sake of precision. Throughout this book, we will see that what we believe in these four areas affects how we view relationships between the sexes:

- *Anthropology—the study of human beings.* Why were we created? Why does that matter? A theological anthropology is the foundation to our understanding of friendship. We are created for communion with God and one another.
- *Christology—the study of Christ.* Who are we as Christians? We can't discuss this without talking about Jesus Christ and what he has done on our behalf. Our union with

Christ, our Elder Brother, gives God's people a new relationship as brothers and sisters.

- *Ecclesiology—the study of the church.* When we talk about God's church and the men and women in it, we talk about God's *household* (see 1 Tim. 3:15). We are God's family. How does he expect us to treat one another?
- *Eschatology—the study of the end times and eternity.* How does the whole Christian life end? What is our ultimate hope, and how does it shape our relationships? What we expect in the future should shape our behavior here and now.

We will study these ideas as we work through the practical aspects of improving our lives together, aiming toward holy, joyful living that glorifies God.

## Our Sibling Status

Some passages of Scripture directly address men or women, but numerous passages in the New Testament are directed to the entire church. In these cases, the biblical writers use the familial term *adelphoi*, meaning “brothers and sisters.” This description appears many times. However, most Scripture translations use the word *brethren* or *brothers* instead. As we navigate the distinctions between men and women in an overly sexualized world, it's important for us to be aware of when the New Testament writers were including both brothers *and* sisters in their audience. It is extremely helpful in the discussion of masculinity and femininity and how we relate. The Christian Standard Bible uses *brothers and sisters*, and it really makes a difference when you are reading through a book like 1 Thessalonians and find yourself underlining twenty instances of this language!

What I can't find in Scripture is any warning about avoiding friendship between the sexes in order to avoid sin. Instead the Bible says, "Let love be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9 CSB). We are to *cling* to what is good, not throw it out because sin is possible. Directly following that command is a call to meaningful relationships with our siblings in Christ: "Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters" (Rom. 12:10 CSB).

I grew up with a brother and a sister, and I was blessed with additional twin brothers when I was twenty-four years old. We have different mothers, but I shudder to call them half-brothers. They are my brothers, and I have the same affection for them as for the brother I grew up with. My family has always valued the blessing of siblingship. When I first began to notice sibling language all over Scripture, it resonated with me. I already know how to love brothers and sisters deeply, because this is something I already do. So it was especially exciting for me to research siblingship in antiquity and how the original readers of Scripture would have connected with that language as well.

The shocking part was how little I could find written on this topic. Christians are continually addressed as brothers and sisters in the New Testament, but there are only a few obscure books on Christian friendships between the sexes and even fewer on the scriptural language of siblingship. You will notice that I have gone outside my usual base for research. The topic of holy friendship is broader than Protestantism, and I have found richness in the contributions of Christians from different traditions who have thought deeply on this topic. And thank goodness for rare dissertations (though not for the cost of buying published ones) for providing academic work on a topic that accomplished authors don't want to touch! Why are so few Christian academics, pastors, and authors writing about this?

## **Faithful Friendship**

As we look at the big, controversial question of this book's title, we will answer some other questions:

- Are we being faithful to Scripture when we talk about and live out our relationships between the sexes?
- What responsibilities do we have before God and to one another?
- How should the church model richness in relationships before the watching world?

In part 1, we'll look at the reasons why friendship between the sexes is so difficult—why we can't seem to be friends. Part 2 shifts to what friends do. Every chapter aims to build my case that there is no need for friendship between the sexes to be a controversial topic. Instead it should be one that glorifies our truest friend and Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.



## **PART 1**



---

# **Why Can't Men and Women Be Friends?**



# 1

## We're Letting the Wrong Voices Tell Us Who We Are

We can say a lot *about* ourselves, but how often do we think about who we *are*?

*Who am I?* As easy as this question sounds to answer, especially for a Christian, we may be surprised to hear some of the responses that those who know us in different contexts would give about us. How would our friends answer this question? Does who we are make a difference in our relationships? How well do our acquaintances and friends really know us? How much of that “knowledge” is merely an image that we *want* them to believe? Are they buying it? What messages have we absorbed from others, and do those messages affect what we communicate about ourselves?

Who are you when safely protected within the walls of your home? Who are you when you walk through the doors of your local church? Who are you to your neighbors and coworkers? Who are you to your extended family? Who are you in the presence of your friends? While integrity calls us to

be the same person no matter where we are and whom we are talking to, we don't always have that freedom.

## **Mixed Messages**

In my childhood, I learned a lot about my identity in relation to my family. In particular, I learned a lot about gender relations by being a sister. My interactions with my sister and brother, and the way our parents treated us, prepared me well for friendship and marriage, living and relating with those outside our household, and one day creating a household of my own. And to this day, my sister and I take credit for how our brother turned out to be such a great friend to others and also a wonderful husband to his wife. As the middle sibling sandwiched between two sisters, my brother Luke learned all about the beautiful, the mysterious, and the ugly of femininity. The three of us learned that we were indispensable members of our household and that we were to build one another up, especially in public. We were equally challenged to live active lives physically, academically, and spiritually.

My siblings know me well. They know my strengths and weaknesses, my way of thinking, my sense of humor, my fears, and my longings. We grew up having fun together, and we also learned to suffer together. We have history. I never felt hindered by my gender<sup>1</sup> in my personal household. I felt equipped and responsible.

1. Here's as good a place as any to point out that many today suggest that gender is merely a social construct. Should I even use that word? Our *sex* has to do with our biology. The differences between the male and female sexes include, but are not limited to, our chromosomes, our muscle mass, our genitalia, our hormones, and even the way we process information. But that's not really what I'm referring to here. *Gender* describes how the two sexes relate to each other socially. Gender often carries the cultural baggage of a society. But gender is also real—when we talk about how we relate, we talk about gender, socially constructed or not.

*Who am I?* I'm a sister and a daughter. I'm blessed.

But, as I was growing up, the culture around me sent messages suggesting that I needed to look a certain way and make myself desirable and available. The world told me that I am autonomous and should use my sexuality to please myself and get what I want.

The year I entered high school, the popular movie *When Harry Met Sally* released, and Harry Burns, played by Billy Crystal, told the world that “men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.”<sup>2</sup> One movie helped to popularize the notion that all women are reduced to a means of sexual gratification for men, that a man cannot control himself from thinking about conquering every woman he is “friends” with, and that we all have to live with this cold, hard fact. It was in the movies, so it must be true.

*Who am I?* I'm a woman who is to use her best assets to attract and manipulate a man. I am empowered by choice for my own body and ambitions.

The church, God's household, ought to speak to us about our truest identity through the ministry of the Word. Even the outside culture expects the church to respond with a higher calling than the world offers. But over time I learned that much of the conservative church believes the “Billy Crystal rule” taught by Burns. In a complete contradiction of our fight to uphold a biblical understanding of sexuality, Hollywood became our teacher on relationships and gender after all. The church sent messages that a woman's attractiveness serves the purpose of landing a husband, then becomes a threat to all other men. My sexuality became a barrier to friendship. This has been quite a challenge in my adult years.

2. “Men and Women,” *When Harry Met Sally...*, directed by Rob Reiner, written by Nora Ephron (1989; Los Angeles: MGM, 2015), DVD.

*Who am I?* I am a woman, created to find a husband and fashion a haven for him. And I am a threat to other people's marriages.

As you can see, my personal household, the outside world, and the church have given me conflicting messages about who I am and why that matters.

## **In Search of Mature Sexuality and Relationships**

I married at the young age of twenty-one with immature views on sexuality. In hindsight, it's as if I moved backward from the healthy understanding of gender and relationships I had learned in my family growing up. I had adopted worldly views about men and women from both the secular culture and the church at large. I wanted to be a good wife. I wanted to do the whole biblical womanhood thing. I pursued it with vigor. Encouraged by a popular Christian radio program, my husband and I came up with rules that would protect our marriage from affairs. But I also looked to my husband to fulfill more of my relational needs than he possibly could. I thought that our marriage and growing family would supply all our needs for companionship.

To make things more complicated, my husband worked with a lot of women. As the owner of a coffee café, I was also meeting a lot of people. Coffee baristas function like bartenders. We have regulars and learn much more about them than how they like their coffee. And while the little church plant that we joined had a great community in which men and women interacted well together, I quickly received signals from my pastor that women don't learn theology at the same level as men. This glass ceiling of expectation for women learning theology and communicating it with other brothers and sisters in the faith was a lonely reality for me.

My husband and I have been married for over twenty years now. In this time, we have grown and learned a lot about relationships. We have come up against some strange views in the church about manhood and womanhood. On one hand, we see regular laypeople with fruitful coed friendships. On the other, we have been taught that this is dangerous territory.

I'd love to be able to point the secular culture to Christ's church as a representation of how communion with God affects relationships between the sexes. But we've reduced a lot of the discussion about manhood in the church to how a man shows authority. Much of the discussion about womanhood draws lines nitpicking what a woman can do and what she can't do. And the church has provided little discussion about how men and women relate to each other.

Worse, I have come across some troubling remarks in the broader evangelical subculture about Christian stewardship to our neighbors, friendship between the sexes, and the value of a woman's contribution. I've read my share of articles about whether a man and a woman can text, share a car ride, or eat a business lunch together in a public place. I even read an argument from a popular pastor considering whether it's okay for a man who is lost to ask a housewife for directions without this challenging his manhood.<sup>3</sup> I've seen high-profile pastors write and share disturbing tweets such as this one: "I could see giving a woman a ride. To the hospital. If the bone was sticking out."<sup>4</sup>

This kind of talk makes my heart sink on so many levels. *Who am I?* I'm such a threat to a man's faithfulness and

3. See John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (1991; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 50.

4. Douglas Wilson, (@douglaswils), "Pence Rule: Case by Case Dept.," Twitter, April 6, 2017, 4:20 p.m., <https://twitter.com/douglaswils/status/850126155546062848>.

a pastor's reputation that I'm barely worth the risk of a ride to the hospital. Thirty years after *When Harry Met Sally*, some pastors have taken Harry Burns's pronouncement to a whole new level.

I wish I could say that I'm just pointing out a few extremes, but I've received this message over and over again in my own life. I see godly men who want to interact with women with a clear conscience but who are brainwashed by the Billy Crystal rule. Some of the very men who preach biblical manhood and chivalry do nothing when it will actually cost them something—and that cost is usually “appearances.” This really hit home when I once found myself in a strange city, at night, in the rain, walking down a sketchy alley when I could have been offered a ride to my car three blocks away. In those situations, I cringe to answer the question *Who am I?*

## **The Damaging Consequences of Our Message**

Men and women can't be friends until we stop letting the wrong voices tell us who we are. Our identity matters. If we listen to conflicting voices that tell us we are adversaries, consumerists, or dangerous to the other sex, then we are in no position to be friends because we will accept the false labels and behave accordingly. In effect, we will live a lie!

Hollywood promotes sex without consequences, and people believe it. When women are displayed as seductresses and men as consumers, it's not surprising when some men think they are entitled to gratify all their desires. Women pay the price as more powerful men abuse and devalue them.

The disastrous effects of this thinking have begun to boil to the surface. In the fall of 2017, after close to one hundred women came forward to accuse powerful film producer and Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment,

assault, and rape, actress Alyssa Milano called women to share their own stories: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.”<sup>5</sup> In response, millions of people engaged in the #MeToo discussion on social media. It was devastating to read story after story from these suffering women. It was also empowering for women to feel like they had a voice—and that their voice mattered.

But the story didn’t end there. Shortly afterward, the #ChurchToo hashtag appeared, as women testified of sexual abuse by those in the church.<sup>6</sup> As if the violation to their bodies weren’t dehumanizing enough, woman after woman shared horrifying reactions from church leaders who did not believe them, shamed them, or told them they needed to repent for provoking the act. These women had no voice in the church, and the voices that they heard did not advocate for them. The silence of their supposed friends and the voices of those leaders who let them down told women that they weren’t valued as sisters in Christ, that they weren’t created with inherent dignity, and that their contributions weren’t welcome.

Is the church, like Hollywood, perpetuating an environment in which she is vulnerable to or complicit in abuse? In the aftermath, will we label all men and women and be led by fear, or will we look to God’s Word to see how he calls us to relate? It’s easy for us to look at Hollywood and say, “I told you so.” The message they promote about sex is now reaping the consequences. But what do the consequences we are seeing in

5. Quoted in Nadia Khomami, “#MeToo: how a hashtag became a rallying cry against sexual harassment,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment>.

6. See Casey Quackenbush, “The Religious Community Is Speaking Out Against Sexual Violence With #ChurchToo,” *TIME*, November 22, 2017, <http://time.com/5034546/me-too-church-too-sexual-abuse/>.

the #ChurchToo response reveal about the church's message? What does the church teach about men, women, what we are created for, and how we are to relate to each other?

## Anthropology and the Sexes

When discussing relationships between men and women, we don't want our personal households, the culture at large, or the household of God to espouse reductive views of the sexes. All three can answer the question *Who am I?* in different, often troubling, ways. And, as we've seen, the consequences can be dire for both individuals and groups. Which message is true?

In his excellent essay on theological anthropology, Kelly Kopic answers many of the problems proposed in the first chapters of this book.<sup>7</sup> A proper theological anthropology gets to the heart of who we truly are. What does it mean for human beings to be put on this earth together as men and women? We find the answer revealed in God's Word, and Kopic has done some heavy lifting academically from which we can build fruitful applications.

Kopic explains that we must “[look] to the incarnate Christ” to “discover the Triune Creator, the human creature, and the particular call and response that hold [them] together.”<sup>8</sup> By looking to Christ in order to understand the relationship between God and his image bearers, we can develop a theological anthropology that “faithfully reflects God's purposes as well as the reality of current human existence—including dignity and struggle, universality and particularity, relationality

7. See Kelly M. Kopic, “Anthropology,” chap. 8 in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

8. Kopic, 166.



and personal identity, all understood within the framework of love and communion.”<sup>9</sup>

The “Triune Creator” calls us into communion with himself. This simply stated sentence is full of wonder! *Communion* is an intimate participation in fellowship. It “is mutual trust, mutual belonging; it is the to-and-fro movement of love between two people where each gives and each one receives.”<sup>10</sup> God has created us to share in the Father’s love for the Son, by his Holy Spirit.

We know about the blessed communion between the persons of the Trinity, but how are we included in that as mere creatures? In the incarnation, God affirms both creation and humanity. God isn’t stingy with his love for the Son but is outgoing, generously calling us to share and participate in that love with him. “In Jesus, God actualizes his call to us to enter communion with him through the Son and by the Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

This is how Kopic frames his Christian anthropology. It is not merely philosophical but is rooted in the incarnate Christ. So, in the act of the incarnation, we see that the Father’s love for humanity is preeminent in Christ, the one to whose likeness we are being transformed in our sanctification. This means everything when we are talking about who we are: those created in the image of God. We get to be like God! How do we do that, you ask? Kopic echoes John Owen in affirming that “*we are never more like God than when we love his Son through his Spirit.*”<sup>12</sup>

The way we treat others in the church and in our vocations sends a message about their Creator. For example, as a

9. Kopic, 166.

10. Kopic, 178, quoting Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 28.

11. Kopic, “Anthropology,” 167.

12. Kopic, 166.

public school teacher and administrator, my husband not only works with a lot of women but is a friend to many of them. He respects them, learns from them, and enjoys their presence (well, some of them, anyway), and he also protects them and helps them to flourish. These women know that he is safe. More than that, they can trust him to act as a friend who sees their value, worth, and contributions.

Unlike Harry Burns, and society at large, Matt doesn't hold a self-serving outlook on humanity in which men are consumers. Nor does he avoid women out of fear. Matt's theology accounts for platonic relational development, sacrificial giving, and accountability to a higher being. The way he treats the women at his work honors God, and it honors me as his wife. Despite the many voices in the evangelical subculture that have told us differently, we've come to learn that our godly friendships outside our marriage are not a threat but actually benefit the unique, exclusive communion that we have as husband and wife.

God's Word upholds the dignity of the sexes, the beautiful complexity in our design, and the way we are to relate to one another. How many people has God created so far? I can't even fathom the answer to that question. How many people does God add to his covenant family in a day? Only God knows. But those of us who are like him in loving his Son through his Spirit are also going to be like him in being outgoing with that love. It is a love that overflows into communion with one another.

The question *Who am I?* directly affects our relationships with both men and women. When we listen to the wrong voices, we either become afraid of each other or try to take advantage of or manipulate one another. This is not the way that God has called us to relate. In a time of sexual chaos, we see over-sexualization of men and women, sexual abuse and

perversion, calls for gender fluidity and androgyny, and even the promotion of transgendered lifestyles. It is imperative for the church to speak God's Word to us about who we are.

I don't want to pretend to be androgynous. It's impossible, really. I am always aware that I am a woman. I am aware of this when I talk to other women and little girls, and when I talk to men and little boys. This awareness doesn't merely have to do with my physical body. It's part of the essence of who I am. When I communicate, I express myself as both a woman and a fellow human being. But more than that, I have been adopted into a holy household as a child of God, and my identity as a sister in that household shapes my communion with others. It shapes the way I relate to both fellow Christians and unbelievers as well.

It's important for us to examine whether our confessional theology (what we say we believe) and our functional theology (our operating beliefs in real life) are congruent. When we do this, we begin to see why it matters so much to learn theology. A good theological anthropology will tell us why a proper identity matters. Developing a rich understanding of our origin and purpose reveals what matters to God and, therefore, what should matter to us. First we will look at how our theology here affects whether we view one another in reductive or holistic ways. This is imperative to answering the question, why can't we be friends?

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Who were some influential voices from home, church, and society that affected your perception of who you are? What messages did they send?
2. How might we discover a rich answer to who we are by looking to the incarnate Christ? Within the framework

of love and communion in Christ, what can we learn about dignity and struggle, universality and particularity, and relationality and personal identity?

3. Write a statement answering these questions: Who are you, and what is your purpose? How does this affect the way you relate to both men and women?