

FELLOWSHIP GREENVILLE:

God's Design for Marriage, Family, and the Church

Preface

The God of Scripture is a creative community within himself, eternally existing as Father, Son, and Spirit – the Trinity. In order to reflect his own beauty, worth, and glory, God made humanity in his image. This image-bearing includes a commissioning by God to mirror Him by being a creative community ourselves. These things are implied in the first command in the whole Bible: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

As we see the story of Scripture unfold, we also see that each member of the Trinity functions uniquely in creation and redemption. For example, Jesus the Son enters human history as a baby born in a stable. This doesn't make Jesus less divine than the Father and the Spirit. Similarly, the Spirit is the divine presence within every Christian. This doesn't make him more divine than the Father or the Son. The point is that there is equality and distinction within the Godhead, and this paradigm of ‘equality in essence’ and ‘distinction in function’ is likewise meant to be present within God's people.

God has ordained two institutions for the flourishing of his people, to help them to be truly human as he created them to be in Eden: the family and the church. The family is meant to be like a small church, and the church is meant to be like a big family. Within these two institutions, every “family member” is equal in worth, dignity, and value. At the same time, different “family members” are called to distinct roles or tasks, reflecting God's own life. Again, equal in essence and distinct in function.

But God has also ordained a third institution for the good of human flourishing. Whereas the first two institutions will remain forever (and merge into one) as God's family in the new heavens and the new earth, the third institution will dissolve upon Jesus' final return, and that is, human government. God has ordained the state as an institution to help society thrive by keeping justice, peace, and order. This does not mean that the state can do no wrong. Rather, human governments are to aid human prosperity by being a social and moral buffer for humans as cultural beings.

When we consider this third institution, we are reminded that even those different from us are loved by God and made in his image. Stated more specifically, God has created every single individual ever in his image to mirror his glory. Regardless of religion, race, color, class, creed, age, or sex, God has created every person to be a reflection of himself. Again, every human life matters to God and is made to image his goodness. And this is where our greatest purpose and joy is found, in rightly relating to God and bearing his image. Sadly, every individual has also fallen into sin, and sin has rendered it impossible for us to perfectly reflect God on our own. But God has sent Jesus to restore us back to himself, and be a part of his family.

But, as God's people, what do we do if there is friction between the first two institutions and the third one? What happens if the government or the state redefines the purposes for which we were created (for example, the Hebrews midwives disobeyed Pharaoh in Exodus 1 when he commanded them to kill newborn Hebrew boys)? What happens when the culture's definitions of the above institutions differ from what Scripture teaches? What should we do? This is especially difficult because we're called to partner with God on his mission of redemption, to show people the love of God, and to welcome them into God's family through Jesus. So, how do we simultaneously offer life, love, and salvation to an unbelieving world, and at the same time, maintain biblical convictions about God's design for humanity? For this, we will always need more grace and wisdom than we realize.

At Fellowship Greenville, our highest allegiance is to God and the revelation of Himself found in Scripture. Within God's character we can see foundations for all three above institutions. In this document, we will not address all three institutions at length, but will consider how the 'equality and distinction' of the Trinity should change the way we think about things like marriage, family, and sexuality – especially in our increasingly sexualized, polarized, and politicized culture.

The elders, pastors, and leadership of Fellowship Greenville do not claim to be inerrant or without fault. However, with humility and conviction, we do maintain an unreserved commitment to the truth of God's Word. We believe that it will be the source of the grace and wisdom we need. There is no desire to become driven by legalistic motives in our practices here at Fellowship Greenville. Yet, the Bible does outline for us God's intended design for the Christian family and the local church, and we want to be faithful to the purpose of those institutions. So, below are different arenas of family life and church life, and how we are seeking to abide by Scripture's design concerning each.

Singleness

In the same passage, the Apostle Paul says that marriage and singleness are both gifts (1 Corinthians 7). But Paul goes further. He says that married people who are following Jesus need the example of single people who are following Jesus. Married people are prone to greater distraction, and need the passionate example of those with the gift of singleness who have an "undivided devotion to the Lord" (7:35). And in many ministries and churches, being married can feel like an elevated status of spirituality, and Paul thinks almost the exact opposite.

So, how are single Christians supposed to "be fruitful and multiply"? They are called to be a part of God's family and multiply God's image through things like worship, community, service, discipleship, and equipping like all of us. This is what Paul is implying by mentioning their "undivided devotion to the Lord." Being a single Christian means not giving in to the cultural lie that you can be whatever you want and do whatever you want and do it with whomever you want. Rather, a single Christian belongs to Jesus and Jesus' family.

Thus, the primary job of single believers is to be a part of the ongoing life of Jesus by things like fellowship, worship, and mission alongside Jesus' people. Paul's discussion on spiritual gifts later in 1 Corinthians perfectly applies here. He says that every believer is given "a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (12:7). That is, all Christians have spiritual gifts. And every spiritual gift is equal in its essence and aim. But then Paul lists gifts that are wildly different in role and practice. This means, the spiritual gifts are equal in essence and distinct in function. All followers of Jesus, especially the single brothers and sisters in our midst, must help lead the way by discovering their gift(s) in order to serve Christ and others.

Marriage

Marriage is likewise a gift. Before sin entered the world, God made man and woman in his image, biologically gendered to reflect his glory. Also prior to sin, God ordained the institution of marriage between his image bearers. Therefore, we believe a biblical marriage to be the union of a biologically gendered godly man and a biologically gendered godly woman, bound together in

covenant love and commitment. Their covenant promises to each other create a new family, and their bond of love is intended to be nourished in the context of the church, God's family. The Bible also teaches that marriage is not a manmade, contractual relationship that can be entered into or disposed of upon one's whimsy. In Scripture, marriage is a sacred and lifelong relationship that shows us something about God's perfect love to us.

In Ephesians 5.22-33, the Apostle Paul says that Christian marriage should be like the marriage of Christ and his church. Jesus sacrificially gave his own life so that his people could live. And now, this same kind of sacrificial, lay-down-your-life love should be the defining mark of Christian marriage. In these kinds of marriages, we come to know and sense God's love in Christ more poignantly.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul also says that Christian marriage is a place where a godly woman and a godly man intimately and totally give themselves to each other. Their union is to be an honest, open, vulnerable, confessing, and rejoicing partnership that mutually shares all of life with the other. Christian marriage is intended to be a place where hearts are shared emotionally, possessions are shared freely, words are shared kindly, burdens are shared graciously, forgiveness is shared frequently, gratitude is shared happily, and bodies are shared sexually. We believe that the Bible teaches that sexual union and intimacy is only meant for the context marriage. Promiscuity and sexual exploration outside of the covenant of marriage dishonors the gift of marriage as it is presented in Scripture.

Further, we believe that the sexual union of marriage is a gift that can lead to the gift of children. As such, children should be received and treated as unique blessings from God. We believe in the sanctity of all of life, and that a child's life begins at conception. We believe children have a special responsibility to God in obeying and honoring their parents. We believe a child's identity and spiritual growth is either helped or hindered by their parents' devotion to God. Parents should see themselves as God's ambassadors, working to build strong character in the lives of their children through consistent godly living, nurturing, discipline, and teaching them right from wrong.

We also know that some couples struggle to have biological children. We believe couples without biological children are of no less value before God than those with children. We believe in encouraging childless couples to consider adoption as a family alternative. We are committed to encouraging childless couples to pass on a godly legacy through involvement with children in their immediate families, churches, and communities.

Divorce

Biblically, divorce means that the lifelong covenant of marriage has been broken. And broken covenants break God's heart. Scripture even goes so far as to say, "God hates divorce." We believe divorce brings harm to every person involved. Therefore, we are quick to discourage divorce, and quick to encourage marital reconciliation in any way possible. We also believe that God allows for divorce in certain situations, not because he wills it, but because of the hardness of people's hearts and because of infidelity or adultery.

We believe, however, that it is God's priority that marital oneness be restored and that, through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, forgiveness and reconciliation be experienced. We believe that in the unfortunate cases of abuse and abandonment, God has provided protection for an abused spouse and provision for child support through the church, civil law, godly counselors, prayer, and other practical measures. We believe God can restore broken people and broken marriages by his grace, by the power of his Spirit, and by practical truths found in His Word.

Sometimes the results of divorce are single-parent homes, remarriage, and also blended families. Each of these scenarios is fragile, layered, and should be considered with patience, grace, and trust. We believe that, ideally, a child needs the influence of both a godly father and a godly mother for healthy development. We also recognize that God's grace is sufficient, and that he is a Father to the

fatherless and the Truest Friend to a wife or husband who has lost their spouse. We believe a single parent and his or her children are a family, and that the Bible contains principles for them to grow as a family. We believe the local church should be a home for single parents, providing their children with godly mentors and friends who serve as role models in place of the missing parent. We are committed to creatively help meet the needs associated with single-parent homes, whether comfort, encouragement, resources, or whatever other assistance is needed for those who struggle in the role of a single parent.

We also believe that the same principles of care listed above apply to other scenarios of broken and/or blended families. God has abundant grace for those in these spaces of covenant fragility. Therefore, we are committed to comforting, encouraging, and teaching these families God's principles of marriage and family life. We are also committed to exhorting the local church to help with the burden of the broken family.

Men

We believe that being a godly man is not contingent upon one's singleness, current marital status, or past marital status. Being a godly man means trusting, loving, and following Jesus in such a way that one becomes more like Jesus. While this is the broad task of every Christian, and every Christian is also supposed to submit to every other Christian out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21), when a godly man enters a Christian marriage, we believe that he is uniquely called to be the sacrificial servant-leader of his new family. He is to love his wife like Christ loved the church, by giving himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).

Just as the Trinity is equal in essence but distinct in function, so it is with Christian marriage. Men do not bear God's image more or less than women. Women do not bear God's image more or less than men. These discussions of role and function are not about superiority or inferiority, but about special responsibility with the context of the covenant family. And because God loves covenant faithfulness and responsibility, and for the same reason that divorce breaks his heart, it breaks his heart when Christian men are disobedient, flippant, or negligent to their task of humble servant-leadership.

We believe a husband will give an account before God for how he has loved, served, and provided for his wife. We reject the notion that a husband is to dominate or control his wife. Likewise, we reject the notion that a husband is to abdicate his responsibilities to lead his wife. Rather, we believe his responsibility is to love his wife. This love is characterized by taking the initiative to serve her, care for her, and honor her as a gift from God. We believe his responsibility is to protect his wife and help provide for her physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Furthermore, we also believe a husband is to seek after and highly regard his wife's opinion and counsel, and treat her as the equal partner she is in Christ. Therefore, we are committed to exhort and implore men not to abuse their God-given responsibilities as husbands, but rather to initiate a sacrificial love for their wives, in the same way Jesus Christ initiated sacrificial love and demonstrated it fully on the cross.

Outside of the marriage relationship, these invitations to be a godly man include the contexts of singleness, fatherhood, and even grandfather-hood. In each of these spaces, God desires Christlike men, regardless of marital status, to be self-sacrificial pursuers and protectors, seeking to love others before themselves. As singles, loving their community well. As fathers, leading their family with grace and truth, and providing for their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. As grandfathers, sharing wisdom, support, prayer, and godly counsel.

Further, we believe the greatest way a father can love his children is to love their mother. We believe children gain much of their concept of God from their fathers. Fathers should lead and instruct from Scripture, in tenderness, with humility, and by example – spending time with his children and practicing unconditional love, consistent discipline, and godly character. Therefore, we are

committed to turning the hearts of fathers back to their children by emphasizing the father's special role. We are committed to exhorting every father to model a love for God and his Word, to model love for his wife, and to love his children.

Women

We believe that being a godly woman is not contingent upon one's singleness, current marital status, or past marital status. Being a godly woman means trusting, loving, and following Jesus in such a way that one becomes more like Jesus. While this is the broad task of every Christian, and every Christian is also supposed to submit to every other Christian out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21), when a godly woman enters a Christian marriage, we believe that she is uniquely called to be a strong, supportive helper for her husband (Genesis 2:18). We believe that a godly woman in a Christian marriage is to offer kind and confident service to her husband, submitting to him as the church submits to Christ (Ephesians 5:22-24).

The above calling is, yet again, another picture of the equality and distinction that we find within God himself. These things are part of how we reflect God's glorious, Trinitarian life. And just as we believe that the godly husband will give an account before God for how he has sacrificed himself for his wife, so we believe a godly wife will give an account to God for how she has loved, respected, and supported her husband because he is a gift from God.

We uphold the biblical truth that the wife is of equal value and worth and dignity with her husband before God. We reject the notion that a wife should assume family-leadership responsibilities over her husband. Likewise, we reject the notion that a wife should passively defer to the leadership of her husband. We believe that her responsibility is to willingly and intelligently affirm, encourage, engage, respect, and trust her husband as the servant-leader in the relationship to the extent that he exemplifies Christ. Therefore, we are committed to exhorting wives to their responsibility of willing, partnering support as it relates to their husbands and their families.

Outside of the marriage relationship, these invitations to be a godly woman include the contexts of singleness, motherhood, and even grandmother-hood. In each of these spaces, God desires Christlike women, regardless of marital status, to be willing, affirming, helping supporters who seek to serve others before themselves. As singles, serving their community well. As mothers, supporting their family with grace and truth, and helping meet their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. As grandmothers, sharing wisdom, support, nurture, prayer, and godly counsel.

Further, we believe the greatest way a mother can love her children is to love their father. We also believe God has gifted and empowered Christian wives with an innate capacity to nurture and care for the children God has given her. Therefore, we believe that Christian mothers are to execute the vital responsibilities of loving, nurturing, and mentoring her children. We believe these to be among the highest priorities for Christian mothers, and they should be carried out in partnership, trust, humility, and joy. We reject the notion that all Christian mothers should stay at home with their children. We also reject the broad cultural milieu that has devalued the role of a mother by placing greater significance on activities outside the home.

Rather, we believe that a Christian mother should sacrifice to find quality time with her children so that her kids might receive the life-giving nurture and wisdom from her that God intended. We believe that mothers should instruct in grace, teach with love, mold by example, and seek to cultivate Christlikeness in her children as in her own heart. Therefore, we are committed to elevating motherhood by rightly assessing its exalted value in God's economy of the family. We are committed to exhorting mothers to model love for God and his Word, to model love for her husband, and to love her children.

Church

As stated, we believe that the church is God's family. God's family and individual Christian families are to be interdependent. We believe the local church is the spiritual home where families should corporately worship God. It is the place where the knowledge and love of God should be communicated to fathers, mothers, and children. Therefore, we are committed to exhorting single believers and families to support the local church through their involvement. We are also committed to exhorting the local church to uphold the priority of helping build godly marriages and families.

Just as there is equality and distinction within the Trinity, within spiritual gifts, within the roles of husbands and wives in a Christian family, so also there is equality and distinction when it comes to the organization of the church. In God's family, every member is equal in dignity, value, worth, and purpose. We believe men and women who have the spiritual gift of service, should be serving; we believe men and women who have the spiritual gift of teaching, should be teaching; we believe men and women who have the spiritual gift of administration, should be administering; and so on.

Beyond this, just as God calls Christian husbands to be the sacrificial servant-leaders of their homes, so does God reserve the church office of pastor-elder for humble, Christlike men to shepherd his flock. This calling is about function and role, and not about any sense of innate superiority. For the Apostle Paul, one of the elements that qualifies a pastor-elder for leadership in the local church is that he is the husband of one wife, (or a "one-woman man" in Greek). If he is a kind and gracious leader of his family, that means that he might also be a kind and gracious leader of God's family.

We reject the idea that a pastor-elder can do, say, implement, or control or whatever he wants because God has called him to the office of pastor-elder. We also reject the idea that a pastor-elder is just a puppet of the people of the church, and should simply heed the democratic leanings of whatever the congregation wants. The line between these things is maintained by a plurality of pastors and elders, biblical accountability, and a specific set of checks and balances set out in our pastoral handbook.

Holding to the belief that women and men have equal status and value before God but differing roles in the church is the equivalent of walking a biblical tightrope, and we need great patience and wisdom to do so. Again, both men and women have the same purpose in fulfilling mission of the church: to produce life-long, passionate followers of Jesus. On this mission, the gifts of the Spirit are delegated freely, and should be sought by all, and Fellowship Greenville welcomes and needs women to serve in every area of ministry apart from the office of pastor-elder. Servant-hearted men whom God calls and equips to serve in the office of pastor-elder are to embrace a benevolent responsibility to lead and serve God's people with humility, joy, sacrifice, grace, and truth.

Additionally, we know that the great enemy of God's family is the devil. It is his nature to deceive, manipulate, and twist that which is true. We believe the devil has attacked God's plan for family from the beginning until now. We believe he uses the various means to promote personal independence, tear apart marriages, distort the differences between men and women, confuse their roles, and elevate personal rights over God-given duties and responsibilities. We believe the devil seeks to persuade people to move away from God's plan for intimacy and oneness, and that he seeks to move people toward isolation, divorce, and their own version of human prosperity. However, we also believe that humbly maintaining consistent biblical positions on all of the above issues is God's slow, true, and loving path to the flourishing that he has wanted for his people since Eden.

Finally, as we engage with others who don't hold to our beliefs on these issues, the gospel must inform our involvement and engagement. Ultimately, we should be living and sharing the message that God offers us forgiveness and reconciliation through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. As extensions of this grace, we ought to: respect and pray for our governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-7); affirm the biblical understanding that all persons are created in the image of

God and deserve dignity and respect (Genesis 1:27); love our neighbors regardless of whatever disagreements arise as a result of conflicting beliefs about marriage, family, and other socio-cultural issues we believe go against biblical teaching; live respectfully and amicably alongside those who may disagree with us for the sake of the common good; and renounce common reactions such as sarcasm, mockery, ridicule, and disrespect to those engaged in practices that are forbidden by Scripture. The gospel does not seek to affirm humanity in whatever it chooses. Instead, the gospel is about the powerful grace of God toward sinners that delivers us from sin by cleansing us through the work of Jesus on the cross. It transforms us. Therefore, in all of our individual families and our church family, we intend to be God's loving family for the sake of the world. We strive to be a community of grace, passionately pursuing life and mission with Jesus.