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## Integrating Mars and Venus

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BY REBECCA AND DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS\*

# INTEGRATING MARS AND VENUS

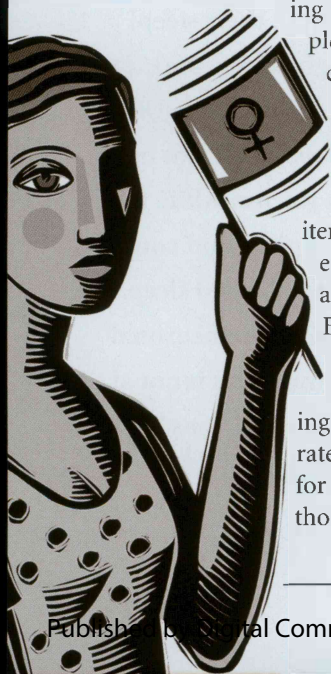
## Gender-based ministries may be effective, but are they biblical?

**F**or Christmas last year, Becky asked for a daily calendar of Bible verses. Doug returned from our local Christian bookstore to report difficulty in finding one for all people; most such calendars were either specifically for men or for women. Indeed, many items once considered common to all Christians—Bible, devotional aids, worship music—are being packaged separately for men and for women. It is as though basic spiri-

tual concepts and activities now need to be translated into two languages, one male and the other female.

We are mystified by such developments, for we experience very similar struggles and concerns in our respective walks with the Lord. Yet if

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the evangelical culture is any indication, a number of women and men feel that they are on separate spiritual wavelengths.

The proliferation of gender-specific products goes hand in hand with the popularity of gender-specific conferences. There we often hear that women and men have different psychological natures and different spiritual needs.

Perhaps the primary reason women and men are being drawn into separate fellowship is that, in society at large as well as in the church, everyone has become a bit wary of the other sex. Gender relations are so troubled that many of us want to escape into an environment where we can enjoy the camaraderie and support of those with whom we can feel emotionally safe.

Participants in both men's and women's groups have even intimated that there is something spiritually special—even superior—about their gender. This is not merely poor theology; it is symptomatic of a desire to shore up a gender identity battered and beleaguered in a culture of gender conflict and confusion.

But is this how God wants us to go about dealing with our conflicts and differences? Is not Christ our peace? Didn't Paul teach that through Christ's death God has provided for our reconciliation by putting to death the hostilities

between groups of people (Eph. 2:14-16)?

### Differences and Consequences

Whether culturally or biologically based, general psychological differences exist between men and woman. One apparent, oft-noted, difference is that men like to come up with plans, rules, and decisions when they get together, while women are generally more interested in discussing their ideas and sharing their feelings with one another. These different inclinations are reflected in the distinctive emphases of the men's and women's conferences: Men are urged to be godly leaders and women are encouraged to share their life stories with one another.

Christian men's literature often notes the need for a man to have a vision for ministry, a sense of mission larger than himself. Yet this is not a gender-specific need, but a fundamental biblical principle applicable without distinction to both male and female believers.

Consider, for example, the basic aims of the



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men’s ministry Promise Keepers: (1) worship and obedience, (2) friendship with and accountability to other believers, (3) moral and sexual purity, (4) commitment to one’s marriage and family, (5) support of the church, (6) racial reconciliation, (7) evangelism. Is not each of these exemplary goals just as appropriate for female believers as for male believers?

Recent Christian women’s groups, however, seem content to focus on mutual encouragement and fellowship. It has not always been this way. Guided by biblical precepts, the evangelical women’s groups of 100 to 150 years ago were brimming with such missionary zeal that they served as powerful agents of change in the church, society, and the world. Their efforts contributed significantly to the modern missionary movement, the abolition of slavery, the legal protection of home and family, and the right of every American to vote.

Though gender differences do

play a legitimate role in the formation of some gender-specific ministries, it seems that men and women have too much in common, especially in the spiritual dimension, to require the reallocation of biblical teaching and spiritual exhortation into distinct masculine and feminine packages.

The virtuous behavior that God desires of us is fundamentally the same for both women and men. The gifts and fruit of the Spirit are not distributed along lines of gender. We are all called to be Christlike and to serve as Christ’s ministers and representatives in this world.

### Healing the Wounds

Many divisions and hostilities exist in both the family of God and the larger human family. But the animosity between the sexes may be the most pervasive and enduring of them all. Even since the Fall, human cultures have encouraged the dominance of men and the devaluation of women.

Evidence of conflict and misunderstanding between the sexes can be found in many places, from the most liberal, politically correct segments of society to the most conservative. The concern over sexual harassment (sometimes valid, sometimes overblown) is certainly an indication of an entrenched mistrust and hostility between men and women. Another is the stereotypical thinking that often negatively influences people's expectations.

For example, we had once hoped to serve together in a campus ministry. We were crestfallen to learn that the director of the ministry saw the matter differently. "It's difficult for the wives to be involved in this ministry," he told us, "because most women aren't cognitive." We responded by discussing our concerns over his stereotyping of women. Although not all misunderstandings were corrected or all wounds healed, some resolution did take place. When reconciliation is pursued, fear and resentment are displaced.

In *Healing America's Wounds*, John Dawson states, "The wounds inflicted by men and women on each other constitute the fundamental fault line running beneath all other human conflict. If gender difference is used as the justification for the devaluation of part of humanity, then the door is opened for the selective devaluation of all of humanity based on some difference

from a perceived ideal." In other words, gender hostility serves to encourage and legitimize a tragic assortment of ethnic hostilities that are also grounded in a view of difference as deviation from a preferred standard. Dawson acknowledges that, although he writes primarily about racial reconciliation, the issue of gender conflict "is the biggest reconciliation issue of all, outside of our need to be reconciled to God the Father."

Bill McCartney reports that when he first began to speak about the need for racial reconciliation, he was met with a stony silence—until one black man responded publicly with tears, saying that he had never heard such words from a white man. When Dawson speaks on gender reconciliation and asks women for forgiveness for the sexual-distinction based behavior of men, he too encounters amazed and tearful responses. "This is the first time I've ever heard a man say, 'I'm sorry,'" women often tell him.

When Becky first heard a sermon in which a pastor offered a Dawson-style apology to women, she was startled and deeply moved. Here was the first tangible opportunity she had ever been offered to forgive the condescending comments, slights, and put-downs she had received from men. Of course, women are not the only ones injured in the gender wars. There is

also need for men to forgive and women to repent. The shrapnel flies in all directions.

### Wrong-Way Signs?

Might not the church be missing something in its present rush to divide the resources for the Christian life—books, music, magazines, support groups, Bible studies, Bible verses, seminars, conferences—into “separate but equal” categories of the masculine and the feminine? Are we, perhaps, going in the opposite direction from the unity, community, and reconciliation our Lord would have for us? How can we negotiate healing within the church if we ignore what may well be the most deep-seated and persistent division of all? And how can this division be healed if it is continually being reinforced through divided gender cultures?

Women and men are meant to complement one another, to work together to help create lives and ministries that are full orbited and well balanced, not to function primarily in their separate spheres. If we gravitate toward only those peo-

ple who are most like us, our souls will become lopsided and our faith truncated. And if we let our differences separate us from one another, we cannot become reconciled to one another.

The healing of gender divisions in the church can make our witness to God’s love more persuasive to believers and nonbelievers alike. Men and women who accept and respect one another as friends, associates, and partners in a variety of endeavors testify to the unity and mutuality that all believers should enjoy in Christ.

Along with confession and forgiveness of sins, reconciliation requires that people be brought together in love and understanding. Advocates of racial reconciliation often note that the worship hour is the most segregated period of the week, and they take this to be evidence of the church’s racism.

We can see the error and shame of a Christianity divided into shades of black and white. Perhaps we should keep a watchful eye, then, on the trend to divide the Christian life into shades of pink and blue. □

