

FULLY ALIVE

*A Biblical Vision of Gender That
Frees Men and Women
to Live Beyond Stereotypes*

DR. LARRY CRABB



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*To Rachael,
A God-revealing woman*

*A student from twenty years ago reminded me
of something I said in class when I was in my forties.*

I remember saying it:

*“I wonder what book I’ll write when I care more about
what God thinks than what people think.”*

This may be that book, perhaps the first of many.

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PROLOGUE

I never heard my mother pray. She never told me Bible stories when I was a child or sang Sunday school choruses to me. Mother knew God, and she knew Jesus as her Savior, but steeping me in Christianity was my father's job. He was a man. She was a woman. Her job, as was true of all godly women, was to fade into the domestic background; to help, never lead; to support, never teach. That was how we thought in our church circles. At the time, I had no idea that such thinking was widespread in culture.

Mother was both a bright and beautiful woman. A university-trained occupational therapist, for years she managed the occupational therapy program at a private psychiatric hospital. I've seen pictures of her when she was a young bride. By my culture's standard, she was more than attractively feminine. She wore dresses, kept her figure, had a pretty face, and looked after her family.

Seven mornings and seven evenings each week, with few exceptions, mother cooked breakfast and dinner. She filled her cracks of time with cleaning, washing clothes, carting me to the doctor and dentist as needed, grocery shopping, and laying a cool cloth on my forehead when I was burning with fever. She was a woman. That's what women did.

In the third year of her seven-year descent into Alzheimer's that ended her life at age eighty-seven, in a rare unguarded and spontaneous moment, Mother put words to an unbearable agony that I now think had lain dormant within her since girlhood. As I was leading her to my car for a lunch outing, with Dad walking slowly behind, Mother suddenly

stopped, and with terrified eyes looking into mine, tearfully said, “I’m no good to anyone.”

That was only the second time I had ever seen my mother cry. The first time, many decades earlier, came about when I, as an eight-year-old bratty child who had not gotten his way, petulantly—no, cruelly—told Mother how mean she was, that she was the worst mother in the world. I shouldn’t have been, but I was startled when she cried. I remember being stunned by the instant realization, *She’s not just my mom, she’s a woman.* I immediately backpedaled and tearfully told her I didn’t mean what I had just said, that she was really a wonderful mother, anything to get her to stop crying. I couldn’t bear to see her in pain.

She died several years ago. I’m left wondering, *Did my mother ever feel she was deeply good to anyone, that her life brought rich pleasure to God, to her family, to others, to anybody?*

I think not, and this realization pains me today: what could have been, but wasn’t. I’m grateful to be her son. According to her understanding of what God designed a woman to be and to do, she was a good woman, a faithful wife, a well-intentioned mother who expressed love in deeds, not words. I never remember her telling me that she loved me.

Although that non-memory is sad, my saddest thought now is that perhaps my mother never knew, never even asked herself, *What would it mean to be fully alive as an image-bearing female in whatever relationships my life provides, and in whatever opportunities to advance God’s kingdom come my way that I am called and gifted to seize?* Had she asked that question and freely decided that her calling and gifting were most fully expressed in domestic opportunities, my mother would have found meaning and joy in all the good things she did for our family.

My father’s story is different, but disturbingly similar. I often heard my father pray. I first believed that there was a God as I listened to my father pray one Sunday morning in church when I was five years old. Sixty people, including children, gathered in a large circle every Sunday morning to remember the Lord in His death. By that time, I had heard many men pray in my few years. Women, of course, were not permitted to pray aloud. We were taught they were to keep silent in the church.

The men’s prayers always seemed formal and predictable. I once timed Bill Nelson’s prayer—twenty-four minutes. But that one Sunday morning, as he often had before, my father stood to pray. I was lying on the carpeted

floor of our church building, hoping Mr. Nelson wouldn't pray again. I don't know why—I suppose it had something to do with God's Spirit—but I looked up at Dad when he began to pray. And it struck me: *he thinks he's talking to somebody!* Within seconds, I sat up and nearly said out loud: "Ohmigosh. He's talking to God!" At that moment I became a convinced theist. Three years later I became a believing Christian.

Dad loved the Bible. When I was twelve, he was telling me about Jesus opening up the Old Testament to show the Christ to two despairing disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. I remember him pausing, looking away from me (I think now he was fixing his eyes on the real but invisible world), and with an almost childish excitement and awe, shuddering as he spoke, he said these exact words: "Wouldn't it be something to be in a Bible study with the Author?"

Dad's father died when he was only five. After completing eighth grade, Dad dropped out of school to get a job to help support his widowed mother and three siblings. In his twenties he landed a sales job with a large corporation that carried a salary sufficient to free him to propose to my mother. A few years later, his superior insisted he follow company custom and provide women to sleep with valued customers.

In the spirit of Joseph, my father replied, "No. I cannot offend my Lord in this way." He lost his job. A promising career ended. Dad then began a small business that for years required long hours and brought in uncertain money. With Mother's help, Dad kept my brother and me fed, clothed, and relatively comfortable.

Looking back, I gratefully realize that Dad fathered us well: my brother, Bill, through his long rebellion, and me through my faith struggles during my graduate school days in psychology. And I have no doubt that he deeply loved my mother.

But I do not believe it ever occurred to him to move as a man toward my mother in ways intended to release her to come fully alive as a woman. Instead, I think he celebrated mother's conformity to their mostly undiscussed but agreed-upon vision that centered on "the role of women" as submissively helpful and unaggressively supportive. I may have missed it, but through five decades of knowing my parents I never saw Dad looking at Mother with eyes that wondered, *Who is this remarkable woman? What can I do, who can I be, that would encourage her to freely give everything within her for God's kingdom, for God's glory, for her joy, for the blessing of others?*

I don't think he resisted that thought. I think it never occurred to him. And I'm not sure he thought about what he could do as a man to deepen his two sons in their masculinity. He fervently wanted Bill and me to love God and others, but as Christians, not so much as Christian men.

In his post-seventy years, Dad often expressed to me how small he felt, how useless and insignificant, how he wondered why God was keeping him alive on earth. I asked myself then, and I ask myself even more now, *Did my father ever enjoy his deepest calling as a man, a calling that could have continued through his senior years until the moment of death?*

I think not. I don't believe my father ever knew, or knew to ask, what it would mean to be fully alive as an image-bearing male.

Irenaeus, an early church father, once famously wrote, "The glory of God is a human being made fully alive." Let me reshape that thought a bit, and re-state it as the question that incited me to write this book:

What does it mean to be fully alive as a male or female for the glory of God?

I don't want our two sons, now middle-aged men, to lament a few decades from now that their mother and I never seriously and with joy asked that question. I want our sons, our two daughters-in-law, and our five grandchildren to celebrate their femininity or masculinity as God-designed opportunities to bring God's rule to earth. I want them to do so by revealing through the way they relate something wonderful about the way God relates, both within His own eternal community of Three Persons and with us, His beloved children.

And I want the same for you, my readers, men and women who were born as male or female, part of a divine plan that brings with it the joyful sense of purpose that God wants you to know in all your relationships, even the difficult ones.

As you prepare to read this book, let me suggest that you entertain some questions I don't think my mother and dad ever asked. They are questions rarely asked today in our churches, families, or friendships. But they are questions that must be asked if we're to fulfill God's design for our lives. After all, we were created male and female.

- What did God have in mind when He created us as male or female? Only pleasurable procreation? Only happy marriages? Is there anything else He had in mind? Perhaps more? Something more transcendent that everyone—married or single—can enjoy?
- What does it mean to be fully alive for God’s glory as a male or female? Are you fully alive in your maleness or femaleness?
- What makes a woman *deeply feminine* in a way that reveals something wonderfully unique about how God relates? Is that a new question? Does it intrigue you? Do you, a woman, see yourself as feminine? When? Why?
- What makes a man *deeply masculine* in a way that reveals something wonderfully unique about how God relates? Is that a new question? Does it intrigue you? Do you, a man, see yourself as masculine? When? Why?
- Do we fall short of revealing God’s character by failing to relate as feminine women and masculine men? Have we understood sin to include *relational* sin? Or do we consider sin to be little more than obviously bad behavior?
- What does it mean for a single woman to be fully alive in her femininity? What does it mean for a single man to be fully alive in his masculinity? Is it possible? Can a single person be as fully feminine or masculine as a married person? Might singleness be a unique opportunity to seize, for God’s purposes, a calling at least as high as marriage?
- Could there be a relationship between the failure to relate as masculine men and feminine women and same-sex attractions, promiscuity, sexual addictions, or sexual fears?
- Can we understand the rule of God, the coming of Christ’s kingdom to earth, to centrally involve the development of a kind of community that only develops among feminine women and masculine men as they live out their gender in how they relate? Stanley Grenz put it this way: “When God’s rule is present—when God’s will is done—community emerges.”¹ What does he mean? Is he right?

Big questions. Lots of questions. Questions that are not often asked or easily answered. But they are important for everyone who longs to know the meaning, hope, and joy of living as we were meant to live—as gendered bearers of God’s image.

1. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000), 24.

My parents lived in a way that brought God pleasure. They enjoyed a good marriage. But how much more of God's relational beauty could they have revealed to me, and how much more of their gendered nature could they have enjoyed, had they asked these questions and searched for answers in the Bible?

To my parents—to their memory that lives in me and to their sense of completion as male and female that they now and forever fully enjoy—I am indebted, and with warm appreciation dedicate this book.

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And to Rachael, my wife of nearly fifty years, the woman I know best and appreciate most. Honey, you live femininity in ways that arouse me to become the masculine man I was created to be. I've said it a million times and I'll say it a million times more: I love you!

INTRODUCTION

Think of a marriage, a family, a friendship, a small group of missionaries serving in a foreign country, a church gathering, an elder board, colleagues at work, or golfing buddies . . .

Wherever people have the opportunity to meet.

Now picture a bridge, a narrow bridge, stretching over a deep chasm.

One person stands at one end of the bridge, a second person stands at the other end. The two people are facing each other. They can see each other's expressions. They can hear each other's voices. But they never connect.

Picture the people as two women. Or two men. Or one man and one woman. It doesn't matter. The one constant is obvious: there is distance between them, whatever their gender. They do not meet on the bridge.

And yet the sign on each end of the bridge says: "The Bridge of Connection." This bridge provides the opportunity for two women, two men, or one man and one woman to meet. It's what they want to do:

- The two women want to connect as sisters or as friends.
- The two men want to connect as brothers or as friends.
- The man and woman want to connect as brother and sister or perhaps as lovers.

They were designed to connect, to meet at a level that deeply satisfies their longing hearts. But they never really meet. It never happens.

What will it take:

- for two women to meet as fully alive women?
- for two men to meet as fully alive men?

- for a man and a woman to meet as a fully alive man and a fully alive woman, as brother and sister or as long-term lovers who will love each other with God-like love forever?

This book draws from the wisdom of the community where *connecting* is defined—the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to suggest how men and women can meet and relate on the Bridge of Connection.

PART I

SEARCHING FOR OUR GENDERED CENTER

 *Where Divine Life Lives*

We cannot say that humanity is divided into the “sanguine” and the “choleric” temperaments, into extraverts and introverts, into white and coloured races, into geniuses and non-geniuses, but humanity certainly is divided into men and women, and this distinction goes down to the very roots of our personal existence, and penetrates into the deepest “metaphysical” grounds of our personality and destiny.

Emil Brunner¹

At the core of who we are, we are gendered. Femininity or masculinity is so irrevocably and irreversibly embedded in our being that no one can accurately say, “I am first a person and then male or female.” With the

1. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1939), 345.

privileged excitement of destiny, we must rather say, “I am a male person, a man,” or “I am a female person, a woman.” Our soul’s center is alive with either masculinity or femininity. Our uniquely gendered style of relating is clearly visible in our interactions when it reflects something wonderful about the relational nature of our beyond-gender God.

And so we must ask, “What makes a man masculine? What makes a woman feminine?”

1



SEX AND GENDER

When we know God well enough to value nothing greater than our opportunity to enjoy Him and reveal Him to others by the way we relate, we will then become more and more alive as masculine men and feminine women.

We must begin with the most basic question: What's the difference between sex and gender? Recognizing the sex of the child—whether a newborn infant is male or female (usually) relatively easy. Genitalia tells the story. With confidence that requires no medical training, the doctor informs the parents, “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” The parents then take it from there. They name and dress the child accordingly. Most Christians agree that God made males to be men and females to be women, and because of God’s design, anatomically determined sex is intended to express itself in socially identified gender.

But not always. I recently read the account of a baby born in Sweden. When the parents were asked by friends, “Is it a boy or a girl?” they calmly answered, “Our child will decide that later. Our child will eventually let us know whether we have a son or daughter.”

In rare cases of hermaphroditism, babies are born with both male and female genitalia. A decision usually follows. Doctors can implement the decision by surgically forming the child as a male or female. In later years, that child might wonder why he feels like a girl trapped in a boy’s body or why she feels like a boy trapped in a girl’s body. In our fallen existence,

complications sometimes arise that seem unanswerable and difficult, if not impossible, to unravel.

The article I read made no mention that the Swedish baby was born with both sexual organs, so I assumed the child's biological *sex* was not in question. But in the parents' thinking, the child's *gender* was up for grabs. In their minds, the child's sex did not determine gender. The decision to adopt the social identity of a boy or girl was left to the child. Someone had to make the decision; why not let it be made by the one who would have to live with it?

The parents therefore clothed their child in a pretty dress one day and little boy's trousers the next. Their plan was to continue that pattern until the child seemed more drawn toward one gender or the other.

Their thinking is clear: *sex and gender are separable*. Sex, whether a child is male or female, is fixed (in most cases) at birth. Anatomy makes that decision. But gender, whether a child will live as a boy or girl and eventually a man or woman, is a personal decision. Chosen gender need not correspond to anatomical sex.

An American educator took this idea a big step further. I watched a video clip of a man passionately telling a classroom full of elementary school children that one's gender was not only a choice, it was a flexible choice. If a boy wanted to live permanently as a girl or if a girl wanted to live permanently as a boy, sexual reassignment by surgery was certainly an option. One's chosen gender could then match one's physical sex. But our personal freedom, said the teacher, is greater than a one-time choice to switch genders. Let sex—the anatomy—remain fixed, but choose gender at will.

If I heard him correctly, the teacher was implying that without altering one's anatomy, any person can choose to be a boy today, a girl tomorrow; a young woman in college, a man throughout adulthood; and in their senior years, an old lady or an old man. Never feel limited by your body. Gender is always a choice.

Neither the Swedish parents' view nor the American educator's teaching represents mainstream culture—not yet, anyway. But without surrendering to what most Christians agree is the biblical revelation that God made males to be men and females to be women, without a corresponding belief that by God's design anatomically determined sex is intended to express itself in socially identified gender, ideas that sound extreme today could become mainstream tomorrow.

The Starting Point

Our culture is sexually confused. And at the center of our confusion is the absence of a well-thought-out agreement about what makes a male person a masculine man and about what makes a female person a feminine woman. Reaching agreement on such a controversy-riddled issue requires an agreed-upon starting point.

Most evangelicals, I think, believe that when God made us male and female human beings, He intended that our *gender*, our social identity as masculine men and feminine women, would correspond to our *sex*, our physical makeup as males or females. If you were born a male, you live as a man, look like a man, and relate to others as a man. If you were born a female, you live as a woman, look like a woman, and relate to others as a woman.

That starting point, however, immediately raises difficult questions. What does it mean to live, look, and relate as men and women, to be *masculine* or *feminine*? The very words *masculinity* and *femininity* fill our minds with silly images, superficial cultural stereotypes left over from earlier eras that continue to haunt us today: three-piece suits and frilly blouses, tough guys and tender women, broad shoulders and shapely legs, absent fathers who work hard and present mothers who cook well, strong male leaders and submissive female followers.

If we leave these stereotypes behind, then another question needs to be asked: Do Christians have any biblical basis that we can draw from to understand what it really means for males and females to become masculine men and feminine women? Because we bear God's image, can men and women reveal something uniquely wonderful about God by the way we relate? Is that question even important?

The church's response to our culture's sex and gender confusion seems inadequate to me. We have so strongly focused on either the role of women or the equal rights of women that we have given little thought to *the unique relational opportunities* of men and women. Traditionalists believe they have biblical reason for keeping women "in their place." Egalitarians worry that a failure to emphasize equality over uniqueness might permit men to remain in "dominating leadership" in positions of authority (especially in the church).

Their worry is warranted. In my growing-up years, I often heard men in my church speak condescendingly about "the role of women." I never

heard a man speak similarly about “the role of men.” The message was implicit but clear: women are restricted, men are free. Leadership belongs to men, women quietly follow. My parents lived that message.

What I’m not hearing in our sex/gender debates today is a thoughtful, biblically dependent, open-minded discussion of what it means for men to resemble God in their masculinity and for women, with equal importance but uniquely and differently, to resemble God in their femininity.

Patriarchal traditionalists emphasize male leadership, if not in the working world, then certainly in the church and family. Hierarchical traditionalists insist on the flipside of the same coin: men’s leadership requires women’s subordination. Women enjoy equal value, perhaps, but not equal opportunity. Women must remain in their God-assigned place. That’s what *feminine* women do.

Complementarians gladly acknowledge that men and women are different, and insist that the God-created differences lie mainly in gender-defined roles. Masculine men lead. Feminine women submit. Some complementarians veer further from traditionalists when they suggest that gender differences provide women with the opportunity to complement men by relating with feminine tenderness while men continue to lead with masculine strength. Final authority, though, remains with the man in both family and church.

Egalitarians often agree that men and women are different. But rather than exploring our gender uniqueness with the hope of releasing men and women into their God-designed masculinity and femininity, their focus centers on the full equality of women with men. Especially in marriage, but also in all relationships—social, ecclesial, or professional—men and women are to relate as equal partners, loving each other, respecting each other, honoring each other’s differences, submitting to each other in healthy dialogue when opinions differ, and living with equal freedom to pursue every desired opportunity to exercise their gifts and to honor whatever their calling. Equal rights for women is their focus, not unique gendered opportunities.

What it means to live, look, and relate as men and women fully alive in their masculinity and femininity remains an inadequately explored question. With a freshness and zeal I did not anticipate, I’m now asking what makes a man masculine and what makes a woman feminine, and how differences in the way men and women were designed to relate, if indeed

they exist, together reveal something about our relational God that He wants us to see and enjoy. I'm looking to the Bible to see if God has any thoughts on the matter.

New Question, New Thoughts

After thirty years as a clinical psychologist, practicing and teaching my understanding of Christian counseling, a deeper and more radical grasp of Christianity got the best of me. A question began to burn in my mind that I hadn't seriously asked before: *What does it mean to become fully alive in Christ by the Spirit for the Father's glory?*

We exist to tell God's story. God does not exist to tell ours. We're to become fully alive for God's sake, to glorify Him by enjoying Him and revealing Him to others. Living for any other purpose leads to death.

It is death. Whatever feeling of life it produces is an illusion.

It occurred to me the conversations that really mattered were conversations that somehow released more of Christ's life in a person's soul, empowering us to better tell God's story. And it slowly dawned on me that neither psychotherapy nor counseling, as practiced by secular professionals and as too commonly practiced by Christians, qualified by this criterion as conversations that mattered. They aimed too low, toward symptom relief and pleasant feelings, with methods more grounded in research than revelation. Spiritual direction, releasing Christ's life through Spirit-guided conversations into souls hungry to enjoy God and reveal God, became my consuming interest. Soon after, the School of Spiritual Direction was birthed.

For ten years now, four times a year, I've been leading a one-week program called the School of Spiritual Direction. For the first three years, I focused on coming alongside image-bearing persons to encourage the process of becoming spiritually formed, to become like Jesus as they followed Jesus. Then several more thoughts hit me. The first one was not new, but it came with new force: we bear the image of a relational God, the Trinity. To be truly formed like Jesus means to relate like Jesus. *Spiritual* formation is *relational* formation.

A second thought quickly followed: we are not only image-bearing persons, we are *gendered* image-bearing persons. Genesis 1:27 makes that

clear. Now I had to ask what it meant to be relationally formed as gendered persons, to relate like Jesus as men and women. It was then that the words *masculinity* and *femininity* came alive with new meaning, a new meaning that I wanted to explore.

Could it be, I wondered, that masculinity and femininity have something to do with how men and women relate in human community, how they relate by the Spirit's power in ways that correspond to how the Father and Son relate in divine community?

A third thought then exploded in my mind. Could it be that we become answers to the Lord's prayer by bringing God's divine kingdom of relational community to earth through relating as masculine men and feminine women? Did God create us as image-bearing males and females so that men and women could each reveal, by the way we relate, something of the wonder of how the persons of the Trinity relate?

Hormones, genitals, and the distribution of XY chromosomes define a person's physical sex. Surgeons can go a long way, though not all the way, in changing someone's born sex. Clothing, hairstyle, and mannerisms give evidence of the social identity as male or female that someone has adopted, although in these unisex days the evidence is sometimes unclear.

Gender issues find their way to center stage when the *religious design* (gender roles as understood by the church) for men and women becomes the topic. The discussion is often heated. But neither anatomy nor appearance (except in fundamentalist cultures where women must wear knee-covering skirts or shape-hiding robes) is responsible for the heat. The battle is engaged over roles versus freedom—typically for women, not men. Depending on one's theology, women should either function within roles assigned by men or women should express their freedom to fully be who they are.

Should physical sex be surgically altered? What are appropriate visible expressions of social identity as a male or female? Psychologists and moralists debate the wisdom of altering someone's physical sex through surgery. Cultural norms either narrowly or broadly suggest appropriate visible expressions of social identity, of a man's or woman's sexually specific appearance. People of faith argue passionately over religious design. Is there such a thing as religious design, a design that either limits what women should do or establishes the full equality of women and men? Are women restricted in any way men are not? Or are women and men equally free to

live as they choose in both church and society, of course within mutually agreed-upon and nondiscriminatively applied moral boundaries?

While these questions clamor for attention, another one, perhaps more important, waits in the wings to be addressed: What does it mean to relate as feminine women and masculine men for the glory of God?

Did God create us male and female to relate in unique ways that together reveal the glory of how God relates, within His own community and with us? That is the question raised by the idea of *relational gender*. It was a question I wanted to ask, and this book is my effort to engage with that question. Let's begin at the beginning. Genesis 1:26–27 is our starting point.