

# Sacred Love Negotiations: A Qualitative Approach to Equality and Mutuality, and Negotiating Around Needs in Marriage and Family Life in the Experience of Australian Mainline Christians

Neil Pembroke

Senior Lecturer in Practical Theology,  
School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics,  
University of Queensland, St. Lucia Brisbane, Australia  
Email: n.pembroke@uq.edu.au

There is currently a relatively large volume of scholarly writing on mutuality and equality in Christian marriage and family life.<sup>1</sup> Two important and related ethical concepts that are advanced in these writings are equal regard

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- 1 See, for example, Don S. Browning / Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore et al., *From culture wars to common ground: Religion and the American family debate*, Louisville (Westminster John Knox Press) 2000; Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Sloppy mutuality: Just love for children and adults*, in: Herbert Anderson / Edward Foley / Bonnie Miller-McLemore / Robert Schreiter (Eds.), *Mutuality matters: Family, faith, and just love*, Lanham (Rowman & Littlefield) 2004, 121–136; Don S. Browning, *Children, mothers, and fathers in the postmodern family*, in: Pamela D. Couture / Rodney J. Hunter (Eds.), *Pastoral care and social conflict: Essay in honor of Charles Gerkin*, Nashville (Abingdon) 1995, 71–85; Don S. Browning, *Biology, ethics, and narrative in Christian family theory*, in: David Popenoe / Jean B. Elshtain / David Blankenhorn (Eds.), *Promises to keep: Decline and renewal of marriage in America*, Lanham, MD. (Rowman and Littlefield) 1996, 119–156; Don S. Browning, *Practical theology and the American family debate*, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 1 (1997), 136–160; Don S. Browning, *The language of health versus the language of religion: Competing models of marriage for the twenty-first century*, in: Alan J. Hawkins / Lynn D. Wardel / David O. Coolidge (Eds.), *Revitalizing the institution of marriage for the twenty-first century*, Westport, Conn. (Praeger) 2002, 29–44; Don S. Browning, *Marriage and modernization: How globalization threatens marriage and what to do about it*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2003; Don S. Browning, *Equality and the family*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2007; Don S. Browning, *The equal-regard family in context*, in: John Witte Jr. / M. Christian Green / Amy Wheeler (Eds.), *The equal-regard family and its friendly critics: Don Browning and the practical theological ethics of the family*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2007, 1–16; Herbert Anderson, *Between rhetoric and reality: Women and men as equal partners in home, church, and the marketplace*, in: Herbert Anderson / Edward Foley / Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore / Robert Schreiter (Eds.), *Mutuality matters: Family, faith, and just love*, Lanham (Rowman & Littlefield) 2004, 67–82; Herbert Anderson / Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Faith's wisdom for daily living*, Minneapolis (Augsburg Fortress) 2008.

and “just love.” Equal regard is defined as regarding the needs and claims of the other as neither more nor less important than one’s own needs and claims. Love as equal regard is considered to be superior to love as self-sacrifice because it avoids the pitfalls of both excessive self- and other-regard.<sup>2</sup> Just love indicates the “intentional pursuit of fairness and reciprocity in sharing the benefits and burdens” of marriage and family life.<sup>3</sup>

We know very little, however, about how Christian married persons actually approach the challenges of mutuality and negotiation around needs. A database search failed to locate any qualitative research on these matters. In the ATLA Religion database, keywords such as “mutuality, family, empirical”; “mutuality, family, qualitative”; “equality, family, empirical”; “marriage, qualitative”; and “family, qualitative” were entered. In the Proquest Social Science database, entries included “Christian, family, empirical”; “Christian, family, qualitative”; “Christian, marriage, qualitative”; and “Christian, marriage, mutuality.” The only instance found in the literature review was a reference to a survey of American Christian attitudes to self-sacrifice in marriage and family life.<sup>4</sup> It seems safe to conclude that very little empirical research has been carried out in the area under consideration. We therefore do not have a social scientific informed picture of the way in which ordinary Christians approach equality and mutuality both conceptually and in concrete practices.

It is contended that qualitative research on the experiences of mainline Christians in relation to mutuality, equal regard, and negotiations around needs brings two main benefits to marriage and family researchers. First, qualitative study of everyday experiences of Christian married persons establishes a comprehensive backdrop for any theoretical analysis. An engagement with concrete realities that extends beyond the researcher’s own personal experience and anecdotally informed knowledge provides a broad practical perspective for her theological and ethical reflections. Second, theoreticians may gain valuable insights into the practical psychology, faith perspectives, interpersonal strategies, tensions, and challenges associated with the ethic that they advocate.

In order to make a contribution to the theory-practice nexus, this researcher set about conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with a sample of Australian married Christians associated with mainline churches. Given that the context is a Western one in which the value of equality in gender relations is generally quite well established, this research will unfortunately have little to say to other cultural groups for whom patriarchy

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2 Browning et al. (n. 1).

3 Anderson / Miller-McLemore (n. 1), 53.

4 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Generativity, self-sacrifice, and the ethics of family life, in John Witte Jr. / M. Christian Green / Amy Wheeler (Eds.), *The equal-regard family and its friendly critics: Don Browning and the practical theological ethics of the family*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2007, 17–41.

and a hierarchical understanding of social relationships are the norms. The decision to limit the research to mainline churches was based on a judgment that it is here that a concern for and interest in equality and mutuality is most likely to be found. In relation to their marriage and family life, the research participants were asked how they typically negotiate around needs and desires, what place self-sacrifice plays, how they view equality and mutuality, and how these values play out in their everyday experiences.

While qualitative research such as this has the advantage of painting an in-depth picture of the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of the participants, it has the disadvantage that it is not possible to generalize the findings. That is, there is never enough evidence generated by a small scale, intensive study to justify a move from the experiences of the participants to those of people (in this case, mainline Christians) in general.

Before getting to the findings, it is necessary to set the context for the empirical work by surveying major contributions in the theological literature on the love ethic and on mutuality and equal regard in marriage and family life. The literature review is followed by a methodological discussion. The method used was interpretive phenomenology. Phenomenology is both a philosophical stance and a research methodology. The aim of the phenomenological researcher is to approach the entity under study on its own terms.

After the discussion on method, the findings are presented and discussed. We begin, though, with a review of the relevant theoretical literature.

### Christian Love and Equal Regard

The love ethic is, of course, accorded an absolutely central place in the Christian faith, and indeed in all the major faith traditions. *Agape* is of fundamental importance in the theory and practice of Christian love. It is disinterested, impartial, and spontaneous love that seeks to secure the best for others.<sup>5</sup>

In the classic treatments of the love ethic by Kierkegaard and Nygren,<sup>6</sup> *agape* is considered to be the only true expression of Christian love. *Eros* and *philia* are judged as inferior by virtue of the fact that they both involve self-love.

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5 Anders Nygren, *Agape and eros*, pt. II, vol. II, London (SPCK) 1932; Gene Outka, *Theocentric agape and the self: An asymmetrical affirmation in response to Colin Grant's either/or*, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996), 35–42.

6 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of love*, trans. H. & E. Hong, London (Collins) 1962 (First published in 1847); Anders Nygren, *Agape and eros*, pt. I, London (SPCK) 1932; Nygren (n. 5).

Some contemporary theologians, however, have attempted to formulate the love ethic in such a way that an appropriate place is found for a proper expression of self-love. Janssens, Outka, and Vacek<sup>7</sup> contend that the impartiality that characterizes *agape* applies to both self and other. Valuing the self is a moral obligation every bit as much as valuing the other is. The rationale that they offer is as follows. Christians are called to love others. They are called to love not only those who are likable, or who have done something good to them, but *all* people. Loving only one's "favorites" is not an option. Christians must love each and every person God puts in their path. The theological rationale is based around every human person's status as a child of God. Each and every person is created in the image of God. He or she is someone Christ died for. It follows that each and every person possesses an inherent dignity and worth. Just as God recognizes that value through the gift of divine love, so it is to be with the followers of Christ. God does not have favorites, and neither should the Christian. This leads Outka to refer to the principle of impartiality.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that Christians are to love others simply because of their status in God's eyes: a person created out of love and offered the loving gift of Christ and his saving grace. According to Outka, a Christian needs to apply the same theological rationale to herself. She is to love herself for the same reason that she loves others. There is, therefore, a principle of "equal regard." The Christian should love self neither more nor less than she loves others.

Browning draws on the work of Janssens and Outka in his approach to the Christian love ethic.<sup>9</sup> Browning and Browning point out that the principle of equal regard constitutes a middle way between the extremes of independence, on the one hand, and self-sacrifice, on the other.<sup>10</sup> In the independence or self-actualization model of love, it is assumed that self-love comes first, and that love of neighbor will follow automatically. That is, the focus is largely on self-fulfillment and the extent to which a particular act or relationship is likely to contribute to it. At the other end of the scale is an understanding of love that sees sacrificing the self for others as the ideal. The equal regard approach, Browning and Browning suggest, picks up values from the other two models, but it manages to avoid their excesses. A person living according to the principle of equal regard will take the

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7 Louis Janssens, Norms and priorities in a love ethics, *Louvain Studies* 6 (1977), 207–238; Gene Outka, *Agape: An ethical analysis*, New Haven (Yale University Press) 1972; Gene Outka, Universal love and impartiality, in: Edmund N. Santuri / William Werpehowski (Eds), *The love commandments: Essays in Christian ethics and moral philosophy*, Washington (Georgetown University Press) 1992; and Edward C. Vacek, Love, Christian and diverse: A response to Colin Grant, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996), 29–34.

8 Outka (n. 5); Outka (n. 7).

9 Don S. Browning, *Religious thought and the modern psychologies*, Philadelphia (Fortress Press) 1987.

10 Don S. Browning & Carol Browning, The church and the family crisis: A new love ethic, *The Christian Century* 108 (1991), 23, 746–749.

needs and claims of the other as seriously as her own. The needs of others are seen to be very important, but so are one's own. Love for others and a proper self-love are assigned an equal weighting.

Grant is highly critical of the equal regard approach.<sup>11</sup> He argues that it represents a retreat from a theological imperative under the influence of an Enlightenment inspired concern for self. The mistake made, Grant thinks, is the tendency to construe *agape* as a rational, anthropocentric notion: "The commonsense responsibility of balancing the claims of self and others represents a compromise of the distinctive thrust of *agape*, rather than being an application of it".<sup>12</sup>

The major symbol of *agape* and of the Christian life in general is the cross of Christ. This symbol serves as a constant reminder that self-sacrifice must be accorded a central place in any articulation of the Christian love ethic. In contrast to Kierkegaard, Nygren, and Grant, however, Janssens and Outka argue that self-sacrifice is not the ideal for the Christian life. Mutuality and equal regard are the ideals; sacrificial love is necessary when these ideals are not possible.

Post also posits mutuality—giving and receiving in relationship—as the ideal for Christian love.<sup>13</sup> He contends that "the moral excellence of communion (giving and receiving love) is too often lost sight of" and that "frequently selfless love ... is thought to be ethically superior to communion and alone worthy of the designation 'Christian'".<sup>14</sup> The experience of communion in which each participant can find fulfillment through the process of mutuality is seen to be inferior to love that is characterized by selflessness. Post is arguing, then, that a proper self-love is legitimate. He contends that it is legitimate to pursue one's own good within the context of a triadic fellowship consisting of God, others, and self. Such self-love, according to Post, must be distinguished from both selfishness and self-infatuation.

### Mutuality and Marital Love: Equal Regard and Just Love

Guided significantly by feminist ideals, many today contend that love in marriage is most fully actualized through a fundamental egalitarianism. The alternative is male headship. Some scholars argue for male headship either on the basis of biblical principles or pragmatic considerations.<sup>15</sup> It

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11 Colin Grant, For the love of God, *Agape*, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996), 3–21.

12 *Ibid.*, 19.

13 Stephen Post, Communion and true self-love, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988), 345–362; Stephen Post, The inadequacy of selflessness, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1989), 213–228.

14 Post, *Communion* (n. 13), 345.

15 George W. Knight, New Testament teaching on the role relationship of male and female with special reference to the teaching/ruling functions in church, *Journal of the Evange-*

is contended that Pauline theology clearly establishes equality between men and women, while at the same time mandating submission of women to men in the household and in the Church.<sup>16</sup> Conservative feminist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen advocates an egalitarian ethic in family relationships,<sup>17</sup> but, guided by Calvinist theology, sees men and women as complementary and incomplete without each other. She also considers that Christ mandates mutual submission as much as equal regard.<sup>18</sup> A more common view amongst Christian feminists is that there is an essential egalitarianism in the structure of relations between men and women. A link is established with the ethic of equal regard: “Authentic human nature created in God’s image and the redemptive action of God in Jesus both confirm a fundamental egalitarianism at the heart of reality. We say much the same when we argue that the foundation of all love as equal regard is the love that God has for all humans, whether male or female”.<sup>19</sup>

Don Browning and his associates in the Religion, Culture, and the Family project have developed what they call a “new critical familism” in which equal regard is assigned a central place.<sup>20</sup> They contend that an approach to Christian love as an ethic of mutuality has much to contribute to an ethic of the family. Along this line, the team argues that love as mutuality or equal regard, rather than love as self-sacrifice (as important as this is on occasion), should be posited as primary in family life. Love as mutuality and equal regard, Browning et al point out, is not uniquely Christian. Love as mutuality becomes explicitly Christian “when it is grounded in the *imago Dei* in humans and renewed by the capacity for sacrificial love, a love that recapitulates the Christic drama and the passion of God”.<sup>21</sup>

Love as equal regard is considered to be superior because it avoids the pitfalls of both excessive self- and other-regard. On the one hand, this interpretation of the love ethic does not require a habitual or pervasive pat-

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lical Theological Society 18 (1975), 2, 81–91.; W. Robert Godfrey, Headship and the Bible, in: David Blankenhorn et al. (Eds.), Does Christianity teach male headship?: The Equal-Regard marriage and its critics, 126–138. Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2003, 126–138; Maggie Gallagher, Reflections on headship, in: David Blankenhorn et al. (Eds.), Does Christianity teach male headship? The Equal-Regard marriage and its critics, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2003, 111–125.

16 Knight (n. 15).

17 Mary S. Van Leeuwen, Re-inventing the ties that bind: Feminism and the family at the close of the twentieth century, in: Anne Carr / Mary S. Van Leeuwen (Eds.), Religion, feminism, and the family, Louisville (Westminster John Knox Press) 1996, 33–54.

18 Mary S. Van Leeuwen et al., After Eden: Facing the challenge of gender reconciliation, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1993.

19 Browning et al. (n. 1), 174.

20 Browning et al. (n. 1); Browning, Children (n. 1), Browning, Biology (n. 1); Browning, The language of health (n. 1); Browning, Marriage (n. 1); Browning, Equality (n. 1); Browning, The equal regard family (n. 1).

21 Browning et al. (n. 1), 273.

tern of self-sacrifice, self-abnegation, and self-denial. On the other hand, it rejects selfishness and egoism, while finding a place for self-love, self-regard, and an ordinate concern with self-fulfillment. Love as equal regard “simply requires that we take the other’s self-fulfillment as seriously as our own, just as it requires the other to give equal consideration to our fulfillment”.<sup>22</sup>

A concern for justice is implied in the notion of equal regard. Establishing genuine mutuality requires a commitment to fairness. Indeed, Browning is quite explicit about the close relationship in his comments on the concept of “justice-love” that is advanced in the 1991 report prepared for the General assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) entitled, *Keeping Body and Soul Together*.<sup>23</sup> Justice-love seeks to establish right relations, to reform wrong relations, especially those marked by destructive power dynamics. Browning comments that this ethical principle is “close, although, not identical to the love ethic of mutuality and equal regard...”<sup>24</sup>. Others have fully developed the notion of love with justice.<sup>25</sup> “Just love” establishes as norms a fair distribution of burdens and benefits, respect for bodily integrity, and fair procedures for conflict resolution.<sup>26</sup> “Love that is just recognizes a place for sacrifice and affection. However, it goes further. It also tries to make greater space in family love for the intentional pursuit of fairness and reciprocity in sharing the benefits and burdens...”<sup>27</sup> Positing justice as an overarching aim for marriage is seen by some to be dangerous. Waldron argues that hostility and separation are likely to be the outcomes for couples who take this approach.<sup>28</sup> Proponents of just love respond to this criticism by suggesting that there is no reason why affection and justice should not work harmoniously together.<sup>29</sup>

As indicated above, Browning has discussed the place of self-sacrifice in relation to equal regard. He is aware that the Christian gospel contains a call for persistence through hard times, sometimes involving considerable cost to the self. He asks the question: “Is there room for sacrifice within agape when it is first interpreted as equal regard?”<sup>30</sup> His answer is that we make sacrifices, we go the extra mile, in marriage and family life not because self-sacrifice is the ideal; rather, we do these things in order to re-

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22 Ibid., 275.

23 Don S. Browning, Mutuality, reason, and family policy, in: Anderson et al. (n. 1), 43–56.

24 Browning (n. 23), 48.

25 Anderson (n. 1); Pauline Kleingeld, Just love? Marriage and the question of justice, in: Anderson et al. (n. 1), 23–42; Miller-McLemore (n. 1); Miller-McLemore (n. 4).

26 Kleingeld (n. 25).

27 Anderson / Miller-McLemore (n. 1), 53.

28 Jeremy Waldron, When justice replaces affection: The need for rights, in: *Liberal rights: Collected papers 1981–1991*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1993, 370–391.

29 Kleingeld (n. 25).

30 Browning, *Biology* (n. 1), 190.

store our relations with our spouses and others to the ideal condition of equal regard. A realistic theological anthropology holds that due to the inherently sinful nature of the human person perfect mutuality will never be realized. There will always be a tendency to imbalance, inequality, and injustice in marital and family relations. Self-sacrifice is rightly understood not as the ideal, but rather as “a transitional obligation designed to restore broken relations to mutuality once again”.<sup>31</sup>

Not everyone is fully happy with Browning’s formulation of the proper relations between self-giving, mutuality, and love in marital and family life. Miller-McLemore, for instance, contends that Browning works too much at the level of theory and not enough at the level of practice. She charges that he fails to pay due regard to “the concrete materiality of families and the many requisite sacrifices”.<sup>32</sup> This may indeed be so, but it should be noted that Browning avers that it is vitally important for couples and families to acquire the skills to put a love ethic of equal regard into practice on the intersubjective level. What he means by this is that family members need to learn to engage in intersubjective communication of equal regard that is characterized by the capacity: (a) to validate the selfhood of the other, (b) to communicate personal needs and to listen attentively to the other’s perceived needs, and (c) to feed back to the other one’s understanding of her or his communication of her or his needs. Moreover, Browning contends that a distinctively Christian perspective on intersubjective equal regard includes a commitment to sacrifice and persistence in listening to and affirming the other in the absence of a reciprocal response.<sup>33</sup>

Jackson takes a Kierkegaardian approach in his critique of Browning’s position. He contends that “equal regard and mutuality are neither primary nor sufficient in marriage”.<sup>34</sup> Further, he argues that while these states may be the consequences of marital love, they should not be viewed as the central aim or motivating force. For Jackson, *agape* is primary; it is the only power capable of providing a firm foundation for marriage and family. Further, he contends that Browning is wrong to view self-sacrifice as mainly serving the purpose of restoring broken mutuality. Surrendering a legitimate interest for the sake of the other should be “first for God’s sake, second for her sake, and even third for my own sake”.<sup>35</sup>

Miller-McLemore, finally, asks whether self-sacrifice should be viewed as only a consequence of the inherently sinful nature of humanity. Self-

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31 Browning, *Biology* (n. 1), 191.

32 Miller-McLemore (n. 4), 30.

33 Browning, *Practical theology* (n. 1).

34 Timothy P. Jackson, *Judge William and Professor Browning: A Kierkegaardian critique of equal-regard and the democratic family*, in: Witte Jr., / Green / Wheeler (n. 1), 123–150, 144.

35 *Ibid.*, 143.



giving, rather than being viewed as simply required to restore a failed mutuality, should be seen as “embedded, even instinctively, in nature”.<sup>36</sup>

Now that the central theological and ethical concepts have been laid out, we are able to move to the next phase. We turn now to a discussion of the method of interpretive phenomenology.

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is interpretive phenomenology. Phenomenology is both a philosophical stance and a research methodology. The aim of its proponents, in the most general terms, is to approach an entity on its own terms. Husserl held that by suspending our habitual or taken-for-granted beliefs about the world (bracketing), it is possible to grasp the fundamental structures in the life-world.<sup>37</sup> In order to achieve this, it is necessary to go beyond the natural attitude to establish the transcendental attitude.<sup>38</sup> In the natural frame of reference, the world is naively accepted as existing. The person with this attitude lives immersed in the world around her. This taken-for-granted world, however, is not the place where apodictic evidence – evidence which precedes all other evidence – is to be found. Apodicticity is reached through a phenomenological *epoché* in which acceptance of reality is suspended.

Some researchers who embrace the phenomenological paradigm view employing an *epoché* or bracketing as a means of achieving objectivity.<sup>39</sup> While they accept that there is no such thing as value-free research, they claim that an attempt to set aside personal biases, presuppositions, and values as fully as possible is an essential requirement in an approach that aims to grasp the lived experience of the participants on their terms.

This researcher, however, supports the view of another group of phenomenologists that contends that aiming for objectivity through bracketing is misguided and ultimately illusionary.<sup>40</sup> This group of researchers takes its

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36 Miller-McLemore (n. 4), 29.

37 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten, New York (Springer) 1983 (First published in 1913); Edmund Husserl, *The Paris lectures*, trans. P. Kostenbaum, The Hague (M. Nijhoff) 1967 (First published in 1950); Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns, New York (Springer) 1977 (First published in 1929).

38 *Ibid.*

39 Leslie Baillie, A phenomenological study of the nature of empathy, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 24 (1996), 1300–1308; Ian Beech, Bracketing in phenomenological research, *Nurse Researcher* 6 (1999), 33–51; Phyllis Knaack, Phenomenological research, *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 6 (1984), 107–123; Carolyn J. Oiler, The phenomenological approach in nursing research, *Nursing Research* 31 (1982), 178–181.

40 See Patricia E. Benner, Quality of life: A phenomenological perspective on explanation, prediction, and understanding in nursing science, *Advances in Nursing Science* 8 (1985),

lead from Martin Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology. Heidegger rejected Husserl's Cartesian approach, according to which the human knower is an observing subject attempting to grasp the deep structure of an object from which she is separated.<sup>41</sup> For Heidegger, the human person is being-in-the-world. That is, she is inextricably related to, lives in and through constant engagement with, the world that she seeks to know and to use. The nature of human existence demands that we live hermeneutically; we have no choice but to find meaning and significance in the things which make up our world.

According to Heidegger, whenever we attempt to understand a thing, we necessarily approach it with "foreknowledge" that has accumulated through our particular cultural and linguistic history. All knowledge is situated knowledge. The only way in which we can know anything is by framing our inquiry in the terms of our foreknowledge. Presuppositions cannot therefore be bracketed out; they constitute the condition of the possibility of meaning. Following this line, Gadamer posited that hermeneutic endeavor involves a fusion of horizons.<sup>42</sup> In the dialogue between the values and perspectives of the author(s) of the text on the one hand and of the interpreter on the other, understanding is generated.

Those of us who use interpretive phenomenology construe our research as a fusion of the perspectives of the researcher(s) and of the participants. On this view, interviewers and participants "co-create the data through interviewer-respondent interaction".<sup>43</sup> This process produces a deep understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The personal and cultural horizon of the researcher, far from contaminating the research process, has the potential to enrich data collection and analysis.<sup>44</sup> If the subjectivity of the researcher is to constitute an asset rather than a liability, however, reflexivity or self-awareness must play a central role.<sup>45</sup> Self-reflection mili-

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1–14; Patricia E. Benner, The tradition and skill of interpretive phenomenology in studying health, illness, and caring practices, in: Patricia Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring, and ethics in health and illness*, Thousand Oaks (SAGE) 1994, 99–127; C. Burke Draucker, The critique of Heideggerian hermeneutical nursing research, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 30 (1999), 360–373; Tina Koch, Interpretive approaches in nursing research: The influence of Husserl and Heidegger, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 21 (1995), 827–836.; Leslie Lowes / Morag A. Prowse, Standing outside the interview process? The illusion of objectivity in phenomenological data generation, *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 38 (2001), 471–480, 476.

41 Martin Heidegger, *Being and time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, London (SCM) 1962 (First published in 1927).

42 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, trans. G. Barden & J. Cumming, New York (Seabury Press) 1975 (First published in 1960).

43 Lowes / Prowse (n. 40), 476.

44 Ibid.

45 Benner, *The tradition and skill of interpretive phenomenology* (n. 40); Draucker (n. 40); Lowes & Prowse (n. 40).

tates against a tendency to overlook, minimize, or misrepresent perspectives offered by participants that are unfamiliar to or and/or uncomfortable for the researcher. The critical reflective exercise helps develop a strong stance of openness to the values and perspectives of the participant; it is more likely that the researcher will produce an interpretation that is grounded in the real experience of the participants. The notion of co-creation of meaning suggests, however, movement beyond the literal or explicit meaning of the respondents. Hermeneutic work by the researcher(s) reveals implicit or latent meanings.<sup>46</sup>

### Participants

Fourteen participants (M = 7; F = 7; av. age = 41) were interviewed, representing one Anglican, one progressive Baptist, two Lutheran, three Roman Catholic, and three Uniting Church congregations. The three major selection criteria were that they needed to (i) be reflective and relatively articulate individuals; (ii) have been married for a minimum of three years; and (iii) be no older than 65. The rationale for the first two criteria is self-evident. The reason for the age cut-off is that it was assumed that an interest in and commitment to mutuality and equal regard is more likely to be found in a (relatively) young cohort.

The participants were selected using convenience sampling. The researcher contacted local pastors and asked them to assist him in recruiting suitable persons. Participants were issued with an information sheet (including the questions to be asked) and a consent form prior to the meeting.

### Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, recorded with the consent of the participant, and lasted an average of 45 minutes. The questions used are listed below.

Families are made up of different people who all have their own needs. You yourself have needs. I wonder if you could tell me how you try to deal with this fact that both you and others in the family have their own needs?

Can you tell me a story about a time when conflict arose because your needs were different from someone else's in the family?

How does your commitment to Christ and to his gospel impact on the way you negotiate between regard for your own needs and regard for the needs of others in the family?

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46 Serge F. Hein / Wendy J. Austin, Empirical and hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological research in psychology: A comparison, *Psychological Methods* 6 (2001), 3–17.

Sometimes for the sake of someone else in the family, you put aside what you want. Can you tell me about self-sacrifice in your experience in the family?

I'm interested in the connections that you make between your Christian commitment and self-sacrifice. Can you tell me a little about this?

Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt called to make a sacrifice for the sake of others in the family?

Words such as "equality" and "mutuality" are used quite a bit these days in the context of marriage and family life. Can you tell me how this works out for you?

Can you give me an actual example of how what you have just told me about mutuality was played out in your marriage?

### Data Analysis

Each taped interview was transcribed verbatim and a pseudonym assigned to each participant. Transcripts of initial interviews were reviewed and missing or unclear pieces of data were identified.

The interpretive work developed through a process of writing and re-writing. Short summaries of central issues and important themes were produced. These summaries included excerpts expressive of the particular issues and themes. The summaries were searched carefully for evidence of paradigms and exemplars.<sup>47</sup> A paradigm is a clear or vivid instance of a particular pattern of meaning. It serves as a "marker" that helps the researcher identify less obvious cases of the same pattern.<sup>48</sup> Exemplars also aid the recognition of other instances of a category of meaning. An exemplar is smaller than a paradigm case, but like a paradigm it is also a clear instance of a particular constellation of meaning. It is a vignette or story relating to a constellation that leads the researcher to other constellations that share its essence while containing different external characteristics.

The final phase of the analysis of the data is "naming".<sup>49</sup> This is a process of coding in which the exemplars and paradigm cases are reviewed in order to identify the central themes that capture the core constellations of meaning articulated by the participants.

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47 Benner, *Quality of life* (n. 40), Benner, *The tradition and skill of interpretive phenomenology* (n. 40); Janice D. Crist / Cristine A. Tanner, *Interpretation/Analysis methods in hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology*, *Nursing Research* 52 (2003), 202–205.

48 Benner, *Quality of life* (n. 40).

49 Patricia E. Benner / Christine A. Tanner / Catherine A. Chesla, *Expertise in nursing practice: Caring, clinical judgment, and ethics*, New York (Springer) 1996; Crist / Tanner (n. 47).

## Findings

The first step in the analytical process was identifying paradigms and exemplars. Out of this analysis, the naming of four main themes emerged. The paradigms are recorded in the quotes from participants that form the second half of the theme statement. The themes are as follows:

1. Negotiation is a difficult conversation: “I go out of my way to make everybody happy. It puts me in a bind.”
2. The struggle to achieve a balance between giving and receiving: “Sometimes I’m selfish, and then my husband leans forward on the teeter-totter.”
3. Equality and complementarity: “We’re equal in different ways.”
4. Shared leadership: “Sometimes he’s the leader, and sometimes I would be the leader.”

It is to a discussion of these themes that we now turn.

Negotiation is a Difficult Conversation: “I go out of my way to make everybody happy. It puts me in a bind.”

Virtually all of the participants live very busy lives. The majority of them have young children. It was common for them to speak about constant negotiations and planning around needs, commitments, and schedules. One participant captured the situation very well when he said that “the relationship is almost a conversation.”

As would be expected, the importance of good communication and listening well was stressed. Lucy (45) put it this way: “What really works well in the negotiation now is that we sit and listen to each other. Once a person feels listened to it makes a big difference to them. It’s a matter of having your concerns listened to. You know: ‘Oh, I didn’t mean ... I didn’t realize it was a concern for you.’” Lyndall (33) mentioned the significant positive change that resulted from awareness that she and her husband developed around their respective “love languages.” She indicated that her love modality is “quality time.” If Justin schedules in too much activity around work or other individual pursuits and she consequently sees little of him she feels bereft, angry, and frustrated. Justin, for his part, has recognized that his love language is acts of service. He feels especially loved by Lyndall when she performs helpful tasks for him such as ironing his shirts when he’s busy or making an especially nice dinner when he’s feeling a bit down. The way they structure their time together is guided by this new awareness of each other’s dominant love modalities.

Most of the participants identified problems in the area of negotiation around needs. Three of the female participants referred to the fact that they find it difficult to tell their husband what they need. Megan (27) associated this difficulty with her overweening need to please: “I always want everyone to be happy with me ... It puts me in a bind sometimes. It causes stress ... anxiety.” Sandra (43) spoke about the fact that she sometimes feels ag-

grieved as a result of her failure to assert herself: “There are certainly times when I get a bit resentful. You know, ‘Gee, I’m not getting much out of this.’” Sandra later said that the tension sometimes builds up to the point where she “explodes.”

Jenny (35) identified a change in her attitude and approach under the influence of what she perceived to be the work of the Holy Spirit. Before the shift, she, like Sandra, used to get quite angry and resentful. I asked her if by her statement, “The Holy Spirit seems to have done something in me,” she meant that she now felt free to put her needs directly to her husband. In reply, she had this to say:

Yeah. Yes, that’s right. Like, I could actually go to Mark and talk about it. Mark and I wouldn’t just sit down and talk about things. I would just somehow assume that he would know that I would need to go off and do all this stuff. I was waiting for him to come up to me and say, “I’ll look after the girls and you go off and do so and so.” But of course that never happened.

I raised with the research participants the important question of what happens when the negotiation fails to lead to a resolution that is agreeable to both partners. Two of the women considered that the husband is the head of the family and averred that he should therefore make the final decision.

Roger (57, a business owner) spoke of his strong dislike of conflict. He further stated that he had “learnt that its best if the man succumbs.” When I asked him if he felt any resentment as a result, he made this comment:

Not really. Like I said, I don’t like conflict. If there’s someone in my business who’s not performing, I’m likely to say, “Well so and so not’s really up to scratch, but we can help him improve.” I can’t stand going to a bloke and firing him. If Joyce’s happy, I’m happy. And I try to make a positive out of things when I don’t get what I’d like. So now we’re living by the water ... Joyce’s preference. But it’s an hour from my work. So instead of grumbling about it, I listen to stock market stuff on my mp3 player that I never get a chance to any other time.

Bill (54) adopted the same approach in his first marriage as Roger: “Um. Well I found myself doing things I wasn’t happy with ... Well, I just did them to keep the peace. Whereas now Joan has things like art that I’m not terribly interested in. I find it easier [now] to say, ‘I’m not really into that.’” Bill, unlike Roger, has discovered that it’s more constructive to be honest about his likes and dislikes. He also has the approach that sometimes he will go along with his wife to her preferred activities to be supportive. But he does this because he wants to, not because he feels he has to.

The Struggle to Achieve a Balance between Giving and Receiving:  
 “Sometimes I’m selfish, and then my husband leans forward on the  
 teeter-totter”

It was very clear from the research that while all of the participants held up give and take as the ideal in their marriage and family life, most considered that often the actual situation is at odds with the ideal. Below are representative formulations of the problems, imbalances, and tensions encountered.

So in terms of pleasures that Susan gets ... I don’t know that she gets any. I don’t allow any selfishness on her part (he laughs). But Susan forgives my need, my desire, to exercise (Tony, 44).

Well, I think I probably give more than I take. I think quite a bit about what would make Joyce happy (Roger, 57).

I felt like I was doing everything for the girls and my needs weren’t being met ... all that sort of stuff. And I used to be quite angry about it, and I’d look at Mike and say, “Aw, you’re just goin’ off and doin’ what you want to do, and I’m the one that seems to be always staying at home” (Jenny, 35).

I guess I think about what’s fair. And there are certainly times when I get a bit resentful. You know, “Gee, I’m not getting much out of this” (Sandra, 43).

Well, I probably sit on the opposite side of the fence from Richard in that he does a lot of self-sacrificing for me. Because we are so different he’s very tolerant of how different I am from him. But I don’t think I’m as tolerant as he is (NP laughs and G. joins in). I think that I probably speak it out more than he does. So I probably feel a little bit guilty when you ask that question [about self-sacrifice in the relationship] (Gloria, 59).

When discussing the need to establish mutuality in giving, two suggestive metaphors were used – namely, the teeter-totter and banking. In relation to the first image, Lucy (45) had this to say:

So much of what goes on in my second marriage is about negotiation. How can we do this? What is your Christian understanding? What is my Christian understanding? And we work it out. Not that we do it well all the time. Sometimes the teeter-totter is way out of balance before we realize.

She also spoke of the way in which her husband “imposes” himself when she is being selfish. He “leans on the teeter-totter” to bring it back to a point of equilibrium.

Tony (44) used banking terms to facilitate his articulation of how he and his wife express mutuality in their relationship:

I should expect to feel that there will be times when I feel like I’m giving more than I’m receiving from the relationship. I also know that there are many other times when I have been getting a lot more than I’m giving. Not that I consciously try to construct a ledger of who’s giving and who’s getting out of this at the moment. You know, it’s like sometimes you’ll have to put deposits into the bank and sometimes you’ll have to withdraw. But you hope that you’re putting a lot more in than you’re getting out (we both laugh). And that’s life. Because if you’re not, it’s not going to last. And the wonderful thing about the bank analogy is that there’s so much interest ... you just earn so much interest on the emotional banking. The interest rate must be incredibly high because if you keep putting in

there's so much stuff that you can get back out of it, because you keep making deposits.

Tony spoke in a very earnest way about his “underpinning philosophy” for his marriage. He recalled the counsel of the pastor that conducted his marriage service: “You need to feel like you are giving more than you are receiving to have a strong marriage.” Tony told me that he had never forgotten that; it had become his guiding principle. However, very little that he said indicated that this is the way that he actually lives. When I mentioned the perceived incongruence, he replied with: “No, I’m trying to think of an occasion when I’ve felt like I’ve been giving more than I’ve been getting. It’s rare. I can’t think of one, in fact.” He also remarked that: “I don’t allow any ‘selfishness’ on her part [*selfishness* is his term for pursuing a pleasurable activity]. But Susan forgives my need, my desire, to exercise.” Tony’s experience highlights the truth that when it comes to ethics there is usually quite a gap between what is and what ought to be.

A number of the participants spoke about the need to have an appropriate regard for self in marriage and family life. The issue was framed by some around the problem of burn-out. For example, Megan (27) opined that: “If you’re always putting yourself last, then you’re going to get tired – in my case grumpy and a pain in the neck (laughs) – and you’re not going to give any ... service, I suppose, to your partner.” Tony also picked up on this idea that pursuing one’s own legitimate needs is in the end beneficial for the relationship. The thinking here seems to be that appropriate regard for self leads to a happy, fulfilled mental state, which in turn enhances the quality of one’s engagement with others in the family. In this context, Tony used the expressions “allowing selfishness” and “being better contributors.” He put it this way: “I’d like to say that I’m completely selfless, because I think that’s what I’m supposed to say. We’ve found that we almost become better people and better contributors to the marriage if there is a degree of selfishness allowed.”

The participants told a number of stories of the sacrifices required in marriage and family life. Mark (35) told of how he had been a motorbike mechanic most of his working career. Until recently, he had never been without a bike. When he became a full-time student, he made the painful decision to sell his (very expensive) motorbike in order to boost the family finances. Michael (31) enjoyed a very successful and profitable career as a software designer. Recently, he made the decision to enroll in full-time studies at a theological college. He has a number of programming projects he is developing that could earn him a lot of money if completed. Moreover, he loves the challenge of working on them. However, his wife has often spoken of her disappointment that he spends time on these at night and neglects her and their small children. He is now at the point where he is about to delete all source code from his hard drive. Finally on this note of self-sacrifice, the fact that taking care of the needs of small children results in not attending to



some of their own needs and desires was mentioned by all of the younger participants.

It is interesting to note, lastly, that while all the participants embraced giving of self in love as an ideal, some were either uncomfortable with the concept of *self-sacrifice* or indicated that it was simply not one that they used:

I guess I've never thought of it as self-sacrifice. Yeah ... it's just part of being a good person (Jess, 47).

I tried [self-sacrifice] and it didn't work (Lucy, 45).

Others did not want to make a strong connection between their commitment to self-giving and Christian concepts and language:

I think anybody that goes into a Church would notice that most of the people are pretty giving. It's just what you do...what you learn. It's like osmosis...I don't consciously think that I'm gonna be like Jesus when I decide to give of myself. I'm not thinking of him dying on the Cross or anything. It's just part of my inner spirit (Roger, 57).

We don't talk about self-sacrifice. We don't compare the way we're living with the way Christ lived. We might, though, use a Bible quote in thinking about a particular situation—like, you know, “Do unto others.” Or we might even use an Old Testament quote that reflects a knowledge rather than an alignment. But we wouldn't talk in terms of self-sacrifice. In the extended family, we've got fundamentalists who can't do anything without adding a Bible verse. Maybe as a reaction to that, our conversation and our household doesn't reflect some overt display of Christian belief (Tony, 44).

### Equality and Complementarity: “We're equal in different ways”

In a conversation about self-giving and negotiating around needs, the issues of equality and decision-making structure obviously need to be addressed. The research cohort was split over the issue of equality in marriage. While I heard statements like “Mostly, I guess, we're equal,” and “I was always brought up that women are equal,” I also heard declarations such as “I don't necessarily buy into that notion, because we're not equal.” Lucy (45) offered her view that:

He's bigger, stronger, he can do things I can't do. We have different skills. I'm a better cook. We're not equal. That's okay; that doesn't bother me. We don't have to be equal. We have to be...Lost the word! ... Ah, balancing?

I tried to help her by suggesting the term “complementing.” She affirmed that this was indeed the word she was looking for. Lucy, interestingly, differentiated between a theological and a practical approach to decision-making: “Practically, I think that it could go either way. Theologically, I still think that I should concede to him.” She went on to say that if she feels she has been heard, it doesn't feel like a loss to concede. Moreover, she considers that when she has conceded to her husband, blessings from

God have followed. The example that Lucy gave had to do with the fact that when she and her husband were struggling financially he did not support her suggestion that she go and buy much needed cookware (the couple had recently immigrated to Australia). When he finally agreed that it was the right time to make the purchase, she got a real bargain.

Other research participants also indicated that they preferred the notion of complementarity to that of equality. For example, Mark (35) had this to say: “I think we’re equal in different ways. Does that make sense? ... If I’m the head, my wife’s the neck. The head and the neck are one. The head might have the mouth sometimes, but the neck points which way [the body] is going.”

Jess (47) observed that she and her husband complement each other by virtue of their different skill sets and knowledge bases; however she also spoke of a fundamental egalitarianism in the marriage.

I guess I was a single mother for a while, and, like, I was in charge of my household. Mostly, I guess, we’re equal ... I mean, everyone has things that they are better at in a relationship. I guess we came together as two individuals after a time as single individuals. We run our own individual finances, though there is a joint thing with the house. We don’t even have a split down the middle thing. I pay for some things; he pays for some things; and who knows if they’re even. There are certainly things that I know Will would know more about than I do ... I don’t know ... ah, the car. And there are some things that it’s just easier to let Will take care of.

Megan (27) was very strong in her affirmation of equality: “In my church growing up, some of the farmer wives would have had something to say if they were told they weren’t equal! (Laughs) In the congregation I was baptized into a few years ago the women were also strong individuals. So for Mike and me, it’s just an equal relationship.” Jenny (35) was equally strong in the opposite direction. She spoke of her rejection of what she referred to as “all the feminist sort of stuff.” She told me that she had made a decision a few years back to stay home to look after her children rather than return to her teaching career. Jenny believed that this was required of her as a mother – “I see my place as raising the girls to be Godly kids.” She also stated that her husband needed her support in pursuing his vocation. Jenny indicated that at the time she felt “bombarded” by objections from feminists ranging from her mother to some of the women at the local play group.

When I asked Michael (31) if he would use the terms *equality* and *mutuality* to describe his marriage relationship, he responded this way:

No ... Actually yes and no. Well, no. The answer’s “no.” We don’t even consider that stuff. We think, “We’re in this together.” I’m going to Bible College, but it’s not just me going to Bible College. For me to go to Bible College, Jill is doing stuff at home and helping where she can. We’re just in it together. Um...so there’s never any rank-pulling or demands ... At least I hope not.

Michael clearly does not like the language of equality, but he nevertheless affirms that he does not assume the right to assert authority in the relation-

ship. He considers that he and Jill are working together to enable him to fulfill his sense of calling.

The theme of equality has a close relationship with the next one – namely, shared leadership. What is particularly interesting here is the influence of what I would describe as a residue of the traditional understanding that the male is naturally the leader in the family. A number of the research participants initially stated this view, but when I probed around the issue, they ended up formulating a position of mutuality and shared leadership. It seems as if they feel a need to declare an allegiance to the traditional position on one level, but the reality is that they do not live their lives that way.

Shared leadership: “Sometimes he’s the leader, and sometimes I would be the leader”

In response to my question concerning leadership in the relationship, most of the participants spoke in terms of a shared role. Interestingly, some averred quite clearly that their relationship was one of equality, yet still felt a need to hold up the ideal of the male having the primary leadership role. Mitchell (27) responded to my summative statement, “From what you’ve said so far, equality and mutuality seem to fit your relationship,” by saying this:

Yes, that’s right. I think a husband should be – if not the big decision-maker – should be a strong person for his wife and family. If there are hard decisions or hard times, he should be someone who can keep the family together ... gives them strength. Whereas all of the decisions and things like that ... I believe strongly in equality.

Above I referred to Michael’s statement, “We’re in this together ... there’s never any rank-pulling or demands.” Yet he also considered that it was his role as the male in the family to be the spiritual leader. He and his wife agreed that it would be desirable to include Biblical narratives in the list of bedtime stories read to their children. Michael told me that he thought it was his responsibility to check that his wife was doing this.

It is also interesting to note that while some of the participants initially stated categorically that the male is naturally (or by divine decree) the leader, they qualified their stated position after I asked some questions for clarification. The theory is male leadership; the practice is both partners presenting arguments and points of view, listening to each other, and then looking for a mutually agreeable situation. Bill, a 54 old pilot, began by saying that he was brought up with the belief that the male is the head of the household. He used a captain and co-pilot analogy to explain his model:

In my line of work, you have a captain and four or five cabin crew. Someone has to be in charge. But at the same time the co-pilot has to be able to say, “Excuse me, if you don’t put the wheels down, it’s going to make a helluva noise” (NP

laughs). So you have to be able to work as a team. If the co-pilot is not assertive enough, the captain will ignore his input. There have been accidents as a result of this kind of thing. So I'm aware that someone has to be in charge, but it's how you manage it.

In response, I asked him if he felt he had the right to put in a veto if his wife really wanted to do something that he thought was not the best course of action. He responded by saying, "Probably ... um ... probably not. I wouldn't say a veto call. I think we're balanced in that regard..." I then put a scenario to him to do with the decision they had made to knock down the existing house and rebuild:

Just to do a hypothetical on the house situation, if Joan was for the renovation path and you were for the knock-down and build a new house option, would you have felt that you had the right to step in and say, "Look, Joan, I've made a decision on this and it makes more sense to build a new home."

Bill responded this way:

Aw, that's a hard one. Um ... it could possibly have caused a bit of tension. I guess I probably wouldn't have said a flat "no," but would have tried to come up with logical, solid arguments as to why the knock-down and build a new one was the only way to go. So that she would come to realize that my option was the sensible way to go.

In a final attempt to get clarity on how Bill sees his leadership role, I asked this question: "So are there situations where you really feel you need to take charge as head?" His reply was: "Ah ... I don't know if I could go that far." He went on to say that:

If I was to make a concrete decision on one particular area and Joan doesn't agree with it, and I can't convince her through good arguments, then the consequences are that either she's not going to come along with it, or she's going to be unhappy. So then I'd have to reconsider ... find out why she's not happy with the decision made, and then come to some compromise or ... or ... ah

The hard edges came off Bill's approach as we explored it together. He does not see his role as "taking charge." He recognizes that in order to maintain harmony in his relationship with Joan and to make the decision work, he needs to listen to her perspectives and to reach a compromise solution.

A view proffered by most of the participants was that both partners take a leadership role, depending on abilities and interests. Gloria's (57) comment is typical: "Sometimes he's the leader, and sometimes I would be the leader." She spoke of her desire at one point in time to take over the administration of the couples' finances. Though her husband operates his own business and is therefore very skilled in this area, he was happy at the time to support her in this. When it became obvious that she was not performing the task particularly well, a joint decision was made that he should take it up again.

A number of the younger participants referred to the fact that the mother is assumed to be the leader in matters to do with the care and nurture of

the children. One older male participant said that while he managed the finances, he was very happy for his wife to run their social life, and especially the hosting of the family members who had left home. One young male stated that he had taken a lead in the move to purchase what would be their first home, but qualified this by adding that this was only because he had more interest in and aptitude for this endeavor.

Michael (31) spoke of leadership in terms of “encouragement.” He and his wife shared this role. Having rejected the idea of male headship, he went on to give concrete examples:

The head and ... No ... There are times when I'll try to do things in leadership, but we never couch it in terms of headship. Like, as an example, we wanted to start Bible studies for our little girls. We wanted the bedtime stories to include Bible stories. So I would continually encourage Jenny in that. Another example would be encouraging Jenny to do some exercise. And now she's doing that. She encourages me in totally different ways. She might say, for example, “You need to spend some more time with the girls. They haven't seen you for a while.” I'm definitely the slacker in meeting the desires of each other. And we understand that ... Jenny knows I'm the slacker one in that area.

I asked Mark (35) if he thought that, as a male, he should take the leadership role. In reply, he had this to say: “Ah, I honestly think that it's healthy in a marriage that the male has a leadership role. I don't mean *the* leadership role, but *a* leadership role.” I followed up on his statement by asking if he meant by this that there were some areas in which he thought it was appropriate for his wife to lead. Mark answered in the affirmative: “Yeah, like ... okay, I may have an authority in the household, yet some areas might be more ‘Dad deal with’ oriented, whereas some areas might be more Mum oriented. And I think that that's something that Margaret and I have for the most part worked out. There're some areas of overlap in the middle that we're still working through.”

### Conclusion

Due to the fact that very little empirical research has been carried out on Christian attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis equality and mutuality, we have only personal experience and anecdotal evidence to fill in the picture. This research represents a contribution to covering the gap in our knowledge base. Using an interpretive phenomenological method, the following four themes emerged: (i) Negotiation is a difficult conversation: “I go out of my way to make everybody happy. It puts me in a bind.” (ii) The struggle to achieve a balance between giving and receiving: “Sometimes I'm selfish, and then my husband leans forward on the teeter-totter”; (iii) Equality and complementarity: “We're equal in different ways”; (iv) Shared leadership: “Sometimes he's the leader, and sometimes I would be the leader.”

It is interesting to note that the psychology associated with mutuality is prominent in a number of the responses. For example, reference was made to the fact that a failure to enact appropriate self-regard leads to “burn-out,” understood as a diminished capacity to enrich the relationship through practical contributions and upbeat, pleasant companionship. Another example is the report by three participants that a fear of a negative reaction from their spouse often stopped them making what they perceived to be a legitimate claim. To give one more instance, a female participant indicated that when she felt she had been heard, the act of conceding to her husband did not feel like a loss.

Another finding worth highlighting is the fact that virtually all the participants spoke about how difficult it is to balance self- and other-regard in a married relationship. Some err on the side of thinking too much of self, and others on the side of thinking too little. One participant, interestingly, stated that his underpinning philosophy is that one should be giving more than one is receiving, but when asked to reflect on this he suddenly realized that there is actually quite a gap in his experience between the vision and the reality. This highlights the danger of self-deception in an intimate relationship. On the other hand, those that are very giving do not necessarily act purely out of altruism or a commitment to the Christian love ethic. For example, one participant chose to “succumb” to his spouse’s wishes and desires because he did not like conflict. Others spoke of an inability to state in clear terms what they needed from their spouse and, as a consequence, found that they were sometimes giving when they really wanted to be receiving.

It is also worthy of note that while self-sacrifice is quite commonly promoted as the Christian ideal, it is not central in the approach of a number of the participants. They either do not like the term, or they simply do not use it.

Finally, it should be noted that in a number of cases the theory and the practice vis-à-vis male leadership were at odds. The theory is male leadership for quite a few of the participants; the practice is both partners presenting arguments and points of view, listening to each other, and then looking for a mutually agreeable situation. It seems that a residue remains of the traditional idea of male leadership in the home, but this belief is usually not actualized.

Any connections that one may make between this research and the ongoing task of developing a practical theology of marriage and family life need to be very tentative in nature. This is a very small sample set in one particular cultural context. However, it is suggested that practical theologians need to take heed of the fact that many of the research participants were unaware of certain crucial psychological dynamics associated with their attitudes and behaviors – the problem of self-deception mentioned above. Virtually all of the participants have embraced the ethic of equal regard, but struggle on the emotional and psychological level in their attempt

to implement it in their marriage and family life. This confirms the critique of much of the current practical theology in which elaborate and intricate philosophical discussions are offered, with little or no attention to the practical and concrete concerns and struggles faced by people in their everyday reality.

It is further suggested that practical theologians could (perhaps) learn something from the fact that for virtually all of the participants the concept of self-sacrifice was either distasteful or simply absent from their theological vocabulary. It may be that those of us working on a practical theology of marriage and family life need to give more attention to the question of an appropriate role for self-sacrifice in the love ethic. That is, we should not fall into the trap of downplaying the value in self-sacrifice in our eagerness to highlight mutuality and equal regard. If the experience of this group is anything to go by, unhealthy elevation of self-sacrifice is less likely than an equally unhealthy dismissal of it. Of course, the limitations of a qualitative study are very evident here. In order to test this, we need much more empirical research on the way Christians perceive the role of self-sacrifice in general, and its relationship to mutuality and proper self-love in particular.

The research utilized only a small sample and was confined to mainline churches in the Australian context. We need many more studies such as this in order to build up a full picture of the ways in which Christians approach issues of mutuality, equality, fairness, and negotiating around needs in marriage and family life.

### Abstract

Qualitative research was conducted on the attitudes and behaviors of Christians in Australian mainline churches in relation to equality, mutuality, and negotiating around needs. Using an interpretive phenomenological method, four themes emerged. The themes, with paradigmatic statements, are these: (i) Negotiation is a difficult conversation: "I go out of my way to make everybody happy. It puts me in a bind"; (ii) The struggle to achieve a balance between giving and receiving: "Sometimes I'm selfish, and then my husband leans forward on the teeter-totter"; (iii) Equality and complementarity: "We're equal in different ways"; (iv) Shared leadership: "Sometimes he's the leader, and sometimes I would be the leader."

### Zusammenfassung

Mit einem qualitative Forschungsdesign wurden Einstellungen und Verhaltensweisen von Christen in australischen 'mainline churches' in Bezug auf Gleichheit, Gegenseitigkeit und das Verhandeln von Grundbedürfnissen untersucht. Unter Verwendung eines phänomenologisch-basierten Interpretationsansatzes wurden folgende vier Themen wesentlich entdeckt, die hier jeweils mit einem paradigmatischen Interviewauszug veranschaulicht werden: (1) Verhandeln ist eine schwierige Art der Kommunikation: „Ich verlasse meine eigenen Wege, um alle anderen glücklich zu machen. Das führt

mich in eine Zwickmühle.“ (2) Die Bemühung um ein Gleichgewicht von Geben und Nehmen: „Manchmal bin ich egoistisch, und dann schaukelt mein Mann wieder nach vorn.“ (3) Gleichheit und Komplementarität: „Wir sind auf verschiedene Weise gleich.“ (4) Gemeinsame Führung: „Manchmal trifft sie die Entscheidungen, und manchmal bin ich der Bestimmer.“