

Family Communication and the Restoration of Edenic Intimacy: A Study of Genesis 1–3 and the Song of Songs

Sorin-Ioan Loghin

*PhD Candidate, University of Bucharest, Romania
loghinion1998@gmail.com*

Abstract: This article explores the relationship between communication and marital intimacy from a theological perspective, focusing on Genesis 1–3 and the Song of Songs. Genesis 1–3 presents the human capacity for communication as an expression of the image of God in humanity, a capacity subsequently affected by the Fall. In the theological vision of Genesis, communication is an important element of marital intimacy, which, according to the Song of Songs, can be restored through dialogue and mutual appreciation within the marital relationship. The theological perspective resulting from the thematic exegetical analysis of Genesis 1–3 and the Song of Songs is confirmed and nuanced by contemporary research on marital intimacy. These studies associate transparency toward one’s partner and the expression of positive emotions, as well as mutual appreciation and understanding, with the maintenance of marital satisfaction and stability. Thus, the theological perspective outlined in the course of exegetical research indicates that theological reflection on the relationship between communication and marital intimacy is compatible with recent studies in family psychology and offers valuable insights for strengthening family life.

Keywords: Family Communication, Marital Intimacy, Genesis 1-3, Song of Songs, Positive Communication

1. Introduction

The Bible recounts, at the beginning of its first book, that God created the first man and the first woman in His “image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26), after which He placed them in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8). In other words, God created the first family and placed them in a space He had chosen, entrusting them with the responsibility to care for it through a joint effort (2:15). The existence of the relationship between man and woman implies interaction and communication, which makes the family the primary setting for human communication as described in Scripture. Although the narrative in Genesis initially states that the relationship between the first humans was characterized by perfect harmony (Gen. 2:25), it suffered with the fall into sin.

This study explores the relationship between communication and marital intimacy from the theological perspective of the first chapters of Genesis (Gen. 1–3) and the Song of Songs. The first chapters of Genesis present communication as an expression of the image of God in humanity, manifested in the original marital communion, whose relational function is impaired by the Fall. Subsequently, the Song of Songs offers a vision of the restoration of marital intimacy through the cultivation of marital dialogue and mutual appreciation.

The first part of the study combines thematic exegetical analysis with a theological reflection on the manifestation of God’s image in humanity and the effects of the Fall on it. It then highlights how the Song of Songs presents the restoration of marital intimacy affected by sin and the theological continuity between the creation narrative and the theology of this biblical text. The exegetical analysis aims to outline a theological perspective on marital communication as a means of enhancing family intimacy. The second section presents the contemporary implications of the theological perspective outlined in the section on biblical theology. The interdisciplinary section at the end of the article draws on recent studies and highlights the role of self-disclosure and positive communication in cultivating intimacy and strengthening family relationships.

2. Exegetical Analysis of the Narrative in Genesis 1–3: Between Creation and the Fall

2.1 Man as the bearer of God's image

In the description of creation in the first chapters of the biblical book of Genesis, man occupies a central place, as he is the only one explicitly stated to be created “in his own image” (Gen. 1:27ab, ESV). Numerous interpretations have been proposed regarding the meaning of this biblical expression, but no consensus has been reached (House, 1998, pp. 60–63; Wenham, 1987, pp. 29–32; Westermann, 1987, pp. 147–161). One way in which the biblical expression has been understood emphasizes the relational dimension of the human being, from which the capacity to communicate also derives.

This interpretation is based on an understanding of the first half of the passage in light of the verse's conclusion: “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27c, ESV). Although the primary meaning of this biblical expression likely refers to the sexual dimension of family relationships (Waltke, 2007, p. 221), it also implicitly highlights the relational nature of human existence. Claus Westermann observes this implicit dimension of the biblical text and asserts that this passage refers to the fact that “a human being must be seen as one whose destiny it is to live in community; people have been created to live with each other” (Westermann, 1987, p. 160). Since relational existence presupposes interaction between people, this relational dimension of the human being also implies the capacity to communicate. The manifestation of the image of God also refers to man's capacity to establish relationships, to live in community, and to communicate with his fellow human beings. The fact that this truth is expressed in the context of the formation of the first family establishes marital relationship as the primary space of communion.

Interpreting the manifestation of God's image in human beings through the lens of communicative capacities does not exhaust the theological significance of the biblical expression; however, this relational dimension may be inferred from the biblical text and contributes to shaping a more complex perspective on the human being. This perspective is supported by two contextual arguments. First, the biblical text shows that man was created following a divine deliberation: “Let us make man [...]” (Gen. 1:26, ESV). Whether the passage may be understood in a Trinitarian sense, recognizing that God communicates with Himself in the secret counsel within the Holy Trinity, or as a reference to the heavenly council in which God and the angelic beings participate (Wenham, 1987, pp. 27–28), both emphasize that God is a being capable of communication and eager to relate. The biblical text presents God as a being who communicates, and man, created in His image, is a communicative being capable of maintaining a relationship with God (Stăniloae, 2010, p. 407). Second, the reason God created Eve is so that man would not be alone (Gen. 2:18), which highlights the human need for communion and communication. This aspect is also expressed by Westermann when he analyzes the biblical passage in Genesis 2:18 and states that: “All human community is centered around the community of man and woman” (Westermann, 1987, p. 227).

From the theological perspective of the first chapters of Genesis, human beings are created by God in His image, which includes the capacity for communion both with God, the Creator, and with one's fellow human beings (Barth, 1958, pp. 183–187). The primary setting for the manifestation of the relational dimension of the image of God is the familial relationship between man and woman. Since any human relationship involves interaction, communication is one of the concrete expressions through which the relational dimension of the human being created in the image of God becomes visible. The family thus constitutes the primary setting in which human beings are called to live in communion and to exercise their capacity to communicate, as part of the manifestation of their likeness to God.

2.2 Human Communication with God

House (1998, p. 63) continues along the lines of interpretation outlined in the previous section and emphasizes that the primary manifestation of the “image of God” involves communication with God and exercising dominion over creation, when he states that: “Humans exercise their

‘imaging’ of God by relating to their Creator and by ruling the animals and the earth according to the Lord’s command.” From House’s observation, it follows that one of the fundamental manifestations of the image of God is humanity’s ability to relate to God. Since any relationship implicitly involves communication, it can be concluded that God created humanity so that they might enter into communion with Him and respond to His initiative of communication. God’s presence in the garden and the reaction of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:8 suggest the existence of a personal and ongoing relationship between the Creator and humanity prior to the Fall. The relational dynamic that forms the basis of ancient Israelite theology is accurately captured and summarized in Vriezen’s observation that the foundation of ancient Israel’s conception of God is the reality of a spiritual communion between God, humanity, and the world He created (Vriezen, 1970, p. 157). Thus, by virtue of the way it was created, the relational dynamic of human existence encompasses three dimensions, the most important of which is communication with God.

2.3 Human communication with other people

God created human beings to be social beings. God did not want Adam to be alone, and so He gave him Eve. God is the author of the monogamous family, which represents the family model found in the account in Genesis (Davidson, 2007, pp. 21–22). God established the family as the primary space for human communion and as the main setting in which the relational dimension of the image of God is expressed through communication. Communication within the family is an essential aspect, not only in terms of living out the image of God, but also for the development and maintenance of the relationship between spouses.

The biblical text emphasizes that before the fall of the first humans, the relationship between the spouses who formed the primordial family was harmonious, characterized by innocence and full communion between them. The dimension of primordial relational innocence, manifested through the intimacy between the two spouses, is captured in the text by the statement that “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25), which Hamilton (1990, p. 191) asserts is “a sign of a healthy relationship between the man and the woman.”

3. The effects of the Fall on intrafamilial communication

One of the most significant effects of humanity’s fall into sin is the corruption of communication. This has manifested itself both in the relationship between humanity and God, as well as in human relationships in general and family relationships in particular. The deterioration of communication between the first humans and the Creator is highlighted by the narrative episode in which, after sinning, humans hide from God, and communication is timidly resumed following His insistence (Gen. 3:8–10). The effects of sin in the lives of the first humans manifest, according to Mathews, through a fear of communicating with God and the loss of their initial relational innocence. At the same time, he evocatively describes the image portrayed by the biblical text when he states that “They are pictured in the narrative like children hiding in fearful shame from their father” (Mathews, 1996, pp. 239–240).

The relational separation between God and humanity culminates in the expulsion of the primordial family from the Garden of Eden. The expulsion from Eden represents not merely a change in the living space of the first family, but the concrete expression of the relational rupture caused by sin. Because of sin, man has relinquished the space that represents the archetype of the place where God manifests His life-giving presence (Wenham, 1987, p. 86; McKeown, 2008, pp. 37–38).

The second dimension of communication corrupted by sin is the family dimension, since sin has corrupted communication within the marital relationship. This aspect is accurately captured by Davidson, who emphasizes that the couple realized they were naked and covered themselves, highlighting the rupture between the two individuals, who prior to the Fall had enjoyed an intimate and profound relationship (Davidson, 2007, pp. 55–58). When God questions the man about his deed, he blames Eve, which is a telling illustration of the divisive effects of sin, which causes man

to turn against his closest partner (Wenham, 1987, p. 77). God asks the woman the same question, and she blames the serpent, following the man's example. The biblical text thus highlights the fact that the divisive effect of sin encompasses all relational dimensions: the relationship between God and man, between man and woman, as well as the relationship between humans and animals (Wenham, 1987, p. 78; McKeown, 2008, p. 37). In this way, the fall into sin affects the theological foundation of the Israelite perspective, which, according to Vriezen, encompasses the three relational dimensions mentioned earlier by Wenham (Vriezen, 1970, p. 157).

At the end of the third chapter (Gen. 3:16), the biblical text revisits the theme of the deterioration of the marital relationship within the original family and shows that sin not only corrupted communication between the spouses but also affected the entire marital relationship, a fact particularly evident in the woman's life. This perspective is reinforced by C. Westermann's observation, who states that: "just where the woman finds her fulfillment in life, her honor and her joy, namely in her relationship to her husband and as mother of her children, there she finds that it is not pure bliss, but pain, burden, humiliation, and subordination" (Westermann, 1987, p. 263). Although the verse in question describes the woman's punishment, it implicitly refers to the man as well, in his capacity as a family partner. The verse does not merely describe the woman's punishment but also suggests that the relationship between the spouses has been distorted by sin, and the deep intimacy between the two has been replaced by a tense and unbalanced relationship.

As such, the biblical text highlights the deterioration of the relationship between spouses through the loss of communion and intimacy. After the fall into sin, the relational innocence of the first family is lost, and marital intimacy is altered. As a result of sin, communication between the spouses is evasive and accusatory, and family communion is distorted and characterized by imbalances and negative emotions. The following biblical chapter reveals the ongoing deterioration of the relationship within the first family, which will escalate until it includes physical violence, through which Cain kills Abel (Gen. 4:1–16).

4. The Role of Communication in Restoring the Edenic Relational Ideal Between Man and Woman from the Theological Perspective of the Song of Songs

The theological significance of the Song of Songs is one of the most debated topics in Old Testament theology. Throughout the history of its interpretation, this text has most often been read allegorically (Longman, 2001, pp. 20–35). However, recent Old Testament interpreters have challenged the traditional allegorical interpretation in favor of an interpretation that prioritizes its literal and natural meaning (Longman, 2001, pp. 35–47). In this hermeneutical approach, the Song of Songs is understood as a love poem that celebrates the love between a man and a woman within the family. This interpretation opposes perspectives that view sexuality with suspicion and, at the same time, restores conjugal sexuality as an integral part of the good order of God's creation. The theological implications of the new hermeneutical paradigm are evocatively summarized by Garrett and House (2004, p. 119) when they state that: "Marriage, as described in the Song protects the hearth, not simply by giving the flesh an outlet for its biological appetite but by giving the hearth a passion for the beloved."

The Song of Songs presents marital relations as a positive expression of the order of creation rather than a concession to human physical desires. Within the marital intimacy between the two lovers, communication takes on a central role. This aspect is highlighted by the fact that biblical interpreters find textual connections between the Song of Songs and the first chapters of the biblical book of Genesis (Barth, 1960, pp. 293–300; Davidson, 2007, pp. 552–553). Some scholars have suggested that the relationship between the two texts is so close that the biblical text of the Song of Songs could be read as a theological reflection on the opening passages of Genesis (Landy, 1979). For this reason, the Song of Songs is interpreted as a restoration of the Edenic relational ideal between man and woman, in which the recovery of the primordial conjugal intimacy between man and woman through love is presented (Davidson, 2007, pp. 552–553).

Although at first glance the text of the Song of Songs appears to emphasize the communion between the two spouses through marital sexual intimacy, Davidson shows that the foundation of intimacy is communication between spouses (Davidson, 2007, pp. 601–604). This observation is reinforced by Michael V. Fox’s research, which demonstrates that the biblical text of the Song of Songs differs from Egyptian love poetry in that the text centers on communication between the two lovers (Fox, 1983). Fox (1983, p. 228) states that: “Love in the Song of Songs is not merely a feeling. It is a confluence of souls, best expressed through tightly interwoven dialogue, and is a mode of perception, best communicated through the imagery of praise. The mode of presentation and imagery reinforce each other in communicating the sense of love as a looking outward with a vision so broad as to elicit a world of its own. For Cantic, love is a way of seeing and creating a world, a private idyllic universe.”

The dialogue between the two lovers is one of the central elements of the text and highlights the uniqueness of the biblical text within the context of ancient writings. Davidson notes that the dialogue between the two lovers is replete with terms of endearment and expressions of appreciation. They prefer not to express their love directly, through phrases such as “I love you,” but rather express it indirectly through compliments, such as “You are beautiful,” in order to emphasize the other person at the expense of their own feelings (Davidson, 2007, pp. 603–604).

The Song of Songs presents therefore communication as the foundation of marital intimacy. In the theological vision of this biblical text, dialogue within the family plays an essential role in regaining the Edenic relational ideal characterized by deep marital intimacy. Communication between husband and wife within the family, manifested through the verbal expression of sincere appreciation motivated by love, is presented as one of the means by which marital intimacy can be cultivated and maintained.

5. Implications for Contemporary Family Communication

The biblical analysis highlights two fundamental realities of the marital relationship that have been affected by the Fall: original intimacy and communication between spouses. In light of the biblical analysis, to create the framework for developing and maintaining marital intimacy, communication must be transparent and contain mutual appreciation grounded in love. The importance of these elements of communication is emphasized not only by biblical texts but also by contemporary research on family life.

5.1 The Importance of Self-Disclosure in Marital Communication

Communication is a complex process through which information is transmitted, either voluntarily or involuntarily. It is not only an intrinsic and indispensable component of an interpersonal relationship but also one of the factors that determine its depth and nature (Greene et al., 2006, p. 409). Although it is an essential element for any type of relationship, simple communication is not sufficient to create an atmosphere of intimacy in a family relationship; self-disclosure is also necessary. This plays an essential role in the relationship between spouses and is understood “as an interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately disclose something personal to another” (Greene et al., 2006, p. 411).

The importance of self-disclosure in the marital context stems from the fact that it serves as a means of maintaining the relationship and fostering intimacy, and is consistently associated with love, satisfaction, and marital commitment for both women and men (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Recent research confirms the existence of a positive relationship between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction (Qori et al., 2022). However, as Sprecher and Hendrick (2004, p. 873) suggest through longitudinal research, self-disclosure alone is not sufficient to fully explain the quality of a marital relationship. This observation highlights the need for other factors that contribute to the cultivation of intimacy. The author’s assertion is reinforced and supplemented by Prager’s research, which emphasizes that self-disclosure must be complemented by two other dimensions of intimacy: the expression of positive emotions and a person’s conviction that they have been heard, understood, and accepted by their partner (Prager, 2000).

Thus, intimacy as a state of relational closeness can be maintained and cultivated through self-disclosure. Through this, personal information that contributes to deepening mutual understanding is actively and deliberately revealed to the partner. The fact that self-disclosure is not sufficient for maintaining a strong and lasting marital relationship highlights the need for active involvement and reciprocity within the family relationship. Therefore, to enhance intimacy in marital relationships, active self-disclosure must be practiced within a framework characterized by positive emotions and mutual understanding.

5.2 The Importance of Positive Communication in Marital Relationships

It has been argued that the effectiveness of self-disclosure in maintaining and fostering intimacy depends on its integration into a more complex model (Specher & Hendrick, 2004, p. 873; Prager, 2000). One of the central elements of this model is positive communication. In this study, it is understood as the form of communication through which “partners understand and come to feel understood, known, and loved by one another” and through which the marital relationship is maintained (Baucom & Baucom, 2022, p. 56, 58–59).

The importance of positive communication is also supported by contemporary research. For example, Gottman et al. (1998, p. 14) suggest that “the amount of positive affect was significantly related to stability.” The expression of positive affect, particularly in the context of marital conflict, is associated with marital stability and satisfaction, as this was the only variable that simultaneously predicted these two dimensions throughout the study (Gottman et al., 1998, pp. 14, 17). The study emphasizes that the origin of dysfunctional communication patterns can be found in the daily interactions between spouses. These observations underscore the need to cultivate healthy habits of positive communication not only during family conflicts but also outside of them, in the daily interactions between spouses (Gottman et al., 1998, p. 20).

Positive communication and mutual appreciation expressed in everyday interactions between spouses help foster marital intimacy. This highlights the importance of positive communication for creating a positive perception of the relationship. Gottman’s research links positive perception—understood as how one partner evaluates their own marital relationship—with marital stability and satisfaction (Gottman, 2000). Cultivating “positive communication behaviors such as empathy, emotional support, and compromise, and lower levels of negative behaviors such as hostility, criticism, and violence” (Baucom & Baucom, 2022, pp. 58–59) increases marital satisfaction and contributes to strengthening the marriage.

Positive communication is thus one of the essential elements of marital intimacy. Expressing positive emotions can help maintain marital satisfaction and stability. It provides partners with relational tools through which they can create a family environment characterized by mutual appreciation and emotional intimacy.

6. Conclusion

The analysis conducted suggests that human beings are created for relationships, both with God and with their fellow human beings. The biblical text presents the family as the primary setting for these relationships; however, because of sin, the relational innocence of the first family was lost, and communication within the family was disrupted. These effects of sin are evident in the marital dynamics of the first family, which came to be characterized by evasive and even accusatory communication. The biblical text Song of Songs, however, presents the restoration of the relationship between spouses through dialogue and the expression of love through compliments that celebrate the partner’s qualities. The contemporary implications of this perspective highlight the importance of cultivating transparency toward one’s partner, expressing positive emotions, and fostering mutual appreciation and understanding to maintain marital satisfaction and stability.

Hence, the theological perspective outlined in this study indicates that biblical reflection on the relationship between communication and marital intimacy, supplemented by contributions from family psychology, can offer valuable insights for strengthening contemporary family life.

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