

My Brother's Keeper, by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen

reviewed by [Ruth Groenhout](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

When women get together and talk turns to the topic of men, it's not uncommon for the conversation to end with someone saying, "Men!" in a certain tone of voice, while another adds, "Men are idiots!" But that judgment doesn't just come from women these days. Some men themselves seem determined to prove that human males are shallow, hormone-driven brutes. From popular-culture artifacts like *The Man Show* and the ads aired during breaks in football games, to the pseudo-scientific pronouncements of sociobiologists, men are confronted with the notion that to be a man is to be violent, sexually promiscuous and constantly concerned about one-upmanship.

Given this context, a book about masculinity written by a woman might seem like more bad news for men. But Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen does not bash men, nor does she label them as emotionally immature. Van Leeuwen writes from a firm conviction that all humans, male and female, are created in the image of God, created to know and love God and to live out their callings as workers for the kingdom. Her book offers an important corrective to the harmful and depressing images of men that saturate our culture, and it does so in ways that are firmly rooted in a respect for scripture and an extensive knowledge of the social-science research on men and masculinity.

A strained relationship has sometimes existed between masculinity and Christianity. Masculinity is frequently defined in terms of control (of self and others) and the protection of one's honor. Christianity requires one to give up control, and to accept dependence on another for both salvation and sanctified living. Further, Christianity is a religion of servanthood, chastity and gentleness--not exactly characteristics that leap to mind when defining manhood. Is Christianity, then, a feminizing religion, as some writers have argued, and thus inherently problematic for men? Can men become fully and properly masculine as Christians, and if so, what does that mean for how we think about both Christianity and masculinity?

As a professor of psychology and philosophy at Eastern University, Van Leeuwen is well situated to analyze current studies of gender. Her discussion accords science its due, but no more. Our experience of ourselves is, of course, connected to our biology, but that does not mean that biology completely determines how sexuality and gender are expressed in a given culture. Van Leeuwen illustrates this by looking at our notion of what is edible. In the abstract, insects are eminently digestible and a good source of protein. But Americans are unlikely to ever digest them. Our cultural beliefs and training affect our biological nature, making us feel nausea at the thought of eating bugs.

In the same way, though masculinity arises out of biology, it is partly determined by cultural and individual beliefs. In an American culture that steeps men in images of cheap sexuality and macho posturing, biological tendencies toward domination, sexual promiscuity or aggression may be exacerbated. And this is bad news for men and those who love them, since it makes it harder for them to be good lovers and husbands, good fathers or good Christians.

It is refreshing to find a book written from a clear Christian perspective that deals with difficult and controversial topics without either gloom or undue optimism. Van Leeuwen's treatment of divorce is a case in point. Divorce rates among committed churchgoers are almost identical to those among the unchurched. In order to respond to this situation, Christians need to understand the phenomena of divorce, but we also need to address the factors that contribute to divorce from a perspective informed by a Christian understanding of the created nature of men and women.

Divorce used to be attributed to the "two tales of marriage," the phenomena that men and women experience marriage differently. What those two tales are supposed to be has varied over time. It used to be common for men to be portrayed as experiencing marriage as a trap or as the proverbial ball and chain, while women experienced it as the whole point of life. Then the pendulum swung the other way, and research was cited to show that marriage is good for men, but bad for women. Married men live longer, enjoy better physical and emotional health, and report themselves as happier than their unmarried counterparts. For women, it seemed, these statistics were reversed. Van Leeuwen examines these data, as well as more recent studies, and concludes that marriage is good for both men and women when the relationship is marked by mutual love, respect and equality. Further, strong marriages are good for kids and for society--no surprises there. But the characteristics needed to participate in such marriages are subverted by the

nonrelational sexuality men are encouraged to develop.

Can we develop a vision of sexuality and gender relationships that is good for both men and women and that provides children with the stable, loving parenting they need? Van Leeuwen is cautiously hopeful. The Christian community has the resources to articulate a vision of true masculinity, one modeled less on wealth, power and consumption and more on service, strength used in pursuit of justice and charity, and the faithful, covenantal love of God. It is a vision that our culture sorely needs.