

Addressing Questions Regarding Gender Roles

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At CityView Church and the Network in which I'm involved, we hold to a position that is known as the "complementarian" view of gender roles — a belief that men are to lead in both church and home ... and by "lead," we don't mean dominate or abuse, but to lead and love like Jesus (Ephesians 5:22-27).

Male leadership does not imply superiority on the part of the male or inferiority on the part of the female. On the contrary, the idea of male headship in both church and home is 100% consistent with the understanding of equality of status and dignity given to both men and women in Genesis 1:26-27.

Thus, male headship is not in conflict with the incredible redemption found in the Gospel that prompts Paul to declare that we are "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28-29).

Now ... having said all this, I believe many complementarians do a terrible job of offering a defense for their views. Thus, I would like to suggest a way to think through how we communicate these important truths to those that might be reasonably skeptical of male headship.

In light of former President Jimmy Carter's recent articleⁱⁱ related to this matter and having recently spoken on the subject of men and boys during our Fathers' Day service at CityView Church, I felt that an essay on this matter would be timely (and hopefully, helpful).

It is my conviction that those who hold to a male-headship view need to think through a defense of their views on three fronts.

First, we need to think through this subject biblically. What does the Bible say on this matter? What are the most basic and elemental texts that speak to gender roles? If you can't make a scripturally sound defense of the complimentary view, it will be difficult to speak intelligently on the matter. Here's an example of how I approach this (minus some nuanced points I might make in a more in-depth discussion):

Since the Gospel is God's graceful response to man's rebellion and fall, I prefer to go to the earliest, pre-fall teachings on the subject (along with the cross-referenced New Testament passages). Taking Genesis 1:26-27 along with Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, we are given a picture of pre-fall man and woman...completely equal in dignity and worth, yet created with different gender roles. One must either explain away Paul's statements OR acknowledge complete consistency in saying men and women enjoy an equality of worth in spite of a division of roles and responsibilities.

Further, the Genesis account also reveals that human beings are representing the image of God in as much as each gender displays his male-ness or female-ness. We were created both male and female in the image of God in such a way that our gender is crucial to the ongoing display of God's image.

For either a man or a woman to act in any other way (or reject/deny their gender) would be to subvert our collective image-bearing mandate. Thus, not only does creation order confirm male headship to be considered consistent with gender equality, but our originally created state intends these differences to be a natural part of the Imago Dei's display in creation.

While some would argue that the Gospel eliminates all gender-role barriers (usually accompanied by a twisted reading of Galatians 3:28-29), such arguments fail to remember that the Gospel is "putting things to right" in a way that responds to the Fall in Genesis 3. Since the pre-fall texts indicate gender roles as being in full swing, it would be a strange argument to assert that the Gospel "puts things to right" by eliminating gender roles. Besides, it was the perversion of natural roles that were one of the many pieces of the fall (In Genesis 3, God was ignored while the man stood by as the woman was subdued and dominated by creation instead of the exact opposite order as God had established!).

Not only should a complementarian think through these things scripturally, but theologically. What are the doctrinal implications of not holding to a complementarian position? What key doctrines will need to be adjusted to make way for the egalitarian view? If you can't make a theological defense of male headship, it will be difficult to converse with those that want to think and speak philosophically on the matter. The following is an example of my preferred way of discussing this:

Since the Trinity is such an important, primary doctrine and its perversion would cause a whole host of theological dominoes to fall, I prefer to converse on the subject of headship and equality as it relates to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For instance, the scripture is clear in declaring the Son's submission to the Father and His will (Father-headship). Yet it is generally accepted that Father, Son and Spirit are also co-equally God in character and both communicable and incommunicable qualities.

If headship is bad and being "under" one's leadership is demeaning or makes the submissive one "inferior," then it follows that Jesus must also be inferior – not co-equal – to God the Father. The same could be said of the Holy Spirit. Are egalitarians willing to speak of the Trinity in these terms?

Further, since the Trinity is the model for the *imago dei* (image of God) in man, it also follows that by being made in God's image – both male and female – part of bearing God's image will be living out the gender roles He has established. Why? Because we are bearing the image of a Trinitarian God that is co-equal in every way while at the same time acting out their different roles! By embracing male headship in both church and home, we actually affirm our understanding of the Trinity!

Some egalitarians might say that this is all fine and good for the Trinity because God can hold co-equality and headship of the Father in tension because God is perfect. However, man's sinfulness prevents him from doing this in a way that is responsible and consistent with the Trinity and thus, men and women are best to eliminate roles so as to prevent the abuse of male headship.

The problem with such an argument is that one must shrink the Gospel in such a way as to believe that men and women cannot be redeemed and sanctified enough so as to successfully live out male headship without sinning. Thus, one has traded a "Trinity-problem" for a "Gospel problem." And the dominoes keep falling.

A final way in which one must think through matters related to male headship is personally. How do you live out the tension of co-equal, yet different roles? How does your behavior and attitude speak to a successfully sanctified out-working of scriptural gender roles? How does your life fight against the notion that male headship necessitates a low view of women? If you can't convey – in speech, attitude and action – a reasonable case for the consistency of male headship with equality of worth and dignity, you will be handicapped in any discussion you might have on this matter. Here's an example of how I handle this:

While I've tried several approaches, my wife has always been my greatest apologetic on these matters. Many egalitarians imagine—wrongly—that most complementarians have weak, quiet, barefoot and pregnant wives. While my wife prefers sock-free feet and HAS been pregnant quite a few times, she hardly fits the descriptions many would imagine.

My wife is a type-A personality that likes to be in charge. She's competent and strong-willed. She intimidates some men (and some women) because she's beautiful, smart and extremely confident in herself. While I in no way intend to paint my wife as the model woman for all men, she is most-definitely the model woman for me. In fact, I not only "accept" my wife's traits, but I actually love and prefer them. I love that she has a strong personality. I love that she can be loud and that she has an edge to her humor.

However, at the end of the day, my wife joyfully respects me and honors my leadership by submitting to my headship as the Church submits and respects the headship of Christ. My marriage is a testament to the Gospel's power to both bring us in alignment with God's created order (male headship) while preventing us from sin (viewing each other as both co-equal and necessary to reflecting God's image).

My marriage presents a bit of a problem for those that would prefer to pigeonhole those that teach male headship. Since the dynamics of my marriage are obvious and observable to anyone that knows us, I leverage my marriage to convey a sanctified picture of male headship. For men that have a different home-dynamic, you might have other ways of displaying sanctified male-headship to others. My point is that you better be ready to present a very personal case that destroys people's pre-conceived (and often emotionally-charged) notions of the domineering, abusive male chauvinist.

It is my belief that if one is going to teach and persuade others of male-headship, one must have clarity on at least one key talking point that addresses the issue in each of the aforementioned fronts – the biblical, theological and personal. The truth is, some people will only be willing to discuss the matter from one angle. Do you know how you would discuss male headship in such a way that both persuades and conveys the Gospel?

ⁱ July 23, 2009. Originally published at: <http://the20yearbaton.wordpress.com/2009/07/23/addressing-questions-regarding-gender-roles/>

ⁱⁱ Carter, Jimmy. "The words of God do not justify cruelty to women." *The Observer*. July 12, 2009. Accessed: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/12/jimmy-carter-womens-rights-equality>