

Battle for the Sexes

Finding common ground between entrenched gender-roles warriors.

by Melody Pugh

"We're going to have an egalitarian marriage," I heard a young couple announce one day. Like many others I know, they found themselves on the cusp of marriage and the progressive edge of evangelical theology. At the Christian college I attended, it wasn't unusual to hear young people discussing whether or not they were complementarian (emphasizing male headship and the husband's responsibility for his wife) or egalitarian (emphasizing a couple's equal submission to each other). In fact, the question quickly became predictable and the opinions simplistic. Though most of us were single, we nonetheless had definitive ideas about what we wanted a marriage to look like. After all, we had been introduced to new thought patterns, which encouraged us to carefully examine traditional values. We'd also begun to see our parents' marriages a bit more realistically since leaving home, and those experiences colored our perceptions--for better or for worse.

Though the debate about gender roles encompasses questions about the role of women in ministry, the average person will probably think most deeply about the question in terms of his or her own marriage and family. I am a single woman who has, over the years, become adept at avoiding ladies' teas and women's retreats where I'm sure the topic will eventually turn to becoming a better wife and mother. I've avoided these events because I fall into the trap of thinking about the complementarian and egalitarian positions in defensive, caricatured terms. But like most single people, I've thought about how these issues relate to my own future, and also to the marriages of couples around me. In so many ways, the heart of this debate has something to say to everyone. After all, what's at stake in this battle for the sexes goes far beyond the simple division of who does the laundry and who pays the bills.

Squaring Off

When it comes to our understanding of gender roles, the battle lines are often clearly drawn between the "traditional" complementarian view and the more "progressive" egalitarians. In the ongoing debate about male headship, most evangelicals--male or female, married or single--have chosen a side and can defend their position with some degree of skill and persuasiveness. But over the years, as debates have raged and tempers flared, a small and increasingly vocal minority has begun calling for a cease-fire, adopting a complex neutral stance between the two sides.

The different viewpoints are represented institutionally by the [Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#), representing the complementarian view, and [Christians for](#)

Biblical Equality, representing the egalitarian viewpoint. Complementarian viewpoints stress male headship and female submission. Egalitarians prefer to talk about biblical equality and mutual submission. Though they engage in spirited debates, CBMW and CBE must be careful not to caricature each other's positions. After all, not every woman resents the idea of submission, and husbands who take a strong leadership role in the family may in fact provide a demonstrable benefit to the family. By the same token, not all egalitarian marriages involve stay-at-home dads and activist women.

Most of the controversy between these two groups stems from differing interpretations of Ephesians 5. Among the questions debated: Is the authority structure a result of the Fall? Is it implicit in creation? Are marriage roles the result of gender or gifts? But the primary question, as *Christianity Today* senior associate editor Agnieszka Tennant points out, doesn't pertain directly to gender roles at all. It's a question of hermeneutics: "Which biblical passages dealing with women's roles are *culturally relative* and which are *transcultural*? In other words, which are *time-bound* and which are *timeless*?"

Our Common Lives

The debates are complex, the issues highly charged and personal. Few would deny the importance of considering these issues closely and soberly before choosing a position. Our opinions on this topic matter, not only for practical decision making in marriage, but also for the way in which we view the metaphor of our life in Christ. But do we perhaps spend too much time debating the nitty gritty details of how these philosophies play out day-to-day? Is it possible that discussions of headship and equality have less to do with roles and more to do with the way we motivate men and women to take an active role in the home?

These models can feel artificial when held up to the reality of two complex lives. Here, those who seek middle ground find their footing. They seek to look beyond the models to the individuals: in relationship to each other, and in relationship to God. After all, if we look closely at both the complementarian and egalitarian positions, we'll find that they have at least one vital and striking similarity. Whether they call it "headship with heart" or "mutual submission," the key to marital success is self-sacrificing love.

If we can even begin to comprehend the nature of God's love for his people, the contentious questions of submission, headship, and gender roles may become less divisive. If human love can even begin to approximate the self-sacrificing love of Christ, our pictures of marriage models may begin to change.

Modeling Self-Sacrifice

Perhaps, rather than focusing so much of our attention on systematic models and concrete pictures, we would be wise to adopt a more particularized approach. This model of a godly marriage might stress the value of honesty and authenticity, of responsibility, maturity, and self-sacrifice. Perhaps we would be wise to encourage a deeper and more complete understanding of what it means to live as children of God, as men and women

who put the needs of others above our own. As we seek to renew and rebuild the value of marriage, we do well to respect and understand the important theological differences represented by both sides of the debate. But we will perhaps aid the broader community most if we emphasize what we share in common. By exercising the virtue of self-sacrifice within this debate and within our marriages, we present a unified and compelling picture of Christ's love.

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