

Equality in Christian Marriage

BY LYDIA HUFFMAN HOYLE

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For nearly two thousand years, most Christians found support in Scripture for the belief that God ordained men to be leaders of women in the church and in the home. According to this view, God established a hierarchy with himself at the top, men in the middle, and women holding up the bottom. This way of ordering life was taken for granted by medieval Catholics as well as Reformation Protestants. Although there were dissenting voices, this was the teaching of both established churches and the majority of sects. The two books reviewed here raise questions regarding the validity of basing this male headship model on early Christian teachings.

Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy, edited by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 528 pp., \$25.00) responds to the historically entrenched assumption of male superiority by extensively rethinking both of the biblical texts used to support a hierarchical view and the theological and cultural issues raised by the biblical texts. This collection of twenty-nine essays has a dual focus. Some contributors explore the question of the proper role of women in ministry. Although this is an issue that continues to be a topic of much discussion at least among evangelical believers, this review will draw on the second central focus of the book—the question of

equality in marriage.

The editors and their team of contributors approach their task with a clear conviction that “both the world and the church urgently need to hear and take to heart the message of biblical equality, because it is at once true, logical, biblical and beneficial” (p. 13). Although they hope their writing will foster a dialogue, it is clear from the start that the authors are confident that the hierarchical teachings that have permeated Christian doctrine for two centuries were supported by cultural assumptions, not biblical mandates. They are hopeful that this book will encourage evangelical Christians in the traditional camp to rethink their positions and to celebrate the God-given gift of gender equality.

Groothuis and Pierce begin with a helpful historical grounding for the debate. Two chapters then review the roles of women in Christian history and how women have ministered effectively even within a hierarchical framework. A third chapter follows the history of a minority movement among evangelicals which since the 1970s has struggled to promote biblical equality in the church and in the home. Many of the authors of the remaining chapters of the book have a place in this history. This is a real strength of the book: we hear the voices of noted theologians, historians, and biblical scholars who have given a portion of their careers to exploring this topic.

As evangelicals addressing an evangelical audience, the authors soon turn their attention to the biblical texts. Although their opponents in the male leadership camp might argue to the contrary, these writers are clearly scholars who hold a high view of Scripture. All of the passages traditionally used to silence women and press them into secondary roles in the home and church receive careful analysis. In addition, the biblical scholars explore the scripture passages that point toward an egalitarian view. Two chapters are committed specifically to the question of gender roles in marriage. I. Howard Marshall, a noted New Testament scholar, discusses “Mutual Love and Submission in Marriage.” He particularly addresses the passages in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 that outline the conduct expected of wives and husbands (as well as of children and fathers and of slaves and masters.) According to Marshall, Paul is speaking to an audience that has clear hierarchical assumptions about marriage and is seeking to move them toward a “love-patriarchalism” (p. 195). The call for wives to submit is simply a plea for these women to do what is expected of them by society. The call to husbands to love their wives is where the text moves away from social conventions. If a husband acts in love, this will necessarily change the way he expresses his authority. Instead of making demands of his wife, he will be willing to sacrifice for her good. Although, Paul assumes that this self-sacrifice will occur within a patriarchal marital structure, his teaching does not require such a structure. In fact, Marshall argues, the “patriarchal authority of the husband is so transformed by the command to love his wife that it ceases to be exercised in the old way” (p. 202). The ultimate result is a

mutual partnership marriage. Because the concept of partnership marriage would have carried Paul too far from his cultural moorings, it would have been impossible for him to have offered this teaching.

Marshall thus focuses on the trajectory of Paul's teaching. While Paul is assuming a hierarchical relationship between husband and wife, this is not necessary for contemporary believers. Marshall believes that this recognition of progress in revelation is consistent with the nature of the Bible. Like many other scholars, Marshall points to the way slavery is addressed in the New Testament to provide light on the issue of women. Paul's writings do not deny the legitimacy of the practice of slavery but by placing slaves and masters equally under Christ, the writings lay the groundwork for a move away from slavery. A similar progression is seen in the marital relationship. The call of the Gospel to sacrificial love and the ongoing work of the Spirit in the Church enable contemporary Christians to move beyond the patriarchal structures of the first century.

Peter H. Davids, a missionary and scholar, offers a somewhat similar conclusion in his article on 1 Peter 3:1-7. This passage, like those in Colossians and Ephesians, is something of a "household code" that outlines the duties of those who dwell together. In the case of 1 Peter, however, the instructions are given specifically to Christian women whose husbands are not Christian. The author of the epistle encourages the women to demonstrate their faith by their reverent and chaste behavior. Then, in a strange twist, he holds up the example of Sarah who "obeyed Abraham and called him Lord" (3:6). It is odd, Davids says, that the Genesis texts that speak of Sarah never mention that she calls Abraham "Lord." (In Genesis 18:12 she refers to Abraham as her master, or lord, but Davids notes the "statement is an unbelieving response to God and indicates no particular submission to Abraham.") In several instances, Sarah seems something less than obedient as well. Thus, it appears that 1 Peter is building on contemporary noncanonical Jewish writings about Sarah and calling women to model "culturally appropriate behavior" (p. 234). Today, the behaviors viewed as problematic in 1 Peter (braiding hair, wearing gold) are no longer signs of sexual promiscuity. Similarly, modern societies do not give all authority to husbands. Therefore, Davids concludes, to fulfill the intention of the writer of 1 Peter, contemporary Christians should be faithful to their spouses and participate as equals in their marriages whether their husbands are Christians or not.

Building on the argument established by Marshall and Davids regarding the biblical support for equality in marriage, Judith and Jack Balswick expand on what it means to have a "partnership of equals" (p. 448). They believe that the language couples use to describe their relationship (e.g. "male leadership" or "equal regard") may not actually describe the realities of the marriage. Ultimately, according to the Balswicks, equality (or the lack thereof) is demonstrated by the distribution of power in a relationship. Utilizing sociological theory, the Balswicks argue that Christian couples

should not seek to gain personal power over the other but rather work to empower each other. The locus of authority should rest in the relationship the two share. Although the Balswicks' chapter jumps rapidly from topic to topic (it has the feel of a condensed book), the authors offer not only practical advice but social scientific support for many of their ideas. Ultimately, the Balswicks argue, a marriage that claims equality of partners should demonstrate that claim as a witness to the love of God.

While *Discovering Biblical Equality* is clearly written as a response to those who believe that the Bible upholds a hierarchical marital arrangement, *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-Regard Marriage and Its Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, 141 pp., \$15.00) actually allots roughly half of its pages to those who oppose the idea of an "equal-regard" marriage. This book, edited by David Blankenhorn, Don Browning, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, is something of a written debate that brings to the table a diverse array of Christians. In it we hear the voices of thoughtful Protestants and Roman Catholics, conservatives and liberals. All address the issue of gender relationships in the family not only from differing theological and ecclesiological perspectives but also from the vantage point of a number of disciplines and occupations. The result is a book well suited for stimulating discussion. It could easily form the core of a small-group or class study of the issue. Everyone could find support within the book for their own point of view as well as reasons to rethink the conclusions they have previously reached.

David Blankenhorn introduces the topic by briefly discussing marriage as a social institution.

According to Blankenhorn, marriage, from its inception five thousand years ago, reflected "the domestic institutionalization" of patriarchy. Even though it has carried this baggage, Blankenhorn argues, marriage has benefited men, women, children, and society as a whole. For it to continue to do so, Christians must address important

theological questions regarding how they can best understand gender relations in the family and practical questions regarding how to best connect fathers to their families. This book is an attempt to do just that.

In the first chapter, Don Browning follows a line of reasoning similar to that of Howard Marshall. He compares the household codes found in Ephesians with those of Aristotle and notes the radical biblical calls to mutual

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submission and love of wife that stand in contrast to the more patriarchal teachings of Aristotle and other philosophical writers of the period. Like Marshall, he sees a trajectory away from patriarchy in the biblical texts. Browning, however, like other authors in this collection, is not content to address Christian marriage in theory only. He is moved by the fact that so many children in America have little or no relationship with their fathers. This withdrawal of fathers complicates the issue for Browning. Ultimately, he believes the answer lies in calling husbands to moments of self-sacrifice with the goal of maintaining marriages of “equal regard” (p. 11).

Other proponents of the equal-regard marriage add their voices to the chorus. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen finds in creation a God-designed “mutual interdependence.” The fall tragically transformed this relationship into one of domination, Van Leeuwen writes, but Jesus brought to humanity a “redeemed vision” of right relationship between men and women. According to Carolyn Osiek, early Christians assumed but did not teach male headship. Like Marshall, she sees the household codes in the New Testament taking a “bold step forward” in their portrayal of Christian families (p. 27). Other essays by John Witte, Jr., and Lisa Sowle Cahill look at the way male headship in marriage has been maintained in Protestant traditions and denied by Pope John Paul II. A final essay by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, a feminist pastoral theologian, repeats some of the earlier arguments forwarded by others in respect to the biblical texts and offers answers from the discipline of feminist theology to questions about headship.

Five critics of the equal-regard marriage outline their response to the arguments of the advocates. Several seem to be responding to a previous book by Browning and others entitled *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997, 2000). John W. Miller and Maggie Gallagher are most concerned that the major problem of male ambivalence toward fatherhood will not be solved by an “androgynous” ethic of equal regard (p. 72). W. Robert Godfrey quotes extensive passages of Scripture and argues that the teaching of the Bible regarding men and women is internally consistent and plain in affirming male leadership. Allan C. Carlson finds the supporters of “equal-regard marriage” guilty of embracing a limited canon of Scripture and devaluing the self-giving nature of Christian love. Daniel Mark Cere, a Catholic scholar, argues that the question of male headship in marriage is not one that can be answered by either Scripture or tradition. Therefore, Christians should press forward toward the mutual subjection encouraged by Pope John Paul II, acknowledging that the issue is ultimately an ethical rather than a theological concern.

The book closes with a final defense by Browning. In it he responds to all the critics and, thus, the equal-regard voice gets the last word.

Discovering Biblical Equality and *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship?* are two radically different books. Although both approach the question of

equality in marriage, the first book carefully builds an argument across twenty-nine chapters that is directed toward those who hold more traditional views. Although written by scholars, the language is generally clear and accessible to most readers. The second book is more concerned with the broad practice of marriage in our culture. The essays are brief but overlapping and sometimes difficult to follow. Readers seeking personal clarity on the issue at hand should turn to the first book. Readers anxious to study the topic from a variety of disciplinary perspectives should examine the second.



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