

After Patriarchy, What?
Why Egalitarians Are Winning the Evangelical Gender Debate¹

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New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd points out that the phrase “I want to spend more time with my family,” coming from a man leaving a government position or a political campaign, can usually be translated: “The 21-year-old has given 8x10 glossies to *The Star*.”² In the same way, evangelical debates over gender rarely have to do simply with teaching roles in the church or teaching roles in the home. They tend more often to sum up, more than we want to admit, one’s larger stance in the evangelical response to contemporary culture.

If evangelical theology is to regain a voice of counter-cultural relevance in the contemporary milieu, the gender debate must transcend who can have “Reverend” in front of his or her name on the business card. The gender debate must frame the discussion within a larger picture of biblical, confessional theology. And in order to do that, complementarians will have to admit that the egalitarians are winning the debate. The answer to this is not a new strategy. It is, first of all, to discover why evangelicals resonate with evangelical feminism in the first place—and then to provide a biblically and theologically compelling alternative.

Evangelical Theology and the Eclipse of Biblical Patriarchy

One of the most important pieces of sociological data in recent years comes from the University of Virginia’s W. Bradford Wilcox in his landmark book, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*.³ Wilcox’s book describes how evangelical men actually think and live. He brings forth the demographic statistics and survey results on issues ranging from paternal hugging of children to paternal yelling, from female responses about marital happiness to the divisions of household labor. In virtually every category, the most conservative and evangelical households were also the “softest” in terms of familial harmony, relational happiness, and emotional health.

Unlike many secular university researchers, Wilcox actually studies real live evangelicals, rather than simply speculating on how such “misogynist throwbacks” must

¹Parts of this paper were originally published as the essay “Soft Servants,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, June 2005, 38-42.

²Maureen Dowd, “No, Karl Didn’t Ice Her,” *New York Times*, 24 April 2002.

³W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

live. He has read what evangelicals read, listened to evangelical radio programs, and otherwise immersed himself in an evangelical subculture that few academics seem to understand. Wilcox demonstrates that his results are not an anomaly. It is not akin to discovering that nineteenth century slaveholders had less racist attitudes than northern abolitionists. Instead he shows that the “softness” of evangelical fathers is a result of patriarchy, not an aberration from it. When men see themselves as head over their households, they feel the weight of leadership—a weight that expresses itself in devotion to their little platoons of the home.

Wilcox argues that churches strengthen fatherhood in ways that directly and indirectly bolster soft patriarchy. Wilcox finds that, “the discourse that fathers encounter in churches—from Father’s Day sermons to homilies on the Prodigal Son—typically underlines the importance of family ties in general and father-son ties in particular.” Moreover, the educational and social programs of conservative Protestant churches tend to endow fatherhood with “transcendent meaning,” he argues. Wilcox notes that this emphasis is grounded in evangelical insistence, from Scripture, that human fatherhood is reflective of divine fatherhood. In studying evangelical writings on the discipline of children, from Focus on the Family’s James Dobson, for instance, Wilcox notes that several theological truths frame the question. Conservative evangelical dads view their children as sinners in need of evangelism. They also see disobedience to parental authority as dangerous “because they view parental authority as analogous to divine sovereignty, and they believe that obedience to parents prepares a child to obey God as an adult.”⁴

Nonetheless, Wilcox’s volume is not undiluted good news for evangelicals and their Catholic and Orthodox co-belligerents in the gender wars. Several other recent works have challenged, convincingly, the notion that grassroots evangelicals hold to male headship at all, at least in practice. University of North Carolina sociologist Christian Smith, for instance, in his *Christian America*, contends that American evangelicals speak complementarian rhetoric and live egalitarian lives. Smith cites the Southern Baptist Convention’s 1998 confessional wording on male headship and wifely submission as expressive of a vast consensus within evangelicalism. But, he notes, the Baptist confession could just as easily have affirmed “mutual submission” within an equal marital partnership, and it would just as easily have fit the views of the evangelical majority.⁵

This is because, Smith argues, evangelicals have integrated biblical language of headship with the prevailing cultural notions of feminism— notions which fewer and fewer evangelicals challenge. He ties this “softening patriarchy” to specific feminist gains within evangelicalism—gains that few evangelicals are willing to challenge—such as growing numbers of wives working outside of the home. While some evangelicals express concern about what dual-income couples might do to the parenting of small

⁴Ibid., 109.

⁵Christian Smith, *Christian America What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 191.

children, very few are willing to ask what happens to the headship of the husband himself. How does the husband maintain a notion of headship, when he is dependent on his wife to provide for the family?

Likewise, in her *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* Oregon State University sociologist Sally Gallagher interviews evangelical men and women across the country and across the denominational spectrum and concludes that most evangelicals are “pragmatically egalitarian.”⁶ Evangelicals maintain headship in the sphere of ideas, but practical decisions are made in most evangelical homes through a process of negotiation, mutual submission, and consensus.

That’s what our forefathers would have called “feminism”—and our foremothers, too.

And yet Gallagher shows specifically how this dynamic plays itself out in millions of homes, often by citing interviews that almost read like self-parodies. One 35-year-old home-schooling evangelical mother in Minnesota says of the Promise Keepers movement: “I had Mike go this year. I kind of sent him.... I said, ‘I’m not sending you to get fixed in any area. I just want you to be encouraged because there are other Christian men out there who are your age, who want to be good dads and good husbands.’”⁷ This “complementarian” woman doesn’t seem to recognize that she is “sending” her husband off to be with those his own age, as though she were a mother “sending” her grade-school son off to summer youth camp. Not surprisingly, this evangelical woman says she doesn’t remember when—or whether—her pastor has ever preached on the subject of male headship.

Unlike some other ideas within evangelicalism that begin in the academy and “trickle down” to the grassroots of congregational life, evangelical views on gender may have a reverse effect: a thoroughly feminized grassroots theology may be “bubbling up” to the academy and the denominational leadership. Baptist feminist theologian Molly T. Marshall, for instance, claims that most Southern Baptists oppose women in the pastorate, not because of some exegetically or theologically coherent worldview, but because they have never seen a woman in the pulpit. Thus, the very notion seems foreign and strange. That is less and less strange as conservative evangelicals, and Southern Baptists in particular, are seeing a woman in the pulpit—at least on videotape—in the person of Beth Moore, preaching at conferences and in their co-educational Bible studies on a weekly basis.

So what would appear to be the future for the evangelical gender debate? Again, the answer may come from a secular social commentator, Alan Wolfe, who notes, “when conservative Christianity clashes with contemporary gender realities, the latter barely

⁶Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 103,

⁷*Ibid.*, 163.

budges while the former shifts ground significantly.”⁸ The question is why. Complementarianism must be about more than isolating the gender issue as a concern. We must instead relate male headship to the whole of the gospel. And, in so doing, we must remember that complementarian Christianity is collapsing around us because we have not addressed the root causes behind egalitarianism in the first place.

In *Evangelical Feminism*, University of Virginia scholar Pamela Cochran identifies concessions to the therapeutic and consumerist impulses of American culture as what led to the “egalitarian” gender movements within evangelicalism in the first place.⁹ Tracing the “biblical feminist” movement from its early days in the 1970s through the contemporary era, Cochran shows that the dispute between “complementarians” and “egalitarians” was not simply about the interpretation of some biblical texts, no matter what evangelical feminists now say. To make the feminist project fly, she argues, evangelicals needed a more limited understanding of biblical inerrancy and an embrace of contemporary hermeneutical trends, such as those that had made possible the liberation theologies of mainline Protestantism. The therapeutic and consumerist atmosphere of evangelicalism enabled this process because it displaced and external, objective authority with an individualistic internal locus of authority. Thus, for the leadership of the evangelical feminist movement, “the primary community of accountability was feminist, not evangelical.”¹⁰ The question was not whether evangelicals should be accountable to this feminist community but how much.

Traditionalist evangelicals should worry in light of the Wilcox, Gallagher, and Smith studies. Most evangelical Christians do indeed hold to some sort of “traditional” family structure. But, without an overarching theological consensus, what happens when the “traditional” is no longer the norm, even in the evangelical subculture? This is especially pertinent when more and more evangelical publishing houses and parachurch ministries are pushing feminism with all the fervor of a tent revival. Unless evangelical churches are willing to be counter-cultural against not just the secular culture but also the evangelical establishment itself, the future of complementarian Christianity is bleak.

After all, complementarian churches are just as captive to the consumerist drive of American culture as egalitarians, if not more so. The biblical evangelistic impulse that leads conservative evangelicals to oppose revisionist “innovations” such as soteriological inclusivism can also be misconstrued to drive them to mute the hard edges of the biblical witness on intensely personal issues such as gender roles—for the sake of winning the lost. When this is combined with a softening of evangelical language into more therapeutic tones, the question regarding a move toward feminism is not whether but when.

⁸ Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 135.

⁹ Pamela D.H. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

Wilcox rightly identifies the origins of this shift in evangelical thought in the pastoral care movement of the twentieth century, which sought to “integrate” Christian faith with the so-called insights of contemporary psychotherapy. The “integration” was easier imagined than accomplished, however, because, as Wilcox points out, the individualistic categories of therapy are inherently anti-hierarchical. Thus, evangelical seminaries are now filled with “Christian counseling” students planning for state licensed practices, while evangelical church members are more and more dependent on secular pediatricians, child psychologists, and marital therapists for advice on what the Scripture reveals as an aspect of the “mystery of Christ” unveiled in the biblical record.

This therapeutic orientation of contemporary evangelicalism is the reason, Wilcox explains, evangelicals don’t seem to speak often of male headship in terms of authority (and certainly not patriarchy), but usually in terms of a “servant leadership” defined as watching out for the best interests of one’s family—without specifics on what this leadership looks like. Thus, “headship has been reorganized along expressive lines, emptying the concept of virtually all of its authoritative character.”¹¹ This understanding of “servant leadership” (read as titular, undefined, non-authoritative leadership) is precisely the model of “complementarianism” several other recent works have observed in the evangelical sub-culture.

Evangelical Theology and the Recovery of Biblical Patriarchy

As gender traditionalists seek to address the encroachments of practical egalitarianism, we must understand that the debates before us are about far more than the meaning of *kephale* or the hermeneutics of head coverings. For too long, the evangelical gender debate has assumed that this was merely one more intramural debate—on our best days along the lines of Arminian/Calvinist or dispensationalist/covenant skirmishes and on our worst days as an theological equivalent of a political debate show with a right- and left-wing representative. And yet, C.S. Lewis included male headship among the doctrines he considered to be part of “mere Christianity,” precisely because male headship has been asserted and assumed by the Christian church with virtual unanimity from the first century until the rise of contemporary feminism.

If complementarians are to reclaim the debate, we must not fear making a claim that is disturbingly counter-cultural and yet strikingly biblical, a claim that the less-than-evangelical feminists understand increasingly: Christianity is under-girded by a vision of patriarchy. This claim is rendered all the more controversial because it threatens complementarianism as a “movement.” Not all complementarians can agree about the larger themes of Scripture—only broadly on some principles and negatively on what Scripture definitely does not allow (i.e., women as pastors). Even to use the word “patriarchy” in an evangelical context is uncomfortable since the word is deemed “negative,” even by most complementarians. But evangelical should ask why patriarchy seems negative to those of us who serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God

¹¹Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, 173.

and Father of Jesus Christ. As liberationist scholar R.W. Connell explains, “The term ‘patriarchy’ came into widespread use around 1970 to describe this system of gender domination.”¹² But it came into widespread use then only *as a negative term*. We must remember that “evangelical” is also a negative term in many contexts. We must allow the patriarchs and apostles themselves, not the editors of *Playboy* or *Ms. Magazine*, to define the grammar of our faith.

It is noteworthy that the vitality in evangelical complementarianism right now is among those who are willing to speak directly to the implications and meaning of male headship—and who aren’t embarrassed to use terms such as “male headship.” This vitality is found in specific ecclesial communities—among sectors within the Southern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church in America, the charismatic Calvinists of C.J. Mahaney’s “sovereign grace” network, and the clusters of dispensationalist Bible churches, as well as within coalition projects that practice an “ecumenism with teeth,” such as *Touchstone* magazine. These groups are talking about male leadership in strikingly counter-cultural and very specific ways, addressing issues such as childrearing, courtship, contraception and family planning—not always with uniformity but always with directness.

Authentic biblical patriarchy is necessary because the problem is not that evangelicals do not hold to “traditionalist” notions of gender and family, but rather where they find these notions. Wilcox correctly argues that patriarchy is “pervasive, at least symbolically, in the world of conservative Protestantism” since “God the Father stands at its Trinitarian core, transcending heaven and earth.”¹³ It seems, however, that the symbolism is not well fleshed out in evangelical churches, since “patriarchy” in conservative evangelicalism is so loosely, if at all, tied to the Fatherhood of God.

There is some progress here in evangelical complementarianism, largely in response to egalitarian claims for “mutual submission” within the Godhead. Complementarian theologians such as Bruce Ware and Peter Schemm have demonstrated convincingly that the Trinitarian “bungee-jumping” of egalitarians such as Gilbert Bilezikian and Kevin Giles have erosive implications not only for male headship, but also for an orthodox doctrine of God.¹⁴ Randy Stinson of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood has demonstrated a dangerous trajectory within religious feminism when it comes to the God/world relationship.¹⁵

¹²R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 41.

¹³Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, 141.

¹⁴See, for example, Bruce A. Ware, “Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 6 (2001): 4-12 and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “Trinitarian Perspectives on Gender Roles,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6 (2001): 13-21.

¹⁵Randy Stinson, “Religious Feminist Revisions of the God/World Relationship: Implications for Evangelical Feminists,” Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005.

But there is more here to be said about the Fatherhood of God—a Fatherhood that is not just eternal and abstract but realized in a divine relationship with Jesus as the representative Man, an historical Father/Son covenantal relationship that defines the covenantal standing and inheritance of believers. Patriarchy then is essential—from the begetting of Seth in the image and likeness of Adam to the deliverance of Yahweh’s son Israel from the clutches of Pharaoh to the promise of a Davidic son to whom God would be a Father (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:26) to the “Abba” cry of the new covenant assembly (Rom 8:15). For too long, egalitarians have dismissed complementarian proof-texts with the call to see the big picture “trajectory” of the canon. I agree that such a big-picture trajectory is needed, but that trajectory leads toward patriarchy—a loving, sacrificial, protective patriarchy in which the archetypal Fatherhood of God is reflected in the leadership of human fathers, in the home and in the church (Eph 3:14-15; Matt 7:9-11; Heb 12:5-11). With this being the case, even the so-called “egalitarian proof-texts” not only fail to demonstrate an evangelical feminist argument, they actually prove the opposite. Galatians 3:28, for example, is all about patriarchy—a Father who provides his firstborn son with a cosmic inheritance, an inheritance that is shared by all who find their identity in Christ, Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free.

This understanding of archetypal patriarchy is grounded then in the overarching theme of all of Scripture—the summing up of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).¹⁶ It does not divide God’s purposes, his role as Father from his role as Creator from his role as Savior from his role as King. To the contrary, the patriarchal structures that exist in the creation order point to his headship—a headship that is oriented toward redemption in Christ (Heb 12:5-11). This protects evangelical theology proper from both the impersonal deity of Protestant liberalism and from the “most moved mover” of open theism. Indeed, the evangelical response to open theism would have been far more effective had evangelicals not severed the issues of open theism and egalitarianism. Open theism is not more dangerous than evangelical feminism, or even all that different. It is only the end result of a doctrine of God shorn of patriarchy.

Many egalitarians are quite willing to concede what some complementarians are afraid to say: a rejection of male headship means a redefinition of divine Fatherhood and divine sovereignty. Nicola Hoggard Creegan and Christine Pohl write of the “open theist proposals” offered by Gregory Boyd, John Sanders, and Clark Pinnock: “The openness of God critique of classical orthodoxy, however, is interesting because it owes much to feminist efforts at the dismantling of Calvinism and yet attempts also to stay true to the biblical narrative—more true, openness theologians claim, than Calvinism is.”¹⁷

Authentic Christian patriarchy also has immediate implications for the welfare of the family. There is a growing trend among the weaker segment of complementarians to seek to indict complementarianism for not writing more on the issue of spousal abuse. On

¹⁶For a description of a Christocentric Kingdom motif for evangelical theology, see Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 102-20.

¹⁷Nicola Hoggard Creegan and Christine D. Pohl, *Living on the Boundaries: Evangelical Women, Feminism and the Theological Academy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 162.

the one hand, the charge is a red herring, since complementarian evangelicals speak to the issue all the time. On the other hand, the charge itself reveals a tacit acceptance of a fallacious egalitarian charge: that male headship leads to abuse. This is akin to an evangelical theologian saying, “I believe in penal substitutionary atonement but I wish to make very clear that I also oppose child abuse.” Such a statement assumes the liberationist critique that penal substitution is cosmic child abuse. Instead, patriarchal evangelicals should speak loudly against spousal abuse precisely because, as Wilcox’s study demonstrates, traditional views on gender roles actually protect against spousal and child abuse.

Ironically, a more patriarchal complementarianism will resonate among a generation seeking stability in a family-fractured Western culture in ways that soft-bellied big-tent complementarianism never can. And it also will address the needs of hurting women and children far better, because it is rooted in the primary biblical means for protecting women and children: calling men to responsibility. *Soft Patriarchs* is, in one sense, a reaffirmation of what gender traditionalists have known all along—male headship is not about male privilege. Patriarchy is good for women, good for children, and good for families. But it should also remind us that the question for us is not whether we will have patriarchy, but what kind.

Right now, Western culture celebrates casual sexuality, cohabitation, no-fault divorce, “alternative families,” and abortion rights. All of these things empower men to pursue a Darwinian fantasy of the predatory alpha-male in search of nothing but power, prestige, and the next orgasm. Does anyone really believe these things “empower” women or children? Instead, the sexual liberationist vision props up a pagan patriarchy complete with a picture of a selfish, impersonal, cruel deity. And ironically, the kind of patriarchy feminists rightly oppose—the capricious use of power by men to objectify and use women—is itself the product of changes the mainstream feminists championed. It does not bear the imprimatur of divine revelation but of the Darwinist/Freudian myth that sex is the measure of all things. This turns out to be a patriarchy too, but there is nothing “soft” about it.

Egalitarians are winning the evangelical gender debate, not because their arguments are stronger, but because, in some sense, we’re all egalitarians now. The complementarian response must be more than reaction. It must instead present an alternative vision—a vision that sums up the burden of male headship under the cosmic rubric of the gospel of Christ and the restoration of all things in him. It must produce churches that are not embarrassed to tell us that when we say the “Our Father,” we are patriarchs of the oldest kind.