I was a heartbroken twenty-one-year-old. My relationship with my girlfriend was falling apart, and I was desperate to figure out what had gone wrong and how to make it better.

Deliverance came in the form of a popular Christian relationship book. It taught me the principle that many evangelicals know so well: “women need love, men need respect.” Suddenly it all made sense. I could hardly contain my excitement when I shared this good news with my soon-to-be-former girlfriend.

Her steely glare was enough to tell me how thoroughly unimpressed she was. Still, it was with kindness and calmness that she rebuffed my attempts to recount and solve all our problems through this lens. I left frustrated. Why couldn’t she see the light?

In the following years, my embrace of the love-respect principle waned, and eventually the whole idea began to rub me the wrong way. I finally figured out why: I’ve become convinced that the love-respect principle is born of patriarchy, not Scripture. I don’t mean to discount or disparage the experience of many people who have found this to be a profound and helpful tool in their marriages. I think it can be useful, but that usefulness is limited.

It’s useful in the same way as it’s useful to analyze your family of origin in pre-marital counseling. That is, it can help us understand why we may act in certain ways, why we have certain expectations, and why we perceive things as we do. The love-respect lens clarifies the ways our “culture of origin”—patriarchy—has shaped our identities and expectations. However, for those who no longer want to be defined by patriarchy, I believe this is where its usefulness ends. The love-respect principle has no business being a model for Christian relationships.

The story that “women need love and men need respect” is simple and
Because a patriarchal culture assumes the best of a man’s intentions, a man can “love” a woman like he’d love a child, and the world will celebrate him for it. But is one with a dirty little secret (okay, maybe it’s not that much of a secret): it places all the power in a relationship squarely in the hands of men. Let me break down the two key elements, love and respect, to explain what I mean.

**Love**

“Love” is a very flexible word. I can love my new shoes and I can love my wife. I can love my parents, and my brother, my friends, and my in-laws. I don’t have children, but if I did, I’d love them too. And what it means to love in each of these contexts is different. Unfortunately, the flexibility of the concept of “love” makes it easy to conflate, confuse, or redefine different types of love without having to stop calling it “love.”

I once heard a sermon where we (humans) were compared to a hamster in a cage. The hamster recognized that it was confined and desperately tried to escape. But the hamster’s owner (God) knew something the hamster didn’t: on the ground beneath the table that held the hamster cage was a dog, eager to devour any hamsters roaming about on the lam. By keeping the cage locked, the owner was protecting the hamster’s life. What could be more loving? The clear principle here is that we don’t always see the full picture, so we may feel like God is being unloving, when in fact, God couldn’t be more loving.

Sometimes we call this “tough love.” It’s the kind of love we exhibit toward someone less adept, less gifted, less understanding, or less mature than ourselves. It may be appropriate for God dealing with us, or for parents dealing with children, because one party has some superior knowledge, wisdom, or maturity compared to the other. Then, and only then, can this rightly be called love.

In a relationship of two equals, this is not loving but patronizing. Still, we expect and even celebrate this kind of love between men and women.

Consider how many stories you’ve read or seen on screen that feature a woman (even a strong, courageous, leader) without a man by her side absorbing her emotions and reigning in her passions. I can’t think of any. This man might seem aloof, rude, or even cruel. But it always turns out that he only seemed this way because he understood the big picture and she didn’t. If she’d just trusted him instead of taking things into her own hands, everything would’ve been better. She is like an irrational child. Or a hamster.

Because a patriarchal culture assumes the best of a man’s intentions, a man can “love” a woman like he’d love a child, and the world will celebrate him for it. Through the twisted logic of patriarchy, disrespect, pride, and even abuse could be construed as love. When we say “women need love” in a patriarchal world, we allow room to believe this: “women need to be treated as men see fit.”

Could the situation be reversed? Could a woman “love” a man however she feels is appropriate, without consequence? No, because there’s a safeguard in place. It’s called respect.

**Respect**

When I enlightened my ex-girlfriend about the love-respect principle, I felt that all the pieces had finally fit together. All our problems were because she was unable to recognize my love and because she didn’t respect me. She disrespected me by not being ready when I arrived to pick her up for a date, not taking my side in debates with friends, refusing to give in to me in arguments, and on and on.

Looking back, I now recognize that I had latched onto the love-respect principle because it allowed me to define literally anything I disliked, especially if it embarrassed me, as disrespectful. And I, as a man, needed respect more than anything else. It was her job to ensure that happened.

I had no equivalent obligation toward her, because what she needed most was love, not respect. If I publically embarrassed her or dismissed her ideas or put her down, I could simply have said it was tough love. I didn’t do these things, at least not knowingly. But I could have.

When we say “women need love” in a patriarchal world, we allow room to believe this: “women need to be treated as men see fit.”
Building Better Marriages

The “love-respect principle” is one of many ideas on what makes for a “biblical” marriage. Most of them fall short of God’s design for marriage—a relationship of mutually-submissive equals, jointly serving God and their community. Sadly, there are few resources on marriage written from an egalitarian perspective.

CBE is changing that.

We’re creating a marriage resource that will address both the theory and practice of biblical egalitarian marriage. But, we need your support to make it a reality. Right now, we’re about half way to our goal of $40,000.

If you believe that egalitarian marriage matters, will you help make this resource a reality?

To contribute in any amount, visit cbe.today/marriage, call CBE at 612-872-6898, or scan the QR code below.

It’s not fair to project my experience on everyone else. But my experience illustrates that the “respect” side of the equation has the same fundamental problem as the “love” side: its definition is the domain of the man.

Is it really so bad?

In the typical fashion of patriarchy, the love-respect principle allows men to define the rules and makes women responsible for obeying them. This is neither loving nor respectful.

Notice that I said it allows this arrangement. It doesn’t require it. I recognize that I’ve described the worst possible application of the love-respect principle. Yes, it is entirely possible to make use of the love-respect principle in a mutually submissive way, in which neither party gets to define or dominate what it means to live this way. And I understand that the principle is not meant to suggest that women only need love or men only need respect.

But in that case, what’s the point?

If you’re living out the love-respect principle in a way characterized by mutual submission, you are doing nothing more than treating one another with equal measures of love and respect. You’ve rendered the principle meaningless. So let’s just say it like it is: both men and women need love and respect. This is a better and truer story about men, women, and marriage.

A better story

I propose we tell this better story about marriage, love, and respect:

We live in a world marred by patriarchy. In this world, or at least in my culture, boys learn that they should be assumed to be right. To disagree or contradict in any way that feels uncomfortable to us constitutes disrespect. It is an insult to our masculinity—our very identity.

And patriarchy teaches women to seek the approval, or “love,” of men as validation. To gain a man’s love is to submit to his definitions and expectations.

In such a world, a slogan like “women need love and men need respect” resonates with many of us. It taps into the hopes, fears, doubts, and dreams that have shaped us from birth. It may even help us understand ourselves or each other because it reveals how we’ve been shaped by the broken narratives of patriarchy.

But for the people of Christ, this is not good enough. We are not bound to our cultures of patriarchy and privilege. When Jesus’ culture taught that women should be dismissed, he praised Mary for taking the stance of a rabbincual student (Luke 10). In a world where social interaction revolved around avoiding the unclean, Jesus welcomed the touch of a bleeding woman and talked theology with a despised Samaritan woman.

And in the context of the Ephesian church, where the fabric of society was ordered around the rule of men over women, parents over children, and the free over slaves, Paul ordered the church to eschew this narrative of privilege (Eph. 5:21–6:9). He taught that Jesus had broken the power of hierarchy and unified us as one body—his body. This is redemption at its finest.

We no longer exert power or authority over one another, and patriarchy holds no sway over us. We need not hold to the story that “women need love and men need respect,” but can replace it with a similar but profoundly different one: women and men both need love and respect in equal measure. Jesus has freed us to pursue this, the better way. Why would we chase after anything else?