Introduction

A closer discernment of biblical influence on spousal relationships can help humanity model pervasively the image of God. In his divine image, God created “man” both male and female (Gen 1:27). A new fleshing out of the bare bones of marital oneness can foster health within Christian marriages by exploring biblical matrimonial ideals. Based on the example of the Trinity, the egalitarian stance of reciprocal mutual submission displayed through marital oneness more fully reflects the imago Dei.

Identification of concepts relating to marriage

The image of God in humanity is reflected in Adam and Eve’s sinless state and is the true nature both for which and in which all of humankind was created.1 In his divine image, God created “man” both male and female (Gen 1:27). Sadly, after the fall, the perfection of their oneness bond and the relationship they experienced with God were destroyed.2 Yet, even in light of their post-fall circumstances, the truth and essence of God’s image in humans remained intact.

The traditional male position of domination, contrasting with the female’s as the subordinate mate, bestows an incorrect rendering of God’s intention for unity within marriage.3 As a result, marriage is frequently perceived as an antiquated and parochial contract as opposed to a relevant and indispensable covenant relationship between equals. Further obfuscating matters, a marriage including a “Christian man” and a “Christian woman” does not automatically comprise a “Christian marriage”; all too often, “Earthly marriage as it is now lived out is a bad copy of a good original.”4 False impressions prevail over proper biblical relationships. In a survey of 750 readers, Christianity Today found a substantial 89 percent expressed “a lot of confusion about male and female roles in the Christian world today.”5 Only 19 percent believed that scriptural teachings on the matter are “very clear and plainly understood,”6 while a considerable 39 percent expressed biblical role differentiation as “clear in principle, with much room for personal choice and practice.”7 Far too often, competition and struggle for power within the marital relationship, a lack of empathy and edification, and a rejection of scriptural authority combine to characterize negatively the Christian matrimonial relationship within society at large.8

Proper gender ideals within the imago Dei

Current Scripture interpretations have reassessed biblical teaching pertaining to the doctrine of creation and gender ideals within the imago Dei.9 Egalitarianism, complementarianism, patriarchalism, hierarchy, and traditionalism are all descriptive “isms” expounding different views of the correct biblical position of husband and wife within marriage and family. The impact of human sin must also be taken into account when deciding which consequences are the result of biblical mandate and which of natural sinful progression.

At one extreme are those who inaccurately propose man’s (Adam’s) absolute rule over the woman (Eve) as scripturally sanctioned sexual domination. This viewpoint includes the disturbing notion of a curse levied upon the woman that demands perpetual correction, further intensifying sexual domination (Gen 3:16),10 though the Hebrew verb in this verse is tĕšūqā, which, when correctly translated, denotes turning, including its usage within Song of Solomon (7:10)—not in the sense of lust, impulse, or alliance, as has been falsely alleged by some within the church.11

The hierarchical argument entails the man exercising dominance over the woman, who is to remain subservient. However, the validity of this argument’s logic breaks down right at the outset. As the Bible reveals, the woman was created last (Gen 2:21). This poses an immediate problem of congruency within the hierarchical view: In the larger creation, humanity was created last as God’s crowning achievement, instructed to care for that which was previously created, not to be subservient to it. To subjugate one part of the body under another, claiming that it is evil, is erroneous.12 Likewise, it is fallacious to place one mate hierarchically over the other, as both are created equally in God’s likeness (Gen 1:26–27).

The historical assumption that the Bible sanctions male authority contradicts God’s intention for unity within the marriage covenant. Many evangelical authors and lecturers who have this patriarchal and traditional perspective diverge and debate on the extent of how gender relationships are suitably practiced and alternately disagree as to the extent of male authority.13 According to John Bartkowski, “This gender difference–gender sameness debate is not adequately conceptualized as a simple dichotomy, however, because evangelical authors who argue for gender difference disagree about the extent to which gender blending is desirable or possible.”14 Woman was formed from a portion of man, but the initial “man” prior to Eve’s creation was both “male” and “female.”

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The Image of God in Humanity: Fleshing Out the Bare Bones of Marital Oneness

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Tracing their ancestry from Eve, women incorrectly focus on their husbands rather than on God. This is not a punishment emerging from the fall, but a natural consequence of fallen human nature, initiated by Eve and Adam’s disobedience. Eve finds Adam in the same sinful predicament, and he would therefore “take advantage of her and rule over her” (Gen 3:16). Mutual submission has been derailed. As ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio notes, “Thus, while the early Christians are striving for the egalitarian vision to which they feel Jesus called them, they are not quite able to free themselves from the ideas of patriarchal marriage that are pervasive in their culture.”

Unlike the patriarchal Jewish and Roman marriages, early Christian marriages were notable for their emerging egalitarianism. . . . [I]t is fair to say that the first Christians responded to Jesus’ message and practice by trying to reshape their marriages so that they would be more equal.

Progressive transformation continues as believers assess present-day culture in light of biblical marriage.

Scriptural teaching on the relationship between man and woman begins with the Hebrew word ēzer, used with the subject “God” as a “helper” (Deut 33:26; 33:29), denoting “strength.” Employed twenty-one times in the Old Testament, ēzer suggests two “individual words under common single spelling,” these two words being helper and strength. Genesis 2:20-21 would then translate more precisely, “I will make [woman] a power [or strength] corresponding to the man.” Therefore, her position is described as that of a coworker. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:10, acquires the word authority from Genesis 2:18, as Adam identifies with Eve, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man” (Gen 2:23). Unique in her design, Eve possesses family propinquity, a blood-kin relationship that can be described as “my equal,” “suitable partner,” “corresponding to,” and “strength, indispensable aid.” Clearly, from the beginning of human creation, a wedded couple was to interact with mutuality and partnership.

Having been taken and formed from the side-part of the man, his rib (Gen. 2:22), woman corresponds to him exactly. She is strong like him (“bone of my bones”), and, through love, the two become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24; Mark 10:8). They are congruent and equal image-bearers of God (Gen. 1:27). Yes, woman is made as a “helper” who is to be man’s partner (Gen. 2:18), but the Hebrew word “helper” does not impute inferiority as in some English scripture translations. There are several explanations for today’s continuously maintained and flawed translational analysis, including the influence of Gnosticism, Jewish traditional teaching, the Hebrew customary attitude toward women as property, the King James Version interpretation of women in leadership, and the influence of other longstanding, traditional, subsequent translations.

Remaining are the deliberations of hierarchism and egalitarianism. The crucial difference is that hierarchists hold the conviction of husband and wife as “equal in essence, different in role,” while egalitarians maintain this assertion is a logical impossibility if the difference includes one-way submission on behalf of the wife.

Mutual submission within the Trinity

God’s very substance through his Trinitarian relationship expresses equality. The crux of the Doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one (Deut. 6:4) and yet exists simultaneously in three equal persons: “The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any way inferior in essence” to which hierarchists would assent. However, taking a next cogent step, we note that internal submission is a natural characteristic of the Deity. The Trinity operates without an authoritative person within the Godhead; to presume otherwise would imply that God himself is unbalanced. Beyond the obvious and crucial yielding of Jesus to the Father’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:39–44), the Father also acquiesced in permitting the killing of his only begotten innocent son (Matt 27:42–46). Moreover, the Holy Spirit expresses a congruous form of submission within the Godhead as he dwells within us (Acts 2:4). Asserting that the Father does not take part in mutual submission within the Godhead would mean the Holy Spirit and the Son have an ability that the Father does not, implying disunity within the Trinity through insinuation of the Father’s inferior essence. As God provides for humanity’s sinful state, here the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of humanity convene. The Godhead in ousia (substance) practices perfectly balanced and harmonious submission in ways thoroughly outside human comprehension.

It would be fallacious to equate earthly matrimony with the perfect holiness found in the Trinity. However, within marriage and in light of the Trinitarian example, mutual submission is reciprocal and exemplified through Scripture. In a wedded Christian couple, “God makes us copies both of himself in his Trinitarian unity and distinction as one God and three persons,” providing an example of intimate relationship. This oneness includes mutual submission and “is also what is meant to be in the relation of man and woman and more specifically of husband and wife.”

Husband and wife oneness

In Ephesians, Paul uses the word head to mean “first,” but not to indicate an authority figure: first in service, as wives are “to submit in everything to their husbands,” just as the church does to Christ (Eph 5:22–24). The preceding verse gives further instruction: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). Ironically, this verse is located above the biblical subtitle “Wives and husbands,” while the call for wisely submission
is found below the subtitle:32 “The force of the passage as a whole is calling husbands to self-giving sacrifice for their wives; that is, it is calling husbands likewise to submit to their wives”33 without using those precise words.

When husband and wife leave their families of origin and cleave to one another (Gen 2:24), their relationship operates as a one-flesh unit while they remain distinct individuals.34 Out of this intimate one-flesh relationship, the Christian twosome submits to the Lord in a nonreciprocal and vertical relationship; humans are God’s finite creation, altogether dependent on him. This relationship is the target the fall struck most painfully: “In the case of Adam and Eve, trust, love, confidence, and closeness were replaced by fear, dread, and avoidance of God,”35 disfiguring not only the shared relationship with one another, but also their communion with God. Since the imago Dei was obscured, but not erased, a couple possesses some capability to emulate the created original perfect and healthy relationship. Moreover, it is then appropriate to yield mutually to each other and then together as a unit submit jointly to God. Clearly, the Bible regards husbands and wives as egalitarian co-image-bearers of God, bestowed with gifts to be employed for Christian redemption within the unity of marriage, inside the Christian home, and in all employment and volunteer positions of the church and society at large.36 The ideals of gender, then, are dependent upon the unique gifts and personality God bestows upon those who are his and not based upon cultural gender expectations.37

God established earthly marriages to model finitely his own perfect and whole Trinitarian union (Gen 1:26): “This means that we are not to understand the true reality of God’s union with us in terms of marriage, but vice versa.”38 While practicing mutual oneness, the couple consummates marriage in all aspects appropriately and equitably together, representing his likeness in humankind.

Conclusion

God created the oneness of Adam and Eve to be essentially mutually submissive, the view held by today’s egalitarians. Covenant relationship within marriage is likened to the relationship within the Trinity: permanent in quality, binding stronger than a promise though inclusive of a vow, forsaking all others, refusing to abandon, and in complete alignment.39 As both male and female were created in God’s likeness, God himself gave humans the living illustration of mutually submissive marriage through the Trinity’s eternal flawless image and harmonious model of mutual submission. Thus, it is an egalitarian relationship that a Christian couple should pursue: “When husband and wife live together according to God’s will, their marriage becomes like a mirror, a reflection, of Christ’s love.”40 Mutual submission within the marital covenant is entirely transformational because both individuals congruently yield to the will of God within their relationship and are committed to carrying forth God’s image in this manner, seeking the continual and equal advocacy of each other over themselves, therefore appropriately and more fully reflecting the imago Dei.

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 593; and Jonathan Farrar et al., eds., Today’s Light Bible FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 12.
2. Farrar, FAQs, 12.
12. Erickson, Christian Theology, 557.
20. Erickson, Christian Theology, 564.
24. Reid, “Toward a Sacred Unity.”
29. Erickson, Christian Theology, 363.
30. Bromiley, God and Marriage, 77.
31. Bromiley, God and Marriage, 77.
32. This is the case in the 1984 NIV translation. The NIV 2011 places the subtitle “Instructions for Christian Households” above v. 21.
35. Erickson, Christian Theology, 621.
37. See Rubio, A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family; and Bartkowski, Remaking the Godly Marriage.
38. Bromiley, God and Marriage, 43.