Preparing for Equality: Perspectives on Christian Marriage

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The research resulting in this article focuses on evangelical churches in New Zealand, examining both the practice and content of their pre-marriage counselling sessions. Two competing visions of marriage relations—egalitarianism and complementarianism—representing different interpretations of the Bible are embedded within Christian pre-marriage counselling discourse. Here, sociological research and theology intersect. This article examines how differing interpretations of Scripture shape marriage advice given to engaged couples. The study’s interview participants, whose pseudonyms are John, Stephen, William, Sharon, and married couple Ron and Shivani, are leaders who facilitate pre-marriage counselling within their evangelical churches.

I analyse the participants’ discussion of their personal theology, examining to what extent it shapes their premarital instruction. Theological themes emerged in interviews, including complementarian and egalitarian theologies, evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and its association with destructive beliefs resulting in violence against women. Theological discussion of these themes is situated within a feminist framework, drawing on the comprehensive work of two feminist sociologists who are also theologians—Elaine Storkey and Fran Porter.

In what follows, I define evangelicalism and fundamentalism, and compare and contrast interviewees’ personal use of Scripture within marriage counselling. Next, I outline complementarian theology, observing both feminism’s historical reaction to it and its association with violence against women. Finally, I examine interviewees’ use of egalitarian theology as well as the arguments of evangelical feminists.

**Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism**

A definitional haze surrounds the word “evangelical.” Confusion around this term became apparent in the interviews. Evangelicalism is not a denomination; it is a conceptual unity that designates a group of Christians who hold to certain beliefs. According to David Bebbington, four qualities have been the consistent marks of evangelical religion: “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.”

Two interviewees were cautious of the term “evangelical” because they viewed it as associated with fundamentalism. When asked how participants would describe their theology, John claimed he is “more comfortable describing it as ‘orthodox’ these days rather than ‘evangelical.’” He states:

> One of the reasons I’m uncomfortable now with modern day evangelicalism is that it’s become much more fundamentalist in the last ten or fifteen years.

. . . I think, these days, for example in America, evangelicalism is associated with certain political beliefs. It’s associated with a very fundamentalist understanding of the Bible. So you can read off the Bible certain rules about living, rather than having to interpret it.

John explains “orthodox” as theology related to “biblical standards” in which the Bible is “normative for one’s faith.” Similarly, Stephen describes himself as both “orthodox” and “evangelical,” adding “but I wouldn’t say conservative evangelical.” William regards himself as “evangelical,” commenting that “fundamental can mean some very rigid views that I wouldn’t necessarily go along with.”

It is evident that John, Stephen, and William are cautious of fundamentalism and theological conservatism. Thus, it is important to distinguish evangelicalism from fundamentalism. Fundamentalists strictly adhere to a literal interpretation of Scripture; whereas evangelicalism pursues biblical interpretation that addresses inevitable gaps between the contexts Scripture was written in and those we read it in. Stephen brings attention to this process of biblical interpretation. He observes that much of the complementarian premarital counselling material he encounters is “American.” He states he “doesn’t agree with it,” questioning its handling of Scripture that projects “first-century social context” into our postmodern context. Stephen asserts this projection does not need “to be part of the way we understand men and women.”

Fundamentalism, which arose out of a perceived need to defend orthodox Christianity in the nineteenth century, consists of “five fundamentals of the Christian faith.” One of these fundamentals is the inerrancy of Scripture, resulting for fundamentalists in a belief in the literal interpretation of Scripture. Today the fundamentalist movement exists in two forms: hyperfundamentalism, which is found mostly in extreme conservatism in America, and fundamentalism, which has abandoned its antiintellectualism and militant tone but has retained an unwavering commitment to the authority of Scripture and belief in its literal interpretation. Michael Habets argues that this latter group of fundamentalists has traded in its name for another one—evangelical. Similarly, Sally Gallagher’s U.S. study, as well as my own findings, reveals that evangelicalism is both conservative and progressive. Approximately one quarter of evangelicals in Gallagher’s study identify themselves as “affiliated with a pentecostal church or as part of the charismatic movement.” Gallagher points out that, in America at least, “evangelicals, fundamentalists and pentecostal Christians are often identified as ‘conservative Protestants’ and ‘biblical literalists.”

Gallagher’s American evangelical participants abide by a definition of evangelicalism which includes “the responsibility
of husbands to be the spiritual head of the household.”8 This belief, guided by biblical literalism, makes Stephen and William suspicious of the term “evangelical.” But Ron and Shivani, who identify as evangelical, endorse male headship and female submission based on literal interpretation of Scripture, and attend a pentecostal church. This supports John’s observation that fundamentalism within evangelical denominations is “growing [in New Zealand] because of the influence of American theology and politics.” Literal interpretation of the Bible within conservative evangelicalism shares similarities with fundamentalism. While Ron and Shivani represent a theological conservatism (consistent with America’s evangelical culture), William, Stephen, John, and Sharon represent a more progressive evangelicalism evident in New Zealand church contexts. Endorsement of these differing theologies by New Zealand churches has implications for relationship advice offered through Christian pre-marriage counselling.

Complementarianism and Feminism

Feminist theologians and sociologists often view evangelical complementarian relationship ideals as an expression of institutionalized patriarchy. Complementarianism, according to Gallagher, is the most hegemonic, well documented, and criticized Christian tradition in which gender relations are organized by the principles of hierarchy and subordination.9 This tradition locates its origins in select biblical passages, such as the Apostle Paul’s teaching that women should “submit to their own husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22) and should not “teach or have authority over a man” in the church because “Adam was created first” and Eve “was deceived” (1 Tim 2:12–14). While elements of these teachings were eventually muted, Gallagher’s U.S. based grouping shows that the majority of conservative evangelicals today “continue to believe that God’s design for family is a benign patriarchy set within a broader vision of a hierarchically ordered universe.”10

The New Zealand-produced pre-marriage counselling resource used by Ron and Shivani, Marriage Works,11 reinforces this belief with references to “God’s order in marriage.” Ron and Shivani state that Marriage Works is biblically based, and “there are references back to the NT where a husband should lead, you know, what a wife’s role is.” This view contrasts with the other interviewees whose pre-marriage advice is shaped by egalitarian theology. Feminist Christians have been swift to challenge a biblical mandate for hierarchical marriage. Storkey presents a fuller picture of Christianity and gender, noting how feminists have been pointing out for fifty years that the patriarchy afflicting all religions is evident in Christianity’s long history and understanding of gender attitudes, family roles, and theological interpretations. The existence of patriarchy, for her, is essential to the discussion of changing “traditional” gender relations within Christianity. She remarks:

It’s easy to see the strong, set lines of patriarchy in the public face of the Church. Centuries of male popes, patriarchs, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, clergy, elders, and theologians have led the flock, exegeted the Scriptures, written the agendas and preached the sermons.12

Storkey refers to Eph 5:23, “the husband is the head of the wife,” among a handful of other passages, whose literal interpretation is “evidence of entrenched inequality, with headship for the man and obedience from the woman.”13 She remarks that the repercussions of this view of headship have included the “subjection of wives to husbands.”14

Feminism in the second half of the twentieth century argued for Scripture to be read with ancient cultural contexts in mind, with a focus on better biblical hermeneutics. Some feminists advocated leaving the faith, convinced that gender abuse is supported by theology and leaves no space for gender equality. Others pursued an “uprooting of centuries of patriarchy” through the revisiting and dismantling of “language, worship, authority, and religious symbols.”15 Storkey notes how Christian feminists reflect a wide spectrum of perspectives and approaches. For example, biblical scholar Catherine Clark Kroeger melded a conservative view of Scripture with a fresh approach to biblical interpretation.16 Other writers suggested various forms of canonical revision to relocate the weight and meaning of authority. While “post-Christian” Daphne Hampson and Mary Daly rejected the “biblical God” as destructive to women, Phyllis Trible urged careful biblical exegesis, believing that the Bible could be “liberated from patriarchy.”17 Since those early days, feminists have continued to develop these debates. Storkey remarks that despite their own failings, “most Christians around the world believe in a different God, compassionate and loving, who abhors injustice against women.”18

Ephesians 5:21–25: A Complementarian Reading

The recurrent reference to Eph 5:21–25 suggests its central significance as a hotly debated biblical passage, and one that requires careful reflection and analysis. There are two main strands of interpretation of this passage associated with different theological positions—complementarian and egalitarian. The passage is as follows:

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.
22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.
25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . (Eph 5:21–25 NIVUK)

One complementarian scholar argues that this passage reflects “God’s created order of headship and submission” and that these are to be the roles for husbands and wives within contemporary marriage.19 He views headship as a husband’s “responsibility and unique role of leadership,” stating that a wife’s “submission is not
slavish . . . it’s free, it’s willing.”20 Although he admits that some find his teachings to be “obscene,” this scholar endorses this passage as a vision of biblical manhood and womanhood. Addressing the meaning of “head” and its translation into English, he argues:

Even if you give “head” the meaning “source” the most natural interpretation of these verses is that husbands are called by God to take primary responsibility for Christ-like, servant leadership and protection and provision in the home. And wives are called to honor and affirm the husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts.21

Various egalitarian interpreters view this highly debated passage differently, as explained later in this article.

**Complementarianism and Violence against Women**

In the light of biblical interpretation, one question that has attracted attention is the relationship between male authority and gendered violence. Storkey considers this relationship: “Could it be linked to an immutable authoritarian theology where ‘someone needs to be in charge, someone needs to have the final authority and that someone is the man?’”22 This is consistent with Stephen’s concern that elements of complementarian relationship ideology might contribute to domestic violence. Stephen states:

I know women who have been beaten in relationships in years past, and the church has told them “stay and put up” and “you made your bed, now lay in it,” that sort of thing, which often other women have told them, which just appals me. My intention and my action is not the oppression of women in marriage relationships. That’s not necessarily that gender roles oppress people, but I think sometimes they can. I think the church has taught things in the past that I find really unhelpful. I can’t talk about it without saying, we had one of our members who married about six years ago to someone who we weren’t sure about—re-married—and he later murdered her when she left. . . . I’d be concerned if the church has been seen as contributing to a theory that men should oppress their wives or should require certain behaviour from their wives.

Stephen is concerned that features of complementarian relationship ideals might contribute to violence against women. To combat this, he encourages “an equality model in our church” and he states that for years their church has actively supported the anti-domestic violence White Ribbon Campaign.23 As Stephen alludes to, the complementarian belief of male authority has implications for marriage. In some cases, the combination of a relational power imbalance and daily stressors in marriage can be an excuse for violence. Pepper Schwartz gives evidence for this, referring to a study that shows that a common argument preceding wife battering is about housework. Schwartz says, “The homemaking role is a surrogate for the wife’s display of obedience to and support of the husband, and any crack the violent husband sees in that picture can drive an angry and insecure man to a physical attack . . .”24

When authors Owen Blackburn and Pamela Blackburn discuss male headship in the *Marriage Works* resource, they state, “a woman whose husband dominates or abuses her . . . is pretty quickly going to resist and defy such treatment.”25 They state that in such a marriage, “there will be disharmony, hurt, rejection, and it will fall apart.”26 They warn that husbands should not lead in a domineering manner. In fact, in the *Marriage Works* mentor’s guidebook, Blackburn and Blackburn encourage the mentor to look out for men who likely “will not want to hear” such teaching because their “fathers dominated their mothers” or they “have a tendency to be arrogant.”27 Thus, the authors encourage the mentors to “be prepared to deliver some straight talking” to these men. There is, however, no instruction or advice given to women to leave an abusive marriage or stand up to a domineering husband. The absence of this instruction for women suggests husbands have more power or entitlement to negotiate relationship dynamics.

Furthermore, Storkey points out that intimate-partner violence is often associated with an overt of subconscious belief in male privilege and entitlement.28 Overcoming violence against women begins with cultivating the belief that males and females are of equal worth. Changed thinking leads to changed cultures that empower healthier communities.

**Egalitarianism and Evangelical Feminism**

Egalitarian theology—often referred to as “biblical equality”—lies at the heart of evangelical feminism and endorses mutual submission and shared leadership within marriage. Contemporary evangelical feminists claim that Christianity “is not hopelessly patriarchal, but offers ideological tools and organizational resources to transform and undermine gender inequality.”29

Gallagher asserts that egalitarianism has a long history. Feminist Christians draw from the Apostle Paul’s declaration that, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NIV UK). They point to a thread of teaching on mutuality (and the wider biblical narrative of equality), partnership, and women’s gifting that has wound its way through the centuries and across a range of Christian communities. Efforts to reclaim and interpret this strand of biblical discourse as evidence of a redemptive movement pointing toward a new model of community are at the centre of the contemporary biblical or evangelical feminist project.30 Similarly, Gallagher states that although a thread of discourse supporting partnership and mutuality between women and men “has a long history within Christianity,” it is not until the nineteenth century that it emerges as “a viable alternative to hierarchy as the basis of domestic relations.”31

Based on an analysis of evangelical discourse on gender hierarchy and equality, Gallagher argues that in spite of its relative lack of organizational resources, contemporary evangelical
feminism thrives as a subculture within a subculture for four reasons. First, it is supported by a growing body of theological, exegetical, and historical studies. Next, it is consistent with the normative ideal of egalitarianism in the broader culture. Third, it represents an effective gender strategy within the majority of dual-earner evangelical households. Finally, egalitarian rhetoric defines a cultural and ideological space in which feminist evangelicals may find meaningful religious identity and community. Nevertheless, Gallagher states that explicitly feminist perspectives remain marginalized within evangelicalism because “gender persists as a central and effective element of the boundary work that maintains evangelical subculture and identity.” Stephen, William, John, and Sharon discuss their egalitarian theological positions; most of them refer to Eph 5 in their discussion.

Ephesians 5:21–25: An Egalitarian Reading

An egalitarian reading of this passage examines the context in which it was originally written, a Greco-Roman culture where subordination of wives to husbands was the overarching norm. Andrew Lincoln asserts, “this is not a timeless and universal prescription for marriage though the ages”; rather, this “vision of marriage is conditioned by the cultural assumption of its time.” Egalitarian theologies see the command in v. 21 for Christians to “submit to one another” as setting the tone for the ensuing household code. Lincoln calls Christians to appreciate what this passage attempts to accomplish in its own setting:

For husbands and wives to have carried out their duties under the guidelines of mutual submission, and a wife to have subordinated herself voluntarily to a husband who cherishes her with a self-sacrificial love, would have been to experience a very different reality than that suggested by the traditional discussions of household management.

According to Walter Elwell, these counter-cultural Christian household codes emerged when “Christians were conscious of the need to adjust to living in the Greco-Roman world without necessarily disrupting the status quo.”

Briefly mentioned above, theological debate over the interpretation of the word “head” (v. 23) continues. “Head” translates the Greek word kephalē, which can also be translated as “source” or “origin.” Therefore, this line of exegetical critique argues that Paul’s concern “is not hierarchical but relational—the unique relationships that are predicated on one’s being the source of the other’s existence.” Gordon Fee argues the word “head” is a reference to the creation account where Eve’s life originates from Adam’s rib; thus, “the man is the source of the woman’s life.”

Most egalitarians appeal to the whole of Scripture—the biblical narrative—to further clarify passages such as this.

Stephen and William refer to an egalitarian understanding of Eph 5. Stephen clearly establishes that his theology is founded upon an egalitarian reading of Scripture, stating that “the heart of making a marriage work” lies in the biblical instruction of Eph 5:21 to “submit to one another.” Stephen criticises the practice of male headship, observing this as a cultural practice “in the first century.” He rejects male headship as a “Christian value,” suggesting that Christianity is “trying to reflect what was [culturally] common in those days.” Stephen’s theology also emphasises the “attitude of Jesus” who “treated women as people of great dignity and worth, quite differently from people around him in a first century context.” William agrees, claiming that Jesus, not a husband, is the head of a marriage. He states, “My basic view is that God wants a couple to be one, and leadership within that is where each is submitting to the other . . . it’s the basis of Eph 5, that couples submit, one to the other.”

Similarly, John’s egalitarian theology focuses on the nature of God. He says, “I think a sophisticated theology understands that the fundamental shape of God—Trinity—is primarily relational and not hierarchical. And that’s what makes the understanding of the Trinity absolutely unique in theological circles. So if you understood that, your theology just couldn’t remain hierarchical in that way.”

Sharon explains how, when she married in 1974, Christian marriage discourse was shaped by books with titles like The Total Woman and The Christian Wife, which Sharon claims espoused a “constructed viewpoint” that the wife was “not just submissive, but subservient.” She states this view is constructed because “you could argue many different viewpoints from the Bible.” Later, Sharon explains that, although an egalitarian relationship is “the ideal,” she acknowledges that a literalist reading of Eph 5 can negatively “impact” the realization of equality in a marriage. Sharon’s conclusion that “women will probably have to work harder to be able to get an egalitarian relationship” reinforces that a commitment to critical interpretation of the Bible takes work, but is an essential ingredient of a Christian egalitarian marriage.

Conclusion

In summary, it is important to examine underpinning theological convictions embedded in pre-marriage counselling resources. Since advice given to couples from leaders sits within wider theological discourses that contain differing messages about gender equality and inequality, evangelical churches, including those in New Zealand, must develop pre-marital resources that invite couples to reflect critically on wider ideologies and theologies that may be informing beliefs about gender. Theologians have pointed out that literalist interpretations of Scripture, which endorse male superiority and perpetuate beliefs associated with violence against women, are embedded in complementarian relationship ideals. Evangelical feminist discourse highlights the need for strategies couples can utilize to practice equality within their marriage. Pre-marriage counsellors facilitate discussion with couples in a safe, non-judgemental environment, and it would be wrong to force beliefs upon someone. However, creating a space for couples—through mediated discussion—where they can grapple with themes such as egalitarianism, complementarianism, and the implications these ideologies have on their relationship could be useful and potentially transformational. Overall, I agree with Porter who
asserts that, "the task of ending women’s subordination involves creating something new."41

Notes


12. Storkey, Scars across Humanity, 204.


20. Piper, Desiring God.


22. Storkey, Scars Across Humanity, 208.


25. Blackburn and Blackburn, Marriage Works, 88.


27. Blackburn and Blackburn, Marriage Works, 34.


40. Fee, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 565.

41. Porter, It Will Not Be Taken Away from Her, 16.

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