Premarital Counseling: Hierarchical and Egalitarian

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Evangelical Christians can agree: marriage is a foundational relationship ordained and blessed by God. It is the beginning of healthy, stable families and forms the groundwork for children navigating through the world. It provides the basis for their worldview and even for learning about God. Evangelicals also agree that premarital counseling can be a good way to start off a strong marriage. Jack and Judith Balswick explain that the premarital stage is the stage of differentiating from the family of origin: “The goal of differentiation is to develop a clear sense of self that enables one to relate to and interact with others in interdependent ways. . . . Success in differentiation gives one the best chances for a mature marriage.”¹

Evangelicals do not always agree, however, on the roles of each marriage partner and how each partner should interact in the family to create healthy family relationships and to please God. The debate is widespread and ongoing. It evokes emotions and challenges deep-rooted beliefs, teachings, and traditions. The purpose of this article is to compare two different doctrines within evangelicalism in regard to premarital counseling. While there are many different theoretical approaches to counseling, I have asked for premarital counseling referrals from gender hierarchists and egalitarians, compared them to each other, compared them to their doctrine, and have come to conclusions based on the findings.

Hierarchists and egalitarians

Male hierarchy and egalitarianism are considered generally to be opposing views; however, they are not opposite of each other. If the views were on a line diagram with husbands dominating over wives on the left and wives dominating husbands on the right, male hierarchy would fall about three-quarters of the way to the left. Egalitarianism would be in the center. The opposite of male hierarchy, then, is a relationship in which the woman has the God-given authority to make the final decisions and lead her family, and her husband must submit to her leadership. The online Wikipedia describes the views this way:

Christian egalitarianism (derived from the French word égal, meaning equal or level), also known as biblical equality, is a Christian form of the moral doctrine of Egalitarianism. It holds that all human persons are created equally in God’s sight—equal in fundamental worth and moral status. This view does not just apply to gender, but to religion, skin colour and any other differences between individuals. . . . The opposing view is Complementarianism that differing, often non-overlapping roles between men and women, manifested in marriage, church leadership, and elsewhere; is biblically required.²

An article in Christianity Today states,

The different viewpoints are represented institutionally by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, representing the complementarian view, and Christians for Biblical Equality, representing the egalitarian viewpoint. Complementarian viewpoints stress male headship and female submission. Egalitarians prefer to talk about biblical equality and mutual submission.³

The organizations Christians for Biblical Equality and the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood were created to represent and distribute information about these two views concerning the relationship between men and women.

The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) was formed in 1987 in direct response to the beginning of the group that is now Christians for Biblical Equality. The main document describing its doctrine is the Danvers Statement. This group felt that evangelicals were being too greatly influenced by the feminist movement and something should be done to maintain the roles of men and women. With the creation of the organization also came the new term “complementarian.” They define the position this way:

Men and women are equal in the image of God, but maintain complementary differences in role and function. In the home, men lovingly are to lead their wives and family as women intelligently are to submit to the leadership of their husbands.⁴

Male hierarchists also believe that to differ from their interpretation of the Bible concerning the issues of manhood and womanhood is to disregard God’s word: “God’s design for manhood and womanhood is being attacked on many fronts. CBMW believes that at the heart of all of these challenges is a disregard for the authority, clarity, and integrity of God’s word.”⁵ The mission of the CBMW is “to set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women, created equally in the image of God, because these teachings are essential for obedience to Scripture and for the health of the family and the church.”⁶ According to their Web site, these biblical truths supersede talents and gifting of individuals: “In both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries (1 Tim 2:11–15, 3:1–13; Tit 1:5–9). Rather, Biblical teaching should remain the authority for testing our subjective discernment of God’s will.”⁷ They also declare that “We are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.”⁸ One hierarchist expands on this belief that people should act based on their gender rather than on gifting:

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Paul says the same to everyone. God has placed the husband in the position of responsibility. It does not matter what kind of personality a man may have. Your wife may be resisting you, fighting you, and spurning your attempts to lead, but it makes no difference. I believe our wives want us and need us to lead. You are not demanding this position; on the contrary, God placed you there. You will not lead her perfectly, but you must care for your wife and family by serving them with perseverance.9

This doctrine is so important to hierarchists that they believe it is necessary for furthering the gospel of Christ: “Biblical manhood and womanhood is the life-transforming effect of the gospel on full display.”10

The model of marriage that best fits the hierarchical view is the traditional, patriarchal model.11 The ideas of marriage fit the criteria for this model in that the role of leadership in the family is reserved for the father:

In the less authoritarian Christian version of the patriarchal model, the husband is seen as the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church; the husband also emulates Christ’s role as the suffering servant. The husband remains head of the home, however and he is expected to make decisions and assign responsibilities.12

Recommendations for premarital counseling from hierarchists

One prominent hierarchical organization, when contacted by phone, gave recommendations for premarital counseling.13 Two books recommended were The Exemplary Husband14 and This Momentary Marriage.15 While the organizational representative admitted that these books did not deal directly with premarital issues, he could not think of any book to recommend that did. He also made a referral to an organization offering a variety of services, including counseling, classroom training, distance education, publications, and conferences.16 This group believes that Christ should be a present and active agent in counseling and that counseling should flow through that filter. As part of their mission statement, they explain, “We have a passion for personal change that is centered in the person of Christ.”17 Noticeably absent, however, is any reference to the hierarchical view. A search of the organization’s Web site for the hierarchical keywords headship, complementarian, submission, gender roles, and gender yielded no results.

In a personal interview, a therapist from the organization was asked what role male hierarchy plays in the counseling room, particularly in premarital counseling. The therapist replied that, while she may keep the ideas in the back of her head, she would never tell anyone explicitly her beliefs about it. She said that this could lead to danger, such as an abused woman being told to stay with her abusive husband. For premarital counseling, she recommended the book Should We Get Married?18 She said that nowhere in the book does the author allude to male hierarchy. When asked why she espouses this view if she does not counsel it, she responded, “Because we are Reformed, and that is what Reformed believes.” She said that she could think of no good books about hierarchical premarital counseling. She said that she “thinks about it, but we do not practice it.” To her, male hierarchy is the “foundational context” of counseling, but Christ is the head and bread of life. The only time she might consider bringing in the doctrine is when the couple is trying to build a relationship, but, “at the end of the day, helping bring safety is more important than complementarianism.”19

The organization’s Web site offers a wealth of information concerning premarital counseling, including an article titled “Premarital Counseling for Married People”:

The sweetest gift, husbands, that you can give your wife, and the sweetest gift, wives, that you can give your husband, is your pure devotion to Christ. . . . If a husband loves Christ more than anything else, and a wife loves Christ more than anything else, they will move toward the same goal. Look at that person to whom you are married as the bride of Christ, and do everything you can to encourage their devotion to Christ.20

Another resource for premarital counseling recommended by both CBMW and Christians for Biblical Equality was the PREPARE/ENRICH program. PREPARE/ENRICH is a set of inventories put out by an organization called Life Innovations:

PREPARE/ENRICH is a customized couple assessment completed online that identifies a couple’s strength and growth areas. . . . Based on a couple’s assessment results, a trained facilitator provides 4–8 feedback sessions in which the facilitator helps the couple discuss and understand their results as they are taught proven relationship skills.21

The program has 75,000 trained facilitators and has administered more than 2.5 million tests worldwide. The program is highly recommended and reviewed by many scholars. The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy concludes, “PREPARE’s strengths include its relatively shorter length, comprehensiveness, and ease of administration and interpretation. PREPARE has multiple measures of reliability and validity. Excellent supplemental counseling materials are available.”22 There is no mention in the inventories of hierarchical values being the only way to live in a biblical way; however, the assessments do take an inventory of the couple’s expectations of gender roles. I asked Jan McCormack, a teacher of the program and professor at Denver Seminary, if she considers the program to be egalitarian. She replied:

The way Life Innovations wrote the inventories, a couple where BOTH score traditional 1950s family or BOTH score egalitarian would read as a couple STRENGTH, since they as a COUPLE agree on roles. . . . If one was each—it would show as a problem [for] the couple. Our job as counselors is to help couples [with] the up/down sides of their expectations [especially] if/when circumstances change due to illness, economy, changed experiences/values . . . etc.23
Christians for Biblical Equality

Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) was started in 1988, issuing a document called “Men, Women, and Biblical Equality.”24 According to CBE, equality is the way that the Bible as a whole should be interpreted:

What is biblical equality? It is the belief that all people are equal before God and in Christ. All have equal responsibility to use their gifts and obey their calling to the glory of God. God freely calls believers to roles and ministries without regard to class, gender, or race. We believe this because the Bible and Jesus Christ teach it to us. That is biblical equality.25

The mission of CBE is the following: “CBE equips believers by affirming the biblical truth about equality and justice. Thus, all believers, without regard to gender, ethnicity, and class, are free and encouraged to use their God-given gifts in ministries, communities, and families.”26 In contrast to gender-based roles, CBE believes:

The Bible teaches that both women and men are called to develop their spiritual gifts and to use them as stewards of the grace of God (1 Peter 4:10–11). Both men and women are divinely gifted and empowered to minister to the whole Body of Christ, under His authority (Acts 1:14; 18:26; 21:9; Rom 16:1–7; 12–13, 15; Phil 4:2–3; Col 4:15; see also Mark 15:40–41; 16:1–7; Luke 8:1–3; John 20:17–18; compare also Old Testament examples: Judges 4:4–14; 5:7; 2 Chron 34:22–28; Prov 31:30–31; Micah 6:4). 27

CBE believes that its interpretation of equality in the Bible is essential in furthering the gospel of Christ, not insisting on living within certain roles, but by setting men and women free to serve God as they are gifted. This perspective is reflected in the organization’s core purpose and envisioned future statements:

Core Purpose: To communicate broadly the biblical truth that men and women are equally responsible to act justly and use their God-given gifts to further Christ’s kingdom. Envisioned Future: CBE envisions a future where all believers will be encouraged to exercise their gifts for God’s glory and missional purposes, with the full support of their Christian communities.28

Egalitarian marriage and premarital resources

The model of marriage that best describes the position of CBE is the empowerment model; that is, when “[f]amily members use their gifts and resources for one another.”29 Biblical equality is described by the Balswicks’ theological basis of relationship, which is a spiral of initial covenant, degree of grace, degree of empowering, degree of intimacy, leading to mature covenant.30

In addition to the PREPARE/ENRICH program, CBE also recommended a list of egalitarian therapists on their Web site. They referred me to their online bookstore featuring many books on egalitarian marriage. These include Two Become One: God’s Blueprint for Couples,31 Model for Marriage: Covenant Grace,
the egalitarian counselor says, or is that “outrageous,” as the hierarchist claims? Does the husband make the final decision, or does the couple appeal to the Bible together when there is a conflict? Is the egalitarian counselor actually denying Scripture by not counseling male hierarchy? Is it truly not possible for the new couple to have a healthy marriage if they choose not to be hierarchical?

If, on the other hand, the premarital couple decides to have an egalitarian marriage, they should be engaged in discovering giftedness, talents, and callings. Each spouse is to be accountable to God, and each person has something unique to bring to the relationship. Premarital counseling is about discovering each other’s strengths and weaknesses. If the couple decides that, in fact, the husband does have more leadership abilities, they have the freedom to live that way. If the couple decides that one spouse will make decisions about finances and the other about child discipline, they have the freedom to do that. If one spouse feels called to lead home Bible devotions and the other feels called to lead bedtime stories, they are free to do that. This freedom makes a family strong because it calls upon each person’s strengths.

A premarital couple will have to decide upon their core beliefs about their relationship and act accordingly. Pastor Burt Wright of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, says, “We can say what we believe all day long, but we end up doing what we actually believe.” Pastor Arny Guin of Crossroads church in Greeley, Colorado, concurs. He has been doing premarital counseling for many years, and believes that “marriage is a partnership—the two shall become one. Roles look different for every couple. Our goal isn’t to dissect roles, but to create a partnership that will last forty, fifty, sixty years. I put reality over theory.”

Michael Novak identifies three types of belief: public, private, and core. Public beliefs are those that one tells other people about. Private beliefs are those that one thinks and says one believes, yet, when circumstances change, these beliefs could also change. Core beliefs are those that one truly believes and can never violate. According to the recommendations and experiences of premarital counselors, male hierarchy seems to fall into the category of private beliefs. There are certain circumstances in which it would be dangerous to tell the woman to submit to her husband. A pastoral blog reads:

And now for something controversial (isn’t that what bloggers are supposed to write?): Pastors who try to open the Bible and reason with a narcissist are merely setting themselves up for frustration and failure. And, pastors who insist women live meekly and submissively with a narcissist are enabling a very twisted view of Scripture and must share in the responsibility for the lives that are shattered.

Hierarchists truly believe that God has ordained men and woman into certain roles and that women should submit to their husbands. However, when a circumstance changes, such as the commencement of abuse by the husband, the hierarchist would (or should) allow the woman to stop being submissive, as shown in section 7 of the Danvers Statement: “In all of life Christ is the supreme authority and guide for men and women, so that no earthly submission—domestic, religious, or civil—ever implies a mandate to follow a human authority into sin (Dan 3:10–18; Acts 4:19–20; 5:27–29; 1 Pet 3:1–2).” This makes the belief a private belief.

In the same way, CBE’s egalitarian position says,

Neither spouse is to seek to dominate the other, but each is to act as servant of the other, in humility considering the other as better than oneself. In case of decisional deadlock, they should seek resolution through biblical methods of conflict resolution rather than by one spouse imposing a decision upon the other. In so doing, husband and wife will help the Christian home stand against improper use of power and authority by spouses and will protect the home from wife and child abuse that sometimes tragically follows a hierarchical interpretation of the husband’s “headship.”

This demonstrates that it would not violate egalitarian belief to advise a wife to seek safety from an abusive husband, because there is no mandate for the wife to be solely submissive in the first place. This would make it a core belief, because circumstances cannot violate the commitment to equality.

Conclusion

I did not start out this research to prove a point about either view. I started out to study premarital counseling from two different perspectives. I felt offended that many male hierarchists believe that couples who choose to live based on gifting are putting the health of their families at stake. This research has convinced me that premarital counseling is best when the talents, personalities, and gifting are explored. I believe that it can hurt the premarital couple if they try to live within gender expectations rather than gifting. As a future premarital therapist, I plan to help couples explore what strengths they can bring into the relationship in order to create healthy intimacy. My core belief is that we all have spiritual gifts and should be free to use them.

Notes

For years 1 Timothy 2:11–14 has been at the center of an exegetical firestorm prompted by the ongoing debate over what the Bible says about women's place in church and society. Providing new grist for an old mill, J. G. Brown poses a bold challenge to those who appeal to the ‘traditional’ argument that complementarianism is embedded in the creational order. This invocation of tradition, Brown provocatively argues, is misguided precisely because it is historically unfounded.”

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