I attended a women’s ministry retreat my freshman year of college excited to bond with Christian women and grow in faith. At one point in the evening, we sat down together as some of the women students shared their personal stories with the group. One moment stands out in my memory.

A young woman who was in a relationship (I believe they were nearing engagement) shared with the group. She appeared confident and strong, but then she made the strangest comment, at least to my ears. She said that she wished her boyfriend would be more of a spiritual leader in the relationship.

This was the first time I had heard the phrase “spiritual leader” and it caught me off guard. What did “spiritual leader” mean and where did this phrase come from? Why did people think this was a calling given to men? Weren’t women able to be responsible for their own spirituality? Did they really need a man to lead them in their spirituality? If this was the case, I felt I would be better off without a man. I did not want my spirituality to be dependent upon another person, a finite human being. Plus, what if God called the woman to be a leader?

This young woman confessed that she was a natural leader and her boyfriend was naturally less outgoing and less likely to take leadership roles. If this was the case, I wondered why they were trying to change who they were in order to fit into this bizarre notion that the man was to be a “spiritual leader.”

I began searching the Bible to find where the designation “spiritual leader” comes from. To this day, I still haven’t found it. But, I was surprised by what I did find. The Bible offers a wonderful message about the unity, equality, and interdependence between men and women.

One of the passages in Scripture that most clearly demonstrates this unity and equality is the creation account in Genesis, where we find God’s original intent for relationships beautifully displayed.

Proponents of male-only leadership and authority over women, also known as male “headship,” believe that the original creation in Genesis 1–2 demonstrates that male “headship” was a part of God’s original intent for creation and relationships between men and women. I am dismayed at the distortion of the Genesis text that has occurred due to this understanding being read into the creation account.

What can we learn about God’s original intent for male-female relationships from the Genesis creation accounts? We learn not that men were intended to be authorities over women, but quite the contrary. We learn that man and woman were designed to share the same likeness of being and to be in a relationship of unity and interdependence with one another. Let’s take a closer look.

**Genesis chapter 1**

Proponents of male headship often ignore Genesis 1 and turn straight to Genesis 2 to support their interpretation. We must pay attention to what we learn about God’s creation of humanity in this first chapter of the Bible.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–8, NRSV)

Instead of establishing a hierarchy based on gender differences, what is clear from the creation account in Genesis 1 is that man and woman were equally:

- Created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27)
- Charged to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28)
- Given dominion over the world God created (1:26–31)

Both man and woman shared the image of God, and both man and woman were given the same tasks of being fruitful and of caring for the earth.

**Genesis chapter 2**

Those who claim that male “headship” is a part of God’s original design for humanity turn to Genesis 2 for support. I am baffled by their claims, for this is one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture that describes the goodness of human community and the unity and equality of men and women. When reading this passage, it’s important to consider the main points the narrative is intended to communicate.
The necessity of Eve

The creation account in Genesis 2 describes the creation of humankind as male and female in more detail. In this account there is a time when Adam was alone before the creation of Eve. This temporal priority of Adam serves to demonstrate God’s beautiful design for humanity.

In Genesis 2:18, God says that it was “not good” that Adam was alone. This is a remarkable statement. Up until this point, everything God had created was considered “good.” Only here, when seeing that Adam was alone, did God declare that it was “not good.” This conclusion shows that Adam lacked something that was not fulfilled until woman was created. Adam was in need of a partner, of a helper. Adam needed Eve.

Before creating Eve, God wanted Adam to recognize his need for Eve. God first wanted Adam to be aware that he was in fact alone. How did God accomplish this? By bringing all the animals to Adam to name (2:19–20). Adam probably took time carefully considering each animal before naming it. In this way, he became familiar with all of the animals and recognized that he was different than them. None of them were fitting to be his helper.

By bringing the animals to Adam to be named before creating Eve, God made it clear to Adam that he needed someone who was different from the animals and like Adam to partner with him in the task of caring for the earth.

The similarity of Adam and Eve

After demonstrating Adam’s lack while he was alone and the necessity of Eve, God created Eve in a way that reveals the similarity and interdependence between Adam and Eve by forming Eve from Adam’s rib (Gen. 2:21–22).

Woman was not made from the dust like man, but rather was made from the same flesh as the man. This is a beautiful and poetic way to describe the “one flesh” relationship of unity between man and woman.

Adam rejoices in this similarity when he exclaims, “this is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man this one was taken” (Gen. 2:23). Adam recognized the similarity he shared with Eve, a similarity he did not share with the animals. The names given to man and woman continue the theme of rejoicing in the likeness and unity of the two.

Just as Adam and Eve were made from the same flesh, in marriage they become one flesh again as Genesis 2:24 states, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh.” This is the first time marriage appears in the Bible. There is nothing patriarchal about this text. In fact, contrary to the tradition of the woman being “given away” by her father to her husband, in the biblical account the man leaves his father and mother to unite with his wife.

At no point in the Genesis account of creation does God give the man “headship” or a “spiritual leadership” role over the woman. If male-only leadership and authority over women was God’s intent, wouldn’t this have been the perfect time to make this clear, right at the beginning of creation?

Instead, God gave man and woman shared dominion over the earth and its creatures. The first mention of a spouse ruling over another only comes after the Fall as a consequence of sin in Genesis 3:16. But here at the beginning, the focus of marriage is clear: the one flesh relationship of the two.

Conclusion

I still wonder how people can read the creation account in Genesis and come to the conclusion that man was intended to be an authority over the woman. The intent of the narrative is to show Adam’s lack before the creation of Eve, and to show the unity, likeness, and interdependence between man and woman. For this reason, I think reading male “headship” into this text is a complete distortion.

If God’s design for male-female relationships was unity and interdependence, and if hierarchy in relationships came as a result of sin, perhaps we need to reevaluate teachings on male “headship” in marriage today. Rather than perpetuating the results of the Fall by modeling hierarchy in relationships, we should model our relationships after the unity of flesh and purpose so clearly displayed in Genesis 1–2.

The young woman at my college who shared her frustrations with her relationship wanted her boyfriend to be her “spiritual leader.” Why should she try to be less of a leader and why should her boyfriend try to be more of a leader—especially if doing so would quench the gifts God had given them? Perhaps if this young woman had let go of this unbiblical notion, they could both be free to support one another in developing their gifts and to celebrate the mutuality they already enjoyed in their relationship.

Allison Young served as a theological intern for CBE this summer. She is a graduate of Bethel University with a degree in biblical and theological studies and is pursuing her Masters of Divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary.