The landscape of the debate between egalitarians and hierarchists (self-styled “complementarians”) has changed drastically owing to decisive gains that have been achieved by egalitarians on scriptural grounds.

For example, egalitarians have shown that any hierarchical interpretation drawn from the creation account of man and woman was actually read back into it from post-fall situations. There is not even a hint of a hierarchical structure existing between man and woman in the story of God’s original design for male/female oneness. In particular, it has been pointed out that the word “helper,” so often used as a device for the subordination of women to men, actually has the strength of “rescuer.” God provided the man with the one who delivered him from the “no good” situation of being alone, so that they could bond together into the “one flesh” community that God had intended to create from the beginning.

The accurate understanding of the use of the head-and-body metaphor in the New Testament has provided another major advance for egalitarians. It has been decisively shown that Christ’s ministry as “head” to the body is consistently defined as sacrificial servant-provider of life, growth, salvation and unity. Never does it indicate or even imply authority or leadership. Similarly, the “headship” of husbands toward their wives is described in the New Testament, not as exercise of authority, not even as submission within the model of mutual servanthood, but as something infinitely more demanding than mere submission: as a mandate for husbands to love their wives to the point of sacrificing their will, their pride, and their lives for them.

Another giant step toward the rehabilitation of women as full members in the community of oneness pertains to their participation in church ministries. No more can women be excluded from exercising their spiritual gifts, since similarly
stringent restrictions are also required of men aspiring to positions of leadership, of teaching, and of church management. Indeed, it has been observed that the same passage in 1 Timothy that is used to restrict female ministries goes on to screen male candidates on the basis of their family status. According to a consistent reading of the text, not only are women excluded from such ministries, but also single men, childless married men, men with only one child, and men with disobedient or disrespectful children. Obviously, the application of such provisions would eliminate most leaders in churches today. As a result, biblical scholars are recognizing that the standards laid out in this epistle are exceptional rather than universal, and that they apply to churches that find themselves in similar situations of crisis-management for survival.

A remaining sticking-point in the dialogue concerns the process of decision-making within marriage. The hierarchical approach lays the burden of decision-making on the husband, thus victimizing him as the all-competent enforcer, and his wife as perpetual loser. Fortunately, the Scriptures address conflict resolution head-on by providing principles supported with a practical case-study.

A Definitive Passage on Conflict Resolution

This definitive teaching is found in the New Testament section where the Apostle Paul deals extensively with issues that concern gender relations among believers. In 1 Corinthians 7:3–5, he goes to the heart of the matter through the lens of a believing couple’s sex life. Instead of commenting on a relatively trivial matter such as the purchase of a home, the addition of a child, or a change of profession, he focuses on the “one flesh” relation that concretely symbolizes the couple’s union.

The ancient Greek thinkers were dualistic, meaning that they separated relational life into two categories: the higher plane at the level of “pure” interaction of soul and mind; the lower area relegated to the supposedly vile physical part of human functions, including sexual activity which was considered to be an animalistic expression of human nature.

Not so for the authors of the Bible! For them, the male/female gender differentiation is essential to the “image of God.” Moreover, they freely describe the relation between the Creator
and his people in terms of spousal relations. In the very context of our 1 Corinthians passage, the apostle ascribes the highest dignity to the body in the context of sexual interaction as the noblest expression of physical oneness: the believer’s body is meant for the Lord and the Lord for the body (6:13). Because our bodies are members of Christ (v. 15) and, by virtue of the creation design according to which: “The two shall become one,” (v. 16), a believer who is united to the Lord becomes one in spirit with him (v. 17). Therefore, our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (v. 19) in which God is glorified (v. 20).

In this paradigmatic text regarding decision-making (7:3−4), the apostle lays down the basic biblical requirement of spouses to respect each other’s rights within the context of shared authority. This passage happens to be the only place in the Bible where the word “authority” is used to describe the husband/wife relationship. The fact that it is used in verb form makes it even more compelling as a principle of mutual submission. There is absolutely no allowance in this relational model for one spouse to exercise unilateral authority over the other. The symmetry of privileges and obligations is flawless.

In order to reinforce this teaching, the apostle adds a real life situation that requires spouses to make a major decision involving their own intimate relation and their relationship to God (v. 5). According to the apostle, the decision may not be forced on one spouse by another as if one were the leader. It is reached by consensus between equal partners as appropriate within the relationship of oneness.

It must be noted that, predictably, this passage makes proponents of female subordination uncomfortable. They either choose to ignore its existence or reduce its application exclusively to equality in sexual relations, thus falling into the same dualism as the ancient Greeks. Egalitarians owe it to the Christian community to proclaim that this template of mutual submission is the one that biblically governs all decision-making situations in the lives of Christian couples.

**When Stumbling Blocks Emerge**

Despite the goodwill inherent in the mutual submission model, stumbling-blocks commonly emerge in situations where well-meaning spouses may become honestly unable to reach a consensus and remain stuck in decisional impasses. In such cases, the most relationally destructive solution is for one spouse to claim the right to impose one’s will on the other. The purpose for this article is to present biblical alternatives for the resolution of such deadlocks that are consistent with the biblical call to mutual submission (Eph. 5:21).

- Agree to predetermine areas of competency (spiritual gifts) where each of the partners is the one better qualified to render the final decision, and stick to the pre-arranged division of responsibilities.
- Figure out which partner has the most to lose in the outcome of the decision, and allow him or her to make the final call.
- Separately and together (if still possible...) consult the Holy Spirit for guidance. Prayer can open hearts and minds when nothing else works, to say nothing of providing supernatural solutions.
- Take turns at having the last word. Be allowed to win one time. Accept to lose the next time. And so on.
- When desperate enough for a resolution, involve an impartial, mutually acceptable third party to settle the differences after having promised to abide by his or her decision.
- Submit the issue for advice to your small group and make yourselves accountable to them not to be selfish and stubborn.
- Whenever possible, buy time. Of its own, the passing of time resolves a lot of problems.
- Engage together in research projects on the issues involved, with both parties promising to be open to learning and changing. Whenever applicable, conduct together a well-informed Bible study about the matter. Basic biblical principles are applicable to most situations in life.
- Learn to suspend certainty. Be open-minded enough to try to argue for the other person’s position better than he or she does.
- Do not react emotionally to differences of opinions. Do not interpret them as personal rejection. Allow each other the right to independent judgment. Don’t allow disagreements to poison relationships.
- Take a course or read valid books on conflict resolution. A little common sense can spare a lot of grief.

Finally, follow the teaching of biblical scholars who believe in the community of oneness. Availing yourselves of the resources of Christians for Biblical Equality is a good place to be!

*Any resemblance between the contents of this article and parts of Beyond Sex Roles is purely incidental and due to the fact that they were both written independently of each other by the same author.

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