

# Marriage at the Crossroads

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*Couples in Conversation about Discipleship, Gender Roles, Decision Making and Intimacy | By William and Aída Spencer and Steve and Celestia Tracy | Reviewed by Alice Mathews*

Many of us have longed for a sane, nuanced conversation around differing viewpoints on gender issues in marriage. The Spencers and Tracys have given us that conversation in this fine book. This is not a debate pitting egalitarian against complementarian and vice versa. This is a genuine conversation in which each couple has laid out their beliefs about the nature of Christian marriage, issues of headship and submission, marital roles and decision making, and, finally intimacy. After exchanging these extended essays, the two couples then looked to see the areas of agreement and the areas of difference. To their surprise, in several areas, there was far more agreement than disagreement. In the process, they came to understand in a deeper way the rationale used by the other couple. The conversation is honest and respectful.

Both couples have been in Christian ministry for many years; all four are seminary trained, and three of them have earned doctorates in biblical studies and theology. Thus, the conversation includes in-depth biblical exegesis and theological reflection. At the same time, the essays reflect a common-sense awareness of the pitfalls in marriage in a fallen world. The writers illustrate their understanding of biblical teaching out of their decades of personal experience in marriage. The Tracys, in particular, because of the nature of their counseling and teaching ministry, use social science findings amply to undergird their position on the meaning of headship for them.

An added benefit in this conversation is that the couples then invited three other couples to read the essays and comment on them as they applied to their own contexts. The Hispanic couple noted the potential positive and negative impact of the extended Latino family on marriages. The Asian couple brought in the family expectations from immigrant parents that their married children give priority to making a lot of money and living in a big impressive house—factors that can work against a godly marriage. The African American couple noted a possible negative impact of an egalitarian approach to marriage on African American men who “have been marginalized in America, [and] . . . may feel they are losing power in the home” (203–04). It is critically important that writers consider how ideas that seem rational, even self-evident, in one culture may have unintended consequences in another.

My quibbles with elements in the book are small. As one trained in the social sciences, I prefer sociology’s distinction between *sex* and *gender* over Webster’s Dictionary’s equation of these two terms. The social sciences suggest the term *sex* should be used for all physiological differences between male and female; the term *gender* should be reserved for those things that are socially learned as culturally acceptable expressions of masculinity and femininity. God did not create

two genders; he created two sexes. When the biological and the socially learned are conflated in one single term, it is an easy step to assume that what men and women have learned from the culture about being masculine or feminine is part of the creation mandate. The Tracys made a number of references to brain studies in support of gender differences. These sex differences are examples of the biological difference built into the male and female, and they cannot be dismissed. At the same time, what society has made of these fundamental differences has often distorted God's creational intention; thus, these are issues of gender.

My other quibble was with the frequent use of the word *headship* in the complementarian section of the book on "Headship' and Submission." This is not a biblical term; it does not appear anywhere in the biblical texts. It is a contemporary creation that carries freight beyond what the texts legitimate. As Sarah Sumner has pointed out, the logical pairs of words in Ephesians 5:21–33 are "head/body" and "submit/love."<sup>1</sup> The marital relationship has the intrinsic unity of a head with its body, and the body parts submit to one another because one part of the body cannot say it has no need of another part; we love [respect] our body parts because we know they are integral to full functioning.

My quibbles aside, this book will help all Christians come to a deeper appreciation of the miracle of marriage as God intended it. The Spencers and Tracys show us in practical ways how a good and godly marriage works. The template comes from the Scriptures. In the hands of these thoughtful handlers of the word of God, the glory of marriage shines through virtually every page.

#### Notes

1. Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 162–64.

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