

MEN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO ADOPTING AN EGALITARIAN VIEW

Chuck Romig

I have been told on a number of occasions that men who adhere to an egalitarian view of the marital relationship and who see no ministry restrictions for women in the church approach the Bible from some personal bias that keeps them from seeing the truth. What usually follows in the conversation (lecture) is armchair psychologizing as to why such men want or need to hold an egalitarian view. I find armchair psychologizing somewhat specious and boring when it occurs among my professional colleagues, so I am quite intolerant when laypersons enter into such endeavors, particularly when I know they are applying their theories to me! Nevertheless, in violation of my own rules in this regard, I offer some of my ideas as to why men have a psychological investment in holding to a hierarchical view and thus may show little willingness even to entertain the possibility that an egalitarian view could be scriptural.

I am borrowing somewhat from the work of Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, for some of my basic concepts as I psychologize on this matter. I think Tannen documents well the inclination for men to view relationship dynamics, including simple conversations, as negotiations for status. Men seem to attempt to gain the upper hand in interactions, or at least make sure they are not put in a position of lower status. I think this natural tendency, which is predicted in Genesis 3, is one of the primary reasons for men not relinquishing a hierarchical view of *all* relationships, but particularly relationships with women. However, I have yet to find a Christian male willing to admit that power and status motivations are inherent to men's nature and I must admit that I have met many Christian males (hierarchicalists) who are quite humble in most aspects of their lives. Therefore I suspect some additional psychological processes must be operating.

According to Tannen, a second aspect to this negotiation for status is more subtle and likely operative. Men have difficulty admitting they are wrong, because such admissions involve a loss of face, which lowers one's status.

From my point of view, even many sincerely humble Christian males have difficulty admitting they are wrong, particularly on doctrinal matters. I believe, particularly for males in leadership positions, that admitting one is wrong

on a doctrinal matter carries with it the fear that one's followers will lose total confidence in the leader and possibly in their (the followers') faith. I have heard many men state that it is more important to remain firm in one's decisions, even though those decisions may be poor ones, rather than change them. Changing a poor decision will create a crisis of confidence that will be far worse than the impact of the decision itself, or so goes the reasoning.

I have also counseled with numerous fathers who privately admitted they wished they could retract poor decisions, but feared their family members would lose respect for them, so they firmly enacted such decisions while insisting to their family the decisions were appropriate. I sometimes wonder how such men can live with themselves as they force their families to suffer the consequences of decisions the men know are unwise. I also wonder how they can handle the sense of responsibility that must accompany such reasoning.

I suppose this crisis of confidence could be even more personal. I recall one man commenting that if it were possible that he were in error on this matter of women's subordination which seemed so clear to him in Scripture, how could he have confidence in his ability to interpret Scripture on other doctrinal matters?

Such barriers generally keep many males from even entertaining the possibility of an egalitarian view. But a related psychological barrier that I think is far more powerful arises when men begin to study gender matters and recognize the possibility of the egalitarian view being correct. The barrier they feel is a fear of having to admit they were doctrinally wrong and consequently have caused a great deal of pain to the women in their lives. I have met few males who, after serious soul searching, readily confess to others having sinned against them and express willingness to hear the pain they have caused through their sin. So consider the difficulty many men will experience when considering not only having to admit holding to false doctrine, but further, to having used that false doctrine in such a way that they have severely injured others.

In my marital therapy, I have found few husbands willing to hear the anguish they have caused their wives, even when they have grievously sinned against them. I think this anguish would be even harder to hear when a male has been convinced he was acting righteously. One does not easily admit to having oppressed another, particularly the persons one loves most.

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Further, a male must face the reality of having hindered the work of the church by denying women the use of their spiritual gifts, surely quenching the work of the Spirit. The male hierarchicalist must also face the likelihood that he has perpetuated a view that in many societies makes the Gospel a severe stumbling-block to unbelievers. Sincere believers would find both of these ideas difficult to admit, let alone openly confess. I once suggested to a male friend (a hierarchicalist) that rather than his holding to a doctrinally accurate view that attempts to recreate the (so-called) creation order, he was actually helping to maintain the consequences of the Fall. Needless to say, this was not well received.

To summarize: I think subtle, but deeply personal, elements of pride make changing to an egalitarian view particularly difficult for all too many males. Humility and confession come with great difficulty, particularly when males must acknowledge they have not only been doctrinally in error, but have hindered the spread of the Kingdom of God and injured those they love in the process. I hope my theorizing is in error, but my intuitions tell me it is not.

WITNESSING AGAINST ABUSE

The newly formed Advisory Council on Violence Against Women, co-chaired by Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala, is seeking to maximize the impact of the Violence Against Women Act by recruiting the collaboration of national leaders from law enforcement, the media, colleges and universities, sports, health care, primary and secondary education, the corporate workplace and also from religion. On October 11, 1996, leaders from many faiths and religious groups gathered in Washington DC at an interfaith breakfast, with President Clinton as honorary chairperson of the event. The Attorney General gave the key-note address, and leaders of various faith communities were asked to respond briefly. Speaking for evangelicals, Catherine Kroeger made the following remarks:

God said to Cain, “The blood of your brother Abel cries to me from the ground.” What of the blood of thousands of our sisters? Does not that blood too cry out to God and to our consciences?

Although we evangelicals are a diverse group, one of our common distinctives is a commitment to the authority and inspiration of Scripture. We believe that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are the inspired Word of God, our only infallible guide in matters of faith and practice. The Bible condemns violence scores of times, as well as stalking, lying in wait, word-twisting, threatening, and other forms of abuse. The Scriptures are quite explicit that the duty of the righteous is to deliver the oppressed from the hand of the violent.

Yet how often we hear of desperate women who go to the church for help, and then are sent home to highly dangerous situations along with the instruction to “Be more submissive and the problem will take care of itself.” This is *not* the calling of a church or of an individual believer. The Bible says: “Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been violated Is not this to know me?” says the Lord (Jer 22:3, 16).

Sometimes we have endorsed a theology that made our ultimate priority the preservation of a certain power structure within the family—even at the price of human life. Jesus indicated that other priorities were higher (Matt 10:35-37; Luke 12:53) and Jesus once asked: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm, so save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4).

Our first obligation to a battered woman is not to offer bad advice but to offer assistance in finding safety for her and her children. This may well include transportation, lodging, and allocation of appropriate resources. Certainly it will include prayer, counseling, and a network of emotional support. She should be allowed, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to come to her own decision about how to proceed without being subject to pressure or opprobrium.



SPECIAL THANKS!

Members and friends of CBE are most grateful to CBE member Lucille Boone for compiling the third Priscilla Papers Index, which appears as a separate pull-out section in the center of this issue.

Lucille holds a BA from the University of Sydney, as well as a Post-Graduate Diploma of Librarianship from the University of New South Wales. She has been on the staff of public and academic libraries in Australia and California, and at present is a librarian at the San Jose (CA) Public Library. She is a member of the area branch of the Church and Synagogue Library Association, and serves on the Christian Education Committee of Grace Baptist Church in San Jose.

Thank you, Lucille, for your gift of time and talents!