The Patriarchs Are Coming!

Why are they arriving on the scene and in our churches?

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The patriarchs are coming to church! But what kind of persons would claim such an epithet? In fact, the neopatriarchs who are now coming are those who identify with the ancient, old-order patriarchy. And why are they now arriving on the scene in our churches? And what is their agenda, hidden or spoken?

Simply put, the neopatriarchs now coming are men who perceive a personal advantage by identifying with ancient, old-order patriarchy. They prefer to be known as complementarians. Regardless, this description is ambiguous, since rather than “complementing” equal relationships with women these men advocate perpetuating an authoritative “chain-of-command” lordship over them. They are, in fact, traditional hierarchalists who are promoting an agenda that advocates “Christian patriarchy” for the twenty-first century church and seeking a firmer base to practice hierarchic headship in the church and home.

What patriarchy is

What exactly is patriarchy? Socially and culturally defined, it is that form of social organization in which the father is the head of the family, clan, or tribe . . . in which power is held and transferred through males (and) the principles or philosophy upon which control by male authority is based. It is government, rule, power, and domination by men. As such, patriarchy is a de facto system of sovereign ownership based on gender.

In the early biblical narrative, patriarchy (patriarchs) refers specifically to the forefathers of Israel—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, and to the direct descendants of David. These Old Testament patriarchs were sovereign chiefs of pastoral-nomadic clans wherein they wielded great power. They were very wealthy, they owned slaves, and they were usually polygamous.

In light of that description of biblical patriarchy and of hierarchalists’ affirmation and defense of it, we wonder: Are these modern men also direct blood descendants of David? Are they Middle Eastern agrarian leaders of roaming clans, or do they live with their minuscule nuclear family in suburbia? And defending the authority of the patriarchs as their own authority as well, do they also defend their right to own slaves and to take multiple wives?

If, then, we’re to have real contemporary and evangelical “patriarchs,” we first need genuine and Old Testament biblical patriarchs appearing on the scene. How can anyone rebaptize the Old Covenant so as to render it compatible with the Galatians 3:28 New Covenant church? How can modern Christian “patriarchy” become exegetically congruent with the historical and biblical data?

Because we see in biblical history that polygamy and slavery were integral to the practice of patriarchy, then we would suggest that modern hierarchalists should be consistent. When, for example, they argue for women’s submission to men, are they being consistent with Paul? If Paul does teach the permanent subordination of wives, then complementarians must consistently accept that Paul also teaches the permanent subordination of slaves (Eph. 6:5–9). In other words, nothing in Paul’s writing supports the subordination of women any more than what was used to support the Christian subordination of slaves in the days of American slavery. Let us consider three major fallacies “complementarian patriarchy” ignore.

Patriarchy is forever fallen

Hierarchalists think patriarchy is Christian. But in fact, patriarchy is part and parcel of the Fall. Complementarians who embrace patriarchy do not honestly grapple with its contextual and biblical definition in the Genesis record. It should be no surprise that in the Scriptures patriarchy first comes into existence after the first couple sinned and fell away from their innocence. Patriarchy is patently described in Genesis 3:16 in five gender-specific words: “He will rule over you.”

Any serious discussion of patriarchy, therefore, will by necessity begin with the curse due to the original sin of Adam and Eve. But it is precisely men’s lordship over women that the Bible singles out as the supreme symptom of the Fall. While traditionalists comb Genesis 1 and 2 for even a hint of support for patriarchy, this opening drama depicts only the Creator’s amazing design of man and woman in total oneness of mind and body. There is simply no indication here nor in the entire Old Testament that God mandated husbands to have authority over their wives or over women in general. And nowhere in the New Testament did God authorize a husband to rule or have authority over his wife. When hierarchalists claim that God mandated patriarchy for his people, they are importing into the text their own biased preunderstanding based on a hierarchical system theology.

Patriarchy is hopelessly hegemonic

Hierarchalists think patriarchy is men’s God-given authority to lead and dominate women. But in fact, patriarchy is hopelessly hegemonic and pathologically infected. The Christian mind needs to come to grips with Jesus’ warning to his followers about patriarchal power as well as needs a mental epiphany over the absence of hierarchical nomen-

Talking to his followers, Jesus said that the worldly Gentile ruler-chiefs always exercised “leadership” by “lording it over” others. But “not so among you,” he declared (i.e., “you are never to act like that”). In one swoop, Jesus turned the common hegemonic leadership style on its head, and he further issued a stunning prerequisite: anyone who would follow him and would rule/lead others (“the one ruling,” hegoumenos>hegeomai) must first be a servant (diakonos “deacon”) to others, humbling oneself to the lowest rank in his kingdom (Luke 22:25–26). Strong words here for Christian complementarian leaders with hegemonic aspirations.

“Hegemony” (hegeomai) is used in the Old Testament and classical Greek, and occasionally in the New Testament. The meaning of the word centers on the idea of leading or guiding with an attitude of dominance. A leader (hegemonos) may be a chief, sovereign, president, ruler, general, commander, officer, or administrator (as were Festus, Felix, and Pilate). But Jesus didn’t use these terms for leadership in his kingdom because of its hegemonically fallen nature. Fallen leadership, like patriarchy, is hopelessly hegemonic.

Congruently, patriarchy is pathological, for in the Fall, gender relations between men and women became an abnormal variation from the sound and proper condition that Adam and Eve enjoyed with the Creator and with each other in Eden. Expelled from their pre-Fall environment of harmony, their fallen motivations became governed by compulsions to control and to abdicate.

God’s accommodation to the proclivities of the fallen relationships between men and women is seen in his immediate search for them and in his loving but condemning provisions for their lives in fallenness. Their fallen sinful inclinations reinforce one another to abuse their God-given exercise of accountable dominion. The man’s passion is to dominate by abusive power, perceiving himself in charge without regard for God’s original plan. The woman’s peculiarly female sin is to abdicate responsibility, to use the preservation of the fallen relations as an excuse not to exercise accountable dominion in the first place. In the light of Genesis 3:16, the woman’s temptation is to avoid taking risks that might upset relationships.”3

The reality of gender violence is exceedingly distressing. Worldwide, men are by far the most violent gender; women worldwide are the abused gender. Violence remains the most unconcealed expression of male rule. Sexual violence is about male dominance, and male dominance is about patriarchy.

Although hierarchalists relish patriarchy, they are wrong when it comes to its frame of reference. The struggle of Prof. Guenther Haas is an example.4 His thesis is simple: Most evangelicals view patriarchy as an established cultural pattern in the Old Testament, but egalitarians view Old Testament patriarchy as having been abolished in the fullness of Christ’s redemption. His question is: Can we adopt this (egalitarian) assumption and still retain an evangelical view of the infallibility of Scripture?5

Haas attempts to answer his question by rendering subversive the very foundation of sound evangelical theology, which rests on the fact that biblical revelation (what God did and said) was given by God progressively in the Scriptures. He then sets out to discredit the parallel principle of “developmental hermeneutics,” the consistent summary of biblical interpretation (how to understand what God did and said in context) that arises from God’s progressive revelation in the Scriptures.

To describe progressive revelation is to state the obvious; “the history of Christian theology is a story of development. In the Bible we have the record of God’s progressive revelation and unfolding redemption.”6 Biblical revelation came from God but was revealed through human agents. Thus it has both eternal relevance as God’s words and historical particularity as humans’ words. Further, there is broad consensus among evangelical scholars that, when God communicated his revelation to specific peoples in their historic situations, he divinely accommodated himself to them through the genres of literature and in the various cultural situations in which his word was given.7 Consequently, to arrive at a genuine understanding of Scripture we must affirm the progressive nature of God’s revelation and engage every text within the framework of a “developmental hermeneutic.”8 This paradigm constrains and equips us to take full account of the human authors who received the divine inspiration as well as the varying cultural situations in which they received God’s word in the revelatory process.

Haas admits to a degree of plausibility in progressive revelation, yet he maintains that it does not apply to patriarchy. Patriarchy is thus evidently a kind of supreme “static” revelation from God, and so it cannot be part of a progressive revelatory model. Further, he asserts that biblical authority is at stake and fears losing it. But it does not follow that to give up patriarchy is to give up the infallibility of the Scriptures. To the contrary, we genuinely respect the authority of Scripture and gain in our understanding only
when we grasp the progressive nature of God’s revelation. And since God’s revelation makes progress, then biblical authority will mean change (the new vs. the old) in fulfillment of his redemptive plan.

Rather than the writings of egalitarian scholars being deficient—particularly “if one holds to a progressive understanding that goes beyond what is found in the NT”—progressive understanding occurs within the text, not beyond it. Haas also reflects fearfully on the biblical text containing both divine and human elements. Perceptively, New Testament critical scholar George Ladd went to the heart of this matter long ago, asserting that “the problem facing the modern evangelical is precisely this: how can the words of men be at the same time the eternal Word of God?” While liberals tend to view the Bible as only the words of men, fundamentalists tend to see it as exclusively the words of God. Haas appears to find himself on the far end of this struggle, not having found the evangelical both/and balance.

In this light, Haas concludes that “there is no underlying unity to the various applications (of the several obscure and difficult texts about men and women relations) we find in Paul’s writing.” Though Haas sees no unity here, since hierarchists exert great energy to counter the evangelical consensus that Pauline texts culminate in his Galatians 3:28 liberation manifesto, this text is, nevertheless, the most forthright statement on social ethics in the New Testament. As such, it reflects the core of Paul’s theology of freedom in Christ. It is the ultimate text that unites together all human divisions that are resultant from the Fall, including male dominance over women. Haas wonders “what [we biblical egalitarians will] do with this patriarchal Bible.”

The truth is that biblical egalitarians perceive the New Testament as the completed written revelation of Jesus Christ. And, in view of the controlling hermeneutical principle that “the new interprets the old,” the new order Christ wrought replaced the old order patriarchy and rendered it obsolete in Jesus Christ. The infallibility of Scripture remains the same; but what’s more, the old order has passed away, and the new order has arrived in the progress of redemption (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16–17).

Likewise, the connection between patriarchy and Scripture’s infallibility that Haas seeks to establish is contrived. Obviously, there is no New Testament “doctrine of patriarchy” that “biblical infallibility” defends. Nor is patriarchy mentioned anywhere in the New Testament as the subject of the Christian’s life in Christ. It is, in fact, the very written authority of the Scriptures in the progress and fulfillment of redemptive history that renders patriarchy contradictory to that full and final work Christ accomplished.

**The truth about the pursuit of patriarchy**

1. **Patriarchy is not a biblical doctrine.** Nowhere is patriarchy mandated by God, nor is it taught anywhere in the entire Bible. Neither is there a single verse in the New Testament linking patriarchy with believers in Christ. Any genuine “New Testament patriarchy” will have to be founded on more than inferences and conjectures from ideas of male “headship” or from texts such as 1 Timothy 2:12. The several New Testament verses about the patriarchs cited at the outset all point backwards to the early Hebrew religious patriarchy that was accommodated with the cultural/social patriarchy of the pagan nations.

What the Scriptures do reveal about patriarchy is to describe it as a fallen structure, recording the critical predicament it created in the times of Old Testament accommodation: the daily dominance women suffered under male rulership, which hardened into a clearly inferior feminine status, the occasional equilibrium women and men attained within its influence, and the rare exceptions when women leaders transcended patriarchy’s protocol.

2. **Patriarchy is a problem hermeneutically.** A fundamental hermeneutical rule forbids building a Christian doctrine based on a few texts. This is ignored when a system of patriarchy “is built upon the New Testament churches’ foundation (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–11). There is, of course, the theological truth about Abraham, who “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Jas. 2:23). And this grace, Paul asserts, is the same also to “those who are of the faith of Abraham; he is the father of us all” (Rom. 4:3, 16; Gal 3:6f.). In redemption’s progress, Abraham was the first to receive the fuller revelation of salvation by grace through faith, and so he is our spiritual “father” (patros) in the broad sense that we all receive that same grace in the same way. But Abraham is not our “patriarch” whom we follow into his “patriarchy.” It is his person of faith being emphasized, not his patriarchy, which has no relevance to our faith in Christ (cf. Heb. 11).

3. **Patriarchy is an ancient but contemporary dominion worldwide.** There is no “doctrine of patriarchy” in the Hebrew Bible. However, the rationale for gender-specific domination is explicitly traced to the Pentateuch. From the Genesis 3:16 pronouncement that men are predisposed to dominate women, patriarchy survives and thrives in gender bondage worldwide. Although patriarchy took root and was nurtured within ancient religious systems, the socioreligious philosophy festers within national cultures and people...
groups everywhere in our world. What is happening to the liberating good news of the gospel? And why are some “preaching a gospel other than the one we preached”? (Gal. 1:6–9).

The encroaching phenomenon of “patriarchal Christian men” perceiving themselves in charge under God is a parody in Christ’s one body of absolute equals. Jesus prayed for his people “that they may be one as we are one.”

Furthermore, hierarchalist Christian women are not without guilt in this disarray. Having drunk deeply of a “complementarian theology of roles,” their reaction to hierarchalist teaching is generally characterized by a fallen feminine tendency to abdicate responsibility, an irresponsible passivity vis-à-vis dominating men. That, in turn, only hardens hierarchical manhood in a delusional mold. Everywhere, then, beholding the sinful proclivities of each gender reinforcing the other in creating an ever-present, chronic, “natural” condition of male rule and female subordination,14 truly, “the gods must be crazy!”

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Endnotes


5. Ibid, 321.


9. Haas, 335–36


11. Haas, 335.

12. Ibid, 324


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