

The Wife as a Training Ground: Complementarian Theology and Coercive Control

Bethany Jantzi

Our theology has real life implications. The way that Christians read Scripture and apply it matters greatly. Complementarian teachings hold to a gender hierarchy in marriage in which husbands are appointed by God to lead with wives responding with willing submission. This is fundamentally different from the egalitarian viewpoint of biblical equality and mutual submission. What if these complementarian teachings foster an environment in marriage that jeopardizes women's autonomy? What if the way complementarians frame submission and headship replicate the main dynamics present in an abusive relationship? What if complementarianism operates as a spiritualized form of coercive control that reduces wives to a training ground for their husbands' spiritual and leadership development?

As a believer who is concerned with the implications and consequences of how Scripture is interpreted, I find it striking how the mindset of a domestic abuser is one that can be given spiritual cover within complementarianism. While complementarians profess to protect and honor women, I question how this theology plays out in everyday life.

The field of psychology has made substantial and critical contributions helping us understand domestic abuse. The research on domestic violence has long pointed to an attitude of entitlement as a cornerstone of an abuser's mindset.¹ Adherence to traditional gender roles is a related factor that correlates with elevated levels of abuse.² Men are socialized to believe that having control is a large part of what it means to be a man. Further, they are conditioned to believe that they are *entitled* to be in control.³ Boys are exposed to social and cultural messages that normalize women's abuse and male control over women.⁴

Men who abuse often do so to prop up an insecure sense of self. While men do experience control and abuse from their female partners, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of abuse where their female partner experiences severe physical violence and chronic fear.⁵ This gender divide is even more clear in cases of domestic homicide which is considered the "ultimate consequence of unequal power relationships between men and women."⁶ Research on femicide cites the social conditioning of men to be entitled to control their partner as a foundational component of relationships that end in homicide.⁷

Yet in Christian communities, husbands receive messages not only normalizing male control over women but using theological justification to do so. Much of the research on the developmental factors and drivers of domestic abuse can be mapped onto complementarian theology. Central to both are hierarchical gender roles and the power dynamics associated with them.⁸ It is then unsurprising that Christian communities that are patriarchal have significant levels of abuse.⁹ While male entitlement, undermining female autonomy, and normalizing male control over women are not endorsed in Scripture, these elements can emerge from a specific belief system.

In light of our current understanding of the primary drivers of domestic abuse, any environment that normalizes a gendered power imbalance and requires female submission as part of a religious practice deserves further scrutiny. I employ the framework of coercive control as a lens to evaluate complementarianism and its domestic impact.¹⁰ Through this, I hope to show how complementarian theology frames wives as training grounds for their husband's development and growth at the expense of the wives' personhood and autonomy.

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Complementarianism and Gender Roles

My conceptualization of complementarianism is based on resources from two organizations: The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) and the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC). CBMW is the flagship organization for complementarianism, formed in 1987 by a group of male leaders from various conservative evangelical churches, united by their concern for the damaging impacts of biblical feminism (egalitarianism) and secular influence on families.¹¹ The core beliefs and values of CBMW are put forward in their document, The Danvers Statement, which sets out that men are called to be the spiritual leaders and heads of their families. Wives are called to come under the headship of their husbands with attitudes marked by submission "in everything," and their submission to their husband is a reflection of their submission to God. Husbands are instructed to take "dominion over our marriages and homes" because this reflects how Christ took dominion over everything.¹² CBMW emphasizes that these specific masculine and feminine roles in marriage are ordained by God.¹³

ACBC, the largest certifier of biblical counselors globally, was founded in 1976. Their focus is training biblical counselors to use Scripture to address their clients' sin, urging repentance and relational restoration to "restore true worship of God."¹⁴ Similar to CBMW, they hold to complementarian theology and view it as critically important.¹⁵

Based on common teachings and problems addressed in CBMW and ACBC resources, I will lay out a basic conceptualization of coercive control with respect to complementarianism.

Coercive Control

Understanding coercive control can provide a valuable framework for the complexity of abuse. It can illuminate the subtle threatening and controlling behaviors that are often missed due to oversimplified conceptualizations of abuse that focus on the use of violence, and as a result, fail to recognize other forms of abuse such as psychological or spiritual abuse. Coercive control is defined as an intentional pattern of behavior that is designed to control another person, resulting in their subjugation. Coercive control produces compliance of, and psychological control over, the victim.¹⁶ A simple way to understand coercive control is to see it as the subtext that carries a threatening “do this or else” implication.

Coercive control is uniquely tailored to the victim.¹⁷ It is not uncommon to see religion and ideology being used to incentivize the victim to accept certain treatment that undermines their own autonomy and places them in a vulnerable position.¹⁸ The fear of consequences—corporeal or existential—can make the victim compliant and obfuscate the harm being done, in favor of being committed to a larger cause or higher plan.¹⁹ In the case of complementarianism, this is seen as God’s true and perfect design for biblical marriage.

These tactics have an incredibly damaging impact on the victim, undermining her sense of self, deepening her reliance on the perpetrator, and eroding her autonomy. Coercive control is also described as a form of psychological captivity in the way it systematically breaks the victim down by hijacking her cognitive independence. All these processes occur while the coercive controller simultaneously eliminates crucial paths for support, connection, and resources that would support life outside the relationship.²⁰

With this basic understanding of coercive control with respect to complementarianism, we look at the emphasis placed on female submission within complementarian marriages.

Female Submission and Male Control in Complementarianism

In complementarianism, the submission of wives is framed as critically important. It has crucial implications for the salvation of the world because ignoring submission distorts the gospel picture. As a pastor at a CBMW conference puts it:

A wife’s submission to her husband’s headship portrays the gospel. How glorious a picture is that of your submission, wife? When a wife gladly, intelligently, godwardly submits to her husband, she shows the Christ who sacrificed for her is a leader worthy to be followed. Her submission is ultimately to Jesus Christ. The Church is always feminine with respect to and in submission to her bridegroom Jesus, so to ignore submission is to distort the gospel picture. So the question for a wife isn’t how much do I have to submit? The question is how well can I submit? And then you see Christ becomes her example as one who submitted to the Father all the way to death, to death on a cross. What a countercultural picture wifely submission offers a watching world. The question comes, why do you submit to your husband? And the door opens for the gospel.²¹

This theology frames wifely submission with incredibly high stakes. The wife’s submission is a compelling and unique tool of influence that only married women possess. It has tremendous power to draw in the curious, watching, and unsaved world.²² Additionally, the Danvers Statement reinforces these high stakes by saying that “denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.”²³

Submission is also an issue of obedience to God, with potentially terrifying consequences should a wife fail to submit. As Martha Peace, an enduringly influential ACBC figure whose work is used as a textbook to train biblical counselors, urges, “God will do what He has to do to turn you from your rebellion to humble submission to your husband. Those consequences are painful, embarrassing, and very difficult to endure.” She follows that up with, “Fear of consequences is a powerful motivation,”²⁴ illustrating she is aware of the coercive and threatening underpinning of this demand for wifely submission.

Complementarian theology’s emphasis on inflexible hierarchical gender roles can give rise to, or exacerbate, insecurity in men who perceive themselves as falling short or who fear other men may view them as emasculated. After all, their masculine headship is framed around their entitlement to leadership and control. They see headship as what God requires of them, adding a level of spiritual pressure.²⁵

Michael Kimmel, a leading American sociologist and researcher specializing in masculinity, says men “are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval.” He goes further to say that relationships with women and control over women act as a kind of currency to gain status as a man. Men care more about how other men judge their masculinity than how women evaluate it.²⁶

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In complementarian churches, men are the primary judges, in their positions of authority in church leadership, of how well other men carry out their role. With this pressure of demonstrating their headship, and a sign of their authority being their power over women, there is a risk of establishing a harmful dynamic ripe for abuse of power.

For example, men who accuse women of stepping outside their defined role can more easily justify control because they have lost something they believed they were entitled to. As Dr. Monckton Smith, a forensic criminologist and coercive control expert, puts it:

“Boys are in many ways socialised to believe and expect that they are entitled to be in control of their families: that it is the way of things, a biological imperative. This sets both an expectation and a pressure. Men may defend that absolute right, feeling entirely justified, by enforcing their control in any way they can. To lose that control, or to have it usurped, can feel like humiliation, weakness and failure.”²⁷ Within this theology, as the spiritual leader, husbands have a right to bring correction to a wife who is rebelling against her biblically mandated role. Moreover, their husbandly duty requires them to correct her for her own sanctification.

The importance of submission weighs heavily into how and when a wife can present an appeal to her husband. Constrained by the demand to be submissive, women are instructed to speak sweetly when appealing to the husband—softly, in a soothing tone. They are directed to constantly monitor and regulate their facial expression. A smile is imperative to signify respect even in situations where the husband is clearly in the wrong.²⁸ A wife’s concerns about mistreatment at the hand of her husband may be invalidated if her approach is deemed unsubmitive. Her sinful lack of submission can be framed as being just as concerning as his sin of abusive behavior.²⁹

Adding to this, a wife who desires to appeal to a sinning husband to repent is cautioned that she must be confident in her view that the husband is indeed sinning. If she is incorrect, she is flouting his authority (and God’s) and rebelling in her lack of submission. The value she can bring to the relationship—even her own discernment in witnessing her husband’s sin and urging him towards repentance—is hemmed in by this prioritization of submission. While her husband’s judgment, feelings, and desires hold weight and have value, she should not expect the same.³⁰

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This dynamic makes the wife vulnerable to coercive control because a representative measure of the husband’s headship is how much his wife submits to him. Respect and compliance to his desires highlights the husband’s authority and points to successful headship. This also includes his ability to bring a non-compliant wife back into submission. Any reactive reinforcement of his authority can be normalized and rationalized as him acting within his entitled role, for everyone’s spiritual growth. This spiritual justification can provide cover for a husband’s entitlement to control his wife.³¹

As seen in domestic abuse research, male entitlement to be in control of women is a key driver of abuse, so any ideology which upholds that will make women particularly vulnerable if they dare step outside the bounds, whether accidentally or intentionally.³² Men who abuse their partners do so in an effort to gain control or re-establish their control when they perceive it to be violated or threatened. Any manner of behaviours, comments, or even looks can be interpreted as a signal to the coercive controller that the trap of control, which has been carefully constructed, is under threat.

It is noteworthy that literature on domestic homicide and coercive control cites men experiencing a real or perceived loss of control as the trigger for escalating their abuse and controlling behaviour.³³

It follows then that complementarian theology, which mimics some of the central components that contribute to domestic abuse, would not be excluded from expressing this dynamic. This is concerning because spiritual justification for this attitude towards male control over women contributes to normalizing these dynamics as ostensibly benign patterns that naturally occur in relationships. When a harmful dynamic is normalized, it makes the resulting harm less visible. This compounds the vulnerability of those who already have less power. Within this theology, the wives may have the coercive and controlling behaviors of their husbands framed as typical challenges or conflicts a marriage faces, instead of something much more insidious and harmful—if they are even recognized as problematic at all.

Devaluing Women and Elevating Men

The rhetoric around wives’ submission reveals what is valued about a woman’s role in marriage. This is evidenced by the way submission is highly praised in certain circumstances. These circumstances include instances where the husband’s decisions may have devalued the wife’s intelligence, undermined her autonomy, or negated her personal well-being. This appears in the ACBC and CBMW resources as submission in spite of harsh treatment or unwise decisions made by the husband. These circumstances also include the wife submitting to decisions made by a selfish husband, an overtly abusive husband, or when it is obvious the husband is wrong.

For example, in one ACBC podcast titled, “Submitting to Your Husband When You Think He’s Wrong,” the host asks: “How can a wife work through submission when she disagrees with a non-sinful decision that her husband makes?” The guest answers, “I’m so glad you asked that because so many women come to counseling with that question.” Then they discuss how “she’s not prohibited from giving her opinion . . . and all the reasons.” They conclude with, “but it’s not submission if she just goes along and does what she wants, right? Therefore, submission is defined as following when you have a different idea.”³⁴ Yet, they do not explore how the wife may have a contrasting perspective that could be valuable.

This description of submission makes it seem that what matters most is that the husband does not go along with what his wife wants when it differs from his desires. The way these situations have been framed in ACBC and CBMW articles, and the wife’s submission praised, make it clear that what the wife brings to the marriage that is highly valued is simply her compliance and submission. The wife is encouraged to have submission as her default attitude even when the husband’s actions undermine her personhood.³⁵

Not only are wives required to submit to explicit commands from their husbands, they are instructed to elevate their husbands’ preferences as containing wisdom from God. This was clearly illustrated in CBMW’s article, “Wives, Honor Your Husband’s Preferences,” where the author feels guilty for not complying with her new husband’s preference for her to get up early every morning to make a breakfast sandwich for him. She chides herself for her

“selfish and naïve” decision to not comply: “I figured that what my husband wanted me to do wasn’t a matter of holiness and sin, but a matter of personal preference—so what was the urgent need to honor that preference, especially if it made more work for me?” She concludes that for years he was trying to influence their marriage culture by leading her through his preferences. She now understands that he was simply desiring “nearness” with her which he expressed through his early morning breakfast sandwich requests. She reflects with sadness how her lack of deference caused her to miss many opportunities to experience her husband’s leadership, saying: “It never occurred to me that my new husband was also trying to lead me through his expressed preferences.”³⁶ With submission being such a defining part of the role of a wife, and with the stakes outlined earlier,³⁷ it is not surprising that wives order their routines around those preferences, prioritizing them instead of following their own ideas or instincts.

Meanwhile, let us look at how husbands struggle with the gendered expectations laid on them. A common concern that husbands express when seeking guidance from spiritual leaders, as illustrated in ACBC resources, is feeling under-qualified to perform their biblical mandate because they believe their wives are more spiritual or possess more wisdom or knowledge. Despite this, husbands are told that this does not negate their biblical responsibility to lead.³⁸ This sets up a reality in which some men report feeling insecure, but simultaneously they receive the message that being the head means they are made for dominion. To take dominion, to be in control, is a key part of complementarian framing of headship and masculinity.³⁹

While husbands are told they are to be leaders and that their lack of capability does not negate this calling, wives were encouraged to submit to every request and desire. The wife’s submission, the scope being submission in all things outside of explicit sin (as determined by him), is the training ground where the husband can exercise his dominion and practice his leadership.

These patterns reveal how, within these complementarian spaces, wives can be conditioned to hold back valuable contributions while the husband is told to soldier on, despite awareness of his inadequacies. What is more, the husband may use his wife as a training ground by which to neutralize his inadequacies, as we will now see.

The Wife as Training Ground

“The Wife as a Training Ground” is a theme that emerged from my larger research on coercive control. This theme concerns the way a wife’s submission is prioritized while her personhood is undervalued or suppressed specifically in the service of her husband’s development or to support his headship.

If the wife’s giftings fall in line with the husband’s ideas and vision for his family, they are seen as valuable. The wife is encouraged to make those contributions. If they fall outside the husband’s or church leadership’s concept of the wife’s role within biblical marriage, they are viewed differently. These parts of a wife’s personhood are unwelcome in the wife, but—interestingly—often viewed as providing an arena in which the husband can develop the skills central to his role as the leader. In these cases, the knowledge,

skill, and personhood of the wife can be suppressed, intentionally underdeveloped, or even punished. Take for example a personality trait like extraversion and interpersonal confidence in mixed-gender settings. This, according to ACBC, is viewed as part of male headship, as this podcast transcript illustrates:

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When I got married, Zondra was very outgoing and very social while I was not; I would hesitate and I would let her initiate meeting people. I mean it was bad. . . . God needed to grow me in this area. . . . I needed to be reaching out and showing initiative in relationships and meeting people. And so she agreed that she would hang back. She would let me take the initiative. She is naturally out-going so she had to really think through about holding back and letting me step up, meet people, be more decisive, and that has really been helpful. God’s grace was evident; I began to grow in that area and continue to grow in that area.⁴⁰

In this excerpt, we can see how the husband feels entitled to control his wife by curtailing an aspect of her personhood. This control is justified because it is important for *his* growth. It is striking how the development of the husband’s leadership, a process he dictates, is prioritized over his wife’s unique personhood. The husband’s development is so central that it justifies suppressing aspects of her personality.

These parts of her identity are viewed as an obstacle to the husband’s development of traits that are singularly ascribed to husbands. Leadership and decision-making are seen as the distinct domains of men and could include anything that is seen as demonstrating authority or having control, including taking initiative in social gatherings. These traits in the wife are viewed as a threat to the husband and his authority. They could be seen as usurping his divinely mandated authority and resisting his leadership. In these cases, the husband does not only have the right to correct her behavior, but it is his duty. In this process, she could become the training ground for her husband’s development—a unsettling Christian (complementarian) expression of coercive control.

The Wife as Training Ground in Situations of Abuse

The expectation for wives to provide the training ground for husbands to work out their issues is especially clear in discussions around how wives are to respond in difficult and abusive marriages.

While ACBC provides the token recognition that certain Bible verses have been misused to advise wives to return to dangerous marital situations, it emphasizes that, “it is also true that God *can* use the Christ-like behavior of a wife to reach an angry husband.”

It also underscores the multiple ways “that the Lord *can* use the godly behavior of a victim to soften the heart of a sinful spouse.”⁴¹ Wives are exhorted to treat their husbands better than deserved with the hope of influencing his behavior without a word, through pure conduct alone. This is based on a reading of 1 Pet 3:1-2: “Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (NIV).⁴² If she removes herself from the marriage, then those opportunities for change diminish. As Martha Peace, the above-mentioned ACBC counselor, puts it, “if you stay in the battle for as long as God requires, God will apply tremendous pressure on your husband to repent.”⁴³ After all, a husband will not experience his “wrath” being “turned away” if she is not still there to offer “a gentle answer.” Therein lies this expectation that the wife is the training ground.

In these examples, it is striking that it is the wife who must continue on in hope that one day God will convict her husband and his behavior will be changed. It is noteworthy how this framing paints a picture of placing one’s hope in God. However, what follows is Scripture being leveraged to apply pressure to wives to shoulder responsibility with potentially grave repercussions. The wife’s responsibility is to provide this ongoing training ground so her husband can work through his sin issues. Frequent references to 1 Cor 11:8–12 throughout CBMW and ACBC resources underscored this dynamic.⁴⁴ The wife exists for the husband, as this example illustrates:

She [Eve] met a need in Adam’s life. She was created to serve him uniquely as a helper “fit for him.” This also is your role as a wife. When God joined you with your husband in marriage, he was meeting a need in your husband’s life. You were made to complete what was lacking in his life, to help make him into a better man, and to serve him in ways only you can.⁴⁵

It seems acceptable to complementarianism that the wife provides a training ground that may at times sacrifice her well-being or require her to subordinate her personhood in service to her husband’s growth. Again, this is a particularly salient feature of abuse through coercive control.

The Cost of Being the Training Ground

A stark implication of the wife’s role as a training ground is that it is not clear when women are free to prioritize their own well-being over submitting to their husband. Peace specifies that outside of the wife dying or God removing her from the situation, she must press on. She is to never stop “fighting” by using her influence. Her influence is her attitude of quiet submission and constant prayer.⁴⁶

It is striking how the wife is granted especially limited personal autonomy. There are multiple stipulations and conditions for how and when she may exercise this limited autonomy. This reflects a level of psychological control that is externally fostered and weakens the victim’s self-trust. Over time, as cognitive independence is weakened, the dependence on the abuser increases.⁴⁷ The victim’s critical thinking becomes replaced by the abuser’s mindset as she is conditioned to see the world the way he does.⁴⁸ This is a significant stage within the development of coercive control where the victim

no longer plans for the future and may not have the psychological resources to seize clear opportunities to escape the abuser’s control.⁴⁹

Considering the messages wives receive about their value and role, and given the psychological control, it is not surprising that Christian women stay longer in abusive relationships.⁵⁰ This environment can foster a psychological state where it is difficult for the victim to maintain the level of autonomy required to make decisions that prioritize her own well-being. This would require her to believe that she has the authority and the right to give herself that permission to leave.⁵¹ After all, she has been conditioned to believe that it is her responsibility and privilege, as a wife, to be that training ground. She may question how much God could use her if she makes the choice to remove herself from the marriage. The default position seems to be that her continued selfless and steadfast example can be a powerful tool for her husband’s growth. This exemplifies how complementarian theology reduces wives to the role of a continuous training ground for the husband’s growth, healing, and development.

Conclusion

Our theology matters. When we follow a theological perspective that sanctifies male control over women as part of God’s design for marriage, we create environments that place wives at increased risk for coercive control. They are more likely to normalize dynamics that are rooted in inequality and downplay the resulting harm. So, when women are conditioned through this theology to believe their role is to be a training ground for their husband’s development and growth, it must be called out. If we truly believe that men and women are equally made in the image of God, we must reject any theology that frames female autonomy as an acceptable sacrifice in the pursuit of biblical marriage.

Notes

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