

EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MEN-WOMEN RELATIONSHIP

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Introductory Observations

In general, women's studies relate to the genetic nature of men and women and cultural expectancy regarding their interaction. Discussing evangelical perspectives on men and women in relationship adds biblical interpretation to the inquiry.

On this subject what makes a viewpoint evangelical is not so much the viewpoint itself as the accompanying attitude toward scripture and the consequent method of interpretation which that attitude involves.

The same viewpoint may be shared by those with different views of scripture. An egalitarian viewpoint may be taken by a neo-orthodox or modernist/liberal who sees New Testament writers as products of their own time; a complementarian may arrive at that same point hermeneutically while affirming the inerrancy of scripture. Different viewpoints may be taken by those with the same view of scripture because they differ in their approach to interpretation. That last phenomenon establishes the subject matter for this presentation. In short, as a matter of description, within evangelicalism stands both (1) egalitarianism/ equalitarianism and (2) complementarianism/hierarchism, hence, the title "Evangelical Perspectives."

"Egalitarianism" means either that there is no organizational structure in home (or church) or that all places of responsibility are equally open to men and women "on a level playing field." "Complementarianism" means that there is a pattern that enjoins men to accept the ultimate places of responsibility—at least as a matter of wisdom if not standard norm. Ideally both approaches stand within an original interpersonal condition.

NOTE: Labels are often more confusing than helpful, but for present purposes four terms correlate with the following distinctions. In part, evangelicalism may be distinguished from neo-orthodoxy and modernism/liberalism to the left and fundamentalism to the right by hermeneutics and by their variant understandings of the nature of scripture. Fundamentalism tends toward a legal conceptualization of biblical content, which shows up in more rigid thinking patterns and absolute viewpoints, in stressing literalism over anything else as the assumed intention of biblical statements, and in being less amenable to cultural qualification of biblical statements; it produces concepts like the husband/father as priest of the wife and the family. Evangelicalism emphasizes special divine guidance in the origination of scripture whereas neo-orthodoxy emphasizes the guidance of the Spirit on the reader's response as comparable to that in the writer's communication (as each writer interprets "events" vs. receives "words" that constitute revelation). Modernism/liberalism pretty well dissociates special divine assistance from either end of the revelation-illumination process.

A Concept Inventory Relevant to Evangelical Interpretation

Proper interpretation of language depends on having a concept inventory co-extensive with the speaker's. Otherwise conceptual match-up will not always occur between reader and writer.

1. The interpersonal worldview. Interpersonal relationship is the basic, central, ultimate, most important reality in the Christian understanding of the big picture. That belief has qualifying effects on subsequent considerations. Since love is the summarizing reality for positive interpersonal relationships, its attitude and pattern of operation must be maintained in all subsequent operations. As a result, legal and natural processes between persons are limited in their manner and scope of functioning by the larger interpersonal construct in which they stand. (See documents "Bases for Interpersonalism" and "Characteristics of Interpersonalism" found in the author's unpublished packet of essays entitled Interpersonalism: The Integrating Reality for Christian Truth.)

2. Imperative intent. Imperative forms are used not only for mandates, but also for advice, exhortation, and entreaty. (See document entitled "Imperative Intent.")

3. Morality (ethics/"law"/mandate), wisdom, and service. These three types of social-relationship categories are concentric spheres expanding from morality to wisdom to service. Is the imperative form in a given text used as a mandate ("law"), which someone sins against if he does not follow; or is that imperative meant as advice (wisdom) for practical purposes, so that a person takes a risk if he does not follow it?

4. Formal leadership vs. purely social relationship, natural leadership, and subsidiary leadership.

5. Influence, authority, and force as descending ways of affecting other people's behavior.

6. Responsibility more than authority. The real issue is where God has placed final responsibility in home and church (and, presumably, by implication society in general). Authority comes into the picture simply as a function of responsibility. The biblical terminology "headship" and "submission" are correlative concepts: "headship" simply means who God holds ultimately responsible for the successful operation of home and church; "submission" simply means conducting oneself toward the "head" in a way which recognizes that he has that ultimate responsibility to fulfill. The very terms themselves conjure up negatives in the minds of a highly individualistic culture. Understanding that the real issue is responsibility should help remove an unnecessary stigma from expressions like "authority," "headship," and "submission."

7. Standard situation. All biblical statements regarding deference behavior on the part of women assume a circumstance of "married with children."

8. Disjunction of rank and worth. A child is not worth less than an adult simply because she is a child. A person with a lower IQ is not worth less than a genius, a highly coordinated athlete than a "clumsy" individual, someone with perfect pitch than another who is tone deaf. They may be more "useful" to certain endeavors than their less gifted counterparts, but they are not less "worthful."

9. Shifting from success in competition as a basis for personal worth and replacing it with (a) being created in the image of God, (b) living in positive vertical and horizontal relationships, and (c) self-giving in service relative to divine purpose. This reconceptualization

involves a change from works to grace-trust and from competition to love as objective foundations for self-worth.

10. Control cases: slavery, veil-wearing, holy kiss, homosexuality, superspirituality, silence behavior, parenting, etc. Here also belongs “exceptions to the rule.” Exceptions are important because they make clear that the rule is in fact a rule rather than a uniformity and that there is a higher frame of reference that is more important and more fundamental than the rule itself; otherwise the exception could not exist without contradiction.

11. Assumed limitation, cultural and otherwise. By the nature of language communication, authorial intent determines the meaning of statements; so readers have to consider whether a writer’s statement in absolute form has an intended meaning within an assumed frame of reference.

12. Statistical by degree in some areas as the manner of male-female natural differentiation. Obviously men and women are not opposites nor skilled in entirely different ways. In fact, they are not necessarily differentiated at all in many respects. There are relative strengths in some areas. The only question then is whether scripture indicates that God has gifted men and women differently in correlation with differing centers of responsibility that by nature and purpose (and conceivably positive directives) he has willed them to have.

13. Perversion of something as distinguished from the character of the thing itself. Perversion of authority is not an appropriate basis in itself for eliminating responsible authority anymore than perversion of political process is a justification for anarchism. Furthermore, as surely as something good can be perverted, something bad can be ameliorated by interpersonal qualifications. The latter is what Christians typically assume apostolic writers are doing with slavery inasmuch as early Christians had no power to eliminate the institution itself. The question is whether those writers were doing that same thing in giving directives about male-female relationship. Obviously first-century Christians could ill afford to characterize themselves as social subversives on unnecessary points.

A related consideration here is the tendency in some of the general literature today to feature “dominance” and “subjugation” as the issue in “patriarchy”; unconsciously that sense of the topic can bend biblical texts into advocating a practice foreign to the writers’ intent.

14. Better does not constitute best. Equality of individuals may be better than oppression of certain classes of them but unity is the higher good in men-women relationship. The political system may indeed be able only to establish equality (and eliminate abuse), but worldview (i.e., “religion”) has to be left free to inculcate the summum bonum. What may be achieved by law may be less than what people would best aspire to in marriage, home, and church. Consequently, the political realm ought not interfere with the “religious” one.

15. A wide range of interpretation principles. Particularly common is the tendency to adopt a conclusion and then work toward it rather than operate, so to speak, from behind “a veil of ignorance” regarding the proper conclusion. The more appropriate hermeneutical method is to establish clear primary frameworks (like interpersonalism) and read ambiguous specifics in light of clear fundamentals.

The preceding concepts and distinctions are some of those that come into the discussion as the two evangelical approaches struggle for consensus. In other words, differences on these points are the ones that presently lead to the different views evangelicals are taking.

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