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Death to the Patriarchy?

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

To ignore, minimize, or repudiate the differences between men and women is to reject our creational design.

In this episode, Kevin reads from an article written for *Desiring God*, reasoning why we should be careful not to banish patriarchy to the ash heap of history too quickly.

Transcript

[music] Greetings and salutations. This is Life and Books and Everything, and I'm Kevin Diyung, and I wanted to read to you today the *Desiring God* article I wrote came out the middle of July, July 19, entitled "Death to the Patriarchy" "Complementarity and the Scandal of Father Rule." What is the difference between "patriarchy" and "complementarity"? And which is the better term for capturing the full vision of Christian manhood and womanhood? Most complementarians steadfastly avoid the word "patriarchy," wanting to distance themselves from any associations with oppression and prejudice. On the other hand, critics of complementarianism are eager to saddle their opponents with the charge of defending patriarchy.

The terms often function as a way of communicating "I'm not THAT kind of conservative Christian," to which the reply is "Oh yes you are!" So what is the most accurate term for those who want to recapture a lost vision of sexual differentiation and order? Defining to everyone's satisfaction terms like "patriarchy" and "complementarity" is nearly impossible. I'll do some definitional work in a moment, but I don't want this article to become a tedious academic inquiry into the usage and history of these terms. I also don't want to define the term so that "complementarity" becomes a convenient gloss for "good male leadership" and "patriarchy" ends up meaning "bad male leadership." To be sure that distinction isn't totally misguided, but if that's all I said, my argument would be entirely predictable.

And a bit superficial. As I'll argue in a moment, there is nothing to be gained by Christians reclaiming the word "patriarchy" in itself. In fact, "reclaim" is not even the

right word because I'm not sure Christians have ever argued for something called "patriarchy." "Complementarity" is a better, safer term with fewer negative connotations, though that is quickly changing.

I've described myself as a complimentary in hundreds of times. I've never called myself a "patriarchalist." Yet there is something in the broader idea of "patriarchy," no matter how sinister the word itself has become, that is worth claiming. If the vision of male female complementarity is to be more than a seemingly arbitrary commitment to men leading in the home and being pastors in the church, we cannot settle for a proper interpretation of 1 Timothy 2. Of course, careful exegesis is absolutely critical, but we need more than the right conclusions we need to help people see that our exegetical conclusions do not just fit with the best hermeneutical principles, they fit with the way the world is and the way God made men and women.

"Complementarity" and "patriarchy." The idea of complementarity. A man and women were designed with a special fittedness each for the other is not new. The term "complementarianism" however is relatively recent.

In their seminal 1991 work "Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood," John Piper and Wayne Grudem deliberately termed their "recovery mission of biblical complementarity" because they wanted to both correct the "selfish and hurtful practices" of the traditionalist view and avoid the opposite mistakes coming from evangelical feminists. No one committed to intellectual honesty and fairness should treat traditionalist, hierarchicalist, or patriarchalist as synonyms for complementarianism. In coining the term "complementarian," Piper and Grudem explicitly rejected the first two terms, "traditionalist," hierarchicalist, while the third term, "patriarchalist," or "patriarchy," or "patriarchal," is never used in a positive sense in the book.

"If one word must be used to describe our position," they wrote, "we prefer the term "complementarian," since it suggests both equality and beneficial differences between men and women." 30 years later, this vision of complementarity is still worth carefully defining and gladly defending. The term "patriarchy" is much harder to define. Strictly speaking, "patriarchy" is simply the Greek word meaning "father rule." There is nothing in its etymology to make the term an "epithet of abuse." Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are often called "the patriarchs," Romans 9.5, for example.

The spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church is the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople. In a generic sense, every Christian believes in "patriarchy" because we affirm the rule and authority of God, "the Father Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth." Despite these positive associations, as a sociological and historical category, "patriarchy" is almost always used in a pejorative sense. Here, for example, is the first sentence of the Wikipedia entry on "patriarchy." "Patriarchy" is an institutionalized social system in which men dominate over others, but can also refer to dominance over women

specifically.

It can also extend to a variety of manifestations in which men have social privileges over others to cause exploitation or oppression, such as through male dominance of moral authority and control of property." In quote, that coming from Wikipedia. In this one long sentence, we have a host of pejorative words. "Dominate." "Dominance." Two times.

"Exploitation." "Appression." No one is expected to read this definition and think of patriarchy as something good, or even something that could possibly be good. In a recent long form article in The Guardian, Charlotte Higgins argues that, "at its simplest patriarchy," quote, "conveys the existence of a societal structure of male supremacy that operates at the expense of women," end quote. Higgins admits that patriarchy is virtually dead as an academic idea, too blunt and monolithic a concept to be useful, but in popular usage, the term has experienced an unprecedented revival, one Higgins supports.

"Only patriarchy seems to capture the peculiar elusiveness of gendered power," she writes. Higgins' street-level definition is helpful in so far as it reveals that for most people, including most Christians, I suspect, "Patriarchy is shorthand for all the ways our world promotes male supremacy and encourages female oppression." If that's patriarchy, the world can have it. It's not a term you'll find in Christian confessional statements from the past.

It's not a term you'll find employed frequently or at all in the tradition of the Church, as it defends biblical views of the family of the Church and society. As a conservative, reformed, evangelical Christian, I applaud the vision of equality with beneficial differences and stand resolutely opposed to all forms of domination, exploitation, and oppression. Cost of dismantling patriarchy.

Why not in the article right here? Complementarianism is good. "Patriarchy is bad," Case closed enough said, right? Not quite. We should be careful not to banish patriarchy to the ash heap of history too quickly.

For starters, we should question the notion that patriarchy equals oppression. In his book, "Ancestors, the Loving Family in Old Europe," Stephen Osment argues that family life, even in the patriarchal past, is not wholly different from our own age. Parents love their children, husbands performed household duties, most women preferred marriage and homemade king to other arrangements.

History is complex and rarely allows for meta-theories and monocausal explanations. If women have fewer opportunities and rights in the past, almost everyone have fewer opportunities and fewer rights, women also lived in meshed and stronger communities, and their roles as wife and mother were more highly honored. Accounting for differences in economic prosperity, it is entirely debatable, and perhaps ultimately unknowable,

whether women are happier in the present than they were in the past.

As Osment puts it, "For every historian who believes that the modern family is a recent superior evolution, there is another who is ready to expose it as a fallen archetype." Second, we should question the unstated assumptions that hold together the pejorative understanding of patriarchy. If sexual differentiation, subordination, and role distinctions are prima fascia evidence of exploitation, then patriarchy of any sort, at any point in history, is going to be undesirable. Writing over 40 years ago, Stephen B. Clark noted that feminist social scientists "apply liberally such terms as dominance, oppression, repression, inferiority, and subservience to men's and women's roles." These terms did not come from dispassionate historical observation, as Clark puts it, "This terminology based on a political power model of social analysis derived from modern political ideologies is designed to make all social role differences appear repulsive." The rhetorical deck, in other words, has been stacked.

To defend patriarchy, as presently and popularly understood, is to defend the indefensible. And yet most complementarians do not realize that in rejecting patriarchy they have, according to the contemporary rules of the game, rejected the very reality they thought they could reclaim by an appeal to complementarity. Most importantly, and along the lines of the last point, we should be careful that in dismantling patriarchy, we don't end up kicking out the cultural ladder from underneath us, and then hoping that people can reach the right conclusions by jumping to extraordinary heights.

One of my great concerns, which sadly seems to be becoming more and more true with each passing year, is that complementarianism. For many Christians, amounts to little more than a couple of narrow conclusions about wives submitting to husbands in the home, and ordination in the church being reserved for men. If that's all we have in our vision for men and women, it's not a vision we will hold on to for long.

We need to help church members, especially the younger generations, see that God didn't create the world with one or two arbitrary commands called "complementarianism" to test our obedience in the home and in the church. God created the world with sexual differentiation at the heart of what it means to be human beings made in His image. We cannot understand the created order as we should until we understand that God made us male and female, like and unlike Adam.

The creation story is so familiar to most of us that we overlook the obvious. God could have created human beings to reproduce on their own. God could have created every subsequent human being out of the ground, just as He created Adam.

God could have created a group of male companions to hang out in Adam's literal man cave, so that Adam wouldn't be alone. God could have given Adam a golden retriever or a gaggle of little atoms to keep him company. But God created Eve.

God made someone from Adam to be like Adam, and God made that same someone from Adam to be unlike Adam. According to God's biological design, only Eve, not another Adam, was a suitable helper because only Eve, together with Adam, could obey the creation mandate. That's why she was a helper fit for him, Genesis 2:18. Only as a complementary in pair could Adam and Eve fill the earth and subdue it.

Different languages and cultures and peoples will come later and Genesis, and these differences will be in part because of sin, Genesis 11. But the differences between men and women were God's idea from the beginning to ignore, minimize, or repudiate the differences between men and women is to reject our creational design and the God who designed it. At the level of common sense, most people know to be true what social science research and biology tell us is true.

Sex differences are real, and they matter. There was a reason that humor regarding men and women has often been a staple of comedy, whether in sitcoms and stand-up or in informal conversations. Most people know by intuition and by experience that a host of patterns and stereotypes are generally true of men and women.

In his book, *Taking Sex Difference Seriously*, Stephen Rhodes argues that traditional patterns of male initiative and female domesticity have been constant throughout history because the most fundamental human passions, sex, nurturing, and aggression manifest themselves differently in men and women. One day old female infants, for example, respond more strongly to the sound of a human in distress than one day old male infants. Unlike their male counterparts, one week old baby girls can distinguish an infant's cry from other noise.

According to Leonard Sacks, a medical doctor and PhD, no amount of nurture can change the nature of our sexual differentiation. In his book *Why Gender Matters*, he writes that girls can see better, hear better, and smell better than boys. Conversely, boys are hardwired to be more aggressive, to take more risks, and to be drawn to violent stories.

Sacks, who is not a Christian that I can tell or even particularly conservative when it comes to insisting on traditional moral behavior, criticizes those who think sex differences are simply the result of prejudice. Sex chides gender theorist Judith Butler and her followers for showing no awareness of sex differences in vision, sex differences in hearing, sex differences in risk taking, or sex differences in sex itself. Moreover, these differences cannot be laid at the feet of environment and social engineering.

Quote, "The biggest sex differences in expression of genes in the human brain occurs not in adulthood nor in puberty, but in the prenatal period before the baby is born." End quote that from Leonard Sacks. Or as Moses put it, "male and female, he created them, Genesis 1:27. Embracing reality.

Everyone can see that on average men are taller and physically stronger than women. Most everyone agrees that men and women have occupied different roles in the home and religion and in the world, for most, if not all of human history. Virtually everyone would also agree that boys and girls don't play the same or develop in the same ways, and nearly everyone would agree that men and women taken as a whole tend to form friendships differently, talk to their peers differently, and manifest different instincts related to children, sex, and career.

Almost everyone sees these things. What we don't see in the same way is how to interpret these phenomena. The question is whether we view these distinctions as reflecting innate differences between men and women, differences not to be exploited or eradicated, or whether the distinctions we see are the result of centuries of oppression and ongoing prejudice.

This brief article is written in hope that Christians might consider the former to be truer than the latter. In 1973, Stephen Goldberg published "The Inevitability of Patriarchy". A book he claims was listed as a world record in Guinness for the book "Rejected by the Most Publishers Before Final Acceptance", 69 rejections by 55 publishers.

Building off that earlier work, Goldberg released "Why Men Rule" in 1993, arguing that given the physiological differentiation between the sexes, men have always occupied the overwhelming number of high status positions and roles in every society. In other words, patriarchy is inevitable. Decades later, Rhodes said the same thing.

"Matriarchies, societies where women have more political, economic, and social power than men do not exist. In fact, there is no evidence that they have ever existed." We are told that dismantling patriarchy is one of the chief concerns of our time. Surely Voltaire's battle cry, "Acressela en Farm! Crush the infamy!" is no less suitable for the ancient regime of father rule.

Except that where patriarchy is already absent, dysfunction and desperation have multiplied. That's because patriarchy, rightly conceived, is not about the subjugation of women as much as it is about the subjugation of the male aggression and male irresponsibility that runs wild when women are forced to be in charge because the men are nowhere to be found. What school or church or city center or rural hamlet is better off when fathers no longer rule? Where communities of women and children can no longer depend upon men to protect and provide, the result is not freedom and independence.

50 years of social science research confirms what common sense and natural law never forgot. As go the men, so goes the health of families and neighborhoods. The choice is not between patriarchy and enlightened democracy, but between patriarchy and anarchy.

Observations like these sound offensive to almost everyone, but they don't have to be. If patriarchy, as a descriptive rather than a pejorative term, reflects innate differences between the sexes, then we would do well to embrace what is, while fighting the natural effects of sin in the way things are. Rather than pursuing what never will be.

You can sand a piece of wood in any direction you like, but the experience will be more enjoyable and the in-product more beautiful if you go with the grain. As Goldberg puts it, "If a woman believes that it is preferable to have her sex associated with authority and leadership rather than with the creation of life, then she is doomed to perpetual disappointment." Women were made to be women, not a different kind of man. The stubborn fact of nature almost never mentioned is that men cannot do the one thing most necessary and most miraculous in our existence.

They will not nurture life in the womb. They will not give birth to the propagation of the species. They will not nurse and infant from their own flesh.

Deep down, men are aware of these limitations of manhood, which is why they feel the urge to protect women and children, and why in every society Goldberg writes, "They look to women for gentleness, kindness, and love, for refuge from a world of pain and force, for safety from their own excesses." When a woman sacrifices all this to meet men on male terms, it is to everyone's detriment, especially her own. Men and women are not the same. If we want to acknowledge that in the home and in the church, we need to acknowledge it in all of life and in all of history.

The biblical vision of complementarity cannot be true without something like patriarchy also being true.

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