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## Q&A#125 Contrasting Complementarian Approaches to Headship

April 7, 2019



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Today's question: "Could you comment a little on practical differences among complementarians on the notion of headship?"

Within this episode, I reference James Davison Hunter's *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*: <https://amzn.to/2l42Q5l>. I also reference this blog post: <https://knowingless.com/2019/02/03/blame-game-theory/>.

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, could you comment a little on practical differences among complementarians on the notion of headship? Sure, this actually might tie in quite well with some of the discussions I've had in the last couple of days on the sex recession and also on the notion of worldview and our emphasis upon ideology within the current context. Complementarianism is, for the most part, in most of its iterations, an

ideology.

It's not so much about attending to reality and engaging with reality, so much as a certain set of rules and roles, a certain ideology that is brought to reality and doesn't actually attend enough to the parameters, limitations, and concrete embedded situations within which we're working. Now, there are ways in which we're obviously supposed to take concepts and bring them to reality and engage with reality, bring scripture and these sorts of things to help us to understand the world, but there's a danger of having a sort of ism. There's a danger also of moving in the direction of a position that's very much based around a certain sort of performativity, that we're creating a sort of act, a performance that creates a reality, rather than actually learning how to work with the grain of our natures, the grain of the world, the grain of the way that God has created things.

And complementarian positions, at their best, have been about working with the grain of reality, recognising the differences between men and women, where men and women most thrive, and considering how, within the specific limitations and contexts in which we find ourselves, we can work towards a situation within, whether within our particular relationships or within the broader context of our society, we can work towards a situation within which more people thrive. And that has generally been the better forms of complementarianism. They've worked towards that and had much less about the ism.

Now, one of the areas at the heart of complementarian positions is this idea of male headship. And in many contexts, it's the idea that the man is the boss. God has said that the man is the boss.

And so we have to play it out in that way. And you need to perform that way within your marriage, etc, etc. In scripture, actually, it does not say the man should be the head.

It just says the man is the head. This is just a fact of the world, that the world has been created in such a way that the man is the head. Now, that's not just a matter of meaning that the man is the one who goes around and tells everyone what to do.

Rather, it's instructive to look at the way the concept of headship is used more generally. For instance, the way that it's applied to Christ, where Christ has authority and power in the world of all principalities and powers, and he is the head of the church. Now, what does that mean? What it means is that Christ is the preeminent, prominent one within the church.

He's the one who stands at the head of the church and leads the church out into the world. He exercises his power within the world on behalf of his bride. And so it's a statement about the actual fact that men are the stronger sex, that men in just about any single society you could care to look at, that men tend to establish the structures, tend to establish the ruling systems, tend to establish the institutions, tend to invent

things, tend to pioneer things, tend to be the ones that display the pronounced agency.

And through that agency, they are the ones who are at the head of society. And same within the marriage, for the most part. That is the way that things play out.

And even it's not just in that sense of greater strength, it's also the way what the father represents, for instance, the father represents something different from the mother who has that immediate bond with her child, with her child. The father represents a difference and an alterity within that pulls that child out into the world. Now, the father may not do that very well, may not occupy that position very well, but no one else is occupying that for him.

The mother relates to the child in a way that's conditioned by the fact that she bore the child within herself. And when we're thinking about these things, we need to focus a lot more upon how these are rooted within reality and we're acting out of these real identities. And then how we function is secondary to that.

We live in a context within the world today, however, where exercising agency and having dominion and authority and these sorts of things are very much, that realm has been very much diminished. And so increasingly, we are working for the sake of other employers, we're working in other households as it were, not within our own. And so the idea of the home as a realm that's working out into the world, that's exercising rule and dominion over the creation and doing so in a way that allows the people within it to thrive.

And that's just not the reality for most of us today. For most of us today, people go out to work and then they return to the home as a realm of consumption. The home isn't really a domestic realm in the same, as a domestic realm, it's very much shriveled.

There's not much that takes place within the home in terms of domestic activity and in terms of the domestic care that would once have taken place there, the sort of education, the sort of health care, the sort of provision and all these sorts of things. So many of those have been farmed out to other agencies, outsourced. And increasingly, the home is a ghost town for much of the day, and then we return at the end of the day to consume.

On the other hand, the home isn't really a site of production anymore. And as the home has ceased to be a site of production, it's become a place where the man first and then the woman as well, leave the home and go out and work somewhere else. And so the whole dynamics have changed.

And within this sort of situation, what is left of the home is a very feminized place. It's a realm where it's very much ordered around the woman. You go into the average home and you can see that right away.

The average home is ordered around a woman's preferences. The woman will be the one who primarily chooses the decor, things like that. And it's a realm in which it's a sort of limited nest.

Now, there are certain parts of the home that often the man can feel are more his own. So you can have the man cave or the attic or the basement or the office or the shed or the garage. These are realms of where man exercises his characteristic agency and tend to push out more into the world.

They're not realms of hospitality, not the realms where people are being invited in. But that's what it has become. And so the home is not a realm where we are really working out into the world anymore.

And that leads to a problem because the concept of headship is very much connected to those concepts of dominion within the world, agency moving out into the world. And in the context that we now face, the context of the concept of headship mutates. So there are some people that just abandon it altogether and then complain about the inequality of society where men clearly are the ones who set the terms, who establish the structures, this sort of thing.

And we need to equalize this by displacing power from men, increasingly placing it into systems, impersonal systems, and then farming out that authority to people within those systems. Now, that's one way of approaching the problem. That's a more egalitarian approach.

The other approaches can be a sort of performativity, reactionary performativity. And in some contexts, that's a hyper patriarchal approach where you have the man who struts around, lapping as if he was some great patriarch, when actually he's not really exercising any dominion in the world. He's just being a petty tyrant within his home.

And there's nothing good about that. What it involves for the most part is the headship that formerly would have been exercised by the man in the household being turned in and exercised upon this domestic realm where he acts as the boss and just tells people what to do all the time. It's not a healthy situation.

It's not healthy for him. It's certainly not healthy for his wife and children. And that is the approach that some people have taken.

Whereas for the most part, the complementarian response has been a different one. And the complementarian response has been to salvage the concept of headship through domestication of the notion of headship, through notions of servant leadership and things like that. Two great quotes from James Davidson Hunter on the New Evangelicals that he describes these sorts of dynamics and the rise of the complementarian movement.

Aaron Wren brought these quotes to my attention. I find them very perceptive, particularly as they're written a few decades ago now. He writes, an unusual kind of double speak is taking place.

On the one hand, the man is encouraged to assert a forceful leadership in all matters pertaining to the organisation and development of the family. This would include matters of spiritual maturation, child discipline, family responsibilities and the myriad decisions any family has to make. He is to command respect and ultimately the willful submission of his wife and children.

He is, after all, ultimately responsible for keeping his household in order. On the other hand, he is encouraged to cultivate the emotional development of his children and open and expressive emotional bonds of intimacy with both his children and his wife. The upshot of this is, though the husband and father has ultimate authority, that authority is qualified by an emphasis upon sentiment.

To maintain final authority and to carry the form of strong leadership normative for centuries past, a clear difference in status from other members of the family was required. Patriarchy, in other words, required the husband to maintain social distance from the rest of the family. That social distance, though, is significantly reduced, if not eliminated altogether by the normative expectation of sensitivity and intimacy.

In this sense, his authority becomes purely theoretical and abstract. Paternal authority is no authority at all. He writes again, It becomes especially clear when the lay and professional experts affirm the authority of the husband, but simultaneously describe wives as equal partners, total companions, friends, joint heirs, true comrades and the like.

By redefining the husband's authority as an administrative technicality, the marriage relationship as a functional equality and her nature as a weaker vessel in exclusively physiological terms, evangelicals have been able to maintain the integrity of their commitment to biblical literalism, while at the same time making the submission of women much less intellectually and emotionally objectionable. And he's got a real point there. A lot of the positions that you see out there under the name of complementarianism are a certain face-saving position.

Within a situation where there is no authority and dominion exercised by the household and where there's always the temptation for that authority and dominion to turn in upon the household in a performative way. In that sort of situation, what they recommend is this position where the husband is just often can become like the sidekick, the assistant to his wife within that domestic realm. And the emphasis is very much upon the man upholding that domestic realm in a way that's very much just serving his wife.

And the household has no outward orientation as it once did. And so he's very much the

mall cop for the home and the one who very much follows the instructions and the directions of his wife. And he may exercise some, perform some sort of authority from time to time, but it's very much one that is directed by his wife and also held in check by all these other agencies in society that are about getting him to exercise in a domesticated, to act in a domesticated manner in a way that's designed to support his wife.

And the church can often be like that. It's often designed to tame men, to make men who are just very domesticated men. And there's nothing wrong with being a man who can work well within the household and support one's wife and be someone who's encouraging and supportive, someone who's emotionally present.

These are important things. But if that's all that it involves, if that's what headship is, there's a pretty empty concept. And that's often what it has become.

The other thing that you see within this context is the emphasis along those lines leads to an emphasis upon the weight that men bear, but without much sense of any dignity to that. This is a responsibility that falls upon men's shoulders a lot of the time, but there's very little sense of a dignity that comes with that, very little sense of an actual authority, very little sense of the household moving out into the world, being led by the husband and father. And when that is lost, you end up with the husband taking a lot of responsibility and blame.

And it's a very different sort of position than I think we see within scripture, within the Christian tradition as well. And this inequality between responsibility within husband and wife is another aspect of the complementarian picture that has often been malformed within the current context. There's a very good post that was written upon this not too long ago by a woman who was raised within a fairly extreme complementarian, a more patriarchal context.

And she writes about her experience and the imbalance of the concept of responsibility. So responsibility being placed overwhelmingly in the hands of men. But that responsibility is one that is, first of all, it's emptied of the dignity and actual authority.

So the man bears a lot of responsibility, but does not actually have a lot of true authority in these situations, because the household really isn't doing much. And so often his authority is in principle only. He's a figurehead rather than anything actual.

And she writes about this as a glowing ball of responsibility. In my old society, men were formally and strongly given the glowing ball of responsibility. This was great and it also really sucked.

It sucked bad enough that I'm not totally sure being a woman was worse than being a man. I talked a bit about the men being expected to go die thing, but there's another

aspect here too. The nature of holding the glowing ball of responsibility means that if things are hard, it's your fault.

And you're less likely to complain or try to institute systemic change. It means that your pains are more invisible because it starts and ends inside of you. When you hold the glowing ball of responsibility, it doesn't even cross your mind that you try to make the world change.

No, what's happening is yours. Yes, Eve gave you the apple, but the world entered sin through you. There's no room to blame others.

You need to be stronger. You need to handle this. Your weakness is yours.

When the glowing ball of responsibility is outside of you, you search for change through others. You don't consider this as weakness, and thus there's nothing to be ashamed about. How can society change? You're fine with taking those antidepressants.

When things are hard, the world could be better. You shouldn't have to live like this. Your pains are visible because making progress requires noise.

You need to have higher standards. Your boyfriend shouldn't be abusive. So you're going to break up with him and then speak loudly about signs of abuse and things you shouldn't put up with.

And then join Facebook groups where you affirm each other and list things you love about yourself. These two modes have drastically unequal visibility from the outside, which means if you had an equal amount of suffering between men and women in a society of traditional gender roles, this would look like a society in which women suffer more. The fundamental divide in my culture of traditional gender roles was the allocation of responsibility, and I see no evidence that our current culture is doing much different.

Everywhere I look, in our advertisements, in conversations at parties, in our movies, I see men held self-responsible and women as environment changers. This is a bit of a meta problem. Both roles create issues.

Men tend to be stoic, emotionally repressed. It's my fault. In greater positions of power, I need to work harder, provide for my family, generally over women.

Women tend to view themselves as more helpless than they really are. Society is the problem. But society's answer to this isn't to lower the amount of responsibility we give men and raise the responsibility we give women, or even to just acknowledge the responsibility gap at all.

It's to blame the issues that arise from the responsibility gap on the side of the gap that is built to accept responsibility. Men. Patriarchy.

Men's fault. When women support it, we say they've simply internalised the messages of men, and then plucked that glowing ball of responsibility right out of their dainty little hands. Victim blaming.

When we decry suggestions that women alter their behaviour to reduce risk of assault, though appearance influences catcalling, we're shoving responsibility straight into the environment. There's almost no body acceptance movement for men. Advertisements portray men as either the butt of jokes, or muscular and handsome.

Why? The attractiveness of a man is their responsibility. Contrast this to one out of a billion ads for women, where their feelings about their attractiveness are taken out of their hands and placed directly into the environment. It's also easy to find articles that place responsibility in the environment by listing ways workplaces can be more woman-friendly.

If women aren't in enough powerful roles, society's reaction is to place the fault outside of the woman. Reversely, I tried to find articles on how to make women-dominated workplaces or housekeeping, advertisements, communities more male-friendly, but I couldn't find any. And she puts her finger there on, I think, some very important issues within certain forms of complementarianism, but also more widely within society.

That there is this deep imbalance between male and female assumption of responsibility. And so even if you look at much feminist movements, look at feminist movements and pay attention. Are they seeking to create power and take responsibility? Or are they seeking to be empowered by some other party and to get that party to take responsibility for them? And generally you will find it's the latter.

And that party is implicitly patriarchal, but the expectation is that men are the ones that are responsible. Men are the ones that have agency. Men are the ones that have power.

Even in the heart of the feminist movement, which claims to be about equality, but often there's this imbalance of responsibility at the very heart of it. And she puts her finger upon that dynamic. Now, within complementarian circles, when you have this emphasis upon responsibility without actual authority, and that's more generally within the world.

Increasingly, men don't actually have men's authority is being denied to them. They can't exercise power. They can't gain power.

They can't form groups. They can't exercise their agency in the way that they would want. Currently, you find that all these things tend to be closed down and displaced.

And then we need to empower women at every point. And then the problem is that what you have is no actual authority, no actual or limited actual authority and power, but a lot of responsibility. And so in that situation, what you have is a very toxic situation of blame and shame.



And what you see, I think, in many churches, complementarian churches, is this approach of blame and shame and responsibility, but very little sense of actual authority. We're seeking to reclaim agency within the world, seeking to reduce our alienation from our labour, seeking to reduce our alienation from our agency. And the groups in which we might attain to a full stature in our agency, all that alienation is denied.

And as a result, what you have is a situation where the responsibility is placed upon men's shoulders, but they don't really have a lot of agency or authority allowed to them in order to fulfil that responsibility. And then what happens is the concept of their masculinity becomes deeply attached with the idea of shame. You see that within certain forms of feminist masculinity.

Toxic masculinity is the thing that men keep getting told. Now, what does it look like for a man to exert himself to fully exercise his virility and not be toxic? There's not a lot of that discussed because as soon as men exert themselves in this way, it's seen as a threat to women within the context of labour, within the context of government, within all these different sorts of contexts of discourse, because it's difficult for women to compete with men on men's terms. And in that sort of situation, I think you have all this talk about responsibility, but very little room in which men can exercise agency responsibly.

And the whole notion of masculinity then becomes attached with a sense of guilt, shame, inadequacy, inadequacy for certain aspects of responsibility that they just cannot fulfil. You're supposed to be like Christ and sacrifice for your wife. Now, what does that mean? What does it mean within the modern world where you're doing most of your labour outside of the home and you don't really have any way to exercise much agency within the home, within the household? What it means is that you end up being the assistant to your wife, the one who's the mall cop within the house, the one who's really upholding the feminine order.

And that is not actually the vision that you have in scripture. The vision you have in scripture is the man being created, given a task that pushes him out into the world. And then the woman created and the woman works alongside the man.

But the woman's emphasis of forming the, primarily forming the inner life of society. And this dynamic is one that tends to be lost when the man is no longer ordered out into the world. Either that becomes turned in upon the home and becomes a sort of toxic authoritarianism and bullying and tyrannical leadership.

Or, on the other hand, it's just squelched and there's nothing there but the shadow, the ghost of responsibility with no actual authority to match up with it anymore. I think complementarianism is wrestling with this problem. And it's wrestling in a way that often is designed more to salvage the biblical teaching to save face rather than to actually wrestle with the situation that has been created by the modern world.

To think about what would it look like if headship were being exercised properly? What would it look like if households had agency? If it were the case that men were working within the world and that that labour within the world was something that was forming a realm in which their households and their homes and families could flourish. But was not just narrowly worked in upon that context. And I don't think many people are asking that question.

There are more people now, which is good, but it tends to be a question that's ignored. And in that context, what you are left with is very often performance, empty performance. You're trying to create an appearance of something when there is no actual reality there.

Now, without that actual reality of agency within the world and an outward oriented dominion within the world, a certain sort of complementarian performance can be more negative than positive. It can just involve the man trying to perform a certain act to try and save face, to try and save the appearance of headship rather than actually pursuing the actual reality of it. And as the family has ceased to bear any weight, any great weight, you have this situation, I think, that we are wrestling with.

And so I think the concepts of headship are really arising out of this particular set of problems that are very distinctive to the last 200 years or so. And we've not really found an adequate solution to it. But one of the things a complementarian approach, a healthy one, should do is name the problem and start to think about ways in which we can limit its spread.

Think about ways in which we can develop agency for our homes again and our households. Think about ways in which the home can be a site of life again, of unalienated labour, where people are forming a context, man and woman together, in a way that's healthy, not in competition with each other, not one bossing the other around. And each as king and queen, as it were, forging a realm of life that's healthy and good for all within it and for society as a whole.

Now, within scripture that concept of king and queen is important. There is an asymmetry between man and woman and there is a sense in which the responsibility falls chiefly upon the shoulders of the man. And that responsibility is a factor that comes with greater agency, greater strength, greater social power, all these sorts of things.

That involves a greater degree of responsibility. It also involves that situation is one that can be reversible in different contexts. So within the context of the domestic life of the home, it should generally be the wife that calls the shots.

And it's not when we talk about headship, often people can think about it just in a straight hierarchical manner that the husband is here and the wife is here. And that seldom leads to healthy results. Rather, they should be looking face to face as

counterparts, but counterparts in a way that there's a dance and there's an asymmetry in the way that they play out that dance.

And sometimes the man is leading. Sometimes the woman is the one that's setting the terms. And within Genesis, that's part of what we see as the image that's provided for us.

When we're looking at this, then I think we need to step back from the specific situations that we face in modern society. We need to step back, consider the broader parameters of the relationship that are envisaged by Scripture. We should think about the ways that these things have changed.

We should then think about the specifics of our historical situation, knowing our situation, not just as our general situation that we just act in like fish in water, unaware that we're actually in water that has a particular character. Rather, we should be aware of what has led to this position and the specific limitations and problems. And we should work within those in a way that expands things.

And that requires imagination and creativity. And it requires deep wisdom and prudence. It will require men and women working in partnership with each other.

It will require moving away from the idea, first of all, of radical equality that seeks to flatten out the differences between men and women. It will seek to move beyond the artificial performance that tries to maintain the appearance of these things without actually maintaining the reality. And it will seek to move into the grain of reality itself.

And that's going to take a lot of work. But I think this is where the differences between complementarianism and its positions on headship tend to play out. Some are trying to save the appearance.

Others are just, we just don't know why God gave us these commandments. And we just have to work out some way of living in terms of them according to as limited an approach as possible. So we have certain realms that have certain requirements.

And outside of those, anything goes. We shouldn't really require any difference. Now, within scripture, that's not actually the way things appear.

There's a lot of emphasis upon an asymmetry, but an asymmetry that's supposed to be a beautiful one that's danced out, not one that's just a flat hierarchical asymmetry. And there is a reversibility to this. There is a sense of, I mean, it's like fundamental forces within reality.

Different man and woman are working differently within reality, but in ways that ideally complement rather than compete with each other. And when we work well together, we'll work in ways that we're all stronger from the cooperation. And that has been the

vision of headship that I think you see in scripture, that the headship of the man, the headship of Christ, is a headship that's exercised out into the world for the sake of the bride, the church.

It's not a headship that's exercised within the zero sum game of who gets to say how things go within the marriage itself. Marriages are outward oriented. When God created the man and the woman, he created the man, first of all, for the sake of tilling the ground, of serving the ground, of guarding and keeping the garden.

And he created the woman to work alongside the man. Now, when we lose that, what we end up with is the man and woman facing each other, and the woman ends up being very much the sidekick. It's not a healthy situation.

Rather, marriage should be ordered out into the world, and there's a sense in which the man leads in that. But yet, that is something that requires both parties working together in asymmetrical but mutually reinforcing ways, not as a zero sum game. I hope this has been of some help in answering that question.

There's so much more that I could say about this and have said about this and will say about this. If you have found this helpful, please share these videos with others. If you would like to support these videos, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

And you can leave any questions you have on my Curious Cat account. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with some more thoughts on the story of Abraham. God bless, and thank you for listening.