

Benefits of complementarianism

THE CLAIM

The following quotation is taken from a review of a work typical of attacks on the complementarian position:

‘Accordingly, we note how Grady routinely suggests that the “traditional” or “hierarchical”⁵ view **is so deeply prejudiced against women that it actually encourages abuse and other harmful effects.**

Consider the following samples:

“... the church seems powerless to protect women because its misguided theology actually **encourages abuse**” (viii).

“This *pagan*, hierarchical view of marriage **has resulted in a skyrocketing divorce rate among Bible-believing Christians, as well as a growing problem with domestic abuse that Christian leaders don’t like to talk about**” (xi-xii, italics added).

“This *warped view* has created a fragile foundation in many Christian homes, **leading to strife, mistrust and, in some cases, abuse**” (10, italics added).¹

¹ Lister, ‘J. Lee Grady’s 25 Tough Questions About Women and the Church: A Review Article’, *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (9.1.102), (Spring 2004).

THE FACTS

It is certainly true that traditional ‘hierarchical’ and complementarian views of the respective roles of men and women have been used to justify unScriptural abuse, and have been taught in such a way as to encourage such abuse, just as the Biblical teaching on slaves and servants has been historically abused.

However, readers of Grady’s claims may be wondering what evidence there actually is for his claims that the complementarian view of women in ‘the church’ has, in and of itself, caused ‘a skyrocketing divorce rate among Bible-believing Christians, as well as a growing problem with domestic abuse’.²

STRONG MALE ROLE MODELS

Egalitarian Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen notes that authoritative male role models and an involved fathering style (which complementarians encourage), are of demonstrable value to families.

‘In cultures and subcultures **where fathers are absent or uninvolved in hands-on parenting**, boys tend to define themselves in opposition to their mothers and other female caretakers, **and to engage in misogynist, hypermasculine behaviors as a way to shore up a fragile gender identity.**⁴⁶

And girls who are not sufficiently affirmed as persons **by available and nurturing fathers** are at risk of becoming developmentally

² Ibid., p. 102.

“stuck” in a mindset that **sees their sexuality and reproductive potential as the only criteria of feminine success.**⁴⁷

The bottom line appears to be this: children of both sexes need to grow up with stable, nurturant and **appropriately authoritative role models of both sexes** to help develop a **secure gender identity.** ^{46’³}

Interestingly, she notes that the **absence of such authoritative male role models** are a concern not only for boys raised in lesbian households, but also in home-schooling households where the mother is the primary point of contact for boys in the family:

‘This might be grounds for worrying **not only about the development of misogyny in boys raised in lesbian households, but boys in conservative Christian home-schooling households**, given that almost all such home-schooling **is done by mothers.**’⁴

Van Leeuwen notes that studies of pre-industrial societies (with traditional pre-modern complementarian views, rather than modern egalitarian views), show that the involved and nurturing role of authoritative fathers has a demonstrably positive impact, notably **reducing** abuse of women, and actually contributing to their empowerment:

³ Van Leeuwen, ‘Opposite Sexes or Neighbouring Sexes? What Do the Social Sciences Really Tell Us?’, in Husbands & Larsen, *‘Women, ministry and the Gospel: Exploring new paradigms’*, p. 190 (2007).

⁴ Ibid., p. 190.

‘Scott Coltrane’s analysis of almost a hundred **preindustrial societies** (n. 42) shows that **nurturant fathering of children** also correlates strongly with **reduced abuse of women and greater empowerment and voice for women** in the cultures where **involved fathering** takes place.’⁵

NUTURING FATHERS

‘University of Virginia sociologist Bradford Wilcox has shown that **conservative Protestant fathers** are more likely to report using corporal punishment than other groups, but also (in keeping with a “**soft patriarchal**” ideology) **more likely to praise and hug their children and less likely to yell at them than other groups, both church and unaffiliated.**’⁶

Leeuwen notes the complementarian view of the role of the man in the family has been shown to have positive life outcomes for children:

‘He concludes that conservative Protestant fathers’ neotraditional parenting style **seems to be closer to the authoritative style**—characterized by moderately high levels of parental control and high levels of parental supportiveness—**that has been linked to positive outcomes among children and adolescents.**’⁷

Van Leeuwen concludes that claims of abuse leveled at complementarian parenting models have been exaggerated:

‘In any case, the accusations about authoritarian and abusive parenting by conservative Protestants **appear overdrawn**. The findings paint a more complex portrait of conservative Protestant fathering that reveals a hybrid of strict, puritanical and progressive, child-centered approaches to child rearing—**all in keeping with the logic of “expressive traditionalism” guiding this subculture.**’⁸

MARITAL HARMONY

Van Leeuwen’s balanced study does not ignore the incidence of abusive behaviour in some conservatively based marriages, but demonstrates that the data does not lead to the conclusions claimed by egalitarians such as Grady.

On the contrary, Van Leeuwen notes that spousal abuse among conservative Protestant husbands is strongly related to lack of involvement in their congregation, a mere nominal claim to be Christian, rather than related to complementarian views on men and women.

“‘These are men who have, say, a Southern Baptist affiliation, **but who rarely darken the door of a church.** They have ... the highest rates of domestic violence of any group in the United States. They also have high divorce rates.

⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

But evangelical and mainline Protestant men who attend church regularly are ... **much less likely to divorce than married men who do not attend church regularly.**”⁹

The evidence demonstrates strongly that complementarian husbands and fathers (what Van Leeuwen refers to as a ‘traditionalist ideology of gender relations’), are the **least likely to commit domestic violence**, as long as they are regular church attendees and genuinely involved in their congregation:

‘**And conservative Protestant husbands and fathers** (including those who espouse, among other things, **a traditionalist ideology of gender relations**) are—provided they attend church regularly—the group that is actually **least likely to commit domestic violence.**’¹⁰

Summarizing the scholarly data Van Leeuwen demonstrates (contrary to the claims made by egalitarians such as Grady), that complementarian views are not demonstrably related to domestic abuse:

‘The upshot is that **we have no evidence so far that a gender-traditionalist ideology**—at least of the soft patriarchal variety—**is a strong predictor of domestic physical abuse.**’¹¹

(Jonathan Burke, 2009)

⁵ Ibid., p. 190.

⁶ Ibid., p. 194.

⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 194-195.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 195.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 195.