

The Trinity as the Model and Foundation for Male-Female Roles and Relationships

Modern Christianity has all but abandoned the roles established for men and women as dictated by the scriptures. It is no longer uncommon to have a church led by a female despite Paul's instructions for a woman not to teach and to learn silently (1 Timothy 2:11-14). Marriages are plagued with apathetic men who refuse to take on the leadership role of the "head" of the wife as commanded throughout the New Testament (Ephesians 5:21-33). I would like to use this brief article to suggest that the modern movement away from the biblical roles and relationships of men and women not only denies scriptural teachings but also distorts our understanding of the very nature of God. I will argue that it is God's triune nature and the relationships and roles that exist among the three Persons of the Trinity that form the foundation for the scriptural dictations for male-female relationships.

Scriptural Teachings on Male-Female Roles and Relationships

When speaking of male-female relationships, the heart of this article will focus on the relationships between men and women in the context of marriage. The scriptures teach firmly that there is a distinction between men and women. We learn from reading the New Testament that men and women are unique aside from their sexuality (although that too certainly distinguishes men and women). Men and women are unique in their roles as individuals and in relation to others of the opposite sex, specifically spouses. Consider the following verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesians which set the biblical precedent for the relationship that is to exist between husband and wife:

Ephesians 5:20-33

Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her*

by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. *He who loves his wife loves himself.* For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that *it refers to Christ and the church.* However, *let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*

From these few verses arise a storm of theological differences, most of which come from attempting to merge modern cultural values with scriptural commands¹. The purpose of this article, though, is not to discuss how a man is to be the "head" of his wife or how the wife is to submit to her husband². We simply want to establish that the scriptures do in fact outline how a relationship in the context of marriage is supposed to be characterized by authority and submission, leading and following, humility and love. Our interest is in where our model for living in accordance with these commands exists.

Consider also the following verses from Paul's letters to the Corinthians and to Timothy which teach a differentiation of roles between men and women:

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, *the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.* Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head--it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. *Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.* That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man

of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

1 Timothy 2:11-14

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Again, as with the verses from Ephesians 5, we could endlessly discuss the implications of this section of scripture and the weight it carries in our relationships but that is better left for another forum. Do see though that Paul clearly teaches there is a differentiation of roles between men and women. The husband is the leader, or head, of the relationship. The man is to teach and the woman to learn with all submissiveness.

We see then by taking the most superficial examination of these verses that men and women are different in roles and relationships. We see in other places in the Bible that this difference is not one of equality. Christianity does not teach that men are inherently any more valuable than women or that God in any way favors one sex over another. In fact, Jesus Christ and Christianity were and continue to be revolutionary in how women are included in the faith. Christ was mocked and ridiculed for including women in his ministry and teaching that they had an equal share in attaining salvation. The difference between men and women is not one of equality; it is a difference of biblically established roles within and outside of the relationship of marriage. Let's now turn our attention to the doctrine of the Trinity and broaden the study.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Before we can effectively see how the God's very nature as triune lays the foundation for the relationships and roles that exist between men and women, we must first define the doctrine of the Trinity briefly. For an accurate definition we will look to Dr. Bruce Ware who wrote a foundational book on the topic of the Trinity:

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that there is one and only one God, eternally existing and fully expressed in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each Person is fully God and each is eternally God – not three gods but three Persons of the one God.

Each person is equal in essence and divinity as each possesses fully the identically same eternal divine nature, yet each is also an eternal and distinct personal expression of the one undivided nature.

The goal of this article is not to provide an all inclusive definition of the doctrine of the Trinity, the complexity of such a study extends far beyond the limitations of this short article³. There are though a few foundational pieces of information we should glean about the nature of God as being triune. When we say God is triune or that God exists as a Trinity, we are affirming the very nature of God. The Bible teaches us that there is one and only one God whom we are to worship, love and serve. At the same time though the scriptures teach that the Father, the Son who is Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are in fact also God. We learn then that there is one God expressed as three distinct Persons, all of whom are all fully God yet part of one God. Truly, it is a complex mystery but is it what the Bible teaches. Consider briefly the following verses which teach first that there is only one God and then the subsequent verses that teach that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are fully God:

Scriptural Support for Monotheism (One God)

Isaiah 45:5-6

I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me.

Isaiah 46:8-9

Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; *for I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me.*

1 Timothy 2:5

For *there is one God*, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Scriptural Support for the Father as God

1 Corinthians 8:6

Yet for us *there is one God, the Father*, from whom are all things and for who we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

John 6:27

"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on him *the Father, God*, has set his seal."

Scriptural Support for the Son, Jesus Christ, as God

John 1:1-2, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 20:28

Thomas answered him [Jesus Christ], "*My Lord and my God!*"

Scriptural Support for the Holy Spirit as God

Acts 5:3-4

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart *to lie to the Holy Spirit* and to keep back some of the price of the land? "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? *You have not lied to men but to God.*"

1 Corinthians 2:10-11

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; *for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God*. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God*.

We see from this brief overview of a few key verses that there is only one God and that this one God is expressed in three distinct Persons. What distinguishes these three Persons is not power, wisdom, or might because all three Persons are fully God and all three fully possess the characteristics of God equally. No, what distinguishes the three Persons is that each person has a distinct relationship to the other two persons and each serves a unique role in redemptive history.

Relationships and Roles within the Trinity

Relationships among the Three Persons of the One God

If there was one defining characteristic of God, as odd as it might sound, it would be authority and submission. The relationships of the three Persons of the Godhead are saturated with humble and loving authority and submission; the Father has ultimate authority among the other two Persons with the Son and Spirit willing submitting to the Father's will. The Son too exercises authority over the Spirit while simultaneously submitting to the Father with the Spirit submitting to both the Father's and the Son's authority. There exists a hierarchy of authority among the three Persons of God with the Father having ultimate authority, the Son under the Father in authority, and finally the Spirit under the authority of both the Father and the Son.

One might ask why if all three Persons were fully God would they submit to or exercise authority over one another. The best answer is that we have no answer. We do clearly see from the Bible that this relationship does exist among the three Persons and that it is one of the defining characteristic of God. Consider the following verses of scripture which show how the Son submits to the Fathers authority:

John 8:28-29

So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that *I do nothing on my own authority*, but speak just *as the Father taught me*. *And he who sent me* is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him."

See from these verses that Jesus was fully submissive to the authority of the Father's will. He spoke definitively in absolute terms saying he did "nothing" outside of what he was commanded by the Father's authority and "always" did what the Father willed. We see then that Jesus Christ, the second Person of God, was fully submissive to the Father's authority and the Father supremely exercised authority over the Son.

Let's also see some verses of scripture which Jesus speaks later in the book of John which use parallel language to refer to the Son's authority over the Spirit and the Spirit's submission to the Son:

John 16:12-14

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for *he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak*, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. *He will glorify me*, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Within nearly the same breath that Jesus says he is fully reliant upon the Father's authority, he also says that he exercises authority over the Spirit and that the Spirit does not act on his own authority but instead only on the commands given to him by the Son who has rightful authority over the Spirit. We see then that there does truly exist a hierarchy among the three Persons of God which defines God's very nature.

Hopefully, reading these verses on the relationships among the three Persons of God brings to memory the words spoken by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians which teach that the husband is to be the head of the wife exercising authority over the wife with the wife submitting to the authority of her husband. God established eternal decrees for authority and submission to be exercised in marriage because we are created in God's image and God's image is defined, in part, by the exercise of authority and submission.

Note though that the authority and submission that is exercised among the three persons of God is not done so begrudgingly. The Son does not begrudge the Father for submitting to the Father's authority just as the Spirit does not resent the Son because the Son commands the Spirit. Instead, we see that the reason that the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit to the Son is because there exists a deep reciprocal love among the Persons of the Godhead which drives the three Persons to serve and lead the other Persons:

John 15:9-10

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in His love.

Jesus himself tells us that the reason he submits to the Father is because he loves the Father and desires to please him and the Father loves the Son. So too in marriage, the wife submits to her husband not out of forceful subjection or willing resentment, but instead out of the deep

reciprocal love that exists between the man and woman. The man too leads his wife spiritually not with an iron fist or authoritarian force, but instead, as Paul says, with love and adoration just as Jesus leads the church of believers and leads her spiritually out of the love he has for her. Again we see that it is the nature of the relationships among the Persons of our triune God lay the foundation and serve as the model for what the relationship between a man and his wife should resemble within the context of marriage.

Roles among the Three Persons of the One God

I would like to close briefly with a final thought on how God as triune serves as the foundation and model for the biblical commands for the differentiation of roles among men and women spoken of in the Bible. With the simplest understanding of the Trinity we can clearly see that there exists a difference in the roles of the three Persons of the Godhead. The Father serves as the grand planner and architect of all of creation and sent the Son to become incarnate, the Son became incarnate to die for the salvation of the church of believers and now serves as king and protector of the church and the Spirit serves in the sanctification of believers. Each of these roles is unique to the Person who serves in that role.

So too we see from the scriptures that there exists a differentiation of roles among men and women. Men are called to serve and the leader of their households. Men are also called to love their wife as Christ does the church and to give his very life for her just as Christ did for us⁵. Women are called to submit to the authority of the man's leadership with humility. Women are commanded not to teach publicly and men are commanded to be the spiritual guides of their families. Just as neither the Father, Son, nor Spirit are any less among themselves, there exists differences in the roles each fulfills so that a dynamic harmony exists among the three Persons. In the same way men and women are to serve with love and humility in their scripturally dictated roles so that they dynamically complement⁴ one another.

Conclusion

We worship one true and living God who is expressed as three distinct Persons. Each person is fully God and yet each Person can be distinguished by the relationships and roles unique to each Person. The relationship and roles that exist among the Persons of the Godhead are

characterized by authority, submission and love. This design is so favored by God that it is intertwined throughout his creation among the relationships we experience among other people of God's creation. Ultimately, shaping ones marriage around these characteristics of authority, submission and love as dictated by scripture is honoring God by living in obedience to his commands and testifying to the world about who God is and what he is truly like.

1. The modern feminist movement, both outside of and within the church, teaches that differences between men and women are to be minimized and similarities maximized. God specifically created man and women though to be different so that their differences complement one another. While not discussing the full implications of these verses, the author firmly believes and teaches that a man is to be head of his wife in both the home and the church as the spiritual leader of his family. The male leader is given the unique role being responsible for the spiritual condition and exercise of his family.

2. For an orthodox exposition on the significance and implications of these verses of scripture see the sermon titled "Adam, where are you?" by John Piper delivered June 17, 1984. Dr. Piper offers support for the maintenance of the biblical roles for men and women and outlines the how it is that a man is to be the head of his wife by serving as the spiritual leader of the family.

3. For a more extensive study of the theological doctrine of the Trinity see the book titled "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" by Bruce Ware, Professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Study. Dr. Ware provides both an academic and practical study of the Trinity and relates the implications of God as being triune to the lives of believers within the Church; specifically the relationships between men and women but also among parent and children, pastors and their congregations, etc... It was Dr. Ware's book that inspired the undertaking of this article.

4. The word "complement" has been used multiple times throughout this article. This word is favored by the author because of its relation to the Complementarian view of the relation between men and women. This view affirms that both men and women are equal in status but can and do have different complementary roles. This view is in opposition to Egalitarianism which affirms that there is no biblically supported difference in roles for men and women. For a greater understanding on the Complementarian view see The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and John Piper's book Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood.

5. I don't think one can emphasize enough how a man is to love his wife. Paul gives the analogy that the husband is to love his wife as much in the same way that Christ loves the church of believers. And just as Christ gave his very life for the church so to is the husband to so love his wife that he is to humbly and lovingly lead her and be willing to give all of his life for her.