

# CBMW's evolving position on spiritual headship.

Dalrock | 16 July, 2016 | by Dalrock

---

From the beginning complementarianism has been an effort to split the difference with Christian feminists (egalitarians). This comes naturally from their belief that feminism isn't a manifestation of the same discontent that caused Eve to want to be like God in the garden of Eden. Instead, complementarians see feminism as a misguided (but entirely understandable) rebellion caused by the provocation of cruel men\*.

Complementarians believe if they are nice enough to women, feminist rebellion will go away as the reason for the rebellion is thereby withdrawn (examples [here](#) and [here](#)). This requires compromise when Scripture offends feminists, and this has led complementarians to invent [novel interpretations of Scripture](#). But this compromise is by no means a one time deal. The compromises of yesterday become the starting position for bargaining today, and today's new compromise will become the starting point for bargaining tomorrow.

We can see this with the complementarian position on spiritual headship. Complementarians had to find an interpretation for Ephesians 5:26-27\*\* that formally set them apart from egalitarians but caused minimal offense to feminists. But no amount of compromise with feminists will actually avoid offending feminists, and this has led to multiple complementarian stances on the topic of spiritual headship.

In the latest CBMW [quarterly journal](#) David Croteau describes the two predominant complementarian compromises on spiritual headship, and then [proposes rejecting the concept of spiritual headship altogether](#).

Croteau describes the first compromise position complementarians created on spiritual headship. This position frames spiritual headship primarily (if not entirely) as a club to beat husbands with. The focus is on declaring husbands as failures, while avoiding offending the feminists in the pews by pointing out that wives should look to their husbands for spiritual instruction (emphasis mine):

The first category I've called "Sanctification is the Husband's Responsibility." The following authors/pastors have been specifically chosen as examples because they are known for being careful expositors and have ministries that I particularly appreciate. The use of these men should not be seen as an indictment against them, but calling into question their particular use of Eph 5:26-27. "The man is responsible for the spiritual well-being of his wife. Her sanctification is his responsibility. **There is probably no male task that has been more neglected in our society than this one.**"<sup>[1]</sup>

But even constraining references to spiritual headship as a club to beat down husbands still will generate envy from feminists. This has led to a further complementarian compromise position on spiritual headship:

The second category is a little more fuzzy, where it *seems* like the husband is responsible but the connection to Eph 5:26 is more ambiguous: "By Implication, the Husband is Responsible for His Wife's Sanctification." For example, "When a husband's love for his wife is like Christ's love for His church, he will continually seek to help purify her from any sort of defilement. He will seek to protect her from the world's contamination and protect her holiness, virtue, and purity in every way. He will never induce her to do that which is wrong or unwise or expose her to that which is less than good."<sup>[4]</sup>

Croteau rejects both of these compromises, and argues that we should get rid of the concept of spiritual headship altogether. To get here, he argues that Eph 5:26-27 is a diversion, and that while the Apostle Paul started making an analogy to Christ's relationship with the Church in Eph 5:25, he has exited that analogy in verses 26 & 27 and is now talking only about Christ and the Church. Croteau's claim is that verses 26 & 27 are a *digression*, and while sandwiched in instruction on husbands and wives have nothing to do with husbands and wives (emphasis mine):

The third category clarifies that the husband is to have a sacrificial love for his wife and the example of this sacrificial love is the way that Christ loved the church. All of the discussion about sanctification, presenting the church as glorious and without spot or wrinkle, is primarily about Christ and the church. Thielman says, "**The analogy between the love of husbands for their wives and the love of Christ for the church leads to a digression on the relationship between Christ and the church.**"[8]

He reiterates this in the conclusion:

Analysis of the structure and context of Eph 5:25–27 demonstrated that a husband is given only one command in the passage: love his wife. The rest of the passage used Christ's love for the church as a comparison for the sake of explaining the depths of the sacrifice of this love. The sacrificial love of Christ is similar to the kind of sacrificial love a husband should have for his wife...

None of this means that a husband shouldn't seek for his wife to become more like Christ daily. Since every Christian should desire the progressive sanctification of each other, how much more a husband with his wife. However, the main point of this paper is to say that Eph 5:25–27 does not directly address this issue...

...Attempts to apply the specifics in verses 26 and 27 are misguided as it is specifically talking about the way Christ loved the church. The application of verses 26 and 27 can be seen in what Paul says in 28–29. Therefore, Eph 5:26–27 does not describe as part of a husband's duty the progressive sanctification of his wife.

This is not (yet) from what I can tell a widely held position by complementarians. Most complementarians still struggle to find a way to nominally support spiritual headship without supporting it in practice. However, the fact that the CBMW is publishing this argument means that abandoning the concept of spiritual headship entirely is a discussion they are quite open to. This is a formal announcement that the complementarian Overton window now includes the argument that there is no such thing as spiritual headship.

\*An alternate rejection of the idea that feminism is women rebelling exactly as the Bible tells us they are most tempted to rebel is the claim that feminism is a [scam men have run on gullible women](#). However, this is not the mainstream complementarian view.

\*\*And related verses such as 1 Corinthians 14:35.

---

Archived from [theredarchive.com](http://theredarchive.com)