

# **Q&A: Is their God ordained gender-roles for the Christian home? What does it mean to be the "head" of the home? What doesn't it mean?**

I've received two question to do with the theme of gender roles and women in ministry etc. I'm not sure which order they arrived in. I'll answer this one first because it's somewhat conceptually prior.

When it comes to "gender roles" different people mean different things.

Some use "role" in a very functional sense – certain jobs belong to the woman (stereotypically home-making, domestic stuff) and certain jobs belong to the man (stereotypically providing for the family etc.). I think this is less ascribed to these days – even among the most complementarian of couples I find men cooking and women working for income etc. I don't think this is a helpful place to be begin.

Some use "role" in more of a management sense – certain decisions belong to the man, and other decisions belong to the woman. In an extrapolation this is the "wife obeys the husband" sense. Less extreme, but equally unhelpful is a "we work cooperatively, but if we can't agree, he wins" attitude. Again, however, I find inconsistency – amongst complementarian couples you will find everything from choices of dinner menu to decisions about remortgaging the house made by either partner or both. I don't think this is a helpful place to begin.

Some use "role" in more of a relational sense – and I think

this is where I would want to begin. And it begins with unity. For instance, Jesus interprets Genesis 2 in Matthew 19 along these lines: "They are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

The aim of each partner in a marriage/household relationship is therefore to maintain that unity. The question is "what do I do, how do I respond/engage express myself in relationship that will maintain and build a genuine unity?"

And that begins with mutuality and submission. Ephesians 5:21 expresses this: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Submission can only be given, not taken. And so the intimate unity of the marriage relationship is, at it's heart, a giving of oneself to the other. The cry of the heart is "I am yours."

If there is differentiation, or a dynamic asymmetry, in what this means for the man or the woman, it can only be grasped at this point. Otherwise you end up destroying the mutuality. (It's like slipping into tritheism if you forget that Trinity is unity).

The differentiation I see is that the masculine cry of "I am yours" is meaningfully expressed in terms of "I give myself FOR you." And the feminine cry of "I am yours" is meaningfully expressed in terms of "I give myself TO you."

When it works, this is beautiful. There is no danger in the woman placing herself in the hands of someone who absolutely has her best interests at heart. Rather, ugliness in relationship comes, for instance, when a man takes the one who gives herself to him and abuses that gift, or, when a woman takes the one who gives himself for her and belittles or betrays that gift.

The masculine side of this is often expressed in terms of "headship" taking cue from Ephesians 5:23 which states "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the

church.” The explanation of what this actually means comes a couple of verses later where it talks not about Christ’s authority or lordship but in terms of his giving of himself FOR the church. A man therefore loves himself when he truly loves his wife – by “dying” for her (in the sense of dying to his own interests and living for hers) etc.

For this reason when I hear men standing on the fact that they are the “head of their home” I often wonder if they realise the true meaning of what they are saying.

And I don’t look for how their family is managed, I look to see whether that man is truly serving his wife and family with gentleness and respect and a deep sense of self-sacrifice. And if I don’t see that, he may call himself the head of his house, but I can usually think of other parts of the anatomy that are a better fit.

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