

DO GENDER ROLES CONTRIBUTE TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN THE HOME AND CHURCH?

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 93 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have Becky and Rachel with me, and we are going to talk about what I believe is an extremely important subject for all of us to understand. The problem with it is that it has two big words, and sometimes (at least for me) when I see big words my brain just goes offline. I just don't want to think about anything that has big words in it.

The two big words are "complementarianism" and "egalitarianism." Do you know what the other problem is with two words? It's the "isms." When I see "isms" I think, "Oh my gosh, that means there's an entire package of stuff behind that, and let's not talk about that." But here's why we must talk about it. Those two terms describe a huge issue in the Christian church today. It's been an issue for fifty or sixty year. Actually, it has been a church issue since the beginning of the church.

The reason it is important in the discussion of emotional and spiritual abuse is that complementarianism implies that men and women have different roles and that men are in leadership or have roles that are powering over women. Egalitarianism basically means all people are equal. When you have an "ism" that teaches that one kind of person is and should be in power over another kind of person, the problem is that is the definition of abuse: one person having power and control over another.

What we are seeing in the last few years: the rise of the #MeToo movement, the rise of the #ChurchToo movement, and the growing rise of women in destructive marriages. There is a ground swell, a tsunami that is rising of women saying, "Woah! I have been abused in my marriage for years, and I thought it was normal. I thought it was okay for my husband to treat me this way. He firmly believes it's okay, and my church firmly believes it's okay."

But it's not okay. It's not the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, all those wonderful things. That's not the fruit that we're seeing in Christian marriages today. So we must figure out why not and what is wrong, because here's the thing. The enemy comes in, but he doesn't come in with this big, black, dark pool of smoke and everyone says, "Oh, it's evil!" He doesn't come in like that. He comes in with this beautiful feast on an amazing platter and it looks godly, holy, and spiritual. It is

super tasty going down and it feels great. Everyone eats and drinks it, and then everyone is puking their guts out in the toilet the next day. That's what this is. Let's look at that food, that feast, and let's find the poison in it so we can stop eating it. So welcome to the podcast, girls.

RACHEL: Hey.

BECKY: Good to be with you.

NATALIE: First, I want to talk about what those terms mean and where they came from. I'm not sure if you guys have your own thoughts about that. If you didn't do any research on it, I'm curious what is in your mind when you hear those words, "complementarianism" and "egalitarianism"?

RACHEL: So "complementary" means that you work together. You're like puzzle pieces, right? It's regretful because it's a bit of a misnomer for how that thought view takes shape. It really focuses on the roles of men and women, and of course it emphasizes that power-over role as you said, Natalie.

When you think about the natural progression of that, if you put yourself in the egalitarian camp, the argument becomes that you don't want to recognize and celebrate the differences between men and women. I don't think I've met any egalitarian who actually believes that men and women are just the same. Striving for equality does not mean that men and women have no differences, that we are sexless, genderless beings. That's not the worldview of egalitarianism.

All you must do is look at the structure of male bodies and female bodies to see that, yes, they complement one another, and that is beautiful. But there is a lot of bad fruit that comes from this power-over dynamic. As you have also said in the past, a lot of healthy marriages who would describe themselves as complementarian actually function as egalitarian marriages. So if they say, "We believe that, and there is no abuse in our house," they are probably not living out the worldview of complementarianism in the day-to-day.

NATALIE: Yes. I totally agree with that.

BECKY: When I was thinking about the topic, the first thing that comes to my mind is, in my personal experience, I always run into one of three types of women. Well, four, because one would say, "I don't know what you're talking about." From there you will have women who have no idea and do not understand at all why we are even

questioning it. They have a good marriage. They have a loving husband. They feel they work with their husband in a complementary role, not necessarily... As Rachel was saying, they function as egalitarian.

Again, egalitarian is that "feminist" thing. Egalitarianism is that "anti-Bible" thing. They want to keep to the traditions and the doctrines of their beliefs. They look at it and will fight back with you, even though you agree. They just don't want to question because they don't understand. They really have no clue.

Then you have the women who are in the abusive marriages in the complementary role, and they are either living in cognitive dissonance where they truly don't understand how this is affecting their life or they are too afraid to even approach it. When you were saying the word "complementary" and it is how we complement each other, I've also heard people say, "It's because women complete the man." If you are telling me I am there to complement him or to complete him, then I myself am an incomplete person.

Did God create incomplete people? No. He created me fully complete, fully capable, fully able to care for myself. "Autonomy" is my favorite word. Complementarianism takes that away. It makes you question your capacity and your ability if you get down to the nuts and bolts. If you are living in an egalitarian marriage but you call it complementarian, again, you just will not understand. My best friend would say she is complementarian, but she is a pastor.

NATALIE: How can you...? I don't get that!

BECKY: Right? But when she defines it, she is actually defining egalitarianism.

NATALIE: So she is clearly confused about what complementarianism is.

BECKY: I think that is very widespread. Natalie, women who you minister to and help, I think they instantly understand it. When they start to come out of the fog they realize, "Wow! This is a theology, a belief system, that can nowhere be validated in the Bible." But it is an idea, a tradition, that the church has held onto.

NATALIE: So for people who don't know what exactly we are talking about yet, here is the definition of complementarianism. I shouldn't say the definition. This is what they believe. They believe that Men and women are created equal but are called to distinct and complementary roles in the church and the home, with women in voluntary submission to the servant leadership of men.

Notice the little words they put in there. Instead of saying, “with women in submission to the leadership of men,” they put two words into that definition to throw you off-base. The words are “voluntary” submission, so women are choosing to go in and be subservient. Then men are in leadership, but they are doing it in a “servant” way. It is so confusing.

BECKY: It is doublespeak.

NATALIE: It is totally doublespeak. It is absolutely ridiculous. Here is the rest of it. Women are free to teach and lead women and children but are restricted from authoritative teaching and leadership roles over men. In some environments, women aren’t allowed to lead in any way, and in others they can have limited leadership under the umbrella of men.

Let me give you one practical example of how this plays out. The church that used to be John Piper’s church excommunicated me. During the process of my trying to extricate myself from my abusive marriage in that church, I was going to them for help. They had decided they were going to take a stand against abuse. They were going to bring in some professionals who were advocates in the field of abuse to train their leadership on how to combat this terrible thing in the church. That all sounds great so far.

But one of the top advocates at that time, with experience and education and the whole nine yards, was Leslie Vernick. They had originally invited her to come and do part of the training. But then they changed their minds because she didn’t have a penis. That is the only reason. I’m sorry for saying that word on a podcast, but that is the ugly fact of it. They couldn’t have a woman stand up in front because the leadership was men. She would stand up in front of them in a teaching role, and they couldn’t have that.

It didn’t matter that she had more experience. (She had all the experience. They had no experience.) She had experience, knowledge, education. She had written several books on it. She was already speaking in other churches on it. None of that mattered. She had this beautiful gift she could have offered this leadership team. That didn’t matter. The only thing, the only criteria for them that made any difference at all, was a lack of a body part. Now that is reprehensible! That is happening in our church.

That church is huge on complementarianism because the pastor of that church for many years, John Piper, was (I’m not sure if he still is) one of the heads of the Counsel on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which is the primary evangelical Christian organization that promotes the complementarian view. They invented and coined the

term, and all their online and offline writings and teachings promote and encourage this. So that church is a hornet's nest of this teaching.

There are so many people who have come out of that church completely beat up and demolished in their personal and spiritual lives because of this teaching. This teaching undermines the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ at such a profound level because it destroys women and children. And it destroys men because it strips them of their God-given ability to be like Jesus Christ.

BECKY: Absolutely. It strips the world of the answers to so many problems. Could you imagine if every woman could do what she was gifted to do? We could have a cure for breast cancer right now. We could have starvation eradicated. We don't know. While you were talking I was thinking. To anyone listening for whom this idea is new to them, maybe they go to a mega-church where this is not a problem, they have a female pastor, or maybe they've never heard of this, I think their first question would be, "Why are women gravitating? Voluntary servitude? Why would a woman do that?"

I thought I'd tell you why I did it: because I had an abusive marriage, and I thought this might be the solution since my abuser had already convinced me I was the problem. A natural next step would be to grasp onto complementarianism because it is spiritual. "It will definitely fix the marriage next." That's why I ended up believing it fully. I drank all the Kool-Aid in the cup and then asked for seconds. What I didn't realize is that it enabled my abuser even more.

I want to say one more thing about servant leadership. I am the CEO of a company. I have a lot of employees. Am I a nice person? Absolutely. Would I use the word "servant leadership?" Sure, we can throw that word out. Why not? I make it a goal that my employees are increasing their skill level as they work for me so when they leave me, they are better than when they came. Great. Few companies do that. But at the end of the day, I am still the boss. I can still fire. I can still tell you what to do. You are not equal to me. Does that make sense? You can say "servant leader" all day long, but that does not change the fact that a man can tell the woman and she must obey because of this idea of complementarianism.

NATALIE: Boom!

BECKY: Boom.

RACHEL: Here's the thing. If both the man and the woman in a marriage partnership are following Jesus, I don't believe that this issue comes up where one person must

take control and direct. It's a togetherness. It's that we're on the same page and we're both running hard after Jesus. We're not staring at each other in a power struggle.

NATALIE: Right.

BECKY: The imagery they use is that you're on a fifty-yard dash. Your husband is next to you, and you are trying to beat him instead of saying, "No, you're in a relay race. You're both working hard to get the part done that you can do best."

NATALIE: Right.

RACHEL: Exactly. I was thinking about functioning as an egalitarian. If we consistently look at men and women as being in these strict roles, it doesn't leave room for the natural giftings that the Bible talks about God giving His church – the spiritual gifts, whatever they may be. It is different for every person. But if we act like there are defined, strict ideas about what each person looks like, it crowds all that out. I think that is a huge disservice to the church.

BECKY: I'll give an example of watching that happen in a church. This was many years ago. It was a country church. It was kind of small. They needed someone to do the books. Now obviously a woman could be a secretary, but she could not do the books, the finances. That's a man's job.

They looked around and there was a female accountant at the church. (She ended up leaving. She didn't last very long because typically, professional women don't make it long in these types of churches.) There was a man there who was a bank teller. "Well, he should do the finances because he is a male and he's a bank teller. Forget this woman who is twenty years older and has been doing accounting for over twenty years working for a corporation. No, we're going to have the guy who is a teller." There's nothing wrong with being a bank teller, but a teller doesn't necessarily know how to do bookkeeping. I vividly remember that and thinking, "How stupid!"

RACHEL: It is stupid, and it's not biblical. I'm sure they would have many texts from the Bible to justify that. But that is more influenced by culture and 1950s misogyny than anything found in the Bible.

NATALIE: Right. There are two things you guys brought up. One is the 1950s misogyny. The whole idea of complementarianism was a reaction to the feminism that was rising in the middle of the twentieth century, some radical feminism: the bra burning, abortion, and all that. The church thought they should squelch this movement but

couldn't do it in a way that made it seem like they were doing what they were actually doing, which is putting men in power over women. So they carefully crafted words together to create a smokescreen that would squelch feminism... Which, by the way, not all feminism is bad. If it wasn't for feminism, we would not be able to vote this year in the election. There are so many things that we would not be able to do.

BECKY: The word "feminism," just like "egalitarianism," just means that we are equal. That's it. We have the same rights as everyone else.

NATALIE: The problem is that there is a brand of feminism that believes women need to be over men.

BECKY: Right. But that's on both spectrums. You have the evangelical Christians who are showing up at funerals for veterans... You've got crazy on both sides. You will always have crazy on both sides. The problem is, it seems like there is a much larger percentage of churches, even if they don't formally come to a conclusion on what they believe, that function and operate in the complementarian role, which means that one out of every three women sitting in their pews who is being abused will never get help.

RACHEL: It takes courage to look at something as big of a word as "feminism" and take a nuanced approach instead of just dismissing it whole cloth, because there are radical elements who are, of course, wrong.

BECKY: There are radical elements of egalitarianism.

NATALIE: Right. You're right.

BECKY: The same with complementarianism where women can't... Well, honestly, the most extreme complementarians are the Muslims where the wife must cover her head.

NATALIE: Right. If you want to take that philosophy, that worldview, to the nth degree, that's where you'd go. You'd go there and further. And people do. Here's another problem. In the homes where the men are the "servant leaders," that is happening in the homes on a fundamental level. They take that philosophy, and when you live it out in its base level, what you have is a terrible recipe for abuse, neglect, and entitlement. It's like a petri dish for narcissism, really. Children born into that environment grow up to either become narcissists themselves or they grow up to become future victims.

I want to read a couple of verses. I want you to think about these verses considering this idea of men powering over women. "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you

to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Now how are we supposed to walk worthy of this calling? "With humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." (It doesn't say bearing with men in love or bearing with women in love. It says bearing with one another in love.) "Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

So there are lots of "one's" and "all's," but there is no division between sneetches who have stars on their bellies and sneetches who don't have stars on their bellies. This is what the church is. The church is a unified family with a Father and brothers and sisters. A healthy church is going to exemplify this humility, patience, love, unity, and hope. And God is our Father over this church. I don't see any indication anywhere that some siblings are supposed to have power over the other based on gender, race, or socioeconomic status at all.

Here's the other verse, and then I want to ask you guys about this. The other verse is Galatians 2:2: "There is neither Jew nor Greek..." Now, that is just an overall idea that it doesn't matter what nationality you are or what part of the world you come from. "There is neither slave nor free." Again, it doesn't matter what your status is economically. "There is no male and female." It doesn't matter what your gender is. "For you are all one in Christ Jesus." -Galatians 2:2.

We don't throw out all the verses about brothers and sisters once we get married. It's not "Well, now you're married, so all those verses go out the window. The whole scope of the Bible that teaches these beautiful 'one another's,' that all gets thrown out the window, and now your Bible consists of five verses in the New Testament that talk about marriage relationships." (I don't know how many verses it is, but it is barely a handful.) "Those are the only verses that are about you. And we're going to take those verses and twist them up a little so we can present this idea that men are over women in those marriages."

That's not the direction we want to go with this, but it is the direction some people go. When they go there, that's when you have all this pain and agony. You don't have love. You have hate. You have fear. You have hate by the people who think they are better than the other people, and you have fear and sometimes hate by those who are underneath. That is not the fruit of the Spirit.

I wanted to bring this back to something we were talking about before the podcast started. We were talking about roles. I think it was Rachel who said people will say, "We

can't have a bunch of chiefs in the Indian village. We only need to have one chief." Let's talk about that a bit.

BECKY: Can I go back to those verses quickly? I want to tell my experience for those who have probably experienced this at their church. They would actually fully agree. They would say there is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free. There is no male or female. We are all equal. They will say that until they are blue in the face.

But then they will turn around and say, "But being equal does not define role." You've got one of two problems. First, I really think that there are men who walk around saying this who believe it. It is cognitive dissonance. You cannot say, "You are equal, but you're not equal." You just can't say it. I'm sorry, but you can't say, "My role is the owner, but I'm not the owner. Your role is a manager, but you're not the manager." Does that make sense?

RACHEL: Yes!

BECKY: So they will tell you, "Absolutely, we agree in all kindness. That's why when a man is making the decision, we ask that he be gentle." That is their answer. Part of the problem is when a woman says, "Wait a minute. This scripture says I'm equal," they say, "Absolutely you are equal. You have just as much value and worth as every person on this earth. But God had specific roles." Now first, you can't find that anywhere in scripture. That is pulled out of the air. They are taking scripture and twisting it. They are really relying on this tradition. They will go back to Adam and Eve to support that the man is in charge and twist that story. So either it is cognitive dissonance or they truly know it is not the same thing and they just want power.

RACHEL: Yeah.

BECKY: I was the one that said the chief and Indians, and that was something... I must have been in a lot of looney churches, or maybe this is just the south, but they use all these little analogies: you can only have one chief. Everyone else needs to be Indians. I think Rachel was saying something about them using worldly positions and worldly ideas to define a Christian theology.

RACHEL: Yes. And that happens a lot. I wish that the church in America would be repentant about the way we have allowed our culture to replace actual theology from scripture. We're not aware of how our worldview and the culture that we live in affects how we interpret the Bible. We don't have a good way of reading the Bible to understand the culture it is coming from. We apply it like it is coming from our culture.

It's really twisted up.

Once you study the Greek culture that it emerged from and what was going on in context, it makes a lot more sense where these things were coming from – some difficult verses, like in 1 Timothy and in Corinthians, about women being silent. There aren't always the most straightforward answers, but there are answers about why these hard verses are present in the Bible.

BECKY: There's a context to them.

RACHEL: Yes. But we often just want to take one verse, which was never how scripture was supposed to be read. These scriptures, especially these Epistles of Paul and others, were meant to be read aloud in its entirety. But we take these single verses and prop them up like they are a command.

BECKY: Without trying to understand.

RACHEL: Right. Without trying to understand what it meant to the people whom it was sent to.

NATALIE: Right, and there are a ton of amazing books that some of us have read trying to deprogram from the propaganda that we grew up with. Those books have been out there and continue to be written by theologians. But the problem is that people who are stuck in churches that are immersed in this propaganda, they are being told not to read those books. Why do you think that is? Why do we have to be so afraid of educating ourselves? Because we might change our minds, that's why.

BECKY: I've got a great story. This week a gal texted me. I'm studying certain topics: the brain, for example, and she is studying the same topics. But everything she said where she read something from, she would preface it with, "But he's a Christian author." I said, "My absolute favorite author to read about the topic of neurology is an atheist."

The reason I enjoy reading him and listening to him is because it challenges me to overcome his objections to a God. It has made me so much stronger in my belief in God, and I'm not afraid. What can his opinion do to me? Am I so weak-minded that I don't have the ability to take logic and discern? I think the problem is that there is so much fear in churches.

RACHEL: Yes.

BECKY: First, if it is not affecting your daily life – you don't have an abusive husband or family member – there is no reason for you to question it. That's the sad part. That's how we determine what we believe: what works the best and feels good rather than what is true. The church would say, "That's how the world lives." But that is actually how the church lives.

NATALIE: Exactly. That is how everyone knee-jerk operates, whether Christians want to admit it. Those who will admit it are willing to look at what is underneath all that and ask, "Do I really want to continue to believe this? What is the logical outcome of this kind of belief? Maybe there is something more I can learn out there."

BECKY: This would be a conversation you might have with a Christian. She's super skinny and there's a plate of brownies. I have diabetes and the plate of brownies is there. She says, "The brownies are good for you." I say, "No, they're not." But she is die-hard. "They are absolutely good for you. Look, I'm not heavy. I don't gain weight when I eat them."

Then she pulls out the box and shows the ingredients with the scientific proof that it is bad. If she's an extreme Christian, she is still going to hold fast that the brownie is not bad. It's good for you. It's the simplest analogy I could think of. But that is how the church operates. As long as it is not bothering them, as long as it is not an issue they have to deal with, they will not question the status quo.

RACHEL: This is a good thing to wrap up with. Going back to that scripture you read, Natalie, the theme woven throughout that (I think it is even mentioned once) is unity. Unity is a command in scripture, and Jesus prayed in the garden for us in John 17 that we would be unified, that future believers would be unified. It is throughout the Epistles.

Yet we don't really talk about that. We don't make giant movements, and we're not always striving for unity. In fact, if you look at the fruit, many times it is the opposite. A lot of times churches are pointing fingers at one another about how they aren't following their idea of... Especially in gender roles, they elevate it to an issue of salvation: "If you aren't doing this then you aren't a Christian, or if you're not doing this then you are wrong and therefore you are shunned and canceled."

That is the opposite of what we are called to do. We have allowed these issues to tear us apart, and that is sinful. We are commanded to be unified as the body of Christ. We cannot do that when there is pride and certainty that our way is the only way because we read it on that page in scripture, and there is no room for conversation or looking

into what it really could mean, etc. That is the end of the discussion. We have a lot of repentance to do as a corporate body, especially in America, about how we have approached this issue.

NATALIE: Yeah. That leads to what I was going to say, which is this. People who are listening may think, "What can I do to change this?" Some of you may think, "Woah. I didn't even know any of this before, but it totally makes sense." (I was going to say some of you have already tuned out, but then you wouldn't be listening anymore.) Others are thinking, "What can I do to make a difference? How can we turn this around?" If you are anything like me, you are thinking, "I've got to tell my church, and we've got to change. We have to be better at this. We have to change our theology."

Here's the thing. In and of yourself, you cannot go out and change your church. In fact, if you try to say, "Listen to this podcast," they are going to probably attack you. Church organizations, generally speaking, are very entrenched in what they believe. They will not say, "Thank you for all of that insight. We never knew that before. We're going to completely change now." They will not do that. People in organizations don't change until they come to the end of themselves, until they are completely demolished. If a bomb goes off in your house and destroys your house, then you change. When you rebuild the house, it will probably look different from what it looked like before the bomb went off. Until the bomb goes off in church, nothing is going to change. And I'm not saying go make bombs!

What I am saying, and what you can do, is that you can change you. I don't want you to underestimate the power of personal change to have a major impact on the world. You may not see that impact in your lifetime. But as you change, there will be a ripple effect in the people around you. Let's take the analogy of a drop of watercolor paint on a piece of paper. It is very concentrated in color in the first place it dropped onto the paper, but as it spreads out the color dissipates and fades. But it still spreads out. Someone else that you have spread out to may suddenly catch on fire and change drastically as you did, and they become another drop on the paper. Over time, you've got a colorful piece of paper that is very different from the white paper it was before.

I want to encourage you that though you are one synapse in the universe of time and space, your synapse counts. Your neural connection counts. Make it count. You work on you. You change the way you believe. You decide how you want to change, not just your beliefs. It will change how you feel. That will change what you do and how you show up in the world. That will create the results in your life and have a ripple effect on everyone else's life.

I believe that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is like a piece of yeast that starts small, but soon it leavens the whole loaf of bread. It's like a mustard seed that starts small, but it grows a huge tree that shelters animals and birds. The Bible is full of this concept. I think we can wrap up this session with that concept. Go forth and conquer. That's it! That's all I have for you. Rebecca and Rachel, do you have anything else to add?

RACHEL: No. That was beautiful. The Gospel is always the solution.

NATALIE: It is. Love. It always comes down to love. I tell my kids when they are in Sunday School class, if they get asked a hard question, just say "God" or "love" and the answer will be correct.

With that, thank you so much for listening. If you like this podcast, go to Apple iTunes and leave a rating and review. It helps our podcast get heard by more eardrums. That's what we want. We want more women to be set free. Thanks for listening. Until next time, fly free!