

The Flying Free Podcast with Natalie Hoffman, Episode 334 - Is Complementarianism Damaging the Mental Health of Christian Women?

Heads up, friend: What you're about to read is a raw, unedited transcript straight from the robots. That means you'll find some weird words, funky punctuation, and moments that make you go, "Huh?" If you want the real experience (and to actually know what's going on), I recommend reading the polished article, listening to the full episode, or watching it on 1.5x speed with captions on. Your brain will thank you.

Natalie: Have you ever felt like the submissive ideal woman your church promotes is quietly crushing your soul? In this episode, we're gonna unpack some hard hitting research, real life stories, and powerful insights that reveal the true emotional and spiritual impact of Complementarian teachings on women. If you've secretly wondered whether something might be deeply wrong with how we've been taught to understand biblical submission.

Stick around.

Today we're diving into a topic that, let's face, it might ruffle a few feathers in the church pews, but that's kind of my specialty. Before we jump in, I wanna share something personal with you. Years ago I sat in a women's Bible study, nodding along as a leader, explained that God designed men to lead and women to follow.

In fact, in this particular Bible study, we were going through a book called *Me Obey Him*, which taught the view that women should obey their husbands even if they ask us to sin. Yes, husbands trumped God in this view. I highlighted all the right verses about being a submissive wife. I bought other books with titles like *Created to Be His Help Meet* and *the Excellent Wife*.

I was in every sense, the perfect Complementarian poster child, and I was dying inside. Does that sound familiar to anyone? Do Complementarian teachings genuinely serve women, or does this quietly harm their emotional, spiritual, and psychological health? And let's be clear about what we're discussing. When I say complementarianism, I'm referring to the theological view that men and

women have different but complimentary roles in marriage, family life, and religious leadership.

With men having the authoritative headship role while women are called to submit. It's not just a set of marriage guidelines, it's actually an entire framework that shapes how Christian women view themselves, their worth, their capabilities, and even their relationship with God. And when intertwined with fundamentalism, which emphasizes strict adherence to religious doctrines and literal interpretations of scripture, it creates a powerful system that can be difficult to question, let alone escape.

So buckle up. This isn't gonna be a light and fluffy episode where I give you seven ways to submit more joyfully to your husband. Instead, we're gonna look at research, psychology, theology, and real life experiences to understand the true impact of these teachings on women's lives. And for some of you, this may be the first time someone has validated what you have felt in your bones, but you couldn't quite put your finger on it.

So first, let's look at the research. When I began to question Complementarian teachings, I thought that my painful experience was unique or that maybe I was just doing submission wrong. In my situation, I was wired to be a leader. I was a leader in my school. I used to organize in, in my neighborhood. I used to organize people in the neighborhood to do, you know, to play fun games in my school, elementary school, in college, in my ministry.

Leadership came naturally to me. Now, I didn't care if I led or followed, but, and usually if someone else was leading, I was more than happy to let them lead. But if no one else was taking the reins and leading, I would jump in and initiate. I would take initiative with things. I liked to start things and get things going.

It was in my blood. It was how God made me. Now, my first husband, on the other hand, was not a natural born leader. He was a behind the scenes kind of guy. He was hardworking, he was consistent, he was very responsible in his job and so on, but he didn't initiate things. He just wasn't the way he was wired. I never saw him start anything, although if he was put in charge of a project, he could execute that very well.

So here we were, two people in this marriage who were wired very differently, but we were in this culture that told us that he had to be more like me, and I was supposed to be more like him. And so it was a recipe for disaster. After that marriage ended and it ended for a lot of other reasons, not just this.

You can read about that. Uh, my spiritual journey in my memoir, all the Scary Little Gods, it's on Amazon. But after that whole experience, I started digging into some research and I heard from thousands of women in similar situations and realized we were all experiencing something much greater than just what was happening in our churches, in our marriages.

This was systemic. So let's start with some groundbreaking work by psychologist Marlene Weell, who identified something called religious trauma syndrome. Weill's research shows that people who leave controlling fundamentalist religious environments often exhibit symptoms that are similar to PTSD, like anxiety and depression, difficulty with making decisions and feelings of worthlessness.

And guess what? Women raised in strict complementarian environments are particularly vulnerable to these same effects. One study by Krause found that women in communities emphasizing female submission showed significantly lower scores on measures of self-esteem and autonomy compared to women in more egalitarian faith communities.

Now I can already hear some of you thinking, but Natalie Correlation doesn't equal causation. Maybe these women just had other issues. That's a fair point, but here's where it gets interesting. Research by Johnson and Ferraro examining domestic relationships found that marriages with rigid gender hierarchies, you know, the kind that COMPLEMENTARIAN teachings often promote, showed higher rates of what they called control instigated abuse.

So in these relationships, the husband's headship would often morph into a license to control various aspects of the family life. Everything from financial decisions to the wife's personal choices. And here's what's particularly troubling. These controlling behaviors weren't always recognized as problematic by either partner because they were cloaked in religious language.

I'm just leading our family as God commanded sounds a lot better than I'm controlling you because I like having power, right? The fascinating thing about Complementarianism is how it creates what psychologists call learned helplessness, a concept first identified by Martin Seligman. Seligman's experiments showed that when subjects repeatedly face adverse situations that they can't escape, they eventually stop trying, even if escape becomes possible.

So apply this to marriage when a woman is consistently taught that one, her husband is her spiritual head, two, God wants her to submit to him and everything, and three. You can't question this arrangement or that sin. What

happens? Many women stop believing that they can or should make independent decisions.

They develop a kind of spiritual and emotional paralysis. It infantilizes grown women. A 2019 study by Walker examined women who had left Complementarian marriages and found that 78% of them reported experiencing significant anxiety when making decisions without a male's approval even years after leaving those relationships.

Now that's pretty sad. It gets worse. Research by Tar Rico found connections between strict religious gender roles and higher rates of depression in women. In her article, religious trauma and women's mental health, she notes that women in fundamentalist religious communities report clinical depression at rates up to 40% higher than the general population.

The kicker. These women often didn't seek help because they were taught that negative emotions were spiritual failures. If you're depressed, you are not trusting God enough or submit more fully and you'll find joy in your role. I've heard these exact words from pastors, counselors, and well-meaning friends.

You know what makes me laugh in that painful, ironic way, the number of complementarian marriage books that suggest women who are unhappy in their submissive roles just haven't submitted deeply enough. That's like telling someone with a broken leg that they're limping because they're not walking correctly.

Have you tried walking harder? Maybe the problem isn't your shattered femur. It's your walking attitude. Okay. Back to the research. A comprehensive study by Davis in 2018 examined the long-term psychological effects of Complementarian teachings on women's identity development. The findings showed that women raised in these environments often developed what Davis termed bifurcate bifurcated identities, essentially maintaining two separate selves.

The compliance submissive self presented to their religious community and a hidden self that harbor doubts, desires, and independent thoughts. This psychological splitting takes an enormous toll. As one participant in Davis's study put it, I spent so many years being who I was supposed to be, that I honestly don't know who I actually am.

I'm willing to bet some of you watching right now are nodding your head so hard they might fall off. And here's another uncomfortable finding from MA

from Mahoney's 2020. Research. Women in highly complimentary marriages reported significantly lower marital satisfaction over time compared to women in egalitarian marriages.

Yet they were less likely to consider divorce due to religious prohibitions, creating a perfect storm of trapped unhappiness. So what does all this research tell us? In essence, complementarian theology correlates strongly with the reduced psychological wellbeing for women. It's associated with lower self-esteem, increased anxiety and depression, difficulty with autonomous decision making, and reduced relationship satisfaction.

And that's not even touching on the spiritual trauma that many women experience when they begin questioning these teachings. The fear of God's disapproval can be paralyzing for some people. As one woman told me, I'd rather face my husband's anger than feel like I'm disappointing God by not being submissive enough.

Now, I can guess what some of you are thinking, but Natalie, the Bible clearly teaches wives to submit to their husbands. Are you saying the Bible is wrong? No, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that we need to examine whether our interpretations of scripture are as clear cut as we've been led to believe.

Let's look at Ephesians five that go to passage for Complementarian teachings. Yes. Verse 22 says, wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord, but. Interestingly, many biblical scholars point out that in the original Greek text, the verb submit doesn't even appear. In verse 22, it's carried over from verse 21, which says, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Biblical scholar, Marge Moscow notes that the entire passage begins with mutual submission, everyone submitting to everyone in love before addressing specific relationships. So when we cherry pick verse 22, without the context of verse 21, we distort the message. Carolyn Custis James in her book called Half the Church, takes this even further by arguing that the Hebrew word either translated as helper in Genesis, which it's often used to justify a woman's supportive role, but it's the same word used to describe God as Israel's helper.

So it conveys strength, not subordination. From a psychological perspective, complementarian teachings often directly contradict what we know about healthy human development and relationships. Psychologist Judith Herman's work on trauma recovery emphasizes that a core element of healing is reclaiming personal autonomy.

That's the ability to make choices and exercise control over your life. And yet Complimentarian teachings often explicitly discourage women's autonomy, framing it as rebellion against God's order. Similarly, attachment theory founder John Bowlby. His research demonstrates that healthy adult relationships are characterized by mutual dependency and emotional accessibility, not a one-sided submission and authority.

Even more concerning some Complementarian teachings align disturbingly well with what psychologist Lundy Bancroft identifies as tactics of controlling partners, like monitoring behaviors, limiting independence, making unilateral decisions, and using spiritual manipulation to maintain control. Think about the messages that many Christian women receive.

Your husband is your spiritual covering. You need to get your husband's permission before making decisions. Your desire should be secondary to your husband's needs. If you feel unhappy in your role, the problem is your rebellious heart. These aren't just theological positions. These are psychological frameworks that shape how women see themselves and their place in the world.

And when the idea of religious authority is used to reinforce these messages, they become extraordinarily powerful. Now, I'm not saying that all complementarian marriages are abusive. That would be unfair and untrue. Many couples navigate these teachings in ways that allow for mutual respect and care. I know couples like this.

But I am saying that Complementarian theology does create a fertile ground for control, diminishment, and even abuse of women, particularly when paired with fundamentalist interpretations that allow no questioning. So let's move beyond the research and the theology. I wanna share some real stories from women that I've talked to and worked with.

Now, I have changed identifying details and tweaked things a little bit. I've combined stories from different situations just to protect people's privacy, but these experiences are painfully common, and I have heard these stories in various versions of these stories, literally thousands of times. So there's Sarah who came to me after 20 years in what she described as a model complimentary marriage.

Her husband was respected as a spiritual leader in their church. He never hi her. He quoted Bible verses during family devotions. So from the outside they looked perfect, but inside their home, her husband made every decision from how they educated their children to what Sarah wore to church. If she

questioned him, he would remind her that God had placed him as the head of their home and her resistance was ultimately resistance to God's plan.

When Sarah developed depression, her church friends suggested that she needed to find more joy in serving her family. No one asked her if her marriage might be contributing to her mental health struggles. Sarah told me I spent two decades believing that my exhaustion, anxiety and emptiness were spiritual failures on my part.

It never occurred to me that constant submission was crushing my soul and annihilating my identity. Then there's Rebecca who married young and embraced Complementarian teachings wholeheartedly. Her husband began controlling their finances completely, giving her a small allowance and requiring receipts for all purchases, and then going over those receipts with her present to point out all the things that she should have done differently when she was grocery shopping or picking up other necessities for the family.

When she expressed discomfort with this arrangement, he would bring up Proverbs 31 of all things, noting that a virtuous wife manages the household resources wisely now, and for some reason he was, he would draw a connection between that and then he would say, if you were truly virtuous, you wouldn't mind my oversight.

I don't think that's what those verses are saying, but this is how people twist scripture to, you know, control and manipulate other people. Well. Over time, Rebecca lost confidence in her ability to even make small decisions. She told me that she would stand in the grocery store paralyzed with anxiety over whether to buy this brand of peanut butter or that brand of peanut butter.

She, she told me she was wondering if her choice would displease her husband, or even worse displease God. One particularly heartbreaking story comes from Jennifer whose pastor counseled her to be more submissive when she revealed her husband's pornography addiction. He told her if you were meeting his needs more fully, then he wouldn't have to seek satisfaction somewhere else.

I wonder what that pastor was doing in his private time. Anyway. Jennifer spent years believing that her husband's sexual sin was her responsibility, so she would increase her sexual availability even though it made her feel used and violated. The psychological term for this is religious duress when spiritual beliefs are weaponized to coerce compliance.

Is religious arrests under religious arrests, women make choices they otherwise wouldn't make. They surrender boundaries that they would otherwise maintain, and they endure treatment that they would otherwise reject. All because they believe God requires their submission, and then the men around them are telling them what that's supposed to look like.

And it, it always favors the men around them. Right? Of course, what's particularly insidious is how Complementarian teachings can distort a woman's relationship with God. Melissa described it this way. I began to see God as just another male authority figure who demanded my compliance and offered conditional love.

It took years of healing to realize God doesn't view me the way my husband and pastors do. And this brings me to an observation that might be uncomfortable in many complementarian communities. Women's pain. The pain of women is systematically invalidated so that when women express suffering under these kinds of teachings and the fruit of these teachings in their bodies and their minds, they're often told, well, you are just not submitting with the right heart attitude.

Or, your discomfort shows where your flesh needs to be mortified. Or this one. This is your cross to bear. As a godly woman, this creates a perfect environment for gaslighting where women's perceptions and experiences are consistently denied or minimized. After years of this treatment, many women stop trusting their own instincts entirely.

As one Christian woman told me, I reached a point where I couldn't even tell if I was hungry. Unless my husband mentioned that it was lunchtime, that's how disconnected I became from my own reality. Now, given all that we've discussed, you might wonder why do so many women remain committed to complementarian beliefs, even when these beliefs are really destroying their lives?

I think the answer is complex and multifaceted. First, there's the, uh, the power of religious socialization. When you have been taught from the time you were a small child, that God ordained specific gender roles, if you question those teachings, that is the equivalent in your mind and in your nervous system to questioning God himself and who are we to question God?

Right. There's also community pressure. Women who step outside these complementarian norms often face significant social consequences, losing friends, church communities, and support systems, and even their families of

origin. As social psychologist Solomon Ash demonstrated in his conformity experiments, the pressure to align with group consensus is extraordinarily powerful.

I talk about this in my book, *all The Scary Little Gods*, and indeed we, I had a sense that if I stepped outside of the norms in my church that something bad would happen. And it did. I was actually excommunicated and there was a quorum of several hundred people who had to all vote to excommunicate me from the church that I had been a member of for over a decade and had served in.

We can't, also, can't discount the impact of cognitive dissonance because when you've invested your, your entire identity in a belief system. To acknowledge problems within that system is threatening to our core sense of self. It's actually psychologically easier to rationalize or minimize the harm than it is to confront the possibility that your foundational beliefs could be flawed.

This is why leaving complementarian systems or even just questioning them can be so disorienting. You're not just changing your mind about gender roles. You have to literally reimagine your entire relationship with God, scripture and your self. So how can women begin to discern harmful teachings from health, healthy spiritual practices?

Here are some practical steps. First of all, trust your body. Our bodies often register to stress before our minds can articulate it. If certain teachings are consistently leaving you feeling anxious, full of shame, diminished, confused, that's a big one, or exhausted emotionally, pay attention to those physical and emotional responses.

That's valuable data, not spiritual weakness. As psychologist Bessel VanDerKolk notes in his work on trauma, the body keeps the score. Your headaches, stomach problems, and panic attacks might be telling you something important about the theology that you're swimming in. Second, engage in safe, reflective conversations.

Find people who are willing to discuss these issues without immediately shutting down questions or labeling them as rebellious. This might be a trusted friend, a therapist, or an online community like my Flying Free group. I. Third, expose yourself to alternative perspectives from within the Christian tradition.

'cause hey, complementarianism is not the only way. Faithful Christians understand gender and marriage authors like Sheila Re, rewar Beth Ellison Barr

and Kristen Cobas Dume offer thoughtful scripture based alternatives that honor the word of God while challenging harmful gender hierarchies. Sheila Re Rewart research.

Research in the great sex rescue is particularly illuminating. Her survey of 20,000 Christian women revealed that many popular evangelical teachings about marriage, gender, and sexuality correlates strongly with marital dissatisfaction, sexual dysfunction, and poor mental health outcomes. And then fourth, practice making small autonomous decisions.

If you've been conditioned to seek permission or approval for every choice, start reclaiming your agency in manageable steps. Maybe it's choosing a book to read without consulting anyone. Maybe it's expressing an opinion without apologizing for your opinion, or setting a small boundary for me. It was as simple as opening my own private bank account and depositing my salary in there instead of in a joint account where I had no control over how it was used.

And finally, be gentle with yourself through this process. Questioning deeply held beliefs takes courage, and inevitably it's going to bring grief. You're not failing God by examining teachings that have caused you pain. In fact, I believe seeking truth is profoundly spiritual work. So as we wrap up today's episode, I wanna speak directly to those of you who might be feeling a mixture of recognition.

Like, oh, I, I can, I feel so seen right now, uh, maybe relief because of that, but also some terror. I. If you are experiencing pain, confusion, or exhaustion from living under teachings that diminish you, your feelings are valid. It's not a sign of weak faith or rebellion. It's your spirit longing for freedom, authenticity, and dignity.

These are things God created you to experience. The God I know doesn't ask women to surrender their personhood on the altar of submission to a man. The Jesus I follow challenge religious systems that burdened people with heavy loads they weren't designed to carry. Remember that passage in Matthew where Jesus says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light?

If the version of Christianity you are living under feels like a crushing weight, particularly because of your gender. It might be time to ask whether you are carrying religious baggage that Jesus never intended for you. For those who find resonance in what we've discussed today, know that you are not alone.

Thousands of women are on similar journeys, questioning harmful interpretations of scripture and finding more life-giving ways to express their faith. And for those who disagree with perspectives that I've shared today, that's okay too. My goal isn't to convince everyone to abandon Complementarian views entirely, but just to at least create a little itty bitty space.

I. For some honest conversation about the real impacts these teachings have on women's lives. If you're interested in continuing this exploration, I have several resources available. My Flying Free membership community provides education support and connection for women navigating these exact issues.

This affordable program offers personalized guidance for rebuilding your sense of self and faith after religious trauma and emotional control, either in your church environment or in your marriage. I also highly recommend books like *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* by Beth Ellison Barr, and *The Great Sex Rescue* by Sheila Re, rewar for deeper understanding of how certain gender teachings developed.

What their effects on Christian women have been in history. So whether you're just beginning to question complimentary teachings or maybe you're well along the path of reclaiming your autonomy, I want you to remember this. Your worth is not determined by how well you submit to human authority. Your voice matters and your experiences are valid.

And the God who created you never intended for your womanhood to be a limitation. He intended it to change the world. I hope you'll join me for more. Go visit join Flying Free dot com to find out how you can work with me and hundreds of other Christian women. In the Flying Free Kaleidoscope program.