



The Masculinist #30: Complementarianism Is a Baby Boomer Theology That Will Die With the Baby Boomers

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Speaking of original insight, this month a look at complementarianism through a generational lens that I've never seen anyone use before, finding that it was essentially developed by just one half of one generation, the early cohort Baby Boomers.

Complementarianism and Why It's in Trouble

Protestants divide into two main camps in interpreting the scriptures about the nature and role of the sexes:

1. Complementarianism – the view holding that men and women are created of equal value in the image of God, but have differing, complementary roles in the home and the church. The husband is the head of the home, and only men can be ordained as elders or preach in church.
2. Egalitarianism – the view holding that men and women are not only created equally in the image of God but are also equivalent in terms of roles for which they are eligible in the home and church. Traditionally, egalitarians have said the genders are complementary and not simply identical, but that there are no domains in which there is gender hierarchy. Men are not the head of the home and women can be ordained, preach, etc.

Clearly complementarianism is the conservative position and egalitarianism is the progressive one. Mainline Protestant denominations are mostly formally egalitarian. Evangelicals are split, with the large and significant Southern Baptist Convention being complementarian.

Egalitarianism, as an accommodationist theology in tune with the spirit of the age, appears to have a bright future. Because it is accommodationist, however, it will need to continue to change going forward. For example, the principal egalitarian book is called *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (the "red book"). We can see the problem immediately: "complementarity without hierarchy" implies a gender binary. But society is moving beyond that idea towards a fluid conception of gender. Presuming secular culture continues that direction, egalitarians will ultimately need to change as well or find themselves in the same position that the complementarians are in today.

By contrast, the future of complementarianism looks grim, because it was developed as a response to a specific set of cultural circumstances in the late 1980s that no longer exist, and because it's a theology of the Baby Boomers, especially the early half of that generation, that seems likely to fade away along with them.

My current church is in a denomination that has no official policy on the sex role question. But historically I attended complementarian churches and so have studied that system extensively, both in theory and how it is taught in

practice.

There are significant, substantive problems with the complementarian system. Not least of which is that, as famed University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter put it *avant la lettre*, one of its principal characteristics is “doublespeak” (his word).

In fact, I have sitting in my files tens of thousands of words of unpublished analysis of complementarianism. With the amount of material I already have, I could spend the next year or more publishing 5,000 word Masculinists going through many of the problems of complementarianism. I could write a book on it. But that’s pointless; the complementarian Evangelical brain trust is well aware of these problems and certainly has been for many years and possibly since the very beginning (see the Coda below).

I’m not going to engage in substantive critique of complementarianism because a) it’s a pointless waste of time that it would have absolutely no effect, as previous attempts by other would-be reformers have already proven, and b) it’s unnecessary anyway because complementarianism is a dying theology already on its way out.

That’s not to say it will disappear anytime soon. The Episcopal Church has been dying for decades but still exists with many people attending it, after all. But complementarianism already has the air of a project in deep trouble. The question then is not about reforming or fixing complementarianism, but about what comes after it.

The Dominance of Early Cohort Boomers in America

It’s worth first talking a bit about the Baby Boomers. This huge generation, traditionally defined as those born from 1945 to 1964, was the Millennial generation of its time in that their sheer numbers enabled the Boomers to dominate public consciousness and societal preferences to an incredible extent for an extended period of time.

The Boomers figured heavily in the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s that included the Sexual Revolution and its redefinition of sex roles from patriarchy to egalitarianism. Like the Millennials, they were (justly) known for their self-regard. They were the original “Me Generation” – and still are, though subsequent generations are now contending ably for the title.

The Baby Boomers came into America at the height of its economic and imperial power, then declared war on its culture and institutions. Yet in their young adulthood they did face significant adversity in the form of the Vietnam War and then the stagflation of the 1970s. But coming out of the early 80s Volcker recession, when the American economy started to boom as they were entering prime adulthood (“thirtysomething,” as the Boomer-focused TV show of the era put it), they became the original Yuppies and saw an incredible uptrend in their fortunes. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, the Boomer generation started taking control of America, and they’ve been running it ever since.

In examining Boomer control, it’s important to distinguish between two Boomer cohorts, early and late. The Baby Boom is unusual in that its start year is so traditionally set firmly in 1945, whereas other generational boundaries are usually seen as fuzzy. I think we should view the Baby Boomer start date as similarly fuzzy. And culturally, I date the start of the Baby Boom to 1942. Why? Because so many people I see born during World War II hew to the Boomer style. Think about, for example, Newt Gingrich (b. 1943), who was a fitting sparring partner to the Bill Clinton both politically and personally on account of his numerous affairs and dubious moral behaviors.

The early cohort Boomers, born 1942-1954, were the ones whose lives were heavily shaped by the 60s and the threat of Vietnam. The late cohort Boomers, born 1955-1964, were children of the 1970s and are culturally different in many ways. In particular, the Vietnam War was far less formative in their lives. To generalize, the early cohort Boomers were the parents of Generation X who brought us workaholic fathers and “latch key” kids; the late cohort Boomers were the parents of the early Millennials, who gave us helicopter parenting and “Baby on Board.”

It is especially the early cohort Boomers who have been running America since the late 1980s/early 1990s, after assuming power at a young age. We see this most clearly in presidential politics. Bill Clinton was the first Boomer president, elected in 1992 at 46 years old, making him the third youngest person ever elected president. Boomers have held the presidency ever since. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump are all early cohort Boomers. In fact, they were all born the same year, 1946. (Hillary Clinton was born in 1947). Barack Obama is the odd man out as a late cohort Boomer, born 1961, and you can immediately tell the difference in style. (I should note that Boomer dominance is far less true in black America, where the largely Silent Generation people who personally participated in the Civil Rights Movement retained leadership for a very long time. A good Christian example here is John Perkins (b. 1930). Obviously there’s been a changing of the guard in progress in recent years as this generation passes on).

We are on track for a minimum of 28 consecutive years of Baby Boomers as President – and could easily have Boomers in office for another 12-16 more after that since the late cohort Boomers have barely started getting their own shot at the title.

The Temporal and Generational Origins of Complementarianism

Egalitarianism is obviously a modern theological movement. But complementarianism is itself a thoroughly modern theology. In his 1987 book *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, James Davison Hunter says that the trends that crystallized, after his book was published, as complementarianism originated in the 1970s (what he identifies as strategy two, pp. 103-104 in the hardcover). Formal complementarianism, including the coining of the very word itself, developed in the late 1980s. It seems to have been largely conceived at meetings in Dallas in 1986 and in Danvers, Mass in 1987 (the same year as Hunter's book). A creedal document called the [Danvers Statement](#) was published in early 1989 as an advertisement in Christianity Today magazine, along with the announcement that a new organization called the [Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#) (CBMW) was being founded to promote complementarian theology. They published their main theological book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (the "blue book") in 1991.

Complementarianism arose at a time when the feminist movement was making significant inroads into Evangelicalism. Feminist academic activists were raising many revisionist arguments, such as saying that the Greek word *kephalē*, traditionally translated "head," really meant "source" as in the headwaters of a rivers, and thus did not imply hierarchy. This was part of a broader liberalization trend that Hunter documented in his book.

Complementarianism, then, was a reaction against the specific feminist challenges of that era, developed at a time when, at some level, conservatism was staging something of a resurgence during the Reagan administration.. Theologian Wayne Grudem, for example, seems to have gotten interested in the topic through his Greek word studies rebutting the idea that *kephalē* means source. The blue book is a collection of chapters by many authors, each weighing in on a topical point or dispute like that one, and thus feels disjointed. The blue book to me feels like a collection of responses to feminist arguments rather than a coherent whole, going along with the reactive nature of the project. (I should stress that the complementarians did agree with and adopt feminist positions as well – they didn't disagree with the feminists on everything).

In short, complementarianism came out of intellectual currents that began in the 1970s and was formalized in the late 1980s as a reaction against specific feminist developments of that era. You can read Wayne Grudem's [reflections](#) on the development of complementarianism online if you'd like.

Since complementarianism was developed right as the Boomers, particularly the early cohort Boomers, were coming to power nationally, I also wanted to see if complementarianism was one manifestation of that. So let's look at the personalities involved, using my Boomer definitions above.

The two main people in the development of complementarianism appear to have been Wayne Grudem and John Piper. They were charter members of the CBMW council's executive committee and co-edited the blue book.

It's notable that Piper (b. 1946) and Grudem (b. 1948) are both not only in the early cohort Boomer group, but both part of that narrow band of years in the mid-1940s that produced so many hugely influential people. Why has John Piper been such an incredibly influential conservative Evangelical for so long? It would be easy to cite his theological smarts or preaching skills just as it would be tempting to cite Bill Clinton's incredible political skills for getting elected President. Both are real. But I don't think it's any accident that Piper, Clinton, Bush, and Trump were all born the same year.

The Baby Boomers came into very senior positions fairly early in life. Like Clinton, Piper and Grudem were still relatively young (~41 and ~39 respectively during the Danvers meeting) when they took the lead on developing and championing this new theology. A similar interesting case on the liberal side is Jim Wallis (b. 1948), in some ways the face of progressive Evangelicalism. Wallis was a signatory of the [Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern](#) in 1973 when he was only ~25, showing the influence of Boomers at early ages. (Exercise for the reader: find the affirmation from the egalitarian Chicago Declaration that was carried forward in a slightly modified form into the complementarian Danvers Statement).

The Danvers Statement did not appear to have signers as such, but my researcher did look up the original council members of the CBMW listed in the 1989 CT ad and found their birth year. (There was also a "Board of Reference" we

did not look at, but which appears to have been there to supply gravitas and thus skews older, e.g., Bill Bright). For some, we could not find a birth date at all. For others, we could only impute an approximate birth year from things like college graduation years. We found actual or imputed birth years for 73% of them. Thirteen of the council members with birth dates were early cohort Boomers – 59% of the total for which we had birthdays. More tellingly, we determined birth years for the entire executive committee, and 80% of its members were early cohort Boomers.

Next, we did the same exercise for the collection of authors featured in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. We were able to obtain or impute birth years for all of them. And 16 of them – about three-fourths - were Baby Boomers. And all but one of those was an early cohort Boomer.

Beyond just these folks today, many (most?) influential advocates of complementarianism seem to be Boomers. This includes Tim Keller (b. 1950, early cohort) and Al Mohler (b. 1959, late cohort). I don't have a birth year for Mary Kassian (who was present at the creation of complementarianism) or Kathy Keller, the two most prominent and authoritative female complementarian boosters, but both are clearly Boomers, with Kathy at least early cohort with Tim. Even the main critics of complementarianism from the right like Doug Wilson (b. 1953, early cohort) are Boomers.

While complementarianism was not exclusively developed and pushed by Baby Boomers and evolved out of some pre-Boomer threads from the 1970s, it appears to have been formalized largely by early cohort Boomers at a time when that generation was taking over American leadership generally, and who remain its principal theological champions. As such, it is tuned to their generational experiences, sensibilities, and style, and more importantly not tuned to those of subsequent generations.

While my analysis is not scientific and could certainly be redone in a more thorough way, and few things in human affairs are completely clear-cut, I think it's fair to say that complementarianism is indeed a theology largely driven by early cohort Baby Boomers (just one half of one generation) and a response to events happening in the 1980s and 70s.

The State of Complementarianism

Thirty years on, complementarianism today appears in some ways to be in rude health, but look around and it's easy to see serious problems. One is the way that complementarianism has extended its position of absolute Biblical minimalism to the point where it is breaking down. By absolute Biblical minimalism I mean that they ask: what is the absolute least amount of deviation from egalitarianism we can possibly justify scripturally?

One rubric that seems popular, especially in the Kellersque circles of Presbyterianism, is the notion that “a woman can do anything an unordained man can do.” As Kathy Keller wrote in [The Meaning of Marriage](#):

I do know that in New York City (or any educated and highly secular environment), any practice that we cannot defend biblically is not an option. So the corollary of not ordaining women is to make sure that every role legitimately open to unordained men and women is filled with women as well as men.

Those following this Biblical minimalism approach generally hold it that a woman can't be formally ordained as an elder and can't preach on Sunday morning but anything else is fair game. Redeemer itself has pushed both biblical interpretation and the denominational rulebook about as far as they can towards egalitarianism. The many churches inspired by Redeemer seem to do the same. For example, my wife's former PCA church – a Redeemer clone right down to the name – attempted to get her to volunteer to be the chair of their pastoral search committee. Their rationale was that since the Bible doesn't explicitly say women can't lead the search for a new pastor, then not only is it allowed, but they should deliberately attempt to place a woman into that role.

But this formula is common elsewhere too, and that's where we also see it reaching farcical levels. For example, during the Southern Baptist Convention's last election cycle, someone floated the idea that Beth Moore be named president of the denomination. According to a [news report](#), the SBC ruled that this would be ok. The logic seems to be that the SBC is a parachurch organization, not a church, so having a woman as its head is Biblically permitted. The SBC's complementarian theology holds that the Bible says a woman can't be the head of a church, but can be the head of a denomination. (In fairness, in the Baptist system, the denomination has no real authority over the local church, but this is still revealing).

And we now also hear the argument that women can preach, as long as they are doing it subject to the authority of male elders. For example, British complementarian Andrew Wilson [now says](#), “I would have been in a position ten years ago when we did not have women on the preaching rota. And we do now – in both the churches I serve. And I

would totally defend that on biblical grounds.” He got pushback on this from some, but this is typical of all vanguard type moves, and he’s not alone in making that argument.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, complementarianism has arrived at a place that is untenable. The domain of restrictions on women in the church today is razor thin in practice and requires ever-greater exegetical and rhetorical gymnastics to sustain. How long can this situation hold before they fall off the knife’s edge? The liberalization trend Hunter identified in the 1980s didn’t stop then. It continued and is continuing. A theology that was acceptable to many in the late 1980s cultural environment is less so today, and will be even less so tomorrow. Unlikely the early cohort Boomers, young people today have zero cultural memories of traditional sex roles. The current situation does not look sustainable. While the sex roles in the church and home don’t seem to be necessarily linked, it’s hard to anticipate them holding to a complementarians of the home while being egalitarians of the church. I’m [not the only one](#) to suggest this state of affairs can’t go on indefinitely.

There also does not appear to be an intellectual next generation to carry the complementarian project forward. Owen Strachan could possibly have been that person. He was previously president of CBMW, but stepped away from it a couple years ago. He’s still a Senior Fellow there and certainly still adheres to complementarianism as far as I know. But it no longer seems to be his area of interest. New CBMW head Denny Burk seems more focused on sexuality than the sexes.

Other folks working the same territory, like British theologian Alastair Roberts, who has [a book](#) on the theology of the sexes coming out this year, don’t seem to engage intellectually much with complementarian antecedents. Roberts appears to have a vision that’s quite different from dominant Biblical minimalism paradigm. From my reading he looks to be drawing from different sources and going a different direction, though has written articles for CBMW.

This is one area where I don’t have big expertise, but even with input from those who do, I haven’t been able to find a real intellectual next generation. This too augurs poorly for complementarianism’s future.

The Future of Complementarianism

The future is inherently impossible to predict, but as humans we can’t help but try. So I will outline where I see things heading based on the current trends, with the caveat that unforeseen events are likely that will upset things.

First, complementarianism will die. Again, like the Episcopal Church, that doesn’t mean it will go totally extinct any time soon. But the life force has gone out of it and it’s already starting to fade. Its most robust defenders are what I labeled “positive world” Christians in [Masc #13](#). That group is mostly low status and has a very poor understanding of how cultural power and cultural change works, thus are almost always rolled by those who do. (To be fair, they would have a steep uphill battle in any case).

Secondly, the Baby Boomers aren’t going away just yet. That generation can’t bear not being the focal point of the action, so I don’t expect them to go away or retire willingly from any sphere of American life. Even very early Boomers could be active for a decade or longer. So long as the Baby Boomers, particularly the older cohort, are still active, complementarianism will have a home base of support. But we are already starting to see that the day will come when the door will close on that generation, and when it does, it will be a huge blow to the movement.

Third, a large group of people, including much of the complementarian “neutral world” church (again see [Masc #13](#)) is on a journey towards egalitarianism, whether knowingly or not. The Moseses of this migration may not personally cross the Jordan River. But having led multitudes to the edge of the egalitarian Promised Land, their Joshuas in waiting likely will. I’m not sure when the shift might happen. Many of these churches are Presbyterian in the PCA which current prohibits female elders at present, so that would need to be changed or churches switch denominational affiliation. But when it does, it could happen very fast. I continue to be amazed at how quickly new talking points on various matters get downloaded into low-level leaders and even the rank and file, whom I frequently hear repeating them verbatim shortly after their introduction. So once the zeitgeist changes, the switchover might not take long, especially for non-denominational churches.

Fourth, continued liberalization will open space inside egalitarianism that allows complementarians to make the move there, while retaining the cultural disposition of a conservative. This will greatly facilitate transition. As noted, egalitarianism will have to respond to things like gender fluidity. This means, for example, someone could become an egalitarian and stake out a conservative position within it as a defender of the idea that there are only two genders. This pattern of conservatives getting pulled to the left over time has been consistently repeated in many domains, so this switch is eminently realistic.

Fifth, a small but not insignificant group of people will move in a reactionary reaction, embracing a thicker, more substantive sexual complementarity and even a patriarchal vision. Like the word “patriarchy” itself, much of this will initially be what I call “reactionary affect” (which I intend to explain and elaborate on in a future Masculinist issue devoted to the concept). This group will struggle to create an intellectually coherent theology/vision that is viable in the today and tomorrow’s world. Unless they succeed in this undertaking, which would likely take some time to pull off that they may not have, these groups will wither. In any event, I don’t expect this will come from Baby Boomers (and probably not Generation X). Rather, this group will be the Millennial and Gen Z successors to people like Doug Wilson and Tim Bayly. People attracted to this will be those who are embracing, knowingly or not, a Benedict Option approach and would be the American Protestant equivalents of the energized young French Catholics Rod Dreher likes to talk about. The people attracted to Jordan Peterson or other secular online men's gurus are the most likely candidates to join this group.

In addition to the inevitable future events we can’t foresee, future trends often play out much more slowly than we think they will. So I’m not going to make the mistake of setting a date on when this happens. One lesson I take away from my urban studies is that things can go on a lot longer than anyone thinks they possibly can. As Adam Smith put it, “There’s a great deal of ruin in a nation.” Time magazine ran a [major feature](#) on “decline in Detroit” in 1961. But the city didn’t go bankrupt until 2013, and even then only because the governor decided to force the city into it. Yet the decline noted in 1961 was very real.

Hunter’s book is a case in point. My impression is that he thought the trends he identified back in 1987 would mature faster than they did, and that his readers certainly thought so. That doesn’t mean he was wrong. In fact, the complementarian vs. egalitarian debate is one low-grade manifestation of the Evangelical split he thought might happen. Actually, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* is still relevant 32 years later, even if the actual research is no longer current.

It will definitely be interesting to see how this plays out.

After Complementarianism

What then is to be done?

To repeat, I don’t believe there is anything to gain by trying to substantively engaging with complementarianism or its promoters. People have wasted years of their life trying. Nobody really makes decisions based on rational analysis, but the Boomer is particularly impervious to logic. Besides, is it likely that someone who taught and advocated for complementarianism his entire career is likely to change his mind on it? It’s unlikely, and any who do are highly likely to turn towards egalitarianism. Most egalitarians I see have already concluded this. Rather than arguing about the meaning of *kephalē*, the rhetoric I hear today tends to boil down to, “It’s 2019, people!”

The question is then what comes after complementarianism.

As always, we must discern the truth, align ourselves with it, and speak it. So if you are a pastor who genuinely believes complementarianism is true, then believe it, teach it, live it. The same for egalitarianism.

I have personally concluded that both complementarianism and egalitarianism are modern doctrines that are in significant error and should be rejected.

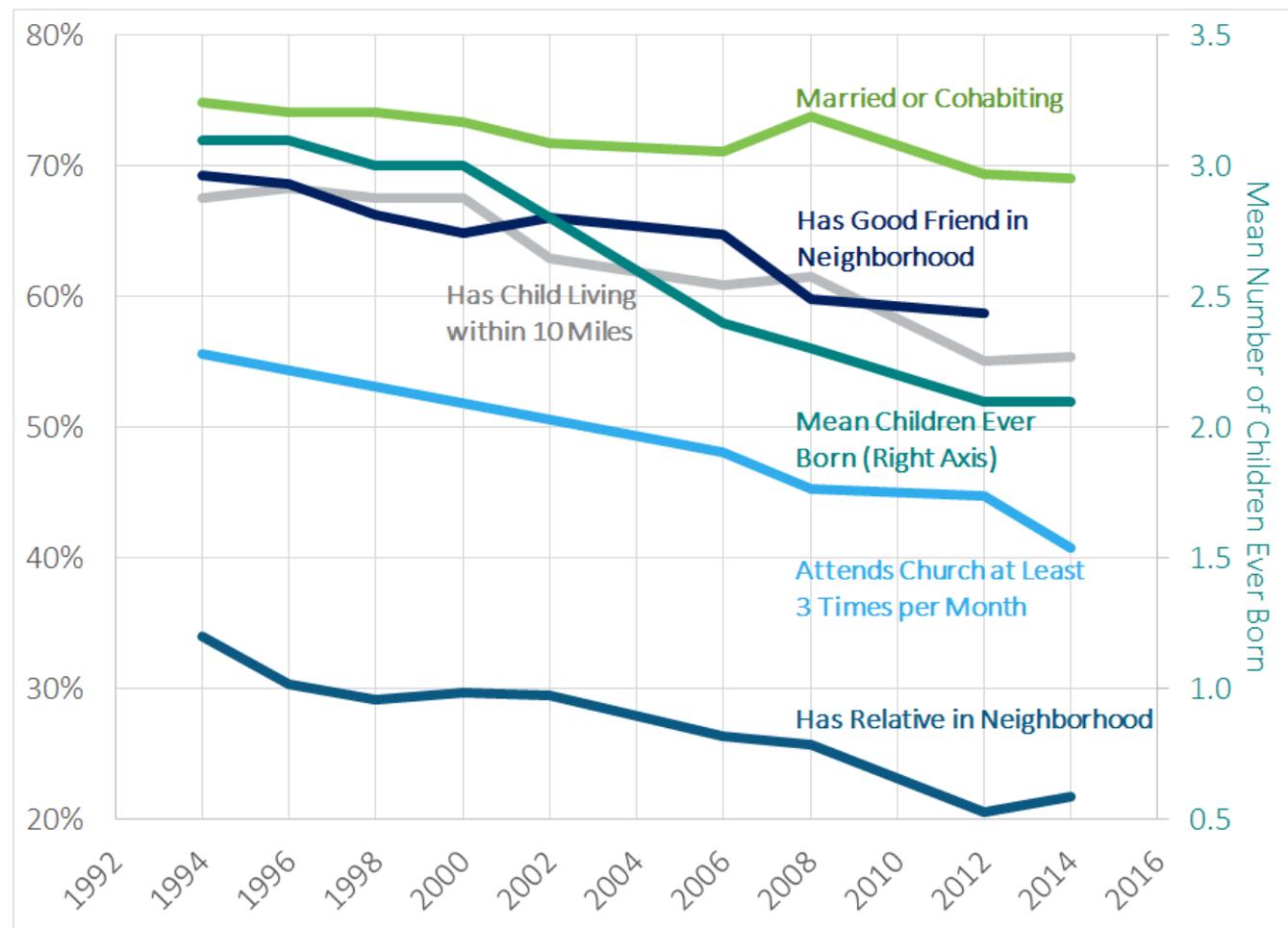
I don’t claim to have a complete replacement. It’s something that will require significant study and development and thus will fall to others on the theological front. Starting with God’s revelation of Himself as Father and incarnation as the Son, the Bible is pretty obviously patriarchal in that it is literal rule by the Father. But believing in patriarchy is kind of like believing in the divine right of kings. You may have noticed that we don’t have a king. Similarly, we live in a legally and culturally egalitarian society. What then do you do? I will make my contributions where I can, such by noting that despite nominal egalitarianism, hypergamy remains in effect ([Masc #23](#)) and by providing superior models of how attraction works ([Masc #17](#) and [Masc #18](#)). Or by noting that a successful replacement theology must explicitly address changes in the nature and function of the household ([Masc #26](#)); the neoliberalization of the sexual, dating, and marriage markets ([Masc #21](#)); and other major challenges that must be confronted by all of us regardless of what we personally believe or prefer. My wife and I have a more traditional relationship, but this is a lifestyle choice for us, not a legal, social, or cultural system – that’s all it can be. Other people can and will make their own choices, since we live in a free country after all.

With egalitarianism poised at a major redefinition point, and complementarianism's pending demise, the question then is not a rehash of battles between the two from decades past, but rather how we move forward from here towards a time when the Boomers will no longer be calling all the shots and America is a very different place.

Noteworthy

It's difficult for the solipsistic Boomers to understand or accept that subsequent generations have a generally negative view of them. Generation X folks like myself tend to be ambivalent. On the one hand, our parents are Boomers. On the other, we personally watched the Boomers pull up the ladder after themselves. The Millennials seem to be increasingly blaming the Boomers for their problems. Here are a couple of recent examples. First, a recent Saturday Night Live skit called "[Millennial Millions](#)" that's hilarious. Second, a Vox [interview](#) with the author of a book on the Boomers called *A Generation of Sociopaths*.

And from Sen. Mike Lee's Social Capital Project: [An Invisible Tsunami: 'Aging Alone' and Its Effect on Older Americans, Families, and Taxpayers](#). This chart shows things looking pretty ok for now to me, but the trend lines are heading the wrong direction.



Back in [Masc #14](#) I highlighted Nassim Taleb, whose works have been given little consideration by Christians despite their implications being very favorable to Christianity. I noted in that issue that there were zero mentions of Taleb in First Things. Well, I'm pleased to see that's been corrected, as they just published [a review](#) of his corpus. If you are interested, my notes on Taleb's books are available for [free download](#).

Coda

An unusual kind of doublespeak is taking place. On the one hand, the man is encouraged to assert a forceful leadership in all matters pertaining to the organization and development of the family. This would include matters of spiritual maturation, child discipline, family responsibilities, and the myriad decisions any family has to make. He is to command respect and ultimately the willful submission of his wife and children. He is, after all, ultimately responsible for keeping his household in order. On the other hand, he is encouraged to cultivate the emotional development of his children and open and expressive emotional bonds of intimacy with both his children and his wife. The upshot is this: though the husband and father has ultimate authority, that authority is qualified by an emphasis on sentiment. To maintain final authority and to carry the form of strong leadership normative for centuries past, a clear difference in status from other members of the family was required. Patriarchy, in other words, required the husband to maintain social distance from the rest of the family. That social distance though is significantly reduced if not eliminated altogether by the normative expectation of sensitivity and intimacy. In this sense, his authority becomes purely

theoretical and abstract. Paternal authority is no authority at all.

...

The emphasis on the requirement of the husband to love his wife...is so prominent that the relationship remains hierarchical in principle only...By redefining the husband's authority as an administrative technicality, the marriage relationship as a functional equality, and her nature as "weaker vessel" in exclusively physiological terms, Evangelicals have been able to maintain the integrity of their commitment to biblical literalism while at the same time making the submission of women much less intellectually and emotionally objectionable.

- James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicals: The Coming Generation* (1987)

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