
Of “Dad Moms” and “Man Fails”: An Essay on Men and Awesomeness

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In November 2011, I was watching a football game, minding my own business, when a Tide commercial popped up on the television. It is not a commonplace that I pay great attention to advertisements for laundry detergent. But there was something different about this one. It began by showing a man folding clothes in a cheerfully lit bedroom. He introduced himself with this odd statement: “Hi. I’m a Dad mom. That means while my wife works, I’m at home being *awesome*.”

This was interesting. I had not heard of a “Dad mom” before. This commercial suddenly had my full attention. It continued,

I know there’s a lot of mom moms that look at my unique mixture of masculinity and nurturing and find it quite alluring. And I know that there’s dads out there who are astonished at my ability to dress a four-year-old. And here’s the real kicker: I can take even the frilliest girl dress and fold it with complete accuracy. Boom. And, with Tide Boost, I can use the brute strength of dad to mix with the nurturing abilities of my laundry detergent. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go do pull-ups and crunches in the other room.

The light lifting over, the spot ended. Our smiling protagonist left the frame, ostensibly to focus his “nurturing abilities” on his abs and biceps.

Light mockery aside, this Tide commercial had me thinking. One minute I’m watching sports; the next I’m witnessing the renovation of millennia of gender roles. Should I accept the viewpoint

of this advertisement? As a complementarian man, I have committed myself to a sometimes exhausting program of provision. I just completed my third degree; I don’t always get a great deal of sleep; I’ve worked part-time for several years in addition to my full-time work in order to put my family in a solid financial position. Should I shift my priorities? What if my sweet wife is actually supposed to be the breadwinner?

Should I too be at home with my two children, “being awesome?”

My ruminations on this topic led to a blog post that led to a point-counterpoint debate on the Hermeneutics blog of *Christianity Today*. I interacted with Laura Ortberg Turner, a Fuller Theological Seminary employee and evangelical egalitarian, on this topic. Scores of similar voices responded to my articulation of a complementarian domestic philosophy, some genuinely engaging me, others castigating me and swearing at me. Rachel Held Evans, a gifted young writer and Christian feminist who is publishing one of those pop-culture books in which the author “lives the Bible” for a year (she purports to follow all of the commands given to women), suggested rather straightforwardly via Twitter that “If [I was] going to use the Bible to put women in their place at least do us the courtesy of being consistent.” No small reaction, this. Clearly, I had struck a nerve.

I don’t know if laundry detergent has ever ignited such a theological firestorm.

Do Interchangeable Roles Lead to Happiness?

In light of this response, one driven mostly by feminine voices, we are left to ask the question: should the roles of men and women be interchangeable? Should dads feel freedom to be “dad dads” or “dad moms?” Should women take on the duty of provision if they like?

A feminist society and egalitarian culture answers “yes” to all of these questions. Women, goes the line, have been restrained from full flourishing by the traditional division of roles in which men take on the burden of providing and women take on the burden of homemaking and child-raising. Men have been allowed to dominate others; society has suffered as a result. Undoubtedly, there are many sins that have accrued to patriarchy; there are, of course, many sins that accrue to most any philosophy in this fallen world. The modern narrative, however, suggests that only when men and women feel freedom to fluidly inhabit either role will they experience fulfillment.

This kind of argument is now a part of our cultural water. It surprised me a few years back, then, when feminist Maureen Dowd proclaimed from her elite journalistic post that the new sexual economy had made women sadder.

According to the General Social Survey, which has tracked Americans’ mood since 1972, and five other major studies around the world, women are getting gloomier and men are getting happier. Before the ’70s, there was a gender gap in America in which women felt greater well-being. Now there’s a gender gap in which men feel better about their lives.

As Arianna Huffington points out in a blog post headlined “The Sad, Shocking Truth About How Women Are Feeling”: “It doesn’t matter what their marital status is, how much money they make, whether or not they have children, their ethnic background, or the country they live in. Women around the world are in a funk.”

Why is this? Because while men have experienced increased freedom to lay down the hard work of

breadwinning, women now become stressed out not only by their economic labor, but by the continuing duties of the home—cooking, cleaning, keeping track of the kids—which modern men, even in their enlightened state, resist.

Women trained by secular society and culture think, in other words, that they can do everything and have it all. In practice, many of them are finding the endless choices and tasks before them exhausting. The “dad mom” from the Tide commercial exhibits a chipper, can-do spirit. If, based on feminist ideals, we were to imagine his wife, she might be serene, poised, possessing obscene levels of calm as she executes perfect “work-life balance.” If we worked off of Dowd’s generalization, we might find her to be frazzled, haggard, gaining stress weight, and upset.

Equilibrium, thy name is unknown.

I don’t read *Good Housekeeping* or *Real Simple* or those kinds of magazines (though my friend the “dad mom” probably should given his day-to-day tasks). On occasion my wife will show me an article from one of these periodicals, perhaps a profile of a celebrity actress who is also a wife and mom. Invariably, these pieces sketch an enviable picture of a woman who has it all yet remains down to earth. There is discussion, however muted, of her glamorous friends, her favorite vacation getaways, and there are tasteful pictures of her Viking stove, Restoration Hardware couch, and Sub-Zero refrigerator (though she eschews materialism, naturally, in her interview).

There’s usually a question or two about “mommy guilt” or some such term. For example, in a February 2011 interview with Gwyneth Paltrow, modern every-woman, she offered the following on this difficult topic:

“I came back from Hong Kong and tried to make it about bringing back this rich experience for the kids as well,” Paltrow says, but she knows how tenuous that sounds. She tears up a little. “I do feel so guilty and, like, *What am I doing?* but I also want them to know work is really fun for me — ‘Hey, look what I get to do!’ As opposed to feeling like, *Oh, I’m a terrible mother.* Because that really just

doesn't get you anywhere. It doesn't get *them* anywhere."

Even in the softball stories with the airbrushed photos, one finds evidence of the downside of modern gender roles. As a complementarian, I don't read this with any glee or joy. On the contrary, I read it with sadness. It's clear that Paltrow's career choices weigh on her; though one could chalk her self-professed guilt up to unfair cultural expectations, it seems clear that she lives in a world that has only encouraged her celebrity ambitions—her father is a director, her mother a movie star—but that cannot stave off the natural guilt that comes from parental, and especially motherly, neglect. It's rather difficult to see how six-year-old Apple, Paltrow's daughter, will be able to be happy knowing "work is really fun" for her mother. It seems more likely that she would rather actually have fun with her mother in the traditional (personal) sense.

These anecdotes do not prove the rightness of complementarianism with finality. But as the years go by and the Judeo-Christian consensus crumbles, "dad moms" and "mom dads" proliferate. If this was inherently virtuous and good for everyday people, we would expect to hear glowing testimony from all corners, especially from our most trusted guides, celebrities like Paltrow. In reality, however, we hear the opposite. All human plans for the home lead not to flourishing, but sadness.

We think we are liberated, but in reality, find ourselves in bondage to our selfishness and sin, our children unhappy and unable to understand.

A Better Way: "Dad Dads" and "Mom Moms" Who Serve

I have no fancy conclusion to offer in response to the modern turn, no super-creative response to the domestic revolution accomplished by laundry-loving men and globetrotting actresses. For millennia, followers of God have practiced what used to be called patriarchy and is now called complementarianism.

Working from Gen 1:26-27, Christians have historically argued for the full equality of the sexes (though at times our theory has outpaced our prac-

tice). The fact that Adam was created first and given a leadership role from the start in naming the animals and taking dominion has weighed heavily in the gender roles of many believers; that Adam's work is cursed in Gen 3:15 has seemed to many to suggest that in God's economy, men bear the responsibilities of provision. This view is corroborated by a diverse array of texts that touch on the matter either directly or indirectly. It is the men of Israel who leave the home to provide food for their families (see Genesis 37, for example); the husband of the Proverbs 31 woman sits with the elders in the gates while she cares for her family and home in manifold ways; women in Titus 2:5 are instructed to be "workers at home," even as young widows are called by Paul to "marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander" (1 Tim 5:14).

These texts fit with the biblical-theological role Christ plays for his church in redeeming her; he is her head, her provision, and she depends upon him to live (see Ephesians 5). In a marriage, men fill this Christic role. We therefore have explicit textual reasons for calling men to be providers for their families, particularly when God gives the blessing of children, but we should not neglect the rich theme of Christ's provision for his bride. Men who wish to be like Christ, in other words, do well to image his sacrificial labor by their own.

Does this mean, though, that if a man folds laundry he is some sort of spineless creature, giving up his God-given duties for work he should not countenance? Not at all. There is nothing biblically to indicate that it's wrong for a man to pitch in where he can to help his wife. I do not think a husband is called to be a homemaker as a wife is, but neither do I experience personal internal conflict when I wash some dishes at night to help out my wife, who has been nurturing small children and executing countless household tasks all day while I've worked to provide. Complementarianism, with its connection between the husband's work and Christ's provision, sets the bar higher for men than the culture does. It's not easier to be a godly man; you can't claim the title "lord of the home" and then plop yourself into the easy chair to watch ESPN

and lose yourself in your iPhone, leaving discipline and training and teaching to your wife. Contrary to what we see most everywhere in our society today, men are not called by God to tune out from the family and merely make money. No, men are supposed to lead in all areas, including training of the children, discipline, and opportunities for sacrifice.

As I said, in my home this means that I help out where I can with the kids and even a few chores. No one would confuse me for the homemaker; I'm frankly not and never will be. Much of what I do does not fall under that rubric. Neither, though, do I avoid serving my wife. In calling men to be "dad dads," then, I'm not offering a summons from the Stone Age, but a call to show the world a new kind of manhood, a redeemed kind, a self-sacrificial, strong, bold, and loving kind.

Does Christianity Enslave Women?

The "dad mom" phenomenon has caught on in part because people mistakenly think that past conceptions of the sexes have hindered men and women. Christianity, goes the line, has oppressed women and chained them to the home. Some women, even women of an evangelical persuasion, use language that denigrates homemaking and child-raising in speaking of their calling. "I like kids and all, but I want to use my gifts," is one such line that I regularly encounter. In this way of thought, complementarianism—biblical gender roles—keeps women back. Some think that Christianity itself harms and suffocates women, and the culture, with its flexible roles, is therefore their liberator.

The historical record tells a different story. In *Roman Wives, Roman Windows*, New Testament scholar Bruce Winter sheds valuable light on the lives of women in ancient Rome. Men, in short, enjoyed superior cultural standing. For example, if "divorced and found guilty of adultery by a court, the wife lost half of her dowry, one third of any other property she owned, and was relegated to an island" (42). In such a society, the proclamation of the full equality of men and women in Christ from texts like Gal 3:28 was revolutionary and helped, over time, to improve the status of Greco-Roman women.

So it is in our day. Christianity offers not captivity, but freedom. It does indeed offer us models for manhood and womanhood, scripts for how we should live out our days to the glory of God in our sex, our gender. Men must not shun the work of provision for their wives and children; this role is given them of God. Women must not demean homemaking and child-raising; such is their inheritance from the Lord. Families may encounter unusual circumstances that require careful handling—job loss, catastrophic injury, and so on. But for most of us, the way we fill our roles as "dad dads" and "mom moms" is straightforwardly scriptural.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this pattern of life does not mean the absence of pain and hardship. All life in this broken, sinful world is effected by the fall. Husbands will have long days and experience physical problems from work; when given children by God, wives will face some stress and tiredness from caring for active little ones all day. In these and other ways, we reap the curse that we sowed in Adam. It is not God's design for the family that is to blame on this point, however; his plan predates the fall. It is our sin, and the result of living in a Satan-haunted world.

Our call, though, is not to re-envision the family to escape difficulty. Our call is to be faithful, to inhabit the part given us to play in God's cosmic drama. Men can image Christ the savior-king by folding laundry on occasion, by getting down on the floor to play with their kids, and by doing the dishes when they can. But they must commit themselves primarily to the work of provision, whether of spiritual leadership in the home or financial breadwinning to sustain it.

To paraphrase the Tide commercial in question, that and no other definition is what "being awesome" truly means for a husband and father.