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**A Review of William and Aida Spencer and Steve and Celestia Tracy.**  
*Marriage at the Crossroads: Couples in Conversation about*  
*Discipleship, Gender Roles, Decisions Making and Intimacy.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009.

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*Marriage at the Crossroads* by William and Aida Spencer and Steve and Celestia Tracy is well-described by its thorough subtitle as “Couples in Conversation About Discipleship, Gender Roles, Decision Making and Intimacy.” The book is an effort to take those topics and discuss them from the vantage points of two separate perspectives in the gender debate. The Spencers write on those topics from an egalitarian perspective, and the Tracys write from a, so-called, “soft complementarian” perspective (51).

The couples take turns providing their perspective on the issues listed in the sub-title above, and then they collaborate on an interactive review of each other’s treatment where they discuss areas of agreement and disagreement. The goal of such a dialogue is to “leave the polemics behind and strive to be fair, reasonable and irenic with each other’s view” (12). I love that spirit of fairness, reasonableness, and irenicism and so will try to replicate the format of agreement and disagreement used by the book’s authors.

With regard to agreement, there is much to celebrate in *Marriage at the Crossroads*. First, both couples agree that marriage is not about marriage, but about growing together as disciples of Jesus Christ. Some disagreement exists between the authors (and will exist between both sets of authors and complementarians) about how this truth gets fleshed out, but there is consensus that Jesus is the priority for marriage. This joint commitment is represented well by the Tracys, “Jesus jolts us by teaching us that the highest good isn’t our marital bliss, self-actualization, or happiness, but being a

faithful follower of Christ” (38).

Second, both couples make lengthy arguments about the importance of relational intimacy preceding sexual intimacy in a couple’s physical relationship. The authors note how strikingly similar were their respective treatments in this regard (182). In a sex-saturated culture where even Christians can be obsessed with the erotic, it is a happy reality that the Spencers and Tracys paint a beautiful picture of the sexual delights of marriage on the larger canvas of a close relationship outside the bedroom.

A final area of agreement and commendation is the beautiful accounts of marital affection that are sprinkled throughout the book. Both couples shared tender moments from their marriages that would leave any Christian rejoicing in the care demonstrated in those relationships, and eager to implement many of the things the Spencers and Tracys do in marriage to love and serve one another. Many important things are at stake in the church’s ongoing gender debate, but the glimpses of marriage from these two “non-complementarians” demonstrate that one of those issues is *not* the call to extend selfless care in the context of marriage. I read this book and repeatedly thanked God for the blessing of these two obviously happy couples.

In spite of these strengths, the book has numerous critical weaknesses, most of which are related to the couples’ understanding of authority in marriage. If I had more space I would mention four or five. Since I do not, I’ll point out two.

First, while there are some differences in the understanding of headship and authority that exist between the Tracys and Spencers (which will be

discussed below) both couples eschew any understanding of leadership that includes authority. In their combined reflections on the issue all four agree, “The husband and wife rule together as equals ([A principle which sets] the Tracys apart from many hierarchical nonegalitarians.) While there were obviously significant areas of disagreement regarding specific marital roles, both couples agreed that when roles are defined most broadly, they are identical for men and women” (138). Both couples are comfortable with leadership so long as it is of the passive variety (the Tracys talk of an “authority to love”), and when that leadership is shared between spouses. Whenever leadership becomes authoritative, and is centered on the husband, it is bad. Such an understanding of leadership is dismissed as “an authority of power,” “power-intensive,” “top-down,” “rigidly hierarchical,” “patriarchal,” and others of the usual suspects. This issue makes one wonder how much of a “crossroads” is really happening in the book. A truly complementarian marriage is not represented in this work. At the end of the book the authors invite three other couples to respond briefly to their chapters. Each of these couples shared broad agreement with the Spencers and Tracys on the nature of headship and authority. I find it truly fascinating (and frustrating!) that the authors did not want to include a single complementarian perspective in the book. It would have been very illuminating to have an authentically complementarian marriage represented—that is, a marriage full of service and self-sacrifice which also embraces an understanding of authority located in a husband’s role.

A second problem with the book concerns the puzzling treatment of headship provided by the Tracys. The Spencers’ understanding of headship is the typical treatment that egalitarians have served up for decades. Complementarians rightly disagree with their treatment of biblical texts, but at least their position is coherent. It is truly regrettable that the same cannot be said for the Tracys’ utterly confusing presentation of authority in marriage. For example, they say with the Spencers above, that couples share “rule” in the home, and they also argue that when headship focuses on a husband’s

authority a central aspect of the Trinity is lost (71) because the authority of the Father over the Son is not the “top-down hierarchical authority that is assumed and asserted by many Christian writers” (65). The Tracys believe that headship is not an “authority of power,” but an “authority of love” (66).

The problem arises when—sometimes on the same page as these assertions—the Tracys insist that active authority is taught in the Bible. For example they concede, with a great deal of nuance, that the Greek word for “head” typically denotes authority (64). They admit that the Father does have authority over the Son because Christ does nothing on his own authority, but only what his Father commands (65). The reason this kind of authority is not the kind the Tracys disapprove is because, in the case of the former example, *kephale* (“head”) has to do, not only with authority, but also protection (64). In the case of the latter example, the Father is not only in authority over the Son but empowers and honors him (65).

The confusing irony of the Tracys’ position is that in dealing with the concepts of authority and self-sacrifice in the biblical picture of headship they are just as wrong as any male chauvinist, but in equal and opposite ways. Chauvinists place more weight on the authority end of the continuum and are uncomfortable with giving honor to one under authority. The Tracys prioritize the call to honor those under authority and are uncomfortable with an exercise of authority for those called to lead. It is complementarians who have tried to occupy the balanced middle and argue that neither piece of biblical data is at odds with other. Instead they hold each in tension. Those in authority are called to exercise that authority and are also called to love, honor, and serve those under their authority. The Tracys’ “soft complementarianism” is more culturally acceptable, but is just as distorted as chauvinism. Both need to moderate their views and move towards complementarity.

When this is understood it demonstrates why another aspect of the Tracys’ work is so confusing. On the one hand, they critique complementarians throughout the chapter and seem, at times, to conflate that project with chauvinists who demean

women (e.g., 58-59, 61, 65). On the other hand, as they describe some elements of their own marriage it sounds every bit as complementarian as any board member of CBMW: Steve Tracy demonstrates tender sacrificial care to his wife (67, 68-69, 70), listens to his wife's correction and input (132, note 43), takes responsibility to make the final decision when they disagree (132), and Celeste Tracy submits to this loving leadership (74, 132-33).

I honestly do not know if the Tracys are unaware of the well-documented complementarian call for husbands to possess benevolent authority, if (like more typical egalitarians) they do not believe such a position exists, if this is an overreaction to an unbiblical approach to headship in their own marriage (45), or if they are so concerned about abuses of headship that they adopt an unbiblical view in an attempt to correct it. Since the Tracys do not explain their motivations I shall not try to discern them. What I can say is that, apart from the strengths mentioned above, the true crossroads in this marriage book is an intersection of unbiblical and confusing notions of headship. The muddled picture that emerges ultimately fails to add biblical faithfulness and clarity to the church's conversation about gender and marriage.