

Soliloquium

Faith Seeking Understanding

Why I'm Complementarian

I'm continuing my thoughts here from my last post, where I outline what a winsome complementarianism might look like.

By complementarianism I mean the view that men and women are equal as God's fellow image bearers, but do have some differences of role in the church and in the home. The way I like to put it is *equal, but not interchangeable*. In other words, you cannot simply swap male and female in and out of different roles without any consequence; nor are the differences between male and female mere matters of anatomy. There are some fundamental, structural, psychological differences as well (though never matters of better or worse). Two specific ways this plays out: I think the husband is called to a loving leadership role in the marriage, and the office of elder/bishop/overseer (and *pastor* as we typically use the term) is reserved for men.



Let me be clear: as a complementarian, I oppose with all my heart (as much as any egalitarian, I hope) the misuse of male strength, so common in ancient cultures and still prevalent today. I recognize that many human cultures have indeed perpetuated systems and environments in which women have been denigrated and downplayed and devalued. But whereas egalitarianism tries to redress this problem by taking away the principle of male headship altogether, complementarianism does so by radically redefining it in light of the gospel. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). That means complementarianism is a call to die, to love, to serve. In my relationship to Esther, it means that I seek to be the first to soften and apologize in conflict, and that I seek to put her needs above my own – it means that I walk 10 miles to please her rather than walk 1 mile to please myself. I fail every day at that. But that is my target. That is what complementarianism means to me on a daily basis.

Why do I hold this view? A few reasons:

1) First, and this is more of a preliminary consideration than an argument *per se*, egalitarianism (as I use the term, the view that men and women have identical roles) is historically quite eccentric. To the best I can tell, it's the product of recent Western cultures only. Almost every other civilization has conceived of men and women as having different roles in various spheres of life. I am *not* saying all ancient/Eastern cultures were/are complementarian. I think complementarianism, biblically defined, is radically subversive in every culture. For example, the call to Christ-like, sacrificial love from husbands to their wives runs counter to the staunch patriarchalism of many ancient cultures. Jesus' own treatment of women (welcoming them as disciples, teaching them, etc.) was profoundly counter-cultural. I am simply saying that we should have some historical perspective in approaching this issue. Egalitarianism may be the default leaning in our setting, but if we widen our horizon it's very much a minority voice. Unless we have a bias in favor of 21st century Western democratic cultures, this should humble us a bit and give us perspective. Why should our culture see the truth more clearly than others?

2) The Trinity is my model for all human relationship. And I would say the Trinity is pretty decidedly complementarian (Father-Son-Spirit), not egalitarian (Brother-Brother-Spirit). I am aware of the debate about this point in the literature, but it seems basic to me that a father-son relationship is complementarian: each person *complements* the other with a unique role. In the case of the divine Father-Son relationship, for instance, the Son eternally submits to the Father, while the Father does not eternally submit to the Son. The very fact that this God reveals this relationship with our words "father" and "son" is quite telling. Has anyone ever seen a father and son relate to each as though they had identical roles? Does it sound egalitarian when Jesus says, "the Father is greater than I?" (John 14:28)?

That means before I ever get to debate about male and female, a crucial domino has already fallen for a long while back – namely, the premise that relationships of hierarchy and subordination, of headship and submission, *are not necessarily bad or oppressive or unfair*. In fact, this kind of differentiation of role characterizes *the* relationship, the architectonic relationship, the love and joy that pulses at the core of reality. Diverse roles within equality of being and value: this is what a perfect, overflowing joyful, happy, free, living God looks like. We don't need to be scared of this. It's not bad.

3) Before we ever appeal to Scripture, there are strong sociological reasons for believing that men and women are different in a variety of ways that transcend culture or upbringing. Again, at the risk of reiterating this point too much, the differences are never a matter of better or worse! But there are differences. That makes me further open to the fact that maybe these differences go back to something about the way God made us.

4) The creation narrative of the Bible emphasizes that men and women are equal as God's fellow image bearers (Genesis 1:26-28). In fact, it seems to me that the text indicates that the image of God shines forth in humanity *as male and female*; thus, if either all men or all women were to suddenly vanish, the image of God on planet earth would not be reduced to 50%, but to 0%. At the same time, however, the creation narrative is not what you would expect if the Bible were an egalitarian book. If that were the case, you would probably expect men and women created together, naming each other (or both named by God), and each sharing various roles. That is not

the case. Adam is created first, names Eve, and she is called his helper. I am not interpreting these facts just now, I am simply reporting them. That is what happens in the narrative. Its what we all to interpret, and submit ourselves to. I don't know that Genesis 2 would itself get me to complementarianism without the rest of the Bible, but its certainly hard to read it as an egalitarian account!

5) Throughout the Bible, both men and women play a vital role in the life of God's people. Both use gifts to minister to others in significant ways. But in both Old and New Testament, God establishes a pattern in which the office of highest authority and leadership was held by only men. Throughout the Old Testament, women could serve as prophets, which was an occasional, diverse, *ad hoc* institution, but only males could serve as the Levitical priests, the regular, ongoing office of leadership among God's people. Then in the gospels, Jesus calls only male apostles in his inner 12. Egalitarians typically respond that Jesus was adapting to the culture, but is this really plausible? Jesus was not afraid to challenge the culture. He did so all the time. Is it really plausible that Jesus would challenge the culture of his day as radically as he did but capitulate here?

You often hear people say that its sexist to deny equal leadership opportunities for male and female; then was Jesus sexist? He could have chosen 6 and 6. Or 9 women and 3 men just to prove the point. But He chose 12 men. Was Jesus sexist? Was God sexist for the way He set up the Levitical priesthood? Should we be more progressive than Christ was? There is a pattern here already established before we ever get to the office of elder in the church (which, I would say, completes the pattern: priest → apostle → elder).

6) Then of course the Pauline texts, five of which stand out to me: I Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33b-35, Colossians 3:18-19, Ephesians 5:21-33, and I Timothy 2:9-15 (I leave I Peter 3:1-7 aside for now). As I read through *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, I remember struggling with Keener's contribution on I Timothy 2. I wanted to give him a chance to prove me wrong; I read with an open mind. Sometimes I got overwhelmed by the amount of background information he would present, and I would wonder, "hmmm, what if it really was just an issue related to the women in Ephesus?" (Egalitarians typically argue that Paul's restriction was due to the fact that women were less educated in the first century and as a result more susceptible to false teaching, which indeed certainly did happen in Ephesus [I Timothy 3:6]).

But then a rather obvious thought suddenly hit me: if the problem was women in Ephesus who were teaching false doctrine, why didn't Paul place a restriction on women ... in Ephesus ... who teaching false doctrine? Why would Paul *universalize* his concern along the lines of gender? That seems awfully sexist if it really only a problem with *certain* women. Were there no uneducated *men* in Ephesus who were susceptible to false teaching? What about women who had not succumbed to false teaching – wouldn't it be unfair for Paul to exclude them if his concern was only with those who had? Furthermore, there is confirmation of Paul's prohibition in I Timothy in I Corinthians 11 and I Corinthians 14. And in the latter Paul prefaces his comments with, "as in all the churches of the saints," and grounds his teaching in "the Law," which seems to suggest we are dealing with a trans-cultural principle.

There is a danger of appealing to murky, uncertain background situations in such a way that the actual statements of Scripture become neutralized. People do this to try to make Romans 1 not really about homosexuality *per se*. The bottom line is that Paul does not say that he doesn't permit

a woman *who has been influenced by false teaching* to teach and have authority in I Timothy 2. He says he doesn't permit a woman to teach and have authority. Period. No qualifiers. I want to honor Paul's words. If someone wants to convince me its possible to honor this text and come out an egalitarian, I'm all ears. But all the efforts I've read feel like they are not giving his words the honor they deserve.

7) Ephesians 5:21-33 is perhaps the most profound passage in the Bible on the meaning of marriage. Marriage is an institution ordained by God at creation, prior to the entrance of sin into the world. And in this passage, there are clearly different roles for male and female in the way marriage is designed to operate. Certainly Christian husbands and wives are to practice mutual submission (5:21), in the way that *all* Christians are. But when Paul gets more specific about the husband-wife relationship, not all the arrows point in both directions. There are certain responsibilities that husbands have that wives do not, and certain responsibilities that wives have that husbands do not. For example, Paul nowhere says, "husbands, submit to your wives, as the church submits its (wife??), Christ." It does not say that.

Gender means something. Diverse roles in gender mean something. In this passage, their meaning is bound up with the gospel. Male, female, husband, wife, Christ, and church are all somehow integrated in Paul's thinking. "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (5:32). If we flatten out the differences of role assigned to husband and wife, we are in danger of tampering with this God-ordained institution that pictures, and is predicated on, the gospel. Its a big deal to flatten out the differences and make all the arrows point in both directions.

8) One thing I have learned in ministry is that every group tends to have leaders, and often, one key leader. Why should families be different? If its not offensive for churches to have a senior pastor, or businesses to have a CEO, or nations to a President, why is it offensive for families to have a head?

I am not ashamed to be a complementarian. I do not accept that I am 60 years out of date by taking this view. I think it is the best and most reasonable synthesis of all the relevant biblical data, and I think it accords with much of what we know apart from the Bible in the arena of common grace, and I think it can work well in every day life for mom, dad, kids, and society as a whole. It is not a view to be scoffed at and dismissed as out of touch. It should be taken seriously as a non-sexist, non-patriarchal option on the table – even for we in the 21st century West.

September 3, 2013 November 8, 2014 Categories: Complementarianism

13 Comments

1. **4 Dangers for Complementarians | The Publican** Author
November 20, 2014 at 6:32 am

[...] I am not ashamed to be complementarian. It has never been a dirty word for me, because I've grown up seeing godly expressions of it in my family, and hearing compelling arguments for it from my ministry heroes. More than anything, C. S. Lewis books like *Perelandra* have shaped my thinking about gender. (For anyone curious, I've summed up why I'm complementarian here.) [...]

REPLY

2. **David** Author

November 24, 2014 at 3:17 pm

I fail to see how you can claim women are equal to men if you deny them equal access to leadership roles. If women are to be followers whilst men are leaders, where is the equality? There are many other shortcomings in your arguments – for example the Hebrew word in Genesis 2 for helper is used of God, so it cannot imply any order of authority as you suggest. Also, the 12 apostles were all Jewish, so by your reasoning that must mean gentiles cannot be leaders in the church.

Despite your objections to the misuse of male strength and the devaluation of women, you have done what you protest against. As a man, you have constructed a theology that devalues women by restricting their roles, based on a selective interpretation of the Bible. I hope and pray you will reconsider.

REPLY

3. **Women and Men in the Church | Occasional Thoughts** Author

January 27, 2015 at 3:04 pm

[...] 4. Gavin Ortlund has written a good overview coming at this from another angle at: <https://gavinortlund.com/2013/09/03/why-im-complementarian/> [...]

REPLY

1. **Andrew** Author

May 2, 2016 at 1:38 am

This reference is now at: <http://awamos.com/blog/2012/05/women-in-the-church/>

REPLY

4. **Jacob** Author

January 31, 2015 at 2:41 pm

Thank you Gavin for your helpful perspective. Ministering in a Scottish context, I find that rampant Anachronism plus a systemic inbreeding of thought made up of only moderate to liberal leaning European theologians has led most of the evangelical church in GB to see Complementarianism as the ancient bigotry of a by-gone era. Rather than starting with the Word of God, the Gospel of Christ, and the big picture of what the Holy Spirit has been speaking through the Church universal of two thousand years... most Christians and sadly many churches assume that any church or ministry who holds any view opposing the cultural tide of the PC brigade is ready to take away suffrage and begin arranging marriages. We are black balled and lambasted in all circles... yet the Gospel is growing and bearing fruit– and is being displayed in marriages and in the church through complementation relationships.

REPLY

1. **David** Author

February 3, 2015 at 11:50 am

Jacob, I can start with the Bible and produce an egalitarian theology. But appealing to “the big picture of what the Holy Spirit has been speaking through the Church universal of two thousand years” isn’t really a good argument when for most of those years the church claimed that slavery was divinely approved. It’s impossible to detach our theology from the surrounding culture, be it christian or secular. I’m no liberal and I regard complementarianism as a false teaching, created by by the old boys network in the interests of self-preservation. The gospel is all about equality – the old saying that there is level ground at the foot of the cross – and so it is best modelled through egalitarianism, both in church and marriages.

REPLY

5. **Megan Ryan** Author

February 25, 2015 at 7:08 pm

Thank you so, so much for this. I have not found another blog post explaining my own thoughts so thoroughly and clearly – and I am a woman. Thank you for the scripture exegesis. Thank you for going into detail and actually bringing the counter-arguments into the light instead of just the pro-complementarian views. They both need to be addressed and discussed in light of the historical and redemptive context of scripture. I teach Girls’ Bible at a Christian High School (a relatively “liberal” one, at that!), and I am going to direct my students here for a more thorough explanation of why I am a complementarian.

REPLY

Gavin AUTHOR

February 26, 2015 at 8:18 am

glad you found it helpful megan!

REPLY

6. **4 Dangers for Complementarians** Author

April 28, 2015 at 4:32 pm

[...] I am not ashamed to be complementarian. It has never been a dirty word for me, because I’ve grown up seeing godly expressions of it in my family, and hearing compelling arguments for it from my ministry heroes. More than anything, C. S. Lewis books like Perelandra have shaped my thinking about gender. (For anyone curious, I’ve summed up why I’m complementarian here.) [...]

REPLY

7. **Mahlon LeCroix** Author

May 27, 2015 at 10:02 am

Thoroughly enjoyed reading this. I am a Baptist pastor and I teach a new believers class on a regular basis. It never fails that when the role of Pastor is addressed this issue comes up, because it is so counter cultural. I was impressed by how you addressed this issue, and with your permission I would like to use your blog to give new members additional reading on this subject.

REPLY

Gavin AUTHOR

May 27, 2015 at 10:09 am

Please feel free to use it, glad it was useful!

REPLY

8. **Breakfast Blend 11.17.14 | Scribblepreach.com** Author

May 30, 2015 at 5:05 pm

[...] Four Dangers for Complementarians: I am not ashamed to be complementarian. It has never been a dirty word for me, because I've grown up seeing godly expressions of it in my family, and hearing compelling arguments for it from my ministry heroes. More than anything, C. S. Lewis books like *Perelandra* have shaped my thinking about gender. (For anyone curious, I've summed up why I'm complementarian here.) [...]

REPLY

9. **Charlie Falugo** Author

September 11, 2015 at 10:02 pm

Hey, Gavin,

Thank you for your helpful and detailed explanation of your views. I really appreciate that you used the Father-Son-Holy Spirit example first. I share your views on complementarianism and the value of words used by the Holy Spirit as He inspired the writers of Scripture.

However, I am amazed at the influence of CULTURE on my thinking/feelings. I agree with your views about Scripture, I do speak out in defense of male Pastor/Elder roles and yet I still feel a bit awkward when I explain my views to a mixed audience! As Mr. Spock would say "fascinating". As a Christian I think "WHAT?!"

REPLY

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