

Resource Package – Unpacking the Two Views

The following is a general presentation of the key passages and perspectives of both the Complementarian & Egalitarian Positions. In providing this resource, we are intending to give you a little more detailed look into the rationale of both positions and how they interact with each other. By sharing this document, the elders are not at this time endorsing any one position or each specific point/argument that is being made by either position. If you would like to go more in depth... please see the recommended book list at the end of this document.

A Broad Overview of the Complementarian Understanding

A. Created Equality of Essence and Distinction of Role

Male and female were created by God as equal in dignity, value, essence and human nature, but also distinct in role whereby the male was given the responsibility of loving authority over the female, and the female was to offer willing, glad-hearted and submissive assistance to the man. Gen. 1:26-27 makes clear that male and female are equally created as God's image, and so are, by God's created design, equally and fully human. But, as Gen. 2 bears out, their humanity would find expression differently in a relationship of complementarity.

B. Fallen Disruption of God's Created Design

Sin, introduced into God's created design, brought many manifestations of disruption, among them a disruption in the proper role-relations between man and woman. As most complementarians understand it, Gen. 3:15-16 informs us that the male/female relationship would now, because of sin, be affected by mutual enmity. In particular, the woman would have a desire to usurp the authority given to man in creation, leading to man, for his part, ruling over woman in what can be either rightfully- corrective or wrongfully-abusive ways.

C. Restored Role Differentiation through Redemption in Christ

Passages such as Eph. 5:22-33 and 1 Tim. 2:8-15 exhibit the fact that God's created intention of appropriate male leadership and authority should now, in Christ, be fully affirmed, both in the home and in the church. Wives are to submit to their husbands in the model of the Church's submission to Christ, and women are not to exercise authoritative roles of teaching in the Church in view of Eve's created relation to Adam. Male headship, then, is seen to be restored in the Christian community as men and women endeavor to express their common humanity according to God's originally created and good hierarchical design.

Primary Rationale Supporting the Complementarian Position

A. Evidence that God's design was male/female equality of essence

1. Gen. 1:26-27 – Man and woman share the same human nature, both are made in God's image, and both are given God's commission to rule the earth. How they are, together, to rule the earth on God's behalf, is not here explained. The thrust is that male and female are equal in essence (i.e., both fully human, both full imago Dei, both of equal value and worth to God) and together commissioned to rule over the earth.

2. Gal. 3:28 – God's redemption and regeneration of those whom He would save involves no distinction between male and female. Gender is irrelevant regarding who may or may not be saved.

3. 1 Cor. 12:7-11 – God distributes His gifts to His people as He so wills and one's gender is not a factor in His giving any particular gift to a person. Women and men alike are recipients of all of God's gifts. Again, this indicates that women are equal in essence with men in God's sight.

B. Evidence that God's design was for male/female role differentiation

1. Gen. 2 – The order of creation (male created first) indicates God's design of male priority in the male/female relationship. This is also Paul's observation both in 1 Cor. 11:8 and 1 Tim. 2:13. Eve was created to be Adam's helper, and Paul understands Eve's role as helper to mean that woman be under the authority of man.

2. Gen. 3:1-7 – Eve was tempted and deceived by the serpent and ate the forbidden fruit, and then gave it also to Adam. Eve, that is, sinned first. Despite this fact, God seeks out Adam after their sin to inquire why they were hiding (3:8ff). God approaches Adam, not Eve, as the one ultimately responsible for the sin. Likewise, Paul clearly teaches that the line of sin in the human race begins with Adam (Rom. 5:12ff; 1 Cor. 15:22). But he does this in full recognition of the fact that Eve sinned first (1 Tim. 2:14). Adam only rightly bears the responsibility as the head of the sinful human race, when Eve sinned first, if he is viewed by God and Paul as having authority and therefore ultimate responsibility for that act.

3. 1 Cor. 11:1-16 – Paul uses Gen. 2 to support his contention that women should submit to male authority in the church. Because Paul links the woman's submissive role in the Church to God's created design, it seems that these instructions to the church at Corinth are not applicable only there, but instead are applicable universally in the Church.

4. 1 Cor. 14:34-36 – This prohibition on women speaking cannot be absolute, for Paul previously acknowledged women prophesying (1 Cor. 11:5). Complementarians hold that either (1) women may never be involved in an official capacity of teaching the corporate assembly or (2) that women may not function in the elder role of 'judging prophecies'.

5. 1 Tim. 2:8-15 – Paul links his command that women receive instruction with submissiveness rather than teaching or exercising authority over men (2:11-12) with God’s created design for man and woman. Women are to submit to male leadership and teaching because Adam was created first (2:13), and because Eve was deceived and sinned first (2:14). This link to creation suggests that this truth be seen as universally applicable for the Church.

6. Eph. 5:22-33 – Wives are to be subject to their husbands in response to their submission to the Lordship of Christ (5:22). The reason for this, says Paul, is that the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church (5:23). The next verse makes the matter even more explicit: “as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives to their husbands in everything” (5:24). The key notion here is the parallel of the headship of the husband with the headship of Christ. As the Church submits to Christ as the one who has rightful authority over her, so the wife is to submit to her husband as the one who has rightful authority over her. Husbands, for their part, are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church (5:25-29).

Biblical Examples of Male/Female Role Differentiation

1. Male leadership in Israel

From the Garden of Eden on, God has primarily called on men to be responsible for religious leadership.

2. Male leadership with Christ

Jesus chose only men as his closest disciples, continuing the Old Testament pattern.

3. Male leadership in the Church

In several of his letters, Paul restricts women from a certain level of spiritual leadership and instruction in the Church: 1 Cor. 11:1-16, 1 Cor. 14:34-36, and 1 Tim. 2:8-15.

4. Male leadership in the home

Eph. 5:22-33 and Col. 3:18-20 teach that the man is to give overall leadership in the home.

Egalitarian Responses to the Complementarian Position

A. Response: This complementarian understanding is essentially a fully hierarchical view. This view has women subordinate to men, which is contrary to the freedom of the gospel and it often degenerates into women being perceived and treated as ‘less-than’ men.

Answer: Complementarians would view the male/female relationship in a similar way as the Trinity: the Scriptures do not intend to suggest Christ is inferior in value to the Father because He came only to do His Father’s will. Likewise, the Scriptures do not intend to suggest that women are inferior to men because of male-headship.

B. Response: While male leadership was the norm of both OT and NT, there are many significant examples of female leadership in Israel, in the Gospels, and in the early church. Perhaps most

significant of all—women were the first to testify (proclaim, inform, teach?) the male disciples about Jesus resurrection.

Answer: Yes, women do play significant religious and leadership roles throughout the Bible, but most of the examples of female leadership appear in roles other than those of highest human religious authority. Those highest positions are reserved for males. The most notable exception to the above is Deborah (Judg. 4-5), who was both prophetess and judge of Israel. Most complementarians see Judges not as illustrating well God's ideal for His people.

C. Response: Complementarians tend to highlight the few verses that Paul writes about male leadership in the church and the home, which egalitarians take as contextual commands, and downplay the significant amount of verses that call all people—both male and female—to submit to one another, honor one another, prefer one another, and seek to put the other person's needs ahead of their own.

Answer: As stated above, because Paul links the leadership and authority of man to the creation narrative, complementarians hold that these NT instructions that give authority and leadership to man in both the church and the home are not to be read as culturally bound but as normative truth for all cultures and for all time.

A Broad Overview of The Egalitarian Understanding

A. Created Equality

God created male and female as equal in all respects. Gen. 1:26-27 makes no distinction between woman and man insofar as both are equally made in His image (i.e., ontological equality), and both are given the responsibility to rule over His creation (i.e., functional equality).

B. Fallen Disorder and Hierarchy

Sin was introduced into God's created order and caused many manifestations of disorder and corrupted relationships. Among the chief examples of sin's defilement is the introduction of an illegitimate hierarchy in the relationship between woman and man. Gen. 3:16 (the curse on the woman) suggests that, because of sin, the woman would have a disposition of subservience before the man, and the man would have, in contrary measure, a disposition of supremacy over the woman. Thus, the relationship of male/female equality intended by God in creation is now defiled by the presence of a sinful and harmful hierarchical tendency.

C. Restored Equality through Redemption in Christ

Gal. 3:28 expresses the grand truth that in Christ, the false and sinful basis of male/female hierarchy has been abolished, so there is no legitimate distinction, in God's kingdom, between female and male. Full male/female equality is restored, dignity is given back to women, and servant attitudes are called for in men and women alike.

Primary Rationale Supporting the Egalitarian Position

A. Evidence that God's design was for male/female equality

1. Gen. 1:26-27 – shows that man and woman share the same human nature, both are made in God's image, and both are given God's commission to rule the earth. Not only is there equality of being or nature between man and woman, there is also, importantly, equality of function or task – both are commanded to rule. And note: no distinction is made to give the man a superior position in this rulership.

2. Gen. 2:18 – woman as "helper" is best understood as one who comes to complement (i.e., make complete something that is incomplete). So, far from the woman being subordinate to the man, this shows how indebted man should be to the woman. Interestingly, the Hebrew word here for helper (ezer) is used most often of God (who in no sense is subordinate to those whom He helps) in His help of others. The point, then, is that man and woman need each other and are equal partners in this relationship, not that the woman is in a subordinate relationship to the man.

3. Gen. 2:22-24 – they are one flesh, or the same flesh, indicating full equality of person.

4. Gal. 3:28 – if it is God’s purpose through redemption to abolish false and sinful distinctions that separate men and woman into classes or into a hierarchy, then this must be understood as a return to what He intended in creation, an intent that was distorted by the fall and sin but now made real again in Christ.

5. 1 Cor. 12:7-11 – Clearly, God distributes His gifts to His people as He so wills, and one’s gender is not a factor in His giving any particular gift to a person. Women and men alike are recipients of all of God’s gifts (e.g., see 1 Cor. 11:5 for a statement of women having the gift of prophecy). Since God’s spiritual gifting is gender-neutral, and since God expects His gifts to be used in the church, it follows that men and women alike are equal in their exercise of gifts in the church.

Biblical Examples of Female Equality with Males

1. Female Leadership in Israel

Although Israel was largely patriarchal (in accord with most other sin-afflicted cultures of the time and through history), God saw fit to have in Israel some expressions of female leadership. Examples are: Miriam (Exod. 15), Huldah (2 Kings 22) and Deborah (Judges 4-5) who were prophetesses; and Deborah who was also a judge in Israel. Other examples of women who had prominent roles in the spiritual formation and development of Israel, but not in official religious offices, are Esther, Ruth and Naomi.

2. Female participation in Jesus’ ministry

There are numerous examples of significant roles women played in Jesus’ ministry which, although unacceptable to the culture of the day, nevertheless display Jesus’ full endorsement of women and their desire to minister. Some examples:

- Luke 8:1-3 – Women financially supporting Jesus’ ministry and even travelling with Him.
- Luke 10:38-42 – Mary commended for listening & learning from Jesus...no longer just for men
- John 4:39-42 – Samaritan women as the first evangelist within the Gospel of John
- Matt 28:1-10 – Women are the first to see and testify about the empty tomb
- Matt 28:18-20/Acts 1:8 – The great commission is widely recognized to apply to both genders and, as such, proclamation of the Gospel is not gender specific.

3. Female involvement in the early Church

- Acts 2 – Filling of the Spirit was experienced by both men and women
- 1 Cor 12 – The gifts of the Spirit are not gender specific
- 1 Cor 11:5 – Speaks of women ‘prophesying’ in the church
- Acts 18:26 – Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos
- Rom 16:1, 7 – Paul commends Phoebe (possibly a deacon in the church) & Junia, who is ‘outstanding among the Apostles’

Complementarian Response to the Egalitarian Position

1. **Response:** Israel's political and religious structures exhibit an almost exclusively male leadership, and this by God's calling and command.

Answer: This reflects, primarily, the patriarchal culture of the time. Just as God tolerated polygamy and even introduced laws to regulate it despite His created purpose of monogamous marriages, so here God tolerated patriarchy.

2. **Response:** If Jesus broke with cultural expectations and norms in permitting women participation with Him in ministry, why did He not break with those same conventions and choose some women disciples?

Answer: Jesus began the process of the restoration of women to their place of full equality, a process seen continuing in the early church (e.g., Gal. 3:28, 1 Cor. 12). Jesus knew that only a certain degree of break with tradition would be possible, still leaving Him the opportunity to teach and travel freely as He did. A parallel case can be seen when Paul fails to denounce slavery, although clearly he sees it to be at odds with the freedom of the gospel.

3. **Response:** Paul tells women to submit to their husbands. How can he rightly do this if he has declared hierarchy the result of sin and now abolished in Christ?

Answer: It is worth noting that the fullest treatment by Paul on husbands and wives (Eph. 5:22-33) is *introduced* with a statement in 5:21 that reads, "and be subject to one another in the reverence for Christ." What follows after this verse, then, cannot rightly be seen to contradict his clear command that Christian people be subject to one another. What, then, does he mean in 5:22? He gives this as a prime example of the kind of submission that needs to go on more generally among all Christian people. Its purpose is illustrative and is not meant to single out wives as subordinate to their husbands. Submission is a Christian calling, not a feminine calling.

4. **Response:** When Paul says that the man (1 Cor. 11:3) or husband (Eph. 5:23) is the head of the woman, doesn't he mean that the man has the position of authority and responsibility over the woman?

Answer: No, and this can be shown by looking at the word translated as "head" (Gr.: *kephale*). This term is widely used in Greek literature outside of the NT to mean "source" (as with the "head" of a river). Therefore, what this means, then, is that woman owes her existence to the fact that man was created first and, in his incomplete state, God made from him the woman. The woman, then, is "sourced" in man. As such, this word does not suggest, as many think, that man has some rightful authority over woman. In biblical thought, it is the *heart* not the *head* that is understood as the seat of the will and the place of rule.

5. **Response:** When Paul says in 1 Tim. 2:11-15 that women are to learn in submission and not to teach or exercise authority over men, and that this need be the case because of the order of creation and Eve's fall into sin, doesn't this require that women are to be in a subordinate relationship in the church, with only qualified men teaching or preaching?

Answer: This traditional understanding errs because it treats Paul's specific instruction to one particular church situation as though it is normative instruction to all churches at all times. There is evidence that the church at Ephesus (where Timothy pastored) was plagued with false teaching, and that this false teaching was coming primarily from women in the church who usurped authority and taught wrong doctrine. If this is the case, then we must see this passage not as precluding any and all female teaching in the Church, but as a direct prohibition to these certain women in the church at Ephesus who were false teachers.

**This summary is an edited version of a resource put together by Bruce Ware and posted at www.cbmw.org*

Suggested Resources for Further Study

If you would like to dig into things further, we would recommend the following books for you to engage with:

Egalitarian Position

1. Women in the Church – Grenz (1995)
2. Women in the Church's Ministry – RT France, (2004)
3. Discovering Biblical Equality – Fee (2005)

Complementary Position

1. Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood - Piper (1991)
2. Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles – Keller (2012)
3. God's Design for Man and Woman - Kostenberger (2014)

A Different Attempt at Addressing the Question

- a. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian – Lee-Barnewall (2016)

One book that explores both perspectives – with rebuttal – is

- Two Views on Women in Ministry – Counterpoints series