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An Open Appeal to My Complementarian Brothers and Sisters

Jeff Miller

Complementarians believe the New Testament places limits on women in Christian leadership. Egalitarians believe the New Testament frees women for Christian leadership. These labels are useful to a degree, but we need to be reminded that they are neither especially accurate nor entirely fair. Beyond their usefulness as six-syllable shorthand for two vast groups of people, they are most helpful as describing the emphasis or focus of each group—the emphasis but not the entire platform, the focus but not the breadth of each group. *Complementarian* focuses on the ways that men and women complement each other. *Egalitarian* focuses on the equality of men and women. Nevertheless, complementarians self-identify as promoters of gender equality, and egalitarians self-identify as promoters of gender complementarity. Though I would much prefer that we had other less pejorative titles, I'll make free and frequent use of *complementarian* and *egalitarian*, trusting you to understand them along with their limitations.

My title includes the word *appeal*. This article is indeed an appeal—a persuasive essay, if you will (or unpersuasive, if you won't). So let me be clear about what my appeal is. Though I am a convinced egalitarian, my aim here is *not* to persuade anyone to my egalitarian point of view. Instead, my appeal is that you who are complementarians be the best complementarians you can be—the most consistent, logical, honest, and biblical complementarians you can be.

Next, please notice the phrase *brothers and sisters* in the title. It is my genuine intention that this phrase bring to the fore church unity, Christian fellowship, and academic collegiality. I address those of you who disagree with me as “brothers and sisters,” and I have indeed experienced the same kindness. This should not change, even if we each go to the grave thinking the other is wrong.

Before making my appeal, I want to commend my complementarian readers for some admirable traits.

First, you are to be commended for carefully studying the issue. Thank you for your commitment to the text. Please keep studying both the texts and the contexts. Future students of the Bible need to know exactly what both sides think and why they think it. Those future Christians will likely come to a viewpoint that incorporates some of each side. A problem for both sides is lack of careful thinking. Many thousands of egalitarians believe what they believe but cannot answer why. The same is true of complementarians, and we would all be better off if we knew more precisely what we believe and why we believe it. Just as importantly, we would all be better off if both sides were honest about what we are *not* sure of and *why* we are not sure of it.

Second, thank you for your Christian partnership and fellowship. Please keep standing side by side with the occasional clusters of egalitarians in your congregations. Worship with them. Serve with them. Study with them. Our congregations are to be commended that they have not sought to shun or marginalize those with whom they disagree on questions of women in leadership. On this topic we have actually lived out the phrase, “in opinions, liberty.” We have not resorted to disfellowshipping. Some denominations, however, have come perilously close to just that.¹ While there are some among us who would like to follow suit, I thank you for resisting that divisive impulse.

1. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, changed its creedal document in 2000 to include the statements, “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” and “A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband.” The SBC makes its “Baptist Faith and Message” available at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/default.asp>.

I now turn to my appeal, which is divided into two categories. The first concerns theology: I offer caveats about how I believe complementarian theology may soon go or already has gone too far. I am concerned that treatments of certain texts are initiating trajectories that go beyond what the text allows, and doing so in unhelpful ways. The second concerns practice: I describe how I believe complementarians have been too limiting in their congregational policies and customs. I am concerned that their treatment of certain issues is inconsistent and amounts to constructing unhelpful fences around the law.

Theology

My theological caveats arise largely from Genesis 1–3. I have three concerns about complementarian applications of these foundational chapters to the roles and relationships of men and women. A leading complementarian author affirms my starting point:

Why go all the way back to the first three chapters of the Bible, if our concern is with manhood and womanhood today? Because as Genesis 1–3 go, so goes the whole Biblical debate. One way or the other, all the additional Biblical texts on manhood and womanhood must be interpreted consistently with these chapters.²

The first and foundational feature of Genesis that I believe most complementarians overlook is that Genesis 1–3 *is not about women's roles in the Church*. It is not about who can pass communion trays, pray from the podium, chair a committee, or even preach a gospel sermon. Genesis 1–3 is about the whole world. It is about who God is, what it means to be human, where things went wrong, etc. And yes, part of that “etc.” concerns God's choice to create us as men and women. But again, these bedrock chapters are aimed much more broadly than just at gender roles in the church.

Many millions of Christians—including most of those in the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ—have come to some version of the view that women can lead in society but not in church. No complementarian I know would argue from Genesis, for example, that a woman should not be a bank manager. No complementarian I know would argue from Genesis that a woman should not be a shift manager at a restaurant, a school principal, or perhaps even a United States senator.

Consider an excerpt from a 2008 letter to the editor of *Christian Standard*: The letter writer begins, “The issue [of women in leadership] is obviously tough in a society like ours where women are increasingly in leadership roles. I have had women in leadership over me; I am comfortable with it, and I fully understand their ability to succeed.” Thus the author affirms women as leaders in society. Nevertheless, that same letter explains that women are by nature less fit to lead than men: “Paul says that Eve was deceived, not Adam.... We tend to bypass this without much thought. I believe it refers to the natural emotional temperament of women.... I believe it was this emotion-decision-based tendency that led Eve to succumb to Satan's temptation. Adam might have resisted.”³

Here is my concern in a nutshell: The interpretive trajectory which gives rise to a letter such as the one quoted above is illogical. You cannot say that Genesis subordinates women to men and then say that women can be in authority over men. You can only believe this if you assume or somehow convince yourself that what Genesis says about the male-female relationship applies only to the church and marriage, not to broader society. To go a step further, what *really* concerns me is what will happen when complementarians realize the breadth of this interpretive leap. I am afraid they will have painted themselves into a corner regarding Genesis. They have so strongly utilized Genesis 1–3 to answer certain questions that they will not be willing to give it up when they realize it is not about those questions. Instead, they may head for the logical extreme and begin to teach that women should not lead in

2. Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 2006): 86.

3. This excerpt is from “A Leadership Factor that Wasn't Mentioned,” which was posted online on August 19, 2008 at www.ChristianStandard.com but the letter has since then been deleted with all other article comments and letters to the editor dating from that far back.

society either. Such a scenario would work against Christian unity, further polarizing complementarians and egalitarians, and causing further disharmony in the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

My second theological appeal requires a bit of background: One of the many debates about Genesis 1–3 concerns the precise nature of its curses and punishments. Setting aside thorns and thistles and difficulty in childbearing, let's move directly to God's statement to the woman, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16 ESV). The debate concerns whether this verse announces a new reality which was not true in Eden (the egalitarian view), or records the demise of a pre-existing reality (the complementarian view). Simply put, is this where man begins to have authority over woman, or where man begins to abuse authority over woman?

With this background in place, I want to point out where one trajectory of that debate is headed. If man had authority over woman in Eden, then the same will be true in heaven, the new Eden. For those who do not initially find this view appealing, it is important to point out that this doctrine of eternal gender hierarchy teaches that male rule will display none of its post-Eden trappings such as abuse, pride, and self-centered motives. Male authority over women will be entirely in women's best interests, like Adam's authority over Eve was before her sin. Permit me a substantial quotation from an article that lays out the doctrine in detail:

God formed the man first and gave him responsibility and authority as the head of the human race. This headship... is a central feature of the divine created order. Because the new creation is, fundamentally, a return to the divine order that prevailed before the fall, it follows that male headship will remain in the new creation....

...[I]n the new creation, those who were husbands in the former dispensation will, at last, be unencumbered by the flesh. They will be able, as never before, to genuinely love "as Christ also loved the church" (Eph 5.25). They will, as never before, have the capacity to relate to those they love "in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life" (1 Pet 3.7). Consider, moreover, that in the new creation those who were wives in the former dispensation, will have the mind of Christ, "who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and... humbled himself." (Phil 2.6–8)⁴

My appeal to complementarians in regard to this doctrine is simply this: Flee from it! You do not need it. You can be fully complementarian without it. It is a desperation doctrine formed to prop up the prior interpretation that Adam was already the boss even before God said he was. Furthermore, it suffers from the already-described logical leap that Genesis does not apply to gender roles outside the church and Christian marriage.

My third theological appeal is in defense of the gender equality that Genesis establishes, equality affirmed by complementarians and egalitarians alike. This appeal concerns a doctrine that is developing in the complementarian camp, a doctrine that teaches that Jesus had to be male. I could easily be persuaded that God determined that Jesus would be incarnated as a male, rather than God leaving it up to chromosome roulette. But some complementarians are taking the next step and saying, not only that God determined Jesus' gender, but also that God *had* to determine Jesus' gender.

This doctrine has been strongly promoted, for example, by Bruce Ware, professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, former professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a senior consulting editor of *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. I mention these credentials because you need to know I am not getting my information, for example, from the blog of an obscure or rogue complementarian. Ware gives "twelve reasons why our Savior could not have been a woman and must have been a man." He considers these reasons sufficient "for concluding that the male gender of Jesus was essential both to the reality of his incarnational identity and to the accomplishment of his

4. Mark David Walton, "Relationships and Roles in the New Creation," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 11:1 (Spring 2006): 14-15, <http://www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-11-No-1/Relationships-and-Roles-in-the-New-Creation>.

incarnational mission.”⁵ In other words, God would be unable to, or at least unwilling to, forgive sins and reconcile the world to himself on the basis of the death of a female messiah.

To be sure, this is a hypothetical point, for Jesus was most certainly not a female messiah. So why do I consider it so dangerous? For starters, it is downright offensive! A more important reason is that this doctrine teaches that there is actually something ontologically inferior about women; it chips away at gender equality. As a result, Jesus’ mandatory maleness is not good complementarian doctrine! A central and standard feature of the complementarian platform is the equality of men and women. One leading complementarian says, “There is virtually universal agreement that man and woman are ontologically equal, equal in essence and worth, because both were created in the image of God.”⁶ Wayne Grudem, America’s premier complementarian scholar, strongly agrees: “Every time we talk to each other as men and women, we should remember that the person we are talking to is a creature of God who is *more like God than anything else in the universe*, and men and women share that status equally. Therefore we should treat men and women with equal dignity and we should think of men and women as having equal value.”⁷ So I appeal to the complementarians reading this: This developing doctrine of the essential maleness of Christ threatens a more central complementarian doctrine. Thus you do not want it. You can be fully complementarian without it.

Practice

Stepping away from Genesis and theology, my next cluster of caveats concerns congregational practice. Earlier I expressed concern that complementarian treatment of certain issues is inconsistent and amounts to constructing unhelpful fences around the law. In this latter metaphor “the law” refers to core complementarian beliefs. Most commonly, these core beliefs are that women should not preach or hold high authority positions such as lead minister or elder. If that is what you believe, then by all means live out those beliefs. But why build fences around those beliefs? Why mount up policies and prohibitions designed to protect the more central principle? Under this heading I will make three appeals.

My first appeal concerns deacons. We are all in agreement that deacons are servants. But most Stone-Campbell complementarians are also against women being deacons. Perhaps an outsider would conclude that most Stone-Campbell complementarians are against women being servants. Such a conclusion would, of course, be wrong: a more accurate conclusion would be that most Stone-Campbell complementarians are against women being a particular kind of servant—the kind that has a title and receives recognition. Because the idea of a female deacon is so distasteful to many people in our congregations, we have stripped Phoebe the deacon of her title. Consider the backwards situation we have created: I am an egalitarian, so I go out of my way to argue that Phoebe was a *diakonos* (which means “servant”), and my core piece of evidence is simply that Paul says she was (Rom 16.1). Complementarians respond by arguing that Phoebe was a servant, not a deacon—a distinction rooted more in the twenty-first than the first century. Should not it be the other way around? Should not complementarians be pointing to Phoebe the deacon as an appropriate role model for Christian women? Paul does not say “I suffer not a woman to serve.” He does not even say “I suffer not a woman to serve in important or official ways.” Thus I appeal to my complementarian brothers and sisters: let women serve, let women be deacons. And if the reason you cannot do this is that in your congregation the deacons are actually the leaders, then you have stepped away from Scripture in a different way and have caused women to suffer for that error.

My second practical appeal concerns preaching. I realize that a single paragraph asking complementarians to let women preach will not cause an influx of female preachers any time soon. Nevertheless, please hear me out. This appeal is to a specific subset of complementarians—those who *do* allow women to teach adult men but *do not* allow women to preach. This subset includes the majority of Stone-Campbell complementarians.

5. Bruce Ware, “Could Our Savior Have Been a Woman?” <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/could-our-savior-have-been-a-woman/>.

6. Walton, “Relationships and Roles,” 14.

7. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Multnomah, 2004): 26 (italics original), <http://www.cbmw.org/Online-Books/Evangelical-Feminism-and-Biblical-Truth/Evangelical-Feminism-and-Biblical-Truth>.

My claim concerning that subset is that they have it backwards! Paul does say, “I suffer not a woman to teach” (1 Tim 2:12 KJV), but he does not say, “I suffer not a woman to preach.” True, preaching is similar to teaching and can overlap with having authority, and that is why this appeal is limited to a certain subset—those who allow women to teach adult men but not to preach. This subset has already worked its way around “women should keep silent in the churches” (1 Cor 14:34 ESV), for teaching is rarely silent.⁸ In short, if you are letting women teach men, then you are not being true to your interpretation of Paul unless you also let women preach.

My third appeal is my final appeal. More than anything else I have said, I urge you to go out and actually put this final appeal into practice: Let women serve communion and baptize. Serving communion is not teaching, not preaching, not leading, not making policy. It is service. In fact, it is food service! Women can bake the bread, fill the cups, wash the cups. . . . There is no reason to bar them from serving the Lord’s Supper. Baptism as well is not teaching, not preaching, not leading, not making policy. It is service. There is no reason—biblical, theological, historical, or practical—to bar women from baptizing. To do so is to build a fence around the law. Grudem lists nineteen ways women can be involved in congregational life, and in that list America’s leading complementarian scholar says women can baptize and serve the Lord’s Supper!⁹

When women are told they cannot preach or lead, at least there are texts to point to. But when they are told they cannot serve, we can only turn to tradition and Pharisaic logic. I say “Pharisaic” because the Pharisees were fence builders *par excellence*. It is not only Pharisaic, it is also “Sadduceic,” if I may coin a word. The Sadducees were part of the Temple establishment, and first-century Temple policies foreshadowed Stone-Campbell communion policies. Women could not come as close to the Temple as men because the Temple was sacred. Women cannot be as involved in the Lord’s Supper as men because the Lord’s Supper is sacred. To be honest, I believe it actually goes deeper than that: The Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are in large part defined by communion and baptism, and many of us do not want women to have a significant part in what defines us.

Conclusion

One problem with complementarian-egalitarian relations is that each camp tends not to recognize the diversity in the other. They portray the opposition as monolithic and thereby imply they are not thinking for themselves. Let me therefore conclude by saying that a complementarian congregation that allows women to serve as deacons, preach, pass communion trays, and even baptize certainly could not be accused of being just like all the others! If your congregation were to take some of these steps, it would demonstrate that you are not just complementarian because it seems like you ought to be, that you are not simply following along with what other conservative congregations do. Rather, it would show that you have thought it through carefully and are committed to doing what you believe the Bible says, even if it goes against the flow.

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8. I say “rarely” because teaching by publishing could be characterized as silent. It is important to note that Grudem believes women can indeed write “a book on Bible doctrines,” “a commentary on a book of the Bible,” “notes in a study Bible,” or “other kinds of Christian books.” Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 96, cf. 75.

9. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 100.