

WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP:  
A SURVEY OF THE DEBATE, POSSIBILITIES FOR NEW PATHS FORWARD, AND  
PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

by  
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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine the role of females in church leadership by 1) reviewing the writings of some of the more notable proponents of each of the two primary views on the issue; 2) pointing out “challenges,” or difficulties, with each view; 3) examining alternative approaches to the issue; 4) re-examining key verses and issues, given the preceding review; 5) expressing my view on these issues as well as providing suggestions for new “conversations” within the debate.

I will address the apparent tension between passages that seem to indicate a complete “oneness” and the equal standing of all believers (such as Galatians 3:28 – 29) and the apparently “gender restrictive” verses cited by complementarians. I will propose that the answer may lie along the path set out by authors such as Webb, Westfall, De Young, and Groothuis. That is, in God’s “perfect will” there is be no distinction in personhood or role because of gender, but that perfect will is unrealized in the current age. I will note that De Young’s analysis is that Paul may have, in effect, been describing the world as it “should be” in Galatians, but describing the world “as it is” in the various “complementarians verses” as he dealt with the actual reality of church issues some years later. I do not believe that Paul was espousing a universal, eternal prohibition of women serving in church leadership roles. *However*, I believe it is incumbent upon the community of Christ to yearn for God’s perfect will and actively seek, through prayer and discernment of the Holy Spirit, opportunities to express ourselves in a manner more closely aligned with that perfect will. We should be sensitive for, and actively seek, places, times, and persons (of both genders) to move from

the imperfect to the perfect. We should also be sensitive to do so by always keeping in mind that advancement of God's Kingdom is the foremost goal.

I will conclude with a summary of my view and practical concerns and applications.

To my beloved wife, Carmen, who has lovingly and sacrificially supported me throughout the journey of my studies and my life! You are one of God's greatest blessings and the "Best Wife Ever!" (Proverbs 31)

Love you

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of the role of women in church ministry and leadership is not new.<sup>1</sup> At least as early as Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Christian churches have struggled to discern God's plan for the correct roles for female believers in church ministry and leadership. Does God intend men and women to have distinct roles in the church? Or should men and women be "one in Christ" and, therefore, share equally in church leadership, subject only to the calling of God?

In the recent history of the church, the debate has coalesced, generally, around two views: the first view, now usually called the *complementarian* view, posits that, while women should be honored and allowed to participate in ministry, certain ministry, or leadership, positions are reserved for males. The second view, generally now referred to as the *egalitarian* position, holds that men and women should be accorded the same opportunities for ministry positions and leadership without regard to gender.

I suggest that attempting to solve this apparent dilemma by viewing these two categories as mutually exclusive, or as the only two possible solutions, is neither biblically complete nor practically possible in today's evangelical church. New ways of approaching the topic are called for; paths that draw upon the biblically sound parts of each view are needed, as is an understanding that the correct answer, i.e., God's perfect plan, should not be defined by seeing these categories as "either / or" but rather by applying the "both / and" often seen in God's Word.

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<sup>1</sup> In the "gender in church" dialogue, a distinction is often drawn between women in "ministry" and women in "leadership" positions, such as church offices, e.g., "elder" or "pastor." I will argue, *infra*, that this is often a distinction without a difference, especially as it applies to "practice" within the church.

I also suggest that the possible resolution of this issue should not be seen as lying somewhere on a continuum between two extremes. That, if one envisions the complementarian view at one end of a straight line and the egalitarian position at the opposite end, there is a tendency to assume the correct answer might lie, if not at one end of the line or the other, at least somewhere along that line. However, it is also possible that the correct answer may not be on the (hypothetical) line at all but somewhere outside the strictures of the current dialogue altogether. (As I will reference later, writers such as De Young, Lee-Barnewall, and others are useful in suggesting “off the line” answers.)

This paper will seek to synthesize certain elements of the main views described above, show that modern biblical scholarship on each side is (perhaps) not as widely divided as may initially appear (especially as to practice), and put forth new possible approaches for the debate, including elements of both, and a view of the debate from the “already, but not yet” perspective seen throughout God’s plan for His redemptive history.

### The Need for Conversation and Dialogue

The issue of gender in the church is not going away. A cursory survey of the references in this paper alone indicates that the dialogue continues well into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, cultural factors, such as the *#metoo* movement, continue to exert significant external pressure on the church to accommodate females in leadership positions. Likewise, recent scholarship related to key gender verses (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and Galatians 3:28) indicates that there is still significant work to be done for the church to fully comprehend God’s message from these verses. Thus, it seems that the divisions within the church on this issue will continue. This, in itself, is not an ideal situation.

As Sarah Sumner said: “prophetically speaking, I believe it grieves the Spirit of God for us, as evangelicals, to be divided in the way that we are on the issue of women in ministry.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition, as the debate continues, it is also vitally important that we understand the debate itself and, perhaps more importantly, how we conduct the debate is being closely watched not only by young believers, those most susceptible to influence (positive or negative), but also by those outside the church. Jesus himself warned us, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Therefore, while those of us inside the church may (or may not) view the issue of the proper role of women in the church as one of intramural concern only, possibly even a non-essential theological issue, those outside the church are formulating opinions about the church itself by observing our dialogue. In that regard, I add my voice to that of Bruce Barron, who wrote in 1990, “Would a truce marked by continuing dialogue and the absence of inflammatory rhetoric-on both sides-be too much to ask?”<sup>3</sup> This attitude might help us not only in finding God’s will, but also improving the witness of the church for those looking in from outside the confines of the evangelical Christian community.

### A Note on the Scope of the Paper and Terms

#### Scope of the Paper

This paper intends to examine the proper role of females in church leadership by 1) reviewing the writings of some proponents of each of the two primary views on the issue; 2)

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2. Sarah Sumner, “Forging a New Way between Complementarians and Egalitarians,” in *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms*, ed. Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 250–51.

3. Bruce Barron, “Putting Women in Their Place: 1 Timothy 2 and Evangelical View of Women in Church Leadership,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33, no. 4 (December 1990): 459.

pointing out challenges, or difficulties, with each view; 3) examining alternative approaches to the issue; 4) re-examining key verses and issues, given the preceding review; 5) expressing my view, and adding suggestions for new “conversations” within the debate.

The issue of women in church leadership, often leads to a discussion of other related issues and concepts. For example, some complementarians argue that eliminating all gender distinctions in church leadership leads to eliminating those distinctions in the family and in the culture in general. Complete egalitarianism in the church, some have suggested, gives credence to same-sex marriage and the breakdown of cultural (and biblical) boundaries as it relates to gender roles. While I disagree, I simply point out here that the scope of this paper is limited to the role of women (and men) in *church leadership*. I will not attempt to argue (though I believe I can do so) why the positions I take here do *not* lead, *ipso facto*, to the outcomes mentioned above. I firmly believe that the Bible does not support same-sex marriage and that homosexual relationships of any kind are contrary to God’s will and, therefore, sinful.

Likewise, I believe that the relationship between man (husband) and woman (wife) in the context of marriage and the family does contain specific roles for each. As I will expound below, I do not believe those family roles, that is the family structure outlined in the Scripture, should be utilized to define the leadership structure of the church, including the role of females in that structure, nearly to the extent contemplated by the traditional complementarian position. In other words, I do not believe God’s family structure, as expressed in the Bible, is determinatively analogous to church leadership, as some complementarians suggest.

I will expound my view on the latter of these subjects (family / church structure) later in this paper. On the former issue (same-sex relationships), it is outside the scope of this

paper to deal with this more than to simply say I do not believe it is logical to attempt to conflate one (so-called) “gender” issue (homosexuality) which is clearly defined as sinful with another gender issue (the fact that a person is a female) that is clearly not sinful (Webb has responded to this argument thoughtfully and thoroughly.<sup>4</sup>)

In addition, my focus here is church “leadership” as opposed to church “ministry.” I will elaborate below, but it seems that the current state of the discussion is not that females are prohibited from any specific type or form of “ministry” (including preaching), but are (according to most complementarians) precluded from holding certain church “leadership” offices (e.g., elder, pastor, and so on.) For example, noting the example of Priscilla in Acts 18, John Frame writes: “Scripture does not say that women may not teach men.” He says, “the implication of this passage [1 Corinthians 14] is that women are not eligible for the teaching *office* of the church, whether that office be called elder, pastor, or bishop” (Emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup>

While this may (or may not) represent a shift from previous eras and views on the topic, it seems clear enough today that the primary conversation is related to leadership roles and not “ministry” as that term is commonly understood.

### Terms

As with any significant issue which generates debate, defining terms can have a significant impact on the direction of the debate (we see this to an extreme degree in the issue of abortion, where those who support taking unborn human life insist on calling themselves

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4. William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

5. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 635–36.

“pro-choice” rather than “pro-abortion”). In this paper, I will use those terms which the majority of persons taking a particular position seem to prefer for themselves. For example, I refer to one general group as “complementarian” (rather than “hierarchal” or “patriarchal”) because that is what they call themselves, and it seems to be a fair description of the position. The other main group I refer to as “egalitarians,” again because most seem to prefer that description for themselves and it seems an apt description of their position. I note, however, that within each group there exists a variety of “sub” groups, those that take nuanced positions that are, often as not, at odds with the positions taken by other persons in the same “main” group. It is for that reason, and others described throughout the paper, that I eschew any existing “label” for my position. This is not because I do not firmly hold my position, but simply because I believe none of the existing labels capture the essence of my position. I agree with some aspects of both positions and, likewise, take issue with some aspects of each primary position. Further, to some extent, I believe there is an “already, but not yet” aspect to this issue that does not lend itself to labels or easy definition. By avoiding such labels, I hope my modest contribution to the conversation might be more readily accepted by proponents of both “sides.”

Throughout the paper, the terms “ministry” (as in “females in ministry”), “leadership,” and “office” (e.g. “church office”) appear in various contexts, as they do in the literature on this topic. However, they are not necessarily synonymous, and therefore not interchangeable, especially in the context of gender issues. As noted in the preceding section, the focus of this paper is formal “leadership” and “church office,” not ministry activities *per se*. By “leadership” and “office,” I intend to convey the idea of holding official positions within the church, such as pastor, elder, deacon, etc., which usually, but not always, involves some type of formal recognition or ordination. (Although leadership almost always includes

“ministry,” some ministry activities are conducted by those not necessarily considered “leaders” or “office holders” by this definition.)

Finally as to terms, in this day, gender descriptive terms (and the term “gender” itself) can prompt heretofore unexpected responses. Therefore, to be clear, in this paper I use the terms “male” and “female” as well “man” and “woman” in their traditional, i.e., biological sense. No implication or comment regarding “transgender” issues or roles is intended from any part of this paper.

### Summary of the Two Primary Positions

Later in this paper, I provide a more detailed overview of the two primary positions, along with a review of other alternative positions. For now, the two primary positions can be summarized as follows:

*Complementarian:* Men are leaders in the family and the church. Women cannot preach to, or (authoritatively) teach men.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, women cannot function as pastors, elders, bishops, or even deacons.<sup>7</sup> Key verses relied upon by complementarians include 1Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-40.

*Egalitarian:* Men and women are equal in the family and the church. Domestically, husband and wife submit to each other. In the church, women can take up leadership positions as men do. Female ministers can be ordained as pastors and elders. They can also be the senior pastors of the Church. Key verses relied upon by egalitarians include Galatians

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6. As will be developed later, some complementarians would allow women to teach (and even preach) in certain contexts with males present, i.e., where that context does not involve asserting ultimate spiritual authority over those men. In addition, most complementarians would allow women to teach and even have authority over male children, although at what point in chronological age (or otherwise) this exception ends is not entirely clear.

7. William C.C. Fung, “An Interdependent View on Women in Leadership,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (April 2015): 119.



3:27-28, Ephesians 5:21, Genesis 1:27, and various verses indicating women in leadership positions in the New Testament Church.<sup>8</sup>

Within each primary position, there are a variety of modified positions. Especially on the complementarian side, the literature suggests there has been significant movement over time. Certain positions of leadership (and ministry) that would have been at one time forbidden by traditionalists seem now acceptable to most complementarians.

### Alternative Positions

Besides the two positions described above, alternative positions, or alternative approaches to the issue, have emerged (four examples of these are provided in chapter 4). These generally fall into two categories: a view that the complementarian position may have been correct, but that, due to passing time and God's sovereign hand on our culture, the egalitarian position may be more correct today. In this general vein, we find Webb's "redemptive movement" approach,<sup>9</sup> and De Young's "actualization" paradigm.<sup>10</sup> The other general approach is that the debate itself misses the larger point of God's mission for the church and that the proper role of all persons in church leadership should be viewed, not through the lens of gender, but by assessing the larger picture of what is best for God's Kingdom. This includes Lee-Barnewall<sup>11</sup> and Fung<sup>12</sup>, both summarized below.

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8. Ibid., 120–21.

9. See, generally, Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*.

10. James DeYoung, *Women in Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010).

11. Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

12. Fung, "An Interdependent View," 119.

### New Paths and a Note of Caution

In her chapter “Forging a middle way between Complementarians and Egalitarians,” Sarah Sumner says: “. . . We, as conservatives, have been known to confuse the theology of favorite theologians with divine revelation itself.”<sup>13</sup>

Heeding her warning, I endeavor, especially in the final two chapters of this paper, to suggest new paths and new topics of conversation related to this debate. It is my opinion, expanded in those chapters, that perhaps God’s perfect will for church leadership is not found “on the straight line” between the two major camps. Perhaps elements of each are correct, but it is also possible (probable, in my view) that better answers lie off to the side of the line formed by attempting to connect (or correct) the two primary views. I will attempt to push further down the paths suggested by Webb, De Young, Lee-Barnewall (and others).

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13. Sumner, “Forging a New Way,” 251-252.

## CHAPTER 2 COMPLEMENTARIAN VIEW

The (current) complementarian view is best defined as set out in the Danvers Statement, first published in 1988, and as expounded in the seminal work *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, first published in 1991 and re-published in 2006.<sup>1</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, complementarians generally hold that, while God equally values both men and women, certain church leadership positions are restricted exclusively to men.

Under the heading of “Affirmations,” the Danvers Statement, as affirmed throughout the book, contains this key statement: “In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; *nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men*” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

To support this position, complementarians cite key verses (discussed below) that fall into one of three general categories: male “headship” verses, prohibitive verses, and verses which analogize church leadership to family structure, with some verses falling into more than one category. Those in this camp also often refer to church history, both as recorded in the New Testament and after, as support for their interpretation of these biblical texts. In this chapter, we will look at some of the key verses (and other supporting evidence) as seen through the complementarian lens, followed by some challenges associated with this interpretation.

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1. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, ed., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006).

2. Ibid., 470.

## Key Complementarian Verses

### Male Headship

#### I Timothy 2:11–15

Some have said that without the inclusion of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in the biblical record, the complementarian position as we know it today would likely not exist. Other verses (discussed below) are simply insufficient on their own to support the exclusion of women from church leadership. In the “Timothy verses,” Paul sends these instructions to his protégé:

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Timothy 2:11-15)<sup>3</sup>

From these verses, complementarians derive their primary support for the notion that women can hold no position of “authority” over men.<sup>4</sup> This is interpreted to mean that women cannot hold official offices in the church and, accordingly, to most complementarians, likewise may not publicly “preach,” at least when (adult?) males are present.<sup>5</sup> Moo sums up the complementarian view of the Timothy verses:

We think 1 Timothy 2:8-15 imposes two restrictions on the ministry of women: they are not to teach Christian doctrine to men and they are not to exercise authority directly over men in the church. These restrictions are permanent, authoritative for the church in all times and places and circumstances as long as men and women are descended from Adam and Eve . . . Therefore, we must conclude that the restrictions imposed by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 are valid for Christians *in all places and all times*.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)

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3. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture verses are from the ESV.

4. Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men?” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 179-193.

5. For a different view, see Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 635–36.

6. Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach,” 180.

This mandate, the argument goes, is based on the concept of “male headship” and Paul’s use of the Adam and Eve reference (Genesis 1-3) clarifies that his instruction is “universal,” because it relates to a “creation order.” In commenting on these verses, Ortlund states: “both *male-female equality* and *male headship*, properly defined, were instituted by God at creation and remain permanent, beneficent aspects of human existence” (emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, based on the “creation order” as set out in the Timothy verses, Daniel Doriani writes:

(W)omen ought to learn, but in a quiet and submissive manner... They may teach informally, but may not hold teaching offices or formerly authoritative positions in the church... Paul forbids that women teach both because of God’s sovereign decree and because of the history and nature of man and woman.<sup>8</sup>

### Challenges with the Position

Notwithstanding what complementarians see as the clear mandate of 1 Timothy 2’s admonishments, there are several difficulties with this passage. It has been called one of the most difficult texts to interpret rightly. Schreiner notes that “(v)irtually every word in (1 Timothy 2) verses 11-12 is disputed.”<sup>9</sup> Belleville adds: “the complexities of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 are many.

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7. Raymond C. Ortlund, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 95

8. Daniel Doriani, “A History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Kèostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 262.

9. Thomas R. Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15: A Dialogue with Scholarship,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Kèostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 121.

There is barely a word or phrase that has not been keenly scrutinized.”<sup>10</sup> One word alone, “authenteo,” usually translated as “authority,” has received a great deal of attention.<sup>11</sup>

The egalitarian position on this passage is discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters; however, suffice to say that the scholarship on these Timothy verses is far from unanimous in its conclusions. In comparing the traditional interpretation of this passage with previous institutional mistakes, (such as Galileo, slavery, past treatment of women, and so on) Pierce notes that it is worth asking if it is “possible that the church could have been blind to the prejudices and biases affecting our reading of these texts for nearly two millennia.”<sup>12</sup>

A particular challenge for complementarians who seek to develop a universal doctrine with the enormous impact on the church that their view produces, is the use of the Timothy verses which, at a minimum, seem to lack the clarity (“perspicuity”) that one would normally demand of the text serving as the foundation for such a significant mandate. Jamin Hubner makes this point in his 2016 article. Citing the Westminster Confession of Faith, he notes: “when there’s a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture... It must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>13</sup> He says:

The last 25 years of academic scholarship vindicate the claim that in 1 Timothy 2:12, “it isn’t even entirely clear what Paul was prohibiting (citing Groothuis).” This is demonstrated by the expansive variety of interpretations and applications of the texts by multiple sides of theological interest, not to mention the sheer attention the verses taken in New Testament biblical studies and the women in ministry debate. While it is comforting to know that both complementarians and egalitarians hold to the “obscure-in-

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10. Linda L. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 205.

11. Jamin Hubner, “Translating 'authenteo' in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 16–26.

12. Ronald W. Pierce, “Evangelicals and Gender Roles in the 1990’s: 1 Tim 2:8-15: A Test Case,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 3 (September 1993): 345.

13. Jamin Hubner, “Revisiting the Clarity of Scripture in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 18.

light-of-clear” hermeneutical principle, it is disheartening to see that principle being compromised when it comes to complementarians treatments and attitudes surrounding 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>14</sup>

Putting aside that Hubner sees the error on the side of the complementarians, his point is well taken, i.e., that the passage seems far from clear enough upon which to base a critical doctrine.

In addition, at least one author concludes that Paul never intended his writing here to be instructive at all but rather a statement of his own practice:

One issue is whether Paul was issuing a command or just stating a personal practice. The idea that the present indicative, *ouk epitrepō*, "I do not permit," rather than an imperative, "Do not permit," suggests the latter—that is, a personal practice—seems to be gaining more acceptance.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, egalitarians view the “Timothy verses” as either purely contextual to the culture at the time, not meant to be universally applied for all time, or not imperative at all.

1 Corinthians 14:34-40 and 11:2-16

(T)he women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:34-40)

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave

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14. Ibid., 23.

15. Walter Liefeld, “Women and the Nature of Ministry,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 1 (March 1987), 50.

her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

In these verses, Paul instructs the church at Corinth regarding “orderly worship.” For example, at 11:3-6, after reiterating that the husband is the head of the wife, Paul states that when a woman prophesies she should do so with her head covered. The central message of the passage from 11:2-16 relates primarily to women covering their heads during church services. But several verses in this section do refer to the roles of husbands and wives.

Likewise, in chapter 14:33-36, Paul addresses the role of women in the church service. He states it is “shameful” for a woman to speak in church. From the complementarian perspective, these verses show Paul’s concern that women not take an active role in church leadership, or at least not do so in public services.

As with the Timothy verses, these verses certainly appear to restrict, in some sense, the role of women in the church. They reemphasize that the husband is the head of the wife and indicate a diminished role for females at a minimum in that context. Complementarians view these verses as supporting a “universal” prohibition of female leadership in the church.<sup>16</sup>

While conceding that the head covering mandates are culturally irrelevant today, Schreiner says: “Nevertheless, that does not mean that this text is not applied our culture. The

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16. See, generally, D.A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36.” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 140-153.



principle still stands that women should pray and prophesy in a manner that makes it clear that they submit to male leadership.”<sup>17</sup>

### Challenges with the Position

As with the Timothy verses, there are a variety of difficulties sustaining the position that Paul’s remarks in 1 Corinthians were meant to be either universal (i.e., applicable for all time and all places) or absolute prohibitions in the first place.

The first challenge is obvious from juxtaposing these two sections as we have done above. We see in one section Paul admonishing women to remain silent while in another section in the same letter he is giving direction to females regarding head covering when they, in fact, do not remain silent! It is clear from the verses in chapter 11 that Paul was not only aware that the women were “prophesying,” he gave them instruction as to appropriate attire when they did so.

Frame says:

The attempt of some to argue that Paul mentions but does not approve this practice (women praying and prophesying in worship), is not persuasive. He requires women who are praying and prophesying to wear a covering while doing so. If he disapproved of them praying and prophesying as such, it would be like saying, “if you rob a bank, be sure to wear a coat and tie.”<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Carson, quoted above, dealing with the same verses, notes that “Paul is quite prepared for women to pray and prophesy, albeit with certain restrictions...”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, however, Carson seems to “bootstrap” his view of these verses by referring to the Timothy verses, where he says, “a strong case can be made for the view that Paul refused to permit any

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17. Thomas Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 138.

18. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 635.

19. Carson, “Silent in the Churches,” 140.

woman to enjoy a church-recognized teaching authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11)...”<sup>20</sup>. This statement is one (of many) that supports the general idea that, without the complementarian view of the Timothy verses, the entire position loses significant weight.

It is difficult to believe that the references to “remaining silent” in chapter 14 were meant as absolute prohibitions against women speaking in church. This is developed more fully in the next chapter, but as Westfall notes in discussing chapter 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, “very few scholars argue that the silence for women should be understood as absolute.”<sup>21</sup>

Without the support of the Timothy verses, these passages in 1 Corinthians would likely not support the complementarian position as it is seen today (This is not to say that the verses are necessarily isolated instructions to a particular church (at Corinth) at a particular time, though some make that argument. In my view, these verses require a response from those who argue that they do not, universally, preclude women in church leadership. A sampling of those responses can be found in the next chapter.)

#### “Elder” Verses and Additional Family Analogies

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

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20. Ibid., 152.

21. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 241.

In addition to the proposition that Paul either explicitly prohibited female leadership in the church in the verses we have examined, and / or that he did so based in part on the concept of male headship, complementarians also argue that Paul's guidance for the selection of elders assumes that such elders would be male and that, again, he did so based in part on analogizing church leadership to the family structure (1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9).

Complementarians turn again to Paul's first letter to Timothy. In chapter 3, verses 1-7, Paul instructs Timothy regarding the criteria for selection of "overseers," also translated as "elders." The list of criteria, e.g., "the husband of one wife," suggests that Paul anticipated the overseers Timothy would select to be male. Again, Paul refers explicitly to the "household" in verses four and five to further explain to Timothy the type of individuals he should be looking for to carry out leadership in the church.

As with previous verses, complementarians rely on these instructions to support the position of exclusive male leadership in the church, based in part on *family* male headship.

Typical of the comments are these from Poythress:

The requirement concerning 'managing his own family well' is particularly important, because the same wisdom and skills necessary for good family management apply also to the management of God's church. . . In sum, the theme of God's household runs through 1 Timothy and is validly used as the basis for inferences about Christian behavior, not merely as an incidental illustration. . . The central use of the household analogy naturally points toward inferences regarding authoritative leadership in the church. . . The church as God's household also needs wise and competent leadership. That leadership is to be sought among men who have already shown their abilities in the context of their immediate families. Women by contrast are not to be placed in authority in the church, because such a role would not harmonize with the general relations between men and women in marriage, as established at creation (1 Timothy 2:11-14). Thus, the differences between men and women within the context of marriage and family carry over into differences in roles that men and women may assume within the church. . . Hence, women are excluded from being overseers on the basis of general Biblical principles concerning the family, not on the basis of some temporary circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

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22. Vern Poythress, "The Church as Family: Why male leadership in the family requires male leadership in the church," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 235, 237-239.

(Note that, again, the complementarian view regarding elders and the family analogy is bolstered using the 1 Timothy 2 verses.)

### Challenges with the Position

Like the previous sections we have reviewed, interpreting the elder qualification verses to suggest that Paul meant the church would have exclusively male leaders at all times and in all places is not without difficulties. For example, neither this text, nor similar texts in the book of Titus, provide significant information regarding the organization of the early church. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent Paul's use of generally male-sounding criteria was meant to create exclusivity for male leadership, and it is even more difficult to ascertain whether Paul's intention was to create universal criteria or simply guidance for the situation at hand.

At no point in the "elder criteria" verses does Paul's specifically exclude females from these (apparent) church offices. Reading these criteria as literal requirements leads even complementarians to potentially anomalous results. For example, the requirement that an overseer be the "husband of one wife," if applied literally, would exclude not only females, but also single males. If that interpretation is applied, Paul would have been establishing a criteria which he would not have met himself. (The complementarian response to this challenge is that the verses were addressing issues such as polygamy and (perhaps) divorce, not singleness as a result of voluntary celibacy or death of a spouse.)

Gordon Fee addresses the risk of creating universal standards for church leadership from the rather thin descriptions that Paul provides regarding the organization of the first-century churches. "Thus what is totally lacking in our documents is any instruction intentionally

stipulating who, what, how many and the duties of these various people. At the ‘church universal’ level we get tantalizing glimpses, but scarcely anything on which all can agree.”<sup>23</sup>

In short, without the prior assumptions regarding male headship and the applicability of the family / church analogy, the “elder qualification” verses are problematic when relied upon to support male exclusivity.

### History and Practice

Much like their egalitarian counterparts, complementarians rely on biblical and post-biblical history to support their position that church leadership was generally understood to be restricted to men. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* contains a comprehensive survey of both Old and New Testament females who served in various ministry or leadership capacities. This list includes Old Testament characters such as Deborah and New Testament figures such as Priscilla, Euodia, and Syntyche, to name a few. However, after conceding that the examples cited “has rightly shown that women participated in various forms of ministry in both the Old Testament and the New Testament,” the authors distinguish the activities of those females and come to the conclusion that “it is clear that biblical writers consistently ascribe ultimate responsibility to men for the leadership of the church.”<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, complementarians will show that throughout much of post-biblical church history, at least until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, church leadership offices were restricted to males. While again conceding that women have “contributed to the church” throughout its history and conceding that “women have done almost everything men have, and have done it just as well,” complementarians such as Weinrich hasten to point out this has traditionally not included the

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23. Gordon Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry.” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 243.

24. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity,” 215, 222.

“office” of teaching and of the sacramental ministry. He states that “the recognized teaching and sacramental ministry of the church is to be (and has been) reserved for men.”<sup>25</sup> Exceptions to this general rule are considered “historical anomalies” and / or the providence of “sects and peripheral groups.”<sup>26</sup>

In any event, there is little serious debate that, until the last 50 years or so, women did not traditionally hold high church offices in large numbers in the church.

### Challenges with the Position

In response to the arguments related to church history, those who do not hold the complementarian view are quick to point out inconsistencies, i.e., the fact these women appear at all is evidence for acceptance of female leaders.

For example, Paul, by providing a written account of the roles of several females in his own ministry and in the ministry of the early church, (for example, see Romans 16:3 (Priscilla); Philippians 4:2 (Euodia and Syntyche); 1 Timothy 3:11 (possible female deacons); Romans 16:7 (Junias)) was actually signaling his acceptance of these females in church leadership, or so the argument goes. The very mention of females in such a favorable light, at a point in history in which the female’s status was so different in the culture at large, Paul was indicating the legitimacy of the female role in the church hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

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25. Thomas Weinrich, “Women in the History of the Church: Learned and holy, but not Pastors,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 263 and 273.

26. Ibid., 273.

27. As expounded a bit in the next chapter, complementarians generally respond to these examples as showing that the females were “prominent” but did not necessarily hold the equivalent of a church “office” or leadership position. In fact, the exact role that some of these women played is in itself less than clear from the text, and they clearly, say the complementarians, should not all be categorized in one grouping of “church leaders.”

Regarding post-biblical church history, there is at least some evidence that the Christian church was “ordaining” females well into medieval times. In his interesting book, Gary Macy reviews the history (and meaning) of ordination in these ancient times and concludes that, putting aside modern definitions, women in the medieval church “found ways of gaining and retaining power within the church.” He also states that “several authors upon whom this work depends have already established that women played a far greater role in both the sacramental and jurisdictional life of Christianity in these earlier centuries than they would from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward.”<sup>28</sup>

More recently, many Christian denominations and independent Christian churches have begun to ordain females into full top leadership positions (hence the present debate). This generally occurs in organizations that adhere to the egalitarian (or similar) position. However, even churches and denominations that profess to be complementarian in theology utilize females in positions of ministry and leadership. In fact, the wide variety of ministry and leadership positions these organizations allow females to hold are so diverse as to make one question to what extent the complementarian position provides meaningful guidance with respect to the actual practices within these churches (a topic I cover in some detail in the final chapter.)

As one example, missionary and educator James Stamoolis, reflecting on 30 years of mission work, states:

Even in denominations which are heavily male-dominated, women missionaries carried on pastoral functions that they would never have been permitted to undertake in the churches that sent them out. This phenomena, well documented in any standard history of mission, demonstrates there has been a disconnect between what are perceived to be the clear instructions of Scripture in the sending country versus the actual needs of the mission field.... The position of teaching and authority that women carried out most

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28. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127–29.

capably is the reason (on a human level) for the church existing in many places today. The women got the job done.<sup>29</sup>

Some complexities of practice versus theology I will defer to a later chapter; however, it suffices to say here that the actual activities and positions (by whatever title one uses) of females in (supposedly) complementarian churches present a challenge to the practical application of that theological position.

### Summary

There is no doubt that the theological position today known as “complementarian” has been the traditional, accepted position of the church for much of its history. Based upon the ideas expressed in (mainly) Paul’s writings, this position holds distinct gender “roles” for males and females in both the family and the church. While women are equally valuable in the sight of God, and are as fully redeemed as males, certain roles are restricted to males. The day-to-day details of applying this position vary somewhat from place to place, and appear to have varied to some extent over time; however, the most senior positions in the church community, i.e., elder, senior pastor, and so on, as per the complementarian view, are reserved for males.

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29. James Stamoolis, “Scripture and Hermeneutics: Reflections over 30 Years,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 28, no. 4 (2004): 339–40.



### CHAPTER 3 EGALITARIAN VIEW

The egalitarian position, generally stated, is that no church office or ministry / leadership position is restricted exclusively to males. That is, females are equally entitled to hold such leadership positions or offices. Egalitarians generally hold that church leadership positions, including that of elder or senior pastor, should be determined by the calling of God through the Holy Spirit and persons of both genders are equally qualified to be so called.<sup>1</sup>

According to the editors of *Discovering Biblical Equality*:

The essential message of biblical equality is simple and straight forward: gender, in and of itself, neither privileges nor curtails one's ability to be used to advance the kingdom or glorify God in any dimension of ministry, mission, society, or family. The differences between men and women do not justify granting men unique and perpetual prerogatives of leadership and authority not shared by women. Biblical equality, therefore, denies that there is any created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy *based solely on gender*. Egalitarianism recognizes patterns of authority in the family, church and society-it is not anarchistic-but rejects the notion that any office, ministry or opportunity should be denied anyone on the grounds of gender alone.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Scholer says:

Such a hermeneutic commits one to the Biblical affirmation of the equal partnership of women and men in the ministry of the Church. It is my deepest conviction that the full evidence of Scripture, with all proper hermeneutical awareness of contexts and settings, and an understanding of balance and consistency in interpretation mean that we must rethink some of our traditions and affirm with clarity and conviction the Biblical basis for the full participation of both women and men in the ministries of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, ed., *Discovering Biblical Equality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

2. Ibid., 13

3. David M. Scholer. "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no 4 (December 1987), 419.

Egalitarians place much emphasis on God's calling to determine a person's proper role in ministry, which, they contend, takes precedence over gender:

Another qualification for ministry is the divine bestowal of spiritual gifts. There is absolutely no differentiation made in Scripture between men and women in this regard. The gratuitous intrusion of male terms in English translations is to be deplored. The words "If a man's gift is prophesying" in the NIV translation of Rom 12:6 represent such an intrusion. No masculine term, nor any term that could be so understood, appears in the Greek. If spiritual gifts are indeed essential for ministry and if women have them, should not the burden of proof be on those who would restrict women from ministries for which God has qualified them by the bestowal of these gifts?<sup>4</sup>

Most Christian (evangelical) egalitarians seek to distance themselves from the so-called "radical feminist" positions which deny any gender distinction, and, further, to distance themselves from the secular philosophies of the so-called feminist movement. They prefer the term "Biblical egalitarianism (as opposed to any brand of secular or pagan feminism) . . ."<sup>5</sup>

To support their position, egalitarians rely on three primary methods. First, they rely on key verses themselves (such as Galatians 3:26-29) which they assert stand for the proposition that God intended there to be no lasting distinction, at least within the church, of the roles to be carried out by males and females. Second, they argue that the key verses cited by complementarians (and discussed in the preceding chapter) do *not* lead to the conclusion that the Bible established a universal prohibition of females serving in teaching, ministry, or church leadership capacities. Third, egalitarians cite examples, within the Bible itself, of a variety of females holding key leadership positions in both the Old and New Testaments, such examples demonstrating, in their view, the acceptability of females in leadership.

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4. Liefeld, Walter. "Women and the Nature of Ministry," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 1 (March 1987), 58.

5. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 14.

## Key Verses

### Galatians 3:26–29

In his letter to the church of Galatia, Paul sets out one of his more famous pronouncements regarding the “oneness” of the community of Christ, pointing out that there is no distinction within three very important groups of people, groups that were certainly seen as very much distinct at the time of his writing.

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

Gordon Fee summarizes the egalitarian view of this verse:

So where does this bring us in conclusion to a discussion of Galatians 3:28- with its eye catching addition of slave and free, male and female to the primary issue of Jew and Gentile? The answer lies first with the fact that both the argument of Galatians as a whole and the specifics of this passage itself indicate that this text has to do with Paul's ecclesiology: What it means to be the people of God under the new covenant brought about through Christ's death and the gift of the spirit. Second, it lies with Paul's new creation theology embedded in this text, which sounds the death knell to the old order, even though its structures remained in the surrounding culture.<sup>6</sup>

Westfall sees Paul's statements in connection with his other writings as indicating that believers in Christ are on a path toward completeness. “In Philippians 1:6, Paul sees believers as being God's work-in-progress, who are on a trajectory that is completed when they reach their eschatological destiny: ‘He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus’ (TNIV).”<sup>7</sup>

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6. Gordon Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry.” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 184.

7. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 146.

Westfall also views Paul's statements in Galatians as consistent with his overall eschatology and states: "The underlying assumption of Galatians 3:28 is that in Christ, men and women will become what they are created to be. Conversely, women cannot become what they were not created to be." She goes on to argue that:

According to Paul, there is no differentiation in humanity's destiny on the basis of gender, race, or status. Women, as well as Gentiles and slaves, have a shared destiny of authority and rule. If this is consistent with the purposes of God at the foundation of the world, with the creation of Adam and Eve, and with the new creation in Christ, then women could not have been created to be subject to men. In other words, women cannot have a final destiny that was not their intended purpose or function at creation... The loss of authority and rule for women is a consequence of the fall in Genesis 3:16, which symbolizes a general disruption and corruption of power in human relationships, including the loss of authority and rule for many men who have been subjugated, such as male slaves... Paul, in the prison and Pastoral Epistles, argues for the entire church to adopt a missional self-sacrificial adaptation to fallen social structures... as a strategy to advance the gospel, similar to missionary strategy required in the Middle East today.<sup>8</sup>

In responding to the complementarian claim that the Galatian statements mean that a woman can be "equal in being" but "subordinate in role" (as some seek to interpret these verses), Groothuis responds:

In a new covenant, physical distinctions such as race and gender no longer demarcate unequal levels of religious privilege (Galatians 3:26-28). No one in the body of Christ is excluded the priestly responsibilities of representing God's holiness to the world, offering spiritual sacrifices to God, representing God or other believers and interceding for others before God.<sup>9</sup>

Woman's inferior "role" cannot be defended by the claim that it is ontologically distinct from all woman's equal being. In female subordination, being determines role and role defines being; thus there can be no real distinction between the two. If the one is inferior, so must be the other. If, on the other hand, woman is *not* less than man in her personal being, then neither can there be any biblical or theological warrant and for woman's permanent, comprehensive and ontologically grounded subordination to man's authority.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 145-147.

9. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 328-329.

10. *Ibid.*, 333.

In summary, those of the egalitarian view argue that the restrictions placed on females in church leadership are, at best, culturally tolerated at the time of the other writings (as discussed below) but are not God’s ultimate plan for reconciliation of all people, even as they apply to the present age, with such an argument based largely on these verses from Galatians.

### Challenges with the Position

As with the key complementarian verses, alternative readings of Paul’s “one in Christ” verse are possible. For example, within the immediate context of the verses, there is no indication that Paul has church leadership or ministry in mind. Galatians, which is known as a summary of the gospel message, focuses itself on matters of spiritual redemption, not church hierarchy. It is reasonable to assume that Paul here may have been simply expressing the basic gospel message of redemption, as opposed to commenting on, for example, church ecclesiology.

This view is summarized by S. Louis Johnson, Jr.:

There is no reason to claim that Galatians 3:28 supports any egalitarianism of function in the church. It does plainly teach an egalitarianism of privilege in the covenantal union of believers in Christ. The Abrahamic promises, in their flowering by the Redeemer’s saving work, belong universally to the family of God. Questions of roles and functions in that body can only be answered by consideration of other and later New Testament teaching.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson is arguing that this generic statement of the spiritual union of believers in Christ has nothing to do with the question as to the proper *role* of genders within the church. Other complementarians are generally in accord with this position (see, for example, Reaach<sup>12</sup>).

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11. Lewis S. Johnson, “Role Distinctions in the Church-Galatians 3:28,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 164.

12. Benjamin Reaach, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-movement Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2012), 140–42.

### Response to Complementarian Verses and Concepts

Because the complementarian position has, for many years, been the traditional position, egalitarians, not surprisingly, spend much of their effort in refuting the interpretation of the key complementarian verses discussed in the preceding chapter. By refuting the conclusion that these verses prohibit women in church leadership, so the logic goes, it will be establishing the opposite—there is no such prohibition. The key verses and concepts described above are reiterated here, with a more detailed egalitarian response.<sup>13</sup>

#### Male Headship

That the complementarian verses are part of, and derived from, the concept of male headship (as espoused in the first three chapters of Genesis, for example) is the subject of much discussion in the egalitarian (or “non” complementarian) literature. Once such example is William J Webb.

In his book *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, Webb states:

Obviously there exists a crucial difference between slavery and patriarchy. The former is not found in the creation story, while the latter, perhaps in implicit ways, is. Those who support a patriarchal perspective for today make much of this point. The observation itself is a good one. Yet there are several reasons why we should not be quick to use the original creation story in affirming patriarchy for today. First, the patriarchy in the pre-Fall material is at best implicit... not explicit disclosure. Patriarchy only becomes explicit after the Fall . . . the patriarchal aspects of the story may have been a way to accommodate the story to the patriarchy of the Exodus generation and beyond. Most Christians are familiar with this accommodation phenomenon in eschatology, where the projections of the future are often cast in terms that are understood to the present audience... Thus the inclusion of something in the creation story does not automatically make it transcultural, as some would suggest.<sup>14</sup>

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13. In this section, I forego the “Challenges with the position” sections, as they would be largely repetitive of the complementarian position outlined in the preceding chapter.

14. William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 248–49.

Likewise, Hess puts it this way:

In short, both unity and gender diversity are clear themes in the creation accounts. God created the woman and the man to be one in unity and love. There is neither explicit nor implicit mention of any authority or leadership role of the man over the woman, except as the sad result of their sin in the Fall and their ensuing judgments. Even then, such hierarchy is not presented as an ideal, but rather as a reality of human history like that of the weeds that spring from the earth. The resolution of this conflict in equality and harmony cannot be found in these chapters but looks forward to a future redemption.<sup>15</sup>

### 1 Timothy 2:11–15

The “Timothy verses” present, at least on the face of them, the most direct statements regarding the proper role of women in the church context. The passage is used more often, and with more vigor, to undergird the complementarian view than any other bit of Scripture. Bellville notes that “1 Timothy 2:11–15 continues to be perceived and treated as the Great Divide in the (gender) debate.”<sup>16</sup> (In the preceding chapter, I summarized some of the challenges this passage presents for complementarians, including the perspicuity challenge. By definition, those challenges are also the egalitarians’ offensive tact against the passage. Therefore, I expand those issues here.)

Most commentators, regardless of their position on the general issue, agree that this passage of Scripture is one of the most difficult to interpret. Bellville notes there is “barely a word or phrase that has not been keenly scrutinized.”<sup>17</sup> Entire journal articles and book

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15. Richard S. Hess, “Equality with and without Innocence,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 94–95.

16. Linda L. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 205.

17. *Ibid.*, 205.

chapters have been devoted, in fact, to arrive at the appropriate translation of *one* word (“authenteo”) generally translated as “authority.”<sup>18</sup>

Egalitarians have also focused much attention on the context of the passage because, as noted above, it stands in virtual isolation in Paul's writings regarding proper roles for females in church leadership. The egalitarian position on context is based on reading the Timothy verses as addressing a particular contextual challenge in the congregation in the church at Ephesus. Bellville summarizes it this way:

A reasonable reconstruction of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 would be as follows: The women at Ephesus (perhaps encouraged by the false teachers) were trying to gain an advantage over the men in the congregation by teaching in a dictatorial fashion. The men in response became angry and disputed what the women were doing.... This interpretation fits the broader context of 1 Timothy 2:8–15, where Paul aims to correct inappropriate behavior on the part of both men and women.... It also fits the grammatical flow of 1 Timothy 2:11–12: “Let a woman learn in a quiet and submissive fashion. I do not, however, permit her to teach with the intent to dominate a man. She must be gentle in her demeanor.” Paul would then be prohibiting teaching that tries to get the upper hand-not teaching per se.<sup>19</sup>

Another key point in determining the context of the passage is: What was Paul getting at in saying that women should not exercise “authority” over men? In this vein, Hubner, in an in-depth study of the word “authenteo” (a word only used only once-here-in the entire New Testament) in 1 Timothy 2:12, concludes that the now common translation of “to exercise authority over” is historically and grammatically flawed. The more appropriate meaning that Paul was seeking to convey, he opines, was that of prohibiting females from having a “domineering” attitude as they taught. Hubner suggests that the now common translation related to “authority” may be driven by the desired outcome, rather than the other way around. He notes that “1 Timothy 2:12 is considered by many to be *the* biblical case against

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18. Jamin Hubner, “Translating 'authenteo' in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2015), 18.

19. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 223.



women pastors (therefore) its traditional interpretation must be championed if men alone are to remain behind the pulpit. Otherwise, the case against women in ministry is jeopardized.”<sup>20</sup>

Convinced that the context of the gender issue has prompted a lengthy history of “mistranslation” of the word rendered as “authority,” Hubner sums up:

Historically, it is lamentable that the (patriarchal) lens of interpreters has led to a patriarchal reading of 1 Timothy 2:12 in the first place. This is no surprise given the influence of traditional ideologies about gender and the tendency of all human beings to hold on to positions of power. But, one may wonder why in this *this* age such an erroneous reading still exist-especially in churches dedicated to the Bible's teaching?<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Westfall has done in-depth studies of the exegetical history of 1 Timothy 2:11–15. As with the previous authors, she notes:

Historically, 1 Timothy 2:12 is the primary text that has been used up to the present to ban women from certain activities and functions within the church, regardless of a woman's training, skills, or spiritual gifts. It has provided a lens or exegetical grid through which all other Scripture is applied to women. In traditional interpretation, in fact, obedience to this passage, together with submission, seems to constitute the entire scope of a woman's call. Therefore it is imperative to offer more comprehensive exegesis of this passage and to explore the interpretive options as well as the implications of certain interpretive choices that have been made.<sup>22</sup>

In the ensuing thirty-three page chapter, she does exactly that, concluding that the Timothy verses are, in fact, what is known as a “household code,” that is, Paul instructing the men in the congregation to deal with heresies that females in the congregation were putting forward, and to do so family by family, i.e., in their individual homes. She states:

The controversial passage that addresses women in 2:9–15 does not fit the setting of the church service either. It is better understood as a type of household code, whereby the heresies involving women that invaded the household were to be corrected in each household by the husband, who was in the best position to take responsibility for the spiritual formation of his wife. Rather than prohibiting women from participating as

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20. Hubner “Translating 'authenteo' in 1 Timothy 2:12,” 22.

21. Ibid., 23.

22. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 279.

leaders in the church, Paul addresses the lacuna in discipleship that is holding the Ephesian women believers back for maturity and sound teaching.<sup>23</sup>

### Summary and Response

The above represent a sampling of the egalitarian interpretations and analysis of the Timothy verses. They generally conclude that the verses have been mistranslated in a way that overstates the prohibition against general authority in the church and, further, the passage relates to a specific contextual setting which may make the verses “non-universal” in their application. However, challenges of the egalitarian position are fairly apparent when considered in juxtaposition with the complementarian position on these verses discussed in the preceding chapter. That is, one must delve fairly significantly behind the text, either exegetically or contextually, to come to the conclusion that Paul did not intend to apply the prohibition set out in the passage universally. Doing so can obviously create hermeneutical difficulties in attempting to interpret many of Paul's teachings, large portions of which could be read to be considered contextual in nature. Also, the complementarians correctly note there must be *some* significance to Paul's use of the creation order in these verses.

I defer further analysis, and my own perspective, for subsequent chapters. I will simply note at this point that the Timothy verses are an example (among several) of an area where I believe there is merit to *both* viewpoints, i.e., an argument (which I will make below) can be made that the verses are both universal and contextual.

### 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:34–35

In response to the passages discussed in the preceding chapter from the book of 1 Corinthians, Gordon Fee and Craig Keener provide alternative explanations in which they

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23. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 311-312.

suggest that both of these passages were prompted by the specific context of the Corinthian church. Certain members of the church communities, presumably females, were behaving in an inappropriate manner during the public assembly of the church. In his chapter on 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, Keener points out that virtually no one today takes these verses to mean all that they could literally mean, i.e., no reasonable interpretation of the verses today indicate that women should be “completely silent” as a sign of subordination to the church leadership.<sup>24</sup> He summarizes:

(S)cholars have read this passage from various angles. Most likely the passage addresses disruptive questions in an environment where silence was expected of new learners—which most women were. It also addresses a broader social context in which women were expected not to speak much with men to whom they were not related, as a matter of propriety. Paul thus upholds church order and avoids appearances of social impropriety; he also supports learning before speaking. None of these principles prohibit women in very different cultural settings from speaking God's word.<sup>25</sup>

As it pertains to the 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 section, Fee first points out the “stark contrast” with 14:34-35 in that in the former verses, the women were assumed to pray and prophesy, while in the latter there is an (apparent) requirement of women being absolutely silent.<sup>26</sup> He prefaces his analysis of the verses with this observation:

Despite the many uncertainties, acknowledged in part by almost everyone who has written on this passage, one may still find some who are bold to assert that this passage teaches “that women should pray and prophesy in a manner that makes it clear that they submit to male leadership.” In light of what Paul actually says— or does not say—such an assertion is made with a great deal more confidence than a straightforward exegesis of the passage seems to allow.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Craig S. Keener, “Learning in the Assemblies: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 161.

25. *Ibid.*, 171.

26. Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry,” 143.

27. *Ibid.*, 143.

Fee concludes, generally, that the verses were written to address a specific problem in the Corinthian church, not to “put women in their place,” with universal restrictions.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the verses in these sections related to prophecy and attire, Westfall discusses in detail the context in which 1 Corinthians 11 was written and concludes this:

Therefore, the fact that man is head of woman is not used here to argue for the subordination of women or the priority of men. Rather, Paul argues that the glory of man should be diminished in worship and the glory of God should be magnified, and this is done, at least in part, by gender-specific apparel.<sup>29</sup>

### “Elder” Qualification Verses and Family Metaphor Issues

The “elder qualification” verses (1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9) present another challenge for egalitarians, as it appears that Paul contemplated males serving in this capacity. As also noted, this seems related to the concept that the head of a household was required to serve as an overseer (elder) in the church.

With respect to these matters, generally, Fee notes that with regard to the “matter of gender as it relates to structures in ministry” the biblical texts:

(S)imply do not have an explicit teaching on these matters... Precisely because the biblical texts themselves do not have an agenda on this question. . . Rather, they speak to a variety of ad hoc situations . . . which, when they are all put side by side, seem to show evidence of a wide variety of practices.<sup>30</sup>

Fee argues further that the text actually does not deal with the gender issue in any intentional way, and states:

But what they do *not* do in an intentionally instructive way is to speak to the question whether women may or may not be in leadership; and except for first Timothy 2:11–12, they do not otherwise speak to the issue of women's participation in some, but not other, activities of ministry. The obvious difficulty with the 1 Timothy passage is that

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28. Ibid., 142-160.

29. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 100.

30. Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry,” 243.

it stands in unrelieved tension with passages that either narrate (Acts 18:26) or imply (1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-31) that women were involved in some form of teaching.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, as noted in the preceding chapter, egalitarians also point out that, based on a literal reading of the elder qualification verses, only married men with children, as opposed to, for instance, single men would meet the qualifications to be an elder.<sup>32</sup>

### Examples of Women in Leadership

Egalitarians point out that the Bible (including the New Testament) contains a variety of examples of women serving in the church in leadership capacities, or, at a minimum, in prominent roles in the church community. Among these are Phoebe (Romans 16:1), Junia (Romans 16:7), and Priscilla (Romans 16:3). Old Testament examples are often cited as well, such as the prophet and judge, Deborah (Judges 4:4-7). When read with verses such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-11 (wherein Paul clearly did not disapprove of women praying and prophesying in public), egalitarians surmise that these example from Scripture provide evidence of both the appropriateness of, as well as examples of, women in various positions in church leadership in the New Testament church.

In addition, regarding the post-biblical Christian church, and as noted in the preceding chapter, there is at least some evidence that women continued to be in positions of leadership and were, in fact, ordained members of the clergy, as much as eleven centuries following Jesus's time on earth.<sup>33</sup> Other researchers have noted that, while a traditional interpretation of the Timothy verses prevailed during the first five centuries of the church, women were

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31. Ibid., 247.

32. As noted elsewhere, most (but not all) complementarians see this as prohibiting polygamous and (possibly) divorced men from serving, not other types of "singles."

33. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008)

“actively involved in officially recognized and public speaking ministries by the middle of the second century.”<sup>34</sup> Dray points out that:

The office of deaconess developed and the Council of Chalcedon addressed positively the issue of their (women’s) formal ordination. Other women, especially the highborn, studied and taught the Bible. These included Jerome's fellow workers Paula, Eustochium and Marcella. . . Thus, the historical evidence is not altogether unambiguous. It suggests that appeal to historical precedent as to the role of women in the church needs to be advanced with a greater degree of circumspection than has frequently been the case.<sup>35</sup>

In response, complementarians consider such examples anomalies, arguing that such exceptions may actually prove the general rule that males alone should hold church leadership offices. In addition, the specific role each of these women played is not entirely clear and, therefore, may not be analogous to a church leadership role today.

Complementarians would not dispute that these females figured prominently in the Bible, but do not generally agree that “prominence” equals “leadership role” in this context.

Nevertheless, the appearance of these females (along with others), especially in the biblical texts, demonstrate God’s acceptance, or endorsement, of women leaders, say the egalitarians.

### Summary

Egalitarians, including those that put forward that there are no distinct gender roles in either the church or the family, generally defend such positions with a detailed analysis, offering alternative (either contextual or exegetical) analysis of the key verses described in this and the preceding chapter. Their analysis leads them to the conclusion there was, at a minimum, no universal prohibition in Paul's instructions to his churches as a related to

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34. Stephen Dray, “Women in Church History: An Examination of Pre-Reformation Convictions and Practice,” *Evangel* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 23.

35. *Ibid.*

women serving in key church leadership roles. Most egalitarians posit that the church leadership positions, whether held by males or females, should be based on spiritual gifting and calling (which calling should be affirmed by other leaders within the church) rather than gender alone.

## CHAPTER 4 OTHER VIEWS

### Introduction

The two preceding chapters summarized the two primary views related to the proper role of females regarding church leadership. However, frequent use of terms such as “primary,” “generally,” and “usually” in connection with these writers implies, and such is the case, that there are a variety of alternative views on gender in church leadership. Some alternatives might be characterized as nuanced versions of one of the primary views; others seek to lead the conversation regarding women in church leadership in an entirely new direction.

Lee-Barnewall, for example, notes: “There is a growing sense among many that neither position quite encapsulates what they sense is the biblical view, along with a desire to explore the topic beyond the bounds of the current positions.”<sup>1</sup> She adds: “I have come to believe that the topic cannot be completely defined by either the complementary or the egalitarian viewpoint, and that there is room, perhaps even a necessity, of an alternative way of conceptualizing gender issues.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of (her) book is to question whether this is the best way to frame the discussion and to suggest a different way.”<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will review four examples of alternative views on the debate, as well as providing, where available and appropriate, responses to these alternative views. I do not suggest

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1. 1. Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 1.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 3.



these are the exclusive alternatives, but rather that they represent certain new directions that the conversation has taken, or may take.

### William J. Webb and the “Redemptive-movement” Hermeneutic

William J. Webb’s above-cited contribution to *Discovering Biblical Equality* is derived largely from his own book, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*.<sup>4</sup> Here, Webb puts forward a hermeneutical method which he terms “redemptive-movement.” At the outset of his writing, Webb challenges readers with a list of some three dozen biblical “commands” or statements. He then challenges the reader to analyze each passage and conclude whether or not such a command is applicable today. He then challenges the reader to ask the all-important question regarding applicability (or non-applicability): *Why?* This fairly straightforward introduction to the concept of “hermeneutics” sets the stage for Webb to ask a related question (applicable to the key verses we have examined here), which is whether such passages are to be universally applied in all places at all times.

From this simple exercise, Webb begins his argument with the assertion:

A crucial distinction drives . . . the entire hermeneutic proposed within this book— the distinction between (1) a *redemptive-spirit* appropriation of Scripture, which encourages movement beyond the original application of the text in the ancient world, and (2) a *static* appropriation of Scripture, which understands words of the text aside from or with minimal emphasis upon their underlying spirit and thus restricts any modern application of Scripture to where the isolated words of the text fell in their original setting... I will argue that a redemptive-movement hermeneutic champions that which is of foremost importance for actualizing the sacred text today... I have coined my approach a “redemptive-movement” hermeneutic because it captures the redemptive spirit within Scripture... Some may prefer to call this interpretive/application approach a “progressive” or “developmental” or “trajectory” hermeneutic. That is fine. The label “redemptive movement” or “redemptive spirit” reflects my concern that the derived meaning is internal, not external, to the biblical text.<sup>5</sup>

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4. William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

5. Ibid., 30–31.

From this basic premise, Webb provides details throughout his book that suggests key verses are not intended to be “static,” that is, literally applied at all times and in all places, but rather should be viewed from the “redemptive spirit” viewpoint. Therefore, in his view, there is a “progressing reconciliation” at work in God’s redemptive history that we should account for in our interpretation of key verses (see, for example, Philippians 1:6).

As the title of the book implies, one of Webb’s most prominent examples is that of slavery, i.e., that the New Testament texts seem to condone slavery in texts that, for instance, direct believers as to how they are to treat their slaves (see Titus 2:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:1). He notes that the church today does not view these verses as supporting slavery. He attributes this to the concept underlying his “redemptive-movement” hermeneutic, i.e., that slavery did not represent God’s ultimate ethic (or plan), but was tolerated due to the cultural environment at the time.<sup>6</sup> He argues that this same movement (trajectory), when properly analyzed, should apply in other areas, including the question of the proper role of women in church leadership.

Webb, anticipating one objection to his method, notes that his “redemptive-movement” hermeneutic is *not* simply a thinly veiled effort to apply a cultural synchronicity to the Scriptures, that is, work backwards from the current cultural climate to a hermeneutic that fits that culture. Rather, it is an attempt to determine, from the text, which features within Scripture are “culturally confined” and those that are “transcultural.” He goes on to say that “When it comes to cultural assessment, it matters little where our culture is on any of the issues discussed in this book! Scripture, rather than contemporary culture, always needs to set the course of our critical reflection.”<sup>7</sup>

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6. Ibid., 36–38.

7. Ibid., 245–46.

He also adds that, in applying his hermeneutic, appropriately applying the Scriptures may be different in different places at different times and still be in conformity with the biblical principles. He states, for example:

Perhaps women should be permitted to teach in cultures where these underlying assumptions (based on his criterion) no longer apply in quite the same way. Once the cultural component within these verses is identified, one must move up the ladder of abstraction... and reapply the transcultural principles contained within these texts. This needs to be directed toward both genders, not simply women, in the selection of teaching leadership within a congregation: choose leaders and teachers who are worthy of high honor within the congregation... And choose leaders and teachers who are not easily deceived.<sup>8</sup>

In fleshing out his redemptive-movement hermeneutic, Webb establishes a series of criteria to be utilized to determine if, and to what extent, the biblical statements should be interpreted as universal, cultural, or in some other way. Webb places his criteria into four categories:

- Persuasive Criteria
  1. Preliminary Movement
  2. Seed Ideas
  3. Breakouts
  4. Purpose/Intent Statements
  5. Basis in Fall or Curse
- Moderately Persuasive Criteria
  6. Basis in Original Creation, Section 1: Patterns
  7. Basis in Original Creation, Section 2: Primogeniture
  8. Basis in New Creation
  9. Competing Options
  10. Opposition to Original Culture
  11. Closely Related Issues
  12. Penal Code
  13. Specific Instructions Versus General Principles
- Inconclusive Criteria
  14. Basis in Theological Analogy
  15. Contextual Comparisons
  16. Appeal to the Old Testament
- Persuasive Extrascriptural Criteria
  17. Pragmatic Basis Between Two Cultures
  18. Scientific and Social-Scientific Evidence

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8. Ibid., 249.

As an example of applying but one of the above criterion (5: Basis in Fall or Curse, which falls under the “Persuasive Criteria” heading), Webb provides a sample of his analysis as it relates to the “Order of the Fall” argument often made to support male headship as found in 1 Timothy 2:14-15:

Some Christians argue for the ongoing application of hierarchy in view of the fact that “woman was created second, yet first to fall.” (Citing the use of this criterion by the Southern Baptist Convention to exclude women from ordination)... While it makes for a nice oratory slogan, the first-to-fall argument is not persuasive. For one thing, if those who hold this position are attempting to derive it from Paul, they are quite mistaken. Paul focuses on the nature of the fall (woman’s deception), not the order of the fall. Second, both Adam and Eve were present when the snake makes his crafty appeal and eventually both Adam and Eve sin.... The order of fall may reflect the deception difference between Adam and Eve. However, this is only speculation. Neither the Genesis text nor the Pauline text tells us why Eve sinned first. To base a transcultural hierarchy on interpretive speculation is hardly responsible. Third, the Fall and curse are not a valid basis for the perpetuation of anything on an imperative level due to implications of redemption in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Based in part on this analysis, Webb summarizes in the concluding paragraph of his book (on this topic): “Thus, the inclusion of something in the creation story does not automatically make it transcultural, as some would suggest.”<sup>10</sup>

Webb similarly analyzes the key verses used by complementarians to support their view, as well as an analysis of the egalitarian position of many of those verses. In doing so, Webb concludes that his view should be considered a “complementary egalitarianism,” which he defines:

Complementary egalitarianism is an appropriate title for the form of egalitarian position developed within this book. On the one hand, it differs from secular egalitarianism in the sense that interdependence and mutual submission are the pursued values instead of extreme independence and autonomy. On the other hand, it differs from some forms of Christian egalitarianism and it applauds the recognition of biological, psychological and social differences between males and females. Men and women can and should function in a “complementary” way. The component that complementary egalitarianism seeks to

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9. Ibid., 112.

10. Ibid., 249.

remove from the gender-differentiation equation is that of a power differential based solely upon gender and any role differentiation related to that power differential. Nevertheless, I would continue to argue for distinction based on biological differences between men and women.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his book, Webb promotes the idea that the words written by Paul to his readers at the time they were written were meant to be applied universally and, perhaps for a significant time following his writing. However, in Webb's view, God's continuing, historical redemption and sanctification of His body continue to progress toward an ultimate ethic, that is, the eventual total elimination of restrictions on serving in any capacity in His church because of one's gender.

### Response

Benjamin Reaoch responds to Webb's "redemptive-movement" hermeneutical method (which Reaoch calls a "trajectory" concept) in his book *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate*.<sup>12</sup> Reaoch traces the history of the "trajectory" idea, (i.e., that God's redemptive spirit is moving His people from an "acceptable" ethic (e.g., biblical slavery, gender distinctions, among others) to an "ultimate ethic" which will have no such distinctions) to a variety of previous writers. He includes Krister Stendhal, R.T. France<sup>13</sup>, Richard Longenecker, and David Thompson, along with Webb<sup>14</sup>, among those he says have espoused some version of the idea.

Reaoch provides a complementarian response to the trajectory view. While summarizing that the "conclusions these authors reach (primarily the "slavery and gender" issues), that we

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11. Ibid., 241.

12. Benjamin Reaoch, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-movement Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2012).

13. See, e.g., R.T. France, *Women in the Church's Ministry: A Test-case for Biblical Interpretation* (2004; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995).

14. Reaoch, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate*, 1-6.

must move beyond the specific biblical instructions about manhood and womanhood, is not warranted,” he makes several points, the principle of which are summarized here:<sup>15</sup>

- (On slavery) The Bible never condoned slavery, but gave principles that regulated it and led to its demise; therefore, there is a fundamental distinction between the issue of slavery and male-female relations.<sup>16</sup>
- The gender issues are “rooted” in the creation order and, therefore, transcend culture.<sup>17</sup>
- (On Galatians 3:28) The three categories enumerated are different in nature; slavery was an institution created by sinful men, the Jew / Gentile distinction was reconciled at the cross (Ephesians 2:14-16); but the male / female distinction was created by God and rooted in creation itself. Therefore, the distinctions for the last category continue to have significance even in the realm of redemption.<sup>18</sup>

In short, Reaoch (and the authors he quotes), although giving some deference to Webb’s hermeneutical criterion (which Reaoch analyzes generally and in the context of some of Webb’s examples), does not see mankind as on a “trajectory” of any kind that would (even ultimately) do away with gender distinctions or roles. Reaoch also provides a warning of sorts, which is not uncommon among the complementarian responses to egalitarian hermeneutics. He says that it leaves too much room for subjectivity and for individuals to interpret specific texts (versus general principles) in a manner that leads to the outcome they might have desired before beginning the process. He suggests:

It allows a person to emphasize the principles that fit his or her presuppositions and to undermine the texts that are at odds with those presuppositions. We must strive, rather, to understand how each passage fits into the unified message of the Bible. And we must allow each passage to challenge and refine any assumptions we may have absorbed from sources other than the Bible.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Ibid., xxi.

16. Ibid., 11, 13, 45-46.

17. Ibid., 13.

18. Ibid., 100.

19. Ibid., 159.

John Frame also takes exception to Webb's "redemptive-movement" hermeneutic, opining that it "violates the authority of Scripture . . . denies the authority of Scripture. . . (and) substitutes modern fashion for the authority of Scripture."<sup>20</sup> He also states it is unnecessary to resort to a "redemptive-movement" analysis to deal with the "slavery question."<sup>21</sup>

### James B. DeYoung

As with the other authors examined in this chapter, in his book *Women in Ministry*, Professor James B. DeYoung seeks to "bring another alternative to this debate between the complementary and egalitarian views. I suggest that the biblical view is not complementary nor egalitarian."<sup>22</sup>

DeYoung sets out the complementary position as affirming "that while men and women are equal in their spiritual position in Christ they have differing divinely-ordained roles to play in society, including the church. In the church they may serve in various capacities, but not in teaching or leadership roles that place them in authority over men."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, he summarizes the egalitarian position as affirming that "because men and women are equal in their spiritual position in Christ, they should have equal roles in society, including the church. They may be able to exercise authority over men in the church should their gifting and calling equip them to do so."<sup>24</sup>

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20. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2008), 641.

21. Ibid., 661.

22. James DeYoung, *Women in Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), xi.

23. Ibid., X.

24. Ibid.

DeYoung puts forward a proposition for consideration of the gender debate that is similar, at least, to that of Webb et.al. DeYoung refers to this as part of his larger “paradigm of reality to express the Bible's worldview.”<sup>25</sup> He says that his paradigm affirms:

(T)wo realms of reality and how one relates to the other. . . In the biblical worldview, there is existential or historically limited reality, which is physical, temporal, limited, and earthly... (but there is also) essential reality that is spiritual, eternal, unseen, heavenly—the realm of God in the spirit world. *There is actualization: essential reality is being actualized more and more fully in existential reality.* <sup>26</sup> (Emphasis added)

DeYoung goes on to note that all believers simultaneously exist in both realms and that both realms have existed since “the creation of humanity and will endure throughout all of the future.”<sup>27</sup>

The highlighted sentence in the quoted paragraph above is the center-piece, in my view, of DeYoung’s approach to the gender debate. He seeks to bridge the gap between the world we see and the world that God intends via what he calls a “third element”—actualization. This is the “process” by which we are moving (or will move) from one realm to the other. He says (later): “This third element is the key.”<sup>28</sup>

DeYoung provides examples of his two realms paradigm before turning to the specific issue of gender and church leadership. He states that his paradigm with its various elements is “reflected over and over in the Bible.”<sup>29</sup> He sees the “actualization” element in, for example, Paul’s words “. . . are being transformed” in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. He states:

Virtually all agree that a biblical worldview encompasses the two realms of historical or existential reality and essential reality...The important matter is that these concepts, these realities, exist and virtually all recognize them...What is not readily recognized is the

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25. Ibid., 74.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 74.

28. Ibid., 75.

29. Ibid.



third element of the paradigm. There is a process that is already underway to actualize, to realize, more and more the essential or eternal realm in our existential, temporal realm.<sup>30</sup>

He points out that Paul, in passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:17–18 and 2 Corinthians 4:16–18, acknowledges the existence of the two realms *and* the actualization process which is moving believers from one realm to the other. DeYoung points out that Paul actually “exhorts” Christians to move from one realm to the other; that is, to “actualize, to realize one’s truest identity in Christ” in passages such as Romans 12:1-2 and Colossians 3:1-4.<sup>31</sup>

After noting, “I believe that this paradigm offers significant help in resolving the issue of the role of women in church,” like other writers, DeYoung turns to slavery and passages such as Galatians 3:26-38 as examples of Paul’s texts anticipating a perfect, future reality (i.e., the freedom from slavery) with the present reality in the New Testament era (i.e., the existence of biblical slavery).<sup>32</sup> Utilizing both the “slave and free” and “Jew and Greek” (Galatians 3:28) analogies, DeYoung concludes:

Since the essential identity of believers as “one in Christ Jesus” has been quite well actualized in the *roles* that “slaves and free” and “Jew and Greek”... have today in most cultures, it should be expected that the essential identity of “male and female” should also be actualized more and more in their roles in contemporary culture. Some actualization, it seems, must take place this side of eternity. Given enough time and enough changes in culture such will occur. In the eternal era it seems that there will be no distinctive roles for men and women.<sup>33</sup>

DeYoung sees the “existential” reality in verses such as 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and the verses in 1 Corinthians we have examined. He sees “essential” reality in verses such as Galatians 3:28. The transformation, or “actualization,” of believers from one realm to the other will, per DeYoung, occur over time as per God’s sovereign will.

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30. Ibid., 76.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 74.

33. Ibid., 92.

DeYoung concludes:

(A)ll of Paul's teachings regarding the role of women in ministry is culturally limited. Yet this does not mean that it can be disregarded. It means that role of women may differ from culture to culture. . . It means that, for the foreseeable future, women will not have roles equal to men in every respect. During this era, gender differences exist . . . These disappear only in the future era when humans will be like angels, when they no longer marry nor parent children . . . Many believe that the problems at Ephesus and Corinth can be traced to an “over-realized eschatology”—that the Christian women believed that the era of transformation, the kingdom, had already arrived. The believers believed that the rubric, “already but not yet,” was to be understood as, “already even now!” . . . We can draw out this distortion in another direction as well. At present it is those of the complementary view that fault egalitarians as following “over-realized eschatology.” Yet it seems that those of the complementary view are caught up in an “under-realized” eschatology. They believe that the rubric is, “not now nor ever.”<sup>34</sup>

### Observations

DeYoung has added to the conversation by putting forth his approach to the “process” by which believers (and the church universal) are, or should be, moving from one reality to another, i.e., from the temporal, historical reality to a fully “actualized” reality—the latter being that which God has intended for mankind. He does not suggest, as quotations above indicate, Paul’s work should be disregarded as being solely cultural, but nevertheless acknowledges that those limitations in which Paul dealt with in his day continue to exist, at least to some extent, in the 21st century. Where I find professor DeYoung’s analysis lacking, however, is in the day-to-day reality of the believer’s role in the process of “actualization” as he describes it. As I will discuss below, I believe the believer, and the church universal, has a role in moving from the “not yet” to the “already.”

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34. Ibid., 101.

## Michelle Lee-Barnewall—Mutuality and Unity in Leadership

At the outset of this chapter, Lee-Barnewall contributes her voice to those looking for alternatives to the traditional complementarian versus egalitarian debate. She states: “in searching for the most accurate way to understand the biblical text, we must be open to exploring another way of viewing the issue itself.”<sup>35</sup> This she does by downplaying the question of “rights” and focuses on the unity of the faith in proclaiming God’s Kingdom. In her text *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian*, Lee-Barnewall suggests “there are significant limitations in assuming that the truth of an issue is to be found in one of two sides.”<sup>36</sup> She then sets out on this quest for a “new way”:

We may gain more from not merely asking what rights a person has or who has power but by seeing why unity matters and how it is accomplished by power manifested through weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), such as was exhibited through the cross. This does not mean the questions of rights and authority do not matter. Instead it implies that our perspective on them may shift when we see them within a larger context.<sup>37</sup>

She continues:

Although both (sides) have accused the other of following the larger culture, this book explores how all sides have been impacted by social trends, and more important, how the overall trajectory of the debate aligns with these patterns. Evangelicals in America followed the general movement toward increasing individualism and preoccupation with personal over corporate concerns.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the theme of “unity,” Lee-Barnewall revisits time and again the concept of “reversal” and the giving up of rights as shown in the Scripture. Typical of this concept are these observations:

But the New Testament ethic also transcends rights. Paul affirms their importance, but states that what matters more is one’s willingness not to act on one’s right if it will lead to a greater good. When Paul calls people to give up rights for the sake of others and the

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35. Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian*, 5.

36. Ibid., 5.

37. Ibid., 7.

38. Ibid., 8.

furtherance of the gospel, he exhorts them to place their trust in God, the one who ultimately justifies and rewards. In some cases, to see rights as foremost can actually harm another person and hinder the Gospel (e.g. 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 9:1-23) . . . We can reframe the debate by asking additional questions such as “How could male leadership lead to unity and oneness?” and “How could equality promote sacrificial living on behalf of others?”<sup>39</sup>

Lee-Barnewall suggests that the issue of hierarchy (with implications to both sides of the gender issue) has taken on an oversized dimension in the current debate. She acknowledges that hierarchies existed both in the family and in the larger family of God (in both the Old and New Testaments). She states: “However . . . the point is not so much whether hierarchies are present as it is what they mean. In the kingdom, values of power and privilege are turned upside down, and they are upended according to the new values of the kingdom is seen in Christ himself.”<sup>40</sup>

Although she generally eschews details of women in church leadership, Lee-Barnewall does use a few specific biblical examples to make her larger points. For example, regarding the evidence for female leadership in the biblical record, she notes that women were “part of larger group that followed Jesus,” and the “remarkable” nature of inclusion of women in the text is the “reversal” seen in the women being portrayed as “being *more* faithful than . . .” the male disciples.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, she sees the significance of the fact that women were the “first witnesses of the resurrection . . . may exemplify the reversal of the old order . . . in the implication of their social status.”<sup>42</sup>

In the final section of her book, Lee-Barnewall notes that her book is not a typical addition to the gender debate when she notes: “Many people may want answers to questions such

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39. Ibid., 175.

40. Ibid., 91–92.

41. Ibid., 93–95.

42. Ibid., 95–96.

as ‘So, what can women do?’ However . . . I believe that before we can move forward . . . we must spend some time rethinking foundational issues.”<sup>43</sup>

She sums up her thoughts on those issues this way:

If neither authority (complementarianism) nor equality (egalitarianism) is sufficient for explaining gender in the Bible, a paradoxical “reversal” applied to both concepts can help point us to critical kingdom goals. What “authority,” “leadership,” “equality,” and “rights” have in common is that they often highlight the individual over the community and God himself. What their reversals share is the potential to guide us to a greater acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty and a recognition of God’s ways in which the willing sacrifice for the other through the denial of self-interest results in unity and love.<sup>44</sup>

### Observations

Lee-Barnewall challenges us to refocus our attention off of the power struggle of the gender-leadership debate and to refocus on what is the best way to advance the Kingdom of God. Doing so, she implies, will naturally lead to correct results as it regards the issue of gender roles. It is advice well heeded. In the process of this re-framing, she also suggests, implicitly at times and explicitly at other times, that the context of the gender verses requires a re-examination of what was *really* important to both the early believers and the biblical authors.

### William C. C. Fung—“Interdependence”

Another interesting alternative idea to the traditional two camps debate, one of the most practical, is that of Dr. William C. C. Fung. Fung argues that the husband is the leader of the family and that this arrangement is transcultural.<sup>45</sup> However, in the church, women should be

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43. Ibid., 167.

44. Ibid., 177.

45. William C.C. Fung, “An Interdependent View on Women in Leadership,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (April 2015).

allowed to teach, preach, and be ordained “If they have the calling, character, and corresponding spiritual gifts recognized by the church.”<sup>46</sup>

Fung’s approach is interesting because it contains elements of both views (i.e., the husband is head of the house, but the church leadership is open to both genders), and attempts to synthesize them to some degree, as explained below. It is also worthy of note because it seeks to first ascertain the needs of the church and the mission of the Gospel, rather than starting with trying to decide who is right and who is wrong on the gender / leadership issues.

The primary textual basis for Fung’s “interdependence” view is 1 Corinthians 11:11 “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, Nor is man independent of woman.”

(NIV). Fung states early in his paper:

Rather than striving for consensus between the Complementary and Egalitarian position, it might be better to have more views on Women in Leadership, so that discussions on the topic can go beyond the diametrical exchanges between the two camps, into a multitude of thoughts and ideas that can enrich each other’s understanding.<sup>47</sup>

Fung provides a very useful overview of the two primary positions described in the preceding chapters of this paper and, then, provides a so-called “third view” which he calls “interdependence.” The key components of this interdependent viewpoint can be summarized as follows:

1. Men and women are equal but they may have different roles and gifts. Everyone should serve according to the role God assigns and the gifts the spirit gives.
2. In the family, the husband is the leader of the household. However, he should be a servant leader.
3. In the church, we should serve according to our gifts and callings. Our spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit . . . but should be confirmed by others and by

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46. Ibid., 122

47. Ibid., 117

the church. Everyone should be given the opportunity to serve according to their gifts and callings.

4. Women should be given the opportunity to serve in different capacities according to their vocation, including preaching and teaching. Women with the calling for pastoral ministry should be allowed to serve as pastors. They can be ordained if their calling, character, and gifts are confirmed by the church they belong to....If a woman minister feels that she has the calling to be a pastor and wants to be ordained, she can serve in a church with the same conviction for Women in Leadership.
5. A church may have a senior pastor with other male or female pastors serving the church under his supervision. A male senior pastor is usually preferred because the church is made up of many families. Since men are the leaders in their families, it is fitting to have a male senior pastor functioning as the spiritual leader of the church.
6. When there is no suitable male pastor or male senior pastor available, and if a woman has the calling for pastoral ministry, she can take up the office of a pastor or senior pastor, if approved by the church.<sup>48</sup>

Fung's paper, as evidenced by the preceding enumerated points, puts forward an extremely practical view of women in church leadership. His hermeneutical method regarding the interpretation of, for instance, the Timothy verses yields a fairly traditional egalitarian result; *however*, he recognizes that the preference is always for male leadership when possible.

The distinction between Fung and those who hold a strict complementarian view is seen when, as he puts it, "there is no suitable male leadership" and/or when a female whose gifts and

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48. Ibid., 121–22

callings clearly indicate she is capable of performing those functions. In the latter case, however, rather than fighting “or contending” for ordination, Fung’s recommendation is that females must associate themselves with denominations and churches that accept and encourage the ordination of females. (Thus, Fung places women in leadership in the “nonessentials” category and would readily support a church or denomination of either view and would also move from one viewpoint to the other depending upon the needs of the greater church body.)

Fung also provides useful commentary on some of the key of verses—again, with a penchant for pointing out practical ministry issues. For instance, he points out the difficulty of suggesting that the verses described elsewhere in this paper universally require that women should submit to men in the church. That is, where does one draw the line on women submitting to men in the context of the church? He points out the following:

Whenever a woman is asked to submit to a man, it is in the context of a husband-wife relationship . . . There is no Scripture commanding all women submitting (sic) to all men. Even in the creation of the first couple in Genesis 2, the headship of Adam should be understood in the context of husband-wife relationship. The husband is the head of the wife. *Men are not the heads of women* (generically). In the same way, head covering of the woman in 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 is to express her subordination to her husband and not the other men. She is under the cover of protection of her husband. She is the glory of her husband and not of other men.<sup>49</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Regarding the “elder qualification” verses, Fung, again the pragmatist, addresses the “husband of one wife” passage which, some complementarians argue, indicates that Paul considered only males be eligible to hold the office of church overseer. Fung notes this is a:

(W)eak argument because it is an argument from absence. Since a requirement of an elder is a husband of one wife, does it mean that all elders have to be married men? If that was the case, single men could not be elders or pastors. Furthermore, the passage says that the children of an elder has to be submissive and respectful . . . Certainly, one will not draw the conclusion that to be an elder one has to be married, and has children.<sup>50</sup>

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49. Ibid., 124

50. Ibid., 134



Throughout his article, Fung argues (convincingly, in my opinion) that the key verses regarding male headship do apply in the family but were never intended to universally define leadership in the church. Additionally, Fung also concludes that the 1 Corinthians verses and the Timothy passages containing prohibitions (or restrictions) on women's roles a) were meant for husbands and wives, and; b) were almost certainly to address particular problems in the local churches Paul was addressing.<sup>51</sup>

Fung concludes by stating the following:

An Interdependent view of Women in Leadership facilitates cohesiveness and unity in the family and maximizes the use of spiritual gifts for the building up of the church. More different viewpoints on Women in Leadership are welcome, so that discussions on this topic will not be just dialogue between the Complementary and Egalitarian Camps, and our knowledge and understanding can be enriched by each other's contribution. Different denominations, churches, Christian institutions, theologians, pastors, and individuals may hold different views on Women in Leadership. We may not need a consensus on the viewpoints, but we do need to accept our differences and respect each other's conviction. Though we may hold different viewpoints on Women in Leadership, we can still labour together or separately for the gospel. The Great Commandment and the Great Commission should be the focus of our Christian ministry.<sup>52</sup>

### Summary

We can see from the writings reviewed here, there are, in reality, a variety of views on the way we should approach the gender issue and the proper role of women in church leadership. Those in this chapter are in addition to the traditional complementarian and egalitarian perspectives. In this chapter, we have discussed four such alternatives as examples; they are but a small representation of the alternative conversations that occur in this area. In subsequent chapters, I will expound upon some themes found in both of the traditional views as well as these alternative views, several components of which I find persuasive and useful.

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51. Ibid., 125–30

52. Ibid., 136

## CHAPTER 5

### REEXAMINING KEY ISSUES AND VERSES

In the preceding chapters, we have surveyed the two primary views of women in church leadership. We have also examined alternatives that do not fit neatly into either of these two camps. In this chapter, I will revisit the main themes and verses, and will here include my own views on these points.

#### Male Headship (generally) and Creation Order

Several of the key decision points regarding the proper role of females in church leadership turn on one's understanding of the Bible's teachings on the issue of male headship. That is, to what extent does the Scripture require males, and males only, to be the "head" of the family unit and, by (possible) extension, how does the male headship of the family inform our understanding of the role of gender in church leadership?

Unlike some evangelical egalitarians, I agree that male headship, as it relates to the family, is seen throughout God's Word, (see, e.g. Ephesians 5:22–25; Colossians 3:18–19; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1–6; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.) In this respect, I agree with Fung (and others) who have written that the husband (male) should be the head of the family and, as such, has a unique role in the family unit. "(D)omestically, a husband is the head of the family. Wives should submit to their husbands, and husbands love their wives (Eph 5)." <sup>1</sup>

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1. William C.C. Fung, "An Interdependent View on Women in Leadership," *Asia Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (April 2015), 122–23.

However, even the idea that the male/husband will be head of the family, head over the wife, is not “universal” in the sense there will come a time when the husband/wife relationship will come to an end and all persons will be subject only to the headship of the Lord. Jesus clarified this to the Sadducees when they quizzed him regarding husbands and wives after the resurrection:

Jesus said to them, “Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” (Mark 12:24–25; see also Luke 20:34–35)

Thus, as difficult as it may be for us to envision an eternity where we will not be in a relationship with our spouses similar to that we know here, these passages make it clear that even the husband/wife relationship is temporary. (But we see no indication that this arrangement is to be set aside during the current age.)

Even if we do not see a point in God’s redemptive history on this side of eternity where the family hierarchy will be abrogated, the primary issue, in my view, is the “second” step, i.e. if, and to what extent, the pattern established by God for leadership in the *family* is analogous and/or controlling regarding *church* leadership? I submit that this is made more difficult by the fact that Paul does not always carefully distinguish between *church* problems and *family* problems. I believe this is because at the time of Paul’s instructions to the churches under his care, the family was so inter-woven into the fabric of the church that family problems *were* church problems. (As Fee reminds us, “Our only experience in church, even for those who have broad inner communion experience, is of a later development of church that looks almost nothing like the house churches of the first-century Greco-Roman world.”<sup>2</sup>)

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2. Gordon Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry.” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 248.

It is difficult for us to comprehend the vast differences that exist between our times and those of the first century Christians. In one limited, but extremely important, area, Catherine Kroeger has extensively examined the religious practices of New Testament era women.<sup>3</sup> Upon consideration of her findings, it is almost impossible to believe that the specific cultural situation into which Paul was speaking was not (at least) a significant consideration in what he wrote.

Kroeger's article on this topic provides insight into this culture, and how difficult it is for us to relate to. At the end of this intriguing article, she concludes:

It is my contention that the Pauline mandates deserve a great deal of very careful scrutiny and that they must be examined not only in the light of their context in the NT writings but also against a background of contemporary attitudes and practice. To do this we must know far more about the religions of ancient women. We must use literary evidence, archeological monuments, coins, papyri, and art historic materials such as vase and wall paintings. The language of the difficult passages about women, and especially the *hapax le-gomena* that they contain, have not received adequate attention. Too often students of the NT have disregarded the relevance of such evidence to the understanding of a vexed problem . . . If we are to deal with the hard sayings about women in the Pauline corpus, let us do so with integrity. Let us not discard them until we have examined them to the very best of our collective ability. Let us use all the resources at our disposal to study the texts more intensively and to build a larger picture of the context. Let us not be too proud to reach out to those in other disciplines— the classicist, the archeologist, the epigraphist, the papyrologist, the art historian, the numismatist . . . your church and mine are in a state of crisis over the interpretation of these very passages. I believe that there are positive and constructive answers to our dilemma if we will invest the time and trouble to find them.<sup>4</sup>

Keeping in mind that the early church services were held in homes, and that the services looked virtually nothing like they do today, it is easy to imagine that Paul had both the family and the church in mind when penning his letters to the members. Formal church ecclesiology as we view it today was likely not on Paul's mind as he wrote these passages. Certainly, Paul did

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3. Catherine Kroeger, "The Apostle Paul and the Greco-Roman Cults of Women," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 1 (March 1987), 25-38.

4. Ibid., 38.

not have in mind the modern church, with its “business like” management structure, let alone a so-called “mega” church.

The primary basis for suggesting that the family model should apply directly to church government are *inferences* from passages such as the “elder qualification verses” that we have examined. Poythress uses such language throughout his chapter, “The Church as Family: Why male leadership in the family requires male leadership in the church” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.<sup>5</sup> However, despite his use of the term “requires” in the title of his chapter, Poythress’ typical statement related to these verses is one such as this: “In sum, the theme of God’s household runs through 1 Timothy and is validly used as the basis for *inferences* about Christian behavior, not merely as an incidental illustration” (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> He uses the term “inference” early and often throughout his chapter.

I do not dispute that a “qualified elder” is one who has shown himself (or herself?) to be capable of conducting his external affairs appropriately. However, in my view, this is somewhat akin to ensuring that if a person is put in charge of the church checkbook, that person has shown himself to be an adequate bookkeeper. That is, Paul may have been advising Timothy on the type of people not to select (e.g., polygamists, men with unruly children, and so on.) more than setting out universal criteria. In other words, this seems to be a (partial) list of “qualifications,” not a list of “disqualification.”

Further, this suggests another point: even the “husband headship” of the family is, generally, left to each set of believing spouses to work out details under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Poythress, with whom I agree on this point, puts it this way: “Ephesians 5:22–6:4 and

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5. Vern Poythress, “The Church as Family: Why male leadership in the family requires male leadership in the church,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 233–47

6. Ibid., 237

other passages about the family clearly leave open a great many possibilities for the exact form of managerial arrangements. In these matters, a wise leader attempts to work out arrangements that best use and enhance the guests of each family member.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, each example of even a biblically proper marriage may not look like another such marriage, except in a general sense. For example, in one family, the spouses may agree that the headship of the husband must include control over the financial decisions and, therefore, the wife may not access the family checkbook without explicit permission of the husband. Another Christian couple might determine that so long as the wife operates under the general guidance of the husband, she can actually oversee the day-to-day financial matters. It would be difficult to argue, I suggest, that either of these seemingly opposite results are unbiblical. Does the wife in the second example have *de facto* authority over the husband because of her use (control) of the family checkbook?<sup>8</sup> I suggest that both couples are operating within the biblical framework, so long as they both acknowledge the husband’s role as the head of the family and so long as both are operating in the unity and love that writers of the New Testament (mainly Paul) envisioned in various marriage passages. How much more difficult, then, is it to apply a strict headship view within the walls of the church based on this family model when we have so few details?

This is not to say that we should not attempt to glean general principles from Paul’s instructions to the early church in the area of church services, order, leadership, and so on, and even specific proscriptions when *clearly* appropriate. As evangelicals, we believe that Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was capable of providing guidance for the church throughout all times, even as he dealt with the immediate issues of the day. It is to say, however,

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7. Ibid., 244

8. Given the realities of 2019, perhaps I should say the “family debit card.”

that perhaps we should not attempt to superimpose steadfast, eternal rules regarding church leadership from verses where Paul may have been dealing with mixed issues of family and church, especially when the church services, and the church structure itself, were so different from what we encounter today.

Further, even to the extent Paul was addressing church issues, as with the family examples given above, he may have not envisioned that each and every church would reach the same operational or practical result when applying his guidance. Like the married couple's checkbook, Paul may have assumed that each church, including future churches, would work out the details of what it means to have authority and teaching within the church so that it was done appropriately and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I emphasize here that I do not believe that the meaning of God's word changes over time; however, as Frame (and others) have noted, our *understanding* of that Word certainly may change. Frame calls this an "epistemological disadvantage" that works in both directions, i.e., that passing time may have obscured our understanding of the original intent of the writer but, likewise, the distance of the years may provide greater insight.

One remarkable evidence of biblical inspiration is the incredible difference in spiritual understanding between the last books of the New Testament and the earliest writings of the post canonical period. Clement, for example, is confused about all sorts of important things. *Scripture, however, is so rich that it has taken 1,900 years for the church to learn many of its lessons . . .* We should not pretend that everything is cut and dried, even though these issues may have been cut and dried in the New Testament period itself. (Emphasis added.)<sup>9</sup>

In summary, as with any analogy or metaphor, applying it to the matter at hand poses certain limitations. Only through applying appropriate hermeneutics can we arrive at the extent to which the male headship passages related to the family should also apply to the church

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9. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2008), 287–89

structure. While there are certainly similarities, and while the family was likely the most familiar institution with which Paul could compare the church, pressing the exclusivity of male church leadership from the concept (alone) of family male leadership is not, in my opinion, warranted by the texts.

In a similar vein, I do not find the arguments for male leadership *in the church* based upon the creation verses (Genesis 1–3) to be persuasive. Even if one concedes a headship of Adam over Eve, this, again, would only seem directly applicable to the family.<sup>10</sup> (Paul’s use of the creation order in the Timothy verses is discussed below.)

In summary, I do not see adequate support for a universal, eternal male leadership of church government from the biblical concept of male headship of the family. As Fung notes: “There is no Scripture commanding all women submitting to all men... It can be argued that in the New Testament, whenever a woman is asked to submit to a man, it is in the context of husband and wife relationship.”<sup>11</sup> I agree.

#### “Prohibition” Verses

Throughout this paper, we have examined key verses that complementarians rely upon to conclude that females should be excluded from certain church leadership positions. To facilitate a review of these verses, I provide them together here.

(L)ikewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness--with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

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10. Not all authors see such a headship here. See, Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hierarchist and Egalitarian Inculturations,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no 4 (December 1987): 422. (“(T)he Genesis creation account does not present even a hint of any hierarchical relation between Adam and Eve.”)

11. Fung, “An Interdependent View,” 124



Yet she will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Timothy 2:9–15)

(T)he women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:34–40)

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:2–16)

When taken at face value, that is, literally, the above passages contain verses that prohibit women from speaking at public church services. However, they also contain verses which, taken literally, require a woman to keep her head covered while prophesying and to remain silent in the church. We must approach Paul's writings in these verses knowing that everyone—complementarian, egalitarian, or other—applies some type of hermeneutics to arrive at an interpretation that the person believes to be consistent with the intended messages. Virtually no one (today) holds to the proposition that women who cut their hair are “disgraceful” and, therefore, all women should cover their heads. Or that women should remain completely “silent”

in church. Hence, if these verses are not applied literally today, what are we to make of the others, that is, those relied upon by the complementarians to establish the doctrines related to the proper roles of females in the church?

### Analysis

On interpreting these verses, I suggest that we must avoid the temptation to treat even clear sounding verses in isolation from the rest of God's Word, from the rest of the author's (Paul, in this case) writings, and from the rest of the message within the book in which we find the verses. That is, if the message of a particular passage, upon first examination, appears at odds with the message of the Scripture, generally, a closer look is warranted. The same applies for the additional reviews I have mentioned.

In these three verses, it appears that Paul is placing significant restrictions on women engaging in what we today view as church leadership. They seem to support the position that there is a patriarchal hierarchy recognized by Paul for church structure and that gender is the distinction (or a distinction) upon which leadership roles should be determined.

However, when we follow the analysis I have laid out above, does our view change? For example, the Bible, both Old Testament and New, contains a significant number of women in prominent roles, as noted earlier. Although these roles may not be completely analogous to modern day church leadership roles, they appear to at least be roles that are as closely analogous to modern church leadership as we might expect from the historical context. (See Phoebe (Romans 16:1), Junia (Romans 16:7) and Priscilla (Romans 16:3).)

At the next level, Paul himself recognized several women by name in his writings (see above examples from Romans). Including these women at all in Paul's writings would have been a significant, perhaps radical, departure from the culture at his time. If Paul felt it was inappropriate for women to participate in church leadership (or "ministry"—see below) would he

have so mentioned them? (In fact, at least one writer has concluded Paul’s practice of including women in ministry, and recognizing them when they were, should be the deciding factor in reconciling the difficult (complementarian) verses.<sup>12</sup>)

Further, in the same letter (1 Corinthians) from which these passages are drawn, Paul acknowledges that women are, in fact, participating publicly in the services and gives detailed instructions as to how they are to do so. The “keep silent” verses must be read in conjunction with the “how to speak appropriately” verses to validly interpret these passages.

Likewise, when the verses from Timothy are read with (e.g.) Galatians 3:28, which Paul also wrote, Pierce’s analysis seems reasonable:

Stated differently, 1 Timothy 2:8–15 might be described as an exception to the rule of Galatians 3:28, reflecting a deliberate restriction of Christian liberty advocated with good reason in this specific situation. This principle is developed more clearly elsewhere by Paul regarding food offered to idols and observance of Jewish holidays and festivals (1 Corinthians 6:12–20; 10:23–33; Romans 14).<sup>13</sup>

From this analysis, and after the review of other related literature, I conclude that Paul was not universally, i.e., for all times and at all places, excluding women from functioning as leaders, even in key or high leadership roles, in the Christian church.

### The “Elder Qualification” Verses

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall

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12. Waldemar Kowalski, “The Role of Women in Ministry: Is There a Disconnect between Pauline Practice and Pauline Instruction,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 20, no. 2 (August 2017).

13. Ronald W. Pierce, “Evangelicals and Gender Roles in the 1990’s: 1 Tim 2:8-15: A Test Case,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 3 (September 1993): 352.

into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 3:1-13; see also Titus 1:5-9)

The so-called “elder qualification verses” are often used to argue that Paul, having only laid out qualifications for men, was directing that only men serve as elders in the church. However, as noted elsewhere in this paper, such argument is an argument based on absence. One should not necessarily conclude from these verses that Paul meant to universally and eternally exclude females from the role of elder. A more reasonable explanation is that given the cultural context in which Paul was writing, along with, possibly, his personal knowledge of the particular churches, Paul simply assumed that the overseers would be men. As I pointed out in the preceding section regarding the use of the family metaphor, it seems reasonable to assume that Paul was simply wanting to assure that the men chosen (or who were under consideration) would be of high quality, who had shown themselves capable of running the local church.

The most significant difficulty I see with using these passages to permanently exclude females is that the same qualifications would have potentially excluded Paul himself from serving as an elder in these churches. Accordingly, I do not believe the “elder qualification verses” provide an adequate foundation for a universal exclusion of females from church leadership.

Based on the hermeneutic described at the outset of this section, I conclude that considered either singularly or in combination, the key passages of the Scripture considered in connection with the issue of the proper role of women in church leadership positions do not preclude the possibility of females holding those positions.

### Theological Considerations

If Paul in his writings was not universally excluding the possibility of female leaders in the church, what larger theological message was intended here?<sup>14</sup> First, as noted in several places in this paper, I believe that in these passages Paul was certainly reinforcing the concept of male headship within the Christian family. I also believe that Paul assumed within the context of the early Christian church, and perhaps for such time as he could foreseeably predict, males would dominate leadership positions in the church.

However, Paul, in many other places, including Galatians 3, sought to emphasize the unity of all believers and the lack of distinctions among them, a concept clearly contrary to the culture in which he lived. I believe that Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was laying the groundwork for the church, through the ages, to move from the reality he observed with his natural eyes to the reality he undoubtedly was given the grace by God to observe through his spiritual eyes. I generally concur with both Webb and DeYoung to the extent that their hermeneutic and theology suggest a progression toward an ultimate goal of total unity and oneness in the church. I believe that it is possible that we may see a further outworking of this progression throughout the church in our time, as we have already seen with the abolition of slavery in our age.

I also find persuasive those, such as Neufeld, who find that we should view the unity verses, such as Galatians 3:28, as taking priority over the prohibition verses:

Another principle of normative ordering might be more appropriate, however. In such an ordering first place is given to those texts which most clearly express the essential vision of Paul's gospel, the normative force of other texts being established in light of that vision. Paul himself leads the way by making application the servant of evangelism, as we see in I Corinthians 9:19-23. When the question is asked in this way, Galatians 3:28 comes at the top of our list as most clearly expressing the heart of Paul's gospel. By virtue of baptism, that is, by virtue of becoming together parts of the living Christ, all social

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14. I believe, and think most would agree, no matter what else he may have been doing, Paul *was* addressing the specific concerns in the particular churches to which he was writing.

differentiations are radically called into question. . . At the very minimum this means that the call of Christ is one which demands conformity to who Christ is, namely, one in whom value distinctions based on gender, race, and class are irrelevant and thus positively subverted and finally undone. . . Texts which reflect accommodation to the prevailing mores and norms of society (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:8-15, 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, and the household code texts) are given last place on the normative scale. This does not rule them out of consideration. It means, however, that we must see them not as timeless rules but as examples of contextualization. We must do this even if on occasion the arguments offered in support of restrictions on women's activity appeal not to contextual sensitivity but to the order of creation.<sup>15</sup>

Against the charge that this theological perspective is either “warmed over” egalitarianism or a capitulation to the current secular culture, I offer the following. First, we should not fear the association of any theological position simply because it may align to some degree with the current culture (again, see e.g., the slavery issue). As believers in the sovereignty of God, do we not also believe that God is in sovereign control of our culture? Therefore, while we do not look to the culture to establish our theological position (that is exclusively the domain of God’s Word), we should not be surprised when God sovereignly moves the church to a more egalitarian place, while He sovereignly allows the culture to move in a similar direction. As with all such matters, we often see the world, in its fallen state, twisting the apparent will of God in an effort to bend it to its own evil desires. We should not allow these counterfeit appropriations of God’s plan to dissuade us from moving toward an “equal in Christ” position if we firmly believe that is His plan, as I do. Stated another way, we should not cling to positions that are counter to the current culture simply *because* they are counter-cultural.

Second, I do not concur with the egalitarians who see no distinction in roles due to gender in any aspect of God’s Word. I have noted several times that I do see those distinctions in the family, for instance. In addition, as alluded to previously, I view the situation to be a

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15. Neufeld, Tom Yoder. “Paul, Women, and Ministry in the Church,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 8, no. 3 (September 1990), 294.

movement from one position to the other over time and under God's sovereign direction. Even in the present age, I concur with Fung, Lee-Barnewall, and others who hold to the proposition that it is the advancement of the Kingdom that is of paramount importance, not the strict enforcement of a female, or anyone else's, right to a position of leadership.

### Summary of Theological Position

To adequately assess God's plan for women in church leadership, we must view His Word as an expression of His will not only for the time in which it was written and delivered but for all time. We should seek to ascertain what God's will is for His church *at the present time*. To accomplish this, we must, of course, consider His written Word, which should always be considered the clearest expression of His will. However, as we do in other contexts (which we will consider below), we must also deal with the reality that throughout the over two thousand years of His history, God's will for a particular place and time may, in fact, look different than it does at some other place and time.

We should always keep in mind, however, that:

. . . this places two potentially conflicting demands on Christians: one, evangelical living implies that the good news of freedom in Christ be lived out in deed; two, evangelical living means "not giving offense" so that the good news is not obscured by practices which would attract needless controversy or cause outright offense. I Corinthians 9:19-23 is an example of how far Paul is prepared to go in this. Despite his radical understanding of the relationship of grace and law, most particularly as it relates to Gentiles, Paul states it as a matter of principle that he is willing to be everything to everyone, including Jew to the Jew, and weak to the weak, all for the sake of winning people for Christ. At stake is nothing less than salvation. Paul is prepared to live under the law and to curtail his God-given freedom-ironically for the sake of that very same freedom. Better stated, his freedom is exercised in voluntary bondage to the sensitivities of those he is trying to win (compare also Romans 14).<sup>16</sup>

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16. Ibid.

### Summary

In summary, I believe that the complementarian view of male headship is correct with respect to the family and may have been correct with respect to church leadership at the time of Paul's writing, and for some time thereafter. Paul himself, had he been asked to do so, likely would have espoused a complementarian-type doctrine. However, I also believe that God has elected to carry out His divine plan over what we humans perceive as a history bound up in time. Over that history, God intends to move His people to a place where, ultimately, there will be no distinctions in role based upon gender. (Galatians 3:28)<sup>1</sup>

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1. I do *not* mean to imply by this position, nor should it be inferred, that I do not see the genders themselves as distinct, only that, ultimately, there would be no distinct *roles* for those genders in the church leadership. I have noted elsewhere, and emphasize here, that I *do* see gender distinctions in God's Word, and even gender distinct roles (e.g., in the family). I consider those who press the egalitarian position to the point of eliminating all gender distinctions (as is currently the trend the broader culture) as being guilty of what I caution against here, i.e., allowing the counterfeit, godless forces of society to define "oneness," rather than God's Word.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

In the first four chapters, I have focused primarily on attempting to ascertain an appropriate hermeneutical approach to the key verses related to the gender debate. I have attempted, in the immediately preceding chapter, to accurately apply that hermeneutic and, in doing so, I have argued that these passages, when viewed in the context of the entirety of God's Word, do not universally foreclose the possibility of females serving in church leadership.

This led me to develop a theological position that proposes a steady progression of Christian history toward an ultimate and complete ethic, at which point we will see, perhaps on this side of eternity, an elimination of gender distinctions as it relates to positions within the church. I believe that we, as believers, have a role to play in this process as we strive to ("yearn to") move toward that place of complete sanctification with God's gracious assistance.

In this concluding chapter, I provide a brief restatement (overview) of my position on the overall debate, including a short summary of where I agree/differ with the two main views. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to what I see as practical difficulties and applications for the Christian church in the 21st century, and our role as believers in the process going forward.

#### My View on the Gender Debate

Regarding the traditional structure of the gender issue, I wholeheartedly agree with Lee-Barnewall when she says, "The answer may not be the exclusive domain of one side but rather may lie elsewhere. If this is the case, we cannot discover the entire truth in a debate in which the

only option is to choose from two positions.”<sup>1</sup> We have seen the weaknesses (and strengths) of the two traditional views on gender issues in church leadership. As we have explored the various hermeneutics and the developed theology underpinning those two primary views, I have noted authors, with whom I agree, that suggest that each of the two views, as generally understood, have both strengths and weaknesses associated with them. I provided examples of new ways to approach this topic and, here, I expound on my view, which is informed by these alternative approaches.

First, what are we to make regarding the apparent tension between passages that seem to indicate a complete oneness and the equal standing of all believers (such as Galatians 3:28–29) and the apparently gender restrictive verses cited by complementarians? The answer may lie along the path set out by authors such as Westfall, DeYoung, and Groothuis. That is, God’s perfect will is that there be no distinction in role because of gender. However, that perfect will is unrealized in the current age. I find plausible DeYoung’s analysis that Paul may have, in effect, been describing the world as it “should be” in Galatians (written ca. AD 47–49) but describing the world “as it is” in the various complementarian verses as he dealt with the actual reality of church issues some years later in his life.<sup>2</sup>

There can be no denying that inequalities marked life in early Pauline churches-especially as it related to women. That could be an expression of evangelical living only if these inequalities were lived by those who did so as part of a strategy of freedom. When, however, these inequalities were locked in, the gospel was betrayed. It would thus be, and indeed has been a mistake, to see texts which reflect a "holding back" from full freedom in Christ, however contextually justified, as texts which express the permanent will of God. That has the effect of raising what was-or what should have been-a tactical decision to the level of timeless law. "Timeless law" can only be the "law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), that is, the oneness and equality we all have in Christ. Any holding back from that can ironically be justified only as part of a loving if relentless drive to see full freedom in

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1. Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

2. James DeYoung, *Women in Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 99.

Christ become concretely real in the lives of women and men, first and foremost in the church.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike DeYoung (or at least as DeYoung has not fully articulated in his book), however, I believe it is incumbent upon the community of Christ to yearn for God's perfect will and actively seek, through prayer and discernment of the Holy Spirit, opportunities to operate the church in a manner more closely aligned with that perfect will.<sup>4</sup> We should be sensitive to, and actively seek, places, times, and persons (of both genders) to move from the imperfect to the perfect, including the placement of females in positions of church leadership. In doing so, we should also always be sensitive to keep in mind that the advancement of God's Kingdom is the foremost goal. Therefore, rather than asserting rights, we should be, first and foremost, about asserting the gospel. So, where does this leave me as compared to the two main views on the subject?

#### Comparison with the Complementarian View

- I believe complementarians are correct in seeing a hierarchy of male leadership in the Bible: however, I believe that hierarchy was primarily intended for use within the individual families, not church leadership.
- Like complementarians, I believe that Paul's writings indicate a preference, or at least acknowledgment, of male leadership in the church at the time of his writings; however, I do not believe Paul intended his writings in that regard to be universally applied throughout history.

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3. Neufeld, Tom Yoder. "Paul, Women, and Ministry in the Church," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 8, no. 3 (September 1990), 296-297

4. DeYoung, *Women in Ministry*, 104. (DeYoung, currently, (apparently) holds to the complementarian view, at least in practice. "So if we end up affirming that, at present, women in the church should not teach authoritatively nor exercise authority over men, what is the difference from the standard complementary position? Just this: that Christians should recognize that this limitation is cultural, not a universal: that it will be dispensed with and in time as equality in Christ is fully actualized.")

### Comparison with the Egalitarian View

- I agree with the egalitarians that Paul's writings, and the New Testament generally, teaches us that all persons, regardless of (e.g.) gender, are to be equal in the sight of God; however, I also believe that there are "gender distinct" roles within the family, and that it is more likely than not that Paul envisioned those roles applying to the church during his time and perhaps for some time afterwards.
- Even if there were distinct gender roles in the early church, I agree with egalitarians that, in our time, those distinctions should not be viewed as universal. However, I also believe that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we (all of us) should be focused on the greater good of God's church and the advancement of His Kingdom, not in asserting individual rights.

### Practical Applications and Issues

In the preceding pages of this paper, I have alluded to what I see as some of the practical difficulties with (especially) the complementarian position on church leadership. I expound on those here in what I hope will be a positive, useful way.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps cliché to say we should "practice what we preach." However, is that not exactly what we are called to do? As we seek to walk out the implications of our theology in the area of the proper role of females in church leadership, we must be ever mindful that this matter has significant consequences as to how our churches operate. There are real issues that face real

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5. Perhaps it is because that I believe the "ultimate" ethic is "no gender distinction in church leadership" that I see more practical problems with the complementarian view, which maintains those distinctions, than I do with the egalitarian view. As I note, there are certain practical issues with both; my focus here on the former is meant to be illustrative and not unduly critical of complementarians.

churches, solutions to which are not easily found on the pages of the books on the gender debate. For example, what does a complete commitment to a complementarian theology look like within the walls of a living, breathing modern church?

As an illustration, I offer the following: a large church was several thousand members, a professional ministerial staff of several dozen, and a cadre of “high-capacity volunteers” employing a male senior pastor. Under the authority of that senior pastor, a female is hired to oversee the children’s ministry. In this capacity, the female children’s minister is responsible for the spiritual well-being of the children in the church. (Most complementarians would apparently not take issue with this arrangement, at least if the female is not ordained.) In this church, dozens of volunteers are needed to carry out this ministry. A number of these volunteers are males. Does the female children’s minister have “authority” over these male volunteers? If she does, how is that in keeping with the church’s complementarian theology? If she does not, how is it possible for this ministry to function effectively? Consider also the possibility that a paid assistant children’s minister is hired who is a male. Is the female children’s minister exercising inappropriate spiritual authority over her assistant?

Another situation which seems problematic within the complementarian position; one of church governance generally. Many churches adhere to a congregational form of church government. (I do not believe that complementarians, in general, object to this form of ecclesiology.) However, in such churches the ultimate authority regarding the oversight of the church is a congregation which includes (in most cases) a large number, if not a majority, of females. In the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, this situation is addressed by suggesting that such females are not exercising spiritual authority in a way precluded by the (complementarian’s view of) Bible. They say:

The reason we do not think this is inconsistent with 1 Timothy 2:12 is that the authority of the church is not the same as the authority of the individuals who make up the church.

When we say the congregation has authority, we do not mean that each man or each woman has that authority. Therefore, gender, as part of individual personhood, is not significantly in view in corporate congregational decisions.<sup>6</sup>

The logic of this response is, with all respect to the authors, difficult, at best, to follow. The ultimate authority of an organization, be it secular or religious, lies with those with the ultimate voice in determining key policies, practices, and selection of senior leadership. A congregational church, like a stock-owned corporation, vests ultimate authority in its members. If a significant percentage, or perhaps majority, of those members are females, I fail to see the consistency of the complementarian position in their defense of this form of church government.

### Additional Challenges

I have other concerns (conversation starters, perhaps) with the strict complementarian position, three of which I can only summarize here, for sake of space, but with the hope they will cause meaningful conversations:

1. How extensively does the concept of male headship actually apply within a (modern) church? If there is a (male) elder in a church, to what degree does that elder have authority over a married female member (versus the authority that female's husband has)? Here, I must disagree with Frame, who suggests that allowing females to hold church leadership positions would create the anomalous situation of having a female (wife) be subordinate to her husband at home but have authority over him in the church context.<sup>7</sup> In that case, is it not equally "anomalous" to have some male who is not the persons' spouse exercising

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6. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 79

7. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Press & R Pub., 2008), 638

authority over them?<sup>8</sup> What about regular, i.e., non-leadership males in the church, do they have authority over all females in the church?<sup>9</sup> To push the point further, what if a married female holds some position acceptable to complementarians in the church, and her husband is a participant in that ministry or project? Does this violate the prohibition of male headship?

2. Singleness – The interplay between the complementarian position (as it relates to church leadership) and those believers who are, either voluntarily or involuntarily, single warrants careful consideration. There is a risk, I believe, to creating an atmosphere within the church where singles, especially single females, may feel they are treated as second class, or, worse yet, ostracized. I mention this here only to raise the issue and point out that this extensive element of the church must be considered when asserting that the “traditional” family model (husband and wife) is the model upon which church leadership must be based.<sup>10</sup> (In addition, the “husband of one wife” requirement, if literally applied, which I have argued

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8. In addition, the situation that Frame posits is not at all unusual in the secular workplace; i.e., there are females exercising authority over males, sometimes even their spouses, in businesses and corporations. This is not to say that the church should follow that example *per se*, but simply point out that, from a management or interpersonal point of view, it is not that unusual.

9. I am indebted to Fung, among others, for putting this in their writings so as to remind me that I am not the first person to see the problem here.

10. The authors of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* include an entire preliminary chapter directed to single persons in their book, which is thoughtful and affirming; however, I am not certain that it accomplishes the (apparent) goal of affirming those persons ability to serve in a meaningful role in the church, especially as it relates to church leadership. It appears that the motivation for including the chapter is an acknowledgment that singles, in particular those called to singleness, have no basis of reference for the family model of headship and, therefore, would likely have difficulty relating to (or accepting) that model for church leadership. These singles could certainly affirm the *concept* of families (even though they may not personally have those relationships) but would understandably be doubtful that Paul would insist on emulating that model in the church as universal, where so many (almost 60 million in the U.S. alone, according to Piper et. al.) have no such experience. See, Piper et al., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, xvii to xxviii.

against, would exclude all of these single believers, not just the females, from church leadership.)

3. “Ministry” versus “Leadership” – Near the outset of this paper, I noted that complementarians often seek to distinguish between “doing ministry,” which is acceptable per their position, and holding a “leadership office,” which is not. For the reasons set out in the preceding examples, I suggest this is often a distinction without a meaningful difference. If a female is named, for example, “worship minister” (to distinguish that from a “worship pastor”) but has the same duties and responsibilities, little is gained by the attempt to say that the female is “doing ministry” but does not hold an “office.” This does not solve the male headship problem (especially as to the males in the worship ministry) but may actually compound it. If the complementarian position is that a male must be the “senior pastor” but allows for a multitude of other persons (by whatever title they are called) to do ministry-type functions, one is not, in my view, solving the problem but making it worse. (See the above cited examples.)
4. Another difficulty I see is the complementarian’s willingness to make exceptions to the doctrine of male headship when, for example, circumstances seem to dictate that a female serve as (at least) *de facto* pastor or elder because there are no qualified males to do so.<sup>11</sup> Complementarians respond that the Gospel should not be thwarted because females may be required to do “pastor-like” functions when

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11. Earlier, I quoted Stamoolis, and it is worth repeating here: “Even in denominations which are heavily male-dominated, women missionaries carried on pastoral functions that they would never have been permitted to undertake in the churches that sent them out. This phenomena, well documented in any standard history of mission, demonstrates there has been a disconnect between what are perceived to be the clear instructions of Scripture in the sending country versus the actual needs of the mission field . . . The position of teaching and authority that women carried out most capably is the reason (on a human level) for the church existing in many places today. The women got the job done.” James Stamoolis, “Scripture and Hermeneutics: Reflections over 30 Years,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 28, no. 4 (2004): 339–40.



no males are available and, further, that these extreme circumstances justify the exceptions. With their willingness to accept these circumstances as God's plan for those works, I agree; however, this seems strained logic for two reasons; first, would other biblical prohibitions that are held as equally important be waived because there seemed no other practical solution? If, for example, the only (otherwise) suitable person to minister in a particular place was a polygamist, would that person be empowered by the church to represent it? Second, if God truly wanted the Gospel extended into a particular place at a particular time, would He, in his sovereignty, create a situation that could only be solved by violating His Word?

To many of these challenges, complementarians apparently seek to distinguish between “spiritual authority” and some other type of authority such as “managerial authority.” I would suggest that such a distinction, even if theologically supportable, simply does not solve the myriad of problems associated with this view in the contemporary church. Too often, laypersons, including well-meaning lay leaders, are simply attempting to adhere to what they have been taught is the appropriate biblical standard, in this case complementarianism. However, in doing so, lacking the necessary preparation to understand the (supposed) nuances, they experience these difficult situations and respond in a manner that not only does not advance the Kingdom of God but actually discourages people of both genders from becoming actively involved in the church. I respectfully suggest that understanding how to correctly parse the word “authenteo,” important as that may be, will not solve this problem.

Complementarians (especially the theologians) may also simply dismiss these problems as being too “down in the weeds” and assume that churches will work out the details as individual couples do. This, I believe, actually makes my point, i.e., that individual churches,

denominations, etc. should be free to resolve these problems based on the gifts, callings, and direction of the Holy Spirit as found within their unique expression of the church. The only caveat I would add is that they should be allowed to do so free of any family model, or gender distinct, restrictions.

There are difficulties as well with application of the egalitarian position, especially in Christian communities that have traditionally followed a complementarian, or even “complementarian-like” approach. First and foremost is the impact that the transition may have some members of the church who have previously been taught the correctness of the male-headship doctrine. If there is to be some type of transition (“progression”), handling these members with care, including adequate teaching and conversation is vital. As mentioned several times throughout this paper, the desire to seek first the Kingdom of God should be paramount at all times, not the assertion of individual’s rights and privileges.

(In reviewing the literature, including the Biblical texts, I find it noteworthy that *people* seem to be much more interested in “titles” and “offices” than does God. As Fee rightly notes, the Bible has a “general lack of concern . . . about the way the church ordered its corporate life, whether in its structures (“offices,” etc.) or its gatherings for worship . . . the biblical record simply does not express the same level or urgency about this matter that one can find in. . . the contemporary church.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to note, and I agree, that the biblical text, and therefore God, is far more interested in ideas such as “ministry” and “gifting” and “calling” than who has a particular title.)

I suggest that a blind application of *either* position will result in continued confusion and acrimony. I recommend, therefore, that applying principles other than those generally associated with the gender debate might be of great use here. Principles and ideas such as those expressed

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12. Gordon Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry.” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 242, 252.

by Lee-Barnewall—unity, reversal, and seeking first God’s direction in each situation—are, in my view, more important than who is right or wrong on the gender debate.

### Final Thoughts

I believe in male headship within the family. However, I believe that the time for strict application of the complementarian position as it relates to church leadership has passed or, in the sovereign timing of God, is passing. I believe this based on two equally deep-held convictions. First, I truly believe that the elimination of gender distinction in determining roles for church leaders is God’s ultimate plan. We should be sensitive to carrying out our part in “working out” our—that is, the church’s—salvation and sanctification in this area. Second, I believe that attempts to strictly adhere to the complementarian position in the modern church are beyond impractical and, unfortunately, often hindering to the message of the gospel.

The most extraordinary example of setting aside the right to hold a leadership position is that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Despite hermeneutics, theology, or viewpoint, it is clear that no person in all of history was more entitled to the role of leader than Jesus himself. However, he put it aside and provided the ultimate example of humility to advance the Kingdom of God. Perhaps, then, as we continue to explore our own proper roles in God’s Kingdom, we should not begin with either Galatians 3 or 1 Timothy 2 but with Paul’s words from his letter to the Philippians:

***Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:4-8)***

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