

## Exploring the Question of Women in Ministry

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### Part 2b: Examining the Primary Views (continued)

#### IV. The Primary Evangelical Views

##### A. Introduction

1. The previous discussion looked at views that may be considered extremes since they differ so sharply from the historical orthodoxy of the church in many points, including key points that are not directly related to the issue of women in ministry (e.g., theological methodology, hermeneutics, view of Scripture, belief in revelation).
2. Other viewpoints exist between these extremes, though they are usually variants on the main themes which are represented in the earlier set of views.
3. The following two viewpoints represent the most commonly held views on women in ministry by self-identified evangelicals.
  - a. The two groups hold sharply differing views on the issue of women in ministry, but also hold to the basic doctrines that are shared among evangelicals.
  - b. Both groups hold to a view of the Bible which understands that it is the Word of God, and therefore represents God's will for us.
4. This brief synopsis is my attempt to present in simple form the best case for each of the two views.

##### B. Complementarian Representatives

1. Some of the key or representative leaders, scholars, churches, ministries or groups that identify with this position are:
  - a. Scholars: Wayne Grudem, Andreas Köstenberger, George W. Knight III, John Piper<sup>1</sup>
  - b. Churches: Southern Baptist, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Acts 29 network, Gateway Church network
  - c. Ministries/Groups: Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, The Gospel Coalition, Focus on the Family, Biblical Foundations
2. The view of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches is similar in many points.

##### C. Egalitarian Representatives

1. Some of the key or representative leaders, scholars, churches, ministries or groups that identify with this position are:
  - a. Scholars: Gordon Fee, Craig Keener, Scot McKnight, Stanley Grenz, Gilbert Bilezikian, Linda Bellville

- b. Churches: Methodists, Free Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, most Pentecostals (e.g., AG, ICFG, COGIC), many charismatic churches, Willow Creek network, Vineyard
  - c. Ministries/Groups: Christians for Biblical Equality
2. Most, if not all, liberal churches and theologians would align with this view—though not necessarily with their evangelical beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

#### D. The Complementarian Position<sup>3</sup>

1. Complementarians argue that the Bible teaches that the roles of women and men are different, though both have equal value before God as persons.<sup>4</sup>
  - a. The distinctions between men and women are part of the created order and not due to sin.
  - b. A wife should submit to her husband, who has been given authority in the home.
  - c. Women are restricted from certain positions of authority and leadership within the church, typically those of pastor (elder) and apostle (if apostles are recognized).
2. This view is closely associated with patriarchy, which is viewed positively, when rightly understood and rightly carried out in culture. Complementarians would generally reject the notion that patriarchy is inherently evil or a consequence of the introduction of sin into the world.
3. Paul's teaching on the role of women properly applies only to the setting of the church and of the home.
  - a. While his words do reflect the social and cultural pattern of the first century Mediterranean world, they also reflect God's intended pattern for the home and church.
  - b. Some would add: "and society." Others, however, distinguish the realms so that, for instance, a Christian woman who owned a business might be the boss of her employees, including men.
4. Male authority is not a sign of superiority or of value, but of function. Men and women have differing roles to play and are gifted differently according to their intended function.
5. Male authority is limited—a husband is to have authority over his wife, not over all women.
  - a. Male authority in the church does not give men the right to command all women, nor to expect subservience of all women.
  - b. Rather, those men who are in positions of leadership are expected to exercise authority over those under their care as appropriate to the situation.
6. Male authority is never an excuse for abusive actions of any kind or to any degree toward women.
  - a. Nor is it an excuse to be dismissive or patronizing toward women in general or to any woman in particular.
  - b. All authority is given in order to serve and care for those for whom I am responsible.

7. Women have many places in which they may serve in the church. The only limitations are that they are restricted from:
  - a. teaching positions where they are teaching adult males; and
  - b. governing positions where they are responsible for decision-making for the church.
  - c. Different complementarians will see this restriction in different ways:
    - (1) Some will take this to preclude women from teaching adult Sunday School classes or Bible studies, while others would only restrict them from teaching adult classes where they are telling the class what the Bible teaches.
    - (2) Some restrict women from preaching of any type (if men were in the audience), while others only restrict women from preaching as a function of being a pastor (and thus in a governing role).
    - (3) Some allow women as staff pastors (CE, or Directors of women's ministry), but not as senior pastors; others restrict women from all pastoral positions.

#### E. The Egalitarian Position<sup>5</sup>

1. Egalitarians argue that the Bible teaches that equality of persons and mutual submission ought to characterize redeemed life among believers, so that questions of authority in marriage relationships or in the church are inappropriate and misguided.
  - a. Egalitarians view hierarchical relationships as a result of sin rather than as part of God's intended order for creation.
  - b. Each partner in a marriage is to submit to the other and to regard one another as equals rather than seeing a hierarchy of authority in the marriage relationship.
  - c. In the church, equality of persons is a fundamental given because of the redemption brought through Jesus. Restrictions that prevent women from serving in any capacity are therefore incompatible with the Christian faith.
2. This view recognizes that patriarchy was the dominant structure in the world of the Bible, and continued on for many centuries. However, patriarchy is one of several systemic evils that are due to the introduction of sin, and does not reflect God's desire for humans, which we can see in the person and ministry of Jesus, who valued women and elevated their status relative to the culture of their time.
3. Paul's teaching on the role of women does not cohere with other Scriptures that point to the existence of women ministering as fully authorized pastors, teachers, and leaders in the time of the New Testament church, and/or that support the more general truth of the equality of men and women in Christ.
4. Authoritarian structures are culturally determined and not biblically required. Mutuality is more in line with Christ's teaching (and with Paul's teaching elsewhere, as in Galatians 3), rather than positions of authority/submission.
5. Therefore we should interpret Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2 as something which is culturally limited to the first century generally and/or to the Ephesian context specifically.<sup>6</sup> Though his teaching was appropriate for that culture, it is not appropriate for our culture which does not share the same patriarchal structure.

6. The rest of the New Testament supports a view of ministry which is open to persons of both genders, and which is dependent upon gifting and calling rather than upon gender.
7. There is therefore no reason to exclude women from ministry of any sort, nor is there any biblical basis for limiting women from pastoral (or any other) ministry.

F. My Preliminary Evaluation and Assessment

1. *Both views have merit.*
  - a. The complementarian view has the stronger argument (based on grammar and syntax) for understanding the meaning of the relevant (“problem”) Scriptures.
  - b. The egalitarian view has the stronger argument (based on theology and hermeneutics) for understanding how culture necessarily impacts our interpretation and application, and can appeal to the apparent “blessing” of God on women in pastoral ministry.
2. *Both views have problems.*
  - a. The complementarian view has difficulty answering the logical question, “*Why should God want women excluded from pastoral ministry, particularly when it seems that he has gifted some (many?) with the kinds of skills and abilities that so readily translate into effective ministry?*”
  - b. It also (in some versions) sets up a very odd distinction between the role of women in the church and the role of women in society.
    - (1) Thus, for example, a woman who is the president of a business employing hundreds of people is not allowed to sit on the governing board of her church.
    - (2) Or a woman who is a New Testament scholar at a university is not allowed to teach at her church.
  - c. Another criticism (though somewhat unfair) is that this view lends itself to being a support for abuse, since it allegedly perpetuates a hierarchical authority structure which is based on power and status instead of a biblical structure which is based on love, equality, and mutuality.
  - d. The egalitarian view has difficulty explaining why we should not take Paul’s words at face value, or at least, to recognize that the restriction must mean *something*.
  - e. This view also has difficulty dealing with the passages which speak of authority and submission when it tries to reduce everything to “mutuality.”
  - f. It also tends to build upon a cultural understanding of the relationship between men and women that is not necessarily universally the case, but only the product of modern Western ways of thinking and relating.
  - g. And it has been similarly criticized (again, somewhat unfairly) for being used to advance unbiblical cultural or political (or personal) agendas and/or unworthy candidates for ministry in order to prove a point.

## Endnotes

1. There are a number of female scholars who identify as complementarians. For examples, see [https://churchsociety.org/resources/page/complementarianism\\_resources\\_list/](https://churchsociety.org/resources/page/complementarianism_resources_list/) and the list of resources found there.
2. That liberal churches or individuals hold to the same viewpoint can lead to a fallacious basis for rejecting this view: guilt by association, or the slippery slope argument. Egalitarians are often criticized for abandoning biblical beliefs altogether in order to embrace liberalism, when that is not necessarily true at all. The same misstep is made in the other direction when complementarians are pilloried for holding to a view that is shared by those who devalue and abuse women. It is not uncommon to find, for instance, accusations that complementarians encourage the abuse and degradation of women, which is wholly false.
3. See the two main documents from the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood that state the complementarian position: the Danvers Statement (1987) and the Nashville Statement (2017). The Danvers Statement may be found at <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>; the Nashville Statement may be found at <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement>. The latter addresses the broader context of sexuality in general and current issues that impinge on the church's understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman.
4. This is one of the reasons that complementarians generally reject the label that is regularly given them by egalitarians: namely, that their position is "hierarchical." Because they believe that men and women are equally valued by God, they do not see the differentiation in roles and responsibilities as the equivalent of a hierarchy.
5. See the statement, "Men, Women, and Equality" from Christians for Biblical Equality, available at [https://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/english\\_3.pdf](https://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/english_3.pdf).
6. A similar argument is made concerning Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, though some egalitarians follow Gordon Fee's contention that the key verses 14:34-35 are not original with Paul.