“Woman’s Head is Man:” Complementarian and Egalitarian Perspectives on Biblical Gender Roles

_J. Luis Dizon, Hansie Fernandes, and Robert Groves_

Ever since the rise of Feminism, there have been several debates concerning Biblical teachings of gender roles in church and family life. These debates have cut across denominational boundaries and led to the creation of a large body of literature which addresses this issue. The roles discussed concern such practical issues as what it means for a wife to “submit” to her husband as well as whether it is acceptable to ordain women as clergy. Within conservative Evangelical Protestant traditions in particular, the ongoing debate has led Evangelicals to be divided into two main camps. The first camp is _Egalitarianism_, which takes a more Constructivist view of gender roles, arguing that “hierarchical” gender roles were formed after the fall and that the redemptive work of Christ is meant to eliminate such roles from the Christian Church. They thus allow for women to take on a greater variety of roles, such as being members of the clergy, and are more flexible regarding the roles of men and women in the family life. On the other hand is _Complementarianism_, the second camp within Evangelical Protestantism. This camp takes a strongly Essentialist view of gender roles, stating that “hierarchical” gender roles were established by God at creation and that this institution does not allow for female members in the clergy or for family structures that do not place the man as the head of the household.

Coming from Evangelical backgrounds, proponents of both of these two camps claim the Bible as the final authority on matters of faith. However, they have markedly different approaches to Biblical hermeneutics — the ways in which Scripture is interpreted — and how to apply the various strands of Biblical teaching. The purpose of this essay is to compare the different arguments employed by theologians in both camps in order to see how they differ in terms of foundational presuppositions and hermeneutical methods, compare the differences between the camps, and to discuss which position is most logical in light of the historical and linguistic backgrounds of the texts as well as the conclusion and worldview intended by the Scripture itself.

---

1Quotation marks are used around the word “hierarchical” because the use of that word to describe Complementarian notions of gender roles come from Egalitarian authors, not from Complementarians themselves. It is being used as a substitute for a more suitable term.
The Egalitarian Approach

Egalitarianism, as a movement within Christianity, traces its roots to the first wave of Liberal Feminism that emerged during the 19th century. However, their influence on mainstream Protestant denominations was not felt until the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of Second Wave Feminism. Between 1956 and 1979, most mainline Protestant denominations in North America started to ordain women as clergy, beginning with the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA (both 1956), followed by the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of America (both 1970), the Mennonite Church (1973), the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Covenant Church (both 1976), and the Reformed Church in America (1979).²

It was also around this period that “Evangelical Feminism” as a distinct theological tradition began to emerge within denominations that had been commonly considered “Evangelical.”³ Egalitarian theological treatises were published all throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but there was a resurgence in the 1990s as a result of the debate around the publication of the classic Complementarian text, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (1991).⁴ Given the weight and influence of that text, a number of Egalitarian theologians and members of the clergy have written books and articles in response to the theses presented therein.⁵ These individuals are the main intellectual proponents of Egalitarianism, some of which include Gordon Fee and Roger Nicole. Their responses culminated in an anthology of works titled *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (2005). This work is considered to be a main source for Egalitarian ideology, with twenty-six prominent Evangelical clergy members and theologians contributing to it.⁶

What must be noted about Egalitarianism is that it does not completely abandon the notion of gender complementarity; rather, it tempers it by arguing that complementarity does not necessitate the hierarchical gender roles advanced by Complementarians. This idea is made clear by the subtitle of

---

⁵ See Gallagher “The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism,” 219 for a short survey of Egalitarian literature published from the 1970s through the early 2000s.
Rediscovering Biblical Equality, which is “Complementarity Without Hierarchy.” Egalitarians, in the words of Gallagher, “point to a thread of teaching on mutuality, partnership, and women's gifting that has wound its way through the centuries and across a range of Christian communities.”

As previously noted, Egalitarian theologians argue that hierarchical constructions of gender roles are not part of God’s original created order, but were introduced into human society as a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve. In the Egalitarian treatment of Genesis 3, particular emphasis is placed on verse 15b: ‘yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Based on this verse, Richard Hess argues that, prior to the fall, man and woman enjoyed a relationship of total equality. As a judgement for eating from the tree of knowledge, however, God pronounced that the woman and the man would perpetually attempt to rule one another, with the result of man dominating woman. Emphasis is placed on the fact that a distortion has taken place in the natural order, and that this perversion resulted in the loss of what was previously a harmonious relationship.

Thus, Egalitarians argue that, based on Galatians 3:28, the relational distortions that have plagued humanity are officially abolished in Christ. According to Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This eradication is not to say that Christians perfectly model the oneness that is envisioned in this verse; rather, Egalitarians argue that to maintain hierarchical gender roles would be a violation of the ideal being set out by Paul in Galatians.

The Complementarian Approach

“Complementarianism” began to be used as a theological term as early as the 1960s, but it did not crystallize as a movement until the formation of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) in 1987. The CBMW published a document known as the “Danver’s Statement,” which has served as the gold standard for defining “Complementarianism” among the institutions that subscribe to that position. It stresses that although man and woman are “equal before God as persons,” they are

---

7 Gallagher, “The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism,” 219-220.
8 Fee, Groothuis and Pierce, Discovering Biblical Equality, 79-95.
9 Ibid., 179-185.
10 The history behind this controversy is treated in greater detail by Wayne Grudem in Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?, 23-32.
nonetheless “distinct in their manhood and womanhood,”\(^{11}\) forming the basis for distinction between the roles of the sexes. It then states that though these gender roles were corrupted into a source of oppression at the Fall, they were not created by the Fall itself, but “are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart.”\(^{12}\) This position was given its full theological expression in the 1991 publication of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Edited by such theologians as John Piper and Wayne Grudem, this anthology is regarded as the standard text on Complementarianism. The text includes articles by twenty-two clergymen, theologians, and biblical scholars who present arguments from Biblical and systematic theology, as well as other disciplines, in defence of a Complementarian understanding of gender roles. Most subsequent Complementarian works have been expansions on or modifications to the original positions and arguments advanced in this publication.

While the positions advocated by modern Complementarians remain in continuity with more traditional “patriarchal” notions of gender roles, they are still markedly more nuanced than the positions advanced by their predecessors. For example, theologians from the Early Church and Medieval periods promoted the blatantly misogynistic ideas that women did not completely bear the image of God, and that Eve was responsible for the Fall because she deceived Adam. Modern Complementarians eschew such types of language, noting that Biblical notions of gender relationships do not necessitate such extreme rhetoric.\(^{13}\) For example, in his analysis of Genesis, Ortlund points to how the creation of human beings in the image of God applies equally to both men and women,\(^{14}\) and with that belief comes a necessity to decode God’s intention for manhood and womanhood in Genesis 1:26-28. In Genesis, the glory of man is established in three distinct ways: (1) through the divine intention to directly and personally create man, (2) through the creation of humanity in the likeness of God (bearing a divine image that reflects God’s character), and (3) through the establishment of humanity’s special calling to God as God’s representative and crowning creation. It is important to note that here God is speaking to both man and woman without distinction, and authorizing them to carry out their mission to be stewards of creation.


\(^{12}\)Ibid.

\(^{13}\)Gallagher, “The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism,” 218.

There reference to the human race as “man” in Genesis 1 has been a source of great controversy. Complementarians maintain that this reference is meant to anticipate male headship and, in Genesis 2:27, the foreshadowing of marriage. Ortlund comments that “One may not call this linguistic practice (calling the human race “man”) unjust or insensitive without impugning the wisdom and goodness of God.” In Complementarianism, women are also considered equal based on the events of Genesis 2:23; man treats woman as his equal as she fulfills his desire for a partner. The equality of the sexes is also established by marriage, which acts as a reunion of what was originally one flesh in the creation story. The two are spiritual equals, meant to fulfill and complement one another by holding different roles. Man and woman are equal, but man is intended to be the head of the family and woman is meant to assist in any way possible (cf. Genesis 2:18). However, one does not have more value than the other. Headship suggests a functional difference between man and woman that reflects God’s intention from creation, but does not imply a difference in value nor does it provide a basis for maltreatment.

In fact, the Scriptures show that Jesus “demonstrated the high value he placed on women by ministering to women and addressing them in public.” Examples include Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39), showing concern for a widow in Nain (Luke 7:11-15), and forgiving a woman’s sin at the Pharisee’s house (Luke 7:11-15). Jesus openly defied the social norms of his time by willingly ministering to and addressing women in public. Thus, the decision that his apostles are to be all male may be seen as a deliberate choice and not a decision that was simply bound by his public image; it was a recognition that males are designed to lead and to act as the heads of the Church, and not a belief that man is somehow superior to woman.

Male and female roles are also often defined by “leadership” and “submission.” Complementarians have developed their understanding of female submission upon the descriptions Galatians 3:28-29 and 1 Peter 3:1-7. For them, Godly female submission does not entail relinquishing independence or abandoning efforts to influence and guide one’s husband. It does not require the wife to acquiesce to her husband’s every request, because “submission is not based on lesser intelligence/
competence or being fearful or timid, and is not inconsistent with equality of Christ.”

Most importantly, it does not mean wives are to put their husbands in a place that belongs to Christ. In fact, the idea of wifely submission reflects the inner quality of gentleness in women that affirms and supports the leadership of their husbands (e.g. Sarah’s submission to Abraham).

Though men are meant to lead, this does not mean the harsh application or domineering use of authority. 1 Peter 2:18, 3:1-7 and 4:8 provide good examples of male leadership, where the man is considerate towards his wife’s desires, goals, frustrations, strengths and weaknesses. Leadership implies honouring those who are weaker or less honoured in the eyes of the world both privately and publicly as “One who has equal standing in God’s kingdom is certainly worthy of equal honour and thoughtful, loving attention.”

This model of leadership and submission outlines the role of men and women in the Church and in the family.

In Scripture, the Trinity is presented as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are distinct, yet one Being. However, this distinctiveness leads to a familial model that should be, according to Complementarians, propagated down through the Church and then to the nuclear family. 1 Corinthians 11:1-3 provides the outline for this analogy, where just as the head of Christ is God, so the head of man ought to be Christ and the head of woman ought to be a man. Within a household, a woman should not hold authority because it would cause discord in the relationship dynamics between a man and a woman in their marriage. Rather, the relationship between husband and wife should reflect Ephesians 5:22-6:4, where wives submit to their husbands but where husbands love their wives as Christ loves His Church.

Therefore, the roles of husband and wife are not meant to be interchangeable, and neither are roles of man and woman within the Church. Complementarians believe that they are to lead by example, where a wife’s head is her husband, where a man’s head is his church leaders, and where the Church’s head is Christ (1 Timothy 2:11-14,3:1-7). In short, it can be said that “Deviating from [male-centered paradigm] makes the experience of the “Church as Family” appear vague, and causes individuals to lose grip on the importance of family… and fail to understand that God’s fatherhood is expressed in his rule over us.”

The question then becomes: If women cannot be chosen to lead, how are they to use their skills to benefit

---

19Ibid., 194.
20Ibid., 194-199.
21Ibid., 205.
22Ibid., 247.
others? Complementarians answer this question by exploring what it means to teach, and what forms of teaching a woman can and cannot do.

In 1 Timothy 2:8-15, it states that “Women are not to teach or have authority over men because of the order God created man and woman and because of the order they fell into sin.” Here, we see another reference to Genesis as the defining reference in explaining the role of men and women. Some argue that Paul’s words were meant to be a temporary measure, but it is clear that “these restrictions are permanent, authoritative for the Church in all times and places and circumstances.” Thus, within Christianity, women are commanded by verse 12 not to teach or demonstrate authority over a man, and she is suggested in verse 11 to “learn in quietness and full submission.” It should be noted that the term “teach” is “used mainly in the New Testament to denote a transmission of the tradition concerning Christ, and all the authority of proclamation are prohibited for women.” Therefore, women are prohibited from preaching and teaching the Bible and doctrine in church contexts, since “Scripture should be regarded as replacing the apostles who wrote it, not the teachers who expounded and applied it.” Thus, using 1 Timothy 3:5 and 5:17 as a basis, women are allowed to teach other women and children, but cannot each men, and women “should not hold the position of an Elder or any position an elder would typically hold.”

Comparative Analysis of the Two Positions

The various Bible passages that relate to women’s roles in the Church and in marriage have primarily been discussed in light of the Evangelical tradition. At their roots, the differences between Complementarians and Egalitarians rest in their respective understandings of hermeneutics. However, good hermeneutics arise from the authority of Scripture which, in the words of N.T. Wright, is “not the power to control people, and crush them, and keep them in little boxes.” Instead, he proposes that the

23 Ibid., 177.
24 Ibid., 180-181.
25 Ibid., 181.
26 Ibid., 182.
“authority vested in Scripture is designed, as all God’s authority is designed, to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human.”

With regard to basic hermeneutical issues, Grudem and Fee are in agreement. As Evangelicals, they both view Scripture as authoritative. With respect to their interpretation of ad hoc documents, both present a guideline on differentiating between an “objective command for all time” and “a subjective command specific to the cultural context of the passage it is found.” They depend on “common sense hermeneutics” when dealing with issues of cultural relativity. However, Fee reminds us that “Christians need to recognize the difficulties, open the line of communication with one another, start by trying to define some principles, and finally have love for and a willingness to ask forgiveness from those with whom they differ.”

Among Grudem’s significant contributions to this topic is his analysis of four key words that, in effect, dominate almost the entire debate on gender roles. One of these words is *kephale*. In a survey of 2,336 occurrences of *kephale* from a variety of literary genres, Grudem notes that about 87% of the usage refers to a physical head, 16.2% refers to a person of authority, and none posit a meaning of “source” or “origin.” In response to Grudem, Fee cites five antiquated sources supporting his claim that *kephale* actually meant “source” or “origin,” but does not establish whether these sources are relevant to Biblical usage. In her analysis of the two positions, Diane Montgomery cites Ephesians 1:22, clarifying the implication of *kephale* as meaning “head” or “source.” This verse illustrates Christ’s headship over the church as a necessity for the church to function as intended. She argues that if there are no hierarchical role distinctions in the church structure, then there would be a confusion of functions. Similarly, when Paul uses *kephale* in 1 Corinthians 11:3, he is alluding to the practice of the man leading his wife, and is

---

28 Ibid., The Bible and Biblical Authority. (Pages unnumbered)
30 Ibid., 295
31 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: 2003), 74
“showing the creation order and how that correlates to our relationships and behaviour today.”\textsuperscript{35} With regards to this, James Hurley states:

However we try to construct the parallels in the sense of ‘source’ there is an impossible result: Eve was physically taken out of Adam but we cannot say that every man was physically taken out of Christ. But if we say that God the Father was the creator of the human nature of Christ, then must we say that Adam was the creator of the human nature of Eve? Or if we say that God the Father gives the economic distinction of sonship to the Son, then must we say that Adam gives a distinct personality to Eve, or a man to a woman generally?\textsuperscript{36}

Another point of contention between the two camps is the concept of “mutual submission.”

Ephesians 5:22 is the passage commonly associated to this concept. Egalitarians interpret this verse to mean that husbands and wives must submit to each other in a manner that subverts any gender distinctions. For example, Young provides a brief discussion on Ephesians 5:18-33, emphasizing that the call in this passage is for husbands and wives to submit to one another,\textsuperscript{37} and the command for husbands is to love their wives as they love themselves. She also comments that the act of husbands loving their wives as their own bodies is like the “one-flesh relationship of Adam and Eve” expressing “unity and interdependence.” Therefore, a married couple should self-sacrificially love like Christ did when he laid down his life.\textsuperscript{38} Looking at that specific example of Christ, Young finds issue with Evangelicals who understand “headship” to incorporate the concept of authority, and suggests that it could be harmful to relationships as it “distorts the one-flesh relationship of unity and mutuality God designed for marriage.”\textsuperscript{39} Grudem addresses this question by analyzing the meaning of the Greek words \textit{hyptasso} and \textit{allelous}. He comes to the conclusion that this passage does advocate for submission but not in the same manner as Young believes. Instead, he looks at the overarching example of Christ by skilfully asking questions on their meaning:

\begin{quote}
Are Christ and the church mutually submitted? They aren’t if submission means Christ yields to the authority of the church. But they are if submission means that Christ submitted Himself to suffering and death for the good of the church. That, however, is
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., Here are the Main Passages dealing with Kephale and Marriage Roles/Relationships. (Page unnumbered)
\textsuperscript{37}n.b. Ephesians 5:21
\textsuperscript{38}Allison Young, “Ephesians 5:18-33.”\textit{CBE International}, accessed December 2, 2013. \url{http://www.cbeinternational.org/?q=content/ephesians-518-33}
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid., Ephesians 5:18-33. (Page unnumbered)
not how the church submits to Christ. The church submits to Christ by affirming His authority and following His lead.\(^{40}\)

Grudem correlates these questions with the concept that just as mutual submission should not demote Christ’s headship over the Church, neither should mutual submission between husband and wife dismiss the headship of a godly husband. Grudem also elaborates on the meaning of hypotasso (from the word “submit”) in Ephesians 5:21, stating that it does not mean “to be thoughtful and considerate” as Egalitarians advocate; rather, it should be understood in its synchronic form as referring to a person or persons being ‘subject to’ another person.\(^{41}\) One practical example he gives of hypotasso is its use regarding soldiers submitting to and obeying their superiors in higher ranks.\(^{42}\) Grudem posits a fair and reasonable question: why should hypotasso be given a meaning of being thoughtful and considerate and be depleted of its actual meaning, which is “one-directional submission to authority?”

Therefore, when analyzing biblical texts and interpreting words, an important question to ask is the objective of the analysis. Is the purpose of the interpretation to seek support for a fact or a movement, or is the purpose to observe what Scripture says without prior biases — in light of its immediate, local and general context — and come to a conclusion as to its commands? Of course, scholars from both camps are susceptible to falling into certain subjectivity, as they are only humans. However, care must be taken to always re-evaluate motives when choosing different hermeneutical principles to ensure that Scripture is maintained as the authority, and not manipulated to propagate a human idea.

In conclusion, although proponents of Complementarianism and Egalitarianism both claim Scripture as their authority on matters of faith and practice, they have markedly different hermeneutical approaches to the Biblical texts that speak to the relationships between men and women. The Egalitarian hermeneutic, while attempting to paint an image of Scriptural teaching that is more palatable to the modern world, nonetheless has more conceptual flaws than the Complementarian position. While the hermeneutics used by Complementarians is not perfect either, it is more internally coherent and takes into account more comprehensive definitions of key terms relating to male-female relationships. Most


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 18

\(^{42}\) Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Carr, 1995), 466
importantly, it should be noted that the two positions need not be considered incompatible on all issues. Complementarianism, while maintaining the hierarchical gender roles that have been traditionally accepted, has fiercely advocated for the concept of woman’s value, resolutely espousing a genuine understanding of submission and headship which includes neither brutality nor maltreatment, but rather, shows mutual love and godliness.
Bibliography


