

# BIBLICAL MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD: THE SHARED VALUE OF COMPLEMENTARIAN LEADERSHIP IN THE HOME AND IN THE CHURCH

---

JOSH BLOUNT

*We believe it was God's glorious plan to create men and women in His image, giving them equal dignity and value in His sight, while appointing differing and complementary roles for them within the home and the church.*

Sovereign Grace's seven shared values, as this journal makes clear, define our churches. We could ask a basic question of each value: what would change if we no longer embraced this, and where would we feel that change? In varying ways, our Sunday worship, our church planting strategy, or our understanding of the task of preaching would change with an alteration in any of the corresponding values. But the place where a change would be felt closest to home is in our belief in complementarianism—because this belief is uniquely related to the home.

Complementarianism is the biblical doctrine that nourishes and preserves

healthy families and faithful local churches. Far from being a contentious matter of a few obscure texts, complementarianism is the soil from which healthy families and faithful local churches (the family of God) grow. From this soil, they impart the gift of life, and new creation life, to coming generations.

### **What is Complementarianism?**

Stated simply, complementarianism is the belief that men and women are created equal in dignity yet different in design and role. As our *Statement of Faith* says, “Men and women reflect and represent God in distinct and complementary ways, and these differences are to be honored and celebrated in all dimensions of life” (“Man as Male and Female”). This affirmation

*Complementarianism is the belief that men and women are created equal in dignity yet different in design and role.*

does two things: it protects us from wrongly magnifying the differences between men and women (self-help books notwithstanding, men and women are not from different planets) or wrongly flattening them (men and women are equal, but they are not interchangeable).

Men and women are both created in the image of God. Neither is more valuable to him. Every woman, as a woman, and every man, as a man, is a result of the wise, gracious handiwork of the Creator. To demean women or ridicule men is thus to belittle a particular work of the Lord. And yet, within that equality, men and women are not interchangeable but instead have distinct and complementary roles.

The places where these roles are most clearly seen are in earthly families (the home) and the family of God (the church). In the home, men have distinct roles as husbands and fathers, and women have distinct roles as wives and mothers. The roles might best be defined with the term “headship” and “helper.” Again quoting our *Statement of Faith*, “Husbands are to exercise headship sacrificially and with humility, and wives are to serve as helpers to their husbands, willingly supporting and submitting to their leadership.”<sup>1</sup>

---

1. *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, “Marriage, Sexuality, and Singleness.”

In the church, God's eschatological family, men, and women are equally valuable to our life and mission. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are poured out regardless of gender and yet exercised in a way consistent with our gender. Elders exercise a role analogous to a father in a family, as Paul makes clear in the qualifications for eldership. By reserving the office of elder to men (1 Tim. 2:12, 3:2; Titus 1:6), the new creation maintains the pattern of God's original created order. In addition, within the church, the created differences between all men and women are upheld and honored, whether married or single (for example, 1 Tim. 5:1-2). The order in the new creation life of the church both reflects and advances the created order established in the beginning.

### **Male and Female He Created Them**

Next, we must ask: where do we get this belief in the complementary relationship of men and women? Is it, as some have alleged, a man-made doctrine? Is it a matter of a few obscure texts that could be interpreted differently? This question is vital, especially when there are many external reasons why this doctrine is unpopular. But rightly understood, complementarianism is not at all a matter of a few texts. It is woven into the very fabric of creation and re-creation, and thus to distort or discard it does violence to the storyline of Scripture.

Let's begin in the beginning.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26-27).

Here we see the principle of the equal worth of men and women (both are created in God's image) and their distinctness (they are created as male and female). Then Genesis 2 expands on this foundational narrative. Alone among all the created beings—birds and fish and cattle and beasts—is the lone figure of Adam. While all other living creatures are brought into existence by the spoken word of the Lord, Adam is formed uniquely by God's hand and God's animating breath.

And yet, whereas all other things are created according to their kinds, in Genesis 2, there is not yet another creature according to Adam's kind. Adam alone is alone, and this calls forth the only "not good" in all the pre-fall world: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). And so, God creates from Adam's rib a helper "fit for him" (or "corresponding to him"). When Adam awakes and sees Eve, his words are both the first human speech recorded in the Bible and the first love poetry of the human race: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23).

Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck captures the moment:

As soon as he saw her, he recognized her; his recognition was a knowledge born of love. He saw in her no alien being, but a being just like himself; she possessed the same nature that he had; she displayed the same image of God that had been bestowed upon him; and yet she was different from him, with her own sex, character, and vocation. Like a whoop of joy, like a wedding song, the words came forth from his lips!<sup>2</sup>

This whole narrative—the aloneness of Adam, the special work of God to remedy his lack, and the unique role as corresponding helper that God creates for Eve—is the basis for the institution of marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." As Ray Ortlund writes, "this peculiar thing we call marriage [is] tenderly portrayed in its humble reality and delicate innocence against the enormous backdrop of the creation."<sup>3</sup>

The reason it is so fitting for a human marriage to take center stage against this enormous backdrop is not yet clear in the storyline of Scripture. Before such a further revelation can take place, however, something intervenes: the sin of Adam.

### **Ruined by Sin, Redeemed by Grace**

The fall of Adam in Genesis 3 is familiar to us. But it's important that we not confuse the order of Scripture. By the end of Genesis 2, the good and wise hand of God has already created man and woman, equally dignified

---

2. Herman Bavinck and James Eglinton, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 4–5.

3. Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 171.

yet distinct in design. The irruption of sin into God's world through the temptation of Satan, the deception of Eve, and the disobedience of Adam does not create distinct gender roles; instead, it corrupts them.

As the punishments in Genesis 3:16-19 indicate, the complementary roles of husband and wife in the garden are infected with the pollution of sin in gender-specific ways – and it takes only little observation or human experience to confirm the divine testimony. Apart from the grace of God in Christ, husbands do not live as loving, sacrificial heads. Protectors become abusers. Providers become neglecters. And, without the influence of the gospel, wives do not experience or receive the divinely-given role as helper as life-giving and fulfilling. Instead, it becomes a constraint, a curse. Childbirth is marked by pain (Gen. 3:16), and family life is marked by strife (Gen. 4). East of Eden

(Gen. 3:24), harmony degenerates into dissonance. The home, no less than the creation itself, groans under the futility and destruction of sin.

*God's Word  
protects and  
celebrates marriage  
and gender  
complementarity.*

And yet, in the mercy of God, the goodness of marriage and the created order of male and female endures the rupture of the fall—not unaffected, but also not erased. Thus God's Word protects and celebrates marriage and

gender complementarity. The Law of Israel condemns marital infidelity (Ex. 20:14) and the sexual immorality of the surrounding nations (Lev. 18). The wisdom literature delights in the blessing of marriage (Prov. 19:14, Eccles. 9:9), the gift of children (Ps. 127), the joys of sexual intimacy (Song of Songs), and the distinction vocations of men (Ps. 112) and women (Prov. 31).

Furthermore, marriages, and the roles of men and women, are woven into the storyline of Scripture. The line of the Messiah advances through the marriage of a converted Moabite woman and a godly Israelite man (Ruth). The wisdom of Abigail restrains the sinful impulses of King David (1 Sam. 25). The love of a faithful husband for an adulterous wife becomes a revelation of the heart of God for his idolatrous people (Hosea). With the fullness of time, Jesus himself honors men and women in their created distinctness. He relates to women with purity and dignity (e.g., John 4), teaching them to be his followers (Luke 10:38-42). And in keeping with the Old Testament

pattern, he appoints twelve men as his disciples and the foundation of the apostolic church.

### **A Divine Work of Art**

In this light, the specific apostolic texts that teach complementarianism are not exegetical aberrations but rather form part of a much larger pattern. They are like inspired signposts alongside a divine work of art: concise explanations that enable the viewer to see the whole scope of the masterpiece with the eyes of the Artist himself.

Husbands are to love their wives and not be harsh with them, showing honor to their wives and living with them in an understanding way (Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7). Wives are to submit to their husbands in the Lord (Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1). Thus the pattern of the created order is to be expressed in the posture of Christian husbands and wives towards one another.

As in the earthly family, so in the heavenly family. The apostolic writings make clear that men and women have different roles in the life of the church. Elders are to be men of character whose godliness is first displayed in caring for their own families and then exercised in parallel fashion over the family of God (1 Tim. 3:1-5; Titus 1:6-9). Yet while the office of elder (with all that that entails in relation to the church, inside and outside of Sundays) is limited to men, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not gender-specific. Men and women alike are to use their gifts to serve one another as good stewards of God's multi-faceted grace (1 Pet. 4:9). In the gathered assembly, all participate (1 Cor. 11:5 and 14:26), yet the pattern of submission of wives to their husbands, and all members to the God-given elders of the church, is maintained (1 Cor. 14:34-35, Heb. 13:17).

In the family of God, there is no hierarchy of worth, no inner ring, nor elite few. Yet neither is there the flat, modern monotone of sameness and equality. Instead, there is God's beautiful, complex chord of complementarity: difference by design, a heavenly harmony in which the sum is greater than its parts.

### **Pointing to Ultimate Reality**

If you've made it this far, you probably don't have to be told that what we have just surveyed is not universally accepted in modern culture or even modern

Christianity. In such a world, should this doctrine be one of our shared, and defining, values? We might decide it is a biblical doctrine, but one best left in a closet or a corner of the basement—something trusted friends and family are allowed to see, but not a flag hanging from our collective front porch!

And yet when we tamper with or mute this doctrine, we lose far more than we gain. Because complementarity is not an end of itself. Marriage, and the created substructure of male and female on which marriage is built, is not ultimate reality—but it points to ultimate reality. “This mystery,” Paul writes—this mystery of husbands and wives in harmonious complementarity, this “peculiar thing we call marriage” set against the enormous backdrop of creation, this most basic institution of creation life, that mystery—“is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32).

*When we tamper  
with or mute this  
doctrine, we lose  
far more than we  
gain.*

The bond between Christ and his church is not a useful sermon illustration to teach about Christian marriage. Christian marriage is a divinely-ordained illustration to teach about the future destiny of all things. In Christ, the destination of the universe is a wedding feast, and the future of the people of God is to be the glorious, spotless bride of the Lamb

(Rev. 19:6-8). And all who trust in Christ now will then enjoy the covenant fellowship, the unity-in-distinction, the spiritual oneness with Christ that even the best human marriages only dimly reflect.

Contemporary discussions of gender often bring with them accusations of being on the “right” or “wrong” side of history. Sadly, the history in view is far more truncated than the majestic sweep of Scripture. At the beginning of human and creation history, there was a wedding. At the end of all things, there will be a wedding. In between, the institution of marriage, built on the foundation of the created, complementary design of men and women, endures because it is God’s institution. In it, according to God’s design, comes the gift of children—new generations of boys and girls who must be taught to become Christian men and Christian women in the family of God.

So it has been in every generation of church history, and so it shall be

until the return of Christ, the King, and Bridegroom of his people. Then the groaning creation will exchange its groans for shouts of joy. Then the prayers of the saints will become the praises of the great multitude, crying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready!” (Rev. 19:6-7).

With that vision before us, capturing our imaginations and strengthening our resolve, the church becomes the place that, looking backward, joyfully proclaims, “Male and female he created them...and it is very good!” and, looking forward, happily cries, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” Amen, and amen!

---

**JOSH BLOUNT**

Josh Blount is an elder at [Living Faith Church](#) (Franklin, WV).