

Reconcile handout #3 - A **complementarian** view of relationships between women and men, vs. an **egalitarian** view - and a **third way**

Complementarianism - See the second page of this document for an article the woman who helped men coin the term, complementarian, to express the theological idea that although men and women are equal before God, in worth and value, God has designed that women and men should live and move through the world differently due to their different genders. She offers a theological reason for this: She says that women should not lead men; **women** are intended to submit to men in order to demonstrate Jesus' willing obedience to his Father at his willing death for the world; **men** are designed to lead to demonstrate Jesus' headship over the Church and Jesus' love for the Church of which he is the head.

Egalitarianism - means a position in which women and men are equal before God, not only theoretically but practically. An egalitarian would say that there are no social positions that women cannot fulfil, in the religious as well as political and social arenas. They would also value marriages in which roles and responsibilities are divided according to the skills personalities and interests of each person, not by gender. Women tend to like this, and more and more young women take it more or less for granted, both within and outside religious societies.

Both can be, and often are caricatured - but both are actually acceptable ways for human beings to function. You will find both ways of looking at the relationship between men and women in every society - Christian, Jewish and Islam - as well as in societies that have no particular religious beliefs. It is not necessary to defend it by religious ideas for it to function; and men prefer it simply because it gives them authority in every sphere - ultimately even over the sphere that is supposed to be the woman's: the raising of children, and the management of the household.

But is either actually the way in which women whose stories are told in the Bible actually lived? We have to take their stories at face value - as they are told by the MEN who wrote them down. When we do, we find something entirely different.

A third way - which has no name, as far as I am aware - begins with the notion that each individual, as part of a society, individually responds to God according to what God asks of each one - and that God's call is not based on gender. This seems to better fit the stories we actually find in the Bible.

If we look at the following women in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, we do not find that they live according to some predestined or predetermined plan. They are each unique. And each woman responds in her own way, in her own situation, to God and to others around her. And often, they undermine, not support, the view that roles are gender-based. They actually play a pivotal role in subverting man-made power structures, social and religious. They also don't respond by saying, "I can do whatever men can do." It's altogether different.

(Whether you believe that these are literal and historical biographical stories or not, doesn't matter. In either case, the words on the page are what we have.)

In no particular order:

Mary, the mother of Jesus - Read her song, echoing **Hannah's** in ancient times - She is obedient to God by her choice; but she does not surrender her life to Joseph. She and **Hannah** and **Elizabeth** and for that matter, **Sarah**, are all found "impossibly" pregnant. None of these are traditional marriages. They make it clear that traditional expectations don't mean anything to God. Hannah, Elizabeth and Sarah became pregnant explicitly to show the men that their ability to procreate was limited; that nothing is impossible to God. They are God stories. As is the story of **Mary** - who had no business turning up pregnant before her marriage to Joseph.

Deborah - "the judge" - Judges 4,5 - Deborah was, like the other "judges" in Israel, a charismatic military leader. She is also depicted, as none of the other judges are, as one who actually settles disputes, too, among the people. And she is called a prophet/prophetess. (So are **Miriam**, **Huldah**, the **unnamed wife of Isaiah** and **Noadiah**) And she calls herself a "mother in Israel." - a leader of the people.

Far from submitting to gender expectations, she defies them.

She sends her general to battle, but he refuses to go without her. She shames Barak by saying that the people will remember that God delivered the people by the hand of a woman. And she was right. God uses her quite happily, it seems.

The story ends with the enemy General Sisera escaping to hide in an Israeli woman's tent -

Jael - whose name means "God is the God" - who then lulls him to sleep and murders him with a spike through his temple.

Esther - See especially Esther 4-5

She initially obeys her uncle, which is gender-normal, and yet in the end, she makes her own choices and decision, and takes her own risks to save her people. And Mordecai and the king and others obey her commands. There is nothing passive or submissive in her relationship with her husband. And in the end, political power is concentrated in her hands.

Mary of Bethany - as well as Martha - It says they are sisters of Lazarus, unmarried. There are no men they seem obligated to obey. Martha, however, does follow gender-normative behavior when Jesus comes with his friends to dinner. And she wants Mary to do it, too. But Mary had chosen her own part, which was to sit with Jesus and his friends, his male disciples, to learn, to listen, to participate. And Jesus does NOT send her to the kitchen. He rather tells Martha that Mary has made her own choice, "which will not be taken from her." She was NOT sitting there piously praying, but actively engaged along with the other disciples, on equal terms.

Mary of Magdala - All of the "women" who followed and financially supported Jesus defied gender norms. They spent their own money to go where Jesus went and to care for him. We know nothing about their husbands, parents or children. They don't seem to have cared what

others thought about them. And there were many such women. (cont.)

And after the resurrection, Mary of Magdala was the only one who dared go to the tomb and see what had happened - and when she returned, it seems none of the men believed her message - Peter finally went to see for himself. But clearly she was the first to report the resurrection - She proclaimed it. She preached it. She was, in ancient words, "apostle to the apostles."

We do not see in Jesus any sense at all that women were somehow different in their ability to, or responsibility to, respond to his teaching. The Samaritan woman was the beneficiary of a theological conversation, although it was NOT gender-normative for Jesus to engage her that way; and she was sent to proclaim Jesus to her whole community. Both men and women came to Jesus on equal terms and received healing, freedom, and commission on equal terms. The basis was faith, not gender.

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Complementarianism for Dummies

Last week a reporter asked me to define "complementarianism." She didn't know what it meant. And that's not entirely surprising.

"Complementarity" is a word that doesn't appear in the Bible, but is used by people to summarize a biblical concept. It's like the word "Trinity." The Bible never uses the word "Trinity." But it's undeniable that it points to a Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Though the concept of male-female complementarity is present from Genesis through Revelation, the label "complementarian" has only been in use for about twenty-five years. It was coined by a group of scholars who got together to try and come up with a word to describe someone who ascribes to the historic, biblical idea that male and female are equal, but different. The need for such a label arose in response to the proposition that equality means role-interchangeability (egalitarianism)—a concept that was first forwarded and popularized in Evangelical circles in the 1970s and 80s by "Biblical Feminists."

I've read several posts on the Internet lately from people who misunderstand and/or misrepresent the complementarian view. I was at the meeting, twenty-five years ago, where the word "complementarian" was chosen. So I think I have a good grasp on the word's definition.

In this post I want to boil it down for you. In emulation of the popular "for Dummies" series of instructional books, I'll give you a "Complementarianism for Dummies" primer on the intended meaning of the word.

1. It's complementary . . . NOT complimentary

The word "complementarian" is derived from the word "complement" (Not the word "compliment.") The dictionary defines "complement" as:

"Something that completes or makes perfect; either of two parts or things needed to complete the whole; counterparts."

Complementarians believe that God created male and female as complementary expressions of the image of God—male and female are counterparts in reflecting His glory. Having two sexes expands the view. Though both sexes bear God's image fully on their own, each does so in a unique and distinct way. Male and female in relationship reflect truths about Jesus that are not reflected by male alone or female alone.

2. June Cleaver is so fifties and so NOT the definition of complementarity

In our name-the-concept meeting, someone mentioned the word "traditionalism" since our position is what Christians have traditionally believed. But that was quickly nixed. The word "traditionalism" smacks of "tradition." Complementarians believe that the Bible's principles supersede tradition. They can be applied in every time and culture. June Cleaver is a traditional, American, cultural TV stereotype. She is NOT the complementarian ideal. Period. (And exclamation mark!) Culture has changed. What complementarity looks like now is different than what it looked like sixty or seventy years ago. So throw out the cookie-cutter stereotype. It does not apply.

3. A proletariat-bourgeois-type hierarchy has no place in complementarity

Feminist theorists maintain that male-female role differences create an over-under hierarchy in which men, who are like the privileged, elite, French landowners (bourgeois) of the 18th century, keep women—who are like the lower, underprivileged class of workers (proletariat)—subservient. Complementarians do not believe that men, as a group, are ranked higher than women. Men are not superior to women—women are not the "second sex." Though men have a responsibility to exercise headship in their homes, and in the church family, Christ revolutionized the definition of what that means. Authority is not the right to rule—it's the responsibility to serve. We rejected the term "hierarchicalism" because people associate it with an inherent, self-proclaimed right to rule.

4. Complementarity does not condone the patriarchal, societal oppression of women.

Technically, "patriarchy" simply means a social organization in which the father is the head of the family. But since the 1970s, feminists have redefined the historic use of the term, and attributed negative connotations to it. Nowadays, people regard patriarchy as the *oppressive rule of men*. "Patriarchy" is regarded as a misogynistic system in which women are put down and squelched. That's why we rejected the term "patriarchalism." Complementarians stand against the oppression of women. We want to see women flourish, and we believe they do so when men and women live according to God's Word.

5. Complementarians believe that God designed male and female to reflect complementary truths about Jesus.

Okay, now that we've cleared up some misconceptions and false terminology about complementarianism, it's time to give you a basic definition. Essentially, a complementarian is a person who believes that God created male and female to reflect complementary truths about Jesus. That's the bottom-line meaning of the word. Complementarians believe that males were designed to shine the spotlight on Christ's relationship to the church (and the LORD God's relationship to Christ) in a way that females cannot, and that females were designed to shine the spotlight on the Church's relationship to Christ (and Christ's relationship to the LORD God) in a way that males cannot. Who we are as male and female is ultimately not about us. It's about testifying to the story of Jesus. We do not get to dictate what manhood and womanhood are all about. Our Creator does. That's the basis of complementarianism.

■ *A complementarian is a person who believes that God created male and female to reflect complementary truths about Jesus.*

If you hear someone tell you that complementarity means you have to get married, have dozens of babies, be a stay-at-home housewife, clean toilets, completely forego a career, chuck your brain, tolerate abuse, watch "Leave it to Beaver" re-runs, bury your gifts, deny your personality, and bobble-head nod "yes" to everything men say, don't believe her. That's a straw (wo)man misrepresentation. It's not complementarianism.

I should know. I'm a complementarian. And I helped coin the term.