

### **CCN on Complementarianism**

There's simply no way to escape the fact that the question of women in ministry and leadership and the way male and female relate to each other in both the home and church is an issue of considerable controversy and importance. The purpose of this paper is to articulate CCN's perspective on what biblical complementarianism is and is not.

Let us say from the start that what grieves us almost as much as the theological differences between Egalitarians and Complementarians is the inexcusable disdain with which each side treats and speaks of the other. We begin with a plea for Christian civility in our discussion with one another. We suggest that we expend every effort to portray the other side in the best possible terms, that we avoid caricature, sarcasm, and misrepresentation. We suggest that we respectfully disagree with each other without calling into question the other's orthodoxy or love for God. We ask that we commit ourselves to the sort of dialogue that will honor Christ and enhance rather than tarnish the image of the church in a society that already regards us as our own worst enemy.

All too often we make the mistake of thinking that someone is launching a personal attack under the guise of a hermeneutical decision. In other words, we tend to react to another's approach to biblical interpretation as if they embrace that interpretation because they don't like us or think that we are inferior or have some grudge against us that is best vented by endorsing a contrary position on a controversial topic like the relationship of men and women. We hope that such is not the case, but if it is, we ask that we together commit ourselves to forsaking it.

We are not suggesting or asking that anyone embrace and articulate his/her beliefs with any less intensity of conviction than you feel is warranted by Scripture. In other words, our suggestions are not designed to invalidate or undermine fervent and heartfelt interaction. We are simply asking that we speak the truth, however we conceive that truth, in genuine love.

Are there Complementarians whose primary motivation is self-serving, who insist upon male headship in church and home as a way of compensating for their own insecurity and holding on to the power and resources of the church? Yes. Tragically. Are there Egalitarians whose commitment is driven by a radical feminist political agenda and who bristle with resentment at the mere thought that men and women, by God's design, may be different? Yes. Tragically.

We are not so naïve as to think that none of us is tainted by unbiblical and self-serving motives. We are simply calling for mutual generosity and patience as we together explore God's best for those created in His image.

### ***Foundational Principles***

We begin by articulating five foundational principles that must govern all dialogue on this topic. We trust that both complementarians and egalitarians can agree on the following.

- (1) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equally created in the image of God, and that neither is more or less the image of God than the other.
- (2) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equal in personal dignity, that neither is more or less worthy or of more or less value as human beings.
- (3) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women should treat each other with kindness and compassion and love, and that any and all forms of abuse or disrespect or dishonor must be denounced as sin and resisted.
- (4) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians believe that women should be actively involved in ministry. Complementarians agree with Egalitarians and celebrate the fact that women, for example, served as "co-workers" with Paul and held the office of deacon.

(5) Where Complementarians and Egalitarians disagree is whether women can serve as the Senior Pastor or as a Ruling Elder in the local church, what we call senior governmental authority. Egalitarians believe the Bible permits women to hold such positions of leadership, while Complementarians do not.

The Board and Leadership Team of CCN is extremely reluctant to place restrictions on anyone of either gender or any age in the absence of explicit biblical instruction to that effect. In other words, if we are going to err, it is on the side of freedom. In our opinion, the only restrictions placed on women concern what we call *senior governmental authority in the local church*. By this we have in mind, as noted above, (1) the primary authority to expound the Scriptures and enforce their doctrinal and ethical truths on the conscience of all God's people, and (2) the authority to exercise final governmental oversight of the body of Christ.

Therefore, unlike a number of other Complementarians, as long as the principle of male headship is honored in the above two respects, we believe women can lead worship, can lead small groups, can assist in the celebration of both baptism and the Lord's Supper, can serve as deacons (or deaconesses), can chair church committees, can lead in evangelistic and church planting outreach, can (and should) be consulted by the local church Eldership when decisions are being made, and can contribute to virtually every other capacity of local church life. Women should be encouraged to pray and prophesy in corporate church meetings (1 Cor. 11) and should be given every opportunity to develop and exercise their spiritual gifts. The example of Priscilla in Acts 18:24-28 clearly reminds us that women who are skilled in the Scriptures and theology can effectively instruct men to understand and apply the principles of God's Word with greater accuracy.

Be it noted that if a CCN member differs with the preceding description of what women can do in terms of local church ministry, this in no way is a barrier to their membership in our network. In other words, if a pastor and his church believe that some or all of the preceding activities are not open to women, he can still function as an active and contributing member of the network.

#### ***What does the Board and Leadership Team of CCN Believe?***

Complementarianism asserts that God has created both men and women (1) in his image, of equal value and dignity as human persons, but (2) with a distinction in the roles and responsibilities each is to fulfill in both church and home.

Complementarianism asserts that (1) and (2) above are perfectly and practically compatible with each other. Complementarianism asserts that *functional differences* between men and women in church and home, as expressed in the biblical terms "headship" and "submission", do not diminish or jeopardize their *ontological equality*.

Complementarianism believes that submission to rightful authority, whether wives to husbands or children to parents or Christians to elders in the church or all citizens to the state is a noble and virtuous thing, that it is a privilege, a joy, something good and desirable and consistent with true freedom, and above all honoring and glorifying to God.

#### ***The Meaning of Headship***

Many think that headship and submission mean that a wife must sit passively and endure the sin or the abuse of the husband, as if submission means she has no right to stand up for what is true and good or to resist her husband's evil ways. Perhaps some of you come from families in which the husband was an insensitive bully and where it was assumed that it was the wife's "duty" to tolerate this silently. God's word does not call upon a wife to acquiesce to brutality or thievery or abuse.

Some of you may think that a husband can get away with whatever he wants in the name of headship, as if that word or concept endorses and encourages his sinful behavior, such that the wife has no recourse but to "submit" to his dictatorial and destructive ways. We utterly reject and grieve over such a terrible distortion and misapplication of the principles addressed in this article.

Can complementarianism and the notion of male headship be perverted and distorted by selfishness and sinful oppression? Sadly, yes. Even as egalitarianism and the denial of male headship can be perverted and distorted into a rejection of any differences between male and female.

“Headship” (*kephalē*) has three meanings in Scripture: (1) a physical head (1 Cor. 11:7); (2) source or origin (Col. 1:18); and (3) a person with authority (Eph. 1:22).

#### *Misconceptions about the Nature of Headship*

1. *Husbands are never commanded to rule their wives, but to love them.* The Bible never says, “Husbands, take steps to ensure that your wives submit to you.” Nor does it say, “Husbands, exercise headship and authority over your wives.” Rather, the principle of male headship is either asserted or assumed and men are commanded to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

2. *Headship is never portrayed in Scripture as a means for self-satisfaction or self-exaltation. Headship is always other-oriented.* There is hardly a more horrendous sin than exploiting the God-given responsibility to lovingly lead by perverting it into justification for using one’s wife and family to satisfy one’s lusts and thirst for power.

3. *Headship is not the power of a superior over an inferior. Human nature is sinfully inclined to distort the submission of the wife into the superiority of the husband.* That some, in the name of male headship, have done precisely this cannot be denied, but it must certainly be denounced. We must also remember that the abuse of headship is not sufficient justification for abandoning it. Rather, we must strive, in God’s grace, to redeem it and purify it in a way that honors both Christ and one’s spouse.

4. *Headship is never to be identified with the issuing of commands.*

5. *Headship does not mean that the husband must make every decision in the home.* Unfortunately, some men have mistakenly assumed that it undermines their authority for their wives to take the initiative in certain domestic matters. This is more an expression of masculine insecurity and fear than it is godly leadership.

#### *Identifying the Essence of Headship*

1. *Headship is more a responsibility than a right.* A “right” is something we tend to demand or insist upon as something we are owed. This can all too often make for an authoritarian and self-serving atmosphere in the home. When headship is viewed as a sacred trust in which the husband is “called” by God to lead and honor and sacrifice for his wife, the tone and mood of the home is radically improved.

2. *Headship is the authority to serve.* John Stott explains:

“If headship means 'power' in any sense, then it is power to care, not to crush; power to serve, not to dominate; power to facilitate self-fulfillment, not to frustrate or destroy it. And in all this the standard of the husband's love is to be the cross of Christ, on which he surrendered himself even to death in his selfless love for his bride” (232).

3. *Headship is the opportunity to lead.* If Jesus is our example of biblical leadership, it will help to take note of how he led his disciples.

- Jesus led by *teaching* his disciples (cf. 1 Cor. 14:35)
- Jesus led by setting an *example* for his disciples (John 13:15)
- Jesus led by spending *time* with his disciples (Acts 4:13)
- Jesus led by *delegating authority* to his disciples (Luke 10:1-20)

4. *Headship is Scripturally circumscribed. Husbands have never been given the authority to lead their families in ways that are contrary to the Bible.* On a related note, if a wife is ever asked or told by her husband to do something that violates Scripture, she is not only free to disobey him, she is obligated to do so.

5. *Headship does entail the responsibility to make a final decision when agreement cannot be reached. This final decision, however, may on occasion be to let his wife decide.* Contrary to what you may think, this latter option does not undermine the husband’s authority.

6. *Headship entails gentleness and sensitivity.* See Col. 3:18-19 where Paul exhorts husbands not to be “embittered” against their wives. The idea is that of “friction caused by impatience and thoughtless nagging” (Moule).

7. *Headship does not give men the right to be wrong.* Simply because God has invested in the husband the authority to lead does not give him the freedom to lead in ways that are contrary to God’s Word.

8. *Headship means honoring one’s wife.* See 1 Peter 3:7.

9. *Headship means loving and caring for one’s wife as much as we love and care for ourselves.* See Eph. 5:28-29.

10. *Headship means loving and caring for one’s wife as much as Christ loves and cares for us.* See Eph. 5:25-27. Christ’s love for us has several characteristics:

- It is **unconditional** (Rom. 5:8)
- It is **eternal** (Rom. 8:39)
- It is **unselfish** (Phil. 2:6-7)
- It is **purposeful** (Eph. 5:26-27)

“Christ ‘loved’ the church and ‘gave himself’ for her, in order to ‘cleanse’ her, ‘sanctify’ her, and ultimately ‘present’ her to himself in full splendour and without any defect. In other words, his love and self-sacrifice were not an idle display, but purposive. And his purpose was not to impose an alien identity upon the church, but to free her from the spots and wrinkles which mar her beauty and to display her in her true glory. The Christian husband is to have a similar concern. His headship will never be used to suppress his wife. He longs to see her liberated from everything which spoils her true feminine identity and growing towards that ‘glory’, that perfection of fulfilled personhood which will be the final destiny of all those whom Christ redeems. To this end Christ gave himself. To this end too the husband gives himself in love” (Stott).

- It is **sacrificial** (Eph. 5:25)
- It is **demonstrative** (Rom. 5:6-8)

### ***The Meaning of Submission***

“Submission” (Gk., *hupotassō*) carries the implication of voluntary yieldedness to a recognized authority. Biblical submission is appropriate in several relational spheres: (1) the wife to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24); (2) children to their parents (Eph. 6:1); (3) believers to the elders of the church (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12); (4) citizens to the state (Rom. 13); (5) servants (employees) to their masters (employers) (1 Pt. 2:18); (6) each believer to every other believer in humble service (Eph. 5:21).

#### *Misconceptions about the Nature of Submission*

1. *Submission is not grounded in any supposed superiority of the husband or inferiority of the wife.* See Gal. 3:28; 1 Pt. 3:7.

The concept of the wife being the “helper” (Gen. 2:18-22) of the husband in no way implies her inferiority. In fact, the Hebrew word translated “helper” is often used in the OT to refer to *God* as the “helper” of mankind. Surely *He* is not inferior to us! Rather, this passage means that (1) the husband, even before the fall into sin, was *incomplete* without his wife; (2) the husband will never reach his full potential apart from the input of his wife.

2. *Submission does not mean a wife is obligated to follow should her husband lead her into sin.*

The biblical principle that we owe obedience to God first and foremost applies to Christian wives as well. If there must be a choice between obedience to God and obedience to the state, God is to be obeyed (Acts 5:29). The same would apply in a marriage.

3. *Submission does not mean the wife must sacrifice her freedom.*
4. *Submission does not entail passivity.* See Prov. 31. Note especially the emphasis on her initiative, creativity, tireless industry, etc. There is no biblically prescribed “personality” for wives, any more than there is one for husbands. Husbands who exercise godly leadership can be introverts and wives who submit can be extroverts.
5. *Submission does not entail silence.*

Many mistakenly think a wife is unsubmitive if she ever:

*criticizes* her husband (constructive criticism that is lovingly motivated and corrective in nature is not inconsistent with godly submission)

*makes requests* of her husband (in particular, that her husband and family act responsibly in private and public; submission of the wife is not an excuse for sin or sloth or sloppiness in the husband)

*teaches* her husband (cf. Prov. 31:26; Acts 18:26; it is not inconsistent with godly submission that a wife be more intelligent or more articulate than her husband; on a personal note)

6. *Submission does not mean that everything a wife does must be directly dependent upon or connected to her husband.*

Submission does not mean the wife can never do anything for her own benefit or for the benefit of others or that she should never become involved in activities or ministries outside the home. See Prov. 31.

#### *Identifying the Essence of Submission*

1. *Submission is the disposition to honor and affirm a husband's authority and an inclination to yield to his leadership.* John Piper puts it this way:

“[Submission] is an attitude that says, 'I delight for you to take the initiative in our family. I am glad when you take responsibility for things and lead with love. I don't flourish when you are passive and I have to make sure the family works.' But the attitude of Christian submission also says, 'It grieves me when you venture into sinful acts and want to take me with you. You know I can't do that. I have no desire to resist you. On the contrary, I flourish most when I can respond creatively and joyfully to your lead; but I can't follow you into sin, as much as I love to honor your leadership in our marriage. Christ is my King.'”

2. *Submission is fundamentally an attitude and act of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.* See Eph. 5:22.
3. *Submission is a commitment to support one's husband in such a way that he may reach his full potential as a man of God.* This may involve several things:

- making the home a safe place, free from the sinful influence of the world
- striving to be dependable and trustworthy (Prov. 31:11-12)
- providing affirmation and encouragement
- building loyalty to him in the children (differences of opinion about discipline should be settled in private, away from the children, lest she be seen as taking sides against her husband)
- showing confidence in his decisions

#### *Submission when the Husband is an Unbeliever*

See 1 Peter 3:1-7.

1. *Submission does not mean she must agree with everything her husband says.*

1 Peter 3:1 indicates that she is a believer and he is not. Thus she disagrees with him on the most important principle of all: God! Her interpretation of ultimate reality may well be utterly different from his. This indicates that submission is perfectly compatible with independent thinking. The woman in this passage has heard the gospel, assessed the claims of Christ, and embraced his atoning work as her only hope. Her husband has likewise heard the gospel and disobeyed it. She thought for herself and she acted. And Peter does not tell her to retreat from that commitment.

2. *Submission does not mean giving up all efforts to change her husband.*

The point of the passage is to tell a wife how she might “win” her husband to the Lord. Strangely enough, Peter envisions submission as the most effective strategy in *changing* the husband.

3. *Submission does not mean putting the will of one's husband above the will of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Peter in no way suggests she should abandon her commitment to Christ simply because her husband is an unbeliever. This wife is a follower of Jesus before and above being a follower of her husband.

4. *Submission to an unbelieving husband does not mean a wife gets her personal, spiritual strength from him.*

When a husband's spiritual nurturing and leadership is lacking, a Christian wife is not left helpless. She is to be nurtured and strengthened by her hope in God (v. 5).

5. *Submission to an unbelieving husband is not to be done in fear but in freedom.* See v. 6b.

### ***Conclusion***

As stated earlier, our belief is that women should be educated, trained, empowered, and released into every ministry of the local church except where Scripture explicitly says otherwise. There are only two restrictions placed on women: (1) the office of Elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and (2) the responsibility to preach and apply the Scriptures in the corporate gathering of the church (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

This would not preclude a woman from speaking to the gathered church on special occasions. How often this might occur is a decision that rests with each Elder board.

Thus we believe that it is permissible (perhaps even advisable) that women be empowered to read Scripture in the public gathering, teach in small group gatherings or classes attended by both men and women, pray and prophesy in the public gathering of the church, lead worship, serve communion, administer the ordinance of water baptism, chair church committees, lead in evangelistic and church planting outreach, and should be consulted by the local church Eldership when decisions are being made. These are likely not the only things women are called to do in terms of ministry

### **Addendum A**

#### ***“Should Women Serve as Elders in the Local Church?”***

The immediate problem we face in trying to answer this question is the fact that not every church or denomination today seeks to reproduce the New Testament pattern for local church government. We realize that many will object to this and argue that the NT doesn't present us with an explicit ecclesiology. We disagree. We believe the NT portrays for us a consistent pattern of governance by a plurality of Elders. However, it is important to realize that even if this is not the case, we can still determine whether or not women should be appointed to positions of senior governmental authority.

In the great majority of churches that are part of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Board of Deacons functions in the way a Board of Elders would in another denomination. Whereas the Senior Pastor is often viewed as the sole Elder, thus exercising primary authority, the Deacons exercise a governmental role that *in practical effect* is equivalent to a Board of Elders. So, our position is that women are not permitted to hold the office of Deacon in Southern Baptist Churches. In a number of other denominational settings, such as Presbyterianism, we would happily endorse the

presence of female deacons given the fact that they do not exercise final spiritual authority over the body as a whole. The issue, then, is less on the name or title of the office and more on the actual, functional authority invested in each office.

The texts in which the word “Elder/Overseer” (which are used interchangeably in the NT) appears are many.

Acts 11:29-30; 14:23; 15:1-6; 15:22-23; 16:4; 20:17-18, 28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1; 4:14; 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5; 2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1.

Why do we believe that this ruling or governmental office is restricted to men? We would appeal to three arguments in defense of a male eldership.

First, we appeal to the NT two-fold description of the **function** of elders. (1) They are those who **govern** or **rule** the church (1 Timothy 3:4-5; 5:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17). (2) They are those who are primarily responsible for **teaching** the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11 [assuming the words “pastor” and “teacher” refer to one function or office of “pastor-teacher”; the best grammatical analysis would indicate this is true]; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Since we have determined from 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that Paul restricted teaching and exercising authority to men, it follows that the office of Elder or Bishop is restricted to men.

Second, we would appeal to the qualifications for the office of Elder that are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. An Elder must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6). Note also that an elder “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?” (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

Third, there is no reference anywhere in the New Testament to a female elder. You may wish to object by pointing out that this is an argument from silence. Yes, it is. But it is a deafening silence, especially when taken in conjunction with the two previous points. The bottom line is that we simply have no biblical precedent for female elders nor anything in the text that describes their nature, function, and qualifications that would lead us to believe that this could ever be a possibility.

## Addendum B

### “Should Women Serve as Deacons in the Local Church?”

Whereas the NT is quite clear that the office of Elder is restricted to qualified men, there is considerable and on-going dispute among evangelicals on the question of whether women can serve in the office of Deacon. Here are our reasons for saying Yes to this question.

(1) Although the word for “deacon” can describe a non-technical ministry of serving to which all Christians are called, we believe Romans 16:1 is speaking of the office of deacon to which one may be appointed. Phoebe is not merely said to be a servant or minister but is “a servant of the church at Cenchreae.” She is also said to be “a patron of many” and of Paul himself, an indication that she likely supported the apostle financially.

(2) Benjamin L. Merkle (*40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*) confirms this and points out that “when the generic meaning of *diakonos* (i.e., “servant”) is intended, the text usually reads, ‘servant of the Lord’ or something similar. This is the only place Paul speaks of someone being a *diakonos* of a local church. Tychicus is called a ‘minister [or servant] in the Lord’ (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras is named a ‘minister [servant] of Christ’ (Col. 1:7), and Timothy is labeled a ‘servant of Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim. 4:6). Because only Phoebe is specifically said to be a servant of a local congregation (the church at Cenchreae), it is likely that she was a ‘deacon’ of her church” (251).

(3) Robert Strimple, long-time professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, points out that when Paul refers to Phoebe as (literally), “being (*ousan*-feminine accusative present participle) . . . *diakonon*” he is using a participial phrase that is consistently used to identify a person’s performance of office in the New Testament. Examples of this usage are found in John 11:49 (‘Caiaphas, being high priest that year’), Acts 18:12 (‘Gallio, being the proconsul of Achaia’), and Acts 24:10 (‘Felix, being a judge to this nation’). The case for reading Phoebe’s description as one of office is a strong one.

(4) In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 the question is whether Paul is referring to the “wives” of deacons or to “women” as those who, much like men, can be appointed to this office. The evidence seems to be evenly weighted in this debate, but we find the arguments for women as deacons to be persuasive.

(5) Contrary to the ESV translation, the possessive pronoun “their” at the start of v. 11 does not appear in the Greek text. The insertion of this word reflects the view of the translators that the females in view here are the “wives” of the male deacons. In fact, if Paul had wanted to speak unmistakably of the wives of deacons it seems reasonable to think he would have included the possessive pronoun. It speaks loudly to us that he didn’t.

(6) Paul introduces the office of Elder and their qualifications in vv. 1-7. He then introduces the office of deacon in v. 8 with the phrase, “Deacons *likewise* . . .” He begins v. 11 in much the same way, suggesting that he is introducing yet another office, namely, deaconess (although we don’t like that word, as you’ll see below). He writes in v. 11, “Women *likewise* . . .”

(7) Although there is evidence for both sides, the word translated “women” in v. 11 (or “wives” in the ESV) can refer either to females generally or to wives in particular. The word itself does not provide decisive proof of either position. However, it must be admitted that the use of *gunaikas* in vv. 2 and 12 to refer to “wives” suggests that it might also mean the same thing in v. 11. But this alone is not sufficient to convince us that Paul is talking about the “wives” of deacons rather than “female” deacons.

(8) An argument that carries much weight with us is the fact that Paul says nothing about the qualifications of Elders’ wives. Why would he list qualifications for the wives of deacons but say nothing at all about the wives of Elders, especially given the fact that being an Elder carried far more spiritual authority and responsibility than being a Deacon? Why would Paul hold the wives of deacons to a higher standard than the wives of Elders?

(9) Therefore we conclude that there are two offices in the NT: that of Elder and that of Deacon, and that whereas the former office is restricted to men, the latter may be filled by both qualified men and women.

(10) One final question is whether we should refer to a female deacon as a *deaconess*. Although it is surely permissible, we don’t think it is helpful. In fact, in the one text where a woman is specifically said to be a deacon (Rom. 16:1), the masculine form of the noun is used, not the feminine form. So, there are not three offices in the local church: Elder, Deacon, and Deaconess, but only two: Elder (only men) and Deacon (both men and women).