

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

MODIFIED COMPLIMENTARIANISM:
A RESPONSE TO *TWO VIEWS ON WOMEN IN MINISTRY*

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One of the most divisive debates within Christianity is the role of women in ministry. According to some Christians, there should be no differentiation between men and women in ministry, and women should serve as elders and pastors in the local church. According to other Christians, God intends for men and women to serve in different but complimentary roles in the home and local church. But due to the fact that both sides often misrepresent one another, it is important to clarify that the debate does not concern whether women should minister – because both sides affirm women in the ministry. Rather, the question specifically concerns whether God has intended for women to serve as elders or overseers within the local church.¹

When discussing this doctrine, we must be sensitive, loving, and respectful. Unfortunately, this debate has divided the body of Christ due to its emotionally-charged nature. Not only dreams, but souls are at stake. The doctrine affects the body of Christ in a very practical way – specifically, who can serve in formal leadership positions. For that reason, all of us should be concerned with this issue. No matter what tradition we may come from, we need to be willing to revisit Scripture and see what God has to say on this particular issue.

A brief study of this issue reveals that both positions are logically possible, and this should lead us to respect both sides. But with all of opinions regarding this issue, what does the Bible actually teach about women as elders and overseers? After a broad overview of the two major views, this paper will conclude with a harmonization of the two views – making a case for the roles that men and women should have in ministry.

Egalitarian Perspective

From an egalitarian perspective, women should be allowed to serve in *all* positions of ministry because “all are one” in Christ. In this view, there are no gender distinctions when it comes to Christ’s church, and God does not show favoritism within the Church. Many egalitarians refer to

¹ This debate partly depends on church government. In a congregational church, a pastor might be viewed as under the authority of the congregation. Likewise, in an Episcopal church, a pastor is under the leadership of those above.

Galatians 3:28 which states that in Christ, there are no longer male or female distinctions within the body of Christ. We are united not only spiritually, but socially as well. Therefore, women should have equal opportunity to serve as an elder, pastor, or preacher.

The strongest argument for women's role as pastors/elders is that throughout human history, women have played key roles in God's plan of salvation. This is not a feminist agenda, but a divine agenda. Scripture tells us about many women who faithfully ministered in leadership roles, including Deborah the judge, Huldah the prophetess, Pheobe the deacon, and Priscilla the teacher. At least in the case of Deborah, women sometimes exercised authority over mixed groups of men and women. Countless women have richly contributed, and the Church is indebted to their ministry.

Further, egalitarianism believes that the historical setting of 1 Timothy 2:12 *matters*. Women were undereducated in the first century, and this led to false teaching, disruptive question asking, and other related problems. Because of this specific situation, Paul did not want them to teach. Due to their lack of education, women could not easily teach doctrine to others, so it should not surprise us that there were not many female pastors in the first century. Egalitarians properly draw attention to the historical context within which Paul's epistles were written. It would be careless to exegete a text without considered when, where, and why something was written.

Thus, many Christians have good reasons why women should be allowed to pastor or to serve as elders within a context of a local church. Without denying the authority of Scripture, it is possible to interpret 1 Timothy 2:11-12 as a specific or local issue that does not apply to everyone at all times. Of course, all of the data must be considered before deciding whether such an interpretation is likely.

Complimentarian Perspective

Complimentarianism views men and woman as equal, but different from one another.² In other words, we have equal worth, but men and women were created by God to serve in

² This is not contradictory. It is important not to read modern concepts of equality back into the Bible. According to a Scriptural perspective, function/role is not the same as equality/worth.

complimentary roles. This is most evident by the fact that only women can bear children – something that men can never do. Inversely, as 1 Timothy 2:12 and Titus 1:5-9 imply, only men are called to oversee the teaching of the local church. Thus, gender should *never* be a matter of inequality (as has often been the case in human history), but a realization of our equality in the midst of our diversity.

Rightly so, complimentarians are much more cautious with their use of historical background, instead emphasizing the universal or supracultural nature of Scripture. When Paul addressed a church in a specific context, his teachings were based upon principles that could be contextualized to different cultures. Thus, when considering 1 Timothy 2:11-12, we should not readily dismiss this passage as “not applicable to our day.” It is true that women in the first century lacked education and opportunity, but the biblical text does not merely reflect its surrounding culture – else, it loses its ability to speak and to inform us today. The principles of Scripture remain the same, regardless of our socio-cultural context. As with the rest of Scripture, it is important to seek the universal principle that underlies the specific application.

In fact, rather than addressing the lack of equality for women in his day, Paul uses a timeless truth to defend his position. By referring to the creation account in Genesis 2 – specifically that Adam was created before Eve – Paul reminds his readers of God’s original intention for men and women. The order suggests purpose and/or function. Even if Paul was analogizing in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, he based his prohibitions on *principles* which he drew from the Old Testament. Thus, whatever our social context – whether 2063 B.C., 63 A.D., 2063 A.D., or beyond – we must allow God’s principles to transform our understanding of who we are and what we should be doing.

More importantly, we catch a glimpse into God’s perspective when particular genders are assigned a specific task. Adam is given the responsibility of naming his wife. Only women are given the responsibility of bearing children. Only Levite men serve as priests. Jesus chose twelve

men for his disciples.³ None of these prove that only one gender should serve as pastors/elders, but these examples illustrate that God does *not* see anything wrong with assigning a role to only one gender. Difference in role does not equal difference in equality. Just as we celebrate a woman giving birth, so would it be appropriate to recognize any role that is designed specifically for a man.

Finally, it is important to note that the difference between spiritual gifts and offices within the church. Women have spiritual gifts like men do, including teaching and prophecy, but it appears that men and women served in different roles. When Paul lists the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5-9, he only addresses men for that role. Although other texts are ambiguous, Paul may have referred to a female deacon and a female church planter in Romans 16:1-7, but not an elder.⁴

Modified Complimentarianism

My own perspective is that this debate is not a question about a person's gifting. It should be obvious that women can serve, teach, prophesy, and assist with the local church.⁵ Nothing in Scripture states that women are in any way inferior in ministry to men. Not only is humankind equally created in God's image (Gen. 1), but men and women can be equally effective in their service to the Lord. To suggest any sort of hierarchy of worth would be heresy, since it would cut at the fundamental nature of who we are as human beings.

That being said, despite many important contributions, an egalitarian interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 seems to fall short in the final analysis.⁶ While it is true that the historical context of the first century *allows* for such an interpretation – meaning that it is logically possible – cultural factors do not *necessitate* that meaning. To claim such would be a hermeneutical fallacy. As we interpret

³ To say that Jesus was merely “fitting in” with his culture is not convincing because of (1) all of the other ways that Jesus did not embrace patriarchal culture, and (2) Paul would have been “braver” than Jesus if he risked scandal by endorsing female pastors.

⁴ Paul may have mentioned a female apostle in Romans 16:7, but the meaning is very ambiguous for several reasons: (1) The gender of Junias is likely female, but uncertain. (2) The Greek of ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις may mean “to the apostles” rather than “among the apostles.” (3) Being known among the apostles does not necessarily mean that Junias was in fact an apostle. (4) It is unclear whether Paul is referring to an established office or a temporary position of missionary/church planter.

⁵ No gender distinction is made in the lists of spiritual gifts. See 1 Corinthians 11-14.

⁶ As the “newer” view in the history of the church, egalitarianism bears the burden of proof.

Scripture, socio-cultural context assists by altering us to *potential* meanings of a text, but if our goal is exegesis rather than eisegesis, we must always allow the text itself to inform us and change us. Otherwise, the text is merely a byproduct of culture, and the text is stripped of its ability to transform the reader.

As the body of Christ, we must boldly affirm the importance of women within God’s plan. Scripture affirms that women are gifted in the same ways as men.⁷ Therefore, we should not quench the ministry of women, but encourage their work within the Church. The Bible never denies women the privilege of teaching, prophesying, serving the Lord’s Supper, hosting worship gatherings, leading music, facilitating small groups, planting churches, and various other ministries. Neither should we deny women of these ministry opportunities. To do so would be sinful. Women should be liberated to serve in all of the ways that respect the leading of men – just as men should respect the ministry of women. The *only* limitations for women involve authoritative doctrine, or somehow using doctrinal authority over men.⁸

In cases when men lead, women are absolutely necessary for the health and vibrancy of the local church. The gospels reveal that men often miss what God is doing, but in contrast, Jesus saw tremendous beauty in how women worship and serve.⁹ In addition, women can work alongside their husbands in ministry, just as Priscilla and Aquila coupled together to teach Apollos “the way of God more accurately.” (Acts 18:26) Therefore women, including the wives of elders, should be liberated to minister for God and not limited to the sidelines. If man needs woman’s help for life in general (Gen. 2:18), then certainly this is also true in the specific case of church ministry.

Certainly, a moderate position will not please everyone. However, in the spirit of Romans 14:1-15:7, all of us should be more understanding when dealing with believers who have different

⁷ See Blomberg in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*.

⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger persuasively argues that the coordinating conjunction *oude* in 1 Timothy 2:12 links “to teach” and “to have authority over a man.” Philip Payne further argues that this could be a hendiadys for “authoritative teaching.” Both of these interpretations would allow for team teaching, small group facilitation, and most Sunday school teaching.

⁹ In Mark 14:6, Jesus deeply valued Mary’s expression and scolds his disciples by telling them to “Leave her alone.”

convictions on this matter. It is totally inappropriate to be cruel when we are discussing doctrine with brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁰ Regardless of who is right or wrong, we must strive for unity and peace.

¹⁰ My wife and I were deeply offended when we discovered that elders at a former church stated that “most of the problems in the church were due to women not being submissive,” and that “churches with female pastors are apostate.” Such harshness ignores the problem of chauvinism and leads to unnecessary schism within the body of Christ. Whatever our position, we should engage in dialogue, be willing to learn from one another, and uphold love as we explore these doctrinal issues together.