

Complementarianism, Egalitarianism, and Biblical Complementarianism:

Integrating Biblical, Psychological, and Philosophical Insights on Gender Roles

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ABSTRACT

The debate surrounding gender roles in the church and home often centers on two dominant views: complementarianism, which advocates distinct roles for men and women, and egalitarianism, which promotes equal leadership opportunities regardless of gender. This paper introduces a third perspective—biblical complementarianism—that seeks to balance the biblical principle of male headship with mutual submission and collaboration. Through an integration of theological, psychological, and philosophical insights, this paper explores how biological tendencies, such as hypergamy, and general revelation inform gender roles. The study argues that biblical complementarianism offers a more nuanced and balanced approach that reflects both special revelation in Scripture and general revelation in nature, providing a more holistic understanding of gender roles.

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate over gender roles in both the church and family has been a long-standing and often divisive issue within Christian communities, generally separating them into two primary camps: complementarianism and egalitarianism.

Complementarians maintain that while men and women are equal in worth and dignity, they are designed to fulfill distinct roles, particularly in leadership within the church and family. In contrast, egalitarians argue that these role distinctions are not biblically mandated, and that men and women should share leadership responsibilities equally in all spheres of life.

However, a third perspective—biblical complementarianism—has emerged as a middle ground between these two views. This perspective affirms the equality of men and women while also emphasizing their complementary roles in leadership, stressing the importance of mutual submission and shared decision-making rather than rigid role distinctions.

This paper draws on theological, psychological, and philosophical insights to explore these three approaches to gender roles, demonstrating that biblical complementarianism aligns with both special revelation in Scripture and general revelation in nature. These external insights confirm rather than modify the framework established by Scripture. By examining both special revelation (Scripture) and general revelation (biological tendencies and psychological patterns), this study demonstrates how natural inclinations, such as hypergamy, align with biblical teachings on male leadership and mutual submission, providing a holistic approach that reflects both divine and natural design.

II. Complementarianism: A Biblical and Theological Perspective

Complementarianism asserts that men and women, though equal in worth and dignity, are called to distinct roles, particularly in the areas of leadership and authority within the family and the church. This view is grounded in key biblical texts that emphasize male headship as part of God’s design. One of the foundational passages for complementarians is 1 Timothy 2:12-14, where Paul writes, “*I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.*”¹ Complementarians interpret this text as establishing a universal principle regarding leadership in the church, particularly in the roles of pastor and elder. Paul’s reference to the creation order—Adam being formed first—is understood as a theological rationale for male headship, emphasizing that this structure reflects God’s original design for humanity.

A careful examination of the Greek term *gyne* (γυνή) and its various forms, including the vocative *gynai* (γύναι) used for direct address, reveals that many passages traditionally interpreted as addressing generic women may, in fact, pertain specifically to marital dynamics. In the New Testament, when *gyne* appears in forms other than the nominative case (e.g., *gynaika*, *gynaikos*, etc.), approximately 86% of occurrences explicitly or implicitly refer to a wife rather than a generic woman.² This suggests that translations rendering these terms as “woman” in certain passages may obscure their intended marital emphasis.

¹ The Holy Bible, *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001), 1 Timothy 2: 12-14.

² D. Gene Williams Jr., *Biblical Marriage: Scriptural and Historical Perspectives in Christian Thought*, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://trinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

For example, in 1 Timothy 2:12, the phrase commonly rendered, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man,” could be more accurately translated as, “I do not permit a wife to teach or to exercise authority over her husband.” This reading aligns with the broader biblical theme of marital headship and mutual submission, as exemplified in Ephesians 5:22-33. Rather than establishing universal restrictions for all women, this interpretation emphasizes maintaining covenantal order within marriage.

A closer examination of the Greek word for “wife” leads us to Matthew 5:28, where *gynaika* is used. As previously mentioned, *gynaika* predominantly means “wife” when vocalized as *gynai*. In this passage, the literal reading suggests, “anyone who looks at a wife with lust.” This aligns with the idea that Jesus is addressing the coveting of another man’s wife rather than condemning sexual desire altogether.

Desire itself is not inherently sinful. Scripture affirms that *epithymeō* (ἐπιθυμέω), the word translated as “lustful” in Matthew 5:28, is often used positively in other contexts. For instance, 1 Timothy 3:1 states, “*Whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires [epithymeō] a noble task.*” Likewise, Hebrews 6:11-12 and 1 Peter 1:12 use *epithymeō* to express earnest and godly longing.

The moral weight of *epithymeō* depends on its context. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus’ use of *epithymeō* aligns with the commandment in Exodus 20:17: “*You shall not covet [epithymeō] your neighbor’s wife.*”³ This demonstrates that the prohibition targets covetousness—a wrongful desire for another man’s wife—rather than condemning all

3 Albert Pieterma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., “Exodus,” in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint (Primary Texts)*, trans. Larry J. Perkins (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Exod. 20:17.

forms of desire. Similarly, in 1 Timothy, *epithymeō* is used to denote virtuous aspiration, as seen in the desire for church leadership.

This distinction underscores the importance of a nuanced understanding. Scripture affirms marital boundaries and faithfulness while also recognizing that strong desire, in itself, is not sinful. Such nuances in the Greek language highlight the careful balance in Scripture between covenantal faithfulness and God-given desires.

Another key passage is Ephesians 5:22-33, where Paul draws a parallel between the relationship of husbands and wives and that of Christ and the church. Wives are instructed to submit to their husbands “*as to the Lord,*” while husbands are called to love their wives “*as Christ loved the church.*” Complementarians view this as a divine model for sacrificial leadership, where male headship is not about dominance but rather servant leadership, mirroring Christ’s self-giving love for the church. This distinction between men’s and women’s roles is seen as integral to God’s complementary design for the flourishing of both individuals and families.

The concept of a *helper* in Genesis 2:18 also plays a crucial role in complementarian theology. In this passage, God declares that it is not good for Adam to be alone and creates Eve as a *helper* for him. The Hebrew word ‘*ezer*,’ used to describe Eve, is significant because it is also used throughout the Old Testament to describe God as a helper. This highlights that the role of a helper is one of strength and essential support, rather than one of inferiority. Biblical complementarianism builds upon this understanding by emphasizing that the leadership and helper roles, while distinct, are equally important for the flourishing of the family and church, fostering mutual respect and interdependence.

Additionally, passages such as 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 outline the qualifications for church elders and deacons, stating that they must be “*the husband of one wife.*”⁴ However, the Greek expression *mias gunaikos andra* (μῆς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα) can be translated as “*the husband of a wife,*” as this aligns with the Greek syntax and context of a leader’s ability to manage and lead effectively within the family structure before extending that leadership to the broader church community.⁵ The adjective *mia* (μία), translated as “*one,*” functions quantitatively rather than ordinally. In other words, it specifies a singular or faithful union without implying a sequence or order of wives. The Greek language provides distinct terms, such as *protos* (πρῶτος), to denote “*first*” in an ordinal sense, which Paul did not employ here. I argue this does not refer to divorce as some critiques understand this.

Complementarians argue that this language indicates that positions of spiritual authority, such as pastor and elder, are reserved for men.⁶ This view reflects a broader belief in a divinely instituted order within creation, where men are called to lead and women are called to support in ways that promote the flourishing of both genders. Complementarians see this structure as a reflection of God’s intention for harmonious relationships within the church and family, where different but complementary roles serve the greater good of the community.

4 Ibid.

5 For a discussion of the translation and interpretation of *mias gunaikos andra* (μῆς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα), see William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 123–25; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 275–77. On the use of *mia* (μία) quantitatively rather than ordinally, see Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 648.

6 Matt Slick, “Should Women Be Pastors and Elders?,” CARM, November 27, 2008, <https://carm.org/women-in-ministry/should-women-be-pastors-and-elders/>.

III. Egalitarianism: A Challenge to Gender-Based Role Distinctions

In contrast to complementarianism, egalitarianism challenges the notion that leadership roles should be determined by gender. Egalitarians emphasize passages such as Galatians 3:28, which declares, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* Egalitarians interpret this verse as a foundational statement of spiritual equality, arguing that distinctions between men and women in leadership are not part of God’s redemptive plan but are instead culturally conditioned. As such, these distinctions are not binding on contemporary Christian practice.⁷

Egalitarians also point to examples of women in leadership roles in both the Old and New Testaments as evidence that God entrusted women with significant leadership responsibilities. For example, Deborah, a judge and prophetess in the Old Testament, led Israel during a time of crisis (Judges 4-5), while Phoebe, mentioned in Romans 16:1, is referred to as a deacon in the early church. Egalitarians argue that these examples demonstrate that women were fully capable of leadership in both spiritual and social contexts, thereby challenging gender-based role distinctions.

Another key text for egalitarians is Acts 2:17-18, where Peter quotes the prophet Joel: *“In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”* Egalitarians interpret this as evidence that the Holy Spirit empowers both men and women equally for leadership roles within the church, without regard to gender. They contend that passages like 1 Timothy 2:12-14,

⁷ Roger Nicole, “Biblical Egalitarianism and the Inerrancy of Scripture,” CBE International, accessed September 28, 2024, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/biblical-egalitarianism-and-inerrancy-scripture/>.

which seem to restrict women from leadership, should be understood within their historical and cultural context. Specifically, some egalitarians suggest that Paul's prohibition addressed particular issues of false teaching in the Ephesian church, rather than serving as a universal directive prohibiting all women from leadership positions.⁸

Biblical Complementarianism: A Middle Ground

Biblical complementarianism offers a faithful adherence to Scripture's teaching on gender roles, neither rigidly traditional nor influenced by cultural trends. While biblical complementarians affirm the biblical principle of male headship, they emphasize mutual submission and collaborative leadership in both the home and the church. This perspective draws heavily from Ephesians 5:21, which calls for mutual submission "*out of reverence for Christ,*" as well as 1 Peter 3:7, which instructs husbands to honor their wives as co-heirs of the grace of life.

In the family, biblical complementarians believe that while the husband holds the final authority in decision-making, this authority should be exercised in close consultation with his wife. Decision-making is seen as a shared responsibility, where the wife's insights and gifts are fully valued. This model avoids the hierarchical domination that can sometimes be associated with traditional complementarianism and instead fosters a partnership where both spouses contribute equally to the flourishing of the family.

In the church, biblical complementarians acknowledge that certain leadership roles, such as pastor or elder, may be reserved for men based on texts like 1 Timothy 3:2. However, they emphasize that women should be encouraged to serve in other leadership capacities, such as teaching, prophesying, and leading ministries. This approach allows

⁸ Ibid.

for a more inclusive leadership model while still affirming the theological distinction between men and women in certain roles.

While biblical complementarianism draws from Scripture as its primary authority, psychological insights—such as the concept of hypergamy—offer additional evidence of God’s design in gender roles. These insights reflect, rather than define, the natural differences affirmed in Scripture and promote a model where men and women collaborate for the flourishing of families and churches.⁹

IV. Psychological and Philosophical Insights: Hypergamy and Gender Roles

A key insight from psychology supporting both complementarianism and biblical complementarianism is the concept of hypergamy. This biological inclination, observed by psychologists, refers to the tendency for women to “*marry up*” in terms of social status, income, or other forms of security. While some view this as a sociocultural construct, research suggests it has deeper evolutionary and psychological roots, ensuring the best conditions for offspring. This inclination aligns with the complementarian view of male headship, where men are called to lead and provide in both the family and the church.

Scripture establishes the divine framework for male headship and female partnership, and general revelation—such as hypergamy—reflects this design. This natural behavior serves as a secondary confirmation of the biblical model, where male leadership provides stability, and female partnership complements and nurtures. The persistence of hypergamy even in egalitarian societies underscores the biological and

⁹ Ibid.

psychological dimensions of complementarian theology, suggesting that gender distinctions reflect a natural, God-given order rather than arbitrary social constructs.

Beyond hypergamy, psychological studies also highlight differences between men and women in areas such as risk-taking and emotional intelligence. For instance, research suggests that men tend to take more risks, while women often exhibit greater empathy and emotional regulation. These complementary strengths serve to balance one another in leadership roles and family dynamics, aligning with the biblical model of sacrificial male leadership and wise female support. These biological differences not only reveal God's design through general revelation but also underscore the collaborative nature of gender roles in complementarian theology.

From a theological perspective, Scripture suggests that the natural world—including human behavior—reflects God's design, often referred to as general revelation. Psalm 19:1-4 proclaims that the heavens declare the glory of God, and Romans 1:20 emphasizes that God's invisible qualities are clearly seen through what has been made. Hypergamous behavior, then, can be viewed as part of God's created order, revealing a natural inclination toward male leadership and female support, which mirrors the biblical model of headship and submission. This natural tendency, as revealed in both psychology and biology, supports the complementarian belief that men are called to lead in the family and the church, as this mirrors the divine order observed in nature and Scripture.

Furthermore, sociological studies in egalitarian societies, such as those in Scandinavia, show that even in highly egalitarian cultures, hypergamous behavior persists. Despite efforts to eliminate traditional gender roles, women continue to seek partners with higher social and economic status, suggesting that this behavior is not

purely a cultural construct but has biological and psychological underpinnings. These findings support the argument that gender distinctions are not merely social artifacts but part of a divinely created structure that ensures human flourishing.¹⁰

From a philosophical standpoint, the concept of authority and hierarchy has been extensively explored by thinkers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle's philosophy of natural law posits that certain roles are more fitting for certain people, a concept that Aquinas further developed by connecting these roles to the moral and teleological order established by God. Male headship, as described in complementarian theology, reflects this natural hierarchy—not as a form of dominance, but as an essential element for stability and flourishing. This aligns with, but remains subordinate to, the hierarchy established by God's Word.¹¹ The complementarian view of gender roles as complementary rather than interchangeable aligns with this philosophical tradition, affirming that differences between men and women are part of the natural law and essential for the well-being of both the family and the church.

Expanding on Aquinas' natural law, the concept of hierarchical relationships is essential for order and justice. Aquinas believed that hierarchies exist not for the sake of power but to serve the common good. In the context of gender roles, male headship is not about superiority but about fulfilling a natural role of providing stability and leadership in the family and church, always undergirded by love and mutual respect. This notion

¹⁰ Jordan Peterson, "The Gender Scandal: Part One (Scandinavia) and Part Two (Canada)," *Jordan B. Peterson*, accessed September 28, 2024, <https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/psychology/gender-scandal-part-one-scandinavia/>.

¹¹ See Colossians 2:8 and 2 Timothy 3:16–17 for the biblical priority of Scripture over human tradition and philosophy.

mirrors the biblical call for servant leadership, where the head sacrifices for the flourishing of the whole.

By integrating both general revelation from nature and special revelation from Scripture, the complementarian framework sees hypergamy as one of the many ways in which God's design is reflected in human behavior. Rather than viewing male leadership as an arbitrary social construct, complementarians argue that it reflects a divinely instituted order intended for human flourishing. Biblical complementarians, while affirming male headship, advocate for mutual submission and collaboration in decision-making, ensuring that leadership is characterized by love and service, rather than domination.

V. Practical Application: Gender Roles in the Church and Home

The application of biblical complementarianism in the contemporary church and home offers a balanced approach to leadership and decision-making. In the family, biblical complementarians argue for shared leadership, where both husband and wife collaborate on decisions, with the husband ultimately holding final authority, but only after careful consultation with his wife. This model of mutual submission reflects the call in Ephesians 5:21 to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, creating a dynamic of partnership rather than hierarchy.

In the home, biblical complementarianism can be applied through collaborative decision-making, where both spouses engage in dialogue, and the husband ultimately takes responsibility for the final decision, only after carefully considering his wife's perspective. In the church, women can lead in areas such as teaching, discipleship, and community outreach, using their gifts to build the body of Christ while still honoring the

distinct roles assigned in pastoral leadership. These models foster a culture of mutual respect, allowing both men and women to fully contribute to the church's mission.

In the church, biblical complementarianism advocates for a broader inclusion of women in ministry roles while maintaining the complementarian restriction on certain leadership offices, such as pastor or elder.¹² Women are encouraged to serve as teachers, deacons, ministry leaders, and in other roles where they can fully use their gifts. This approach promotes inclusivity while maintaining a commitment to the biblical principle of male headship in key leadership positions.

By acknowledging the insights of general revelation, such as the natural tendencies reflected in hypergamy, biblical complementarianism offers a model that is both theologically faithful and practically relevant in today's context. It allows for the recognition of biological and psychological differences without compromising the spiritual equality of men and women in Christ.

An essential example of servant leadership is found in John 13:1-17, where Jesus, despite holding ultimate authority as the Son of God, humbly washes the feet of His disciples—a task traditionally reserved for the lowest servant. This act exemplifies that authority, when rightly understood, is exercised through service and sacrifice, rather than dominance or power. By washing their feet, Jesus demonstrated that submission and leadership are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist in ways that honor both roles.

In the same way, biblical complementarianism encourages mutual submission within the family and the church. Husbands, while entrusted with leadership

¹² Matt Slick, "Should Women Be Pastors and Elders?," CARM, November 27, 2008, <https://carm.org/women-in-ministry/should-women-be-pastors-and-elders/>.

responsibilities, are called to exercise this leadership through sacrificial love and service, just as Christ did for His followers. This model of leadership affirms that authority is not diminished by service but is enhanced when it promotes the flourishing of those under its care. The principle of servant leadership forms the core of biblical complementarianism, where leadership is redefined as a call to love, serve, and nurture.

VI. Conclusion: A Balanced and Holistic Approach to Gender Roles

In the debate between complementarianism and egalitarianism, biblical complementarianism offers a third way—a balanced approach that upholds biblical male headship while emphasizing mutual submission and collaborative leadership. By integrating insights from theology, psychology, and philosophy, this paper demonstrates that both special revelation (Scripture) and general revelation (natural tendencies and biological realities) can inform our understanding of gender roles.

The concept of hypergamy, as discussed by Jordan Peterson, provides a useful psychological framework for understanding why certain gender dynamics persist, even in egalitarian societies.¹³ Despite efforts to minimize gender distinctions, hypergamy highlights that women often seek partners or peers who match or surpass them in status, which can lead to challenges in leadership roles. This observation aligns with the theological principle of male headship, suggesting that the distinct roles of men and women in the family and church are not arbitrary but reflect a divine order designed for human flourishing.

¹³ Jordan Peterson, “Psychological Significance of Hypergamy,” YouTube, accessed November 25, 2024.

A critical consideration when discussing gender roles, especially concerning leadership, is the psychological tension introduced by hypergamy for women who ascend to top leadership positions. These women may find themselves feeling isolated or disconnected because their leadership status reduces the pool of potential partners or peers who hold equal or greater authority. Hypergamy's inherent drive toward seeking higher-status relationships creates a unique tension when women occupy positions of leadership, as the relational upward movement they are biologically inclined toward becomes harder to fulfill. As a result, women in these roles may experience emotional and relational strain, as the opportunity to form satisfying relationships with peers or superiors becomes limited. This psychological burden adds another dimension to understanding why biblical complementarianism's model of collaborative leadership and mutual respect can provide a more balanced, fulfilling framework for both men and women in leadership roles.

Ultimately, Biblical complementarianism offers a faithful approach to gender roles in the church and home, grounding its principles in the authority of Scripture. While acknowledging the insights of general revelation, it ultimately rests on God's Word to define the roles and responsibilities of men and women. It affirms the spiritual equality of men and women while recognizing that distinct roles can coexist with mutual respect and partnership. By considering insights from psychology, theology, and philosophy, biblical complementarianism provides a robust framework for understanding how men and women can work together in complementary and collaborative ways for the glory of God.

By engaging deeply with both special revelation in Scripture and general revelation in nature, biblical complementarianism offers a model that respects both the

divine order and biological realities. This approach integrates biblical, psychological, and philosophical perspectives, providing a robust framework where men and women can collaborate in leadership, each using their distinct gifts to serve God's kingdom.

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