

Man and Woman at Creation: A Critique of Complementarian Interpretations

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The complementarian¹ conviction, that women are under male authority and therefore must be excluded from (some) positions of leadership, rests in no small measure on their interpretation of God's eternal, created order as established in Genesis 1–2. However, when the complementarian exegesis of creation is given close scrutiny, substantial—indeed fatal—problems are revealed at the very foundation of their framework.²

In Genesis 1 and 2 we discover God's perfect, pre-fall intentions for the world and all its creatures, including God's intentions for human *identity* and human *purpose*. When we know what something is (identity) and what it is meant to do (purpose or calling), we have the basis for knowing our proper expectations of, and obligations toward, that “something.” Thus, only when we have grasped the created purpose and identity of humanity as male and female are we able to make faithful judgments about the many normative questions facing us today. What do the creation texts reveal? And what light do they shed on whether or not a universal, fixed exclusion of women from (some) leadership reflects God's perfect intentions for womanhood?

Understanding gender roles: Difficulties in the complementarian starting point

One major difficulty with the complementarian treatment of the creation account is that they do not read it on its own terms, but interpret it through their understanding of New Testament restrictions upon women's leading and teaching.³ Here is how the point was made in an article for the *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*: “From Paul, it is clear that the early chapters of Genesis provide significant teaching for our understanding of gender roles. *It is Paul who leads us to reconsider the familiar stories of the early chapters of Genesis for the important implications these chapters set forth...*”⁴

As we see here, complementarian *interpretations* of the Apostle Paul's understanding of Genesis serve as the fixed points within their framework. Consequently, the very question around which the debate over women's leadership revolves (namely, was Paul speaking in a limited way to specific problems or was he speaking universally to all women?) is pre-empted. Having begun with their interpretations, complementarians must then show how the opening chapters of Genesis can be “reconsidered” such that male leadership is proved to be embedded in the created order.

This very effort to reread creation in light of presumed fixed

restrictions from the New Testament is what causes the serious—and I would argue, insurmountable—problems at the heart of the complementarian position. As this article will attempt to show, as complementarians use gender restrictions from the New Testament to interpret creation, they do not open up or shed light on the issue of the Bible's meaning—which is what should happen when Scripture *properly* interprets Scripture—but instead introduce serious distortions into the text.

A second major difficulty within the complementarian framework hinges on the fact that even though they claim to address only the differences between men's and women's functions, or roles, in truth they are making claims about men's and women's identities, or gender ontology. According to the complementarian definition of manhood and womanhood, “A man, just by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God. A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood, is called to help for God.”⁵ By anchoring “leading” and “helping” in creation as aspects of male and female gender, complementarians treat these temporal modes of cooperative human behavior as if they were as permanent and natural as fatherhood and motherhood. Consequently, the man's leadership role and the woman's helping role are as intractable and immune to change or development as is human biological functioning, so that men will always be fathers, just as men will always be leaders. Women will not. With this starting point, the challenge for complementarians is not how to *restrict* women's leadership, but how to find grounds for permitting women any kind of leadership whatsoever. For, if leadership is essential to created manhood alone, then all leadership by all women crosses a gender boundary and is an offense against woman's God-given identity.

However, complementarians in general do not appear to take such an absolute stand against women's leadership.⁶ This, despite the fact that it is the logical end of their starting point. Like the rest of us, complementarians live in a world where it is impossible for women completely to avoid leading—including leading men.

With the unavoidable reality of women in leadership pressing on them from one side, and their belief that leadership is essential to maleness alone pressing from the other, complementarians find themselves mired in unbearable tension. This problem, I believe, explains why they are uneasy with so simple an act of leadership as a woman providing directions to a man lost in her neighborhood.⁷ It lies behind their fear that in any situation where a woman has personal, directive leadership over

a man it “strains the humanity of both.”⁸ It is behind complementarian language which defines a man’s act of giving advice as “leadership,” whereas a woman’s advice-giving is merely “communicating.”⁹ The link they seek to forge between leadership and manhood is also, I would argue, the driving force behind the legalistic impulse within their movement to define in precise detail exactly how much influence, recognition or authority a woman may have.¹⁰ For, if the proportions are wrong, then the

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woman has transgressed the male-only boundary line. This is no mere “role reversal”; her very identity as a woman is at risk.

In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, considerable attention is given to providing strategies for the woman in leadership. These strategies are designed to mask her authority and to reassure the men around her that *they* are the real leaders, not she. Complementarians recognize that such advice poses a problem: “It is obvious at this point that we are on the brink of contradiction—suggesting that a woman may hold a position of leadership and fulfill it in a way that signals to men her endorsement of their sense of responsibility to lead. But the complexities of life require of us this risk.”¹¹

Rather than nudging them soberly to reassess whether “leadership” or “authority” can rightfully be deemed a created aspect of manhood alone, complementarians indulge all the contradictions arising from their starting point, claiming that the elaborate balancing act that results happens to be the price of obeying God’s word.

In addition to finding ways to resolve the tension arising from their claim that “leadership” and “helpership” are merely roles, but then treating them as essential aspects of male and female identity, complementarians have a much more difficult problem: they must overcome resistance from the biblical creation texts themselves. Most notably, they have to find a way to exclude women from the full revelation of Genesis 1:26–28. While inclusive translations of the Bible more clearly reveal the woman’s equality with the man at creation, this equality shines through so clearly even in the NIV translation that complementarians ought not to have missed it:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds

of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (NIV)

Given that the passage equally encompasses men and women both in the definition of their identity and of their calling, it is instructive to see how complementarians ensure that only men are left with the calling to extend God’s rule—or to exercise authority—over the creation.

In the beginning: Complementarian manhood

One of the first items that needs to be addressed in any interpretation of Genesis is the fact of the two creation accounts and the proper manner of relating them. The position taken in the complementarian article, “Gender and Sanctification,” is that, when it comes to determining gender roles, “The teaching of this section [Gen. 2] must not be minimized. Genesis One must be read in the light of this chapter [Gen. 2].”¹² Yet complementarians only employ this hermeneutical principle when interpreting the woman’s identity; when they interpret the meaning of manhood, they take exactly the opposite approach.

Here is how “Gender and Sanctification” presents the teaching of Genesis 2 for the man:

There is a period of time when there is no woman. Initially, God creates the man and places him in the garden....He is to be the sole caretaker of the garden. He is given the rules for living in harmony with his Creator in the garden. Ultimately he is responsible for caring for and maintaining purity in the garden. He is, and there is no other. As such, God communicates to him his special responsibilities. Later in the story the man, as regent in this garden, provides names for the other created beings, including the woman, demonstrating some level of “ownership” and responsibility, as he rules over/subdues his world. These responsibilities are the clear manifestation of the mandate in chapter one to rule and subdue the earth, only the initial mandate appears to be given to the man alone....He is the leader in the world which God creates.¹³

It is important to note how complementarians have added tasks to Adam’s job description that are not found in the biblical text. First, Adam is designated as the “leader.” Later on in this

same article, the claim is made that Adam “is given the rules that are to be *enforced* in the garden.”¹⁴ The primary obligation of the complementarian Adam is not to *obey* God’s law, but rather to *enforce* it. And how is it warranted to conclude that Adam is a leader? For, in the absence of human society, who is Adam leading in Genesis 2? The puppies and the African violets? Indeed, whether Adam has the leadership position the complementarians claim remains to be seen once the woman has arrived and God declares his intentions for male/female inter-relatedness.

But, the most troubling conclusions drawn by the complementarians from the creation account arise from their understanding of the meaning of Adam’s aloneness.¹⁵ In “Gender and Sanctification,” Adam’s aloneness is stressed not to anticipate how the woman’s creation will solve Adam’s problem—as the Bible does in Genesis 2:18—but in order to give a disturbing twist to the meaning of her absence: “...the initial mandate appears to be given to the man alone.” Under complementarian exegesis, Adam’s aloneness no longer highlights his *need*, it highlights his *authority*. The passage no longer establishes the woman’s *indispensability*, but rather her *exclusion*.

Within the complementarian framework, God’s main purpose in creating humanity in sequential order seems to be to highlight how the woman’s omission from the dominion mandate of Genesis 1 is the logical result of the man’s near total self-sufficiency. After all, as the complementarians claim, “Man could have performed his tasks alone...”¹⁶

The meaning of “aloneness” in the complementarian story of Adam is a complete reversal of the meaning of aloneness in the biblical story. Instead of establishing Adam’s lack and God’s powerful provision through the woman, the complementarian account asserts that God has made Adam strong in and of himself. What is more, the man’s aloneness is used to establish his authority over the woman. Contrary to God’s comprehensive judgment that it is “*not good*” for the man to be alone, Adam’s aloneness becomes the very foundation upon which some complementarians build all of manhood’s special rights and responsibilities. Having packed aloneness full of male privilege, complementarians are only able to concede, reluctantly, that it is perhaps *better* for Adam not to be alone, for without the woman, “his task of ruling and subduing would have been incomplete.”¹⁷

One of the most serious problems with this complementarian

interpretation of Genesis is that it cannot work unless the biblical text is reworded. The “let *them* rule” command of Genesis 1:26 (repeated in Gen. 1:28) which is collective and pertains to both the man and the woman, must be recast as if it really says, “let *him* (the male alone) rule.” Is this not tampering with biblical truth?¹⁸

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Having brought their *a priori* conclusions about the universal intent of Paul’s New Testament restrictions on women into their reading of Genesis, complementarians have no choice but to force the text to prove male leadership, no matter how much it distorts the actual creation story. The hermeneutic at work is important to note. While the explicit claim has been made,

that to understand the gender implications of creation, Genesis 2 must interpret Genesis 1, complementarians do not apply this hermeneutic to their study of manhood. Indeed, in order to get their desired interpretation of manhood, they could not possibly apply it. Only by bringing forward the cultural mandate from Genesis 1 into their interpretation of Genesis 2 can they establish that Adam’s acts of tilling the soil and naming the animals are true acts of human dominion over the earth.¹⁹ If the complementarians used the same hermeneutic to understand manhood that they use to understand womanhood—that is, if they read Genesis 2 into Genesis 1—then man could only be identified as the-one-who-needs-help, for that is precisely the counterpart to the woman’s identity as the-one-who-helps.

In the beginning: Complementarian womanhood

When we turn to the complementarian exegesis of biblical womanhood, we discover that Genesis 1 is almost entirely overshadowed by Genesis 2. Complementarians give particular emphasis to Genesis 2:18: “I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Because complementarians define the core meaning of womanhood by the word “help” (*‘ezer*), it is important to see how they interpret the meaning of this Hebrew word. While many simply substitute words such as “opposite,” “companion,” and “completer,” as if these were accurate synonyms, a detailed complementarian interpretation of *‘ezer* can be found in their book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. In responding to the evidence, that when the word *‘ezer* is used in the rest of the Bible it never refers to a subordinate assistant and mostly is used to describe God as our help,²⁰ the complementarians claim,

The context makes it very unlikely that helper should be read on the analogy of God's help, because in Genesis 2:19–20 Adam is caused to seek his *helper* first among the animals. But the animals will not do, because they are not “fit for him”....Yet in passing through *helpful* animals to woman, God teaches us that the woman is man's *helper* in the sense of a loyal and suitable assistant in the life of the garden.²¹

In the same passage quoted above, the authors clearly state that the woman is equal to the man “in Godlike personhood. She is infinitely different from an animal...”²² But these prove to be empty words. By claiming that God's purpose in conducting the parade of “helpful animals” was to prime Adam's (as well as our) expectations for how the helpful woman, once she entered the picture, would be his “loyal and suitable” assistant, these complementarians have manifestly reversed the meaning of the story. Biblical revelation that was intended to draw a bright line between the animal world and the human world with the words, “no suitable helper was found,” biblical revelation that was intended to reveal the closest possible connection between the man and the woman with the words, “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” instead becomes a story that draws the closest possible association between the woman and the animals. The beasts are the ones, these complementarians claim, who model the sense and meaning of the woman's help.

One cannot help but marvel that trusted, God-fearing theologians could arrive at such a disturbing—indeed such a beastly—interpretation of the meaning of *‘ezer*. But, it is demanded by complementarian presuppositions about the New Testament restrictions upon women and results from applying them backward onto the Genesis text. The carefully constructed complementarian woman as helpful assistant to a nearly self-sufficient male who alone is created for leadership, including leadership and dominion over the woman, can only stand if the identity and calling of the woman are severed from their anchoring in Genesis 1. And this severing can only be accomplished by applying a double-standard hermeneutic.

To get the complementarian man to emerge from the creation texts, Genesis 1 must illuminate only the meaning of manhood in Genesis 2. To get the complementarian woman to emerge from the text, Genesis 2 must act as a screen to block the full light of Genesis 1. First, Genesis 2 is used to block the dominion mandate with respect to woman. Second, Genesis 2 is used to compromise severely, if not actually to undermine, the woman's identity as God's image-bearer. Though she is claimed to be “infinitely different” from the animals, nevertheless, like the animals, complementarian woman finds herself imaging their supposed helpfulness. And though she is claimed to be equal to the man in “godlike personhood,” complementarian woman does not stand

with Adam in a place of dominion over the creation. Instead, like the beasts and the rest of the non-human creation, she finds herself under the man's authority.

Reading creation with a single-standard hermeneutic

In Genesis 1 God reveals the identity and calling of every aspect of creation: light and darkness, land and sea, animals and vegetation, humanity as male and female. Genesis 1 establishes the bedrock of human identity. In this text we find the source of all human responsibility and authority. God blesses the man and the woman alike with the gift of a common identity: we are both image-bearers of God. In the same manner, God summons male and female alike to a common calling: we are both given the responsibility and the corresponding authority to be fruitful, fill the earth and to have dominion, or rule.

In Genesis 1, God reveals that both male and female are endowed with inestimable dignity and value. But what is almost more startling, God reveals the desire to work through human agency—both male and female—in accomplishing God's rule on earth. In humanity, God has created us as God's own co-workers.²³

In Genesis 2, after God creates the woman and completes the creation of humanity, we are finally able to see what God desires for human interrelatedness. Of the woman God declares that she is *‘ezer kənegdô*—face to face with man, a help corresponding to him.²⁴ Of the man, God says he is to leave father and mother, cleave to his wife and be united in one-flesh union with her. Since the woman's identity and calling were already given in Genesis 1, the designation, *‘ezer*, cannot be used to define the totality of her function in the world. Rather, it indicates the character of her service. She is a help, not a competitor, not one who harms, not one who hinders, and not one who stands by on the sidelines watching the man do all the heavy lifting of image-bearing. When a single-standard hermeneutic is applied to the reading of Genesis 1 and 2, the woman is clearly revealed as fundamentally, indispensably and *equally* called to the human task of imaging God and extending his rule throughout the creation.

What is striking is that Genesis 2 gives little specific direction for how the man and the woman are to live together. Surely this would have been the time for God to designate the male as the undisputed leader with the woman as second in command and under his authority, if that were God's clear intention, or to mark out which spheres of creation were to be the exclusive domain for authoritative male action, and which for the woman. But this does not happen. The created identity and calling of Genesis 1 for both the man and woman remain as fixed in place as do the created identity and purpose of light and darkness, earth and sea, animals and vegetation—right down to this very moment.

The creation account of Adam does not support a hierarchical ordering of male leaders over female helpers (the complementarian bias). But neither does it support an individualist notion of independent, undifferentiated men and women entering into contractual negotiations to manage their equal relationship (the secular egalitarian bias). Instead, it opens up the very exciting perspective of humanity as a community of man and woman in union together. This perspective, in turn, confronts faithful followers of Christ with the challenge of exercising their authority and responsibility in home, church and society such that our unity as humanity and our diversity as male and female can both flourish as we implement our redeemed identity and calling.

About the Author



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Endnotes

1. I will use the designation "complementarian" for advocates of female subordination to male authority, not because it most accurately reflects their position, but because it seems to be their preferred label.

2. The complementarian position is presented most comprehensively in the book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) (hereafter, *RBMW*). I will also be quoting extensively from an especially clearly laid out complementarian treatment of creation entitled, "Gender and Sanctification: From Creation to Transformation," by David Lee Talley, *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 8,1 (Spring 2003): 6–16 (hereafter, *JBMW*).

3. This problem was analyzed by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

in her book, *Good News for Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). See especially chapter 5, "In the Beginning."

4. *JBMW*: 15 n 2, emphasis added.

5. *RBMW*, 102.

6. Those interested may check publications by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which is the main organization promoting complementarianism.

7. *RBMW*, 50.

8. *Ibid.*, 52.

9. *Ibid.*, 243.

10. Wayne Grudem, "But what *should* women do in the church?" *CBMW News* 1,2 (1995).

11. *RBMW*, 50.

12. *JBMW*: 7.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

15. Complementarians employ various strategies to transform the meaning of Adam's aloneness. One common shift of meaning turns the word "alone" into the word "lonely." (See for example *RBMW*, 100.) Another shift of meaning occurs when complementarians apply Paul's statement in 1 Tim. 2:13, that Adam was created first, to transform the "aloneness" of Gen. 2 into a synonym for "firstborn." Firstborn is then freighted with all the customary privileges of primogeniture. See for example *RBMW*, 81.

16. *JBMW*: 7.

17. *Ibid.*

18. I am indebted to Dr. William David Spencer for this insight.

19. Complementarians also treat the so-called naming of the woman as an act of dominion parallel to the act of naming the animals. For an explanation of the vital differences in the two naming acts, see *Man and Woman in Biblical Unity: Theology from Genesis 2–3*, by Joy Elasky Fleming with Robin Maxon (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 1993).

20. For an especially good recent study of this word, see the chapter, "God Created an Intimate Ally," in *When Life and Beliefs Collide*, by Carolyn Custis James (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

21. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers," in *RBMW*, 87.

22. *Ibid.*

23. In the New Testament this theme is picked up in the parables of the steward who has been put in charge of the household during the Lord's absence. See Matt. 21:33ff; Luke 12:42ff; 19:11ff.

24. Fleming & Maxon, *Man and Woman in Biblical Unity*, 6ff.