Opal (grandmother of coauthor Naomi Eden) lived 104 years on this earth. A devout Christian woman, Opal gained prominence and authority within her rural Minnesota community as she advanced in age. She benefitted from an increasingly exalted status within her local church, as well as from deep respect from the small group of believers who met regularly in her home for prayer and Bible study. At Opal’s one-hundredth birthday celebration, the pastor of her Presbyterian church publicly stated that she knew more about the Bible than he did. In contradiction to many contemporary assumptions regarding the frailty of older persons, Opal remained lucid, lived in her own home, and took no medications right up to her 104th year of life.

When Opal was younger, it would have been unthinkable for her to hold as prominent a place within her church and community as the one she held in her older years. Yet, her advanced age offered her opportunities for leadership and teaching thought of as normal only for men in many Christian circles. What her case reveals is that age, as well as gender, often shapes Christian approaches to leadership, teaching, and living. What we often unquestioningly assume to be gender issues are actually layered questions related to a host of possible factors, including gender, ethnicity, and age.

We gained a new appreciation for the importance of age norms, not only because we visited Opal regularly, but also because we conducted extensive research while completing our recent book, *Age Norms and Intercultural Interaction in Colonial North America.* In our book, we show how various approaches to the aging process shaped life for Native Americans, African Americans, and Europeans in the territory that eventually became the United States. Again and again, whether examining children, youths, or older adults, we found that age norms and gender issues intersected in important and complex ways. Age and gender mattered greatly in Native American villages, African American slave communities, and European churches. Our findings led us to question how gender issues and age norms might cross paths in society today. In particular, we began considering how age might affect debates and controversies regarding the status of men and women within contemporary Christian circles.

Christian theologians and commentators have sometimes noted the connections between ethnicity and gender issues, but they have largely ignored the relevance of age. Even though the Bible addresses age-related issues in depth, there has been startlingly little consideration of how age and gender might affect interpretations of key passages. In this essay, we explain how this lack of attention to age is convenient for complementarians, since age-related questions pose significant logical and hermeneutical challenges to their position.

### Lack of attention to age is convenient for complementarians, since age-related questions pose significant logical and hermeneutical challenges to their position.

**Cultural and Biological Aspects of Human Aging**

There are, of course, biological dimensions associated with human aging. As people proceed through childhood, they grow taller, for example. Yet, at the same time, culture also profoundly shapes the human aging process. Societies collectively determine when a child becomes an adult, for example. Even within societies, there can be significant debate and variation regarding such benchmarks. In the United States, for instance, there is considerable uncertainty about whether a person becomes an adult at age sixteen (the legal age for sexual consent in many states) or eighteen (the voting age) or twenty-one (the legal drinking age) or twenty-five (the age when a person can join Congress or rent a car) or even thirty-five (the age when a person can become President). Within churches, first communion, confirmation, and age requirements for deacons or elders often serve as benchmarks for determining adulthood and for establishing full membership status. Likewise, in colonial North America, Native Americans, African Americans, and Europeans viewed and treated children, youth, and older adults differently. Even within Scripture itself, it is clear that age norms varied over time and across cultures.

A final aspect of human aging that often escapes our attention relates to the nature of numeracy and literacy within societies. Numeracy, which refers to the ability to perform basic math or recognize the meaning of numerals, has not been universal for all people. Due to varying degrees of numeracy experienced by people in various times and places, simply asserting that a person becomes an adult at age eighteen or twenty-one ignores a reality faced by many humans throughout history. The norms and benchmarks that American commentators and theologians might take for granted have been foreign and unenforceable for many, perhaps most, human beings. Over the course of human history, and even today, people have tracked their age with varying degrees of precision.

For example, in colonial North America, Europeans and Native Americans often kept careful records or memories of births. The process of tracking age was more challenging, however, for African American slaves. Slave owners sometimes neglected to record slave births, and few enslaved persons had opportunities to pursue an education. Runaway slave advertisements and other records suggest that many, though
certainly not all, slaves were unaware of their exact age. Today, there are still parts of the world where it is not typical to have a precise record of one’s own age. This necessarily means that determining transitions from childhood, to youth, to adulthood, and to old age involves a degree of imprecision for many people.4

Age Complicates Complementarian Interpretations of Scripture

The vast majority of Christians around the world believe it is perfectly appropriate for women to teach and lead in environments where males are present. This is true so long as the males are of a certain age, namely, so long as the women are teaching and leading boys and not adult men. Indeed, it would be almost impossible for many churches and Christian schools to function effectively without the leadership and service provided by Christian women in the teaching of young males. If we further consider the unthinkably proposition of mothers being unable to teach their sons the faith, it is obvious that women must be allowed to teach males. The key issue then, is not so much the gender of the teacher, but the gender and age of the student. According to complementarian interpretations of the Bible, boys, at some point in their lives, become ineligible to receive instruction or guidance from women in certain religious settings.5

A complicated question still to be answered by complementarians is: At what age do boys become off limits to being led and taught by women? Or, put another way, when do boys become men? The answer is not as obvious as it seems. The Bible itself does not provide a specific numerical age to use as a benchmark. Even if it did, or even if complementarians developed a number using other criteria, applying a precise age would be impossible in social settings where males are uncertain about their birthdate. A society that was not numerate or literate would be literally unable to follow potential scriptural directives against female teaching and leadership if such directives required keeping precise track of the age of boys. This means that the issue of female leadership and teaching cannot be a matter of establishing simple, clear, precise rules. The murkiness and uncertainty of age in many parts of the world throughout history mitigates against a uniform or precise standard for excluding adult males from being led by women. If obedience to Scripture requires removing young men from situations in which women teach or lead, however, then there needs to be some criteria or method developed for determining the timing of this removal. Whether done universally, by setting and enforcing a standard age for all males, or individually, by evaluating each male case by case, the process would likely involve significant effort and careful assessment. Yet complementarians have not laid out such criteria.

As indicated above, complementarians have been rather vague, at best, when addressing the issue of age. One author, when analyzing possible ages at which boys supposedly become too old to submit to female teaching and leading, initially suggests that the age of puberty is crucial. The same author, however, in the very next paragraph, emphasizes the importance of “legal age.” The same author later suggests that the age of twelve could be a benchmark, but never firmly establishes this as a guideline.6

It is worth noting that most congregations and denominations do not adhere to the age of twelve; this would, for example, presumably preclude women from being youth leaders. A large church in Arizona that subscribes to the Danvers Statement is equally vague, indicating on its website with no mention of criteria or a specific age, that, “As far as women teaching boys in Sunday school, the problem seems to grow in proportion to the age of the boys.”8 Complementarians have either ignored the issue of age or have been extraordinarily imprecise when addressing age restrictions for boys.9 But if keeping women from leading adult men is so crucial to obeying Scripture, as many complementarians assert, it would be helpful to have a clear view of this issue, in order to avoid “sinful practices” from occurring.

In anticipation of possible responses complementarians might provide to these questions, we next consider the potential complications associated with establishing various benchmarks to signal a transition from boyhood to manhood. These complications highlight some deep logical and hermeneutical conundrums that have yet to be adequately faced by complementarians. That is, however complementarians might choose to address important age-related questions, they face significant logical and practical challenges.

Problematic Answers to the Question: When Does a Boy Become a Man?

One possible way of developing a benchmark for establishing when boys become men would involve determining and following the standards used by the ancient Jewish, Greek, or Roman societies that existed when the Bible was written. By establishing the meaning and intent of ancient writers, theologians could theoretically discover an age when boys become adult men. In other words, whatever Paul was specifically saying, when he used the Greek word anēr (“man”) in 1 Tim 2:12 he was almost certainly referring to adult men, as several commentators have noted.10 Complementarians could attempt to explain how Paul would have distinguished between boys and men in this challenging passage. This would provide greater clarity regarding when boys transition into a stage of life when they would be off-limits to female leadership and teaching. Fortunately for complementarians, scholars have carefully studied age norms and family life within ancient Roman and Jewish societies. Less fortunate for complementarians, however, are the conclusions reached by these same historians and scholars since current interpretations complicate, rather than simplify, any attempt to find a clear transition point separating boyhood from manhood.

Roman Approaches

Historians who have studied ancient Roman families have found that the transition from boyhood to manhood was long, complex, and often shaped deeply by local context. In other words, there is no magic age when we can firmly say that a boy became a man in ancient Roman society. Thus, if Paul was thinking of a Roman
Like their Roman neighbors, ancient Jewish families possessed broad and vague attitudes regarding the age of transition for males. The OT could have provided some guidance to Jewish communities about this subject. The account in 2 Kgs 11 suggests that, even when faced with the desperate circumstance of an evil queen, Israelite officials believed that Joash was too young to assume his kingship until he reached the age of seven. Other kings, most notably King Josiah of Judah, rose to the throne well before the age of twelve. On the other hand, Exod 30:14, Lev 27, and Num 1:3 all suggest that boys became adults around the age of twenty, when they had to pay certain taxes and offer military service. Indeed, additional information related to the kings suggests that priests and other older adults provided advice and counsel to younger men who led Judah or Israel. In other words, it is unclear exactly how much decision-making power seven-year-olds such as Joash actually wielded when they became king. In any case, the precise extent to which these OT passages shaped Jewish custom during the time of the early church is uncertain.

In terms of boyhood and manhood during NT times, Jewish families practiced certain customs that marked important transitions for males. Between the ages seven and twenty, Jewish males apparently occupied a nebulous status between boyhood and manhood. Legally speaking, fathers needed to provide for the economic needs of their sons only until the child reached the age of seven. Presumably, boys older than seven could be economic assets rather than liabilities. The age of six or seven was also the time when Jewish boys entered formal education. Luke’s Gospel indicates that it was perfectly appropriate for Jesus, at age twelve, to discuss religious matters with scholars, but at this age Jesus also readily submitted to the authority of his parents. The Talmud and Mishnah offer varying opinions and statements regarding an age of transition. Some passages emphasize marriage as a significant moment, offering criticism and ostracism for bachelors older than twenty. The Mishnah also states that boys would normally be held responsible for obeying the commandments at the age of thirteen but that young men would customarily start a business or trade at twenty years of age. The Mishnah also indicates, however, that thirty was a time when males attained full physical vigor and forty was the age of obtaining maturity of reason. Clearly, there were vast ranges and significant complexity regarding all of these age norms. Overall, there seems to have been a great deal of haze regarding the precise onset of manhood for Jewish males. The bar mitzvah ceremony did not begin until the later part of the thirteenth century, perhaps because Jewish communities at that time identified a need for greater clarity regarding the shift from boyhood to manhood. All of this evidence suggests that ancient Jewish age norms offer little clarity or guidance for complementarians who might be interested in using historical context to establish a numerical age of transition for male Christians.

Other Approaches

Another potential way of determining when a boy becomes a man, and ostensibly becomes off-limits to female leadership and instruction, would be to focus on marriage. In some societies, including European villages in colonial North America, marriage was a key way of determining when people became adults.
Complementarians could cite Gen 2:24 and Matt 19:5, which say that “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. . . .” Theoretically, once a male marries, he becomes an adult, since he leaves behind the obligations of childhood and embraces the responsibilities of adulthood. The ancient Greeks emphasized marriage as an important transition point when boys became men as well.16

Yet this approach carries with it numerous complications. If a sixteen-year-old boy was married but a thirty-five-year-old man was single, it would seem ludicrous to assert that the sixteen-year-old was an adult while the thirty-five-year-old was a boy. Such an approach simply would not work for Roman Catholics, since priests and monks never marry, yet presumably women cannot provide leadership or instruction to male clergy in Catholic institutions. What about widowhood or divorce? It would seem silly to argue that a man reverted back to childhood simply because his wife died or he was divorced. As other authors have noted, singleness does not, in and of itself, denote minority status, legally or socially.17 As already mentioned, marriage was not a defining moment for ancient Roman males, and Paul may very well have applied a Roman standard when thinking about distinctions between boys and men. It is also noteworthy that ancient Jewish families could disinherit sons precisely because they married too far below the family’s social rank. In other words, an unsanctioned marriage offered little protection for a young Jewish man who wanted to keep his inheritance.18

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, using marriage as such a benchmark would imply that Jesus, Daniel, Nehemiah, Anna, and other highly regarded biblical figures were not adults. If this were the case, Jesus would have been a person of minority status who was presumably incapable of making important decisions. Such an assertion would seem to dramatically undercut his ability to serve as the willing sacrifice for sin for all humanity.

Another possible complementarian approach would involve using biological changes, such as puberty, as a way to differentiate boys from men. Native Americans in colonial North America sometimes took such an approach.19 The obvious physical changes associated with this biological process make it a visible and fairly clear way to determine such a transition. Yet, if puberty was the benchmark, women would presumably have to cease teaching teenagers. This would seem to preclude teaching at Christian high schools and certainly at Christian colleges. Many Christian institutions would struggle to function if this were the case. Presumably, twelve- through eighteen-year-old males would therefore also be classified as adults, making them theoretically eligible to serve as ministers, deacons, or perhaps even elders. It is doubtful most churches could or would accept this practice. Furthermore, the age of puberty varies tremendously from individual to individual, adding further complexity to decision-making. Would a school or church immediately remove a boy from a female teacher’s classroom when his voice cracked or a pimple appeared on his face? Such a question might seem humorous or ridiculous to some, but that is exactly the point. An emphasis upon rigid roles, in order to remain logically consistent, fairly quickly descends into legalism and arbitrary decision-making.

Economic independence could be another criteria to use when determining whether or not a boy can continue to receive instruction from women in churches. Presumably, when a male moves out of his parents’ home and establishes his own residence, he gravitates closer to adulthood. Yet again, however, the picture is murkier than it might seem at first glance. If the boy/man has significant debt, such as student loans, he might seem independent but would in fact be dependent. It would also be difficult to assess how much financial support from family members it would take to disqualify a boy from being considered a man. A one-time loan is quite different from regular financial payouts. What if the boy/man is employed in a family business by his parents? Enrollment at college would also be complicated. Students typically leave home, for at least a time, but they theoretically are still receiving financial support from parents. Some males become financially independent at age eighteen, while others move out of the house much later.

Some might argue that when a boy discovers, and begins following, his God-given calling in life, he becomes an adult. This would seem to suggest that Jesus became an adult around age thirty, when he was baptized and began his public ministry. Under this criterion, Moses became an adult around the age of 80 and Noah around 500.20 Yet, these ages would seem quite old to us today. Complementarians would have to be comfortable figuring out these and other discrepancies if applying the criteria of occupational and/or economic independence to the issue of determining the age of adulthood.

Mothers and Sons

A final challenge faced by complementarians involves the issue of mothers and their adult sons. Historically, Christians have been comfortable with the notion of mothers (and grandmothers) teaching and leading their adult sons. Augustine (AD 354–430) wrote glowingly about his mother’s continuing influence upon him when he was an adult. Puritan men in colonial New England likewise listened to and submitted to their mothers. Although the Bible suggests that men leave their mothers and fathers and cleave to their wives, it has been quite common for sons to embrace their mothers and their adult sons. Historically, Christians have been comfortable with the notion of mothers (and grandmothers) teaching and leading their adult sons. Augustine (AD 354–430) wrote glowingly about his mother’s continuing influence upon him when he was an adult. Puritan men in colonial New England likewise listened to and submitted to their mothers. Although the Bible suggests that men leave their mothers and fathers and cleave to their wives, it has been quite common for sons to embrace their mother’s authority well into adulthood. Even authors who have claimed to adhere to the notion that women should not teach or lead adult men have demonstrated flexibility regarding mothers and sons. Why has this been so accepted, when it seems to violate an important complementarian directive? The fact that mothers are always older than their sons likely has played a more important role than people have realized. In other words, the wisdom that age imparts somehow makes up for the supposed defects of a woman’s gender that would normally disqualify her from teaching a man. Or, the notion that a boy’s age could trigger a sudden and dramatic reversal of roles and authority between mother and son may be too overwhelming or awkward for most complementarians to accept. Therefore, they typically, if somewhat disingenuously, have affirmed a leadership and
teaching role for women over adult men in the select case of mothers and their adult sons.21

Conclusion

Our essay has demonstrated that a deeper consideration of human aging is warranted for all Christians, and this includes both complementarians and egalitarians. Complementarians need to begin addressing important and difficult questions about the age of boys and men and how this relates to the disqualification of women from certain opportunities for leadership and teaching. Careful hermeneutics and scriptural interpretation, rather than unspoken assumptions or contemporary norms, need to shape their arguments regarding the age at which males supposedly become unsuited for submitting to female teachers and leaders. Although it might be efficient and convenient to merely apply an age such as eighteen to this issue, it would represent a derelict evasion of sound hermeneutics, theological study, and scriptural application. Alternatively, careful investigation of such questions may prompt complementarians to reconsider their position altogether.

Both complementarian and egalitarian theologians and scholars would also be well-served to study the subject of human aging within the Bible with greater fervor and care. Although gender has received enormous scrutiny, age-related issues remain relatively unstudied, in spite of the fact that age-related topics fill the pages of Scripture. The book of Titus, for example, is filled with statements regarding how younger and older persons should relate to one another. Other verses, including Deut 34:7, Josh 14:10–11, 2 Kgs 5, 1 Tim 4:12, 2 Tim 2:22, 1 Pet 5:5, and 1 John 2:13, address age-related issues. Exactly how should we interpret and apply these passages today? Age plays a tremendous role in determining who receives various rights and privileges in many places around the world, but there has been little introspection about the ethics of such practices. Overall, a deeper awareness of human aging would enhance biblical scholarship and theological study, regardless of one’s perspectives regarding gender. We would argue that our own research highlights a consistent and crucial principle found within Scripture—namely, decisions regarding teaching and leading should flow from considerations of character and revelations of giftedness, rather than biological categories or legalistic rules. Indeed, our analysis of boyhood and manhood in biblical times suggests that, practically speaking, this must be true, since no straightforward rule regarding the age of transition from boyhood to manhood is discoverable within Scripture.

Notes

3. Gen 25:7 indicates that, at age 175, Abraham died at a good old age, yet this would have been young for Methuselah, for example, who lived to 969. Josh 14:10 makes it clear that Caleb viewed himself as old when he was 85, suggesting a significant range of biblical possibilities for defining old age, not to mention childhood, youth, or adulthood.
7. The Danvers Statement was drafted by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in 1987; see https://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/


20. Gen 7:6 indicates that Noah was 500 when his three sons were born and 600 when the flood occurred. Acts 7:23–30 outlines Moses’s first 80 years of life, before he led the exodus.


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