

The Evolution of Complementarian Exegesis

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It is common to view the entire debate between complementarianism and egalitarianism in terms of which side has more biblical support. Both sides of the debate have an explicitly high view of scripture that gives biblical texts a central place of authority. Exegetical theology, then, is naturally given a tremendous amount of weight—as are hermeneutics and biblical interpretation.

It has become characteristic of one side of the debate to impugn the other side by propounding a changing base, particularly with regard to biblical interpretation. To show that egalitarians' interpretation of key biblical texts continually changes is to demonstrate that the egalitarian position is, after all, merely a product of contemporary thought, changing with the waves of culture. On the other hand, if it can be shown that complementarians' interpretation of key biblical texts has not changed over time, then this would indicate theological stability and a commitment to unchanging truth. So the argument goes. The preface to the 2006 reprint of the 1991 book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, states these assumptions clearly: “many of the evangelical feminist arguments have changed in the last decade whereas the complementarian defenses have not.”¹

The point of this article is not to ask (or answer) whether this two-pronged line of reasoning is legitimate. Rather, for the sake of the argument, let us assume that it is and address the latter half of this reasoning: is complementarian interpretation of key biblical passages as stable as claimed? Or does complementarianism rest on a gradually-shifting exegetical base? This brief study will show that “the complementarian defenses” have not stopped changing—at least when it comes to the interpretation of key verses.

Susan Foh and 1 Timothy 2:11–12

In her 1979 book, *Women and the Word of God*, Susan Foh summarized her position on 1 Tim 2:11–12: “We have concluded that ... 1 Timothy 2:12 is intended to eliminate women from the office of elder (that is, women cannot occupy the official teaching-ruling office of the church).”² It is an unusually specific exegetical conclusion that any passage in the Bible was specifically “intended to eliminate women from the office of elder,” for historically, those who forbid women elders have understood 1 Tim 2:12 as a basis for prohibiting women elders, not the specific prohibition itself.

Perhaps realizing the extremity of her interpretation, Foh changed her view a decade later in *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, saying with a softer approach, “Possibly Paul aims to disqualify women from the office of elder before he defines the requirements

of that office [in 1 Tim 3],” and “It is debatable whether this passage specifically excludes women from the office of elder or not.”³ Although Foh's second interpretation is still problematic,

it is a significant change. If there is any biblical ban on women elders, it is important to know whether it is actual or potential. The theological distance between “this is a ban” and “this can be used for a ban” is vast. In any case, it is encouraging to see less dogmatism about the authorial intent of 1 Tim 2:11–12 when moving from Foh's former to revised

position. Needless to say, most complementarians today would not argue what Foh originally argued; they do not see 1 Tim 2:12 as a ban on women elders, but as providing the grounds for such a ban.

Douglas Moo and 1 Timothy 2:11–13

In 1980, Douglas Moo's article, “1 Timothy 2:11–15: Meaning and Significance,” suggested that, as a general rule, women may be more easily deceived than men.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul cites Eve's failure as exemplary and perhaps causative of the nature of women in general and that this susceptibility to deception bars them from engaging in public teaching. ... While ambiguities remain, it is arguable that only this interpretation adequately accounts for the data given above.⁴

In 1981, Philip Payne published a critique of Moo's article.⁵ In Moo's response to Payne's critique, Moo shifted his position. In Moo's words,

The difficulties with viewing v 14 as a statement about the nature of women are real. I am now inclined to see the reference as a means of suggesting the difference between Adam and Eve in the fall—he sinned openly; she was deceived. With this in mind, Paul may be seeking to suggest the need to restore the pre-fall situation in which the man bears responsibility for religious teaching.⁶

Moo later affirmed and strengthened his revised position in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*:

It may be that Paul wants to imply that all women are, like Eve, more susceptible to being deceived than are men, and that this is why they should not be teaching men! While this interpretation is not impossible, we think it unlikely. For one thing, there is nothing in the Genesis accounts or in

Scripture elsewhere to suggest that Eve's deception is representative of women in general.⁷

In summary, then, Moo's position essentially evolved in three stages, first from (my words) "women are generally more easily deceived than men," then to "this may not be the case," and finally to "this is not likely the case." Again, while it is discouraging to see such instability (in what is claimed be a stable base), it is encouraging to see a complementarian scholar willing to revise an interpretation after scholarly dialogue.

Thomas Schreiner and 1 Timothy 2:11–13

Moo was not the last complementarian to change positions in interpreting 1 Tim 2:13. In his 1995 book, *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis*, Thomas Schreiner wrote that Paul prohibits women from exercising authority over men and teaching men "because of different inclinations present in Adam and Eve." He continued:

Generally speaking, women are more relational and nurturing and men are more given to rational analysis and objectivity. Women are less prone than men to see the importance of doctrinal formulations, especially when it comes to the issue of identifying heresy and making a stand for the truth. Appointing women to the teaching office is prohibited because they are less likely to draw a line on doctrinal non-negotiables, and thus deception and false teaching will more easily enter the church.⁸

In his 2005 version of the same essay, Schreiner's position has changed considerably.⁹ He states of his former view, "it seems that this view also strays from the text, even if one agrees that such differences exist between men and women. If Paul argued that women were deceived because of innate dispositions, the goodness of God's creative work is called into question."¹⁰ We can view this change as positive insofar as it avoids the error of asserting that women are more susceptible to sin and/or heresy than men.

Wayne Grudem on *authenteō* in 1 Timothy 2:12

In his 1998 essay, "An Open Letter to Egalitarians," Wayne Grudem confidently asserted that "Whenever we have seen this verb [*authenteō*] occur, it takes a neutral sense, 'have authority' or 'exercise authority,' with no negative connotation attaching to the word itself."¹¹ Six years later, in his 2004 publication, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, his position changed so that the term "is primarily positive or neutral."¹² Perhaps Grudem's view evolved in tandem with that of Schreiner, who said in 2005, "The recent studies of H. Scott Baldwin and Al Wolters show the term signifies a positive use of authority."¹³

It is unlikely that either position—*authenteō* as purely neutral or as "primarily positive or neutral"—is correct. The immediate context and a full lexical study of the term lend more support to a pejorative use of the term.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this development might be viewed as progress insofar as complementarian scholarship

has become more open about the possible range of meaning of *authenteō*.

Schreiner on "head" in 1 Corinthians

In 1991, Schreiner published the essay, "Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity." He gave three arguments to show that the term "head" (*kephalē*) in 1 Cor 11:2-16 means "authority" and not "source."¹⁵ In his 2005 essay in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, however, he opened up to the possibility "that *kephalē* in some contexts denotes both 'authority over' and 'source.'"¹⁶

The significance of this change is difficult to overestimate! For decades, complementarian scholars vigorously argued against even the possibility that Paul could have meant "source."¹⁷ To concede this possibility as a viable option is substantial indeed. It is not difficult to understand the need for Schreiner's change, which conforms to the more tenable view.¹⁸

Schreiner on prophecy in Judges 4 and in the New Testament

In his above-mentioned 1991 essay, Schreiner argued "that Deborah did not prophesy in public" and "did not exercise her ministry in a public forum as [male OT prophets] did."¹⁹ But in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (2005), this interpretation is questioned: "Previously I argued that women's gift of prophecy was not exercised as publicly as it was by men... I now have some reservations about the validity of this argument."²⁰

In addition to this change regarding women prophets, Schreiner's position regarding NT prophecy in general also appears to have shifted. In 1991, he had concluded that "the gift of prophecy is not as authoritative as the gift of teaching."²¹ Yet, in 2005, he wrote:

Prophecy is a passive gift in which oracles or revelations are given by God to a prophet. Teaching, on the other hand, is a gift that naturally fits with leadership and a settled office, for it involves the transmission and explanation of tradition. I am not arguing that prophecy is a lesser gift than teaching, only that it is a distinct gift.²²

Before moving on, it is worth noting the irony of this claim, for it demonstrates a micro-level example of macro-level complementarian ideology. Complementarians claim that women are different and distinct from men, but not lesser—even though women are also said to have less authority than men. Similarly, Schreiner above claims that prophecy is considered "distinct" from teaching, but not "lesser"—even though prophecy is said to have less authority than teaching. In both cases, there is an assumption that one can isolate the attribute of authority from the nature of the person or thing itself. Space does not allow for a fuller discussion of this assumption, but many have shown this argument to lack support.²³ At any rate, it is interesting to read complementarian literature and witness the macro-level ideas of anthropology trickle down into (or simply dictate) the micro-level directions of NT ecclesiology and exegesis.

Conclusion

This incomplete survey has demonstrated that there exist both division and regular modification in interpretation of various relevant biblical texts concerning gender roles. One obvious implication is that complementarians should be careful in proclaiming to possess a sure foundation that evidently does not exist. As long as interpretations keep changing in substantial ways, interpreters ought to exercise all the more caution about wielding such interpretations to prohibit women from proclaiming the gospel to men.

The same wisdom applies to Christian egalitarians: humility is always required in the process of exegetical theology, and at times it may be necessary to backtrack in order to get on the right road. Thankfully, that has undoubtedly occurred in the last quarter-century for many evangelical egalitarian scholars. C. S. Lewis remarked, "We all want progress. . . . If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man [or woman] who turns back soonest is the most progressive."²⁴ For the sake of Christ and Christ's Kingdom, let us continue to strive for such progress.

Notes

1. J. Ligon Duncan and Randy Stinson, "Preface," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), xiii.

2. Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 248.

3. Susan Foh, "A Male Leadership View," in *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (ed. Bonnidell Clouse and Robert Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 81, 91. Unfortunately, Foh inconsistently reverts to her former position on p. 95: "We have concluded that . . . the intent of 1 Timothy 2:12 is to eliminate women from consideration for the office of elder, the teaching-ruling position of the church."

4. Douglas Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11–15: Meaning and Significance," *TJ* 1, no. 1 (1980): 70.

5. Philip B. Payne, "Libertarian Women in Ephesus: A Response to Douglas J. Moo's Article, '1 Timothy 2:11–15,'" *TJ* 2, no. 1 (1981): 170–98.

6. Douglas Moo, "The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15: A Rejoinder," *TJ* 2, no. 2 (1981): 204.

7. Douglas Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men? 1 Timothy 2," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 185 (p. 190 in the 2006 reprint).

8. Thomas Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: A Dialogue with Scholarship," in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 145.

9. This is noted in Benjamin Reaoch, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2012), 52, and in I. Howard Marshall, "Women in Ministry: A Further Look at 1 Timothy 2," in *Women, Ministry and the Gospel* (ed. Mark Husbards and Timothy Larsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 67.

10. Thomas Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: A Dialogue with Scholarship," in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (ed. Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas Schreiner; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 225 n. 210.

11. Wayne Grudem, "An Open Letter to Egalitarians," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 3, no. 1 (March 1998), 3. Grudem dismisses the possibility that the term can have any nuance, not only a negative one.

12. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004), 317.

13. Thomas Schreiner, "A Response to Linda Belleville," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. James R. Beck; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 108.

14. See Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), ch. 20. See also my own forthcoming article, "Revisiting *Authenteō* in 1 Timothy 2:12," in *The Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters*.

15. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 119.

16. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry: Another Complementarian Perspective," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 301.

17. E.g., Wayne Grudem, "Does *kephalē* ('Head') Mean 'Source' Or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," *TJ* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 38–59; Grudem, "The Meaning Of 'Head' In The Bible, A Simple Question No Egalitarian Can Answer," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 1, no. 3 (June 1996); Grudem, "The Meaning Source 'Does Not Exist,'" *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 2, no. 5 (December 1997); Grudem, "The Meaning of *kephalē* ('Head'): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged," *JETS* 44, no. 1 (March 2001): 25–65.

18. See Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Richard Cervin, "Does *kephalē* Mean 'Source' Or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Rebuttal," *TJ* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 85–112; Andrew Periman, "The Head of a Woman," *JTS* 45 (1994): 602–22; Payne, *Man and Woman*, chs. 7–13. For a helpful appraisal calling for pause on all sides, see Alan Johnson, "A Meta-Study of the Debate Over the Meaning of 'Head' (*kephalē*) in Paul's Writings," *Priscilla Papers* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 21–28.

19. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 216 in the 1991 ed.

20. Schreiner, "Another Complementarian Perspective," 279.

21. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 217 in the 1991 ed.

22. Schreiner, "Another Complementarian Perspective," 279.

23. See Rebecca Groothuis, *Good News for Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), part I. Cf. Groothuis, "Equal in Being, Unequal in Role," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (ed. Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Groothuis; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 301–33; Adam Omelanchuk, "The Logic of Equality," *Priscilla Papers* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 2008): 25–28; Omelanchuk, "Ontologically Grounded Subordination," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 169–80. For a critique of this assumption as it exists in the debate over the doctrine of the Trinity, see Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002); Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

24. *Mere Christianity*, book 1, ch. 5.

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