

The Genesis of Confusion: How “Complementarians” Have Corrupted Communication

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In the previous edition of Priscilla Papers, my article, “The Genesis of Equality,” outlined the prevailing view that the Bible’s opening chapters make substantial or essential equality of the two sexes the creation ideal, and that the subordination of women is entirely a consequence of the fall. I further noted that Pope John Paul II made this interpretation of Gen 1–3 binding on Roman Catholics. In this essay, I move on to discuss four key terms—“role,” “equality,” “difference,” and “complementary”—which “complementarians” consistently utilize to give a different interpretation of Gen 1–3 and of other biblical texts important to their cause. Again, I bring in the Roman Catholic voice to give a wider perspective.¹

In the mid-1960s, I studied at Moore Theological College Sydney, a large, evangelical and Reformed seminary. In my four years there I became well-grounded in the Bible and learned to think theologically, thus equipping me for a lifetime of ministry and teaching the Bible. As a self-confident young man, I was delighted to learn that God had given “headship”/leadership to men. I enthusiastically became a “complementarian,” to use a term of more recent origin. I remained so for nearly ten years until, after months of careful study, I concluded that the case for women’s subordination rests primarily on one possible interpretation of one text (1 Tim 2:8–15), and this seemed insufficient ground for subordinating half the human race. Moore College still teaches male “headship”/leadership and is strongly opposed to the ordination of women.² However, on reading their current “Vision, Mission and Values” statement, on the man-woman relationship one might not realize this. The statement says they believe in,

Gender Complementarity: Affirmation of the fundamental equality and mutual dependence of men and women as image bearers of God, while recognising proper differences in roles and responsibilities in life and Christian ministry.³

To the uninitiated, this affirmation sounds completely acceptable. Who could deny that men and women are fundamentally equal and mutually dependent yet have different “roles and responsibilities”? However, what this statement of faith is actually saying is this: Moore College is committed to the “complementarian” position. This involves believing that the Bible teaches that, before the fall, God gave the man authority over the woman. The “headship” given in God’s good creation is therefore universal and transcultural. “Complementarians” express this idea by speaking of differing “roles.” There is nothing exceptional in Moore’s doctrinal statement. I have seen dozens of almost identical opaque and innocuous sounding statements published by other seminaries, Bible Colleges and Christian organizations, especially in the United States.⁴

Such carefully worded statements can be called “political speak,” “spin,” or the manipulation of language in the cause of ideology. Evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, speaking on the ideological use of language, says, “Those who control how language is used control the most powerful instrument for shaping human consciousness.”⁵ By use of carefully chosen words, “complementarians” put their case so that it sounds reasonable and

harmless. Carefully choosing words to conceal what is actually being taught and to surreptitiously further one’s own agenda, I believe, is morally wrong. One important responsibility of theologians is to bring clarity to the issues they address, in part by carefully defining and consistently using key terms. To write theology in order to conceal seems to me perverse. Should not Christians communicate with each other openly and honestly?

The origins of this obfuscating language

For long centuries, how the man-woman relationship was to be understood was openly stated and crystal clear. God had made men “superior,” women “inferior.”⁶ Woman was created second, after man, thus women are second in rank. Eve sinned first in the Garden, thus women are more susceptible to sin and error and in need of male leadership. It is difficult to find a book written on the relationship of the sexes before the middle of the twentieth century, by a Christian or a non-Christian, that does not speak of men as “superior,” women as “inferior.”⁷

Only in the late 1960s, with the advent of “Women’s Lib,” did this terminology and its underlying understanding of men and women come under challenge and begin to collapse. This new cultural affirmation of the equality of the sexes put many evangelicals, convinced that the traditional position was prescribed by the Bible, under considerable pressure. This cultural pressure increased when significant evangelical leaders (F. F. Bruce, Leon Morris, Kenneth Kanzer, Roger Nicole, etc.) began arguing that the Bible teaches the equality of the sexes. In this critical hour, one of the most creative conservative Reformed theologians of the twentieth century, George Knight III, stepped forward with an answer. In his 1977 seminal book, *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women*, he rejected the customary language of “superior” and “inferior,” arguing instead that men and women are “equal but different” because God has assigned to each sex different “roles.”⁸ These differing “roles,” he added, were given in creation before the fall. As such, they are permanently binding and transcultural ideals. This wording sounded acceptable to the modern ear; who could deny that men and women are different in significant ways and tend to have different “roles”—women bear and feed babies and in most homes do the majority of the household work while men put out the garbage, fix things, and watch sports on television! Despite the novelty of his cleverly worded argument, Knight called it “the traditional” or “the historic” position. So appealing was this reformulated and reworded argument for women’s subordination, and its application to the few texts on which he built his case, that virtually every evangelical who has written after him in support of the permanent subordination of women has adopted it.

Only one major addition to Knight’s innovative theological work has occurred since he devised it. In a brilliant initiative, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, editing the 1991 symposium, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, A Response to Evangelical Feminism*,⁹ renamed the new post-1977 case for the permanent subordination of women, “the complementarian position.” Simultaneously and pejoratively, they named those they

were opposing, “evangelical feminists.” In socially and theologically conservative Christian circles, to call someone a “feminist” implies a counter-Christian and unbiblical view of the sexes. Because of the universal adoption of these key terms by “complementarians,” communication between the contending parties disintegrated.

“Role”

Grudem’s book, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism*, opens with mention of “the controversy over the Bible’s teaching about men and women’s roles.”¹⁰ Most “complementarians” likewise tell us that this bitter divide among evangelicals is about gender roles. In contrast, for egalitarians the controversy is over whether the Bible permanently subordinates women to men.

No word is more frequent or important in the “complementarian” case for the permanent subordination of women than “role.” The “complementarian” understanding of the relationship of the sexes can be accurately summed up as, *men and women are equal in being but differentiated in role*.¹¹ The first affirmation of the Danvers Statement, which definitively spells out the “complementarian” position, says that man and woman are made in God’s image and are thus “equal before God as persons.” The second affirmation says, “Distinctions in masculine and feminine *roles* are ordained by God as part of the created order.”¹²

The French word *rôle*, referencing the part an actor plays on stage, came into English at the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, functionalist sociologists began using the term to speak of the contributions various people make to a well-functioning society. It was, however, only in the early 1960s that the word began to be widely used to speak of characteristic behavior of people in a given social context, such as the role of teacher or nurse. In such usage, the premise always is that roles can change.

It is important to note that the word “role” is rarely found in theological books and commentaries before 1975, and never before the turn of the twentieth century. The idea that God has given men and women differing “roles” finds no mention, for example, in early books discussing the ordination of women such as those by Fritz Zerbst (1955), Charles Ryrie (1958), and Peter Brunner (1971).¹³ The word does occasionally appear in Larry Christenson’s *The Christian Family*,¹⁴ first published in 1970, but here we find no trace of the idea that men and women have been given different “roles” in creation or that one’s “role” speaks of who rules and who obeys. Credit for introducing the word “role” to euphemistically and cryptically speak of the rule of men and the subordination of women goes to the above-mentioned George Knight III. In 1976, when I was writing my little book, *Women and Their Ministry*,¹⁵ I had on my desk Knight’s essay, published in *Christianity Today* in April of that year, which was later incorporated into his book.¹⁶ My book referred to this article only twice¹⁷ because I concluded his extensive use of the non-biblical word “role” as the controlling term to interpret what the Bible said on the sexes was a creative construct with no antecedents which corrupted rather than elucidated the exegetical enterprise. I thought no one would follow him in

interpreting what the Bible says on the sexes almost exclusively in terms of differing “roles.” How wrong I was!

Today, the word “role” is an intrinsic element of the “complementarian” position, for it allows them to argue that “role differences” between men and women do not indicate the inferiority of women. “Men and women are ‘equal,’” they say time and time again, citing examples such as the ship’s captain and the crewman, the officer and the private in an army, and the manager and the worker. In each of these examples the paired parties have different roles, but the one who has the obeying role is in no way personally less than or inferior to the one who has the commanding role. This is true because, in the examples given, the roles can change and the higher position invariably has some basis in competence,

training, age, etc. However, these carefully chosen illustrations in fact do not parallel what “complementarians” are teaching. In these examples the roles can change; they are not intrinsic to the person. The private can become an officer, and the officer can be demoted. In contrast, exact parallels to the “complementarian” usage of “role” are to be found in classic aristocracy, race-based slavery, and in apartheid,

where one’s permanent “role” is prescribed by birth. In these cases, “difference in role” speaks of an *essential and unchangeable* difference, predicated on the premise that some are born to rule and some obey. The rulers and the ruled are not social equals and never can be. This hierarchical ordering is person-defining and given at birth. In “complementarian” literature, this is exactly how men and women’s “roles” are understood. Men are born to rule, women to obey. A change in “role” is impossible. Women do not only *function* subordinately; they *are* the subordinate sex.

This novel usage of the word “role” by complementarians cannot be justified for four reasons.

First, the Bible never suggests that men and women are simply acting out male and female “roles”; nor does it support the idea that God has given distinctive “masculine and feminine roles.”¹⁸ In the most widely used English translations of the Bible, neither “role” nor the idea it conveys is found. The opening chapter of the Bible teaches that we are, by God’s creative will, men or women. I thus agree with complementarian OT scholar Werner Neuser, who says, “In cause of truth we should give up talking about the ‘roles of the sexes’¹⁹ when interpreting what the Bible says on the male-female relationship.”²⁰ To interpret biblical texts using a word alien to biblical thinking can only lead to reading our own views into scripture. A classic example of such eisegesis is when “complementarians” describe Adam’s and Eve’s sin as “role reversal.”²¹ It was not. It was disobedience to the clear command of God. Paul speaks of Christ on the cross overcoming Adam’s disobedience, not Adam’s failure to be head over Eve (Rom 5:19).

Second, the Bible does not teach that God has decreed that men and men only are to be leaders, to have the “headship role.” In Gen 1 God gives to man and woman the ruling “role.” They are alike commissioned to rule over God’s world. True, men are normally the leaders in ancient Israel, as we would expect in a patriarchal context, but God raises up Deborah, a married woman, to lead Israel as a judge and prophet (Judg 4:4). And God appoints other women in the OT age to speak to his people as prophets (Exod 15:20, Mic

6:4, Isa 8:3, Neh 6:14, cf. Luke 2:36–38). In the NT age we find a woman apostle (Rom 16:7),²² women prophets (Acts 2:17–18, 21:19, 1 Cor 11:5, cf. Rev 2:20), and women house church leaders (Col 4:14, Acts 12:12, 16:14–15). Rather than “roles,” Paul speaks of men and women having differing “ministries” (*diakoneō*) or “grace-gifts” (*charismata*, 1 Cor 12:4), none of which are restricted to one sex.

Third, the use of “role” in “complementarian” literature is foreign to the discipline of sociology. The word “role,” properly understood, speaks of the function assumed or part played in a particular situation.²³ Roles change over time and in differing contexts. Thus in everyday usage we ask, for example, who in the home has the “role” of gardening, washing clothes, managing the finances, etc. And today we often speak of how men’s and women’s “roles” have changed. For “complementarians,” in contrast, the word “role” has nothing to do with routine behaviors that can change. It speaks rather of permanently ascribed *power relations* that are predicated on one’s sexual identity. Men have the “role” of leading (“headship”); women, the “role” of obeying—and this can never change. When a scholar obfuscates in order to further an agenda, we must strongly object.

Fourth, to insist that men have been given *by birth* the ruling “role” and women the obeying “role” implies that women are in some way inferior to men. Their subordinate “role” defines them as women. Simply because they are women, and for no other reason, women for all of their lives are the subordinate sex. They are not in any substantial sense equal with men. Genesis 1:27–28 contradicts this conclusion.

The Roman Catholic Church and gender “roles”

In Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*,²⁴ the word “role” appears only three times in 111 pages. The paucity of usage of this especially common modern-day word in a booklet on the relationship of the sexes is noteworthy and is a striking contrast with conservative evangelical “complementarian” literature where no other term is more common. In speaking of the leadership of women in the apostolic church, he says women “played an active and important *role* in the life of the early church, in building up from its foundations the first Christian community—and subsequent communities—through their own *charisms* and their varied service.”²⁵ In this sentence, “role” is used appropriately of what women did, their ministry.

Neither the Pope’s encyclical nor his many other writings, as far as I can see, ever use “role” to speak of who rules and who obeys. We would not expect him to do so, for he explicitly taught the creation-given “essential equality of man and women.”²⁶ For him, the rule of the man over the woman is entirely a consequence of the fall, and to be opposed by Christians.²⁷

“Equality”

“Complementarians” emphasize their belief in the *equality of the sexes*—men are not superior, nor women inferior. This is also what evangelical egalitarians believe. What then is the debate about? The answer is that the word “equal” is not given the same content by both sides. For “complementarians” to say men and women are “equal” means that they are spiritually equal or equal *before God*, not that they are social equals on earth. They are “equal,” but men are to rule, women to obey. Grudem makes this point quite explicitly,

arguing that to say that men and women are “equal” does not mean they are “equal in authority.” Men, he says starkly, are “superior” in authority.²⁸

Thus the “complementarian” assertion of gender “equality” is without substance in social relationships. It is the counterpart of the white master in the Old South speaking of the “equality” of the black slave. When I hear Christians who uphold male leadership affirm the “equality” of the sexes, I cannot help but recall the words of the ruling animals in George Orwell’s classic story, *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

The word “equal,” when used of people in a social setting, does not mean “identical,” as it does when used in mathematics. Men and women are not the same: if they were we would not have two sexes. In its common social meaning the word “equal” speaks of human beings having the same worth, the same human potential, and thus to be given the same opportunities. Social equality is, of course, an ideal—an ideal that resists realization in a fallen world. Some are richer, stronger, cleverer, bigger, and more powerful. In a world marked by sin, inequality prevails. In particular, women are prone to lack substantive equality because men are on average physically stronger and can assert their will, and when bearing and nurturing children women cannot always fully support themselves. Thus, over the course of time, men tend to acquire more social and political power.

Grudem’s rhetorical assertion that for egalitarians the “fundamental” principle is, “if different, then not equal, and if equal then not different,”²⁹ makes absolutely no sense to an egalitarian. Egalitarians unequivocally affirm male-female differentiation *and* the substantial or essential equality of the two sexes. We believe men and women are equal *and* different. Social equality and sexual differentiation are both God-given and not contradictory ideas. The words “equality” and “difference” are not antonyms. The antonym of “equality” is “inequality.” In the social use of “equal,” only people who are different in one or more ways can be accorded equality. Two identical things are said not to be equal but “the same.”

What is immediately apparent in these two contrasting understandings of “equality” is that one has limited practical outcomes in everyday life, and the other has far reaching outcomes. For the “complementarian,” women’s equality is limited to what might broadly be called “the spiritual sphere.” Despite being “equal,” they must submit to their husbands in the home, and they cannot lead or preach in church. For long centuries women were excluded from leadership in the public domain as well because it was believed women were not men’s equal. “Complementarians” say they believe that women are “equal” with men, but they do not concede that they are relationally equal. With this limited conception of “equality” in mind, Christians in the past have argued with Bible in hand that women should not be allowed to vote, to pursue higher education, to enter certain professions, to hold public office, to earn the same as men for the same work, to use God-given gifts of leadership in the church, or to be full partners in marriage, sharing decision making and responsibility. “Complementarians” who hold to this limited definition of “equality” believe that it is up to male theologians to tell women where they are not “equal” with men in social and relational contexts. The alternative understanding of gender equality held by most other Christians, including evangelical egalitarians, presupposes that women are full human beings, equal before God, that they are socially and relationally equal to men in all

spheres of life, and that it is up to them to discern their own gifts and calling. God has made them women, not men, but God's Word does not make them the subordinate sex.

What makes the limited understanding of male-female "equality" so fraught at this present time for "complementarians" is that, in Western society, women have been accorded unqualified social and political equality. They are now presidents, prime ministers, judges, generals, doctors, academics, pastors and whatever else their gifts and circumstances permit. What is more, the achievements of women have made it impossible to believe that women do not have the intelligence, morality and leadership potential given to men.

The Roman Catholic Church on gender "equality"

Pope John-Paul II has prescribed what all Catholics are to believe about the sexes, noting that the Bible speaks unambiguously of the "essential equality" of the two sexes,³⁰ "their fundamental" equality in marriage,³¹ their equality in "the salvific and sanctifying action of the Spirit,"³² and their "total equality with respect to the gifts of the Holy Spirit."³³ For him, "the essential equality" of the sexes is taught in Gen 1–2, while ch. 3 presents the rule of the man over the woman as a consequence of the fall and displeasing to God.³⁴

In an insightful study of Pope John Paul II's teaching on the sexes, Sister Sara Butler points out that, for the Pope, the fact that man and woman are both created in the image and likeness of God implies that there is *one human nature/being* that they both possess fully.³⁵ Human nature is not "divided or shared between the sexes, but possessed whole by each, though not in identical ways."³⁶ This grounding of male-female equality in the one nature/being of man and woman is a significant step forward in this debate. It helpfully relates human equality and divine equality by using established theologically synonymous terms, "nature" and "being," which speak of what unites and is common among the three divine persons. It excludes the limiting of equality by suggesting that one sex lacks something ontological which is possessed only by the other.

"Difference"

Almost every "complementarian" book presents egalitarians as denying male-female differentiation. Raymond Orland, for example, says evangelical egalitarians teach "an unqualified equation of the sexes." Harold O. J. Brown says the logic of the evangelical egalitarian position is "total sexual equivalence." Robert Yarbrough says egalitarians "obliterate our God-given gender distinctions." Grudem says, "the fundamental egalitarian error is constantly to blur" male-female distinctions.³⁷

These strident charges that evangelical egalitarians deny sexual difference leaves one perplexed. In over forty years of involvement in the debate about the status and ministry of women, I have never known an evangelical egalitarian to deny sexual differentiation—in person or in print. From the early 1970s, those who have argued that the Bible makes the equality of the sexes the creation-given ideal have stressed that our maleness and femaleness is God-given and good.

Of central importance in the early articulation of the evangelical egalitarian position are Richard and Catherine Kroeger. They helped found Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), of which Catherine was the first president. Affirming the widespread conclusion that acknowledging male-female differentiation was an issue at Corinth

and that this is why Paul wanted women to cover their heads and men uncover their heads when leading in prayer and prophecy, they say:

Against such blurring of sexual differentiation the Apostle Paul speaks out: it is good to be a man, it is good to be a woman. He defined sexual identity in terms of God's loving creation of men's and women's need for one another. To repudiate or obliterate the identity God has bestowed on us as sexual beings is a "disgrace," a remnant of pagan religion the Corinthians had so recently left.³⁸

My own 1977 above-mentioned book, *Women and Their Ministry*, emphatically endorses both male-female equality and differentiation, and I have never wavered from this belief. In numerous publications and public forums I have affirmed creation-based sexual differentiation, for which no fellow egalitarian has ever taken me to task.

Most substantial evangelical books arguing for gender equality have extended sections on sexual differentiation. An emphatic example is Stanley Grenz's and Denise Kjesbo's, *Women in the Church*. They assert, "Humans can exist only as male and female. And this primary sexual distinction is deeper than mere physical features related to reproduction."³⁹ They then outline "the basic differences between the sexes suggested by recent research in the human sciences."⁴⁰ Another informed evangelical endorsement of sexual differentiation is Elaine Storkey's, *Created or Constructed? The Great Gender Debate*. She argues that the four basic biblical affirmations about man and woman are: difference, sameness/similarity, complementarity, and the potential for union.⁴¹ It is simply bizarre to argue that evangelical egalitarians deny what is so clearly enunciated in the prologue to the Bible—"male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27)—and so observable in everyday life. How could anyone believe in "total sexual equivalence," whatever that is? In every case, when I have had the chance, on hearing this charge, I have asked "complementarians" to come forward with one example where an egalitarian has denied male-female differentiation, and I have had not one example supplied.

What is going on, we must ask? Why do "complementarians" emphatically claim that evangelical egalitarians deny sexual difference without offering *any* evidence, and in the face of the emphatic denial by evangelical egalitarians? The answer, I suggest, is that the word "difference" does not bring to mind the same things for both sides in this debate.

For evangelical egalitarians, the word "difference" means "not the same," "other than," "not identical." Thus to affirm sexual difference is to affirm that humankind is always male *or* female and this division in the one species is innate, person-defining and behaviorally significant. Sexual differentiation does not stand in tension with affirmations of social equality. Two people, according to this view, can be different—one a man, one a woman—yet substantively equal; that is, not identical but have the same dignity, the same worth, the same intelligence, and the same leadership potential.

For "complementarians," on the other hand, one thing above all else indelibly differentiates men and women: in creation, before the fall, God set the man over the woman. Men are to command, women to obey. This difference in authority is, for the "complementarian," *the most important thing* in setting men and

women apart. The man's God-given pre-eminent authority defines him in distinction to the woman. *This is what makes him a man, not a woman.* Thus when "complementarians" hear egalitarians denying that the Bible sets the man over the woman as the God-given ideal, they hear this as a denial of what is essential to their understanding of what it means to be a man, or in their literature, a denial of "biblical manhood." They sense that their passionate belief is under threat—and it is.

Difference and self-identity go hand in hand. What gives human beings their sense of identity is what differentiates them from other people: their sex, parents, family, nationality, ethnicity, language, education, appearance and religion (or lack of it). Self-identity commonly carries with it some feeling of superiority, even if this is rarely acknowledged and actively suppressed. However, when our identity is threatened, feelings of superiority can easily come to the surface and be articulated, often in politically nuanced language. Most strong affirmations of "difference" are to be understood in this light. Those who hold power and feel threatened define themselves by asserting their *difference* from another race, language group, political party, social class, or sex. Thus when white supremacists say, "We whites are different from blacks," they are in fact claiming that whites are in some way superior to blacks. It may be difficult and painful for many evangelicals to accept, but it would seem that the sharp division between evangelicals on male-female differentiation may be explained in the above terms. For some, to say men are different from women implies far more than simply saying men and women are not the same in every way. It is a claim that God has bestowed on men something not given to women—namely, the leadership "role." To affirm the substantial equality of the sexes is to deny this claim and refute the assumption that God in creation has given to men primacy in the male-female relationship.⁴²

Consider the common "complementarian" slogan used to sum up the male-female relationship; "equal *but/yet* different."⁴³ The adversative conjunction ("but"/"yet") tells us in coded language that "complementarians" believe that woman's "difference" qualifies the equality she has. They cannot say with evangelical egalitarians that men and women are equal *and* different. The term "different" does not reduce or qualify the term "equal"; rather, both are true.

We thus have two understandings of what primarily differentiates men and women. For evangelical egalitarians, male-female differentiation is rooted in God's creative activity that gives to men and women differing bodies, differing chromosomes, differing contributions in procreation, and statistically differing characteristics. For them, sexual differentiation is a creation given and it is good. In contrast, "complementarians" locate sexual differentiation primarily in differing authority. What makes a man a man is his God-given "headship/leadership" over women. For them, to deny that God has given "superior authority" to the man is to deny what is most fundamental to male-female differentiation. Every "complementarian" book tells us what primarily differentiates men and women, albeit in cryptic terminology. To Grudem's credit he explicitly and openly admits, to say men and women are "equal" does not mean that women are "equal in authority" with men. Men are "superior" in authority.⁴⁴

The "complementarian" understanding of male-female differentiation is untenable for at least three reasons. First, in the primary and definitive statement on the sexes given in Gen 1:27–28, man and woman are alike given authority over God's creation.

Neither is given authority over the other. Most Protestant and all Roman Catholic commentators agree that Gen 1–3 makes the rule of the man over the woman entirely a consequence of the fall (Gen 3:16). Second, as we have noted above, the Bible gives many examples of God appointing women to be leaders of his people. And third, we see women with extraordinary leadership ability, and never more than in our age. I do not believe the world is flat, even if a few verses can be found to suggest this, because observation forces me to believe that the world is spherical. Likewise I do not believe that God has appointed only men to lead, even if a few verses can be interpreted to suggest this, because observation forces me to conclude that women have been given by God undeniable leadership ability. Everywhere I look, I see intelligent, well educated, articulate women giving wonderful leadership in the church and the world. *Leadership ability does not differentiate men and women.*

Studies on the differences between men and women have discovered that, when it comes to behavioral differences, more men than women or vice versa may excel at something, but in no case do all men or all women excel over the other sex in every or even most instances. The statistical variations are significant but small. The vast majority of men and women fit into an overlapping range of scores. What this means is that there are vastly more similarities than differences in male-female behavior. Another way to put this is that the variation *between* women and men as two categories is far less than the variation *among* men or *among* women.⁴⁵ Thus the statistical differences in behavior between the sexes in no way support the theory that men only or women only can or should perform certain roles.

Before leaving this matter, let me stress that in affirming that God made humankind in two forms, male and female, egalitarian evangelicals do not allow male-female differentiation to eclipse what is common to the two sexes; both are made in the image and likeness of God and both are given dominion over creation. Egalitarians affirm *both* male-female equality and differentiation without limiting one or the other.

The Roman Catholic Church on gender "difference"

Pope John-Paul II is adamant that the "essential equality of the sexes" in no way challenges or denies that God has made two sexes. He writes of the "Creator's decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man."⁴⁶ He locates sexual differentiation primarily in the bodies given to men and women.⁴⁷ These differing bodies, the Pope argues, express the human spirit.

Sister Sara Butler summarizes the Pope's teaching on the sexes in his various writings, by means of the following six points: "In the first place the Pope affirms the unity of human nature.... Human nature is not divided or shared between the sexes, but is possessed whole by each, though not in identical ways."⁴⁸ "Second, the Pope affirms the body." For him, "the body expresses the person." "Having a body belongs to us being human, belongs to our single human nature."⁴⁹ Third, "in the concrete, however, human nature exists only in one or the other sex, in women or men." "The two sexes are two ways of being a body, two incarnations of human nature." One's sex defines "a personal mode of being in the world."⁵⁰ To be male or female, both for the married and the single, is "part of one's concrete personal identity."⁵¹ "Fourth, man and woman are created for each other. They complement each other in a way that is mutual and reciprocal. They are partners, somewhat like our

two hands.” Being a person “involves existing in relationship.”⁵² Fifth, our differing bodies have “nuptial meaning.” They call us “to interpersonal communion” with the other sex.⁵³ Sixth, “only a man and a woman, as sexual counterparts, can be wife and husband to each other; only they, together, can generate new life.” Their differing bodies make this possible.⁵⁴ In conclusion, Butler says, “the Pope offers a positive evaluation of sexual difference-in-equality.”⁵⁵ This account of male-female equality and differentiation is certainly more profound than much of what is seen in evangelical literature.

“Complementarian”

Because God made humankind man *and* woman (Gen 1:27–28), virtually all theologians agree that man and woman *complete* what it means to be human; the two sexes are complementary. Man alone or woman alone is not humanity in its completeness. Since the earliest descriptions of the evangelical egalitarian position in the mid-1970s, egalitarians have unambiguously affirmed the *complementarity* of the sexes. Egalitarians were therefore flabbergasted when for the first time, in 1991, those who were arguing for the permanent subordination of women by appeal to the Bible began calling themselves “complementarians.” Prior to this they had named their point of view the “traditional” or “hierarchical,” position. They again chose a positive word, in this case one regularly used by egalitarians, and made it their own. No one would guess that those who call themselves “complementarians” are evangelicals committed to the permanent subordination of women!

Grudem, in his 2006 book, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism*, tells us how his side came to use the words, “complementary” and “complementarian.”⁵⁶ He says the first time those arguing for a hierarchal relationship between men and women used the word “complementary” was on November 17, 1988, in the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’s founding document, the Danvers Statement.⁵⁷ He says, that as far as he knows, “it had not been previously used in this controversy.”⁵⁸ It had indeed, as I will show below. In the Danvers Statement, the stance taken is not called the “complementarian” position. Grudem tells us that he and John Piper, in editing the 1991 symposium, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, “coined” the term “complementarian” as a self-designation of their position.⁵⁹ In other words, they invented it. In this book, the editors admit that, in designating their understanding of what the Bible teaches on the sexes the “complementarian” position, they were seeking to establish a new term for what had hitherto been called the “traditional” or “hierarchical” position.⁶⁰ From this point on, virtually every book written by an evangelical in support of the creation based subordination of women has designated the stance taken as the “complementarian” position and constantly spoken of the man-woman relationship as “complementary.”

In my 1993 review of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, I objected to what I called “this novel” name for the hierarchical position, stating that it deliberately “confuses things” because “egalitarians can also gladly call themselves complementarians.”⁶¹ I argued that if the word “complementarian” is to be used, a distinction needs to be made between hierarchical-complementarians who envisage men

standing over women, and egalitarian-complementarians who envisage men and women standing side by side.

Grudem’s claim that, prior to November 1988, the term “complementary” had not been used in this debate is factually incorrect. Egalitarian evangelicals had long before this date embraced this term as the best way to designate the male-female relationship. Paul Jewett, in his seminal 1975 book, *Man as Male and Female*, argued for “a model of partnership ... where man and woman are properly related when they accept each other as equals whose difference is mutually complementary in all spheres of life and human endeavour.”⁶² In my 1977 book I argued that the church needs for its well-being both men *and* women in leadership, for the church is impoverished when more than half of its members are excluded from leadership. I did not explicitly use the term “complementary,” but I did speak of “the distinctive contribution that is made by men and women” in the church and in marriage.⁶³ What is more, I repeatedly described ministry in the church and marriage as a “partnership” where each sex adds to what the other brings. I was surprised on re-reading the book that I had not explicitly used the word “complementary,” for the idea was presupposed in all that I said. However, in my 1985 book, *Created Woman: A Fresh Study of the Biblical Teaching*, I explicitly wrote of the “complementarity of the sexes” and constantly described their relationship in this way.⁶⁴

In 1983, the English egalitarian evangelical scholar Mary Evans, in her important study, *Women in the Bible*, continued this trend, using the term “complementary” to designate what the Bible teaches on the sexes.⁶⁵ In 1985, another English evangelical, Elaine Storkey, in *What’s Right with Feminism*, similarly spoke of the sexes “complementing” each other.⁶⁶ From this time on, the word was commonly used by egalitarian evangelicals. Thus CBE’s 1989 “Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality,” now available in thirty-four languages, implies the complementarity of the sexes throughout and speaks explicitly of their “complementarity.”⁶⁷

Moving forward, Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis named their 2004 scholarly egalitarian symposium, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*. They well support the claim that,

From the time of the first wave of the modern women’s movement at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many have argued that women should participate equally with men precisely *because* they bring complementary gender qualities to marriage, ministry and society.⁶⁸

There is now no turning back. Both sides believe “complementary” captures something basic to their position. One side believes man and woman standing side by side *complete* what it means to be human, they are *egalitarian-complementarians*; the other side believes that men complete what is missing in women by providing the leadership they need, they are *hierarchical-complementarians*.

The Roman Catholic Church and gender “complementarity”

Pope John Paul II also long predates Grudem and Piper in designating the male-female relationship a “complementary” one. He began his regular use of this term as early as 1979.⁶⁹ The Pope’s frequent use of the term “complementary” to speak of the

male-female relationship led Sister Prudence Allen to make a detailed study of how he used this word.⁷⁰ She argues that a clear distinction needs to be made between “fractional” or “partitive” complementarity, which suggests women lack something only men can supply, and “integral” or “synergistic” complementarity, which presumes men and women are complete human beings in themselves yet together in their difference contribute to each other’s lives. An example of “integral” or “synergistic” complementarity is a well-working committee or a healthy co-equal marriage where the sum of the parts is more than the parts on their own. Classic examples of “fractional” or “partitive” complementarity are seen in master-servant, teacher-pupil, and parent-child relationships. Allen concludes that the Pope understands male-female complementarity in the “integral” or “synergistic” sense. In a later article, Sister Sara Butler comes to the same conclusion, arguing that the Pope’s teaching on complementarity implies the essential equality of the two sexes.⁷¹ Man and woman are full human beings in two bodies, and in their difference each contributes something to the other that makes their partnership more than the sum of the parts. She argues that “a theory of complementarity that entails hierarchical relations of power and value or polar opposition” between the sexes has not been the teaching of the *magisterium* for the past twenty-five years.⁷²

Catholic theologians have advanced the debate by bringing to light that “complementary” can speak either of the synergistic nature of the male-female relationship or of what is lacking in women that men provide. “Complementarians” have a “fractional” or “partitive” understanding of relational complementarity: Men supply what women lack, namely leadership. Robert Saucy expresses this point of view. He says the male-female relationship is a “complementary relationship ... the man has the responsibility of leadership ... in the church as well as the family.”⁷³ In contrast, evangelical egalitarians think of complementarity in terms of enrichment and synergy. Together, men and women bring to everything more than either alone can bring. On this view, whenever and wherever the two sexes are free to contribute fully as men or women, humanity is expressed in its *completeness*. This is true in all social settings and most profoundly in marriage, the most intimate of complementary relationships. The best of marriages are those where each sees the other as a full human being, each takes responsibility for the marriage and all that it involves, and all decisions are made conjointly. A synergistic or integral understanding of complementarity of the sexes indicates why women should be encouraged to exercise leadership in the church. The body of Christ is impoverished when leadership is given by men only or by women only. On this principle, we may presume, Paul concluded that the leadership *charismata* are given non-discriminately to men and women (Rom 12:3–7, 1 Cor 12:4–31, Eph 4:11).

I conclude this discussion on the self-designation “complementarian” by urging my fellow evangelicals who believe that God has subordinated women to men in creation before the fall to be honest in putting your case. Nowhere is this more needed than in the name you choose for your point of view. Please decide on a title that plainly indicates what you believe and clearly distinguishes your position from the one you oppose!

Why has communication broken down?

Finally, we must ask, why has this conflict over terms occurred? Why is it that “complementarians” use words that obfuscate rather

than clarify? I suggest the debate is actually about power—who rules over whom and who determines doctrine. When those who hold power sense their power is threatened and evaporating, they become aggressive and combative. All they want is to win, and any argument that may help them is used. As the contest moves forward, the stakes and the militancy heighten. We see examples of this in the battle over slavery in the United States and with apartheid in South Africa; evangelicals led the opposition to emancipation, quoting the Bible profusely. In both these examples, the case mounted by evangelicals to hold power is now repudiated by everyone.

Such clinging to power is exactly what we are seeing today. Not only has the so-called biblical case for male “headship” not won the day among biblical scholars, but also the very idea that God has appointed men to lead has become untenable. Women make excellent leaders. When women are subordinated to men, they are disadvantaged and often maltreated. When women are empowered and emancipated, our communal life is all the richer, but when women are disempowered and oppressed, our communal life is all the poorer.

Faced with these facts and ever-growing opportunities for women to become leaders in the church and society, “complementarians” have desperately sought euphemistic terminology that will help them win the day. The day has come for plain speaking! The bitter debate among evangelicals is not about male and female “roles,” or male and female “differentiation,” or the “complementarity” of the sexes. One issue and one issue only is in dispute: whether God in creation has permanently subordinated women to men. Or, in David Pawson’s plain speech, whether God has decreed that *Leadership is Male*.⁷⁴

Notes

1. I thank Denise Cooper-Clarke, Paul Collier and Elaine Storkey for their helpful suggestions regarding this article. I put the word “complementarians” in quotation marks because evangelical egalitarians also endorse the complementarity of the sexes.

2. For a sympathetic outline of Moore College theology and the Sydney Anglican Diocese, see Michael Jensen, *Sydney Anglicans: An Apology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012). Michael is the son of former Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, and when he wrote this book he was a lecturer at Moore College. He says Sydney’s headship teaching is “a line in the sand” that cannot be crossed and, for many, the “single issue” defining Sydney Anglicans (126).

3. <http://www.moore.edu.au/vision-mission-values>.

4. One notable exception is the English evangelical David Pawson, who honestly names his book, *Leadership is Male*, and in outlining the “complementarian” case makes no attempt to hide what he is teaching (Crowborough, UK: Highland, 1988).

5. *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 167.

6. Daniel Doriani, “The History of Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2,” in *Women and the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (ed. A. Köstenberger, T. Schreiner and S. Baldwin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 258, says the historic position was predicated on the idea that women were ontologically inferior to men. Yet contemporary “complementarians” consistently say they do not endorse the ontological inferiority of women.

7. See Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 145–55.

8. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). Knight also introduced the problematic idea that, just as the Son of God is eternally subordinated to the Father, so too are women permanently subordinated to men. See Kevin Giles, *Jesus*

and the Father: *Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 145-55.

9. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).
10. Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 9.
11. Grudem, *Countering the Claims*, 255. Grudem here takes the "equality" of women to mean "equal [in] value, honor, personhood, and importance," and difference in "role" or function to mean "unequal in authority."
12. Grudem, *Countering the Claims*, 304-7. Italics added.
13. Zerbst, *The Office of Woman in the Church* (trans. A. G. Merkens; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955); Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church* (London: Macmillan, 1958); Brunner, *The Ministry and the Ministry of Women* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971).
14. (Minneapolis: Bethany), 1970.
15. *Women and Their Ministry: A Case for Equal Ministries in the Church Today* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1977).
16. "Male and Female Related He Them," *Christianity Today* 20, no. 14 (April 9, 1976): 13-17.
17. *Women and Their Ministry*, 89 n. 7, 103 n. 7.
18. Danvers Statement, Affirmation 2.
19. *Man and Woman in Christ in Christian Perspective* (trans. G. Wenham; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 30.
20. Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 29.
21. Raymond Ortland, "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood*, 107.
22. Eldon J. Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).
23. Consider, for example, the definition given in *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (ed. N. Abercrombie, S. Hill and B. Turner; London: Penguin, 2000), 301. "The concept [role] assumes that, when people occupy a sociological position, their behavior is determined mainly by what is expected of that position, rather than by their own individual characteristics."
24. (Homebush, New South Wales: St Paul, 1988).
25. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 98. Italics added.
26. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 24.
27. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 22-27, 37-40.
28. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters: Multnomah, 2004), 106.
29. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 411.
30. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 24, 59.
31. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 38.
32. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 60.
33. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 76.
34. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 33-45.
35. "Embodiment: Women and Men, Equal and Complementary," in *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (ed. E. A. Johnson; New York: Herder and Herder, 2002), 35-44.
36. Butler, "Embodiment," 38.
37. Ortland, "Male-Female Equality," 99; Brown, "The New Testament Against Itself," in *Women and the Church*, 200; Yarbrough, "The Hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 2:9-15," in *Women and the Church*, 193; Grudem, *Countering the Claims*, 68.
38. "Sexual Identity in Corinth: Paul Faces a Crisis," *Reformed Journal* 28 (June 1978): 12.
39. Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 158.
40. Grenz and Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology*, 159.
41. Storkey, *Created or Constructed* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 115-17.
42. See further, W. E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); S. Hekman, "Identity Crises: Identity, Identity Politics, and Beyond," in

Feminism, Identity and Difference (ed. S. Hekman; London: Frank Cass, 1999), 3-26.

43. "Equal but different" is the name for the Sydney Anglican organization and journal that promotes male headship/leadership in the Sydney Diocese. *Men and Women, Equal yet Different* is the title of Alexander Strauch's book (Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1999).
44. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 106.
45. See Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "Opposite Sexes or Neighboring Sexes: What do the Social Sciences Really Tell Us?" in *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms* (ed. M. Husband and T. Larsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 171-99; Van Leeuwen, "Social Science Studies Cannot Define Gender Differences," *Priscilla Papers* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 12-19.
46. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 7.
47. John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, 63-72.
48. Butler, "Embodiment," 38.
49. Butler, "Embodiment," 39.
50. Butler, "Embodiment," 39.
51. Butler, "Embodiment," 41.
52. Butler, "Embodiment," 39.
53. Butler, "Embodiment," 40.
54. Butler, "Embodiment," 40.
55. Butler, "Embodiment," 41, 38.
56. Grudem, *Countering*, 13-15.
57. Grudem, *Countering*, 304-7, 537-40.
58. Grudem, *Countering*, 13.
59. Grudem, *Countering*, 13.
60. Grudem, *Countering*, 14.
61. Kevin Giles, *EQ* 65, no. 3 (1993): 8.
62. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, 14.
63. Giles, *Women and Their Ministry*, 13.
64. (Canberra, Australia.: Acorn, 1985), 22.
65. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), 132.
66. (London: SPCK, 1985), 154.
67. <http://www.cbeinternational.org/content/statement-men-women-and-biblical-equality>.
68. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 17.
69. Sister Prudence Allen sent me a copy of her unpublished paper on the use of the term "complementary" by Pope John Paul II. She found 150 examples in his writings, most of which refer to the complementarity of the sexes.
70. "Fuller's Synergetics and Sex Complementarity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1992): 3-16. See also her essay, "Man-Woman Complementarity: Catholic Inspiration," *Logos* 9, no. 3 (2006): 87-108.
71. Butler, "Embodiment," 45-59.
72. Butler, "Embodiment," 36.
73. "Paul's Teaching on the Ministry of Women," in *Women and Men in Ministry* (ed. R. L. Saucy and J. K. TenElshof; Chicago: Moody, 2001), 310.
74. This is the title of Pawson's 1988 book, cited in note 4 above.



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