

Apples and Oranges? Re-evaluating “Egalitarian” and “Complementarian” in the Gender Debate

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The discourse on the male-female gender dynamics, at least within evangelical Christianity, often revolves around the assumption that “egalitarian” and “complementarian” are accepted terms referring to the two opposing views. Following a 1986 convention organized by the Evangelical Theological Society on gender roles, two distinct camps emerged, each representing contrasting views that persist to this day.¹ Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) advocated for the egalitarian perspective that men and women share equal authority both within the church and in the home. On the other hand, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) asserted the complementarian position of male authority and female subordination, while emphasizing the different roles and equality of both genders before God. The book, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, part of the Counterpoints series, reinforced these positions.²

This article challenges this framing of the discourse within Christian circles, particularly with respect to the use of the terms “egalitarian” and “complementarian” as accurately representing the primary distinctions of each position. It argues that egalitarianism and complementarianism should not be treated as opposing viewpoints within the same debate but rather as separate discussions in themselves. The term “egalitarian” is related to structures and hierarchies, while the term “complementarian” or “complementarity” focusses on distinctions in nature and function.

Currently, the discussion has conflated both structure and function into the same debate, leaving little room for nuance. By carefully examining the meaning of each of these terms and analysing the historical development of this discussion, we will show the need for a shift in the framework of the discussion. So, while agreeing that both structure and function are relevant to the gender debate, we ask if they should constitute an opposing pair. Simply put, are we comparing apples with oranges simply because they are both fruits?³

Egalitarianism and complementarianism should not be treated as opposing viewpoints within the same debate but rather as separate discussions in themselves.

Historical Development of the Terms

A historical examination of the gender debate within Christian circles reveals an array of terminology used to frame the discourse over time. Those who have engaged with the debate have not always considered “egalitarian” and “complementarian” as terms to represent opposing views. The following historical survey confirms this.

1970s: Traditionalist vs. Egalitarian/Biblical Feminism

The debate on the role of men and women in the church emerged alongside the second wave of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 70s, a period marked by the growing assertion of women’s rights and participation in various societal domains.⁴ The prevailing social narrative of this era emphasized the equality of women, advocating for their unrestricted engagement in the workforce and in public life, grounded in their status as fully autonomous individuals with equal rights. Conversely, traditional perspectives upheld the notion of women’s domestic roles and prescribed behavioural norms aligned with this societal position. The women’s liberation movement contested these traditional views, with some advocating for equality, and others proposing the superiority of women over men. Additionally, some espoused the belief that gender differences were socially constructed, challenging the notion of inherent distinctions between men and women.

In response to the women’s liberation movement, authors like Virginia Mollenkott urged the church to earnestly confront and reassess traditional gender roles both within the household and the ecclesiastical sphere.⁵ One seminal work that stirred considerable discussion was that of evangelical authors Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty in 1974. They advocated that the church should acknowledge the intrinsic worth of women as human beings, equally bearing the image of God.⁶ They contended equality between men and women: “Only as all human beings—male and female—are regarded as being equally in a condition of need before God and equally recipients of his love and grace can the message of Christ be considered good news for women.”⁷

The book received various responses from evangelical circles spurring the emergence of both radical (Evangelical Women’s Caucus) and conservative (Christians for Biblical Equality) groups lobbying for the equal status of men and women in the church and at home.⁸ At this point, these two groups constituted the egalitarian viewpoint in the gender debate. The debate itself was framed as the “traditional” view versus the “egalitarian” view, as seen, for example, in an article published by *Post-American* magazine in 1975. Here Thomas Howard argued for “A Traditional View,” and Donald Dayton argued for “An Egalitarian View.”⁹ In 1979, Dallas Theological Seminary published an article that reworked the polar terms: “Traditionalist versus Evangelical Feminism.” The new term was to emphasize that the view was based on the Bible rather than on culture.¹⁰

Thus, by the end of the 1970s, the spectrum had an egalitarian/evangelical feminism point of view at one end, representing the newly awakened sense of equality and freedom among women. At the other end was the existing traditionalist view that advocated fixed roles and structures for each gender.¹¹ Worth noticing is that each point of view conflated the structure (of the relationship between men and women)

with nature/function (of men and women). This is a point that we will pick up in the next section.

1980s: Hierarchical vs. Egalitarian

Towards the end of the 70s,¹² it became increasingly evident that the term “hierarchical” more aptly expressed a contrast to the term “egalitarian.” For instance, Susan Foh (1979), advocating from the traditionalist/hierarchical stance, explicitly endorsed the “hierarchical model”¹³ in response to the egalitarian model. She argued:

To try to support the egalitarian model with Ephesians 5:23–24, one’s conception of Christ must be seriously damaged. The relationship between Christ and his church must be understood as a hierarchy; if it is not, Christ as the unique God-man is lost. . . . In the summary of marital duties (Eph. 5:33), nothing new is mentioned for husbands. But a new thought is introduced with reference to wives: they should fear their husbands. . . . the Christian is both to love and fear God (Ps. 34:8–9; Prov 1:7; 31:30; Deut. 11:1), and the Christian wife is both to love and fear her husband. This fear is not cringing before a hand that is quick to strike or a tongue quick to lash. “Fear” for the wife involves valuing the authority or headship of her husband. This attitude is necessary for proper submission. . . . the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife do not contradict “the reciprocity of mutual respect, self-sacrificing concern, and deep affection,” advocated by marriage-egalitarians. Both hierarchy and mutuality are required in the Christian marriage.¹⁴

Based on the hierarchical relationship between Christ and the church that Foh saw in Eph 5, she inferred that the same should exist between a husband and his wife. An understanding that the subordination of the wife should involve “fear” further emphasises that she saw this as an unequal relationship—a hierarchical one, and therefore, one based on the structure of the relationship between men and women.

A further example of the terms “hierarchical” and “egalitarian” being paired is by Dayton and Thomas (1975), who proposed that, “the real question—at least for most Christians [is]: Which of these views (the hierarchical or the egalitarian—or perhaps a synthesis of the two) has the clearer grounding in scripture?”¹⁵ Hierarchical was seen as naturally contrasting with egalitarian. Framing the debate along the same lines is egalitarian author Mary Evans (1983): “Paul presents us with a picture of marriage that is amazingly egalitarian . . . It is often suggested that the use of such terms as ‘head’ and ‘submission’ is evidence that Paul did see a hierarchical order in marriage, but . . . these terms are not necessarily used in that way.”¹⁶

On a side note, some, such as Stephen Clark (1980) felt the need to qualify the hierarchical view by proposing that women could still be considered equal to men while being subordinate to them. He argued: “The head and subordinate can both be of equal worth and value. In fact, they can be equal in many other ways, and still be in a relationship involving subordination. The subordinate can even be of greater rank and dignity, as Jesus was in relationship to his parents.”¹⁷

Shirley Lees (1984) brought together the various existing views under the series “When Christians Disagree,” in which the authors used the terms “hierarchical,” “traditional,” and “egalitarian” to describe the existing views.¹⁸ Carb Hoch (1987) summarised the three main views on the gender debate as being “the non-evangelical egalitarian, the evangelical egalitarian, and the hierarchical.”¹⁹ From these examples, we can conclude that the discussion at this stage was how each group understood the structural relationship between the two genders.

The implications of these points of view for church leadership were collated in the 1989 publication *Women in Ministry: Four Views*. The four different views were: “traditional,” “male leadership,” “plural ministry,” and “egalitarian.” The traditional view proposed that women should refrain from involvement in ministry altogether. The male leadership view endorsed limited involvement as long as it was under male leadership, conforming to the hierarchical position. The plurality view negated any necessity for ordination itself and thereby avoided gender arguments. Conversely, the egalitarian view supported the full participation of women in all forms of service and ministry.²⁰

It appears that the four views each primarily represent how men and women are structurally related to each other. From the standpoint of structure, each goes on to prescribe restrictive or liberative roles and functions for women in ministry. Thus, the traditional and male leadership views restrict women because they see women as structurally subordinate to men. The plural ministry and egalitarian views agree on a non-hierarchical relationship between men and women but arrive at different implications. The plurality view sees the need to do away with hierarchy altogether, while the egalitarian view rejects any restrictions on the roles and functions allowed to women. Here again, the debate has conflated structure and function into a single topic of debate.

1990s Onwards: Complementarian vs. Egalitarian

It was only in 1991 that the term “complementarian” was first used to describe the position that was previously referred to as either hierarchical or traditional. Wayne Grudem, one of the primary founders of the CBMW and coeditor of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, said:

If one word must be used to describe our position, we prefer the term *complementarian*, since it suggests both equality and beneficial differences between men and women. We are uncomfortable with the term “traditionalist” because it implies an unwillingness to let Scripture challenge traditional patterns of behavior, and we certainly reject the term “hierarchicalist” because it overemphasizes structured authority while giving no suggestion of equality or the beauty of mutual interdependence.²¹

Here, Grudem’s choice of word to describe CBMW’s position was not based on their differences with the egalitarian camp, nor on a unique characteristic of CBMW’s position. Rather, it was based on what they felt was comfortable and convenient—a point we will discuss in the next section.

To summarise the history of the terminology: In the 70s, the egalitarian position was contrasted against the traditionalist position. Further, in the 80s it was placed against the hierarchicalist position. In fact, at that time, James Beck (egalitarian) and Craig Blomberg (complementarian) described the traditionalist positions as just another version of the hierarchicalist position.²² It would thus be accurate to assert that, based on the historical usage of the term, “egalitarian” (with its emphasis on equality) should be paired opposite “hierarchicalist” (with its emphasis on ranking).

Scholarly Disagreement over Terms

After the publication of CBMW’s book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, a number of publications acknowledged the terms each group had chosen, yet expressed doubt that the term “complementarian” accurately described the CBMW’s position. For example, Kaye Cook and Lance Lee, while accepting that the neo-traditionalists had rechristened themselves as complementarian, went on to recognise that despite this, egalitarians did not stop subscribing to complementarity.²³ Craig Keener highlighted that it was indeed a challenge to use a term to accurately describe each view and yet keep both camps happy:

Each title risks misrepresenting the other side of the debate: most “complementarians,” for example, insist on the equality of persons (while maintaining gender-assigned differences in role). “Egalitarians” reject hierarchy yet accept the reality of (nonhierarchical) gender differences, hence speak of man and woman as complementary.²⁴

Mary Osburn felt the need to qualify the complementarian view as being hierarchical complementarianism.²⁵ William Webb suggested that the appropriate terms to describe the two opposing positions should be termed complementary egalitarianism (the egalitarian view) and ultra-soft patriarchy (the complementarian view).²⁶ Millard Erickson argued instead for the terminology pair “egalitarian complementarians” and “hierarchical complementarians.” His rationale was that, “The question is not whether the roles are different. It is whether the difference necessarily involves one person having the final authority in decision making. . . . That assumption is that if there is difference in role, there also must be difference in relative authority.”²⁷ Meanwhile, some scholars continued to use the term “biblical feminism” to describe the egalitarian position.²⁸

In 2004, Grudem published a book that analysed over a hundred questions raised against the complementarian position. One such question involved the use of the term “complementary” to describe the egalitarian position, as in Webb’s coinage of the term “complementary egalitarianism.” Grudem replied:

Complementarians will consider Webb’s terminology offensive and confusing. As a cofounder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in 1987, and as a co-author of the complementarian book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, I wish to lodge a protest against Webb’s use of two terms. His phrase “complementary egalitarianism,” which he uses to describe a thoroughgoing egalitarian position, simply confuses the issues by using complementary

for a position totally antithetical to what complementarians hold. . . . Since that time, complementarian has been the term we have consistently used to describe our position, and it has been widely (and courteously) used by others to describe our position as well. For Webb to apply it to an egalitarian position is to needlessly confuse the issues. . . . It would seem more appropriate in academic debate, and indeed a simple matter of common courtesy, to refer to positions by the terms that the representatives of those positions choose for themselves rather than by pejorative terms that they reject.²⁹

In response to Grudem’s claim on sole right to use the word complementary to be limited to the position held by the CBMW, a number of critical points need to be made. First, in the quotation above, Grudem claims that the descriptor “complementarian” has been widely used by others to describe the CBMW position. However, this is not completely true. As seen in the historical debate, up until 1991, “complementarity” had not been used to describe any one position in the spectrum. Moreover, the appropriate usage of the term was challenged even after the term was chosen. The term “complementarity” was often used by authors from both camps to emphasise that men and women are different from each other.

Secondly, the choice to use the word “complementarian” to describe the CBMW position was not based on the unique emphasis of their position. Rather it was chosen because it was the term they were most comfortable with, finding that it conveniently obfuscated role complementarity with male authority. An analogy would be the debate between infant baptism and adult baptism. Let us say the adult baptism camp chose to describe their position as “water baptism” because (a) water was a key element of their baptism, and (b) because baptismal age was not their only consideration. Eventually, they might argue that since they coined the term “water baptism” to describe themselves, they had sole right to the term—even though infant baptism also uses water.

Erickson responded to Grudem’s claim for sole right to the term “complementarian”:

By way of contrast, there is nothing in the usual definition of the term that carries the restrictions that Grudem’s use of it entails. . . . Whether getting a concept and affixing one’s term to it, or taking over a term and attaching it to one’s meaning, the endeavor is similar. This means that in my judgment these persons have engaged in stipulative definition and have usurped a term that probably should be shared.³⁰

Thirdly, and in line with Erickson’s comment, it seems that Grudem’s use of “complementarian” includes the elements of both equality and distinction. However, the term “complementarian” can be used to describe the concept of distinction in the context of equality as well as hierarchy. Erickson, as we have already cited, argued: “I find a better distinction to be between egalitarian complementarians and hierarchical complementarians. The question is not whether the roles are different. It is whether the difference necessarily involves one person having the final authority in decision making.”³¹ Lucy Peppiatt similarly said that if a complementarian would claim that he or she sees men and women

coexisting and working together in reciprocal, harmonious, and interdependent relations, the conditions of this reciprocity, harmony, and interdependence are grossly imbalanced because the conditions of the relations have been established on unquestioned notions of male authority and power. The complementarity of these relations will only endure for as long as a woman agrees to renounce authority, power, and autonomy in favor of a man, for the common good.³²

Thus, a more appropriate description of the two camps would be “complementarity with hierarchy” (complementarian) and “complementarity without hierarchy” (egalitarian). In fact, in the 2004 book *Discovering Biblical Equality*—which was a response to CBMW’s 1991 publication—the subtitle was, appropriately, *Complementarity Without Hierarchy*.³³

It appears, then, that there was no clear consensus within academic circles as to the terms to describe each position accurately. It often depended on what one was arguing against. For example, when arguing against the traditionalist position, the preferred opposing position seemed to be biblical feminism, which referred to progressive thinking on the role of women. When one described one position as being hierarchical, the appropriate counter term of choice was “egalitarian.” “Complementarity,” as a term, was unique. It was used by both camps to describe the fact that men and women have inherent differences that can complement each other.

A fuller enquiry into the meaning of the terms “egalitarian” and “complementarian” will aid in using these terms appropriately in the gender debate.

Understanding the Terms

Let us first consider the term “egalitarian.” When used in the discussion on gender, both within and outside theological circles, it refers to the understanding that all people, in this case both men and women, are equal. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains that, “an egalitarian favors equality of some sort. . . . People should be treated as equals, should treat one another as equals, should relate as equals, or enjoy an equality of social status of some sort.”³⁴ Within the gender debate in Christian circles, egalitarianism is similarly understood as referring to biblical equality. The emphasis is on the biblical aspect, as this understanding is drawn from the Bible and not from society or culture. Hence, the position of egalitarianism within the theological gender discourse would be that both men and women are equal, and that:

maleness and femaleness, in and of themselves, neither privilege nor curtail one’s ability to be used to advance the kingdom, or to glorify God in any dimension of ministry, mission, society, or family. . . . Biblical equality, therefore, denies that there is any created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy based solely on sexual difference. Egalitarianism recognizes patterns of authority in the family, church, and society—it is not anarchistic—but rejects the notion that any office, ministry, or opportunity should be denied anyone on the grounds of being male or female. This is because women and men are made equally in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27), equally fallen (Rom 3:23), equally redeemable through Christ’s

life, death, and resurrection (Jn 3:16), equally participants in the new-covenant community (Gal 3:28), equally heirs of God in Christ (1 Pet 3:7), and equally able to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for life and ministry (Acts 2:17). In short, this is the essence of biblical equality.³⁵

Contrary to what is sometimes falsely assumed, the subscribers of the egalitarian view within evangelical circles never denied inherent differences in gender. They have always subscribed to gender differences but recognised that those differences cannot place members of one gender at a higher level than the other. What is clear from this description is that egalitarianism has to do with structures and power dynamics. The natural opposite position to egalitarianism would be an acceptance that there exists some form of hierarchy between men and women, or that gender differences lead to one gender having authority over another. This has been acknowledged, as seen earlier, by a number of Christian scholars.

In fact, by 2001, despite the two views at either end of the spectrum of the gender debate being established as the complementarian view versus the egalitarian view, in the book *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, the editors highlighted that “it seems to us that hierarchicalist is the more natural opposite to egalitarian and more clearly describes the essence of the position—that in certain contexts there are relationships of authority and submission in which gender roles may not be reversed.”³⁶ However, according to Stephen Lowe, those who subscribe to the hierarchicalist position also believe men and women are equal. This equality is thought to be only soteriological; that is, it operates within the spiritual realm or in the spiritual position of men and women before God. Sociologically or functionally this equality may not exist.³⁷ Egalitarianism, on the other hand, would entail comprehensive equality, both soteriological and sociological.

The term “complementarian,” on the other hand, has nothing to do with power or with structures. Complementarity, from which the term is derived, has to do with how different entities work together. This concept exists across disciplines including, and not limited to, theology, physics, genetics, economics, and psychology. For example, in his 1970 book *Interaction Concepts of Personality*, re-published in 2019, psychologist Robert Carson speaks of complementarity in the context of human interactions and interpersonal relations.³⁸ Complementary human interaction could take place in a dominant-submissive relationship or an equal-affiliation relationship.³⁹ In the field of economics, it can be used synonymously for “synergy” and involves “studying the interactions among pairs of interrelated decisions.”⁴⁰ Within genetics as well, complementarity involves studying how genes interact with each other. For example, if one organism carries a defective mutation of a particular gene, but mates with another organism which has a functional version of that gene, the functional gene from the second organism can complement the defective gene from the first organism, resulting in a normal expression of that genetic characteristic in the offspring.⁴¹

In other words, complementarity refers to the principle or phenomenon where two or more different entities or processes are interdependent or interrelated. These entities or processes complement each other by fulfilling different functions that

contribute to a synergistic whole. Right from the beginning of the gender debate, complementarity was understood in this way. Scanzoni and Hardesty, when describing four ways different religions have understood the relationship between men and women, said that within complementarity, “the sexes are viewed as different but complementary. Each sex is considered equal in worth but has its own sphere to fill. An overlapping of the spheres is precluded or at least discouraged; rather, they are considered counterparts, rounding out, reinforcing, and supplementing one another.”⁴² Clark, who argued from a hierarchical position, also agreed that “the New Testament approach attempts to create ‘one person,’ a husband and wife united, but with a division of labor that allows each to extend the ability of the other to function. The husband and wife become engaged in a relationship of reciprocal service and interdependence without competition. They are, in short, complementary in role.”⁴³ Evans, from the egalitarian camp, saw complementarity not only as difference but also as the need to complement or complete each other when she said that, in the Bible,

the relation between men and women is presented in terms of the three principles of diversity, unity, and complementarity. There is diversity in that they were created distinctly and differently and that distinction can and must never be negated; unity in that they are one in Christ and stand side by side as heirs of God, and complementarity in that they are interdependent and each needs the other if their lives are to be lived as God intended them to be.⁴⁴

What we see in the idea of complementarity is a clear distinction between the two genders, but also the need for the genders to work together as one. Complementarity can work within hierarchy or apart from it. Thus, we can define complementarity as having to do with nature and function, but not with structure. As such, it would be inappropriate to pair it with egalitarianism, which concerns itself with structure.

The issue with the complementarian position is that it unhelpfully conflates the concepts of hierarchy (structure in relationships) and complementarity (function in relationships). What is a way to undo this tangle?

A Suggested Way Forward

So far in this article, we have argued that the terms “egalitarian” and “complementarian” should not be construed as an opposing pair at the ends of a spectrum. Scholars who have identified this issue have suggested alternative terms but have continued to keep them paired. For example, Peppiatt (2019) argued that the accurate terms to describe the two positions should be “hierarchicalist” and “mutualist.”⁴⁵ Here again we see a pairing of structure (hierarchicalist) with function (mutualist), comparing apples and oranges rather than like with like.

Traditionally, theological debates visualized as a spectrum often have opposing viewpoints at either end with a common variable being expressed at varying degrees through the spectrum. This common variable allows adherents of each view to recognize that they are discussing the same issue but also to see their unique

perspectives being represented. However, this is not the case when we consider the terms egalitarian and complementarian.

Additionally, from a practical standpoint, most adherents of the egalitarian view recognize that they also endorse complementarity (the differences between the genders) but cannot use the term complementarian, as it represents the opposing camp. Likewise, complementarians also believe that men and women are equal before God but refrain from using the term egalitarian. Conflating structure and function can also result in strawman and false analogy fallacies where opposing camps are falsely accused of promoting views they do not subscribe to. For example, since egalitarians believe in the equality of genders, they have been falsely accused of rejecting any distinctions between the two genders or even rejecting the need for gender.

One way to remedy the misrepresentations is to recognize the accurate meanings of the two terms and, based on this, develop two distinct debates.

Debate 1: Gender Structure

Peppiatt (2019) argued that the accurate terms to describe the two positions should be “hierarchicalist” and “mutualist.”

Proposed Terminology: Egalitarian vs. Hierarchicalist

Within evangelical circles, both camps have emphasized the equality of both genders in relation to God. However, they have not agreed on whether that equality carries over into the social relationship of men and women. As discussed earlier, hierarchicalism, though recognizing that men and women are equal in status before God, does not require that theological equality be extrapolated into sociological equality. They see that women need to submit to men unidirectionally.

However, egalitarians hold to comprehensive equality. They are not against hierarchical structures, which they concede may be necessary for effective function. For egalitarians, these structures are not gender-based. This is what is unique about the egalitarian position when compared to the hierarchicalist position: absolute equality as against sociological hierarchy.

Based on this, a simplified spectrum to describe whether men and women are equal in relation to each other could be egalitarian versus hierarchicalist. In this opposing pair, egalitarians recognize that men and women in the church and at home rank equally and hence, mutually submit to each other. Hierarchicalists believe that sociologically, men rank above women, and hence, the woman needs to unidirectionally submit to the man. This opposing pair is based on the element unique to each position and dissolves the confusion arising from lack of clarity.

Debate 2: Gender Function

Proposed Terminology: Gender-dependent Complementarity vs. Gender-independent Complementarity

As discussed earlier, complementarity has to do with distinctions in nature and function. Gender complementarity would recognise that men and women are distinct in nature, but how those distinctions impact their functioning would be a matter of debate.

The *gender-dependent complementarian* would argue that there is a purpose for this distinction and hence it does influence how they function in the roles they are given. The biological differences, for example, influence how men and women experience and respond to the world around them, and this impacts the way they function. Both genders may occupy a particular role, but their gender distinctions would, to some extent, influence the way they function in that role. Moreover, they are not meant to function independently (Gen 2:18) but rather, interdependently. Such a view emphasises the need—for example, in a family—for both the mother and father to contribute, but in distinct ways. This view thus values gender distinctions as God-given—not as a means to restrict what roles men and women play but as a means to offer variety in how they function in those roles. In other words, this view would argue that due to their distinctions, the genders gainfully complement one another. It must be noted that gender here is not the sole contributing factor towards complementarity, since personality differences and cultural differences could also contribute positively. However, the point here is: Gender impacts functioning.

Alternatively, the *gender-independent complementarian*, while acknowledging biological differences, would deny any functional distinctions between genders. All roles can be equally and completely fulfilled by either gender independently. Functioning in a role should be based on ability, training, gifts, or even calling. As a result, there is no need for men and women to work together or complement each other. Teams can be all men or all women as long as they have the right gift-mix. This view can also be termed as gender non-essentialism. Maleness or femaleness does not add anything to how one functions. Simply put, gender does not impact functioning.

How would these two separate debates, one on structure and one on function, take shape in real-life? The debates could potentially produce four different combinations for the church and home. The reader can ask which combination describes their own position best.

Position 1: Egalitarian + Gender-dependent Complementarian

A certain person could be egalitarian (structure) and gender-dependent complementarian (function). Their position would be that in the *church* leadership roles are open to both men and women. Both are encouraged to bring their unique gender perspectives to their roles. Teams are intentionally mixed-gender to benefit diverse viewpoints.

At *home*, they would support that spouses make decisions together, with equal say in matters and both partners taking on any household role or responsibility. Gender uniqueness is recognised, which leads to valuing the unique gender perspectives contributing to the overall

functioning of the home. There are some things that mothers and fathers would do differently. For example, a mother may understand and empathise with her daughter who is going through puberty in a way that the father does not. She then brings that expertise to their parenting and decision-making regarding that particular issue. The father could also contribute, but in a different way. Together they provide what they individually could not.⁴⁶

Position 2: Egalitarian + Gender-independent Complementarian

A second possibility is that a person is egalitarian (structure) and gender-independent complementarian (function). Their position in matters of *church* would be similar to the first scenario, however, gender would be seen as non-essential or irrelevant to how they function in their roles. There is no need for teams to include both genders, as their gifting or ability would be sufficient.

At *home*, decisions are primarily based on expertise and ability. All roles can be equally and efficiently performed by either gender without any gender-unique input from either spouse.

Position 3: Hierarchicalist + Gender-dependent Complementarian

In a third scenario, let's say a person is hierarchicalist (structure) and gender-dependent complementarian (function). They would hold that in the *church*, only men can occupy certain authority or leadership positions. Women are seen as valuable, as they bring in their gender-unique perspectives to the roles they are permitted to function in. Their contributions are seen as vital to the healthy functioning of the church.

At *home*, the husband is considered the head of the home and final decision maker. Input from the wife is valuable but has to be submitted to the husband as his *helper*. Gender-unique contributions from both spouses are seen as vital for the healthy functioning of the home.

The discourse surrounding gender function and structures within Christianity has long been framed as egalitarian versus complementarian.

Position 4: Hierarchicalist + Gender-independent Complementarian

A final possibility is that a person is hierarchicalist (structure) and gender-independent complementarian (function). Their position in the *church* would be that men occupy all positions of authority and leadership and do not see the input of women as necessary. Women can serve and function in certain roles but are not seen as vital. At *home*, husbands are the head of the home and capable of making all decisions. As gender is non-essential, apart from their expertise or abilities, wives do not have any unique contributions to make.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding gender function and structures within Christianity has long been framed as egalitarian versus

complementarian. However, a historical analysis of these terms shows that the debate has not always been framed in this way. An examination of the wider use and meaning of these terms persuades that they cannot be posed against each other. By disentangling the conflated discussions on gender structures and gender functions, a more inclusive approach can emerge.

The debate on gender structures is more accurately captured as: egalitarian versus hierarchicalist. This debate addresses the fundamental question of whether, within the church and the home, men and women stand in an equal relationship or in a hierarchical relationship. The debate on gender functions is more accurately depicted as gender-dependent complementarity versus gender-independent complementarity. This debate concerns itself with a focused examination of whether inherent differences between genders necessitate distinct roles and interdependence, or whether gender is irrelevant in the functioning of roles.

Further research is required to validate the appropriateness and practical applicability of these terms. However, carefully identifying and separating out the opposing pairs allows for a more precise and constructive dialogue, enabling participants to engage with the specific nuances of each discussion without conflating disparate issues. In other words, we are finally comparing apples with apples and oranges with oranges.

Notes

1. Mimi Haddad, "History Matters," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021).
2. James Beck and Craig Blomberg, eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Counterpoints (Zondervan, 2001); James Beck, ed., *Two Views on Women in Ministry – Revised Edition*, Counterpoints (Zondervan, 2005). The shifts that took place in the revised edition included, first, that one editor from the original edition, Craig Blomberg, replaced one of the contributors of the complementarian position. Second, the contributors of each position responded to each essay as opposed to the only the editors doing so in the original edition.
3. As the scope of this article is limited to discussing the terms used, it refrains from extensively engaging with the Scriptures or arguments underpinning each position.
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46. This view in no way undermines single-parent homes or questions a single parent's effectiveness in being a good parent. This is only describing a situation where both parents are present.



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