

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

PART 1: UNION AND DISTINCTION

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“It’s best to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it.”

Ecclesiastes 7:18, *The Message*

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Note from the author: I respectfully request that this paper isn’t distributed outside Grace Church Truro without my permission.

All quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV).

Introduction

Some papers produced by church leaders talk about their subject matter with a high degree of detachment and objectivity. This isn't one of them. It marks the culmination of an intensely personal process of reflection and study that began in earnest about twelve years ago.

In 2014 I wrote a paper entitled 'Who Can Teach?' to help the Grace Church elders form and articulate our convictions about teaching in our Sunday meetings. That formed the basis of some teaching on the Bible and gender that we delivered to the church and my paper was made available to the congregation. Some agreed with our conclusions, others disagreed. Some people were astonished that we even felt the need to talk about this issue in the church. Surely the matter is settled? Men and women are equal, aren't they? Isn't that what we see reflected in the ministry of Jesus? Didn't he point to a future in which the inequality of the sexes is abolished? Isn't this what Paul is getting at in Galatians 2:28: 'There is no male nor female; you are all one in Christ Jesus'?

Since I last wrote on this topic, I've heard people in Grace Church and our wider movement say these kinds of things a lot. But, as I've discussed this area with various people, I've realised that the paper I wrote in 2014 was crying out for a refresh. In particular, I felt that it was important to widen the scope of the paper to explore, not just what the Bible says about women and men in ministry, but what it teaches more broadly about the complementarity of the sexes. I also realised that my own thinking had developed in a number of areas, especially in relation to the meaning of the 'terror text' (Smyth, 2016) in 1 Timothy 2 where Paul writes, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man' (v. 12).

It's time to tackle that passage and others like it head on. As I do so, I want to be honest about the fact that all I'm able to do is provide a general survey of the main issues as I see them. The literature on this subject is vast and growing all the time. Among the huge amount of material that's out there, some readers will notice a particular emphasis on sources that come from within the Newfrontiers¹ family of churches.

The emphasis is deliberate. Since embarking on this project, my priority has been to engage with material written for churches with values similar to our own in Grace Church Truro. That doesn't mean that I wish simply to present or defend 'the party line'. For one thing, the idea of a party line is difficult to identify, as I intend to show. But, in addition, some will find in my writing a push back against some of the views that were widely assumed in a previous generation of our movement.

Conversation partners

As I've researched this subject, there are three sources that I've found myself returning to again and again. These three thinkers have been my closest conversation partners, although I don't find myself in agreement with all the views they hold:

i) *Beautiful Difference* by Andrew Wilson (2020)

For a long time, if someone asked me to recommend something they could read that would give them a clear and thoughtful argument for male leadership in the church and home, I didn't have an answer. The large and influential tome, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (1991), was long the go-to resource for leaders in the Newfrontiers family of churches. But the general approach of that book is too conservative and dogmatic, in my opinion. Moreover, as a

¹ Grace Church Truro is part of the Advance movement which grew out of Newfrontiers. The name 'Newfrontiers' now refers to a fellowship of apostolic leaders but is still useful shorthand for referring to the wider group of churches of which Grace Church is a part.

book that was published over thirty years ago, it doesn't include more recent developments in biblical scholarship.

Then Andrew Wilson published his article on complementarity. I still regard this as the best 'one stop shop' for someone wanting to get a handle on why some churches restrict eldership to men. Some readers of this paper will recognise Wilson as the tutor of the Advance Theology Course that we use in Grace Church. He has a reputation for being one of the most astute thinkers in the Newfrontiers family of churches. One of my old theology tutors, Ian Paul, along with his associate, Andrew Bartlett, are no fans of Wilson's views on eldership but their respect for Wilson is obvious when they call him 'perhaps the leading European theologian of complementarianism'² (2022). High praise indeed!

I don't accept all of Wilson's points in his article, but what *Beautiful Difference* has given me is a theological framework which goes some way, I think, towards bridging the gap between the different views on men and women that are held by people in the Church.³ Wilson has been the primary influence on the main message of this paper.

ii) *How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy* by Terran Williams (2022)

When Grace Church first began partnering with the Advance group of Newfrontiers churches, Terran Williams was a significant voice in the movement. Laura and I would look forward to his input at conferences. A dynamic leader, clear thinker and passionate communicator, Williams was always worth listening to.

Then, one day, he disappeared. Terran Williams was no longer at our movement gatherings, and no one said a thing. A couple of years later, I learned some of what had happened. As a result of some research that he'd carried out, Williams had arrived at a different theological position on what the Bible teaches about women and men.

How God Sees Women is the culmination of Williams's research. Laura and I devoured this book. In it, Williams packs no punches. His aim is to persuade readers to reject any theological position that legitimates 'men [having] predominant power' (p. 19) and embrace what he calls 'male-female mutualism' in which men and women 'serve and partner alongside each other in all spheres of life' (p. 22).

Williams has received criticism for the approach he takes in the book. Throughout the book, Williams focuses his attack on a conservative theological position which many readers, especially in the UK, may not recognise. His pastoral instincts also differ from my own. Where Williams is on a mission to call people to come over and join his side, my primary interest is in mediating between the two sides by helping them arrive at a mutual understanding. These quibbles aside, I think that Williams has written an important book. Williams's personal journey adds colour and weight to his thesis and Laura and I found that several aspects of his story resonated with our own.

iii) *Gender Quality* by Stefan Liston (2023)

Stef Liston is an elder in a Newfrontiers-partner church in London. In some ways, this beautiful book (I mean that in the concrete, aesthetic sense and not just in terms of its written content) can be read as a response to Terran Williams (he specifically mentions *How God Sees Women* in his Acknowledgments) but it's also more than that. He announces that his hope is to write 'in a conciliatory spirit' (p. 3) and present the arguments on both sides of the debate in their strongest form. I think his aim is an admirable one. Liston moves quickly from one side of the theological divide to the other, affirming aspects of each view in turn as well as commenting on where he finds them less strong.

² If the term 'complementarianism' is new to you, don't worry: we'll get to its definition later.

³ Just a brief word on my personal convention. I use the term 'Church' (capital 'c') to refer to the universal Church consisting of all believers. I use the term 'church' (lower case 'c') to refer to the local congregation.

Liston finally lands in a very different place to Williams, but where Williams's tone is fervent, urgent and strident, Liston adopts a tone that's far more cool, calm and moderate. It's the best book-length defence of a conservative, traditionalist understanding of gender roles that I've seen.

Having said that, I don't think I've ever read a book which I've ended up annotating more extensively (the wider-than-usual margins of this unusually formatted book were certainly put to good use). Despite Liston's intention to be even-handed in his treatment of the different views, he's very quick to seize on ideas that support a 'moderate complementarian' position.⁴ That criticism aside, my appreciation of this book is reflected in the fact that, in what follows, I quote more frequently from this source than from any other.

Heads and hearts

Like Liston, I aim to take a conciliatory approach. At Grace Church, our beliefs and practice don't fall neatly in one camp. This position can be difficult to maintain. It's unlikely to satisfy someone who sees the issues as being black and white. Sure enough, over the years, I've received fire from all sides, both from people who see me and my fellow elders as being too conservative, and from others who see us as not being conservative enough.

I think there are strong theological and biblical reasons for the position that we hold. But it's important to say at the outset that this isn't a simple matter of finding out 'what the Bible says'. Questions about male and female roles in church life can't be dealt with in the abstract. They touch on deep matters of the heart, on issues of vocation and identity. Coming to any resolution on the question of who can exercise authority in the Church is truly a journey you have to go through in your heart as much as through your head (Betts & Kemm, 2013). We can easily miss that. *I* can miss that. That's why the way in which we approach the questions is as important as the conclusions that we come to. Liston puts it this way:

I would hazard a guess that our perspectives on these matters are as much to do with the condition of our own hearts as they are to do with anything else. ... [I]f there is anything in us that wants the answers to matters of gender to fall a certain way, then we are immediately vulnerable; biased hearts create dark and dangerous blind spots (2023, p. 4).

Of course, none of us can approach these issues in a way that's entirely neutral. How we think about masculinity and femininity, roles in marriage and leadership in the church will always be coloured by a host of experiences and influences (Piper & Grudem, 1991, p. 105). Some of those things are things that we're aware of; others exert their influence in subconscious ways. So, we need to proceed carefully and prayerfully, paying close attention to the motions of the heart – the rise and fall of our desires, a sudden reaction to a thought or opinion – as we go along.

To help us in that process, I've written a series of four papers, of which this is the first. In this paper, I'll be working with broad brush strokes, setting out a theological framework that I believe can help us think about masculinity and femininity in a biblical way. In the second and third papers, I drill down into some of the detail concerning what specific New Testament passages say about men and women. The second paper, which looks at 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34-35, is the more technical of the two and some readers may prefer to skip that one altogether. The third paper looks at 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and includes a defence of why we have women teach in our Sunday services at Grace Church. The fourth paper is the shortest but, in some ways, the most important of the four. Here, I'll talk about what we do with our disagreements in the church and provide a real-life case study on how to disagree well.

Through this writing project, my desire is to try and walk in the way of Jesus and help others do the same. I'm under no illusion that I have my own share of 'dark and dangerous blind spots'. One of the things that can help each of us identify and address our blind spots is doing things in team. I'm grateful

⁴ Liston calls himself 'a very moderate complementarian' (p. 185).

for the eldership team at Grace Church, consisting of myself, Matt Leach, John Peters and Ben Sewell. The time we spent grappling with an earlier draft of this paper was one of the most enriching experiences I've had since entering pastoral ministry. While the writing of this paper has been all mine (and hence any errors that may unwittingly have been included), its conclusions as they pertain to our practice in Grace Church are held by all the elders. I've tried to reflect this fact through a shift of pronouns from 'I' to 'we' as I approach the end of the paper.

The process of writing this paper isn't complete. I anticipate producing subsequent editions which will include various corrections and revisions that are raised along the way. Like so many people in Grace Church, I'm still working these things through. My prayer as I've been engaged in this writing project is that the Spirit would work on all of our hearts, conforming us more to the image of Christ:

[Women] had never known a man like this Man – there never has been another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature.

(Dorothy L. Sayers, quoted in Bessey, 2013, p. 10).

The Debate

Within the Christian community, there's disagreement about male and female roles in family life and in the church. What's the debate about? Let's begin with what it *isn't* about. It isn't a debate about male-female equality. Christians of all stripes affirm that 'God created man and woman equal' and 'that man and woman are of equal worth before God' (Köstenberger, 2001, p. 259). To deny either of these things is to go against both the teaching and tenor of Scripture. Let's be clear: any church that denies these things has no right calling itself 'Christian'.⁵

Nor is the debate about whether women 'have been called to exercise their spiritual gifts actively in the church' (ibid, p. 259). Even Wayne Grudem, who is more conservative in his views on women than I am, affirms that 'God often gives women equal or greater spiritual gifts than men' and that women should be encouraged 'to have full and free participation in the various ministries of the church' (1994, p. 937).

What, then, is the debate about?

Not that God created man and woman equal. Nor that men and women are called to exercise their spiritual gifts actively in the church. The disagreement is based on an additional conviction that's held by some, but not all Christians, namely that 'men and women are created different and that they have been assigned different roles within which they are to fulfil their callings in the home and the church' (Köstenberger, 2001, p. 259).

Notice, then, that the debate is not over inherent *value* but the appropriateness of someone having a particular *role*. Consider these two things:

Equal in
dignity/value

Equal in
role/function

These two statements are conceptually distinct. Andrew Wilson (2015a) uses the analogy of playing the guitar. When I play the guitar, my hands are equal in dignity yet different in function. In the same way (some Christians would argue), men aren't more important than women, or women than men, but each are created to do a different thing.

The point about value and role being different things is frequently missed or glazed over. One of the factors that plays into this is the fact that western culture in general doesn't recognise the distinction. Within our culture, there's a general assumption that ontological equality (equality in terms of being) and functional equality (equality in terms of what someone is permitted to do) are essentially two aspects of the same thing. This leads to the following kind of argument being formulated:

Men and women are equal in the sight of God.
Therefore, there are no things that men can do which women shouldn't do.
Q.E.D. Case proven.

I hope it's obvious that the step from Point 1 to Point 2 is a leap in logic. The first statement is certainly true. It's as well established on biblical grounds as it's possible for any statement to be. But the second statement may or may not be true. To determine its truth value, we'll need to look carefully at what the Bible teaches about the roles of women and men.

⁵ Although, sadly, this has not been obvious through much of the history of the Church. See Brown, 1991 and Williams, 2022, Ch. 2.

Two important terms

The problem is that, within the Christian community, there are different views on what the Bible actually teaches about the roles of men and women. At this point we need to get to grips with a couple of key terms. How Christians think about gender and role is often encapsulated in the terms ‘egalitarian’ and ‘complementarian’:

- *Egalitarian* (or *mutualist*) relates to those who believe – often very passionately and on the basis of reasoning from Scripture – that all roles in church life are equally open to men and women.
- The term *complementarian* (or *hierarchicalist*), on the other hand, relates to those who believe – often equally passionately and on the basis of reasoning from Scripture – that men and women are equal in value and that God has created men and women to have different roles in church and family life.

These terms certainly have their uses. It’s helpful to have terms that can be used as shorthand for where people land in a debate. But the terms ‘complementarian’ and ‘egalitarian’ also come with a health warning. This is because they might imply that there are really only two positions on women in ministry. You’re either egalitarian *or* complementarian.

When the debate is framed in this way, these terms do as much to impede understanding as they do to facilitate it. This is because we’re dealing with a complex and multi-faceted debate. The issues aren’t binary. There’s a *spectrum* of belief.

When I started out in church leadership, the preacher whom everyone was listening to (on our ipods!) was Mark Driscoll. Driscoll was famously outspoken in his support for a complementarian reading of Scripture, but would I wish for one moment to be identified with his brand of complementarianism? Don’t you believe it.⁶ I sympathise with a comment made by the American speaker and author, Beth Moore, who left her complementarian denomination when it lurched to the right during Trump’s first presidential term. When asked if she currently identifies as a complementarian or egalitarian, Moore expresses her weariness with the reductionistic way the debate is framed, saying (or perhaps sighing):

You could ask me one question, and I’d probably land on the complementarian side. You could ask me another, and I’d definitely land on the egalitarian side. At the end of the day, I have seen a misuse of both categories. And I am just tired of them (Moore, 2023).

The fact is that when it comes to thinking about men and women in ministry, there aren’t two categories of belief with clear blue water between them.⁷ This isn’t a binary debate; it’s multi-faceted. That means we need to take the time to listen, really listen, to what others are saying to make sure that we’ve understood their position correctly. This can’t be done in an exchange of soundbites or tweets. It can only be done relationally, in a spirit of genuine dialogue, with a shared commitment to growing in mutual understanding.

⁶ It’s now widely recognised that Driscoll’s views on women were, at various points and to varying degrees, misogynistic, anti-biblical and resulted in many women (and men) being hurt. I wonder how were so many of us were able to miss it at the time? See *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, Episode 5: *The Things We Do to Women* - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/mars-hill-mark-driscoll-podcast-things-we-do-women.html> [accessed 4 Nov 2023]

⁷ In Paper 3, we’ll see that there are different views within the Newfrontiers family of churches concerning women teaching.

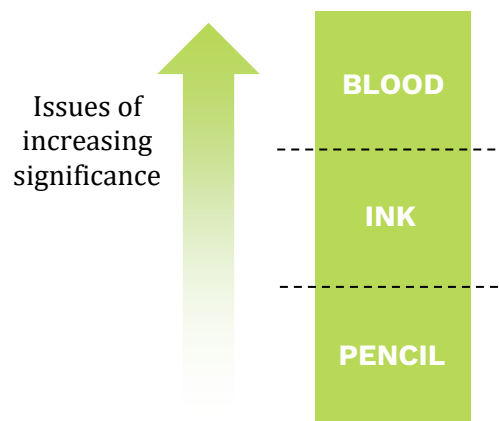
Pencil, ink and blood

Right at the outset, there's one more conceptual thing that needs to be understood. Christians sometimes draw a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' issues, where primary issues are non-negotiable ('gospel') issues and secondary issues are of lesser importance. On primary issues it's necessary for members of a church to be of one mind but, where secondary issues are concerned, there's room for people to hold different views.

I think we need a more sophisticated framework to help us navigate areas where there are differences of opinion in church life.⁸ Andrew Wilson (2018, p. 135), following Keith Drury (2005), advocates for not two categories of issues, but three. The idea is that some things are written in blood, some are written in ink, and others are written in pencil. Those things that are written in blood are the non-negotiables in the Christian life. An example would be the absolute equality of men and women before God. Written-in-blood truths are the things on which we can't afford to compromise. They are the things which define Christian belief as being distinctly Christian.

At the other end of the scale are things that are written in pencil. These are matters on which it's ok to be sketchy. They're things on which we're open to being corrected at any time. In one of my favourite quotes of all time, the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann remarks that 'the Bible is not an answer book to all of the curious questions we may ask' (1986, p. 44). It's silent on a whole bunch of matters which may interest and intrigue us. What about the existence of intelligent life on other planets? I don't know. I have some thoughts, but I don't hold to any of them with anything approaching deep conviction. I'm content to write them in pencil.

Then there's a third category in the middle and, for many of us, this will perhaps be the largest category of the three. 'Written in ink' is where I put those things where I carry a degree of conviction – perhaps even a high level of conviction – but about which I've decided, 'I'm not going to die on that hill.' They matter but they don't matter absolutely. They're not of salvation importance even if they happen to be important to me.



Now, which category is the best one for beliefs about gender roles? It's not an easy question to answer. There may be members of Grace Church who have beliefs that are written in pencil. They're very unsure of their views and recognise that their views are still relatively unformed and open to revision. Others would say that their beliefs about male and female roles are written in ink. The one thing that we would say definitively is that, at Grace Church, we don't regard these issues as being things that we would write in blood. Our blood issues are things like the sovereignty of God, the deity and humanity of Christ and salvation by grace through faith⁹. The things we believe about women and men in ministry may be

⁸ The content that follows has been mostly taken from a previous blog article (Sampson, 2022). In that article, I apply the blood-ink-pencil framework to different views that Christians hold on creation.

⁹ At Grace Church, we define written-in-blood issues in church-historical terms with reference to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (<https://www.stpauls.w-berks.sch.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=84&type=pdf>)

important, but they're not *that* important. They're not things that we would die for or prioritise in our regular scheme of Bible preaching and teaching.

At this point, an immediate application comes into view: there's room for a range of views on gender roles to be held in Grace Church. We don't make it a 'membership issue'. There are members of Grace Church, including those who serve as leaders in the church, who don't see things as I do. Is that ok? Absolutely.

What I've just said may give the impression that we don't really care what people believe about gender roles. That's not what I'm saying at all. The Grace Church elders do believe that the Bible gives us parameters for what to think about men and women. We also believe that the elders need to be clear on what we believe and articulate those views with clarity and with one voice. This paper and the papers that follow are an attempt to do just that. For us, at least, our views on men and women in ministry are mostly written in ink, not pencil. But – and this is the important point – when it comes to matters that are written in ink, we don't adopt a hard-line approach. What I mean by that is that we would never wish to force someone's conscience if, after wrestling in earnest with the Scriptures for themselves, they happen to think differently to us.

Back in 2014, when I wrote my original paper on *Who Can Teach?* I concluded by drawing up a list of recommendations which were accepted by the Grace Church elders. They included the following (at that time I hadn't yet started using the blood-ink-pencil scheme, and simply referred to 'primary' and 'secondary' issues). As an eldership team, we still hold to these principles today.

- Elders help the congregation understand that the issue of who can teach [on Sunday mornings] is a secondary matter, and that there is room for a range of opinions in the church.
- Elders present their position on women teaching as 'the position that is taught and outworked in this church' rather than 'the position of this church'. This ensures that anyone who doesn't share the elders' convictions isn't made to feel 'there isn't a place for me here.'
- Recognising that there is room for a range of opinions on the question of Who Can Teach means that elders do not make this a 'membership issue.' Put simply, there isn't an issue with bringing someone into membership who earnestly and humbly disagrees with the eldership team but is prepared to submit to their authority. However, there is an issue with bringing someone into membership if they stand to be a disgruntled member and stir up dissension in the fellowship.
- Elders do not hold back from seeking to persuade people to accept their views on male and female gender roles. Elders should be unapologetic with respect to their deeply-held convictions that have been subjected to close scrutiny by the light of God's Word. The task of persuasion means that elders should be prepared to set out their reasons for their convictions rather than simply relying on summary statements. This should always be done with gentleness, sensitivity and humility and elders should be accountable to one another in this respect.

Understanding Complementarity

Having dealt with some preliminary issues, it's time to begin setting out what I think the Bible teaches about gender roles. The best place to start our inquiry is not by looking at specific texts that address what men and women may or may not be permitted to do. We're going to start with the Big Picture of what the Bible teaches about gender.

I have a particular reason for starting here. In this paper, I want to make the case that, wherever we land on specific questions about gender and authority and eldership and teaching, there's a Big Idea that I think we can all agree on. This is the Main Thing that we can't afford to lose sight of as we engage with detailed arguments about specific texts. It's the one thing (I think) concerning the complementarian-egalitarian debate which *should* be written in blood.

This is the idea of *complementarity*. And that brings us to Andrew Wilson's (2020) article that I mentioned in the Introduction.

Three visions of reality

In this article, Wilson begins with the broadest of all brush strokes. There are, he says, three alternative understandings of reality:



These alternative visions of reality are often in conflict. This explains a lot of what we see going on around us right now in culture. The different visions of reality function as overarching frameworks or belief systems which make it extremely difficult for people on different sides of a debate to hear what others are saying.

My interest in this paper isn't to analyse our culture wars but to consider what happens when these different perspectives are permitted to shape the debate happening in the church around women in ministry. The union-without-distinction perspective advocates for the idea that there are no significant differences between the sexes. Anything that men can do, women can do, and vice versa. On the other side, the distinction-without-union view argues for absolute difference. Historically, this has often led in the church to men doing all the important things and women being sidelined as passive observers.

Wilson argues that neither of these perspectives are biblical. The biblical vision of reality is for complementarity. 'There is a fit, a mutual enhancement, a beautiful difference', writes Wilson, that's 'written into creation'. 'Men need women, and women need men, and the image of God is expressed as both serve together. Remove either, or diminish the value of either, and we are all impoverished.'

Notice that the case for complementarity isn't established by a few verses taken from here and there. It's the perspective of the Bible as a whole. It finds its grounding in the doctrines of the Trinity (one God in three Persons) and incarnation (the union of spirit and matter) as well as God's end-time purpose for all things (the joining together of heaven and earth). It's also the perspective that resonates with what I think most of us feel in our bones to be most deeply true about the sexes: men and women are both equal *and* different. Unlike other visions of reality, the biblical perspective doesn't subsume union under distinction, or distinction under union. It holds the two together, like binary stars that are gravitationally bound to each other.

Wilson contrasts the term 'complementarity' with 'identity' and 'alterity'. Personally, I find the proliferation of technical terms confusing, so while I'll continue to use the first term, I'll drop the other two. I consider 'complementarity' to be useful shorthand for the biblical affirmation of both union and distinction. In the two sections that follow, I'll look at each of these elements in turn.

Union

At the most basic level, male-female union suggests equality. At the risk of repeating this point ad nauseam, the Bible affirms – repeatedly and unequivocally – the equal dignity and worth of women and men. Both women and men are equally created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), equally redeemed through Christ’s atoning death (2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Revelation 5:9), equal recipients of God’s gracious gift of new life (1 Peter 3:7), equal recipients of the Spirit (Acts 2: 17-18, 38-39; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13) and equal members of the body of Christ (Galatians 3:28).

The principle of equality is established in the opening paragraphs of the big story the Bible tells, when God creates humanity:

Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶ Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

*²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

Notice how God mandates both men *and* women to rule. Thus, everything is divided into two categories (Wilson, 2015b):



This matters, because sometimes this division has been assumed:



Genesis 1 doesn’t provide justification for the rights of men to rule over women. Men and women are created to be God’s vice-regents, sharing in the task of ruling over creation *together*.

The second creation story also includes relevant data on the relationship between men and women. In this story, the man is created first to work and take care of the garden (Genesis 2:15). But the creation isn’t yet complete:

Genesis 2:18

The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'

No suitable helper can be found among the creatures already inhabiting the garden. So, God creates the woman and presents her to the man. For some, the creation of the woman from and for the man implies a subordinate role for the woman. Yet, the term helper (Hebrew, *ezer*) never implies junior, less able or weaker. It's a word that's frequently applied to God himself.¹⁰ It's a word of significant strength and courage. With the creation of the woman from the man, the creation is now complete. She is the climax of creation. Walter Brueggemann remarks that 'woman is the crowning event in the narrative and the fulfilment of humanity' (1986, p. 51).

There's no doubt that the creation narratives in Genesis establish the equality of the sexes. This would certainly have been a radical notion in the ancient world, but these texts go further in showing us that men and women *need one another* to fulfil the mandate that God gives humanity. This is why we're talking about 'union' and not just 'equality'. While 'union' certainly includes the idea that men and women are equal, 'equality' is too weak a term to do justice to all that's implied in the term 'union'.

What 'union' does is pull us away from the abstract and towards the concrete. Consider two people stood in different parts of a room. Each of these individuals may be intellectually persuaded that the other is their equal. Yet, they remain separate, each one of them 'doing their own thing.'

What union does is pull these individuals together. The realisation that 'I can't fulfil God's plan for my life without you and you can't fulfil God's plan without me' draws people into relationship. Union isn't content with leaving us to entertain abstract notions of equality; it impresses on us the need for concrete application. Here's what Terran Williams writes about Eve's relationship to Adam:

She is his indispensable partner and ally. What the man lacks, the woman possesses and supplies. She is not a mere afterthought or an optional assistant to an independent, self-sufficient man. She is his companion, complement, counterpart and collaborator. ... This relationship between the first man and woman is defined by mutual support, mutual appreciation, the sharing of one's strengths to complement the other, and of recognition of the same and the different in one's closest friend. God knew that it was not good for us sons, brothers, husbands, and friends, to be alone, so he gave us our best allies by gifting us with daughters, sisters, wives, female friends and co-workers (2022, p. 75).

As this theme of union is developed in the Bible, we see hints all the way through Scripture of how God intends for men and women to be one another's companions, complements, counterparts and collaborators. This comes into focus in the institution of marriage. It also comes into focus in the earthly ministry of Christ. Jesus counted women among his closest friends. Included among his followers were a number of female patrons who provided financial support for his ministry. Luke records that there were *many* women who supported Jesus in this way (Luke 8:1-3). Similarly, Paul had multiple female co-workers. In Philippians 4, he mentions Euodia and Syntyche who 'have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with ... the rest of my co-workers' (verses 2 & 3). In Romans 16, Paul celebrates nine of his co-workers by name. It's interesting to note that, in this passage, 'more women are described by, or commended for, their ministries ... than men: six Roman women compared with three men' (Mowczko, 2019).

None of this should surprise us. With the coming of Jesus into the world we see the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. What that does is pull back the veil and enable us to perceive reality as it truly is. The 'real' reality is not one in which women are put down, silenced or ignored. God has written the principle of male-female union into the fabric of creation. What we see embodied in the life of God's kingdom is the proof.

¹⁰ See, for example, Exodus 18:4 where Jethro names one of his sons Eliezer because 'the God of my father was my *help* and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.' See also how God is described as helper in Genesis 49:25; Psalm 115:9-11; 121:1; 146:5; Isaiah 41:10, and Judah in Deuteronomy in 33:7.

Distinction

Having looked at what the Bible says about the union of the sexes, it's time to see how distinction comes into the picture. To use Liston's phrase, there are 'notes of asymmetry' (2023, p. 76) in the way that men and women are talked about all the way through the Bible.

Again, this theme is rooted in the creation narratives. On the very first page of the Bible, we learn that our gendered differences aren't merely social constructs; they're part of the created order:

Genesis 1:27

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

Christians in the West sometimes feel like there's a cultural agenda to smooth out the differences between men and women or, in extreme cases, deny the meaningfulness of gender labels altogether. This isn't the biblical way. The biblical vision of reality is that God has made gender differences part of the warp and the woof of creation. These differences are so deeply part of creation that they continue to reassert themselves even when they're denied (see Wilson, 2020, and references therein, and Keller, 2011, pp. 179-82).

But here we need to tread with care. The material below represents a theological minefield. That's why I'll be spending more time on distinction than on union. It also means that we need the theological equivalent of a health and safety briefing before we proceed.

Any briefing needs to sound two notes of caution. Firstly, we need to be aware of the danger of gender stereotyping. Clearly, there's variation within each gender as well as differences between them. It won't do to make bold, sweeping statements, saying, 'All women are like this', or 'All men are like this.' Happily, the Bible itself challenges some of this stereotyping by presenting examples of women and men who don't 'fit the mould'.¹¹ But, at one and the same time, the Bible is unapologetic in its claim that masculinity and femininity do differ. It's surely wise to say with Wilson (2015a) that, while we can't make *absolute* statements about women and men, that doesn't stop us from making statements that are true *in general*.

Secondly, much as we may be drawn to the idea of using the Bible to develop a 'theology of maleness' or 'femaleness', I think we need to be open to the possibility that the Bible may not be as interested in that agenda as we are. The fact is that the authors of the Bible give very little attention to the question of what it means to be a man or a woman. That doesn't mean that the question isn't important; it's just that the question isn't especially important *to them*.¹²

¹¹ There are many women in the Bible who exemplify traits that are more commonly associated with men. Here are some examples. *Shepherding*: we're told that Rachel was a shepherd of Laban's sheep (Genesis 29:9); *defensive warfare*: an unnamed woman protects the people of Thebez (Judges 9:50-57); *national leadership*: Deborah was one of the judges of Israel (Judges 4-5); Miriam is honoured, along with Moses and Aaron, as a leader of Israel during the exodus (Micah 6:4; cf. Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1-2); *political diplomacy*: a wise woman saves the city of Abel Beth Maakah from being destroyed (2 Samuel 20:14-22); Esther saves the Jews from being destroyed (Esther 2:19-9:19); *corrective teaching*: Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila, teaches Apollos in her home to protect the young Ephesian church from inadequate teaching (Acts 18:24-28).

What about men in the Bible who display traits that we might more readily associate with femininity? One example that immediately comes to mind is the extraordinarily tender friendship between David and Jonathan (e.g. 1 Samuel 20). Then there's the way that Paul describes his relationship with the church in Thessalonica as an apostle: 'Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you' (1 Thessalonians 2:7b-8a).

¹² 'Almost all of the biblical commands and virtues are gender-neutral. ... While there might be some gender-specific behaviour embodied by men and women in the Bible, there's a lot more overlap than we sometimes realise. When it comes to genuine, biblical masculinity and femininity, the Bible is quite open handed about what is expected of men and women, reflecting the beautiful diversity of God's good creation' (Sprinkle, 2024d).

This matters, because when we pick up the Bible hoping to find answers to all our ‘curious questions’, only to find that the Bible gives us very little to go on, it’s tempting to ‘fill in the gaps’ with our own clever ideas of what the biblical authors are trying to say. This is the kind of game that Christians play all the time and it’s often well-intentioned. The problem is that it fails to take the text sufficiently seriously. Meaning isn’t rooted in us; it’s rooted in what the original authors of the scriptures *intended* to say.

I can’t help wondering if this is what’s going on when Genesis is used to argue for the vocational differences between women and men. In his survey of Genesis 1 to 3, Andrew Wilson (2015a) finds seven pairs that correspond to the differences between male and female.¹³ While men and women are made of the same stuff and share in the same mandate to ‘rule’, they are given separate spheres of responsibility and created for different destinies (Wilson, 2015a & b). The name ‘Adam’ means ‘earth’. His sphere of responsibility is connected with the ground. The name ‘Eve’ means ‘life-giver’. Her sphere of responsibility is to bring life. This corresponds to the different ways in which the curse of the Fall is applied in Genesis 3. The curse is applied to the ground in the case of the man (vv. 17-19), and the womb in the case of the woman (v. 16), corresponding to the different roles for which they are created.

It’s a well-constructed argument but I can’t help feeling that it’s overstated.¹⁴ A detailed examination of Genesis 1-3 is beyond the scope of this paper; here I’ll simply say that, while there *may* be something to this line of inquiry, my theological instincts take me in a different direction. I no longer think that Genesis gives us a much to go on in developing ‘a theology of maleness’ or ‘femaleness’. I think that novel interpretations (in church-historical terms) to this effect are vulnerable to the criticism that they owe more to reading meaning *into* the text rather than drawing out meaning *from* the text (Williams, 2022, p. 389, fn. 6).¹⁵

What, then, does the Bible have to say about the differences between women and men? As I’ve said already, the authors of Scripture don’t give us a huge amount to go on. However, there is relevant material in the Old Testament (the creation of woman as the man’s helper) and the New (Peter’s comments on feminine beauty and masculine strength, and Paul’s teaching on male headship).¹⁶ We’ll look at each of the relevant passages in turn.

¹³ Andrew Wilson also presents a brief introduction to these ideas in the Advance Theology Course (Module 1 Session 2) that we use in Grace Church.

¹⁴ Wilson follows fellow-complementarian thinker Alastair Roberts (e.g. Roberts, 2016, p. 33) in suggesting that the Hebrew ideas of *tohu* and *bohu* (translated ‘formless’ and ‘empty’ in Genesis 1:2) provide the clue for understanding much of what Genesis 1 to 3 is trying to say, including on the theme of gender. *Tohu* corresponds with days 1 to 3 of creation which are about forming the cosmos; *bohu* corresponds with days 1 to 6 which are about filling it. These correspond in turn with the idea of ‘subduing the earth’, which is predominantly a male function, and ‘filling’ the earth, which is a female one. The problem with this reading is that it takes us away from the idea that the emphasis of the passage is on what men and women are mandated to do *together*. Clever as this reading of Genesis is, there’s no *explicit* indication of distinct, gendered functions in Genesis 1:26-28.

Interestingly, the limitation of this reading comes to the fore when Wilson’s talk to a men’s conference (2015a) is compared to his later talk at a women’s conference (2015b). When addressing a male audience, Wilson employs a version of the argument outlined above to emphasise male distinctiveness. When addressing a female audience, Wilson emphasises the male-female union in pointing out both men *and* women are mandated by God to take dominion and subdue the earth. I worry that there’s some inconsistency here.

¹⁵ Here’s another line of argument that, in my view, should be regarded as having ‘handle with care’ emblazoned across it. It’s the idea that the act of sexual intimacy provides us with clues of what it means to be created male or female. Liston (2023, Ch. 19) suggests that the man’s giving of himself, and the woman’s receiving of her lover into herself, tells us something about what distinctive about the masculine and feminine souls. Wilson (2015a) suggests that the differing biological equipment of men and women points to the male destiny being ‘externally focused’ and the female destiny being ‘internally focused’. Is there something in this? Who knows? It’s interesting, but speculative. I’d prefer to stick with arguments that can be established on a sounder scriptural basis.

¹⁶ Additional areas of relevance are the biblical material on motherhood and what Paul says about a woman’s ‘glory’ in 1 Corinthians 11. I’ll consider the 1 Corinthians 11 passage in some detail in Paper 2. The theme of motherhood is important but space doesn’t permit me to discuss it here.

i) Creation of the woman as man's helper

Genesis 2:18-19a, 20b-22

¹⁸ The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

¹⁹ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them ... ²⁰ But for Adam [or: the man] no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

In the previous section on 'union' we saw that the description of the woman as a 'helper' to the man in no way implies her *inferiority*. Here, our focus is on the fact that the language used in Genesis 2 also takes us away from any notion of *sameness*.

The key term here is the word 'suitable' (Hebrew, *keneḡdō*) which appears only here in the Old Testament and nowhere else. This is a compound word made up of '*kē*', meaning 'as' or 'like', and '*neḡdō*', meaning 'opposite' or 'in front of'. When used in this passage, it 'has the literal sense "like opposite him", suggesting both likeness and difference' (Perrimann, 1998, p. 180). The meaning is clear:

Eve is like Adam because she's a human, not an animal, but Eve is 'opposite from' or 'different from' Adam because she's a woman, not a man. So then, a more accurate interpretation of God's words in creating the woman would be: 'It is not good for the human to be alone, I will make an essential ally who is both like and unlike him' (Bridgetown Church, Portland, 2023, p. 5).

Veteran Old Testament commentator, John Goldingay, agrees, noting that the term 'suitable' 'points to the *complementarity* of woman and man' (2010, p. 39, emphasis mine). In other words, it brings out both union and distinction.

ii) Feminine beauty and masculine strength

1 Peter 3:1-7

¹ Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, ² when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³ Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. ⁴ Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵ For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, ⁶ like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

⁷ Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Peter begins by addressing wives. This next bit is an aside, but it's an important one for a theme that I revisit in Paper 2. Note that that the tricky instruction (to our ears, at least) to 'submit ... to your own husbands' is so that unbelieving husbands 'may be won over ... by [your] behaviour'. It isn't rooted in

creation but in what we might call ‘reputational concern’ (Williams 2022, pp. 186-88).¹⁷ We’ll return to this idea in the following two papers. But now let’s consider a point that may seem so obvious that it’s easy to miss: *Peter says different things to women and men*. Specifically, he says something about *beauty* to women and *strength* to men.

Taking beauty first, Peter works with the assumption that this theme will be especially pertinent to female members of his audience. Remembering the earlier health and safety warning about gender stereotyping, we shouldn’t take from this that men are never interested in beautifying themselves through ‘outward adornment’ or ‘elaborate hairstyles’ or the ‘wearing of jewellery or fine clothes.’ It’s simply a comment on the fact that, *in general*, women place greater emphasis on these things (Paul is coming from the same place in 1 Timothy 2:9-10 where he urges women to adorn themselves with ‘good deeds’ rather than ‘elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes’).

Neither Peter nor Paul are criticizing a woman’s desire to be beautiful. In a passage that we’ll return to look at in some detail in Paper 2, Williams points out that, in 1 Corinthians 11:15, Paul even ‘hints at a woman’s beauty being the high point of creation’ (Williams, 2022, p. 276). We might imagine Peter and Paul saying to wives, ‘So you want to be beautiful? Good! But don’t just strive for beauty that’s skin-deep. Go further! The most significant kind of beauty isn’t external; it’s internal. If you aim for *that* kind of beauty, then you’ll be truly beautiful.’

A woman’s desire for beauty doesn’t need to be challenged but it does need to be stewarded. Although it’s a wonderful thing, Peter and Paul understand that it can easily become corrupted. Williams points out that, in our age of social media, it’s never been easier for women and young girls to become enslaved by ‘the tyranny of the physical ideal’ (Williams, 2022, p. 277). In today’s cultural context, Peter and Paul’s two-thousand-year-old words still carry currency.

Now let’s consider Peter’s second theme of *masculine strength*. While some may balk at the idea that a wife is the ‘weaker partner’, Peter doesn’t intend to offend. It’s true that, in general, men have superior strength to women. This, in turn, places special responsibility on the man. Hence, we find Peter exhorting men to be careful how they use their physical strength in the presence of women. They are to use their strength to safeguard and protect, and never to harm or oppress.

At this point an important question comes to the fore. Does Peter raise the issues of feminine beauty and masculine strength because he sees these things as being intrinsic to the definition of what it means to be a woman or a man? Liston thinks this is exactly what’s going on. In his view, beauty and strength constitute ‘unique stewardships’ of women and men (2023, pp. 135-36, 161-62), pointing to what’s distinctive about the feminine and masculine souls.

I’m not so sure. I find it difficult to imagine Peter being exercised by the issue of how to define femininity and masculinity. His letter is too down-to-earth for that. It’s better to say simply that Peter recognises that women and men face different challenges and temptations, and this translates into different discipleship concerns for each.¹⁸

¹⁷ There’s a similar example in Titus 2:5 where Paul writes that younger wives should be ‘be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.’ Notice again the concern to impress certain conduct on women to safeguard the reputation of the gospel in the eyes of unbelievers. Williams explains: ‘Paul and Peter are concerned about guarding the credibility and evangelistic attractiveness of the fledgling churches in the eyes of the watching world, which happens to be one in which the obedience of women and slaves to the paterfamilias is Roman law’ (2022, p. 186). In other words, reputational concern is coupled with what’s deemed culturally acceptable. What’s regarded as acceptable in one culture may be unacceptable in another. These texts are concerned with believers conforming to the cultural norms of the time.

¹⁸ This isn’t a million miles from Liston’s position, but I think that talk of ‘*unique stewardships*’ goes too far.

iii) Male headship

The idea of male headship is central to the complementarian school of thought. It's also where things get quite murky and start to become contentious. It's going to prove necessary for me to linger here a while as I try and do justice to the issues as I see them.

Before I proceed, it's important to say that there's a great deal here that I hold tentatively and am still working through. There's a fair bit of pencil in amongst the ink.

I'll begin by setting out Liston's take on what he sees as a thread running through the storyline of Scripture (2023, esp. Ch. 7):

- The Bible presents households (rather than individuals) as the fundamental building block of society.
- God's design for households is that one member of a household is entrusted with special responsibility. That individual is primarily – though not exclusively – responsible before God for the condition of the household. The Bible calls this 'headship'.
- Men are entrusted by God with this responsibility.¹⁹ This has nothing to do with ability or gifting. It's intrinsic to how the Bible understands 'maleness'.

Liston follows other complementarian thinkers in rooting this argument in the story of the formation of the first household in Genesis 2 and 3 (e.g. Ortlund, 1991; Grudem, 1994, pp. 460-64). As we've already seen, there's much in this narrative that points to the union idea. Liston would agree wholeheartedly with all the points that I've already made about the union of men and women. However, he thinks that we also need to reckon with the following features of the creation story:

- *Order of creation*: God creates Adam *before* Eve.
- *Special responsibility*: God gives Adam the commandment ('You must not eat from the tree') and commission (to work the garden and take care of it). He does all this before Eve is formed.
- *Special accountability*: Even though it's Eve who's initially deceived, God calls upon Adam to account for why he and his wife are hiding in shame.

In other words, there's an asymmetry in how the first man and woman are described in the narrative. Special prominence is given to Adam as the first man and husband. Is there a pattern here for how we're to understand the distinctive vocations of men and women?

It's possible. However, all things considered, I don't think that the case for gender distinctiveness is as strong from Genesis 2 and 3 as complementarians often suppose. Each of Liston's three points is answerable from an egalitarian perspective.²⁰ Even if we do accept that these three features of the narrative have something to tell us about what it means to be created male, we're still a long way from the notion that a man's responsibility is to 'rule' over his household and a woman's responsibility is to 'submit'. There's nothing said explicitly in Genesis about authority/submission being part of God's intended order for men and women, something that Liston concedes (2023, pp. 44 & 50). Nor are we

¹⁹ Liston introduces an important qualification to this general principle. We know that the world is complex and that many households don't conform to the pattern in which children are raised by two parents, of mixed gender, both of whom are believers. Liston explains that he's talking about what we should expect to see in non-crisis situations where husbands and fathers are spiritually healthy (2023, pp. 155-56).

²⁰ For example: (i) *order of creation*: Eve, not Adam, is presented as the climax of creation. The emphasis of the passage is not on male prominence but on man's incompleteness without woman. (ii) *Special responsibility*: responsibility is actually shared by Adam and Eve. In addition, prior to the creation of Eve, there are good reasons to say Adam (or, more correctly, 'the adam') represents the whole of humanity – male and female – and not just men (Perriman, 1993, pp. 176-77). (iii) *Special accountability*: Adam and Eve are held jointly responsible by God. Williams suggests there are literary reasons why Adam is addressed first by God and these have nothing to do with Adam's headship (2022, p. 73).

told that Adam is ‘head’ of his wife. This inclines me to the view, different from one that I’ve held previously²¹, that Genesis 2 and 3 *on their own* don’t provide a clear basis for male headship.

But we’re not yet finished with the issue of headship. While I don’t think that Genesis gives us enough to go on to develop a full-blown theology of male headship, it needs to be read alongside what the New Testament says on the subject. When we turn to the New Testament, there are two passages that specifically mention male headship: 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5:

1 Corinthians 11:3

But I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man [or: the head of the wife is her husband], and the head of Christ is God.

Ephesians 5:22-24

²² *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.* ²³ *For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.* ²⁴ *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

There it is, the matter is stated in black and white: ‘the head of the woman is man’ and ‘the husband is head of the wife’.

The Greek word for ‘head’ in these passages is *kephalē*. A great deal hinges on how we understand the term. Unfortunately, while everyone recognises that Paul is using the term metaphorically in these passages, that’s pretty much where the agreement ends. The following discussion is quite technical and won’t be of interest to everyone. If you’d prefer to fast-forward to the summary on page 26 (skipping the section with the green line in the margin), then you’re welcome to do so!

The technical bit:

In fact, there are three main ways of understanding the meaning of *kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 (Sprinkle, 2023a):

- *Kephalē* could mean ‘*authority*’: the head is, in a sense, ‘over’ the rest of the body. The implication of this understanding is that the husband rules over his household in some sense. This further implies that the proper response of the rest of the household is to obey and submit to his authority.
- *Kephalē* could mean ‘*life source*’: a popular idea in the ancient world was that the life of the body flows from the head. This understanding conveys the ideas of organic connection and dependence. Wives and children are dependent on the care that comes from the husband/father.
- *Kephalē* could mean ‘*prominence*’ or ‘*foremostness*’: the head is at the top or the front of the body. According to this understanding, the husband/father is simply recognised as having

²¹ Here’s what I wrote in 2014: ‘[T]he principle of headship is rooted in Genesis, this time in the second creation narrative in Genesis 2 and 3. Here, we learn that the man is created before the woman. When the man and woman disobey God’s command, it is the man who is sought by God and called upon to give an account (3:9-11) even though it was the woman who was deceived by the serpent. Why is this? The answer is clearly because the act of disobedience happened on Adam’s watch. This makes him accountable even though he wasn’t the first to sin. God calls Adam to account because he is the representative of the family unit. He is primarily responsible before God for what happens in his family.’ My issue with this paragraph is with my use of the word ‘clearly’. I no longer think this is ‘clear’ at all. My current view is that the data we find in the Genesis narrative supports more than one interpretation. In this paper, I’m trying to steer clear of making black-and-white pronouncements when I think the issues are not clear-cut. I may not always succeed, but my hope is to draw attention to where people with different interpretations of Genesis 2 and 3 may be able to find common ground (or at least agree to disagree without vilifying one another).

some kind of ‘firstness’ in the household. He has a profile that other members of the household don’t have and is understood to represent the household in some way.

To see how Paul’s meaning in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 changes depending on which view you adopt, consider the following:

1 Corinthians 11:3

(‘...the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.’)

AUTHORITY VIEW	SOURCE VIEW	PROMINENCE VIEW
Man is subordinate to Christ, Woman is subordinate to man, Christ is subordinate to God.	Man was created through Christ, Woman came from man, Christ came from the Father (in the incarnation).	Man brings glory to Christ, Woman brings glory to man, Christ brings glory to God.

Ephesians 5:23

(‘...the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.’)

AUTHORITY VIEW	SOURCE VIEW	PROMINENCE VIEW
The Church is under the rule of Christ.	The Church is dependent on Christ for its life.	Christ is pre-eminent in the Church.

Which view of headship is the correct one? The question matters because your understanding of this term will determine in large part whether you think that the exercise of spiritual authority in the home (and perhaps in the church) is a distinctly male function.

Historically, the authority view has been favoured by interpreters who lean towards complementarianism and the source view has been favoured by interpreters who lean towards egalitarianism. When I was in my early twenties and beginning to cut my teeth in leadership, I remember being taught that the term ‘head’ always carries the direct meaning of ‘authority’. Historically, this understanding has been influential in the development of Newfrontiers.²² However, in recent years, the idea of headship as ‘prominence’ has been gaining ground. While acknowledging the danger of suggesting there’s anything like a clear consensus among theological scholars, Wilson (2013) remarks that the weight of opinion seems to have shifted to the ‘prominence’ view. This view is most closely associated with the New Testament scholar, Andrew Perriman.

Perriman’s view

So, let’s consider the prominence view in more detail. Here’s how Perriman himself expresses his understanding of what Paul means by headship in his book-length treatment of this and related topics:

To describe the man as head of the woman is, in the first place, a statement about his perceived prominence in relation to her. Just as the head occupies a position of prominence at the top or front of the body, so the man occupies a position of prominence in relation to the woman ... And just as the ‘head’ may stand ... for the whole person, so the ‘head’ of the tribe or family stands for the whole group; in a sense, he sums up or represents that tribe or family among other similar groups (1998, p. 197).

²² For instance, John Hosier writes: ‘I believe we must see that the word “head”, when it is used metaphorically here, is referring to an authority or a leader. I heard the theologian Wayne Grudem state at a [Newfrontiers] leaders’ conference in Brighton that the greatest Greek expert in the world says that this is the only way the word was ever used in classical Greek’ (2005, pp. 168-69). I attended the same conference in July 2002 and remember hearing Grudem say the same thing. Grudem’s study on *kephalē* is considered by some to be flawed. For an accessible introduction to the issues, see Williams (2022, Appendix 3). For more technical discussions, see Perriman (1998, pp. 14-25) and Sprinkle (2023b, c, d & 2024a).

For Perriman, there are two important ideas included in the biblical metaphor of 'headship': the man is more *prominent* than the woman, and the man is seen as *representing* the family unit. A complementarian would take no issue with either of those ideas.

But notice how, for Perriman, a man's prominence has to do with how he's *perceived* or viewed by society. Headship therefore describes a social state of affairs rather than what's ordained by God. It's a description of what *is* in a particular culture rather than a prescription of what *ought* to be for all times and cultures. Perriman's view is that Paul uses the metaphor of headship because it reflects how men were, in fact, viewed in first century Roman society:

The man has this prominence largely on account of his role in the public sphere, which gives him greater visibility and significance than a woman can have when confined to the sphere of the home. ... Generally ... the man was in a position of considerable social and economic advantage; the woman was variously regarded as his possession, his slave, his ward, his housekeeper, or as a device for the generation of sons (Ibid, p. 197).

Cultural or trans-cultural?

A complementarian will agree with Perriman's remarks about Paul's cultural context. What makes a complementarian twitchy, however, is the suggestion that, for Paul, male headship is purely a cultural or social matter. See, for example, Liston's take on the prominence view:

'A husband has *prominence* over his wife...' He was created first and, as we studied in the creation chapters, I believe there are strong signposts to him carrying a unique, spiritual authority (2023, p. 115, emphasis original).

I am suggesting that prominence is about God charging a man with prominent spiritual responsibility as head of a household (Ibid, p. 189).

For a complementarian, male headship in the Bible isn't to do with how a man is perceived by society but *who he is before God*. He carries primary responsibility for his family, not because that's what society expects, but because it's entrusted to him by God. He represents his family, not merely in the social sphere, but also before God. As the spiritual head of the home, he's accountable to God for the spiritual health of his family.

In other words, a husband's prominence as head of the home is *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*. Behind this understanding of male prominence sit Genesis 2 and 3 which, while not 'nailing' the doctrine of male headship, can certainly be understood in a way that's consistent with this understanding.

What we're left with, then, isn't a prominence view of headship, but two prominence views:

Prominence views of headship:

COMPLEMENTARIAN	EGALITARIAN
Male headship is God-given and rooted in creation	Male headship is an observable social fact
The husband represents the family before God	The husband is recognised as representing the family by society
Male headship transcends cultural context	Male headship is context-specific

One of the things that struck me when I first started looking into Perriman's work in detail is that there's nothing in his definition of prominence on the previous page with which a complementarian would disagree *except* with his inclusion of the word 'perceived' (go back and take a look, observing how the

meaning of ‘prominence’ changes depending on whether you include or cover up that single word). This is the only difference between the right- and left-hand columns of the table above.

Which of the two perspectives on male headship/prominence is the correct one? It’s a difficult question, and one that I’ll come back to after we’ve considered another issue.

Does prominence imply authority?

My current view is that the ‘prominence’ view of headship is preferable to the ‘authority’ or ‘source’ views. But now another question comes into focus. Even if male headship doesn’t directly signify male authority, does it nonetheless imply it?²³

Andrew Wilson (2013) thinks that it does. Stef Liston agrees, saying that the idea of male authority is inherent in the idea of representative responsibility.²⁴ Preston Sprinkle points out that the ‘authority’, ‘source’ and ‘prominence’ views of headship aren’t mutually exclusive; metaphors can have different shades of meaning (2023a).²⁵ He thinks a strong case can be made for *kephalē* nearly always including the idea of authority. The same thought is developed by Wayne Grudem in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* in response to the ‘prominence’ (or ‘preeminence’ view) proposed by Richard Cervin:

Is it necessary ... for us to deny that there is any nuance of ‘preeminence’ (or perhaps ‘prominence’) in the uses of *kephalē*? Certainly not – for one who is in a position of authority often has some prominence as well. ... [T]he notions of leadership, rule, and authority were so closely connected with the idea of prominence or preeminence in the ancient world that it would probably be impossible to separate them decisively at any point (1991, p. 535).²⁶

I think these authors are probably right to suggest that the ‘prominence’ view of headship includes the idea of men having authority. In Paul’s world, men were more socially prominent than women, and a significant way in which this was expressed was through men having authority. However, it’s important that we recognise what’s going on in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5, and in other New Testament passages as well:

²³ Some readers may ask why I don’t consider the ‘source’ view in any depth, focusing instead on the ‘authority’ and ‘prominence’ views of headship. The answer is that I don’t think the ‘source’ view carries much weight. I have found Preston Sprinkle’s recent blog articles on the meaning of *kephalē* to be extremely helpful. Sprinkle surveys the uses of *kephalē* from various literary sources: the Septuagint (2023b – the ‘source’ idea is not well supported); ancient Greece (2023c – stronger support for the ‘source’ view, but the most common meaning is ‘leader’ which implies some sense of ‘having authority over’); the early church fathers (2023d – little support for the ‘source’ view). He then turns his attention to Paul’s use of *kephalē* in relation to Christ in his letter to the Ephesians (2024a). In Eph 1:22, the sense is of Christ having ruling authority. Eph 4:15 can be used to support the idea that Christ is our ‘spiritual life source’, but it seems unlikely that this meaning is carried over into Eph 5 where Paul talks about husbands and wives (2024b & c). The ‘source’ view is, however, still championed by many egalitarian/mutualist interpreters of Paul. Williams (2022, pp. 331-34) supports the ‘source’ view in favour of the ‘authority’ view but (inexplicably) doesn’t consider the ‘prominence’ view of headship.

²⁴ However, Liston argues that how we understand male authority needs to take its cue from the Bible and not from the world. For Liston, the concept of male authority in the New Testament is best understood as ‘authority on behalf of’ rather than ‘authority over’ (2023, p. 51; cf. p. 168). To state the matter in a different way: as head of the household, a man is entrusted with authority to use on his wife’s behalf (for her flourishing) and never to tyrannise or oppress her. The view that Liston states here is close to that of Sprinkle (2024b & c).

²⁵ Sprinkle later clarifies this point in light of a guest contribution to his blog by linguistics specialist, Kevin Grasso (2023). While the same word can convey different meanings in different contexts, it’s rare for a word to convey different meanings at the same time (unless we’re dealing with poetry) (Sprinkle, 2024a).

²⁶ However, Grudem maintains that ‘authority’ rather ‘prominence’ should be regarded as the dominant shade of meaning on two main grounds: (i) the ‘prominence’ view is a novel view in church-historical terms and didn’t feature in Greek lexicons until very recently; (ii) the idea that a husband is ‘preeminent’ over his wife implies that he has ‘greater status and importance and honour’ than his wife (p. 535) which smacks of ‘a very distasteful male chauvinism’ (p. 536). I think this second criticism misses the mark. By decoupling the idea of ‘preeminence’ from ‘prominence’, Grudem reads far too much into this term, as well as turning a blind eye to the obvious difficulties presented by the idea that a man being the ‘head’ means he has ‘authority’ in relation to his wife.

- i) In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul mentions male headship in connection with his main theme of honour/shame. His main point is that, due to the prominence of the man, a wife's behaviour in the public sphere inevitably reflects on her husband, for good or bad. I'll consider this passage in more detail in Paper 2, but it's worth mentioning here that the only time that authority is specifically mentioned in the passage is in verse 10 where it refers to a woman's *own* authority and *not* to the authority of a man. Moreover, Paul steers his argument, not towards the assertion that one gender has authority over the other, but to the *interdependence* of men and women: 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman' (v. 11).
- ii) In Ephesians 5, I think it's clear from the instruction to wives to submit to their husbands that Paul assumes that men have authority in the home (Lincoln, 1990, p. 369 & 386). Yet, as Perriman points out, the Greek construction implies that Paul is at pains to put some distance between the ideas of male headship and female submission (1998, pp. 56-57). Perriman's discussion is quite technical, but I think it's clear even from a cursory reading of Ephesians 5 that Paul's flow of thought in these verses is not: 'Wives, submit to your own husbands *because the husband is head of the wife*'; but rather: 'Wives, submit to your own husbands *as the Church submits to Christ*.' In other words, the emphasis of the passage is not on telling wives to submit, but on the *manner* in which wives should submit.²⁷ I freely admit that Ephesians 5 does afford other interpretations so this idea is offered tentatively: definitely working in pencil here!
- iii) Sticking with Ephesians 5, and looking at the passage as a whole, it seems clear that Paul is doing two things simultaneously: he's working with the norms of Greco-Roman culture while also seeking to subvert them in certain respects. The clearest indication of this is seen later in the passage when he instructs husbands, not to 'rule over your wives' (a natural counterpart to 'wives, submit to your own husbands'), but to 'love your wives' through care and sacrificial service (vv. 25-33). Preston Sprinkle remarks: 'Even if we see some "role distinctions" in the passage where the husband alone has authority, as complementarians argue, these distinctions are stripped of their typical hierarchical framework and imbedded in a rhetorical framework that bleeds with mutuality' (2024b). In other words, Paul is redefining authority. Authority in Ephesians 5 doesn't mean that the husband gets to make the big decisions, or that he has the tie-breaker vote when he and his wife disagree, but 'that he is to give himself up for her' (2024c).
- iv) The most detailed picture we're given in Scripture of Christian marriage is in 1 Corinthians 7. Even if Paul does think that husbands have a civic responsibility to rule over their own households, he teaches that different principles hold sway in the private sphere, especially in the bedroom. 1 Corinthians 7 is a clear affirmation of male-female mutuality in marriage. The interesting thing about this passage is that it's the one place in the New Testament where we read about the husband having authority. But then, in the same breath, Paul tells us that the wife has authority as well: 'The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife' (v. 4).

²⁷ When reading Ephesians 5, it's important to bear in mind that Paul's audience is living in a highly structured society where women are subordinated to men. My reading of Ephesians 5 gives me the sense that, in this section of the letter, Paul is saying, first to wives, then, in turn, to husbands, children, parents, slaves and masters, 'Given that society is structured in this way, how should we deal with these conditions as believers in Christ?' Paul's answer is not to *tell* wives to submit to their husbands: they're doing that already. It's to tell wives to 'submit ... *as you do to the Lord*' (i.e. not resentfully or grudgingly). So, Paul's emphasis is on the 'as you do to the Lord' bit, not the 'submit' bit. Support for this understanding comes from reading verses 21 and 22 together. 'As you do to the Lord' in verse 22 picks up on and reinforces the idea of 'out of reverence for Christ' in verse 21. This is where Paul's emphasis lies, not on the verb 'submit'. In fact, in these verses, the verb 'submit' occurs only once, in verse 21. The idea is certainly carried through to verse 22 but the word isn't repeated in the original Greek.

- v) The *only* place where the Bible specifically says that a man has authority over a woman is in 1 Timothy 2:12. I'll consider this passage in some detail in Paper 3. For now, I'll restrict myself to a single thought. While Wilson (2023) asserts that we shouldn't dismiss 1 Timothy 2, the opposite is also true: let's not make so much of 1 Timothy 2 that other (unrelated) passages are read in the light of this one. Paul's words to Timothy need to be recognised as having their place, but a single (contested) sentence shouldn't be elevated to the point where it provides the single lens for how we understand the rest of Scripture.

Summary

It's time to draw this lengthy discussion on male headship to some kind of conclusion. I think the following points are relevant:

- In Paul's first-century context, men were socially dominant. They were more prominent than women. I tend to think that this is the primary sense of what Paul means by male headship.
- Tied to the fact of male prominence was the notion of authority, which was understood hierarchically. Men were in charge. Women were subject to men.
- Paul picks up on the idea of theme of male headship in both 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians, but in both cases what he does with the idea is surprising.
- Paul never says explicitly that men should have authority over women. This is what Paul might have been expected to say given his first-century cultural context. Instead, he seeks to subvert prevailing social norms, deconstructing the marital hierarchy.
- In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul reflects on the fact that the man's prominence means that a woman's shame inevitably attaches to her husband. A husband's social reputation is impacted by the conduct of his wife. These are brute facts about Paul's world and Paul makes no value judgment about them. But Paul has nothing to say about male authority in the passage. He takes his argument in a different direction altogether, emphasising the interdependence of the sexes. And the only time he mentions 'authority' in the passage is in connection with a woman's own authority.
- In Ephesians 5, Paul's argument is different. Beginning with male prominence/authority, Paul doesn't steer a course away from it (as in 1 Corinthians 11); he reframes it. 'Yes, the husband is head of his wife,' he says, 'but the way in which that authority is expressed is through sacrificial service and self-giving love.'
- How should we take the language of headship in these texts? Is it prescriptive or descriptive? It's certainly descriptive. The fact is that in Paul's world, men were more prominent than women. A case can also be made for saying that Paul's teaching on men and women is prescriptive, but whatever we think about that, I don't think we're at liberty to dismiss these passages as being irrelevant for us today. There are timeless applications here, even if some of the specific details are cultural.

These seven points represent the current stage of my thinking. There's a fair bit of pencil in amongst the ink. My position is not that the traditionalist perspective on male headship is right or that it's wrong. In fact, I think that, regardless of whether someone calls themselves a complementarian or egalitarian, in practical terms they'll probably more or less end up in the same place if they're committed to taking the Scriptures seriously. I develop this point in Appendix 1 with some further thoughts on Ephesians 5. But it's time to move on and consider the implications for complementarity for church life.

Complementarity in practice

Let's take stock and remind ourselves of the main message of this paper. When looking at the biblical material on men and women, it's easy to get lost in the detail. That's why my focus in this paper is on the big picture. What we're after is an apprehension of 'the whole tenor of Scripture from beginning to end' (Virgo, 2001, p. 303).²⁸ While it's not a word that appears in the Bible, I think the term 'complementarity' is useful shorthand for encapsulating the view of reality that we find in the Bible.

We've seen that the hallmark of complementarity is that it holds together two ideas about women and men. Following Andrew Wilson (2020), I'm calling these ideas *union* and *distinction*. Where some affirm union without distinction (an ultra-liberal, progressive view), and others affirm distinction without union (an ultra-conservative, traditionalist view), complementarity affirms union *with* distinction. This is the 'real reality', the true nature of things as given to us by God. We can deny this reality as much as we wish but the truth will always find a way of reasserting itself. As someone once said, 'If you go against the grain of reality, you'll end up getting splinters.'

What does complementarity have to say in response to the cultural 'equality' agenda? As I've said previously, the idea of union affirms male-female equality but adds that the idea of 'equality' doesn't go far enough. *Union* takes us out of the realm of ontological equality as an abstract notion into the concrete realm of relationship. Men and women *need* each other. We're created to co-rule. We're created to fill the earth *together*. The mandate given to humanity in Genesis 1, and amplified in Genesis 2, cannot be fulfilled by man alone or woman alone.

And women and men bring different things to the table. Women have distinctive contributions to make *as women*, and men have distinctive contributions to make *as men*. They have different psychological dispositions, challenges and outlooks. And the Church needs both to play their part in full if it is to grow into maturity.

A personal view

During the time that I've been thinking about and writing this paper, I've come to a fresh realisation of my need for strong female voices in my life. Early in my preparation for this paper, I re-read Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* (1971) (surely a candidate for one of the best Christian autobiographies ever written) and her follow-up volume of recollections, *Tramp for the Lord* (1974). I was struck by how Ten Boom's identity as a woman isn't incidental to the story that she tells. The fact that she remained a (reluctant) spinster all her life; the nature of her relationship with her elder sister, Bessie; the image of the sisters standing naked before the watchful stares of the male prison guards – these are exactly the kinds of details that make her story so compelling.

Then I read a book which had been sitting, unread, on my bookshelf for many years. I bought *The Jesus Feminist* by Sarah Bessey (2013) some time ago when I learned that several young women in the church were reading it. I had all good intentions of reading it myself, but – confession time – there always seemed to be something more pressing going on in the church and the book was put aside and forgotten. I finally picked up and read this book which is an impassioned call to women to become activists in the Church. Once again, Bessey's identity as a woman isn't incidental to the story that she has to tell. The

²⁸ I don't accept all of Virgo's conclusions about how a vision for complementarity is worked out in church life. In particular, we disagree over whether women should be permitted to preach to a mixed-gender congregations (my subject in the third paper). However, I share his view that our approach to the issues I'm discussing in these papers needs to be governed by the right biblical framework rather than seeking to pluck meaning from verses taken in isolation. The central message of this paper is that how we think about gender roles and ministry should start with the biblical vision of reality as a whole rather than resting on a small selection of verses. This is the difference between what's often termed 'proof-texting' (finding isolated verses that support your position, frequently without paying much attention to context) and 'biblical theology' (seeing how the themes of the Bible hold together in a single, coherent narrative).

experience of suffering several miscarriages; her struggles to work out her vocation as a writer and mother to young children; her tenderness as she speaks directly and intimately to the hopes, dreams and hurts of her female audience – *The Jesus Feminist* is emphatically not a book that a man could ever write. And, as a man, I need these voices to have a fully fledged spirituality: a view of God that's expansive and shaped by every aspect of the human experience.

Imagine...

So, what does it mean for the Church to become a place where the biblical vision for complementarity is wholeheartedly affirmed and lived out? Here I think Stef Liston can help us. He invites us to 'imagine for a moment an environment where both men and women lived with a genuine sense of need for the other' (2023, p. 29). It all begins, says Liston, with celebration:

Wouldn't it be wonderful if women spoke well of men as men, celebrating their strength and vitality and their spiritually fraternal and paternal qualities? Imagine women who gladly received the masculine contribution of men into the life of the church. Imagine a community where women felt the freedom to publicly champion strong and godly men, and imagine a rousing response from other women in the congregation, ready to pray for them and encourage them.

Imagine a church where the men were obviously thrilled with the sisters God had given them, where every woman felt like a VIP around them!²⁹ A church where women didn't constantly have to strive to be seen or heard. A community where the women inherently knew, by the way their brothers and father around them treated them, that were seen as equals. Where equality and unique insights and perspectives of women were celebrated by men in the life of the church, and not just conceded (Ibid, p. 163).

We know that the picture that Liston invites us to imagine is an ideal one. Grace Church isn't there yet. We're a work in progress. But I share Liston's vision for a church that celebrates the complementarity of women and men. My earnest desire is that Grace Church has the kind of culture in which union and distinction are wholeheartedly affirmed.

The language of complementarity

At this point, it's important to say something about language. Any discussion as nuanced and emotive as the one we're having about gender roles requires us to choose our words carefully. As I've explained, Andrew Wilson has been a significant influence on this paper. One of the striking things about his 2020 article is that Wilson consistently uses the term 'complementarity' and not the terms 'complementarianism' or 'egalitarianism.'

This is important. To understand its significance, let's see how championing 'complementarity' – as opposed to 'complementarianism' or 'egalitarianism'³⁰ – can introduce some much-needed balance and clarity in the debate that's going on in the Church.

²⁹ Liston remarks that he's indebted to John Benton (*Gender Questions: Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in the Contemporary World*, 2004) for the VIP phrase.

³⁰ While I'm not a fan of the terms 'complementarian' and 'egalitarian', I don't think they should be consigned to the waste bin of history just yet. They can be useful in distinguishing between different positions, especially in relation to the questions of 'Who should lead?' and 'Who should teach?' I'll get to the first of those questions below and the second in Paper 2.

i) *'Complementarity' helps us find common ground*

There's no doubt that the complementarian-egalitarian debate in the Church has become highly polarised (I'll have more to say about this in Paper 3). What the term 'complementarity' does is remove us from arguments that push us apart and help centre us on where we can agree.³¹

The fact is that there is truth on both sides of the complementarian-egalitarian divide. Complementarians emphasise 'distinction', and egalitarians 'union', but at Grace Church we affirm that it's a case of both-and, not either-or. The language of 'complementarity' gives us a way of coming together. As individuals, we'll continue to put our emphases in different places, but we can surely unite around a vision for union and distinction recognising that, what God has joined together, we must not split apart.

ii) *'Complementarity' is defined by what it affirms*

Despite the best efforts of moderate complementarians (such as Wilson and Liston), complementarianism is nearly always defined negatively; that is, complementarians are generally known for what they're *against* rather than what they're *for*. You could say that complementarianism has a PR problem. I've met this time and time again over the years as an elder in a movement that describes itself as 'complementarian'. Before I've been given a chance to say a single word about my understanding of male and female roles in church life, people have often *assumed* that I'm anti-women in leadership, anti-female preachers, and so on.

By contrast, complementarity is defined by what it affirms. And what it affirms is deeply compelling. Egalitarians and complementarians alike are predisposed to recognise that the biblical vision for complementarity is not only true; it's also beautiful. Sharon James puts it well: In biblical complementarity, 'we see a glorious pattern of equal dignity, significant difference, and a divinely ordained synergy when the two work together (yes in marriage, but also the church and community) that is fruitful in blessing future generations and glorifying God' (2020).

Complementarity, properly understood, is about 'beautiful difference' (Wilson) and 'glorious ... synergy' (James). That's why I would much rather Grace Church was known for championing 'complementarity' rather than describing itself as 'complementarian'.

iii) *'Complementarity' recognises that gender differences matter*

If complementarianism has a problem (real or perceived) of collapsing into distinction without union, then egalitarianism is prone to the opposite problem of collapsing into union without distinction.³² The teaching that 'all are one in Christ Jesus' may be true, but it's also only a part of the story. The biblical vision of complementarity shows us that women and men are created equal *and* different. If we're unable to talk about those differences, either because we're reading the Bible with a framework that denies their significance, or we're intimidated into silence, then we do everyone a disservice – men as well as women.

A critic may object that all this talk of 'complementarity' simply sweeps the differences between the complementarian and egalitarian positions under the carpet. I'm not saying that our differences should be brushed aside. I think that the Church should be a place where we talk about these differences, but the environment in which we do the talking matters as much as the issues themselves. Before we discuss

³¹ It's telling that, despite deep disagreement with Wilson on his arguments for what the biblical material teaches or implies about eldership, Ian Paul (2021) republishes with approval the entire first portion of Wilson's (2020) paper in which he sets out the biblical vision for complementarity.

³² This is the basis of one of the criticisms made by Sharon James (2023) in a provocative review of a book (*Men and Women in Christ*) by egalitarian writer, Andrew Bartlett. I feel the same way about way about Andrew Bartlett and Ian Paul's (2022) strident response to Andrew Wilson's article, *Beautiful Complementarity*. While I think some of their criticisms do hit the mark, they have little to say about the distinctiveness of being created male or female.

the areas where we don't see eye to eye, let's be clear on what unites us. My contention is that bringing complementarity into focus gives us that much-needed clarity. Let's agree together that we'll write this in blood.

And let's agree that the other things that we may disagree on are not written in blood, but in ink, or even in pencil. One of the messages of this paper is that, while I have convictions of my own, I'm not mounting a personal crusade for either complementarianism or egalitarianism. Mine isn't an easy position to take, and some will take issue with my approach, but, from where I'm standing, I can't see any alternative.³³

³³ Andrew Perriman (who we met earlier in this paper in connection with the 'prominence' view of headship) agrees: 'Personally, I am of the opinion, notwithstanding all the arguments of this book, that that the unity of the body of Christ is more important than the question of whether or not the woman should be under the authority of the man – not just a superficial unity, but a willingness to live together, worship together, work together and pray together' (1998, p.12). That's the thinking that should govern all our thinking and speaking on this topic.

Eldership

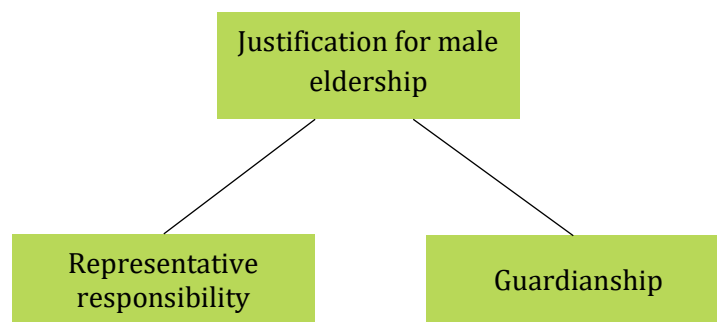
So far, I've been at pains to stress that, in Grace Church, we want our focus to be on what we can agree on rather than our differences. Whether you think men are called to be heads of the home, or whether you think the leadership of a household belongs equally to the husband and wife working as a team, there's a place for you in Grace Church.

The same is also true whether you think that only men can be elders³⁴ in the local church or whether you think eldership is also open to women. On this issue, as on so many other issues that are written in ink, I have convictions of my own, but if you see things differently to me (or any of my fellow elders), then I hope you feel that you can still find a home in Grace Church.

Over the years, the elders of Grace Church have never made disagreement on this issue a barrier to receiving people into membership or having them serve as leaders in the church. On matters that aren't written in blood, we really do believe that we can embrace a breadth of theological opinion in the church. Again, I'll have more to say about this in Paper 4.

However, the issue of leadership in the church differs from leadership in the home in one important respect. While a church or movement needn't take a position regarding the latter, it can't avoid taking a position on the former. Every church or movement needs to make a call on whether it thinks women can or can't be elders. And even if there isn't a policy document with a clearly articulated position, the actual position of the church or movement will be apparent by observing their practice. Do they recognise female elders or don't they?

So, what do we think in Grace Church? Before addressing that question, I want to set out the theological stance of our movement. Since its founding, Newfrontiers has taken a complementarian position on eldership. The idea that eldership is restricted to men is based on a whole bunch of arguments, several of which are included in Appendix 2 but, to my mind, there are two big ideas that do most of the load bearing. These are the ideas of *representative responsibility* and *guardianship*.



Big Idea #1: Representative responsibility

We've already met the idea of representative responsibility in the section on Headship above. Stef Liston defines the term as meaning 'that God has established an order in relationships whereby in any given household, someone will be entrusted with a unique measure of responsibility for the condition of that household' (2023, p. 49). He points out that there are three different kinds of household mentioned in the Bible, and men are spoken of as having special prominence in relation to each:

³⁴ Or pastors. The terms 'elder', 'pastor' (literally, 'shepherd') and 'overseer' are used interchangeably in the New Testament.

- A. The household of humanity
- B. The household of flesh-and-blood family
- C. The household of the church

Beginning with the household of humanity, Adam is regarded as being the spiritual father of us all (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49). It's Adam, not Adam and Eve together, who's identified by Paul as being the representative of the old humanity. For a complementarian interpreter, this idea goes all the way back to Genesis 3:9-12 where God appears to hold the man, not the woman, primarily responsible for their shared act of disobedience.

Where B is concerned, we've already looked at the idea found in the household codes of the New Testament that Paul and Peter recognise husbands as having special prominence in the family unit.

Finally, there's the Church which Paul calls 'the household of God' (1 Timothy 3:15; cf. Ephesians 2:19). The basic idea here is that, as in A and B, so also in C. Complementarians hold that Scripture speaks with one voice on the subject.

The highest human authority in a local church is the elders. As heads of the household of God, they're accountable to Christ for the way they shepherd his people (1 Peter 5:1-4; cf. Hebrews 13:17). It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, that in both passages that set out the qualifications for eldership, Paul assumes that elders will be male. Notice, too, how Paul makes a link between a husband's oversight of his flesh-and-blood family and his suitability for the role of oversight in the family of God's people. In Paul's mind, these issues are apiece:

1 Timothy 3:2-5

² Now the overseer [elder] is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.⁴ He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.⁵ (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

Titus 1:6-7a

⁶ An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.⁷ Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless.

Regarding these texts, Andrew Wilson writes:

[B]oth of these passages list their qualifications on the assumption that the elder/overseer will be a man. I find it hard to believe that, if God had wanted women elders/overseers in the church, he would have inspired the two passages that address this topic most directly to include several specifically male qualifications (faithful to his wife, managing his household well, keeping his children submissive), with qualifications for women coming later in each case (1 Tim 3:11; Titus 2:3-5). And I also think it improbable that this would have cropped up in two separate letters, had it not been standard practice (Paul includes almost identical requirements for villages across Crete as he does for the Artemis-worshipping metropolis of Ephesus) (2012).

My purpose here isn't to evaluate this argument but to set it out as clearly as possible. Even if you don't *like* the argument, I think it's important to *understand* it, and acknowledge it as an honest and intellectually respectable attempt to honour 'the tenor of Scripture'.

Big Idea #2: Guardianship

Several years ago, I read Andrew Wilson's article on *A Theology of Eldership* (2015c). It struck me then as being the best discussion on the essence of eldership that I'd come across. Still today, it remains my go-to resource for what differentiates 'eldership' from plain 'leadership'. Wilson's main thesis is that each of the three words used by the New Testament for local church leaders – shepherds, overseers and elders – contains a central motif, a single, governing idea. Elders are primarily *guardians*.

Now, who are the people who are appointed to guardianship time and time again through the Big Story that the Bible tells? Wilson suggests that, overwhelmingly, it's the men. This is a central plank of his argument for male eldership in his later article on complementarity:

Taking [the] three words [shepherd, overseer and elder] together leads to a clear conclusion: elders are guardians. And no sooner have we noticed that, than we notice that in every period of biblical history, those charged with defending and protecting the people and/or the sanctuary of God are men rather than women, fathers rather than mothers (Wilson, 2020).

Wilson draws on many examples to support this idea, including Adam, the patriarchs, the Levitical priests, the kings of Israel and the twelve apostles. I won't reproduce all the details here. For now, simply notice the main point that the case that Wilson is making for male-only eldership isn't based on a few scattered texts taken from here and there. It's an attempt to explicate a theme that Wilson sees running through the whole of Scripture.

If he's right, it's not that a woman wouldn't be *capable* of serving as an elder; it's simply that it wouldn't be *appropriate* for a woman to serve as an elder. It has nothing to do with women's skillsets and everything to do with God's good design for human beings as gendered creatures.

Response

A detailed response to these arguments, and the others that I've included in Appendix 2, would require a paper of its own. Here, I'll limit myself to saying two things about these big ideas.

Firstly, it's important to say honestly: each of the arguments for male eldership can be answered from an egalitarian standpoint.³⁵ I happen to think that some of the arguments are stronger than others but none of the arguments, in my view, add up to a case for male eldership that's literally overwhelming. That's why the convictions that I hold about eldership are written in ink, and not a few of them are written in pencil.

³⁵ Briefly, for the sake of balance, let me say a few words about each of the big ideas above. *Regarding representative responsibility*: I think Wilson is right to draw attention to the fact that Paul's qualifications for eldership are the same for churches in different places. What he doesn't acknowledge is that, different as Timothy and Titus's contexts are from one another, culturally, they're still more similar to one another than either of them are to our context today. So, the question remains: if Paul were writing in a 21st-century, western context, would he say the same thing to us today? *Regarding guardianship*: Paul and Bartlett (2022) provide a detailed point-by-point critique of Wilson's insistence that through the Bible, guardianship is specifically a male function. While Wilson hasn't (yet!) published a detailed response to their arguments, he refers briefly to some areas of disagreement and references three online papers that bolster his position (Wilson, 2023). I would add: any complementarian response to Paul and Bartlett's critique would surely make the point that, even if guardianship isn't exclusively a male function in Scripture, it's still true in general. As to whether *that* argument carries weight, you be the judge!

This is unlikely to satisfy those who crave certainty, or who believe that ‘the perspicuity of Scripture’³⁶ includes its clarity on questions about church governance.³⁷ But I’m not perturbed by the fact that sincere, humble, Bible-believing Christians may come to differing conclusions on whether the big ideas outlined above are justifiable. Acknowledging that the Bible doesn’t settle the issue decisively one way or the other isn’t a recipe for despair. It’s an invitation to develop our convictions humbly while listening to one another. I believe that the Spirit would wish for you and me to develop our theology relationally, in an attitude of openness to one another. And that includes those brothers and sisters with whom we instinctively disagree.

Secondly, it seems clear to me that Paul *does* assume that only men will be elders in the churches with which he’s associated. In this regard, I depart from Bartlett and Paul’s (2022) suggestion that Paul can imagine suitably qualified women being recognised as elders, and that he consciously words his instructions to Timothy and Titus in such a way as to anticipate this possibility. Given the cultural context in which Paul is writing, and the specificity of his language in 1 Timothy and Titus, I think this is unlikely.

However, we should acknowledge that Paul doesn’t argue specifically for male eldership; he *assumes* it. The question then becomes: *why* does Paul assume that eldership is male? Is he simply reflecting the culture of his time?

Historically, within Newfrontiers, the answer has been no. And Newfrontiers is part of a wider, reformed tradition that has long held that Paul’s instructions about elders (and about husbands and wives) reflect timeless theological principles rather than culture-bound pragmatic ones. This is the tradition that Grace Church has inherited. While I have question marks over a handful of convictions that are mainstream within Newfrontiers, I’m encouraged by what I perceive as a growing appetite on the part of thinkers in our movement to reflect critically on our theological tradition. For example, I see in Andrew Wilson’s and Stef Liston’s writings a commitment to critique some of the complementarian convictions held by a previous generation of leaders which no longer reflect the best scholarship. This is how things should be. Tradition becomes problematic when it becomes fossilized. Each new generation needs to be prepared to subject their presuppositions, including those laid down by their tradition, to fresh appraisal.

However, the dialogue that’s happening in Newfrontiers right now is going on in a movement that remains distinctly and uniformly complementarian on the issue of eldership.³⁸ The founding father of Newfrontiers, Terry Virgo, is categorical when he states, ‘Against the trend, you will not find women in governmental leadership in Newfrontiers churches’ (2001, p. 301 & 2004, p. 4). If a Newfrontiers-

³⁶ The classic formulation of this idea is that ‘those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them’ (Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 1). Notice the focus on ‘those things which are necessary ... for salvation’. The perspicuity of Scripture relates to those things which are written in blood (such as the tenets of the historic creeds) rather than in ink or pencil (such as the things that we’re discussing here).

³⁷ Liston suggests that, had Jesus intended for women to be elders in the future, then he would have made that clear before the ascension: ‘Surely He would have foreseen the difficulties caused by this and would have left instructions? To say that it would have been controversial and so Jesus wouldn’t have done it seems to show little appreciation for the historical Jesus and the nature of His ministry’ (2023, pp. 90-91). The idea that, out of the thousands of issues that Christians have locked horns over throughout church history, Jesus would have prioritised *this* one to address with his disciples (presumably because it’s the one that happens to be important to *us*), is stretching things a little. Arguably, showing ‘little appreciation for the historical Jesus and the nature of his ministry’ is precisely the problem with the position that Liston adopts here.

Ann Brown is surely correct when she suggests that the reason that the New Testament isn’t clearer on the subject of women and eldership is ‘because it was not that important in the early church.’ She adds: ‘I am not sure that the first-century church shared our preoccupation with ecclesiastical structures and status’ (1991, p. 159). I think a strong case can be made for saying that the same is also true of Jesus.

³⁸ But not every issue. As we’ll see in Paper 3, there are different practices in Newfrontiers-partner churches concerning women preaching and teaching.

partner church *were* to recognise a female elder, it's safe to assume that the senior leaders in the movement would consider that church to have removed itself from the Newfrontiers family.

It's time to explain where we currently stand as an eldership team in Grace Church. In January 2024, the elders spent considerable time discussing – sometimes with tears – an earlier draft of this paper. We noted the range of views held by respected, evangelical scholars on the question of whether women can be elders; we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the complementarian interpretive framework, and we agreed that any convictions we may hold concerning the meaning of *kephalē* can't be held with anything like cast-iron certainty.

Then we acknowledged that there's something bigger at stake than nailing down where we stand in the complementarian-egalitarian debate. We're not *certain* what Paul would say about male eldership if he were to visit the western, 21st century Church, but we *are* certain that he would insist, emphatically and unreservedly, on the importance of unity. There are several issues discussed in this paper on which we're still sketchy, but there is at least one matter that's clear cut. We're committed to making 'every effort' to maintain the unity of Christ's Church (Ephesians 4:3). Many of the points made in this paper are written in ink and pencil but this one is written in blood. We will fight for the unity of Christ's Church. This is a hill that we're prepared to die on.

This means that we're not about to do something in Grace Church that would place at odds with the movement that has nurtured and supported us from our founding. We're not going to put distance between us and dear friends in our movement who have walked with us through the highs and lows of church life. Nor do we want to break the trust of church members, from the UK and elsewhere, who have chosen to make a home with us in Grace Church because, in part, they trust our principles and practices concerning elder appointment. Our consciences are bound. We don't consider it worth breaking the 'unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4 again) for the sake of things that are written in pencil or ink. So, there won't be a change in policy at Grace Church concerning eldership. This is what we believe unity requires.

For some people reading this paper, we recognise that this may be disappointing to hear. If that's you, our earnest hope is that you won't walk away. We're committed to listening to you and walking with you. We want to hear your story. We want you to know that your thoughts and feelings matter as we help one another make those all-important connections between what the Bible teaches and our contemporary world. At Grace Church we aspire to provide a context where people with differing views on gender roles can wrestle with the issues without fear of judgment or 'being cancelled'. That may be the world's way but it's not the way of Jesus.

As elders, we're included in this. We also want to be able to share our convictions, openly and honestly, without fear of rejection. We need to be free to challenge narrowness where we perceive that it doesn't accord with the witness of Scripture. At the same time, we know we haven't got everything sewn up. We need brothers and sisters around us who can help us identify and correct our blind spots. We see these things happening primarily through personal conversations rather than in public settings. As I've tried to show, the issues around gender roles are nuanced, sensitive and often emotionally charged. Informal conversations provide far and away the best context for the issues to be explored. They are the main places in the church where growth happens.

Finally, we hope that we can contribute, in some small way, to the reflection on our complementarian tradition that's happening in our wider movement. While we see the strengths of some elements of that tradition, we do think there are some aspects of what's historically been taught about maleness and femaleness that aren't as clear cut as has sometimes been supposed. Some may hear in this a call to arms. That isn't how we see it. We understand that our call is to serve our movement with humility, gentleness and respect, encouraging critical self-reflection and doing what we can to promote understanding across ideological and theological divides.

What next?

The main message of this paper is that, yes, there are real differences between believers as we humbly and thoughtfully try to work out what the Bible says about male and female roles in the home and in the church, but a biblical vision for complementarity transcends those differences. We think that the aim of cultivating a culture that celebrates both union and distinction is something that we can all get behind, whatever our complementarian or egalitarian leanings.

This will seem idealistic to some, but we do think it's possible to build a church where people with differing convictions about men and women can feel at home, where we have the humility and grace to learn from one other. Taking the biblical imperative of unity seriously means renouncing the scourge of evangelical spirituality to schism on every issue of difference. We *can* disagree with one another on matters that are written in ink and pencil and do that agreeably, *Christianly*, in the unity of the Spirit. How we do that is the subject of my fourth paper. You may find it helpful to read that paper immediately after this one.

What are the next steps for us in Grace Church? At this point in time, we don't have a comprehensive roadmap but are clear on one thing: the next stage of the journey begins by reflecting on what is, and isn't, intrinsic to the office of elder in the church.

The problem is that, within complementarian movements, 'eldership' has often become a catch-all term for 'leadership.' When people observe most of the decisions in church life being made by elders, then it's natural to conclude that 'being an elder' is synonymous with 'leading the church'. And when eldership is restricted to men, this can confirm people in the mistaken understanding that we believe leadership is only for men.

Complementarian churches and movements often protest, 'No, that's not true! We *do* believe in women in leadership!' ³⁹ Over the years, I've frequently found myself saying such things when I've found myself playing the role of apologist for Newfrontiers. The problem is that the message often doesn't get through. It isn't difficult to see why. In general, we haven't taken the trouble to define sufficiently clearly what we mean by eldership.

If Andrew Wilson is right (and we think he is) in saying that eldership is essentially about *guarding* the church, then this paves the way for much power and decision-making in the church to be in the hands of other leaders in the church. Elders still carry responsibility for defining a church's position on theological matters, implementing church discipline, contending for the church in prayer, praying for the sick, providing hands-on pastoral care and being involved with strategic decision-making. We anticipate that a significant proportion of the regular preaching and teaching will continue to come from the elders. But much of what's involved in the day-to-day leading of the church doesn't need to sit with the elders. This doesn't mean changing our theology; *it means making our practice more consistent with the theology that we already believe and profess.*

At Grace Church, we truly want to be a church that practises what we preach concerning the complementarity of women and men. While we don't go all the way with Liston in the complementarian opinions he espouses, we find ourselves gripped by the picture of the local church that he paints:

³⁹ Andrew Wilson (2024), quoting Stephen Clark, points out that the Church has formally recognised women in leadership from the earliest stages in its history.

How could I, and other men of influence ‘open the door’ so wide for women that they don’t simply find themselves with ample opportunity to exercise their gifts, but feel enthusiastically invited to do so by men they respect? What if those men were to search them out to co-labour with them, in order to hear from them and be profoundly helped by them? What if those men affirmed and served those women in such a way as to make them really feel their value and worth? Might that be something that carried [a] kind of redemptive power ...? (2023, p. 185)

It certainly would! And let’s be clear: *this is what we’re after in Grace Church. This* is what genuine complementarity requires. We admit freely: this isn’t (yet) where we find ourselves. But we do want to get to that destination.

So, we pose this question to you, whatever your personal leanings regarding male and female roles in church life: will you help us get there?

Appendix 1: Finding common ground in Ephesians 5

I want to offer a potentially radical suggestion: perhaps coming to the ‘right’ view on headship isn’t as important as we may think. Perhaps, just perhaps, it’s perfectly possible to affirm the distinction of the sexes based on an egalitarian reading of Scripture as well as a complementarian reading of Scripture. Let’s take another look at Ephesians 5:

Ephesians 5:21-33

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ ³² This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

My contention is that, wherever you land on the question of how best to understand male ‘prominence’ – whether you adopt a complementarian or an egalitarian framework – Paul’s teaching to husbands in Ephesians 5 has relevance for today.⁴⁰

In the table below, I’ve set out four different positions which I’ve labelled A to D. I’ve purposely steered clear of using the terms ‘complementarian’ and ‘egalitarian’ in this scheme, partly because I want to compare four perspectives rather than two, but also because the line down the middle is somewhat abstract (in practical terms, it may be next to impossible to distinguish between perspectives B and C).

⁴⁰ I appreciate that, here, my focus is on Paul’s instructions to husbands rather than to wives. My views on what we should do with the New Testament command to wives to ‘submit’ (Eph 5:21; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1) are still in formation, but Sprinkle (2024b) has some interesting thoughts these instructions would have struck a first-century audience as being subversive and counter-cultural.

Different views on headship from Ephesians 5:

What headship means for Paul	A man's prominence is <i>prescriptive</i> (based on what God intends for households).		A man's prominence is <i>descriptive</i> (based on the observation of 'how things are').	
What headship means for us today	Men <i>ought</i> to have prominence in family life. God entrusts them with 'representative responsibility'.		We can observe that, in many ways, men are still more prominent than women today.	The world has changed: men are no longer more prominent than women.
How Paul's words to husbands in Ephesians 5 apply today	A. The man's prominence includes responsibility to rule. However, he must be mindful of his call to do this in a Christlike way.	B. The man's prominence means that he takes primary responsibility for the spiritual health of his household. He is called to serve his family in a Christlike way.	C. Husband and wife share equal responsibility for the spiritual health of the household. The man's prominence requires him to be especially sensitive to the call to serve his family in a Christlike way.	D. Male prominence is no longer a useful category. There's no reason for singling out husbands for special instruction as both husbands <i>and</i> wives should serve their family in a Christlike way.

Let's begin with the observation that, wherever someone sits in this grid, from a more conservative, traditionalist position on the left, to a more progressive, modernist position on the right, every Christian husband will recognise that he has a responsibility to his wife and children. If a husband with complementarian convictions is attentive to what the Scriptures are saying, he'll proactively look for opportunities to serve his wife and take initiative in all kinds of ways to help her flourish. And a husband who is egalitarian will seek to do the same. When push comes to shove, I'm not sure that a godly egalitarian marriage will look a whole lot different to a godly complementarian marriage. But an *ungodly* marriage of either stripe will look very different to a godly one.

The second thing to note is that, while someone could argue that there's a fundamental division between positions AB and CD, I think someone could make an equally strong case for saying that the fundamental division is between ABC and D. For position D asserts that the biblical idea of male headship is irrelevant, but the other positions agree that it's still relevant today.

They believe this for different reasons. Where A and B are concerned, the idea is that God has created men for prominence in the family unit. God entrusts husbands with primary responsibility for the spiritual health of their households. Position C rejects these ideas. However, it still holds that Paul's specific instructions to husbands are relevant today. This isn't because God calls husbands to take their rightful place as heads of the home. It's because we look around us and observe that men are frequently more prominent than women.

There are two senses in which this is still true today. Firstly, many (perhaps most) societies in the world today are patriarchal to some degree. This isn't a value judgment: it's a simple recognition of what *is*. In societies where men are endowed with special privileges and powers, the instructions that Paul writes to husbands continue to resonate strongly.

[As an aside, it's possible that as more people from non-western cultures move to the UK, we start to see a stronger pull towards 'traditional family values' (including a traditionalist, complementarian

understanding of male headship) in Church and society. I've observed in the African families that have joined Grace Church in recent months that male authority in the home is generally assumed. Again, that isn't a criticism. It's an observation that the assumptions governing male-female relations in African societies are different in certain respects from the assumptions that predominate in western societies. So long as male power in the home is assumed, then Paul's instructions to husbands have continuing relevance.]

Secondly, even though UK society has come to reject many of the patriarchal assumptions of previous generations, it's still the case that men are often more prominent in society than women. Behind this asymmetry between men and women lie some brute facts about male biology and psychology. As Perriman puts it: 'In the simplest and most general terms, the man is larger, stronger, louder, more assertive, more aggressive' (Perriman, 1998, p. 197).

So long as these basic differences between men and women exist, Paul's instructions to husbands have abiding relevance. So long as men have greater opportunity to use their economic and social capital to their own advantage, or wield their superior physical or psychological strength in a way that causes harm to women, it's essential that husbands pay heed to Ephesians 5. This is where Terran Williams is coming from when he writes:

[I]f the husbands in Paul's time were anything like so many husbands I know of today, then they were (on average) less likely than the wives to lay down their lives sacrificially for their spouses. For this reason, Paul feels it sufficient to merely tell the wives to submit (that is, to humbly serve and please) their husbands, but then proceeds to chip away at the husband's selfishness by saying three times as much to him – pressing him to sacrifice like Christ. The shoe certainly fits me: in my own marriage, it is not Julie but I who have needed the most prodding from Scripture and the ongoing transforming work of the Spirit to sacrificially and humbly serve and please my spouse (2022, p. 168).

To summarise: some will read Ephesians 5 in a complementarian framework. Their understanding of headship will lead them to conclude that Paul is instructing husbands to recognise that they're primarily responsible for the spiritual health of their households. Others will read Ephesians 5 in an egalitarian (or mutualist) framework. For Williams, the asymmetry in what Paul says to women and men is explained, at least in part, by Paul's understanding of the male psyche.⁴¹ It's an argument rooted, not in the specific vocation that God gives men, but in the fact that God has wired men and women differently.

On the egalitarian side, some may be inclined to dismiss Paul's instructions to husbands on the grounds that they're 'just cultural'. I don't think that's a move that we can make. We look around us and see that, in general, men *are* more prominent than women. Against this backdrop, husbands need to take special care that they don't use their prominence to push their wives around. Consequently, *even if understood in an egalitarian framework*, Paul's instructions to husbands remain as relevant today as they were in the first century.

It's true that complementarians and egalitarians will differ in how they understand the particulars of what Paul says to husbands. However, I think it's true to say that believers who find themselves on different sides of the complementarian-egalitarian divide do share more common ground than is frequently acknowledged.

As final note, what about the language of husbands 'leading' their wives and households? I do think we need to be cautious about bringing the idea of leadership into our reading of Ephesians 5.⁴² Paul doesn't

⁴¹ A few pages later, Williams writes: 'If we can assume that men, on average, are more independent and therefore self-oriented than women, who are, on average, more interdependent and therefore other-oriented than men, then by all means, husbands like me should meditate especially on Christ's sacrificial love for the church that results in his bride's radiant flourishing' (p. 174).

⁴² Although Tom Wright shows no such hesitation. Wright is a helpful example of the limitations of the complementarian-egalitarian categorisation. While he's a passionate advocate for women being ordained (2014),

say explicitly that husbands should lead their wives. Of course, some husbands will have a leadership gift and this will inevitably work itself out in their marriages (and why shouldn't it?). But other husbands won't be gifted in this way, and some will be married to women who are naturally stronger leaders than they are. Does that mean that Ephesians 5 has nothing to say to these men? Not at all. Liston's remark on this point (as a self-described complementarian!) are helpful:

Different husbands and wives are diversely gifted. ... A godly husband who has a leadership gift will want to make sure he is manifesting leadership qualities in such a way that his wife feels honoured and understood and loved. A godly husband who doesn't have a leadership gift will still want to engage fully in taking responsibility for the spiritual nourishment of his wife (2023, p. 177).

I think that Liston hits the nail on the head. Absence of leadership gift (or the presence of a stronger leadership gift in the wife) is no barrier to a husband fulfilling the mandate to husbands in Ephesians 5. Every husband is called to take responsibility for loving their wives 'as Christ loved the church' (v. 25).

Wright's comments on Ephesians 5 pull in a more complementarian direction: 'Paul assumes, as do most cultures, that there are significant differences between men and women, differences that go far beyond mere biological and reproductive function. Their relations and roles must therefore be mutually complementary, rather than identical. ... And, within marriage, the guideline is clear. The husband is to take the lead – though he is to do so fully mindful of the self-sacrificial model which the Messiah has provided. As soon as "taking the lead" becomes bullying or arrogant, the whole thing collapses' (2002, p. 67). Taken as a general statement about leadership, Wright's final sentence is surely correct, but I don't think he's right to see this passage as being fundamentally about male leadership in the home.

Appendix 2: Arguments for male eldership

The following notes are from PJ Smyth (2016) who provides as good a summary of arguments for male eldership used in Newfrontiers churches as I've seen anywhere. Smyth acknowledges that he draws heavily from Grudem's *Systematic Theology* (1994). Here, I set them out without evaluating them (which would require another paper in its own right), although Ian and Paul and Andrew Bartlett (2022) touch on many of these issues in their response to Andrew Wilson's article on complementarity.

Before he tackles the issue of gender, Smyth makes some introductory comments which provide some necessary context:

- *First, I believe that the Bible teaches that elders should be men, but that all other ministry roles within the local church are open to women.*
- *Second, I acknowledge and sincerely regret the shameful and embarrassing fact that evangelical churches have often marginalized women, failed to recognize the full equality of men and women, and failed to fully empower and release women to ministry in the church. This has wounded women, and impeded the church, for the body of Christ can only find maturity when 'each part is working properly' (Ephesians 4:16).*
- *Third, I don't believe that women are less gifted, or less called, or less worthy than men. To the contrary, the Bible teaches that men and women are equal beneficiaries of the divine image and earthly rule (Genesis 1:26-28), equal recipients of the Holy Spirit and his gifts (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Corinthians 12:7), and have equal access to the blessings of salvation (Galatians 3:28). But I do believe that, in his wisdom, God has ordained certain gender-dependent roles in the home and in the church.*
- *Fourth, it is not acceptable for the biblical position of male elders to be adorned by extra-biblical practices that prevent women from playing the roles that scripture calls them to play. This is thoughtless at best and pharisaical at worst - the traditions of men should never subjugate the commandment of God (Mk 7:8). Clarity and conviction around male eldership should catalyse not paralyse elders to make space for women to play all their God-given roles.*
- *Fifth, I rejoice that our modern western society has provoked greater equality for women, whilst lamenting the lack of nuance with which some define equality. I fear that those who argue that equal-in-value-means-equal-in-role are setting everyone up for an impossible quest for value. If you make too close a connection between *being and doing* (i.e. if you say that intrinsic value is attained through doing certain things), then equality will elude us as there will always be things we cannot do, that other people can do, and do better than us even if we could do them. It is most unwise to make equality synonymous with homogeneity.*
- *Sixth, I believe that biblical gender roles are a privilege for believers to enjoy in Christian homes and in the Christian church, but that we should not try to insist on them in broader society. I believe such an insistence would be unnecessary, as the Bible doesn't insist on this, and unwise, because without the motivation that believers have, male headship would be misused in broader society, and unproductive in terms of gospel witness - we need to pick our battles. However, I believe that subjugating ourselves to biblical gender roles is a powerful witness to both the nature of God and the nature of the gospel...*

Gender of elders

The Bible teaches that women are called to teach, exhort, encourage, and contribute to the life of the church in every way except in the office of elder, which Scripture indicates is an office reserved for men. Here is some biblical support for this position:

- *1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9:* Both these passages assume that elders will be men, particularly 1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:6.
- *The relationship between the family and the church:* The Bible is clear that the husband leads in the home (Ephesians 5:22-33, 1 Peter 3:1), and the New Testament makes clear connections between home life and church life. For example, 1 Timothy 3:5 says, 'For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?' In view of this home-church connection, leadership patterns in the family will surely inform leadership patterns in the church.
- *The example of the apostles:* Although the apostles are not the same as elders, by appointing twelve men and no women to be apostles, Jesus was demonstrating the principle that not all church offices are open to women. One objection is that the culture of the day didn't allow Jesus to choose women for these positions, but that impugns Jesus' integrity and courage, and is inconsistent with how he readily took on other cultural norms of the day, such as criticizing Pharisees publicly, healing on the Sabbath, cleansing the temple, speaking with a Samaritan woman, eating with tax collectors and sinners, and eating with unwashed hands.
- *The history of male teaching and leadership throughout the whole Bible:* Throughout the Bible there is an overwhelming pattern of male leadership of God's people. There are exceptions where there was a queen and a woman judge (2 Kings 11:1-20, Judges 4-5), but these were exceptions in unusual circumstances and, as such, they hardly serve as patterns for New Testament church office.
- *The history of the church:* The overwhelming pattern through the entire history of the church has been that the office of elder/pastor (or its equivalent) has been reserved for men. Although this does not demonstrate conclusively that such a position is biblically correct, it should give us reason to reflect seriously on the matter before declaring the entire church throughout history has been wrong on their interpretation of Scripture on this issue.

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