

---

---

# THE COMPLEMENTARIAN POSITION ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BIBLE: A DEFENSE

Soba Chettry and Mohammad Manzoor Malik

---

## ABSTRACT

There are two contrasting positions concerning status of women built on Biblical verses: Egalitarians and Complementarians. The egalitarian position asserts that women and men are equal in all senses whereas the complementarian position takes the view that men and women complement one other. Therefore, both positions have implications concerning the role of gender in society. This article explores the passages in the Bible relevant to the topic and how they provide a ground for both positions. The main focus will be on the understanding and interpretation of Bible verse (Gal 3:28). Based upon this examination, the researcher will try to defend the Complementarian position.

**Key Words:** Egalitarianism; Complementarianism; Gender Equality; Biblical Studies

## Introduction

There are two conflicting views concerning the status of women's in the Bible. They are the Egalitarianism and the Complementarianism position. The Egalitarianism believes that males and females are equal and should hold equal roles and positions of authority based upon their abilities, in the home, church, and society.<sup>1</sup> It is understood from the

Bible verse (Gal 3:28), which says that all are equal in Christ through baptism. In contrast, Complementarianism believes that males and females are equal as humans created in God's image, but holds that gender plays different yet complimentary roles in the home, church, and society.<sup>2</sup> It is understood from another verse in the Book of 1 Cor. 11:3 (NIV), where it says that the head of the woman is a man. Both positions appeal to the inerrancy of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

This topic is sensitive and controversial; however, the researcher in this article aims to provide more light than heat. The researcher intends to discern a more 'authentic' reading of Biblical scripture concerning the status of women. And in this regard, the researcher defends the Complementarian position on the status of women in the Bible.

The initial impetus of the debate stems from the popularity of Feminism. Feminist movements have brought many positive changes in women's lives socially, politically, and economically. Yet, some aspects of Feminism have influenced Christian theology, leading many to identify themselves as Christian Egalitarians. In the opinion of the researcher, this often has led to a distortion of the scriptural explanation of the divine role assigned to gender.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, to pursue this debate, the researcher will first introduce the Biblical narrative on women; second, it will discuss the Egalitarian position and its argument; and third, it will discuss the Complementarian position; and finally, it will try to demonstrate how the Egalitarian argument could be refuted from the Complementarian position.

## **Women In The Bible**

Regarding the authority of the Bible, In the Book of 2 Timothy 2: 16 (NIV), Paul says that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."<sup>5</sup> In the Book of Matthew 24: 35 (NIV), Jesus Christ, the central figure for the whole Christian faith, himself endorsed its authority and authenticity by saying that "heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, The Bible insists that it is the

highest authority on the matters it discusses, and among these matters is gender.

Genesis 1: 27 (NIV) is the first Bible verse that mentions male and female. It says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”<sup>7</sup> As John Calvin interpreted this verse, the man was not complete in himself and needed a partner so that both could be one.<sup>8</sup> The following Genesis 2: 18 (NIV) says, “The Lord God said, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”<sup>9</sup> This verse clearly mentions that a female is a helper or a partner, which means an assistant to a male. In the following chapter of Genesis 3:16 (NIV), addressing the woman, it says: “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”<sup>10</sup>

Closely connected to the abovementioned details, which show how the Bible distinguishes between gender, there is also an assertion that these differences should be visible. For example, The Book of Deuteronomy 22:5 (NIV) says, “The woman shall not wear that which pertained unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.”<sup>11</sup> The verse shows us that men and women have to maintain some differences even in dressing. In the eyes of God, having no differentiation in dressing between men and women is disgraceful. If God is very particular in the dress code between men and women, why not in gender and its role?

The New Testament consists of 27 books. The Book of Matthew 27: 55-56 (NIV), the very first Book of the New Testament, describes women being involved in the ministry of Jesus Christ. It says, “there were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, in the Book of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 (NIV), it is mentioned that the woman should not speak in the church but should be quiet and learn with her husband at home. It says, “For God is

not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to that, the Book of Ephesian 5: 22 (NIV) counsels that “wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Egalitarianism**

Egalitarianism argues that everyone is equal and should have the same rights and opportunities.<sup>15</sup> Alexander Strauch, an author of the Book entitled *Biblical Eldership*, explains the meaning of egalitarian, as this perspective is frequently called Scriptural Woman’s rights or Egalitarianism, that men and women are completely equal and the Bible, especially New Testament does not instruct traditional male-female differences including leadership and obedience.<sup>16</sup>

Supporters of Egalitarianism gathered in 1987 to publish their scriptural point of view in a new academic journal, *Priscilla Papers*. With the assistance and vision of these people, CBE Universal (established as Christians for Biblical Equality) was set up on January 2, 1988. CBE is an egalitarian organization. Catherine Clark Kroeger served as the first president of the organization. Since 2001, Mimi Haddad has served as CBE’s president. <sup>17</sup>

In short, the egalitarian perspective of equality is husband and wife, or man and woman, are equal before God. There are no different roles according to gender; males and females are equal before God.

## **Egalitarian Arguments**

Christian Egalitarians use the Bible verses to argue against the complementarian position. For example, the Book of Galatian 3: 28 (NIV) says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>18</sup> Christian Egalitarians

place great importance on this verse and interpret it as asserting total equality. In Jesus Christ, all are equal; therefore, men and women can both be leaders in the homes, church, or elsewhere. In her book, *Good News for Women*, Groothuis, R. M., an egalitarian, explains that times have changed and women should be given full participation with full benefits within the Christian community. In truth, numerous researchers accept that the early Christians asserted their solidarity and correspondence in Christ by recounting Galatians 3:28 as they were baptized. In sanctification, each devotee dies to their previous life and its benefits including their, social, or sexual status and is raised to a new life in Christ. The Book of Galatians 3:27 (NIV) says, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” Paul announces. Women, no less than men, wear the uniform of Christlikeness, which alone qualifies an individual for otherworldly benefit. <sup>19</sup>

An egalitarian, Wayne Grudem explains Gal. 3:28 as a verse that must be applied without limit. A few translators confine the meaning of this to salvation by faith or unity in Christ. That truth is certainly verbalized all through Scripture. Yet the verse carries a ring of widespread application for all our relationships, not just a confirmation that anybody can come to Jesus Christ. <sup>20</sup>

J. Lee Grady, an egalitarian who wrote a book called “*10 Lies The Church Tells Women*”, mentions that in 1 Peter’s chapter 2, verses 5 and 9, Peter does not specify that this New Covenant priesthood is limited to male Christians. This passage makes no mention of gender because “there is neither male nor female... in Christ, “which is mentioned in (Gal. 3:28). <sup>21</sup>

## **Complementarianism**

Complementarianism suggests that women and men complete each other yet playing different roles. The roots of this conception go very back to the Biblical description of the creation of the woman. The Biblical account of the creation of the woman is stated in Genesis 2:20-24 (NIV) that 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 the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh".<sup>22</sup> With that is the love that a woman should share with her husband, as mentioned in the Book of Titus chapter 2: 3-4 (NIV), "Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children".<sup>23</sup> So, to be compassionate so the world can see a lovely partnership between a man and a woman. A collaboration that shows how God engages with His people (the church).<sup>24</sup>

Complementarianism has been in use since December 1987 when the world Christian leaders were concerned by the growth of unbiblical ideas concerning gender. So they met to articulate Complementarianism in Dallas, Texas, USA. They agreed to form the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). Dr. Denny Burk was the first president of CBMW.<sup>25</sup> The organization prepared a statement called the "Danvers Statement" which had ten rationales, five purposes, and ten affirmations. It was prepared by various evangelical leaders in Danvers, USA, in December 1989.<sup>26</sup>

The mission of the CBMW was to create lessons derived from scripture, concerning the complementary contrasts between males and females. They considered these lessons as essential for submission to the Bible and for the wellbeing of the family and the church.<sup>27</sup> The aim was to encourage homes, churches, schools, colleges, institutions, and other services to embrace the standards of the Danvers Articulation and the Nashville Explanation and apply them in a steady, heartfelt way.<sup>28</sup>

The complementarian stance holds that although there is a hierarchy, it is God's ideal, meant for completing, respecting, and appreciating each other while performing different roles as designed by gender. Children are to love and obey their parents and wives to comfort,

teach, and nurture the family and their husbands to protect, lead and provide for the family. According to John Piper and Wayne Grudem, the term complementarianism was chosen because it implied both equality and positive distinctions between men and women. They disliked the label traditionalist because it indicates a reluctance to allow Scripture to question old patterns of conduct, and they also despised the term hierarchism because it stresses organized authority while ignoring equality and the joy of interdependence.<sup>29</sup> They also reject the term “hardliner” because it implies a refusal to allow the Word of God to challenge traditional ways of life.<sup>30</sup>

### **Defense of Complementarian Position**

Based upon the above considerations, the complementarian position seems closer to a biblically authentic position. As we discussed above one of the main claims that Egalitarianism has made by their understanding of the Biblical verse is that: Male and female are both equal, and there is no gender role and differentiation, as mentioned in Gal. 3:18(NIV). However, the context of (Galatian 3:18) is all about spirituality. By Baptism in Christ’s name, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, all are one before the eyes of God. It is about oneness rather than equality. Spiritually, we all are royal priesthood, as 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 9 says “but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”.<sup>31</sup>

The author believes that men should be the head of the family and assume the role of pastors and elders in the church. This does not mean a they should act in an authoritarian manner but as humble and Christ-like servant leaders. Dough Batchelor, a pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist church, says that we cannot be wrong for about 1900 years of church history. If we all become prey to the popular mis-understandings of the feminist style of interpretation, then we are rejecting the age-old views of Mathew Henry, Martin Luther, Adam Clark, John Wesley, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, John Gill, and others.<sup>32</sup>

John Piper and Wayne Grudem say it is critical to carefully consider what Paul says in Galatians 3:28., “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This is different than saying “you are all the same in Christ Jesus.” In place of their similarity, he emphasizes their unity in Christ.<sup>33</sup> John Piper and Grudem conclude,

“Men and women both are spiritually equal in the eyes of God. (Jr., 2011, p. 113). There is no need to assert that Galatians 3:28 helps the idea of the Egalitarianism of function in the church. It does doubtlessly instruct an egalitarianism of benefit within the covenantal union of followers in Christ. The Abrahamic guarantees, in their blossoming by the Redeemer’s saving work, have a place all around to the family of God. Questions of performance and duty in that body can be replied to by a study of another Bible verse”.<sup>34</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the discussion above, we have found out that a close traditional reading of the Bible seems to support the Complementarian position on women. Egalitarian interpreters rely on the use of Galatians 3:28 (NIV), to argue against the complementarian position. But they misinterpret this verse. They believe that it contends that there is no differentiation between male or female; women are equal in all aspects with their male counterparts. However, a closer reading of this verse suggests that we all are one in Christ as a community but we are not the same individually. The sexes play different roles and yet equal in the eyes of God.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon Fee, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>2</sup> John Piper Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism by Piper, John (1991) Paperback* (Crossway, 1992), 478–79.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 11:3 (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> “Together for the Gospel,” June 17, 2016, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WJMD5VJLuQ&t=36s>.

<sup>5</sup> Tim. 3:16 (NIV).

<sup>6</sup> Mt. 24:35 (NIV).

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 1:27 (NIV).

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis - Volume 1 - Enhanced Version (Calvin's Commentaries)*, 1.1 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 54.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 2:18 (NIV).

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 3:26 (NIV).

<sup>11</sup> Deut. 22:5 (NIV).

<sup>12</sup> Mt. 27:55-56 (NIV).

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor. 14:33-35 (NIV).

<sup>14</sup> Eph. 5: 22 (NIV).

<sup>15</sup> “Egalitarianism Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.Com,” n.d., <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/egalitarianism?q=egalitarianism>.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Strauch, *A Study Guide to Biblical Eldership: Twelve Lessons for Mentoring Men for Eldership* (Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1997), 55–56.

<sup>17</sup> CBE International, “History of CBE,” January 4, 2023, [https://www.cbeinternational.org/primary\\_page/cbes-history/](https://www.cbeinternational.org/primary_page/cbes-history/).

<sup>18</sup> Gal. 3: 28 (NIV).

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing, 1996), 34.

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Crossway, 2012), 891.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women* (New York, United States: Penguin Random House, 2006), 100.

<sup>22</sup> Gen. 2:20-24 (NIV).

<sup>23</sup> Tit. 2:3-4 (NIV).

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Heeren, “Why Did God Create Woman?” Crosswalk.com, July 26, 2019, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/women/why-did-god-create-woman.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “Our History,” CBMW, April 6, 2021, <https://cbmw.org/about/history/>.

<sup>26</sup> *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* [2006] (Crossway, 2006), 479.

<sup>27</sup> “Mission & Vision,” CBMW, March 26, 2019, <https://cbmw.org/about/mission-vision/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *50 Crucial Questions: An Overview of Central Concerns about Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 2016), 15–16.

<sup>30</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 2006), 11.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Pet. 2:9 (NIV).

<sup>32</sup> JesuWiederkunft, “Women Pastors: A Biblical Perspective (Doug Batchelor),” YouTube, April 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0irueCn3hHc>.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon Fee, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>34</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Adfo Books, 1991), 157.

## REFERENCES

- CBE International. "History of CBE," January 4, 2023. [https://www.cbeinternational.org/primary\\_page/cbes-history/](https://www.cbeinternational.org/primary_page/cbes-history/).
- CBMW. "Mission & Vision," March 26, 2019. <https://cbmw.org/about/mission-vision/>.
- CBMW. "Our History," April 6, 2021. <https://cbmw.org/about/history/>.
- CBMW. "Our History," April 6, 2021. <https://cbmw.org/about/history/>.
- Calvin, John. *Commentary on Genesis - Volume 1 - Enhanced Version (Calvin's Commentaries)*. 1.1. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009.
- Grady, Lee. *10 Lies the Church Tells Women*. New York, United States: Penguin Random House, 2006.
- Grudem, John Piper Wayne. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism by Piper, John (1991) Paperback*. Crossway, 1992.
- Groothuis, Rebecca. *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*. Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing, 1996.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions*. Crossway, 2012.
- Heeren, Jennifer. "Why Did God Create Woman?" Crosswalk.com, July 26, 2019. <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/women/why-did-god-create-woman.html>.
- Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism [2006]*. Crossway, 2006.
- Piper, John and Wayne Grudem. *50 Crucial Questions: An Overview of Central Concerns about Manhood and Womanhood*. Crossway, 2016.

———. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Adfo Books, 1991.

Strauch, Alexander. *A Study Guide to Biblical Eldership: Twelve Lessons for Mentoring Men for Eldership*. Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1997.

“Together for the Gospel,” June 17, 2016. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WJMD5VJLuQ&t=36s>.