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Is There Such a Thing as a Comlegalitarian?

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One of the most divisive issues in the evangelical church over the past few decades has been the discussion surrounding the role of women and men in the church and the home. This debate pits “complementarians,” who believe that men and women have distinct God-given roles in the church and the home, against “egalitarians,” who believe that the new age of salvation in Christ means full equality of gifts, calling and church office. Complementarians point especially to 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where Paul tells Timothy that he does not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man. Egalitarians point to Galatians 3:28, where Paul says that former divisions based on ethnicity (Jew and Gentile), social status (slave and free), or gender (male and female) have been overcome “in Christ.”

This brief essay is not an attempt to solve the issue. Not even close. If you are interested in pursuing it, there are many excellent books that argue convincingly for one side or the other. See especially the “manifestos” for both positions: *Discovering Biblical Equality* (eds. Pierce and Groothuis; egalitarian) and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (eds. Piper and Grudem; complementarian). If you can’t afford these, get both views in one handy volume with the excellent *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (eds. Beck and Blomberg).

So what are we to do with this issue? I am in print and on record as a complementarian. I remain in this camp because it seems to me that God has made women and men different. Men naturally gravitate more toward assertive leadership roles while women tend toward more supportive and nurturing ones. This tendency seems to be confirmed both biblically and socially. Paul’s instructions related to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-19 appear to go beyond merely cultural norms, calling husbands to exercise a leadership role in their homes. Similarly, in Paul’s exhortation to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, he appeals to the order of creation to affirm male leadership in the church. Social-scientific studies, as well as a mountain of anecdotal evidence, suggest that men and women are different in the ways they think and interact with others. And different gifts and skills translate naturally into different social roles.

Although for these reasons I remain a complementarian, I have been accused on more than one occasion of being a “closet” egalitarian. I’m not unhappy with that description. One of my colleagues calls himself a “comlegalitarian.” That’s not bad. If you asked the women I work with if I am supportive of their gifts and calling, I’m pretty sure they would say “yes.” If you asked them whether they feel their opinions and perspectives are highly valued and respected, I think you’d get the same answer. I have never told a woman she should not teach, or that she should not fulfill a pastoral role, or that she should not become ordained or move into a position of leadership. I believe that is

between her and God. When it comes to using people for his purpose, it doesn't seem to me God ever limits his options. If God could speak to Balaam through a donkey, if God could deliver Israel through a whiner like Moses, if God could turn the world upside down with a bunch of faith-challenged disciples, indeed, if God can use me with all my failings, then it would be pretty arrogant to say that God can't use anyone he chooses.

Although I believe God *usually* calls men to leadership roles, there have been many exceptions both biblically and historically. Take Deborah for example (Judg. 4-5). I have heard complementarians claim that Deborah was really just a counselor, giving private advice to those who came to her (move over Dr. Laura). This seems to me special pleading. The judges in Israel were leaders, and Deborah clearly exercised political as well as judicial leadership. Or take Priscilla, a gifted New Testament teacher who is usually named ahead of her husband Aquila. This is likely because of her more prominent teaching and leadership role. The claim by some that she only privately instructed Apollos while under the authority of her husband seems to me a desperate attempt to deny that God ever uses women in leadership roles. Or take Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), or Junia (Rom. 16:7) or Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), or the thousands of women throughout history who have served in leadership and teaching roles in the church and on the mission field.

How do I square this perspective with 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and the (few) other texts that apparently limit the role of women? First, Paul's letter to Timothy, like all New Testament letters, is situational and was written to address a specific situation in the church. It seems to me Paul is applying a *general principle*—men should lead and teach—to a specific historical situation in Ephesus. Paul wants men to lead because churches are dysfunctional without male leadership. Does that mean that women can never lead or teach men? The many biblical and historical exceptions suggest that God can and does use anyone he chooses. But, in my opinion, these are exceptions rather than the norm. This position may not win many friends in either camp, but seems to me the only legitimate conclusion from the decidedly mixed biblical and historical evidence.

The women's movement—both in secular society and in the church—did not arise in a vacuum. It arose in contexts where women's voices were not heard or respected. It arose in churches where gifts and callings were ignored or demeaned. It arose in places where women who were gifted in leadership and teaching were told to sit down, shut up, and defer to their (sometimes much less gifted) male counterparts. We need to address these issues *first*, before we start telling women what they can and cannot do.

As a seminary professor, I preach in a lot of churches and work with a lot of pastors. I also see many churches in crisis, often losing staff and sometimes splitting. But I have never seen a church in crisis because a woman was trying to assert her authority over a man. Rather, the causes are always the same: pride, self-centeredness, desire for control, an inability to get along with others. And in almost every case, males are the primary offenders. The greatest danger to our churches is not creeping feminism, it is human sin and our inability to humbly submit in love to one another. When we start valuing and loving one another like Christ loved the church, I am convinced that these struggles over

church leadership will disappear. I don't see women clamoring to take over the church. I see them looking for the opportunity to exercise their gifts and calling as equals in the body of Christ.

As you face this difficult issue in your church, ask yourself these questions: Do the women in this congregation feel their gifts and calling are ignored or neglected? Do they feel their voices and opinions are not heard or valued? Do they ever feel like second class citizens? If you get even a hint of a "yes" to these questions, it's time to examine the style of leadership that is modeled in your church body. In the radical new leadership paradigm Jesus proposed, the last become first, and to lead you must serve, "for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).