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# COMPLEMENTARIAN

## VERSUS

# EGALITARIAN

10 Questions for  
Egalitarian Church Leaders

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If you are a church leader leaning toward an egalitarian approach to men and women in church leadership, we want to engage you in a deeper conversation on the implications of an egalitarian approach. We acknowledge that there is so much pressure to adopt egalitarianism and there are many writings by good scholars that advocate methods of interpretation that will help you get there. We understand how easy it is to adopt this viewpoint. But we are asking these questions to help you see if the egalitarian approach is really, truly taught in God's Word.

Male headship is the doctrine that men have a unique responsibility for leadership in the home and church. There are an increasing number of Christians who reject this belief, seeing it as an unnecessary barrier to reaching a people in our culture which has long recognized the equal giftedness of men and women in the workforce and home. It is becoming hard for many to justify anything less than egalitarianism in the local church.

In Western culture, many see churches which insist on male-only elders and senior ministers/pastors as behind the times *at best*, but increasingly more cynically as men cloaking their hunger for male power in a guise of faithfulness to the Bible.

Many call such churches *misogynistic* (hating women). All the while, there are more and more churches of influence to point to in the evangelical community who are abandoning male headship for an egalitarian approach to leadership based on giftedness, not on gender.

Does male headship only *feel* like faithfulness in the minds of conservatives—when it's really just a tradition or unnecessary barrier between an egalitarian culture and the church?

## GOT TIME FOR 10 QUESTIONS?

Perhaps you are already on your way to transitioning away from male headship and embracing egalitarianism in the church. Or maybe you're actually convinced that male headship is biblical, and so you're not going anywhere, but you are struggling with how to explain it or with how to help others. Either way, we humbly ask you to think through these questions and to explore what Scripture says about these issues at a more comprehensive level.

If you take this journey with us and have an open-minded humility before God, we can just about guarantee it's not going to be comfortable. This is because you'll face strong contrary winds from at least two directions: 1) the cynicism of Western culture toward biblical authority and toward anything the Bible says about gender *and* 2) the "large-and-in-charge" tradition-bound leadership culture of many churches.

The teachings of the Bible challenges both trends.



So, wherever you find yourself in this debate, may we ask you to pause and ask for God's help in prayer as you seriously work through these 10 questions? Let's start by defining the key terms: complementarianism and egalitarianism.

### **Term #1: Complementarianism**

Complementarianism is the view that men and women are created equal in their being, value, and personhood, yet *they complement each other* with different roles and responsibilities as manifested in marriage, family life, and in the church.

Note there are two variations in the complementarian viewpoint.

We believe that many tradition-bound complementarians are overly restrictive in not making room for many of the important roles women play in the Word of God. Many overly traditional churches are frozen in a rigid church leadership culture which prioritizes one set of Scriptures about gender while deemphasizing other Scriptures which describe important areas of church ministry in which women were involved. One way to describe this approach is "hard complementarianism."

In contrast to this view, there are those who hold to a moderate or softer form of complementarianism ("soft complementarianism"). Moderate or soft complementarians see a principle-based posture in Scripture, more than that captured by clear-cut rules or laws. This approach envisions the ambiguity of missional settings and circumstances where strict rules are not as important as pursuing God's heart and his normative principles. It also advocates the active participation of women throughout the ministries of the church, while holding that the main preacher-teacher role and elder role in the church are only for qualified men.

We hold to soft complementarianism at the Renew Network. We are a multi-ethnic network with leaders and churches throughout North America and in other countries beyond. Here is our foundational statement on gender.

*We believe both men and women were created by God to equally reflect, in gendered ways, the nature and character of God in the world. In marriage, husbands and wives are to submit to one another, yet there are gender-specific expressions: husbands model themselves in relationship with their wives after Jesus' sacrificial love for the church and wives model themselves in relationship with their husbands after the church's willingness to follow Jesus. In the church, men and women serve as partners in the use of their gifts in ministry, while seeking to uphold New Testament norms which teach that the lead teacher/preacher role in the gathered church and the elder/overseer role are for qualified men. The vision of the Bible is an equal partnership of*



*men and women in creation, in marriage, in salvation, in the gifts of the Spirit and in the ministries of the church but exercised in ways that honor gender as described in the Bible.*

Before we jump into our concerns about egalitarianism, there is something else you should know. At Renew we want to be known more for what we are for more than what we are against. So, we want to point you to an introductory blog post which is a summary of the positive case for moderate or soft complementarianism, if you have not been exposed to our position. You can find “On Gender and the Bible: A Summary,” at Renew.org by [clicking here](#).

Please note, again, that we are aware of profound problems found in traditional church leadership cultures characterized by a rigidity that misses the heart of biblical headship, gift empowerment, and the vital roles women exercised in the New Testament. We believe churches need to be as careful about avoiding domineering perversions of male headship as they are about avoiding egalitarian reframing of Scripture. Both rewrite what the Bible says.

This soft complementarianism that we hold seeks to stand against the impulses of a chauvinistic, dominating, and sometimes-abusive traditionalism on the one side, and the impulses of a sex-blind, gender-leveling egalitarianism on the other side.

We have read and discussed widely and have prayerfully considered the egalitarian arguments. We found that many of our questions are not addressed when church leaders make their shift from complementarianism to egalitarianism. The ten questions below are chosen to really get at the heart of the egalitarian arguments and show why we believe they are flawed.

We will also make the case against egalitarianism by teasing out its full ramifications. Our questions for leaders who buy into egalitarianism are to help them see down the road which they are traveling, leading the people in their churches or ministries to follow. We are convinced many would not want to travel down this road if they really understood the destination.

So, what is egalitarianism?

## **Term #2: Egalitarianism**

Like complementarianism, egalitarianism holds that men and women are created equal in their being, value, and personhood. But egalitarianism diverges from complementarianism by teaching that there are no unique roles for men in the home and church. Men and women, in this view, have interchangeable roles and adhere to mutual submission toward each other. When it comes to church leadership, egalitarianism means women do everything in the church that men do; they should be championed as pastors, teachers, preachers, and elders. Similarly, egalitarianism in the home translates into no unique roles for men or for women;



mutual and interchangeable submission is the standard. Egalitarianism in the church is a relatively new belief system, growing strongly in our Western culture which first valued these ideals in philosophy and psychology. [1]

Up until recently, it was mostly theologically progressive (liberal) churches which adopted egalitarianism. But that is changing rapidly, especially in the last ten years, as more and more evangelical, Bible-believing churches and ministries are following suit.

We believe that these evangelical churches and ministries will end up on the same path that the mainline, progressive denominations have followed. However, they will travel there not by first denying the authority and infallibility of the Bible, as the mainline churches have done. Rather, they will get there by introducing new methods of interpretation that are easier to adopt in a post-truth, post-critical thinking culture. By these interpretive methods, the teaching of Scripture becomes more adaptable.

So, what are the deeper-level problems we see in the egalitarian posture? Here are 10 questions that bring them to the surface.

## 10 QUESTIONS FOR EGALITARIANS

### 1. How did the earliest Christian leaders get it so wrong?

This question helps us to test our exegesis. If the apostles truly did teach the egalitarian posture, as most egalitarians claim, then we should find circumstantial evidence of that posture in the writings of those disciplined by the apostles. Put another way, if the egalitarian viewpoint is true, the earliest leaders, called the Church Fathers, should reflect it in their writings.

The Church Fathers wrote starting in the year AD 90 and on into the second century.

The Church Fathers:

1. were disciplined by the apostles
2. led in the churches established by the apostles
3. spoke the same language as the apostles
4. lived in the same culture as the apostles

It is instructive to see if they embraced the egalitarianism that many tell us is the true interpretation of what the apostles taught.

So, what do the writings of the Church Fathers show us?

There is no hint of the egalitarian view in their writings.



It does not exist.

Thus, for egalitarians to ground their position in New Testament exegesis, they must argue that their unique understanding was present in the apostle Paul and the first church, and then it evaporated before any leader in the early church adopted it and wrote about it.

How could these early Christians have gotten it so wrong, so fast?

Instead, we find that the earliest Christians championed complementarian arguments and said they were based upon what they learned from the apostles. They believed they were explaining the natural reading and understanding of the original text. To be sure, we can find some misogynistic statements in early church writings, but, at the same time, please note the second and third century complementarian affirmations:

- They stated their belief in male and female equality.
- They stated their belief in male headship in the home.
- They stated their belief in only male preachers and elders of the gathered church.
- They supported female teachers for ministry outside the gathered church.
- They supported female deacons for baptisms, anointing for prayer, etc.
- They supported a special order of female widows for prayer, care of the sick and benevolence.
- They supported female missionaries.

Again, consider this first question: if egalitarianism is right, how did those disciplined by the apostles get it so wrong?

## **2. Why did God create from scratch—not based on culture—male leadership roles in the Old Testament, in the ministry of Jesus, and in the New Testament church?**

The egalitarian argument is that male headship was not created by God, but rather, it was an accommodation to the fall or the surrounding culture of patriarchy. Egalitarianism with no gender roles was God's truest intention, to be realized gradually in the new covenant age, we are told.

So, why did God not start things with Abraham and Sarah that way? Or, why not course correct at the time of Jesus and the 12 apostles—if egalitarianism was indeed the intention? And it's not as though it works to say that God was simply accommodating to the culture, when God led his people to do many other things that were *contrary* to their culture. And Jesus started something in his public ministry that was radically new and different—but he still focused on developing 12 male apostles.



We are often told that male and female equality of roles in the church and home is a social justice issue. But if egalitarianism were the path of rightness and justice, why did God not set things up that way?

Please note the following roles that God created, all the while feeling free to deviate from cultural norms:

- The selection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as patriarchal heads of the Jewish people.
- The selection of twelve tribes based upon *the twelve male descendants of Jacob*.
- The appointment of *male-only priests in the Old Testament (although pagan religions had women priests)*.
- *All God-ordained royalty who led over Israel were men.*
- *All the major Old Testament prophets and all the known writers of the Old and New Testament were male.*
- All 12 apostles whom Jesus chose *were male*.
- In the New Testament, we read that *only men were authorized by God to be appointed as elders*. More on this below.

Again, if God wanted egalitarianism, why did God not establish it in the Old Testament, in the ministry of Jesus and the 12 apostles, and with elders?

### **3. Why make giftedness and not the created order the starting point?**

Another way of stating this question is to ask, “Where does Scripture teach us to start the conversation on male headship?”

Headship in the Bible is connected to the concept of *primogeniture*, which simply means “born first.” When the apostle Paul writes about headship, primogeniture is the go-to concept he brings up. In particular, he rewinds to the first chapters of Genesis where we see Adam being created before Eve. The Spirit inspires Paul to refer back to this created order as the basis for male headship in the church:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. *For Adam was formed first, then Eve.* And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (1 Tim. 2:12-14)

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; *neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.* It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head. (1 Cor. 11:8-9)

These passages present the primogeniture argument. God created the man first to have a headship role in the home and church. We are not generally familiar with this posture as an argument, but it was understood as authoritative by many in the ancient world, whether in homes or in society at large.

A modern-day example of primogeniture is found in the British monarchy. The Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, was the firstborn son of Charles, the Prince of Wales, and Diana, Princess of Wales. As firstborn, William will one day be king. When this happens, he will not have a license to do whatever he wants; rather, he'll have great responsibilities toward the subjects of the United Kingdom. He will submit to the needs of his subjects, and his subjects will submit to his authority.

Again, we do not often see this argument in our culture. We are far removed from it naturally making sense to us. Yet the primogeniture/headship argument is the posture of the New Testament regarding men and women when it comes to some church functions, grounded in the first chapters of Genesis.

Sometimes egalitarians locate male-female roles as a result of *the Fall* (i.e., where God says to Eve in Genesis 3:16, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”), but this is not what the New Testament teaches. The conflict of Genesis 3:16 is best seen in context as describing fallen marriage, not marriage as God intended it.

We point you to the created order as originally established by God before the Fall. Wayne Grudem lists ten arguments that show that there was indeed male headship before the Fall. Again, the Fall didn't create gender distinctions and roles; rather, the Fall distorted those roles into ugly power plays. Here, in brief, are Grudem's ten arguments:[2]

1. The order: Adam was created first, then Eve (note the sequence in Genesis 2:7 and 2:18-23; 1 Timothy 2:13).
2. The representation: Adam, not Eve, had a special role in representing the human race (1 Corinthians 15:22, 45-49; Romans 5:12-21).
3. The naming of woman: Adam named Eve; Eve did not name Adam (Genesis 2:23).
4. The naming of the human race: God named the human race “Man,” not “Woman” (Genesis 5:2).
5. The primary accountability: God called Adam to account first after the Fall (Genesis 3:9).
6. The purpose: Eve was created as a helper for Adam, not Adam as a helper for Eve (Genesis 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:9).
7. The conflict: The Curse brought a distortion of previous roles, not the introduction of new roles (Genesis 3:16).
8. The restoration: Salvation in Christ in the New Testament reaffirms the creation order (Colossians 3:18-19).





9. The mystery: Marriage from the beginning of creation was a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32-33).
10. The parallel with the Trinity: The equality, differences, and unity between men and women reflect the equality, differences, and unity in the Trinity (1 Corinthians 11:3).

If we follow Scripture, any conversation around male headship roles should start with a focus on the creation account. Unfortunately, this is not what egalitarians tend to do in the discussion.

We have found that they tend to ignore the creation account and instead start with Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Yet, why start here as the foundational posture? The context of Galatians 3:28 makes abundantly clear that men and women are equal in Christ: they are equally justified by faith (v. 24), equally free from the bondage of legalism (v. 25), equally children of God (v. 26), equally clothed with Christ (v. 27), equally possessed by Christ (v. 29), and equally heirs of the promises to Abraham (v. 29). But Galatians 3:27-29 does not address gender roles or the doctrine of headship.

Creation is the consistent starting point for the apostle Paul when it comes to gender functions. What is Paul’s reason for his appeal to Adam’s creation prior to Eve? He points to it when discussing why women should not be the main teachers in the church (1 Timothy 2:11-15) and when women are to honor male headship when they are praying or prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:3-10).

Again, here is the question restated: How can we justify ignoring primogeniture as the foundational basis Scripture gives for understanding male headship?

#### **4. Why reject the priest/rabbi/synagogue role as a historical background for key texts in 1 Corinthians 11:3-5, 1 Corinthians 14:29-34, and 1 Timothy 2:11-13?**

When it comes to crucial texts on gender in the church, such as 1 Corinthians 11:3-5; 1 Corinthians 14:29-34; and 1 Timothy 2:11-13, it is important to consider the cultural and historical background. A careful reading of the book of Acts shows that the early church started in the temple courts and drew its earliest members out of synagogues. The early church was formed with the synagogue as its background.

In this way, the synagogue is an extension of the Old Testament model where male priests were given the responsibility to be the authoritative teachers; Pagan religions had female priests, but not Israel. The Old Testament taught that only qualified men could be

priests (Numbers 4:1-3; 1 Chronicles 23:12-32). With the emergence of the synagogue, this authoritative teaching role passed to the rabbis in the synagogue who, again, were only qualified males.

Many of us were not taught fully about the role of male priests as the teachers in the Old Testament. We mainly thought of them as making animal and other sacrifices. But Malachi 2:7 describes their role this way: “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth.”

Prophets—male and female—appeared here and there. But the burden of teaching day-to-day in the Old Testament was on the male priesthood in Israel.

This male teaching model continued as the norm in the synagogue in the first century. In those meetings, “There was a large core of dedicated men who had given their lives to the study of the Scriptures, and who prepared themselves to preach when the leadership of the synagogue invited them to do so.”[3] The synagogue thus became a natural model for male leadership in the early church.

Consistent with the synagogue norm and God’s intention in the created order, God inspired Paul to teach that women are not to serve as authoritative teachers in the gathered church (1 Timothy 2:11-15), and women are to honor male headship when they pray or prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:3-5). Likewise, Paul taught women to be silent during the disruptions or the judging of prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:29-34).

This was not just a local prohibition for women in Corinth; according to both Corinthian texts, this was to be the norm for *all churches* (1 Corinthians 11:16; 14:33).

This also helps explain why Jesus’ 12 apostles were men. And it also explains why elders are exclusively male in the New Testament (in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-3).

These practices fit the Old Testament and synagogue norm.

We find that most egalitarians are uninformed about the priest/rabbi historical background for the male teacher-elder role in the church. With a lack of clarity, scholars substitute ideas about the cult of Artemis in Ephesians or other pagan sources as the background. But they point to these backgrounds without a clear biblical basis and ignore the known formative role of synagogues in the early church. For insight on the mis-application of using the Artemis cult, how it connects with Ephesus, and its historical background, click [here](#).

This continuity of male headship that spans both testaments and is tied back to creation teaches that God intended male headship to be transcultural—something which should not get derailed by cultural winds.



In summary, again, why not take the priest/rabbi role as a crucial historical background for the discussion on women teaching in the early church?[4]

## 5. How do Jesus and the Church mutually submit to each other?

At first glance, this question might seem like nothing more than a mind bender exercise, but it is actually a pretty important question. We'll get into the context in a second, but it's an important question that we have never been able to answer when trying to come at things from an egalitarian posture.

Those who embrace egalitarianism uphold "mutual submission" as the primary leadership principle in marriage, with no gender-specific stipulations in how it plays out. This unconditional mutual submission naturally suggests interchangeability. The idea is that husbands and wives mutually and equally submit to each other's leadership (based on Ephesians 5:21 which says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ").

But when we continue reading Ephesians 5:22-24, we find that wives are uniquely told to submit to their husbands and that Jesus and the church are the model for the husband and wife to follow.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Eph. 5:22-24)

As convenient as it would be to be able to read egalitarian, mutual, no-set-roles submission into the marriage relationship, the Christ-church metaphor makes this impossible. It's true that Jesus submitted to the cross for the sake of the church, but his submission is not interchangeable with the church's submission to him.

Put another way, Jesus tells the church to follow him, but the church does not tell Jesus to follow her. The roles are not interchangeable. Neither are the roles for husbands and wives interchangeable as articulated in Ephesians 5:21-33.

And it's not just Ephesians 5 that teaches male headship in the marriage. Look at the following two passages from two other books in the New Testament. They leave no ambiguity on this point.

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. (Col. 3:18-19)

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 behavior of their wives when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (1 Pet. 3:1-2)

In the larger context of 1 Peter 3:1–7, the blessing of being joint heirs “of the grace of life” (v. 7) is directly related to the same kind of equality language in Galatians 3:27-29 that egalitarians rely upon.

This section of Scripture explicitly shows that equality of standing in salvation does not take away gender roles. Here, Peter provides an exhortation for women to submit to their husbands (v. 1) and for their husbands to treat their wives with respect “as the weaker vessel” (v. 7). In other words, Peter saw no conflict between the neither-male-nor-female principle regarding our inheritance (Galatians 3:27-29) and the headship-submission principle regarding male-female roles.

Yes, these passages are unpopular culturally. And, yes, these passages can be and have been abused by large-and-in-charge husbands trying to make power plays by mistreating their wives with forced submission.

But even though it has been abused, the male headship model has been a good, life-giving model, where Christian men love their wives like Jesus loved the church. And we also note, like the passages on leadership in the church, the husband’s headship is connected to creation *before the Fall* (Eph. 5:31). It’s a beautiful thing when lived out by sacrificial husbands following Christ’s example.

Husbands representing Jesus have a unique leadership role with their wives, who have a unique role representing the submission of the church to Jesus.

Is it possible to explain away Ephesians 5:22-24 as interchangeable submission and headship?

## **6. Does it bother you that you must redefine the understanding of so many passages and key words?**

Again, the egalitarian viewpoint requires the reinterpretation of the male headship role God created in both the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus. If we include the whole Bible, the full discussion on gender in Scripture requires egalitarians to reinterpret hundreds of passages. This is contrary to what egalitarians typically tell us, stating that there are really only two passages that restrict the kinds of authority women exercise in the church—1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14—and that the restrictions found in these two passages aren’t actually meant to be taken transculturally.

Again, there are hundreds of passages that can't easily be made to fit egalitarian ideals. There is the centrality of the patriarchs, the male-only priesthood in Israel, the major prophets in Israel, the apostles of Jesus, elders in the New Testament, etc., and then we also get to 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14.

To be a true egalitarian requires one form of reinterpretation or another when it comes to all those passages.

There are also key words that must be reinterpreted from how they have been understood for 2,000 years. Here are four key words that lie at the heart of this discussion which must be redefined according to an egalitarian lens:

- “head”
- “authority”
- “helper”
- “submission”

For more on how these words have needed to be redefined against the historic church's understanding, click [here](#). Respected contemporary scholars such as Tim Keller, D.A. Carson, and Thomas Schreiner show that the interpretive consensus of twenty centuries about these words is the most accurate one, not the egalitarian redefinitions, contrary to what is typically alleged (see Thomas Schreiner's recent summary article supporting the historic consensus on these words by [clicking here](#)).

Throughout history, almost no one adopted the hermeneutical views of egalitarians on the Bible. These views are still rejected in the majority of churches around the world today. Yet we find that egalitarians argue that their reinterpretation of these words is the new scholarly consensus. In our studies, we have not found this to be true. Even if this were the new scholarly consensus, this fundamental fact would remain unchanged: A person who studied the Bible thoroughly without the pressure of our Western secular culture would not naturally end up with an egalitarian understanding of the key words. This is what history shows us.

We have to ask ourselves, are we trying to find reinterpretations that fit our culture or are we letting the original and historic meaning of the text serve as our final authority?

## **7. What can you teach from Scripture on what makes a man distinct from a woman?**

This question gets at the heart of our cultural moment and its clash of consistent egalitarianism with a Judeo-Christian worldview. The Bible teaches that God made us male and female (Gen. 1:26-27), and the strengths and importance of each are meant to play out throughout life, not just playing a role in sexual reproduction.



Yet our culture is fast rejecting the goodness of the distinctiveness of maleness and femaleness.

The result is deep confusion and sometimes even self-hatred directed at one's own body as a gendered creation. We now have millions of men alienated from women because of this confusion: many shrink from any signs of manliness on the one side while others maintain a distorted, brutal, and toxic manliness on the other.

And there is now a crisis for young men, especially in their teens, twenties, and early thirties in America. Why have so many young men lost their way and become directionless? Why are many struggling with shame at being male (seeing it as toxic) and are led into contemplating a new gender identity (just visit a local high school and listen to the conversations)? With a fuzzy understanding of the [purpose of maleness and femaleness](#), many churches remain silent on the issue.

As C.S. Lewis said, "We are producing men without chests."

Although "toxic masculinity" can denote toxic traits such as misogyny and sexual abuse, many secular and Christian egalitarians believe that *traditional masculinity itself* is toxic. The upshot is that, to be accepted in our culture, men must become more like women. The culture and many churches are embracing the belief that a person can change genders and that gender itself is a cultural construct which ought to be deconstructed.

Into this confusion, the church ought to speak with clarity, affirming the goodness and distinctiveness of how God created us differently as male and female. Yet churches which go egalitarian struggle to answer even basic questions about what it means to be male and female biblically. An increasing number are now explicitly adopting the viewpoint of the secular culture when it comes to gender.

So, what does it mean to be a man or a woman?

And, importantly, what passages from Scripture will you rely upon to frame your answer?

Years ago, I (Bobby) read a book by a popular egalitarian leader from Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago on a biblical view of marriage. This has been one of the most influential churches among evangelical, Bible-believing churches and it is an explicitly egalitarian church. I was surprised when I discovered that the book was missing all the major passages on husbands and wives from the New Testament. Then I realized, he did not use them because he believed they were culturally bound and no longer applicable.

Here's the uncomfortable reality: When church leaders interpret passages on gender through an egalitarian lens, they lose clarity on some of the most pressing questions for everyday Christians and parents in this cultural moment.

We believe this question of what makes a man and a woman different, in the light of our current cultural moment, is more important than most people realize. Let us summarize a longer post we published that explains the differences.

1. God created males and females to be different.
2. God created male headship (authority) in the beginning.
3. Male headship (authority) in the home means that husbands mimic the leadership role of Jesus.
4. Wives respond to the headship (authority) of their husbands the way the church responds to Jesus.
5. Male headship in the local church is reflected in the teaching-authority and elder roles.
6. Men and women are to submit to and honor the authority of male headship in the church.
7. Honoring Jesus-style male headship will bring blessings on the family and the church.

We articulate the distinctives of men and women in more detail in the articles [“On Gender and the Bible \(A Summary\)”](#) and [“What Does It Mean to Be a Man or Woman?”](#) In this crucial time in our history, we must help people to understand their unique calling, especially men feeling directionless and unnecessary because of the messages sent by their culture. [Betterman.com](#) has an excellent course for churches on how men are called to uniquely live out their masculinity along the lines that we have laid out above.

How we address the distinctiveness of gender is important, as it's foundational to being able to address much of the chaos created by a culture furiously fighting against anything that suggests God's authority and our createdness.

If egalitarians cannot help the people in our churches with a biblical answer to these questions, then people will adopt the secular culture's viewpoint because that is the only viewpoint they are hearing.

Again, what does *Scripture* teach about the purpose and uniqueness of men and women?

## **8. How will you use Scripture as a basis for appointing female elders?**

One of the most important things a local church does, when it is following the Bible, is the task of appointing elders. The words *elder*, *overseer*, and *shepherd* are synonymous in the New Testament for one body of godly, proven leaders who oversee the local church (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28-31; James 5:14).

So, when churches seek to appoint elders, if they are discipling their people well, they will typically go through the passages on elders and help the members of the church to join in appointing those who meet the criteria to be elders, as described in the key passages.

When we read about the qualities, character, and lifestyle of those who are to be appointed as elders, it is not just that in general their roles sound more masculine; we also see how the passages explicitly only describe men. Here are some examples:

- Now the overseer is to be above reproach, *faithful to his wife*, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach. (1 Tim. 3:2)
- 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. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church)? (1 Tim. 3:4-5)
- 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. (Titus 1:6)

Women elders are simply not in view in these passages. So, will you guide the everyday members of your local church to sidestep the gendered nature of these passages? Egalitarians will typically ignore, reinterpret, and add to them. Once you abandon the norm of Scripture, you will be forced to create human norms for guidance. You will replace what God teaches with your own tradition. Scripture will no longer be the norm for how you appoint elders.

So, if you are committed to egalitarianism, what biblical passages will you use to guide your church to embrace female elders? What will you tell them in order to sidestep the absence of women in the sections of Scripture that tell us what to look for in elders?

### **9. Why do churches not grounded in secular Western egalitarianism tend to read these passages so differently?**

It is not fun to think about, and we mentioned it above in passing, but many Christians living in Western nations live in times where vast numbers are turning from Judeo-Christian views in general and Christianity in particular. We are losing a lot of the historic cultural support we once had for many of our beliefs about the Bible and the ways of Jesus.

The upshot is that many Western Christians attempt to make their views palatable for those who do not like what the Bible says. Contextualizing the teachings of the Bible in terms that make sense to Western ears is a good thing. However, changing the teachings of the Bible to fit secular Western ideals is not. Changing our teachings to better fit in means we end up marrying “the spirit of the age.”

But it will not work, over time.





Trading historic Christianity for progressivism has historically led to decline and then eventual apostasy (more on that below). Most egalitarians believe that they are creating an “on ramp” that will help professional or secular people come into the church. But they are in reality creating an “exit ramp” where church members do not uphold a biblical view and they defer to the beliefs of the dominant culture. Over time, they are subtly and unwittingly encouraging church members to embrace the values of the culture over those taught in the Word of God.

Western cultural ideals are powerful, including egalitarian ideals. All the while, the vast majority of churches around the world still believe that male headship is the biblical norm. The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and most Protestant churches in the global South are in general agreement on the historic consensus on male headship. The male headship view is the norm:

- For nearly 2,000 years
- For all kinds of cultures
- For all kinds of countries
- For all kinds of Christian traditions

Yes, there are exceptions, but they do not overturn the norm. Only in the secular, egalitarian culture of the West is a different view becoming prevalent. Culture is winning over more and more churches to the egalitarian viewpoint.

So, here is the question stated differently: Honestly, if you took away Western cultural pressure, would Scripture lead you to adopt an egalitarian posture?

## **10. How will you stop the drift to gay, lesbian, and transgender affirmation and other forms of progressivism in your church?**

Most church leaders who become egalitarians do not plan to embrace same-sex unions and transgender lifestyles as acceptable for godly people. Yes, some do plan to embrace these things too, but most strongly protest that they will not follow that path.

The problem is that egalitarian *methods of interpretation* lead to those results.

The same tools used to explain away the passages on gender are typically used by others to explain away the passages on LGBTQ issues and other hard doctrines.

This is a trajectory that is better measured, not in years, but in decades.

Wayne Grudem has discovered and documented this trend: Throughout history, the interpretive methods that get you egalitarianism typically will be used by your disciples over time to

“explain away” other hard teachings.[5] That same slide, based upon the same hermeneutical methods, leads to progressivism (liberalism) and then, over time, ultimately to the slow death of churches. (For more on this trajectory, see David Young’s [A Grand Illusion: How Progressive Christianity Undermines Biblical Faith](#).)

You might spend some time looking at the historical trajectory over the decades of the seven major mainline denominations in the USA ([click here](#)). Check out the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Disciples of Christ, and other denominations that have embraced liberalism. They made these same egalitarian moves decades ago, bringing women into all levels of leadership—and now they embrace the goodness of homosexuality and transgenderism, multiple paths of salvation, and often a denial of the reality of hell. They are all on the historical trajectory of decline leading to death as denominations ([click here](#)).

Why?

Because in each case, the logic is the same: Based on the perceived harm that our traditional interpretations of these passages have done (e.g., to women, homosexuals, transgender people, the lost), we need to reinterpret these passages in ways that bring justice and equality. For more on this logic, click [here](#).

If you choose egalitarian methods of interpretation—especially in the name of seeking justice and equality—how will you not end up in the same destination? Don’t look at the short term when the implications take a little longer to work out; take a longer view. What will make you different from mainline and progressive denominations twenty or twenty-five years from now?

### **An Objection**

We have heard people say, “I do not want to be on the other side of eternity and have Jesus say, ‘Why did you restrict women in the use of their gifts for my kingdom?’”

That sounds like a powerful argument against complementarianism, doesn’t it? Yet let us offer some pushback because we believe this confuses eldership/senior ministry with the work of ministry.

When we connect all of the important roles women play in the New Testament church with our all-important work of making disciples, the New Testament picture is not one of restricting women at all. Rather, the picture of elders and authoritative teachers is one of *empowering* women and men “for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:12-13)



There are so many important ministry works outside of being the main preacher-teacher or an elder that it should be obvious this is not an issue of gift utilization. We never want to adopt the untrue view that the truly important and gifted people are the preacher/teachers and elders. At root, their jobs are to equip the rest of the church to serve God in countless ministries that are vitally important in the eyes of God—including the most crucial job any of us could have: making disciples.

The New Testament describes women prophesying (Acts 21:9), serving as deacons (Romans 16:1-2), mentoring younger women (Titus 2:3-4), making disciples (Matt. 28:18-20) and doing other important and visible acts of ministry. Considering the New Testament teachings as a whole, women are to be empowered for countless vital ministries.

In the meantime, here is another painful, potential question by Jesus on the other side of eternity to think about:

*Why did you cave to the pressure of cultural ideals which contributed to the breakdown of gender identity and created gender confusion? Why did you undervalue the authority of my Word and not observe the trajectory of the progressive churches who went before you?*

In light of this trajectory, our tenth question may be the most important of all to marinate on: If you explain away all the passages on male headship to become egalitarians, how will you prevent those methods of interpretation from being used by those who come after you to move further in the slide toward full progressivism?

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Before we finish, let us add some important context.

First, we do not think this topic is a salvation issue. To us it is an issue about honoring God and pursuing God's best for us based upon the created order. And it is about a concern over the long-term implications of new methods of interpretation.

Second, we love our egalitarian brothers and sisters and we empathize with them. It can be very difficult for churches to address these issues today because of the pain involved. Many church leaders are embarrassed by the history of how their churches have restricted and mistreated women. There are also many husbands who have misused Scriptures about male headship as excuses to "lead" in domineering ways opposite the loving example of Christ. We acknowledge those facts and empathize with those feelings.

But we simply believe there is a better way than reinterpreting passages against their grain and, once again, recommend the Renew Network's soft complementarian view (click [here](#) for a summary).



Here are our 10 questions in a summary fashion.

1. How did the earliest Christian leaders get it so wrong?
2. Why did God create from scratch—not based on culture—male leadership roles in the Old Testament, in the ministry of Jesus, and in the New Testament church?
3. Why make giftedness and not the created order the starting point?
4. Why reject the priest/rabbi/synagogue role as a historical background for key texts in 1 Corinthians 11:3-5, 1 Corinthians 14:29-34, and 1 Timothy 2:11-13?
5. How do Jesus and the Church mutually submit to each other?
6. Does it bother you that you must redefine the understanding of so many passages and key words?
7. What can you teach from Scripture on what makes a man distinct from a woman?
8. How will you use Scripture as a basis for appointing female elders?
9. Why do churches not grounded in secular Western egalitarianism tend to read these passages so differently?
10. How will you stop the drift to gay, lesbian, and transgender affirmation and other forms of progressivism in your church?

We pray that God will help you to thoughtfully answer each of these questions.

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The Renew Network is a national and international network of church leaders and churches who seek to “renew the teachings of Jesus to fuel disciple making.” Check out [RENEW.org](https://renew.org) for more information.

[1] See Carl Truman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022) and *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).]

[2] Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 109.

[3] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1: The Biblical Period (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 102.

[4] We are grateful for the input on these points by Professor Richard Oster of Harding School of Theology and Joe Shulam of Netivyah Training Institute in Israel, two experts in first century backgrounds for the early church.

[5] Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

