

The Complementarian Woman

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Johann & Cornelia serve on the eldership team of Joshua Generation Church, and Cornelia (who has a doctorate in New Testament theology) has written this article from a place of desiring every saint to understand and apply the New Testament to their lives, and for every woman to find the fulfillment God has for them.

The role of Christian women in the home and church is and will remain a hot potato issue in a culture where “submission” has become somewhat of a swear word. Churches and individuals who hold a complementarian view are constantly criticised for being oppressive and backwards.

As a church, we do our best to live out what we see written in the Bible, which is that men hold the primary responsibility for leadership in the home (i.e. headship) and that elders (who are men) hold the primary responsibility for the leadership of the church. This is called complementarianism, because we believe that the two genders complement one another when they fulfil their God-given roles.

As a married woman, I have often been asked why I put up with such “archaic” views on gender. First of all, I do not “put up” with these views, I share them. Secondly, I believe much of the criticism levelled against our church’s approach to gender arises from misconceptions of how and why we do what we do. Therefore, without getting into the complementarian-egalitarian debate, I wish to reflect on my own, very positive experience of being part of a broadly complementarian church by busting some of the myths about our way of life and approach to ministry.

Myth 1: Complementarians often focus on what women cannot do

While much of the conversation around the role of women in the household and church centres around the interpretation of so-called prohibition passages (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:11-15; 1 Corinthians 14:33-35) and what women cannot do, this certainly has not been my experience. Since my first visit to Joshua Generation Church, I have constantly been encouraged and exhorted to do. The gifts

(1 Corinthians 12:8-11; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11) are not gendered and Paul makes it clear that God has gifted each one for the edification of all (1 Corinthians 12:7). This includes women. Moreover, Paul spoke very highly of the women with whom he ministered and co-laboured (Romans 16). So when we say that women are not ordained as elders, we create a set of (wide) boundaries within which women can freely run, participate and lead. It is also important to note that all saints have boundaries. Elders have certain criteria that (dis)qualify them (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9), and if they were to move outside of these boundaries, they would be stepped down. Women are also not the only ones who submit. The men in church submit to the elders (Hebrews 3:17). While only a handful will carry the responsibility of directing the church, each saint is called to do the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). This is the portion of both men and women alike.

Myth 2: Women miss their call to ministry in complementarian churches

Sadly, there are churches where this is not a myth. I remember being told in a previous church that I needed to work through my sin issues because the church had great vision and plans for my husband. This missed the mark. I am not called to be a silent partner who can disengage at any minute. I am in it with my husband. While I do not set the vision for us as a couple and I yield to my husband's leadership and calling, I am not just an accessory. Sometimes my ministry is making tea and looking after the children while he ministers; sometimes it is praying, teaching where called upon, ministering, and even giving input in elders meetings. And while I am here with my husband, I am not here just because of my husband. I am also called to contribute and will stand before the Lord as either a good or bad steward one day. What I find most encouraging is that there was plenty for me to do in church even before I was married. I could use my gifts to edify the body, I could disciple with zeal, and I could grow in the Lord. Deaconesses and women on staff fit very comfortably within the biblical complementarian framework. It's not only elders who are called to a life of ministry.

Myth 3: Complementarian churches aim to keep women in their place

One of the pervasive misunderstandings about a complementarian church is that it consists of a group of men wagging their fingers at the women, tutting, "Submit." I cannot recall ever being told to submit without my husband simultaneously being reminded to sacrificially love me as Christ loves the church. Like Paul, who spoke to the men and women (Ephesians 5:22-33), our language around leadership and submission cannot and should not be one-sided. Moreover, submission is not something that is enforced upon the women by the men. As women, we choose submission, and we need our sisters to remind us of our choices. Our husbands also choose submission: to the elders and to one another. My husband has never returned from a men's meeting with a renewed sense of entitlement that he deserves better submission. Quite the contrary: he has always come home repentant and stirred to love me more sacrificially.

Myth 4: Complementarian churches set women up for abuse

Complementarians believe that what we do in our marriages matters. This means that accountability is essential for us to flourish in our walk with Jesus and in our marriages. I can think of no space less ideal for an abusive husband than a church where accountability in marriages is alive and well. My marriage is not only my business. Men who truly honour women as the weaker vessel (1 Peter 3:7) will look after them with care and understanding. Whenever my husband and I spend time with others, we are both asked how we are doing as a couple. In instances where I felt like he did not love me well, I have been encouraged to share and, if my husband was at fault, there has always been a brother or father ready to exhort him to take better care of me as God's daughter. Also important to note here is that I am not called to submit to all men—I am to submit to my own husband (who is called to lead and love me) and to the elders (to whom all men are to submit). There is, therefore, little room for coercion or domination by men who wish to prey on their sisters.

Myth 5: Complementarianism views women as lesser

It is often assumed that women's opinions and voices do not matter in complementarian churches. If this were true, I would not be writing this blog post and you would not be reading it. God has gifted me to teach, and I find it beautiful and encouraging that I can place this gift at the feet of the elders and be used by God for the edification of the church. It would be madness to assume that the teaching gift is limited to the pulpit. If that were the case, 90% of the teachers in church (men and women) would never walk in their gift. If only more men and women learned not to idolise the (very few, I might add) opportunities that they do not have and make every effort to use the ones they have, the church would be healthier (and our leaders would be less exhausted). Like Priscilla and Aquilla, who both taught Apollos the Word more accurately (Acts 18:24-28), or like Phoebe, who brought Paul's letter to the Romans, women and their participation in ministry matters.

Myth 6: Complementarians want all women to be housewives

For some reason, people are under the impression that women in complementarian churches are not allowed to enter the workplace. Proverbs 31 quickly debunks this notion. This woman is praised as one who works both in and outside the home. The author even speaks of her earnings (Proverbs 31:16). It is important to note that this Scripture combines all the virtues of a good woman. No one woman will embody all of the things mentioned (e.g. working with her hands, bringing food from afar, stewarding servants, purchasing and cultivating land, trading, looking after the poor, making clothes and linen, selling what she makes, etc.). However, within this image there is ample room for women to contribute to the household by earning an income outside of it. The caveat is that I am not called to build a career for myself, but neither is my husband. Our jobs grant us an opportunity to honour God by helping to provide for the family and to build God's Kingdom, and we ought to be open-handed with them.

Proverbs 31 even affords the space (and blessing) for women who have a heart to be busy at home (Titus 2:4-5) and to home school their children—women who don't see it as oppressive or limiting

but rather as something beautiful and fulfilling.

Conclusion

While there may be various ways to look at gender roles in the home and church, I have chosen to make Joshua Generation Church my home and I have flourished in this family and its interpretation of these roles. What is glaringly obvious is that we find ourselves in a culture obsessed with power and platform, and this ethos has worked itself into the way we approach this issue. Our Christian lens should rather be for the benefit and edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14:12). This cautions men not to say that they do not need women (1 Corinthians 12:21) and churches not to constrain women in ways that are unbiblical, yet it also cautions men and women not to grab for position but to be faithful in the many roles that they are given in their churches. To my sisters in Christ: run with your gifts! Make disciples (oh, how we need you here), fill yourself with the Word, encourage your brothers and sisters, prophesy, sing, pray, teach, serve, give, lead--the boundaries are wide, and the Lord has called you to be a good and faithful steward of what He has given you.