Objections to Complementarianism[[1]](#footnote-2)

1. **Introduction**

**Proverbs 18:17** says,

“*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him*.”

Whether it’s in a courtroom, in a conference room, in a coffee shop, or even within the walls of a local church, at one time or another we’ve all found ourselves participating in or watching two people engage in a conversation, where one person is in disagreement with or at least *questions* the validity of another person’s claim. In other words, it doesn’t take very long to find out that in life not everyone always agrees with what you believe about any given topic. And the tropic of manhood and womanhood, as it is taught in the Scriptures, is one of those areas that Christians haven’t always agreed upon – which will be the focus of our talk today.

So just to summarize: Over the last 11 weeks, we have been staring at the important topic of Manhood and Womanhood as it is taught throughout the Bible. We’ve looked at our theological foundation from the creation account in **Genesis 1-2**, where we find that both men AND women were created in the image of God. Therefore, by their very being or essence, men and women are created equal in value, worth, dignity, and importance. And though men and women are created equal by God, He has given unique and distinct roles for men and women to live out as His image bearers in the world. These roles are then to overflow into every aspect of men and women’s lives, being carried out in certain *dispositions* that are appropriate to the differing relationships they find themselves in. So whether you’re single or married, and serving in the local church or living out your callings in the workplace, the *essence* of Biblical Masculinity and Biblical Femininity remain true. So if you look at the back of your handout, here are the two definitions we have been working with throughout our class:

* First, “The essence of Biblical **masculinity** is a sense of benevolent responsibility to tend God’s creation, provide for and protect others, and express loving, sacrificial leadership in particular contexts prescribed by God’s Word.”
* And secondly, “The essence of Biblical **femininity** is a gracious disposition to cultivate life, to help others flourish, and to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in particular contexts prescribed by God’s Word.”

So what we are doing in this morning’s class is seeking to accomplish two things at once:

1. We want to recognize that not all Christians agree on the distinct roles God has given men and women, particularly in how it gets played out in contexts like the local church and the home.
2. We want to answer *some* (though not all!) of the most common objections to complementarianism (this would be the conviction we hold as elders @ CHBC and what we would teach publicly as a Church)

In case this is your first time to this class, or maybe your first time learning about this in a local church, there are basically 2 different views Christians have held on this topic. These views are commonly known as **Egalitarianism** and **Complementarianism**.

**Egalitarianism** holds that God created male and female equal in ALL respects, both in value as well as in role or function. So other than biological differences, men and women are given equal and undifferentiated responsibility to rule over His creation.

**Complementarianism** on the other hand, is what we’ve been teaching in this class as the Biblical understanding of Manhood and Womanhood: That men and women are equal in value or worth, yet are given distinct roles that **complement** one another…hence “complementarianism”!

So you might be sitting here and asking yourself, “Why do people who profess to be Christians differ on this issue?” (Maybe some of you here presently hold a different view – We’re glad you are here!). **So why is there disagreement?**

* **Tradition** – Generally speaking, the longer you sit under a particular teaching, the deeper your conviction will be. If that’s what you were taught growing up, or if your particular denomination has taught this regularly, you may begin to accept it without further investigation.
* **Ignorance** – if a person has only been exposed to one view, then they obviously can’t weigh out fairly if their position is right or not
* **Poor Examples** – so abuse. If someone has seen a husband or pastor misuse their authority (verbally or physically), this naturally will affect someone’s perception of headship.
* **Incorrect Interpretation of Scripture** – simply not reading a verse or set of verses in its immediate biblical context and how it fits with all of Scripture. **2 Timothy 2:15** calls us to, “*rightly handle the word of truth*”
* **Unbelief in the Authority of Scripture** – Sadly, there are those who believe themselves to be Christian, but only pick and choose (somewhat like a “spiritual buffet”) which parts they will believe and is binding on their lives.

It might be good to ask yourself: ***which one of these am I most tempted to fall into?***

So this morning we’ll consider a series of objections to the Bible’s teaching, broken into two major categories—**biblical objections**, that is, based on particular biblical texts, and then more **general objections ---** maybe just some subjective skepticism some have.

1. **Biblical Objections** (When a Scripture reference is given, open your Bibles to it)

***#1****. In* ***Eph 5:21****, Paul says that all Christians are to “****submit*** *to one another.” Doesn’t the Bible then teach* ***mutual*** *submission? And doesn’t that rid us of any idea that the man is the head?*

Christians should certainly submit to one another, just as Paul says. It is in fact characteristic of Christians that they consider others better than themselves (**Phil. 2:3**) and that they “*outdo one another in showing honor*” (**Rom. 12:10**). *The question here is whether that kind of characteristic of Christian love and humility flattens or negates all other distinctions in gender roles*.

Well first, I don’t think it does, and clearly neither does Paul. (The main reason is really context!)

1. “*Submitting*” is a participle, which means it is a description of what Paul teaches will characterize the wise, Spirit-filled believer (**v.15**, **18**)
2. **V.21** serves somewhat like a heading that introduces the following section **5:22** – **6:9**). Paul goes on to describe three categories of relationships (Wives and husbands in **5:22-33**; Children and parents in **6:1-4**; and then slaves and masters in **6:5-9**). So without taking too much time, notice how in **v.22** Paul tells *wives* to “***submit*** *to your own husbands, as to the Lord*”, but the husbands are never told to submit to their wives. In **6:1**, Children are instructed to “***obey*** your parents in the Lord”, which necessarily involves submission. Note that parents are not instructed to submit to their children (think of how disastrous that could be if a parent has young children!). And in **6:5**, slaves are instructed to “***obey*** *your earthly masters…”,* and again masters are never instructed to obey or submit to their slaves.

**So a better way to understand Ephesians 5:21. Paul means:**

**“**submitting to others according to the authority and order established by God**”.** Or as our class definitions have said: “…in particular contexts prescribed by God’s Word.”

***#2.*** *In* ***1 Tim 2.12****, isn’t Paul teaching that women can preach/teach, at least under the delegated authority of the elders?*

So in other words, though a woman can’t hold the office of elder, but can she preach underneath the *instruction of her elder*? It’s simply very clear in context that Paul is not speaking to the *office* (that comes later in **chapter 3**), but to the *function* of teaching and exercising authority. The fact that the teaching is “delegated” doesn’t somehow evacuate Paul’s commands here in **1Tim 2.12**.[[2]](#footnote-3) **V.11** right before it makes it clear that the godly woman’s attitude and disposition is to be one of *learning* and *listening*, with the purpose of *submitting* to Biblical teaching AND Biblical leadership. And as you keep reading on to **v.13** Paul writes, “***For*** *Adam was formed first, then Eve*”. From this reasoning, we see that Paul grounds his argument in creation (**Genesis 2**), which is always binding and trans-cultural, and not simply to just one context like Ephesus.

**So can women teach?** Yes, they can be exceptional teachers! **Should they teach?** Absolutely. We desperately need women teachers in a variety of contexts, some of which are shown in the Scriptures.

So for example,

* **Titus 2:3-4** > Older women are exhorted to “*teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children*”
* **Proverbs 31:26** > the virtuous woman is described as, “*She* ***opens her mouth with wisdom****, and the* ***teaching of kindness*** *is on her tongue*”
* **Proverbs 1:8** > The son is commanded “*Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s* ***teaching***”
* **Ephesians 4:15 >** Paul instructs ALL believers (men and women) to “*speak the truth in love*” to one another for their spiritual maturity

But sometimes it’s asked: ***So should women teach in mixed settings (adult men and women are present) in the publicly assembly of the church?*** Not according to what we see in the Scriptures, particularly **1 Timothy 2:12** with teaching and authority, and in **1 Timothy 3** with the qualification of and elder (see also **1 Timothy 3:15**).

1. *Doesn’t Galatians 3:28 remove gender as a basis for distinction of roles in the church?*

**[Read]** “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one* ***in Christ Jesus****.*”

It’s true that **Gal 3:28** isdispensing with gender distinctions—but only in a very specific context. **Galatians 3:28** affirms the full equality of male and female ***in Christ***, as the text says. That phrase “*in Christ*” refers to the covenantal union of all believers in the Lord. Paul is saying that *in the context of* ***salvation***, which **Gal 3** is all about, the justification of sinners is by faith apart from works. And the great divisions that ran through society are erased. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman are not saved in different ways, nor do they inherit different promises from God. No matter what one’s ethnicity, gender or social standing, salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. In other words, there is no varsity and j.v. with regards to God’s acceptance of men and women into His royal family.

And Paul isn’t wiping out distinctions altogether. After all, he can still speak to Jews and Gentiles *as* Jews and Gentiles, and to slaves and masters *as* slaves as masters—and to men and women *as* men and women.

*4. Didn’t Priscilla teach Apollos in Acts 18:26?[****read Acts 18:26****] Doesn’t that show that the early church did not exclude women from the* ***teaching office*** *of the church?*

*“He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.”*

Of course Priscilla helped teach Apollos. And from our study in **1Tim 2** and **Titus 2**, women *are* to learn themselves and to instruct others. So nothing in our understanding of Scripture says that when a husband and wife visit an unbeliever (or a confused believer, or anyone else for that matter), the wife must be silent. In situations like that, there’s no reason a woman shouldn’t participate in that conversation and instruction.

But it’s wrong to conclude that Priscilla’s *private* tutoring of Apollos with her husband means that women therefore now should hold the *public* office of elder. **Acts 18** simply isn’t dealing with the office of elder/pastor. For that we go to **1 Tim 3**, **Titus 1**, and **1Tim 2** - these texts and others teach that the teaching office of elder/pastor is given by God – and even that, only to those men who are *qualified* for it*.*

1. *Don’t you think that all these texts we’ve studied are simply a temporary compromise with the cultural status quo, while the main thrust of Scripture is toward the leveling of gender roles?*

It’s true that Scripture does sometimes seek to regulate undesirable relationships without condoning them as permanent ideals. So for example, Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.*” (**Matt. 19:8**) The same can be said about Paul’s instruction to slaves to obey their masters, even though Paul longed for every slave to be received by his master “*no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother*.” (**Philemon 16**);

Having said that, we can’t understand gender roles to be in this same category. **Why?** This is because, for one thing, *the role distinctions we’ve been talking about are rooted in the created order*, before the introduction of sin. So the redemptive thrust of the Bible does not at all aim at *abolishing* male headship and female submission, but rather at *redeeming* them. (repeat) Also, and maybe most clearly, the Bible contains no condemnations of loving headship nor does it give any encouragements to abandon it.

**\*We’ll stop there for a moment for any questions/comments you might have\***

*6. What about Deborah’s leadership in the book of Judges? Doesn’t that undermine the complementarian understanding of gender roles?*

This is an important question, for complementation critics regularly point to Deborah as the counter-example.

Any faithful student of the Bible should affirm that women play significant religious, and even *at times* crucial leadership roles in the Bible. For example: Think of **Esther** in the deliverance of the Jews, or the prophetess **Huldah** who proclaimed the word of the Lord to King Josiah. But consider two things. First, most examples of female leadership appear in roles *other than* those of the highest human religious authority. While there are prophetesses like Huldah (**2 Kings 22**) in the Old Testament and Anna (**Luke 2:36**) in the New Testament, it’s worthy to note that there are not any women priests, women heads of tribes, or women kings (**2 Kings 11** - Athaliah wrongly usurped the throne; was a murderer, and the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel). And when we open the New Testament, we read that Jesus chose His Twelve disciples [later named “Apostles”] who were all male, and there is no evidence that there were ever women pastors in the early church. The Bible seems to provide a clear and uniform pattern of male leadership.

**So what about Deborah?** Deborah, who was both a prophetesses and judge, is the notable exception (cf. **Judges 4-5**). However, the events recorded in the book of Judges are *not* illustrating God’s ideal for his people. Judges is a tragic cycle of one mistake after another. In fact, the book of Judges could be outlined by a verse found twice in the book: “*Everyone did what was right* ***in his own eyes***” (**Judges 17:6b**; **21:25b**) Given the awful spiritual state of Israel, Deborah’s judgeship is recorded *not as an endorsement of female leadership, but rather just how far from God’s design and purposes Israel had strayed*. Properly read in context, Deborah’s role as judge serves as God’s *indictment* of Israel. The fact that Barak (a man) would see the glory of battle go to a woman (Deborah) for his unwillingness to faithfully follow God, just underscores this point.

We should in no way despise or ignore Deborah. We should rather be thankful for her and for all the ways she followed God faithfully when Israel abandoned Him. Remember the issue has never been *can* a woman lead, or teach, etc. The issue is not ability but *oughtness*. Therefore we should conclude that its’ simply difficult to accept the case of Deborah as normative in light of the *overwhelming* evidence to the contrary.

Now that we’ve look at several of the most common ***Biblical objections***, let’s look at a few of the common ***General objections***.

1. **General Objections**

*7. Does stressing male headship encourage domestic abuse?*

Some of you might have seen that the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service went to the *Charleston Post and Courier* for their story on domestic abuse.[[3]](#footnote-4) Sadly for years, South Carolina has been the most deadly state for domestic violence against women. A couple horrifying statistics were recorded as stating that,

“More than 300 women have been stabbed, strangled, beaten, bludgeoned, or burned to death by men in South Carolina over the last decade. It’s a staggering toll that for more than 15 years has placed South Carolina among the top 10 states nationally in the rate of women killed by men. The state topped the list on three occasions, including this past year (2015), when it posted a murder rate for women that was more than double the national rate.”

So what’s at the root cause of all this? According to this Pulitzer Prize winning series, they claim, “*it’s deeply held religious beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and women’s place in the home.*” Did you hear that? “A woman’s place in the home.”

This should upset us on multiple levels. First, at the mere thought that any man would use Christ as a club against women. To justify domestic violence in the name of Christianity is absolutely appalling, it undermines one’s profession to be a Christian, and God will pour out his fierce wrath on men who unrepentantly misuse their authority to harm others. God cares deeply about those who are most vulnerable, most susceptible to abuse, because He cares deeply how authority is carried out on people.

But unfortunately its’ articles and blogs that get the publicity and makes the faulty assumption that this is somehow the Biblical model of headship. **The Bible *nowhere* justifies a man *abusing* a woman in any way, be it physical, verbal, or emotional. And the Bible in the name of complementarianism *nowhere* calls a woman *to submit* to such abuse**.

*We should never confuse complementarianism with any form of traditionalism that leads toward chauvinism or oppressive forms of patriarchy. (2x)*

On the contrary, it ought to be the case that women feel most prized in complementarian churches, where they are loved uniquely as women, and prized uniquely as women: Where their distinct attributes and contributions are cherished and exalted, not ignored or suppressed.[[4]](#footnote-5)

*8. If God has genuinely called a woman to be a pastor, who are you to say she can’t be one?*

The simple answer here is that we don’t believe that God calls women to be pastors (denying the premise). That’s because God *always*, without exception, acts consistently with his Word. So if the Bible teaches that God wills for men alone to bear the primary teaching and governing responsibilities in the church—that is, the office and function of elder/pastor—then we do not think that God will ever act contrary to that. That is, he won’t call a woman to be an elder/pastor.

It may be that many women who feel a call to such ministry are indeed being called to ministry—just not to *pastoral* ministry. As we’ve discussed, there are numerous ministries, even vocational ones, in which women should be encouraged and welcomed. So when a woman senses such a subjective sense of call to ministry, the best course of action would be to recognize the boundaries Scripture draws and then enter into conversations, prayer, and thought about where, within those limits, she could be deployed for ministry.

*9. It’s just not fair.*

At the end of the day, I think many of our common objections to complementarianism falls into this category. In our age of “equal rights,” to deny access to any position or reserve any duty for one gender alone is seen as sexist and downright unfair. But we must remember that authority structures do not entail greater human value or essential superiority of those in charge, or minimize the human value or imply essential inferiority of those under their charge.

That’s the fundamental error of our cultural presuppositions. That for two people to be equal, they must be able to do the same thing. The assumption is that we can’t have differentiation and hierarchy without also having inferiority of dignity and worth. **But the Bible simply rejects this assumption**. Here Christians go to the Trinity, where Christ is said to submit himself to his Father’s will, to do only what the Father has commanded, and yet he at the same time is no less God, and no less worthy of our worship.

***Brothers and sisters, be encouraged by the reality that*** ***men and women experience their full humanity when they function in the manner God intended in his creation of them.*** We are most free as humans when we affirm the legitimate authority structures God intended, and honor them. Fairness is to recognize this in humility, and see these structures not as cruel or unfair, but to see them as expressions of God’s kindness to us.

***So Why Does All This Ultimately Matter?***

Gender is central to our personhood and how God made us. It effects

* + how we act as husband and wife
  + how we parent
  + how we live together as members of a local church
  + our witness to the world, and…
  + how we treat the authority of Scripture.
* Beloved, knowing that we are created in God’s image and are given roles and dispositions that are innate to our gender, touches every aspect of our lives!

Lastly, sisters: If you struggle to see value in your labors and how God can use you through His design of femininity, just remember the history of our own church here at CHBC. In 1867, Celestia Ferris, chief washer-woman at the Bureau of Engraving, started a prayer meeting on Capitol Hill. By 1876, this prayer meeting had grown into a Sunday School Society, at which time the plot of land on which Capitol Hill Baptist Church (CHBC) now sits was purchased and a building was built. Then, in 1878, the Sunday School Society incorporated as the Metropolitan Baptist Church, only later to become Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Dear sisters, remember the example of our sister Celestia Ferris, and countless other women that God has mightily used throughout history!

**Any questions or comments?**

**Let’s pray.**

1. Class Intro: Throughout our class on BM&W, we’ve seen how men and women are equally created in the image of God, and yet with distinct complementary roles. Yet to suggest any distinctions between sexes today smacks of discrimination, repression, even abuse. So how do we think and respond the to the chorus of critiques that often arise? What about Deborah? What about domestic abuse? That’s the topic for today, objections to complemenatrianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The only way to get around this is to argue that “teach and exercise authority” is a hendiadys (one concept communicated by two words, literally *hen* (one) *dia* (through) *dyos* (two)) meaning “authoritative teaching.” In other words, a woman can do everything a non-ordained elder can do (i.e. Keller, even JD Grear it seems). But later in 1Tim 3.2, 4-5, and 5.17 Paul distinguished teaching from authority. They’re related, overlapping ideas, but yet clearly distinct ideas. See Kostenberger in *Women in the Church* as well. Additionally, hendiadys are usually side by side, and here, they are separated by 5 words in Greek. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://www.postandcourier.com/tilldeath/partone.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Will there be domestic abuse – both physical and emotional – in a fallen, sinful world? Tragically yes. Will some abusers attempt to justify their abuse by grossly misapplying the idea of biblical headship? Even more tragically, Yes. Is domestic abuse – or the misuse of God’s word to justify it – ever legitimate in God’s eyes or in the eyes of any true church? Absolutely not. Is the sinful misuse of a truly biblical idea a reason to discard the idea itself from the Christian life? No. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)