

## QUESTION 1

# What Terms Best Describe the Various Views on Women in Ministry?

Sometimes we use the same words, but speak a different language. This statement applies to many *word warriors* engaged in the ongoing battle over what Christian women can and cannot do in ministry and in the home. Words matter. They empower and convince, but when unclear, they easily result in confusion, stereotyping, and misunderstanding.

Sometimes we use the same words in conversation with a person believing that each of us means the same thing when often we don't. This misunderstanding results in many relational conflicts. Thus when we teach the Bible, we never say words like "submission" or "head of the home"<sup>1</sup> without explaining them in depth. We call these "trigger" words. They might trigger emotional reactions in listeners that raise resistant attitudes to whatever else we have to say. Without explanation, what our audience hears may not be what we meant.

### The Problems with Current Terminology

We experience the same complications and misconceptions when we talk about women and the Bible. If we want to understand the current issues, we'll need clear terms that accentuate the real differences between the views. We need to boil down the core perspectives and not be satisfied with terms the factions have chosen for themselves, especially since some of these terms don't accurately communicate their differences. Sometimes those who define the terms control the arguments. Right now, the terminology in this debate is fraught with confusion.

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1. The term "head of the home" isn't in Scripture. Instead the Bible says the husband is "head of the woman" (1 Cor. 11:3). See Question 21.

For example, two main groups have organized and taken up battle stations against one another. Each claims their own label that they insist best describes their views. They call themselves “complementarians” and “egalitarians.” However, both groups adhere to doctrines that reflect the other group’s label. For example:

- Like egalitarians, complementarians believe that men and women are equal in their dignity and worth in the sight of God.
- Like complementarians, egalitarians believe that men and women complement one another in their service in the church and family.

Yet, without unbiased study, one could easily assume otherwise because of the labels these groups give themselves.

Other similar beliefs include:

- Both groups hold a high view of Scripture.
- Both groups believe that men and women experience the same path to a saving faith, and will enjoy eternal life together.
- Both groups believe God gives men and women the same spiritual gifts.
- Both groups believe that God created men and women with gender differences and those differences are good.<sup>2</sup>

At face value, the labels complementarians and egalitarians give themselves are misleading and reductionistic, and they don’t reflect their real, distinct differences. The uninformed pilgrims could easily jump to quick, incorrect assumptions in favor of or against a position simply because they like or don’t like the meaning of the label. They may do this without realizing the issue is far more complex than the labels suggest and far more significant since the outcome affects not only women—at least half of the Christian population—but the whole church and its ministry and witness in the world.

Michelle Lee-Barnewall identifies the limitations of using the terminology of “complementarian” and “egalitarian”:

There is a growing sense among many that neither position quite encapsulates what they sense is the biblical view, along with the desire to explore the topic beyond the bounds of the

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2. Although egalitarians and complementarians believe God created men and women with gender differences, egalitarians tend to limit those differences to related research results (i.e., brain physicality and functioning, decision-making, driving preferences, etc.; see Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters* [New York: Broadway, 2005], chaps. 1–6 for examples), while many complementarians assume stereotypes of gender qualities that have little or no research evidence (e.g., men are rational, women are emotional; men lead, women follow).

current positions. . . . I have come to believe that the topic cannot be completely defined by either the complementarian or the egalitarian viewpoint, and that there is room, perhaps even a necessity, for an alternative way of conceptualizing gender issues.<sup>3</sup>

Lucy Peppiatt also rejects the terms “complementarian” and “egalitarian” as the clearest terms to describe the two current organized camps. Instead, she prefers the terms “hierarchicalists” and “mutualists.” She writes,

The term *complementarian* should describe a view where two different entities enhance one another in a reciprocal, harmonious, and interdependent fashion. Although complementarians claim to hold a view that describes the relation of men to women as such, my opinion is that this represents a sleight of hand. . . . Complementarians believe that men and women stand before God as equally saved, but their view of the relations of men and women sociologically is predicated on the subordination of women to men, where men hold positions of authority and women do not unless they are under male authority.<sup>4</sup>

Peppiatt argues that “mutualists” is a better term for egalitarians because it connotes what they actually promote—that interactions between men and women are characterized by equally shared power for the mutual benefit of both.<sup>5</sup>

We understand Peppiatt’s arguments but find her terms a mouthful to say, and we don’t want to communicate that complementarians reject *any* mutuality or mutual benefit in their relationships between men and women. We’ve worked with some complementarians who are mutualists in many respects.

In conclusion, both groups say men and women are truly equal in their humanity and value. Both believe gender differences exist and see the benefit of men and women working together. Thus their current labels are misleading. So what are the *real* differences between them?

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3. Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1.

4. Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 6.

5. Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision*, 8.

## Real Differences Between the Two Views

The clear distinction that separates the two groups relates to how each group believes God has ordered men and women's relationships and opportunities for service.

Complementarians insist God has ordained an order in the home and church that is hierarchical, or layered, where men lead women and where men hold the highest leadership positions. Most hold that this order benefits the church, the family, and society at large.

Egalitarians believe the Bible does not reveal this hierarchical system but instead that it has been imposed on the Christian faith by interpreters influenced by a patriarchal culture and sometimes by interpreters' personal dispositions. They believe God's Word reveals a flat organizational structure in the home and church based on mutual respect and merit. We will explain how these groups come to these conclusions in the following chapters.

Each group looks to the Bible to support their views, focusing on particular passages and ignoring others or deriving different "truths" from the same passages. Each plays up the passages they like and plays down those they don't. Both groups include extreme elements that interpret the Bible *evangelistically*<sup>6</sup>—*they stretch the text to give credence to what they want it to say.*

We have found Andrew Bartlett's explanations of the differences helpful.<sup>7</sup> Here is a brief synopsis of his opinion:

### *Egalitarianism*

- God created men and women to be truly equal, but since the fall, women have been oppressed by men. Historically, patriarchal cultures unjustly kept women under male control.
- Jesus came to redeem the world from the effects of sin, including women's liberation from male domination, but after a short-lived good start, the church accommodated itself to patriarchal culture.
- It is only recently that churches have begun to treat women as equals of men; there is more work yet to be done.
- Complementarianism must be opposed. It is a misguided attempt to cling to misinterpretations of the Bible that arose from the sinfulness of patriarchal culture.

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6. I (Sue) have used this word for many years to communicate stretching the meaning of the text to fit one's view, although I believe I first heard it from a seminary friend, JoAnn Hummel.

7. For the full treatment of this topic, see Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (London: InterVarsity, 2019), 11–12.

### *Complementarianism*

- God created men and women to be truly equal. It is right to acknowledge men's bad behavior toward women, which conflicts with God's design. The modern controversy over a woman's place has had the good effect of highlighting and correcting wrong attitudes.
- The concern for equality does not justify departing from the "plain" teaching of the Bible, which is for our good and for God's glory.
- There is an important distinction to be drawn between equality of worth and sameness of role. God has called men and women to different roles. Men are called to lead in the family and in the church.
- Egalitarianism must be opposed. It fails to distinguish correctly between God's Word and cultural misinterpretations of God's Word.

Clearly, each side views the issue through different lenses.

### **Fresh Terminology Reflecting the Core Differences**

To present varied views clearly and fairly, we need accurate terms. In light of the current confusion and to avoid aligning with any factions, we have chosen not to use the terms "complementarian" and "egalitarian" in this project.<sup>8</sup> Nor do we believe either group has an absolute corner on biblical truth related to this issue. In reality, significant differences exist within each group, resulting in a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices.

### *Hierarchy*

Instead of "complementarian," we will use the term *hierarchy*. Some complementarians may resist this term, but we believe it communicates the true contrast. Complementarians would be honest to own it. They insist that men and women have different "roles" in life that cannot change because these roles are based on one's biological sex. They argue that these roles are good and result in an order in the church, family, and society that ultimately benefits everyone. Families will be healthy when involved and caring men lead them. The church will function better if men make the final decisions. And healthy families and churches lead to thriving societies. Role distinctions are permanent, based on a hierarchical system where men possess authority over women.

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8. Use of caution when there is great difficulty in applying a clear and concise meaning to a term is one option. However, robust discussion and careful consideration of the language is crucial. Clarifying, standardizing, or abandoning the use of terminology that is confusing and/or not helpful in furthering communication across disciplines should all be carefully considered.

In many other contexts, roles are temporary. Doctors may make their living in the medical profession, but as doctors age, they should retire if they can no longer perform their duties well. Their role as doctors is temporary. Even if we take on the role of a father or a son, a daughter or a mother, that role changes over time in the ways we live out that role, in both responsibilities and authority. The military is arranged in a hierarchical structure, but even there everyone has the opportunity to advance up the ranks.

But the complementarian holds that when a person is born a man or a woman, they are locked into that “role” for life, regardless of how much they learn, mature, serve, or accomplish. As I’m a woman, I will always be under the authority of a man, and that’s the way God wants it. Complementarians believe that God has ordained a permanent, role-related hierarchy. Therefore, we believe the word “hierarch” instead of “complementarian” is a more honest word to label this view because it reflects the core distinction that everyone on the complementarian spectrum agrees with.

English dictionaries generally agree on the meaning of *hierarchy*:

- A group of persons or things arranged in order of rank, grade, class, etc.<sup>9</sup>
- A system that organizes or ranks things . . . a formalized or simply implied understanding of who’s on top or what’s most important.<sup>10</sup>
- A system or organization in which people or groups are ranked one above the other according to status or authority.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, a “hierarch” is a person who believes that God created men and women to live according to a divine order based on their biological sex, and that each role is permanent, creating a hierarchy.

### *Heterarchy*

Instead of “egalitarian,” we will use the term *heterarch*. This term may take some getting used to. It’s not a common word, but we believe it’s the most accurate word to express the core difference between this group and hierarchs (aka complementarians).

English dictionaries generally define *heterarchy* this way:

- A system of organization where the elements of the organization are unranked. . . . In social and information sciences, heterarchies are networks of elements in which each element shares the same

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9. Yourdictionary.com, s.v. “hierarchy.”

10. Vocabulary.com, s.v. “hierarchy.”

11. Lexico.com, s.v. “hierarchy.”

“horizontal” position of power and authority, each playing a theoretically equal role.<sup>12</sup>

- A form of management or rule in which any unit can govern or be governed by others, depending on circumstances, and, hence, no one unit dominates the rest. Authority within a heterarchy is distributed.<sup>13</sup>
- Generally, the word “hierarchy,” the elements of which are ranked relative to one another, is contrasted with “heterarchy,” the elements of which are unranked, or possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, a “heterarch” is a person who believes that God has not ordained permanent roles, but instead wants men and women to function in the world according to merit, preferences, spiritual gifts, abilities, and experience. Heterarchs refute that the Bible teaches a permanent divine order where men always lead women in the home, church, or society at large. Opportunities to lead are not based on gender ranking or biology, but rather on preferences and merit according to spiritual gifts, abilities, and experience.

For example, if a female heterarch has been trained as a certified public accountant and has an acumen for numbers and her heterarch husband does not, they may decide that she should oversee their family’s finances despite the appearance that she may be “leading” the family related to their finances. But a hierarchy couple who believes the Bible teaches that men should lead their families in the area of finances may not be comfortable with such an arrangement.

Multiply these kinds of decisions by the millions of divergent choices in the Christian home and church and, as you can see, whatever view people embrace has tremendous ramifications for marriage, church, and society.

We believe the word “heterarch” instead of “egalitarian” is a more honest word to label this view because it reflects the core distinction that everyone on the egalitarian spectrum agrees with.

## Summary

Scholars holding two opposing perspectives on what women can and can’t do in ministry chose the terms “complementarian” and “egalitarian” to represent themselves. However, we believe that neither term accurately reflects the core difference between these two groups. Both groups believe that men and women should work together in ministry in complementary ways and that men and women experience the same path to a saving faith and will enjoy eternal life together. Both groups believe the Bible is true and both use

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12. Educalingo.com, s.v. “heterarchy.”

13. Britannica.com, s.v. “heterarchy.”

14. Encyclopedia.com, s.v. “heterarchy.”

Scripture, interpreted differently, to back up their claims. Both groups believe God gives men and women the same spiritual gifts and that God created men and women with gender differences.

The core difference between these two groups is how they believe God has ordered men and women's relationships and opportunities for service. Complementarians insist God has ordained an order in the home and church which is hierarchical, or layered, where men lead women and where men hold the highest leadership positions. Egalitarians believe God's Word reveals a flat organizational structure in the home and church based on mutual respect and merit. As a result, we have chosen the term "hierarchy," a layered authority structure, instead of "complementarian," and the term "heterarchy," a flat authority structure, instead of "egalitarian."

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do the terms "complementarian" and "egalitarian" mean to you?
2. What assumptions do you naturally make regarding each term?
3. Why do the authors want to change the terms to "hierarchy" and "heterarchy"?
4. What is the main idea that unites all hierarchies?
5. What is the main idea that unites all heterarchies?