

“Edwards and Mathews provide an excellent resource for readers eager to learn more about interpretations regarding women in ministry. Based on extensive research, the authors present various viewpoints fairly and clearly, and offer concise explanations to equip readers to draw their own conclusions on these pressing questions. I commend them for including a chapter on a topic that is not debatable, namely the importance of making churches and ministries safe for women.”

—Lynn Cohick  
Provost/Dean of Academic Affairs, Professor of New Testament,  
Northern Seminary

“This is amazing! I get these questions every week and have for decades! I want everyone I know to have a copy. Edwards and Mathews offer the church one of the most charitable, accessible, and thorough surveys of the issue of women in ministry. Once you have this book, you’ll pull it off the shelf time and time again for reference.”

—Kat Armstrong  
Author of *No More Holding Back*, *The In-Between Place*, and *The Storyline Bible Studies*

“What a gift Mathews and Edwards have given us in this accessible introduction to and evaluation of the two evangelical views on women and leadership in the church and home! If you care about the important contribution from this half of the body of Christ, and want to make a difference for the good of the church, this book is a great place to start.”

—Ron Pierce  
Editor, *Discovering Biblical Equality*;  
Author, *Partners in Marriage and Ministry*,  
Biola University

“*40 Questions About Women in Ministry* provides invaluable information that enables readers to make informed conclusions about God’s purpose for women in ministry. Edwards and Mathews examine an important but contentious topic with humility and thoughtfulness, all the while promoting unity. Today’s church can learn much from their respectful approach.”

—Paul Lanum  
Vice President of Publishing, RightNow Media

“Raise the topic of women in the church and the roles they have and you better be prepared to have your blood pressure checked along with the person you are talking to about the topic. Here is a book that calmly lays out the view’s pro and con for the array of options the topic yields. It does so evenhandedly. *40 Questions* lets you hear and consider the arguments from all sides, nuances included. I can think of no other work that does this and gives you what you need to consider how to see the topic and why. This is a much-needed work that supplies the up-to-date takes on what people discuss and deliberate on when the issue of women and the church is raised. Well done.”

—Darrell Bock  
Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies,  
Executive Director for Cultural Engagement for The Hendricks Center,  
Dallas Theological Seminary

“For too long, ignorance and shallow theology about women in ministry have caused harm and division in the church. So, with this book, Edwards and Mathews have provided a resource that the church desperately needs. Using language that is clear and accessible, they tackle the most common questions about complementarianism and egalitarianism. But, rather than elevating one position over the other, Edwards and Mathews provide a side-by-side analysis that allows the reader to make an informed decision on their own. If you are looking for a resource that will equip you to think critically about women in ministry with grace and love, this book is for you.”

—Elizabeth Wodson

Bible teacher and author of *Embrace Your Life* and *From Beginning to Forever*

“Women are necessary for the mission of the church, full stop. Mathews and Edwards do a phenomenal job at navigating almost all the questions I ask and are asked by women (and men) as we seek to embody our beliefs on the value women bring to ministry, flourish in kingdom community, and pursue Jesus.”

—Christian Williams

Director of Women’s Discipleship,  
Christ Community Church

“This is the book I was looking for years ago when I started asking my questions! With depth, relevance, and a fair representation of opposing sides, *40 Questions About Women in Ministry* will be a faithful companion to anyone exploring the breadth of this conversation for years to come.”

—Aaron Armstrong

Lead Pastor,  
Dallas Bible Church

“I am beyond thrilled to recommend this resource to you! Finally, questions are answered in a clear, biblical way that gives complete understanding of the calling and work of women to ministry and in the church. Edwards and Mathews have provided a unique tool and comprehensive study of Scripture as it relates to women, men, ministry, leadership, biblical times, current issues, and church history. In our complicated, ever-changing world with a variety of beliefs and misconceptions, this resource provides truth and explanation which builds health and unity—and is honoring to the Lord. A must-read for every woman (and man) who desires to do the will of God.”

—Debbie Stuart

Women’s Minister,  
Green Acres Baptist Church

“I have never read a more comprehensive work on women in ministry in a single volume. It offers a clear understanding of key passages that help us understand women’s roles in God’s redemptive plan. Biblical, scholarly, and engaging, Edwards and Mathews write with a heart for Jesus and his church. This book is a gift to Christians everywhere.”

—Jeff Warren

Senior Pastor,  
Park Cities Baptist Church

**40** QUESTIONS ABOUT  
Women in Ministry

**Sue Edwards  
Kelley Mathews**

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor



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*A prayer for us and our sacred siblings:  
Help us, Lord Jesus, to fulfill your last request  
before you went to the cross,  
so that we may be brought to complete unity.  
Then the world will know that God the Father  
sent you and loves them even as he loves you.  
(from John 17:20–23)*



# Contents

- Preface / 9
- Abbreviations / 11
- Foreword by *Sandra Glahn* / 13
- Introduction / 17

## Part 1: Introductory Issues

- 1. What Terms Best Describe the Various Views on Women in Ministry? / 23
- 2. What Do Different Groups Believe About the Bible and Feminism? / 31
- 3. What Are the Best Methods for Interpreting the Bible? / 35
- 4. When Is a Biblical Issue Cultural and When Is It Unchanging? / 43

## Part 2: Questions Related to the Old Testament

### Section A: Foundations in Genesis

- 5. What Does It Mean That God Is Imaged as Both Male and Female? / 51
- 6. What Does Genesis 1–2 Reveal About Male and Female Relationships? / 57
- 7. How Do Both Men and Women “Exercise Dominion over the Earth”? / 63
- 8. What Does It Mean That Woman Was Man’s “Helper Corresponding to Him”? / 69
- 9. What Does Genesis 3 Reveal About Male and Female Relationships? / 77
- 10. What Did God Mean That “Your Desire Will Be for Your Husband, and He Will Rule Over You”? / 87

### Section B: Women in the Rest of the Old Testament

- 11. What Can We Learn from Women Prophets of the Old Testament? / 93
- 12. How Does Proverbs 31 Inform Us About God’s Design for Women? / 101

## Part 3: Questions Related to the New Testament and Beyond

### Section A: Women in the Gospels and Acts

- 13. What Can We Learn from the Fact That Women Traveled with and Supported Jesus’s Ministry? / 109
- 14. What Is the Significance of Jesus Choosing Only Men as the Twelve Apostles? / 115
- 15. What Is the Significance That a Woman First Witnessed Jesus’s Resurrection? / 123
- 16. What Does Jesus’s Interaction with the Woman at the Well Teach Us? / 127
- 17. What Is the Significance of the Spirit’s Work on Pentecost for Men and Women? / 135
- 18. What Is the Significance of Priscilla Correcting Apollos’s Theology? / 141

Section B: Women in the Epistles

19. What Is the Significance of the Women Commended by Paul in Romans 16? / 149
20. Can Women Teach or Prophecy? / 157
21. What Does Paul Mean When He Uses the Metaphor *Head*? / 163
22. Must Women Cover Their Heads in Church? / 171
23. How Do Christians Reach Different Conclusions on 1 Timothy 2:11–15? / 183
24. What Are the Different Views of 1 Timothy 2:11–12? / 193
25. What Does Paul Mean When He Talks About Creation, Eve, and Childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:13–15? / 203
26. What Does Paul Mean When He Directs Wives to “Submit” to Their Husbands? / 215
27. What Does Peter Mean That the Woman Is the “Weaker Vessel”? / 221
28. What Does the Bible Say About Who Makes Final Decisions in Marriage? / 225
29. If Women Cannot Teach Men, Should They Teach Children Who Are More Vulnerable? / 233

Section C: Women in Church History

30. What Does Church History Reveal About Women in Public Ministry?  
Part 1: Early Church to the Middle Ages *by Dr. Cynthia Hester* / 241
31. What Does Church History Reveal About Women in Public Ministry?  
Part 2: Reformation to the Twentieth Century *by Dr. Cynthia Hester* / 251
32. How Did Western Culture Influence Women in the Home, Society, and the Church?  
*by Dr. Cynthia Hester* / 261

## Part 4: Current Issues

33. Can Women Be Deacons? / 271
34. Can Women Be Priests? / 281
35. Can Women Be Pastors or Elders? / 287
36. Should Women Leaders Be Called “Directors” or “Pastors” in the Church? / 293
37. Are Men by Design Better Leaders Than Women? / 301
38. How Can Women Appropriately Use Leadership and Teaching Gifts? / 307
39. How Does One’s View of the Trinity Shape Relationships Between Men and Women? / 311
40. How Can We Make Churches and Other Ministries Safer for Women?  
*by Misty Hedrick* / 317

Select Bibliography / 323

Scripture Index / 327



# Preface

While our names are on the cover, this book came together through the efforts of a dedicated team. Cynthia Hester, Misty Hedrick, and Nandi Cozart collaborated with us, mostly via countless video chats during the pandemic of 2020–2021, to evaluate and question each step in the process. As part of their studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, Cynthia and Misty also led the writing of several chapters. We are grateful to each of these fine scholars and ministers for their contributions to this work.

We also thank Dr. Sandra Glahn, Dr. Ronald Pierce, and Dr. Darrell Bock for lending us their time and expertise as we consulted them for valuable insights in their areas of scholarly focus.

We are indebted to our series editor, Dr. Benjamin Merkle, for his eagle eye and broad knowledge of who's who in the world of evangelical scholars writing on the topic of women in ministry. He is a gift to the academy and church. Thank you, Kregel Academic, for inviting us to contribute to the 40 Questions series. We trust this volume will serve the church well.

*Sue:* I'm grateful for the men in my life—without them this book would not exist. First to my husband, David, for his sacrificial love, support, and care for me through more than half a century. When I was buried in this demanding writing project, he picked up the slack with a smile. I bless the day the Lord brought us together. To my seminary colleagues Mike Lawson, Jay Sedwick, and Phil Humphries, thank you for valuing my voice and contributions to our department and cheerleading me every step of the way. And to the dear women who have shared this journey with me: Dr. Joye Baker, my daughters, Heather and Rachel, granddaughter Becca, and a plethora of other cherished women.

*Kelley:* Writing the bulk of this book during the pandemic meant that I was constantly hiding in my home office, begging for someone to take the barking dogs away during our team video calls, and regaling my family with random facts I learned in my research. I am blessed with tolerant children who love me! Also, I have the best cheerleaders: a husband who supports and encourages me, knowing it will mean more work for him while I'm burrowed among my books, and a group of girlfriends who never fail to applaud, comfort, and counsel me as needed.



# Abbreviations

- DBE*            *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*. 3rd ed. Edited by Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021.
- EFBT*            Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- MWOC*           Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman: One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.
- RBMW*            *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.



# Foreword

For the past eighteen years, I have taught a course at Dallas Theological Seminary that covers the same subject matter you will find in this book. And honestly, talking about what the Scriptures say regarding women in public ministry is a subject I wanted to avoid making “my issue.” But eventually I had no choice. You see, I am Sandra, daughter of Ann, daughter of Velma, daughter of Ella. But the line back to Eve stops with me.

The fourth of five children, I loved belonging to a large family. And I wanted to be just like my mom—and not only her person. I saw in her vocation as wife and mother a woman’s highest calling. Some of that perspective came from evangelical church teachings. But some of it came from a subculture that made *Fascinating Womanhood* a best seller and aspired for its young women to become like Amelia, Thackeray’s “domestic goddess” (yes, they used that phrase).

I went to Bible college to give my future husband the best wife possible. And after my sophomore and his junior year of college, I married my high-school sweetheart, Gary. At that time, I had a few vocational aspirations: to be a pastor’s wife, birth four kids, and homeschool them. I talked of dropping out of college, but Gary wanted me to finish. So he taught high school science, math, and biology until my commencement. Then we moved south for him to attend seminary.

In Texas, with the rest of the student families we knew, I ragged on Betty Friedan and loathed all things “feminist.”

I took a job to support my husband—who always had broader views about what I could do than I had for myself. I made clear to everyone that I had no aspirations to continue as a “career woman.” I was employed with a financial services corporation only to “put hubby through.” Some felt my being the primary breadwinner undermined manhood. And I wondered that too (though Gary didn’t). But I also noticed that the support of women didn’t seem to undermine Jesus’s manhood (Luke 8:3).

A few weeks after Gary graduated, we decided it was time to expand our family. But a year passed. And then another. I went to the doctor. Nothing. A third year passed. And then it happened—a positive pregnancy test! But cheers turned to sobs when I miscarried. And this scene repeated itself seven times—ending with a final ectopic pregnancy that required emergency surgery. This was followed by three failed adoptions.

The spiritual crisis during our decade of losses laid me lower than the emotional one. What did God want me to do? The wound struck at the core of my womanhood. Wasn't a woman designed to complete a man? Wasn't raising kids the proper channel for a woman with the gift of teaching? Isn't that what Bible-believing scholars said 1 Timothy 2 meant by "women will be saved through childbearing" (v. 15)?

I'd always heard (thanks to Augustine, I now know) that a female images God indirectly, as in via a man—when she's married. Following that logic, I assumed she would even more fully image God by bearing and rearing children. But where did I fit into this "biblical" anthropology?

As I write this, I marvel at the narrowness of my perspective. In God's pattern book, I now see a wide array of options for women serving him. And I wonder, where would my views have left those whom Paul encouraged to remain single (1 Cor. 7:8)? And what about the virtuous wife who bought and sold real estate, stretched forth her hand to the needy, sold belts in the marketplace, and—most shocking of all—taught the *torah* of *hesed* (Prov. 31:26)? Also, there was tentmaking Priscilla, who partnered with her husband to teach the orator Apollos—what about her? And the merchant of the Thyatira Purple Company, Lydia? I couldn't see then what I see now—that godly womanhood cuts its fabric from a wide swath, and its garments are not "one size fits all."

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As I prayed about what I should do, my husband and my pastor's wife urged me to go to seminary. So I applied and was accepted. Yet, I still wondered if I was being a "feminist" by even going. Was I entering into a male vocational world? On the way out the door to my first class, I dropped to my knees in front of my couch (something I had never done), and I begged God to stop me if I was doing wrong. But to my surprise, these words from Jesus came to mind: "Mary has chosen what is better" (Luke 10:42). While Martha was accusing her sister of wrongly prioritizing theological seminary over domesticity, Jesus was saying, "Leave her alone."

I stood with confidence that day, and I walked out my door and into the classroom.

While at seminary, as I translated the New Testament, I saw many places where the Bible writers had women in view, but I had missed them. For example, I had memorized Paul's instruction to Timothy about discipleship, and I had thought Paul had only men in view: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful *men*, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2 KJV). But seeing the Greek, I realized Paul had in mind not males, but "people." And in the passage where it says that men who fail to provide for their families are worse than unbelievers, I was surprised to find the language was similarly inclusive (1 Tim. 5:8, 16).

Seeing these words and how translators rendered them told me that those who were saying, “women are in view in those texts too” were not radical feminists after all. They were right about what the Scriptures said.

I saw similar issues when translating the Old Testament. I also looked afresh at some broad themes. And I wondered, “How should I interpret that Adam was first? If birth order translates to authority, why is Jesus the *second* Adam?” And when I shared with others what I was learning, I saw how freeing my observations were, for men and women alike. I found many who didn’t see themselves represented in the Bible—only to find that they were there all along.

After earning my ThM, I went on to get my PhD with a focus on first-century backgrounds, especially as they relate to women. And I also looked at history, tracing women and their contributions to the church for two thousand years. I found the order of widows and of women deacons referenced in the church fathers and ecumenical council records. I found the wives of male Reformers baptizing, preaching, and burying the dead as expressions of “the priesthood of all believers.” So, Betty had not started some of that, after all.

As I mentioned earlier, for the past eighteen years, I’ve been teaching about what I found. Now, I realize that a drawback to telling about my life is that readers might think, “Your experience has led you to see the text a certain way.” Of course it has! As has everyone’s.

It is worth the risk for me to share my story, then. Because the upside is that perhaps my journey will help you put a human face on the questions being explored in the pages to follow. C. S. Lewis wrote to Sheldon Vanauken that “every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it, which will ‘turn the necessity to glorious gain.’”<sup>1</sup> And the “glorious gain” of my own disability is that it has led me back to Scripture to discover that my body was not the only thing that needed the help of experts. My interpretation needed help, too.

Some have said that the dividing line in views about women’s involvement in home, church, and society is biblical inerrancy. For example, some in positions of great influence have said that those who believe women can minister publicly, especially if they speak, hold a low view of the Bible. Meanwhile, some of those on the front lines self-identifying as egalitarians are also on the front lines defending inerrancy.

However, the key differences are for the most part about interpretation, not inerrancy. And the wideness in the range of interpretive options among those who love Scripture is exactly why my journey took me where it did. And it’s why a “40 Questions” book on this topic is so needed. While many divide the views about women in public ministry into two camps—complementarian and egalitarian—I’ve actually found about eight different views on

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1. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 146–48. The letter is dated May 14, 1954.

how inerrantists interpret these verses. So, in the pages to follow, you will find a range of interpretive options in each answer rather than one definitive one.

The coauthors of this book, Dr. Sue Edwards and Kelley Mathews, are a terrific team to serve as your guides. They have already coauthored a number of books relating to ministry. And they bring to their task decades of experience from a variety of church and parachurch settings. Dr. Sue Edwards teaches on the subject at the doctor of ministry level at Dallas Theological Seminary. And Kelley Mathews holds a master's in theology, which included multiple semesters immersed in Greek and Hebrew. These scholars have been exploring this topic for years and years, and they bring to it some deep wisdom.

Woman was made to image God. And in creation, woman was necessary as man's indispensable companion before God could pronounce the world to be "very good." Whether she is single or married, divorced, or widowed, with or without biological or adopted children, a woman's highest calling—as is every human's—is to glorify God and multiply worshippers. This is what she was made for. This is a biblical anthropology. And this is the grid through which interpretation can begin.

—Dr. Sandra Glahn  
Dallas Theological Seminary



# Introduction

For more than forty years, I (Sue) have ministered to women in the church, parachurch, and academy. During this time, I've planted and implemented ministries to women in two megachurches; taught the Bible to thousands of women in various contexts; trained women leaders in Russia, Africa, and Germany; and for the last two decades have taught, advised, and counseled both men and women at Dallas Theological Seminary, where I now serve as Professor of Educational Ministries and Leadership. The consistent thread that I've observed through these years is the confusion and angst, from both men and women, regarding what women can and can't do in ministry. And the bewildering pitch grows louder and louder.

So when the opportunity arose to write a book tackling forty questions about this topic, I felt compelled to comply. I knew I needed a team, so I recruited my long-time writing partner, Kelley Mathews, two seminary student interns, and a doctoral student. I knew their varied ages and perspectives would enrich the project, and I believe it has. The first thing we did was send out a social media request for questions on the topic, and we received more than eighty questions in two days. Obviously, we struck a nerve! After combining and weeding out similar questions, and with the help of our editor, we chose the forty that comprise this book.

## Our Goal

We hope to present the primary views clearly in everyday language, representing each fairly. When possible, we've attempted to eliminate theological jargon and arguments that require seminary-style academic background to understand. In our limited space, and to create a resource that's helpful but not overwhelming, we have attempted to draw from a variety of well-known and respected scholars who represent their constituencies. No doubt we've overlooked some, but it was not intentional.

One challenge has been to capture the essence of the differing ideas, especially on the "complementarian" side. This is because complementarians fall within a wide spectrum of perspectives, differing from one another in many ways. For example, complementarian churches today typically apply their convictions regarding what women can and can't do very differently. In one complementarian church, women can teach mixed Sunday school classes or lead mixed

small groups. In another, they can't. In some, women can pass Communion, while in others, only ordained male leaders may oversee this sacred practice. The variety is legion and one of the reasons people are so confused.

In looking at our book as a whole, you will notice that more space is given to the views of the heterarchs than those of the hierarchs. This is because the hierarch's view is generally more well-known, and often heterarchs are responding to hierarchs. Heterarchs bring forward newer elements in the discussion that take more space to explain but need to be understood to evaluate the conversation between the two sides.

### Our Approach

What does the Bible really teach about these issues? What pleases God? What will glorify him and result in health and unity in the home and church? We desire to give readers enough information to make an informed decision for themselves. And we will do our best to present these views honestly and clearly. We agree with Mark Twain when he said, "The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter. 'Tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."<sup>1</sup> We cannot promise we'll choose the right word every time, but we promise to try. Also, we will do our best not to let our own views (we all have them) overshadow a fair representation of the varied primary voices out there today.

### Our Hesitation to Align with Warring Factions

We grieve over the divisive nature of this "war." Some of our friends who have adopted extreme views on the spectrum related to this topic have chosen to withdraw from Christian organizations designed to promote unity because other members did not line up exactly with their spot on the spectrum.

The American Worldview Inventory 2020 found that the culture is influencing many churches to become more and more secular,<sup>2</sup> leading to less unity and more contentious disagreement. Divisive groups ignore Jesus's final request before he went to the cross:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they

- 
1. Mark Twain, quoted by Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, *Everyone's Mark Twain* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1972), 669.
  2. See Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, *American Worldview Inventory 2020*, Release #11, "American Christians Are Redefining the Faith: Adherents Creating New Worldviews Loosely Tied to Biblical Teaching," [www.arizonachristian.edu](http://www.arizonachristian.edu).

may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Some may argue that the issues around what women can and can't do in the church and home are so critical that those who do not align with their views hold heretical doctrines or are not even Christians. We disagree. As we have studied, taught, and discussed these ideas with men and women over many years, we have come to the conclusion that there is truth and error and unrighteous actions on both sides. Additionally, we believe the church would be better served by more light and less heat, by more honest dialogue and less presumption of ulterior motives. In a society that's becoming more and more hateful and enraged, Christians dare not follow the same destructive path.

However, we are not advocating abandoning the essentials of the faith or a high view of Scripture. As we examine the Bible and the amount of space dedicated to what women can and can't do in the home and church compared to other doctrines, we simply cannot include this issue as an "essential of the faith." May we all find ways to answer Jesus's final request together.



**PART 1**

# Introductory Issues



## 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 hierarch 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?