Spoiling the Beautiful Difference

Ian Paul and Andrew Bartlett · introduced by Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf · June 2022 · revised October 2026

Above all in the USA, but also in the rest of the English-speaking world, the discussion about whether women may lead and teach is in full swing again. Like waves that roll through Christianity once every decade, here especially through the conservative evangelical world. However, the arguments of the so-called complementarians (Piper, Grudem, Keller, Carson, MacArthur, Burk, DeYoung, Dever, Matthias Lohmann – in Germany quite a few free churches as well as initiatives and publishers such as E21, EBTC, KFG, Brethren assemblies of every kind, 3L Verlag, etc.), who think they can exclude women from teaching and leadership on biblical grounds, have all been worked through and refuted. This essay deals with a text that tries once again to justify this thesis of the hierarchically subordinate role of women. It is a somewhat newer approach, but it misses the mark just as badly, as this critique by Ian Paul and Andrew Bartlett shows.

The German version of this text on my website is a working translation made with the help of DeepL.com, not a print-ready rendering. It is only meant to convey the sense, so that the arguments and counterarguments can be followed. In fact, I found (for myself) some new thoughts that confirm me once again in having abandoned this position completely.

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I have teamed up with Andrew Bartlett QC, author of *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (IVP, 2019), to offer a biblical critique of ‘Beautiful Difference: The Complementarity of Male and Female’, by Andrew Wilson, speaker and theologian for Newfrontiers. For full details of authors and endorsers of this critique, see the end of text.

Wilson steps up

Complementarianism[1] is in crisis.

1991 saw the publication of the major complementarian work *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. But 2020 saw the publication of *Recovering From Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. You can guess the content from the title. The author, Aimee Byrd, was a woman theologian writing from within a Reformed denomination in the USA which does not permit woman leaders in churches.

Byrd’s book was reviewed by Denny Burk, a leading North American complementarian. He candidly admits that there is a generation wanting “to exit complementarianism”. He warns: “there’s a generation looking for a doorway, and Byrd provides it.” Her audience “is ready to jump and is just looking for a reasonably intelligent pretext for doing so.”[2]

Terran Williams was a teaching pastor at a large church in South Africa, committed to complementarianism. He was asked to research and write a better defence of their position. When he thoroughly re-examined it, he found he could not defend it from the Bible.[3]

Many are indeed jumping out of complementarianism. Women are finding their full freedom in Christ. Men are seeing women with fresh eyes, as their true co-equals.

But Andrew Wilson has stepped up to try to stem the losses. He is a teaching pastor and elder at a church in South East London, which is part of the Newfrontiers family of churches. We respect him as a good-hearted and well-intentioned brother in Christ. He is deservedly known as an intelligent and thoughtful writer.[4] He is perhaps the leading European theologian of complementarianism.

Wilson rightly criticizes some aspects of this approach. He acknowledges that it has demeaned our sisters, has read post-war middle America into the New Testament, has defended heterodox views of the Trinity, and has wrongly dismissed those who disagree as theological liberals. Nonetheless, he wants to hold the line, arguing that only men should lead in the family and in churches.

He is aware that many Christians who get their beliefs from the Bible are not persuaded by the standard arguments for complementarianism. So, he has tried to do better. He wants to re-focus complementarianism as "complementarity". And he wants to lay a broader biblical foundation for it. He has done this in an influential article, '*Beautiful Difference: The Complementarity of Male and Female*'.[5] While he touches on male leadership in the family, his argument is mainly directed to justifying men-only leadership in the church (male elders).

The article is engaging, and beautifully written – and in fact there are some important truths here with which we agree.[6] But does it provide sound biblical arguments for restricting church leadership to men? We think not. Contrary to his objective, Wilson's teaching actually *spoils* the beautiful difference between men and women. It stops short of *full* complementarity. While placing no restriction on men, it restricts women in ways that God does not. Please read on to find out where it goes wrong.[7]

Wilson's reasoning

We begin by summarising Wilson's reasoning. He departs from the proof-texting approach often adopted. Instead, he seeks to follow a whole-Bible approach. His main points are:

1. Complementarity is built into God's creation, including into men and women.
2. Men and women are hardwired to be different. Their respective traits are what we should expect from Genesis 1-4, where the Man (in Hebrew, similar to the word for 'earth') was given the task of guarding the garden against attack, and the Woman, Eve (similar to the word for 'life'), was identified as the mother of all living.
3. The complementarity of men and women is expressed in marriage, in the family, and in the workplace. According to 1 Timothy 5:1-2, we should interact with older women specifically as mothers, with older men specifically as fathers, with younger women as sisters, and so on, not as gender-neutral units or sexless atomised workers.
4. Centrally, only men should be elders in the church because **(a) the task of elders is to guard and protect the church as shepherds of the flock**, and **(b) in every phase of biblical history, it is men who are charged with guarding and protecting the people of God**: - In support of (a), he refers to Acts 14:22-23; 20:17-38; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4. - In support of (b), he refers to seven topics, comprising six examples and one passage of teaching. The examples are: Adam, the patriarchs, the Levitical priests, the Israelite monarchy, the twelve apostles, and features of the New Jerusalem with which the Bible ends. The teaching is Paul's list of qualifications for church elders.

5. While women are very significant in the biblical story, they serve as women, in ways that are complementary to men. As women, they can do all sorts of things that men can't or don't do.
6. The church should be viewed as a family. Then, denying that women can be elders is simply like denying that women can be fathers and that men can be mothers.

We commend Wilson's attempt to follow a whole-Bible approach. But his reasoning is visibly flawed: it is false in regard to biblical history, at odds with biblical theology, and unsound in its biblical exegesis. We will consider each of these in turn.

Biblical history

According to Wilson, in every phase of biblical history, it is men who are charged with guarding and protecting the people of God. By this, he means that it is *only men and not women* who are called by God to guard and protect the people of God.

But this is simply not true. Prominent counter-examples falsify his proposition:

- At the exodus of Israel from Egypt, who is appointed by God to lead the people safely through the wilderness, in addition to Moses? Moses' brother and sister – Aaron and *Miriam*. See Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1-2; Micah 6:4.
- In the time of the "judges", God appoints *Deborah* to lead and deliver the people of Israel, by deciding their disputes, prophesying, and instructing them on going into battle (Judges 2:16-19; 4 – 5).
- In the time of King Josiah, God appoints *Huldah* as a prophet to guide the king and the nation and provoke revival (2 Kings 22:11 – 23:3).[8]
- In the New Testament, *Priscilla* protects the nascent Ephesian church from inadequate teaching (Acts 18:18-28). From the way that Luke tells the story, he evidently sees this as God's provision.[9] She also risked her neck to save Paul's life (Romans 16:4).[10]
- *Junia*, who was imprisoned with Paul, was called by God to be an apostle (Romans 16:7). Her apostleship was of the same kind as that of Apollos and Barnabas, travelling evangelists and church planters.[11] An apostle's teaching contributes to guarding and protecting the church.

Even some of Wilson's selected examples do not show men being exclusively called by God to protect God's people.

First, *Adam*. Wilson says that he is put in the garden "to serve and guard it" (Genesis 2:15). We'll assume that his translation "serve and guard" is correct, even though it is a minority interpretation of the Hebrew text.[12] However:

1. Genesis 2 does not say that guarding the garden was the task solely of Adam. On the contrary, the woman was to be his helper, or "an ally corresponding to him" in that task (Genesis 2:18; compare 1:28).
2. In biblical usage, the word for "helper" (*ʿēzer*), which is applied to the Woman, seems to carry a connotation of "protector" or "deliverer". In every other use of it, the context shows that the helping activity is protection or deliverance, often God's help for Israel.[13]
3. Guarding the garden is not guarding the people of God.[14]

Second, *the patriarchs.* Wilson does not identify any Scripture in which God gives to all of the patriarchs the task of guarding the people of God. If he means to rely on the fact that, in practice, some of them sometimes did so, then we can equally cite examples of *women* who protect God's people:

- *Abigail* protects her husband and the men in her household from a violent death (1 Samuel 25).
- *Rahab* protects the male spies (Joshua 2).
- An *unnamed woman* protects the people of Thebez from being burned to death (Judges 9:50–57). She is a particularly interesting example. She performs a feat of strength (lifting a millstone) in an act of defensive warfare (fatally wounding the besieging king, Abimelech) as part of God's plan to defeat evil (v56). But it is socially unacceptable for Abimelech to be killed by a woman, so he instructs his armour-bearer to draw his sword and kill him. This illustrates how God's use of a woman to protect or lead, in order to fulfil his purposes, offends the patriarchal social norms of the culture.
- The *wise woman* of Abel Beth Maakah protects the men and women of her city from an invading army (2 Samuel 20).
- *Esther* protects the Jews from being massacred (Esther 2:19 – 9:19).
- *The strong wife* of Proverbs 31:10-31 protects her own family and household and also the poor and needy. She is described as an ideal, but this implies that the characteristics described are found in real women, even if not all in one individual.[15]

Third, *the New Jerusalem*. Wilson writes:

> *the Bible ends with a female city—which includes the entire people of God, whichever sex we are—being rescued by and finally married to a male Saviour, with the walls of the city and their foundations being named for male apostles and male patriarchs.*

It is unclear why Wilson regards the New Jerusalem as supporting his proposition. John's vision is not making points here about patriarchs or male apostles protecting God's people:

- In Revelation 21:12, the *gates* (not the walls) are inscribed with the *names of the twelve tribes* of the sons of Israel. Gates are entry points. These names designate who may enter, that is, the whole people of God (see Ezekiel 48:30-35; Revelation 7:4, 9). The gates are not for protection: they are never shut (21:25).
- In Revelation 21:14 the wall of the city has twelve foundations which have on them "twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb". The designation "apostles of the Lamb" points to the foundation of the church through the apostolic message of Jesus as the one who "has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Revelation 1:5). This is not a point about protection.[16]

Women were commanded by God to co-rule with men (Genesis 1:28) and, it seems, to co-protect with men (Genesis 2:18). So, even after the adverse consequence of human disobedience in Genesis 3 ("he shall rule over you" – 3:16), we might expect to find in biblical history some evidence of that ruling and protecting behaviour. And that is what we do find. See the examples above, from Miriam to the strong wife of Proverbs 31.

Biblical theology

For accurate understanding of the Bible, it is necessary to keep in mind the New Testament's notion of two contrasting ages.

There is the present evil age, from which Jesus came to rescue us, and there is the age to come, which Jesus came to inaugurate. The age to come will be fully put into effect at the future resurrection and the restoration of all things in the new creation. Meanwhile, we live in the overlap of the ages, the 'now but not yet'. This framework of thought is apparent from numerous passages of Scripture.[17]

The fulfilment of the age to come is not a return to Eden but is a new and different future, symbolized by a city rather than a garden (Revelation 21:1-22:5). So, at the resurrection, contrary to Genesis 2:24, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage (Matthew 22:30). Procreation will not be needed. The new creation will be peopled by a great multitude that no one could count, from every tribe, nation, people and language (Revelation 7:9; 19:6-7).

Of course, Wilson knows all this. Near the beginning of his article he writes, in reference to the new creation:

> *it is not surprising that abolishing the distinction between heaven and earth is connected to abolishing the distinction between male and female.*

But when he develops his argument, the biblical framework is forgotten. His reasoning proceeds as if there were no material difference between the first creation and the new creation, or between the old covenant and the new. He rightly says: "Christians are called to express the complementarity of male and female in this present age", but he fails to attend to how this calling is qualified by the urgent call to express, in this present life, the new life of the age to come.

His omission to think in a way that is faithful to the New Testament framework is vividly seen in his remarks about the Levitical priests:

> *The Levitical priests, charged with the protection of the sanctuary and by extension the entire nation of Israel, are all men, and men of violence at that—they spend their days killing animals, and are first ordained for priestly service because they had sufficient zeal for Yahweh to kill their fellow Israelites (Ex 32:25-29).*

This is said *in support of male elders for churches*! But this is a world away from the life of the new covenant. We follow a Saviour who teaches us to put away our weapons, to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to turn the other cheek, not to retaliate, to overcome evil with good, to correct opponents with gentleness, and to bring back sinners from wandering.[18] In the New Testament, no believer is called, as a believer, to use violence against others.[19] The weapons of our warfare are spiritual, not the weapons of the world (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). Paul's "priestly service" is not to engage in killing but to proclaim God's good news of life (Romans 15:16). All followers of Jesus, both men and women, are called to arm themselves with spiritual weapons for the spiritual battle, which is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:10-18).[20]

Seen in the context of biblical theology, the significance of the Levitical priesthood runs directly contrary to Wilson's conclusion. The priesthood of the old covenant foreshadowed the ministry of Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, in whom all believers become priests, both men and women (Hebrews 2 – 10; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). If the Levitical priesthood is regarded as giving a lesson in lead-

ership and protection of the people of God, the lesson is that under the new covenant both men and women are called to those tasks.[21]

Wilson's argument from the first creation is simply irrelevant here. We do not need to discuss the extent to which men are "hard-wired" differently from women in order to understand Christian ministry. Beyond doubt, men tend to have greater muscle strength than women.[22] But physical qualities such as muscle strength are not qualifications for church leadership. To be an elder requires spiritual qualities of character and giftedness in order to promote, nurture and protect new life in Christ.

It is this framework of thought (old covenant/new covenant, present age/coming age, first creation/new creation) that gives Paul the boldness to directly contradict Genesis 1:27 ("male and female") in Galatians 3:28 ("*not* male and female"). In his letter, he has in mind the contrast between the first creation, disabled through disobedience, and the new creation begun by Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:4; 6:15). In the new creation in Christ, male and female do not have the same significance as before. Just as the abolition *in Christ* of the Jew/Gentile distinction (though physically it continued to exist) had consequences for behaviour in God's new family (see Galatians 2:11-21; 6:15-16), so also the abolition in Christ of the male/female distinction (though physically it continued to exist) had behavioural consequences: women became full co-workers in the gospel.

In Christ, a new time has begun. It was foreshadowed in Jesus' ministry and has been decisively inaugurated by the defeat of death at the cross and the resurrection of Jesus to a new life, never to die again. This new life is shared with those who follow him, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is why, on the day of Pentecost, Peter quotes Joel's prophecy of the coming age (Acts 2:17-18, NIV):

> *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*

In the new life of the Spirit, the old social distinctions are disregarded. The Spirit is given to all. As Jesus said: "It is written in the prophets, they will all be taught by God" (John 6:45, citing Isaiah 54:13; see also Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Spiritual gifts – including for leadership and teaching – are related to the inbreaking of the kingdom age through the Spirit and are therefore given without gender distinction:

- In Acts 2, women are to prophesy (vv17-18), and it is clear that women were in fact amongst the group of 120 who received the Spirit. Prophesying is a form of leadership.
- In Romans 12:3-8, the gifts distributed around "every one" include prophecy, teaching and leading.
- In 1 Corinthians 12, the gifts distributed around "each" (v7) include the message of wisdom (v8), apostles, prophets and teachers (v28).[23] It is very striking here that the Spirit 'distributes to each as he wills', without any suggestion of gender distinction.
- In Ephesians 4:11 there is no hint of gender distinction among apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (note also the women prophets in 1 Corinthians 11, Priscilla teaching in Acts 18 and Paul's female co-workers in Romans 16).
- In Colossians 3:16, those who protect the church by admonishing and teaching may be men or women.
- In 1 Peter 4:10-11 "each" may speak "the very words of God".

Reading the Bible without complementarian spectacles, these teachings confirm the lesson from the replacement of the Levitical priesthood by the priesthood of all believers in Christ. If Peter and Paul believe that church leadership is for men only, why are their teachings about leadership gifts addressed to both men and women, without plainly revealing the restriction? The teachings on spiritual gifts show there is no distinction between men and women in regard to church leadership under the new covenant.

This is not contradicted by Jesus' choice of twelve apostles to be the founding apostles of his new movement. Yes, they were all Jewish, free and male. But he appointed them at a time of transition, before the inauguration of the new covenant. Corresponding to the twelve patriarchs, they symbolized the reconstitution of the people of God as followers of Jesus.

There is no dispute that after Pentecost, in the age of the Spirit, subsequent church leaders could be Gentiles or slaves. That the twelve were Jewish and free is not an argument against such leaders. Likewise, the maleness of the twelve apostles is not an argument against subsequent leaders being female.

Biblical exegesis

We now turn to Wilson's proposition that the task of elders is to guard and protect the church as shepherds of the flock, and to Paul's list of qualifications for church elders. Wilson sees both of these as mandating men-only eldership.

We agree that, according to the New Testament, one of the tasks of elders is to guard and protect the church as shepherds of the flock. But neither the metaphor of "shepherds" nor the nature of their task points to a requirement that elders be male.

In the Bible, shepherds are not only men but also women (Genesis 29:9; Exodus 2:16-17), so this metaphor does not imply a gender requirement.

As regards the nature of the task, we readily agree that more men than women are suited to physical combat. When physical wolves are attacking a physical flock, male shepherds may do better than women shepherds. But this has no relevance to the task of church eldership, which requires *spiritual qualities of character and giftedness that are shared by both men and women*.

This can be seen with great clarity if we review Paul's statement of qualifications for church elders.[24]

In 1 Timothy Paul expresses concern about certain unqualified leaders (1:7) who teach falsely (1:3) and whose gender he does not specify (1:3, Greek *tisin*, from *tis* – anyone, someone). Immediately following mention of women in 1 Timothy 2:15, Paul turns to qualifications for leaders, starting with a gender-neutral introduction: "if anyone (*tis*) aspires to become an overseer …" (3:1).

With just one seeming exception, all the behaviours and criteria which Paul then sets out are capable of being true of women. Whether instinctively or deliberately, Paul reinforces the message that women may have the necessary qualifications for eldership. He does this by using the same or similar Greek words and ideas when he writes elsewhere in 1 Timothy and Titus about women. Running through the list in 1 Timothy:

- Eldership is a good work (3:1); Paul expects women to do good work (5:10).
- Elders must be above reproach (3:2); Paul expects women to be irreproachable (5:7).

- Elders must be temperate (3:2); Paul expects women to be temperate (3:11).
- Elders must be self-controlled (3:2); Paul expects women to be self-controlled (2:9, 15).
- Elders must be respectable (3:2); Paul expects women to be respectable (2:9).
- Elders must be hospitable (3:2); Paul expects women to be hospitable (5:10).
- Elders must be able to teach (3:2); Paul expects women to be teachers of what is good (Titus 2:3).
- Elders must not be drunkards (3:3); Paul expects women not to be drunkards (Titus 2:3).
- Elders must not be lovers of money (3:3); Paul expects women to avoid adornment with gold, pearls and expensive clothes (2:9).
- Elders must be good managers of their households (3:4); Paul expects women to rule their households (using a word which is a compound of the strong term *despoteō*) (5:14).
- Elders must show dignity in the way they keep their children under control (3:4); Paul expects women to show dignity (3:11).
- Elders must not be new converts, falling into condemnation on account of pride (3:6); Paul expects women to be humble and not under condemnation (5:10, 12).
- Elders must have a good testimony from outsiders (3:7); Paul expects women to have a good testimony from others (5:7, 10).

Paul also includes a group of further qualifications: gentle, not violent (contrast 1:13!), and not quarrelsome (3:3). It is uncontroversial that these may be found in women. Thus, Paul has listed at least sixteen qualities or behaviours which may certainly be found in both men and women. He appears to regard women as capable of satisfying the qualifications.

Paul's thinking here is also in line with other remarks that he makes about nurturing God's people, which include feminine images. He describes his and Silvanus's and Timothy's ministry among the Thessalonians as being gentle as babes, like a nursing mother with her own children (1 Thessalonians 2:7). In his ministry to the Galatians, in one of the most astonishing metaphors in the New Testament, he sees himself like a pregnant woman bringing a child to birth (Galatians 4:19).

This is all a far cry from Wilson's conception that the qualifications for elders envisage a characteristically male task of protection and are directed exclusively to men. The texts consistently demonstrate that this does not reflect Paul's thinking.

The one seeming exception to gender inclusiveness in the list of qualifications is that an elder must be a *mias gunaikos andra* – literally, a 'one-woman man' (3:2). This idiom refers to conformity to the Christian standard of sexual ethics – not promiscuous and not polygamous. Because of the context, and because of the way the Greek language works, it should here be understood generically, as applying to both men and women. (Where a Greek writer wishes to refer to both men and women, a standard way of doing so is to use an appropriate noun for males.)[25]

The gender-inclusiveness of Paul's qualifications for elders may come as a surprise to readers familiar with English versions of 1 Timothy 3, which traditionally insert numerous male pronouns and possessives, all of which are absent from Paul's Greek. But prominent, highly qualified, complementarian scholars such as Douglas Moo and Tom Schreiner *agree that the wording of the list of qualifications does not exclude women*.[26] Even John Piper and Wayne Grudem appear to accept this.[27]

Moreover, although we commonly refer to Paul's list as "qualifications", nearly all scholars and church authorities rightly read it as being indicative rather than prescriptive. It is not a church constitution

with a legal definition of qualifications for eldership; it is advice in a letter to a close colleague. We are not aware of any major church grouping which requires elders to be married (literal reading of v2) or to have at least two children (v4). If it were intended to be prescriptive, Paul himself, and even the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, would not qualify to serve as a local church elder.

So, what are Wilson's reasons for interpreting the list as restricting eldership to men? He advances seven points.

First, he says that elders are "assumed to be men". If he means Paul assumes that many elders will be men, we agree with him. But if he means Paul assumes that elders will *only* be men, we think he is mistaken. There is no such assumption in the list, in the absence of a solid reason for reading *mias gunaikos andra* as applying only to males. However, even if Wilson's first point is correct, it does not establish his position, because an *assumption* is not a *requirement*.

Second, he says that an elder must be "the husband of one wife". This is a reference to the idiom *mias gunaikos andra*. Wilson does not explain why, in context, he judges it inappropriate to understand this term generically. Wilson's position requires that Paul (1) introduces his list gender-neutrally, (2) sets out seventeen qualities or behaviours, out of which (as Paul sees it) sixteen may certainly be found in women, and (3) expresses the seventeenth in a way that can be read gender-neutrally (because of how Greek works), but nonetheless (4) intends the seventeenth to be understood as a prescriptive requirement that elders must be male. *This strains credulity.*

It is also contrary to the understanding that the list is indicative rather than prescriptive. Wilson's view implies that those who allowed John Stott to serve the church as a pastor were disobedient to God's word, because Stott was unmarried.

Third, Wilson says:

> *the church is a family which has, and desperately needs, both fathers and mothers (e.g. 5:1-2), and this is a strong indication that Paul sees overseers as fathers.*

But the logic of this reasoning is difficult to appreciate. If the church is a family which needs both fathers and mothers, that would suggest that both men and women should be elders.

Fourth, he believes that the requirement to lead the household well and keep children submissive (3:4) is "a strong indication" that Paul sees elders as male. But, since women lead households and bring up children,[28] the basis for Wilson's belief is not apparent.

Fifth, he argues from the requirement of ability to teach (3:2):

> *Paul has just restricted women from doing this (2:12; the fact that there is plentiful debate about what exactly he meant by this should not prevent us from seeing the obvious connection here).*

But the plentiful debate raises serious issues which cannot be so airily dismissed. Non-complementarian scholars understand 2:12 to prohibit false teaching by certain women. There are real difficulties in complementarian translations and interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:12, including, among others:

- Since Paul's letter sets out to control false teaching (1:3 and onwards), why read 2:12 as prohibiting right teaching by women, rather than as prohibiting false teaching by women?
- If Paul means to lay down *a general rule*, why does he say *ouk epitrepō* – "I am not permitting/I don't permit"? There is no example anywhere in the Bible of this expression being used to lay

down a general rule.

- If in 2:12 Paul is concerned with the use of legitimate pastoral authority in the church, why does Paul use the verb *authenteō* instead of one of the ordinary words for exercising authority?
- Complementarians translate *authenteō* as "have authority" or "exercise authority", but they cannot point to a single clear example of that meaning before Paul's time, or in Paul's time, or until about 300 years later.[29]

However, Wilson's point about teaching fails even on a complementarian reading, since Paul makes clear at 5:17 that not all elders teach.[30]

Sixth, he refers to 3:11, where there is an express mention of women in the midst of the qualifications for deacons, which begin in 3:8 and are resumed in 3:12. Because of 3:11, Wilson considers it "almost impossible" that Paul envisaged women elders. But he overstates his case. Commentators have struggled to be sure of the intent of 3:11. English translations disagree on whether Paul is referring in 3:11 to "women", to "deacons' wives" or to "deaconesses". Commentators have proposed five different interpretations.

A simple reading is that Paul speaks of women in 2:15, then begins his list of qualifications of *elders* with a gender-neutral introduction (3:1), so it is already clear to readers that the first list is meant for both men and women. But the list for *deacons* starts straight in with the male term "*diakonous*", so while dictating he realizes that he needs to give a signal to show whether he has in mind only men or also women. He gives this signal in 3:11: he is talking about female deacons as well as male deacons. Andrew Bartlett prefers this simple reading. Terran Williams prefers other interpretations which are also inconsistent with Wilson's view.[31]

Moreover, we have already seen that Wilson has not taken into account the generic language of the list of elders' qualifications, with its qualities and behaviours appropriate to women. So, Wilson's judgment about the significance of 3:11 is of little weight. And, if Paul really means to lay down a rule for all churches that only men may be elders, why does he nowhere say so plainly and unmistakably? Why leave his reader to draw uncertain inferences about elders from a passage about deacons?

Seventh, Wilson states:

> *even egalitarian commentators often agree that these requirements "present the overseer as a husband and father" (Towner), and that "Paul refers to the bishop throughout as a man" (Wright). In this text, at least, eldership is not sex-neutral.*

But this statement is not good scholarship.

The quotation from Philip Towner is taken from Towner's commentary on the letters to Timothy and Titus. It is part of his discussion of the meaning of *mias gunaikos andra*. Wilson has not accurately portrayed what Towner writes. He does not write that the *qualifications* present the overseer as a husband and father. What he actually writes is that "The domestic *assumptions* of the code … present the overseer as a husband and father" (emphasis added). We are back to the assumption argument, on which we disagree with both Wilson and Towner, but which in any event goes nowhere, since an assumption is not a requirement.

Wilson's portrayal of the significance of Tom Wright's comment is even more misleading, in our opinion. The quotation is from Wright's devotional book on the pastoral letters in the *Paul for Everyone* se-

ries. Wilson presents Wright's comment as supporting the view that "eldership is not sex-neutral" but male-only. That is the opposite of how Wright sees it. Here is what Wright says:

> *Paul refers to the bishop throughout as a man. My reading of the rest of the New Testament inclines me to think that this is more because that's how Greek grammar normally refers to both genders together, and because in the very early days of the church the leaders of most communities were probably men. I don't see it as debarring women from this particular ministry and vocation. (emphases added)*

Because of his expert understanding of first-century Greek, like complementarians Moo and Schreiner, egalitarian Wright does not see Paul's list of qualifications as debarring women.

So, where do we arrive with Wilson's seven reasons for interpreting Paul's list as debarring women from eldership? None of them holds water. On this point, Moo, Schreiner and Wright are correct, and Wilson is wrong.

True complementarity

We have now examined Wilson's central proposition: in every phase of biblical history, it is men who are charged with guarding and protecting the people of God. We have found that it is false in regard to biblical history, at odds with biblical theology, and unsound in its biblical exegesis. Wilson's article fails to provide a biblical basis for complementarianism.

The reality of Wilson's position is that it *spoils* the beautiful difference between men and women. It does this because it denies the full biblical complementarity of men and women, made in God's image. While placing no restriction on men, it restricts women in ways that God does not. It blocks out women's contributions to leading the church.

This deprives the church of gifts and resources that God has given to her. Complementarian Wayne Grudem has rightly said:

> *God has given much insight and wisdom to women … and … any church leaders who neglect to draw on the wisdom that women have are really acting foolishly.*[32]

But there is yet more in Wilson's article that is wrong.

Over-emphasizing sexual difference

As Wilson understands the biblical story, women serve in it only *as women*, in ways that are complementary to men. He lists about 26 examples, and says:

> *In each of these cases, the women in question serve God's people specifically as women. (emphasis added)*

He explains:

> *the power of these examples lies in the fact that women can do all sorts of things that men can't or don't do, and vice versa. (emphasis original)*

This is easy to understand in a case like Mary, as the mother of Jesus. Only a woman can be a mother. But many of his other examples can fairly be described as bizarre. For example:

- Deborah leads Israel; but a man could lead Israel, and many did.
- Hannah and Mary compose psalms and songs which appear in Scripture; but so do David and Asaph.
- Huldah and Philip's daughters prophesy; but many men do too.
- Chloe hosts a church; but men do this too.
- Lydia runs a business; but a man can run a business, and many do.
- Euodia and Syntyche are co-labourers with Paul in the gospel; but so are many men – Paul uses the same Greek term (*sunergos*) to describe Timothy, Apollos, Silvanus (Silas), and Titus.
- Junia is an apostle; but so are numerous men.

Leading Israel, composing songs, prophesying, hosting a church, running a business, co-labouring in the gospel, and working as an apostle are not gendered tasks, like being a father or a mother.

Wilson is so taken with his idea of seeing all human activity as sexually differentiated that he misreads and misapplies 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

Paul advises Timothy: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity." (ESV) Wilson acknowledges that the context of this advice is "interactions with people in the family of God". But he somehow sees it as applying "in the workplace", and counsels us to treat fellow workers specifically as fathers, mothers, sisters or brothers, and not as "gender-neutral units or sexless atomised workers".

Women lawyers or scientists would find it strange if a Christian lawyer or scientist related to them at work primarily as mothers or sisters, rather than primarily as fellow lawyers or scientists, whose gender is (at the most) of minor relevance to their work. Wilson seems to have forgotten his own earlier reminder, derived from Genesis 1:27:

> *Men and women bear the image of God together, and our identity is far more fundamentally defined by our humanity than our sex. We are humans first, males or females second …*

This reminder strikes the proper balance. A woman leader or worker serves primarily as a leader or worker and secondarily as a woman. As a woman, she may tend to bring a mix of qualities and insights which differ from a man's. While this is a benefit of complementarity, it is not the main feature of her leadership or work.[33]

In conclusion

Complementarianism contains many gifted Bible teachers, who usually handle God's word with care. But when they consider men and women, it seems to generate a fog that interferes with their reading and their thinking.[34]

Wilson concludes by observing that the church should be viewed as a family. We agree, but he wrongly considers that this provides a justification for restricting leadership to men:

> *To deny that woman [sic] can be elders will sound like the equivalent of denying that women can be CEOs, but it is more like the equivalent of denying that women can be fathers, and that men can be mothers." (emphases original)*[35]

With all respect to our brother, this is muddled and unbiblical.

It is muddled because it contradicts the very purpose of complementarity. Wilson himself says:

> *In Christianity, male and female bear the image of God together, with neither male nor female able to fully express it without the other. (emphasis added)*

Men and women are the same as each other (human beings, made in God's image) and are also different from each other (created male and female). In so far as they are the same, both men and women may show good character and have spiritual gifts of leadership. In so far as they are different, they may bring different contributions in leadership. While Jesus was God's perfect image even on his own, church leaders are not Jesus. In practice, *the full expression of God's image by the leaders of the church is facilitated if they are both male and female.* The beautiful difference is displayed in co-leadership.[36]

It is unbiblical because Scripture nowhere uses "fathers" as a metaphor for local church elders, or as a description of them. The biblical metaphor of the church as family posits not any earthly pastor as father of the family, but God as father and God's people as children (John 1:12-13), with Jesus as the firstborn and believers as his brothers and sisters (Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:5-6; 2:10-11). Our leaders are our elder siblings in Christ. Believers are *God's* family, not *the elders'* family.

Again, we should emphasize that seeing women and men as both being able to exercise ministry and leadership does not imply that women and men are fully interchangeable and without difference. Believing that both can lead is not a slippery slope to secular gender-identity ideologies. To this extent, we agree with many of the things that Wilson says in the first part of his article about differences in creation; it is the development in the second half to make an absolute distinction in eligibility for eldership that we have shown is mistaken.

Complementarianism's spoiling of the beautiful difference continues to damage and restrict many churches and many believers. It is not biblical. It is not necessary. It is a tragedy. Let the fog blow away. It is time to leave it behind.

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Notes

1. Complementarianism is a system of Bible interpretation, developed in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. It introduced into biblical exposition the sociological concept of male and female "roles", in support of male-only leadership of the

family and of the Church. This differs from most historic Reformed positions in not uniformly requiring male-only leadership in wider society.

2. Denny Burk, 'A way-station to egalitarianism: A review essay of Aimee Byrd's Recovering from Biblical Manhood & Womanhood', July 7, 2020. Accessed at https://equip.sbts.edu/article/way-station-egalitarianism-review-essay-aimee-byrds-recovering-biblical-manhood-womanhood/.
3. He tells his story and expounds the Scriptures in Terran Williams, *How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy* (Spiritual Bakery, 2022) (available at www.terranwilliams.com or from Amazon).
4. See a positive review of his published PhD thesis here: https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/does-god-discipline-those-whom-god-loves/ and an interview with him about his excellent *God of All Things* here: https://www.psephizo.com/reviews/what-can-the-material-world-teach-us-about-god/.
5. Published on his Think Theology website on 20 November 2020: https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/beautiful_difference_the_complementarity_of_male_and_female. It was re-published with minor changes on The Gospel Coalition website on 20 May 2021: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/beautiful-complementarity-male-female/
6. For example, the idea that men and women are not identical and interchangeable. See the first half reproduced at https://www.psephizo.com/gender-2/beautiful-difference-the-complementarity-of-male-and-female/.
7. To keep the present article within bounds, our discussion concentrates on church leadership rather than on the family. We note that Wilson's discussion of marriage and family wholly ignores the longest passage in the New Testament on marriage and the personal relations of men and women (1 Corinthians 7), which is the only place where Paul gives explicit teaching on authority and decision-making in marriage. This is a somewhat inconvenient passage for complementarians, since he indicates that husband and wife have the same authority and that decisions should be made by mutual consent (vv4-5). For a full exposition, see Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (IVP, 2019), chapter 2.
8. For more on Miriam, Deborah and Huldah, and answers to complementarian attempts to minimise their leadership, see further *Men and Women in Christ*, 91-94 (chapter 5, under 'Women's leadership and authority in the Old Testament').
9. Most commentators note that the Greek of Acts 18:19-21 is irregular and discontinuous; the natural reading is that Priscilla and Aquila planted the church there, but Luke is concerned to note Paul's close association with its origin. See Howard Marshall *Acts (TNTC)* 1980, 301; Ben Witherington *Acts of the Apostles* 1998, 557–8.
10. On Priscilla's correction of Apollos, one of the chief teachers of the church, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 207, 227 (chapter 11, under 'The nature of the disagreement', and under '3. Authoritative teaching as a special category?'), 240 (chapter 12, under 'The historical context').
11. On Junia's apostleship, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 299-306 (chapter 14, under 'Women's prominence in the young churches'). Throughout church history, until the recent rise of complementarianism, Junia has been understood to have been a missionary apostle. Her prominence probably explains why she was imprisoned with Paul. In his article, Wilson rightly acknowledges that Junia was an apostle.
12. Out of 54 English versions on Bible Gateway as at May 2022, just four translate the Hebrew שמר as "guard". In addition, four translate as "watch over", and one as "be shomer over". NIV and ESV represent the general consensus ("to work it and take care of it"; "to work it and keep it").
13. See the context of the uses of *'ēzer* in Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalm 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19; 115:9-11; 121:1-2; 124:8; 146:5; Hosea 13:9; Isaiah 30:5; Daniel 11:34. (In some of these references the point is that the hoped-for protection will not be given.)
14. In addition, Wilson says that when the fall happens, it is Adam's responsibility, and it is Adam rather than Eve in whom we all die. But both Adam and Eve are held to account by God in Genesis 3. In order not to misunderstand Genesis 2-3, we need to notice that the writer cleverly exploits the ambiguity of 'Adam' as an individual and 'Adam' as meaning 'Humanity'. So, for example, on the surface of the story it appears to be only Adam who is excluded in Genesis 3:22-24, but the meaning is that Humanity is excluded. Paul's reasoning in 1 Corinthians 15:22 rests on the idea of 'Adam' as representative of Humanity.
15. Perhaps she is the kind of woman that King Lemuel's mother envisages as his future wife: see Proverbs 31:1.
16. For more on Revelation 21:12-14, see Ian Paul, *Revelation* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), 349-350.
17. For some examples, see Matthew 19:28; Mark 10:30; Luke 20:34-35; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 1:21; Titus 2:12; Hebrews 6:5. For a short but comprehensive study of this theme and its importance, see Ian Paul, *Kingdom, Hope, and the End of the World; living in the now and not yet of eschatology* (Grove Books, Cambridge, 2016).
18. Luke 22:49-51; Matthew 5:39, 44; 1 Peter 2:21-23; Romans 12:17-21; 2 Timothy 2:25; James 5:20.

19. Luke 22:38 (“it is enough”) is either a rebuke or a statement that two swords are sufficient to ensure that their journey to, and stay in, the garden of Gethsemane will not be prematurely interrupted. Romans 13:1-4 explains the function of governing authorities, not of the church.
20. Wilson himself wrote on 5 May 2022: “Jesus never used violence against people, whether to defend himself or to defend the innocent. He teaches his followers to live the same way, not resisting evil, and turning the other cheek (Matt 5; Luke 6). Every time a disciple tries or threatens to use violence in the gospel, even in defence of the innocent, Christ rebukes them (Luke 9, 22; John 19). The apostles regularly present Jesus’s suffering as an example for believers to follow (Rom 12; Phil 2; 1 Pet 2). … . Our struggle is not with worldly enemies or worldly weapons (Eph 6). Christians conquer not by killing but by dying: by the blood of the Lamb, the word of our testimony, and not loving our lives even to death (Rev 12).” https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/how_should_christians_think_about_gun_control
21. We should also note that the development of a distinctive (male) Levitical priesthood is itself a sign of the failure of Israel, since it only comes about after the people are seduced into idolatry by the Golden Calf (Exodus 32), against which only the Levites rally (vv26-29). God’s first intention for his people was that they should all be a ‘kingdom of priests’ (Exodus 19:6), a vision that is now realized in and through Christ (Revelation 1:6).
22. 1 Peter 3:7 alludes to this fact. Peter’s point is that Christian men should be considerate towards their wives. It is an interesting example of physical complementarity, since women tend to be stronger than men in stamina, endurance of pain and endurance of cold temperatures.
23. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, those who may bring a prophecy or a teaching may be men or women, as we see from 11:2-14:33. The word for ‘teaching’ here is *didachē*, which is used likewise of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:6, and of the teaching of Jesus, of the apostles, of Timothy, and of elders (respectively, Matthew 7:28; Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9). As to the restriction on women’s speaking in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, there is strong manuscript evidence that those two verses are an addition, not originating with Paul. Those who take them to be authentic have yet to provide (a) a genuinely probable explanation of the evidence, consistent with their supposed authenticity, and (b) a satisfactory reading of how they fit into the context. See *Men and Women in Christ*, chapters 9 and 10.
24. There are two lists, in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:5-9. The passage in 1 Timothy is expressed a little more fully. Our review of the list is taken from *Men and Women in Christ*, 318-319 (chapter 15, under ‘Do Paul’s requirements include or exclude women?’).
25. So, for example, in Acts 17:34 Damaris (a woman) is among the *andres* (men) whom Paul addresses (17:22) and who respond to Paul’s message. For full discussion, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 319-323 (chapter 15, under ‘Do Paul’s requirements include or exclude women?’). Hebrew usage is similar. The command “you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife” (Exodus 20:17) does not allow a woman to covet her neighbour’s husband.
26. Douglas Moo, ‘The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15: A Rejoinder.’ (1981) *TrinJ* 2, New Series: 198–222, 211; Tom Schreiner, ‘Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*.’ (2010) *JBMW* 15, no. 1: 33–46, 35.
27. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism,* 56.
28. Proverbs 1:8; Acts 16:40; 1 Corinthians 1:11; Colossians 4:15; 1 Timothy 5:14; 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15.
29. For more on 1 Timothy 2, see *Men and Women in Christ*, chapters 11-13 and appendices 3-6; and *How God Sees Women*, chapter 7.
30. Because the list of qualifications is indicative rather than prescriptive, there is no contradiction between 1 Timothy 3:2 [corrected] (“able to teach”) and 5:17 (only some elders preach and teach). Note also that, conversely, a gifted person may teach without being an elder (1 Corinthians 14:26; Colossians 3:16).
31. For further details, and proposed interpretations, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 325-326 (chapter 15, under ‘Do Paul’s requirements include or exclude women?’), and *How God Sees Women*, Appendix 5, 339-341.
32. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (1994), 944.
33. When considering the practical effects of sexual differentiation in society, it is useful to remember that most variations between the sexes are less than the variations between individual human beings. The fastest male runners are speedier than the fastest female runners, but a female sprinter runs faster than a male theologian.
34. For some additional examples of this phenomenon, see Andrew Bartlett’s brief response to some strange reviews of his book in ‘Complementarianism and a listening problem?’, posted at Word from the Bird on 11 March 2022, https://michaelfbird.substack.com/p/complementarianism-and-a-listening?s=r. (But please do not over-interpret our meaning here. We have also seen instances where a partisan ideological commitment to egalitarianism had a somewhat similar effect.)

35. Historically, theologians who have believed that only men can lead have indeed applied this restriction consistently to the whole of society, and not selectively to church leadership. See https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/the-historic-reading-of-1-tim-2/
36. We should note here that this does *not* mean that women and men should be leaders or teachers, or speakers at conferences, in equal numbers—merely that there is no biblical warrant for an absolute bar on women in positions of leadership. For a discussion of this, see https://www.psephizo.com/gender-2/should-women-be-on-platforms/ and the follow-up articles.