

FINDING THE BIG POINTS: WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN THE BIBLICAL EQUALITY DEBATE

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The scholarly debate is vast and can be quite confusing to navigate, but there are some big, central points. In the key passages, complementarian expositions depart from Scripture or add to Scripture what is not actually there.

INTRODUCTION

The complementarian–egalitarian debate is a *mass* and *morass* of conflicting opinions about what Scripture teaches.

That includes conflicting opinions on the meanings of words and passages in the Bible and conflicting opinions on the historical and cultural backgrounds to what the Bible says.

The complementarian source-book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, is 684 pages (2021 print). Grudem's big book, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* is 856 pages. Mike Winger's recent video series on *Women in Ministry* runs for 43 hours.

On the egalitarian or mutualist side of the debate, Phil Payne's book *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, just focusing on Paul's letters, is over 500 pages. The third edition of *Discovering Biblical Equality*, edited by Ron Pierce, Cynthia Westfall and Christa McKirland, is 698 pages.

Then there are plenty of other books, on both sides of the debate – mostly in the bracket from 200 to 400 pages.

My new book, *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (published October 2026), engages with all the various arguments, so it's about the same length as Grudem's big book.

If you have the time and the calling to study and sift all this material, that's good. But if not, what then? What about the faithful believer who already has as much going on in their life as they can handle? What about the pastor who is already too busy and always running to keep up?

My aim in this article is to pick out from the whole debate the *big* points and the *biggest* points.

The *big points* are the ones which are clearest in leading to a mutualist position. Then I'll select from among the big points the *two biggest points*. Those are two central points which I believe, on their own, are fatal to the complementarian position. If you were given one minute to explain why mutualists reject a complementarian position, those would be the two to mention.

Hotels near airports often provide a *complimentary* shuttle service, to bring people to the hotel. My hope for this article is to provide a *complementarian* shuttle service – a vehicle to bring complementarian brothers and sisters over to a better place, a place where heaven above is softer blue, and earth beneath is sweeter green.

First, I'll offer a positive account of the mutualist position.

Second, I'll explain ten big points of how the complementarian position departs from what Scripture says. We'll take them broadly in canonical order – but not exactly, because it will be convenient to distinguish between marriage and ministry. That will be the main bulk of what we cover.

In conclusion, we'll pick out the two biggest points. One of them is concerned with Paul's choice of words in 1 Timothy 2:12. The other is concerned with the absence of instructions from God to men, to do what complementarians say men should do. By the end of the article, you'll see why those are the two biggest.

A MUTUALIST VIEW

A mutualist view of men and women starts with some common ground, where complementarian scholars agree. The common ground is the rejection of the traditional majority view of women.

Historically, women have been subordinated to men. The key reason given for that subordination was women's inferiority – women were said to be inferior *in their nature*, so they should also be inferior *in their rank*. Because of their inferiority of nature, they should be subject to men in every aspect of life – in society and public life, in the family, and in the church.

Denigration of women's intelligence and women's moral capacity wasn't some quirky minority report. It was the mainstream view. We could quote big names, like Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, even Wesley.

To illustrate, let's listen to the premier Puritan theologian Richard Baxter, writing in 1665. He advises men, before they marry, to consider how much patience they will need in view of women's nature:

"it is no small patience which the natural imbecility of the female sex requireth you to prepare. Except it be very few that are patient and manlike, women are commonly of potent fantasies, and tender, passionate, impatient spirits, easily cast into anger, or jealousy, or discontent; and of weak understandings, and therefore unable to reform themselves. They are betwixt a man and a child: some few have more of the man, and many have more of the child; but most are but in a middle state." (Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, part 2: *Christian Economics*, ch. 1.)

That view of women is not extreme. It's fairly standard.

Both mutualist and complementarian scholars rightly reject this traditional view. It was not derived from God's word. It was derived from human philosophy and culture.

In the history of the Church, there were respected voices who disagreed with the majority view. For example, in the fourth century, Basil the Great strongly affirmed women's nature as morally and intellectually equal with men (Basil, *On the Origin of Humanity*, discourse 1). But the majority opinion that women were by nature inferior to men was very persistent.

After many centuries of debate, especially in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, by the late 1980s the majority view in the Church had finally shifted. It shifted to a recognition of the true equality of women's nature with men's – morally and intellectually – as seen in Scripture.

The Lord Jesus hasn't given up on purifying his Church.

Genesis

The foundation of the corrected view of women is Genesis 1:26–28, where both men and women are created in the *image of God* as *co-rulers* over God's creation.

Now, equality as fully human persons in God's image does not mean that men and women are the same. God created us male and female. So, men and women are different. They are truly complementary.

It's because of the *differences* between men and women that I use the term 'mutualist' rather than the term 'egalitarian'. Unfortunately, some people misunderstand the term 'egalitarian' as a false claim that men and women are the same.

We need the Bible's perspective on this:

- Being humans in God's image is *primary*; being male and female is important but is *secondary*.

Let's remember that God made animals male and female. And animals are not in God's image. God's image resides not in our sexual difference but in our humanness.

After Genesis 1:28, where men and women are co-rulers, what is the next mention of "rule"? It's in Genesis 3:16, where humans have gone wrong, disobeying God. God warns the woman that the result of the disobedience will be male rule ("he will rule over you").

The facts of life include that men have greater muscle strength than women, and men don't have babies. So, when people choose to disobey God and put themselves first, men generally end up ruling over women. That's Genesis 3.

But God's original design in Genesis 1 was not male rule (men over women); it was co-rule (men and women over creation).

Old Testament in general

The Old Testament witnesses to the fact that, where God's Spirit is at work, women are called to participate in leadership.

We may think of Miriam (Exodus 15; Numbers 12; 1 Chronicles 6:3; Micah 6:4), of Huldah (2 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 34), and especially of Deborah (Judges 4 – 5).

In the Old Testament, before the time of the kings, there are only three leaders appointed by God who combine the functions of overall leader of the people, prophet, supreme judge, and commander-in-chief: they are Moses, Samuel, and Deborah.

God is not against having women as leaders. That's because women are in God's image, as men are.

Jesus

In first-century Jewish culture, as elsewhere, women were regarded as morally and intellectually inferior to men. But Jesus didn't treat women as second-class humans. He received them as full disciples alongside men.

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples how to live. In his teaching, he makes no distinction between how men should live and how women should live.

But what about his appointment of 12 apostles – all men?

That was a time-specific strategy. It was a symbol which recalled the twelve patriarchs. In Jesus' time, there hadn't been 12 tribes in Israel for hundreds of years. The symbolic action of gathering 12 men around him showed that he was now reconstituting the people of Israel around himself.

The temporary function of this symbol is confirmed in Acts 1, where Peter gives instructions for replacing Judas. The replacement must be a man who was part of the group of disciples throughout Jesus' public ministry (Acts 1:21–22). That is unrepeatable.

There is a balancing biblical counterweight to the symbolism of the Twelve. It comes at the resurrection of Jesus. It is his choice specifically of women as the first to give testimony that he had risen from the dead. We see that in the resurrection accounts in Matthew 28, in Luke 24 and in John 20. That symbolic action shows that the disaster of Genesis 3 is now being set right. As Aquinas said – thinking of Eve teaching Adam to take the forbidden fruit:

“just as it was a woman who was the first to announce the words of death, so it was a woman who would be the first to announce the words of life” (Aquinas, Commentary on the Gospel of St John, lecture 3 on John 20).

1 Corinthians 7

We take next the longest passage in the NT about *marriage*: 1 Corinthians 7.

This is the only place in the Bible which talks expressly about authority in marriage and about how to make decisions in marriage.

In 1 Corinthians 7, does the husband have authority which the wife does not have? No. They are one flesh. In verse 4, Paul uses exactly corresponding words for the authority of the husband and for the authority of the wife. Their authority is mutual.

In 1 Corinthians 7, is the husband the decision-maker? No. In verse 5, Paul says that decisions about spending time in prayer together, and about sexual intercourse, are to be made by mutual consent. That is mutuality in marriage.

Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul calls all believers to mutual submission, *each placing themselves lower than others*.

Some interpreters make an exception for husbands in regard to their wives. But Paul does not. No such exception is stated in God's word.

Having called all believers to mutual submission in verse 21, why does Paul go on to say what he does in verses 22–24 – specifically reminding wives to submit to their husbands? Probably, some Christian wives in Ephesus thought that their new-found equality with their husbands in Christ gave them a reason not to place themselves lower and not to treat their husbands with respect. Paul reminds them to place themselves lower, and to respect their husbands, in reverence for Christ.

In this passage, Paul uses a head metaphor to help explain how the husband should behave towards his wife. It is not a metaphor of lordship but of what we could call “saviourhood” (see 5:23). He's thinking: what does a head do if it is attached to a body? It nurtures it and cares for it.

His head-and-body metaphor draws on a conventional idea of the head nourishing the body. As Christ with self-sacrificial love nourishes his people, to whom he is joined, so the husband is called to self-sacrificial love, nourishing and caring for his wife, with whom he is joined as one flesh (5:25–33a).

I think Paul is applying here the principle laid down by Jesus:

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” (Luke 12:48, NIV).

Husbands have greater physical strength and social advantages. So they carry a heightened responsibility of self-sacrificial love and service towards their wives. That is the meaning of their headship.

Peter’s teaching is consistent with Paul’s. In 1 Peter 3, Peter instructs husbands to treat their wives humbly and considerately and to give them honour as co-heirs of God’s gracious gift of new life.

New Testament ministries of women

When we go to the account of how the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost and read it carefully, we can see the effect of the Spirit’s work: women proclaimed God’s mighty acts in public, alongside men, to a mixed audience of men and women (Acts 1:14; 2:1–18). Peter explained what was going on by quoting the prophet Joel: “your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17).

So, as in the Old Testament, but now even more, God himself prompts women to minister in public to both men and women.

In the book of Acts, after Pentecost, women are actively involved in spreading the message of Jesus (Acts 8:1–4; 18:18–26; contrast “men” in Acts 11:20).

In the letters, the apostle Peter and the apostle Paul both teach that ministry is based on spiritual gifting. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tells the Corinthians – men and women – to eagerly desire the greater gifts of apostles, prophets and teachers.

There is no hint in the various passages which teach on gifts that God gives leadership gifts or teaching gifts only to men (Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:1–30; Ephesians 4:11–13; 1 Peter 4:10–11). A restriction of that kind would be something of a surprise, in view of Galatians 3:28

“there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Gifted New Testament women include prophets such as Philip’s daughters (Acts 21:9), the deacon Phoebe (Romans 16:1–2), the teachers Mary and Priscilla and the pioneering apostle Junia (Acts 18; Romans 16:3–4, 6–7; Chrysostom *Homily 31 on Romans*).

In 1 Corinthians 11 we see that women and men were involved together in giving vocal leadership in local churches by prophesying and by leading in prayer. Likewise in 1 Corinthians 14:26 Paul says that “each one” has a vocal contribution of one kind or another, including teaching.

That’s mutuality in ministry.

Revelation

The mutualist perspective of men and women as co-leaders or co-rulers looks forward to the great vision of Revelation 5.

John's vision describes the result of the great work of Jesus the Lamb, who with his blood purchased people from every tribe and language and people and nation:

"You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." (5:10)

That finally fulfils God's purpose for humanity, men and women as co-rulers, which we saw in Genesis 1. This is a vision of all faithful humans as God's priests, mediating his rule over the earth – not just men.

That is the positive case: mutuality in marriage, mutuality in ministry, men and women together as God's representatives.

A TEN POINT ASSESSMENT OF COMPLEMENTARIAN VIEWS

To be clear, I do not question the *sincerity* of what complementarian brothers and sisters believe. What I'm challenging is its *accuracy* as a faithful reflection of what Scripture actually says.

Complementarian teachers agree with mutualists that women are humans who are made in God's image, as men are. Nonetheless, they say that men should *benevolently rule* women, or should *lead* women, or should *exercise authority over* women, or should *take decisions for* women.

They don't rely on the primary traditional reason for men's leadership. It's no longer because women are inferior in their nature. But they say that God has allocated different "roles" to men and women – in marriage, in the church and perhaps in wider society.

We'll run through the ten points where we compare the complementarian view with what Scripture says.

But before we do that, let's notice that the word "role" doesn't appear in the Bible.

When it was accepted that the Church's traditional majority view of women was wrong, complementarians came up with a new justification for putting women under men's leadership, using the sociological language of "roles".

This idea of men's and women's "roles" was a twentieth-century invention. You won't find any mention of it in biblical commentary from the first century to the nineteenth. But in the 1991 printing of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* the term "role" is used more than 700 times.

Since God has given women the same moral and intellectual qualities as men, and has given gifts of leadership to women, there doesn't seem to be a good reason for the supposed allocation of "roles", but that allocation is what they teach.

1) Genesis 2 and 3

According to complementarian scholars, Genesis chapters 2 and 3 show that God has appointed men to give benevolent leadership to women or to their wives. They claim to find "hints" of male leadership in those chapters.

Reading through the literature, I've found 13 points which various scholars have argued are hints of male leadership in those two chapters.

To give one example: woman is created by God as man's "helper". This is said to be a hint which implies male leadership.

Now if Genesis had been originally written in English, we might see an implication there. We mostly use the word "helper" to mean a junior assistant.

But the book of Genesis was written in Hebrew. The word for "helper" is *ezer*. In Hebrew, God is often said to be Israel's *ezer*. But that is *not* a hint that God has appointed Israel to be God's leader! The supposed implication from the word *ezer* is not present in the Hebrew language.

We could usefully run through all 13 of the supposed hints and see why they are problematic. But the big point is something different, and much simpler.

The big point is this: supposed hints are not enough.

If someone is going to say that men have a God-given duty to lead women, then we are entitled to ask: *Where is this commanded to men? Where is it stated to men that this is their God-given duty?*

There is no such command to men or statement of men's duty in Genesis 2 or Genesis 3. That is an addition to Scripture.

2) Old Testament generally

According to complementarian scholars, the Old Testament shows that God has reserved leadership to men. They refer to male kings and male priests.

We could usefully discuss why their arguments from kings and priests are not valid.

But the big point about the Old Testament is simply that leadership is not in fact reserved to men. We've already noted the similarity of Deborah to Moses and to Samuel. God's choice of Deborah as leader of his people stands against the idea that God has reserved leadership to men. That rule is added to the Old Testament; it isn't there.

And in case anyone raises it . . . No – there's no indication in the text that it's somehow God's judgment on Israel to raise up for them a successful woman leader, under whom the land had peace for 40 years. Neither God nor the people express any reservation about having Deborah as the leader.

3) Jesus

We could usefully discuss how Jesus treated women, and the competing theories about why Jesus chose 12 male apostles. But the big point in the Gospels consists of two facts about Jesus's teaching.

Fact 1: Jesus deliberately gave his disciples many enduring commands which would be important for future generations.

The Great Commission requires future disciples to make new disciples, "teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). So, to be faithful disciples, we must pay close attention to what Jesus commanded.

Fact 2: The enduring commands, which Jesus gave, included commands about *leadership*, about *marriage*, and about *discipleship*. But he deliberately did *not* give any command about leadership

being exclusively male, whether in the church, in marriage, or anywhere else.

Complementarians believe it is important for men to lead, at least in marriage and in the church. But it appears Jesus, our leader and Lord, did not have such a belief. If it was important, he would have taught it. He did not.

4) 1 Corinthians 7

We could usefully discuss how the whole chapter shows Paul's view of the complete equality of relations between men and women. But for the big point, we focus just on verse 5, where Paul instructs Christian couples how to take decisions about sexual intercourse and about spending time praying together – *by mutual consent*.

Complementarians have to say that this instruction is a special exception to the husband's leadership and the husband's decision-making responsibility.

But the idea of a special exception makes no sense. These are important matters – even central matters. Sexual intercourse is the *physical* intimacy that makes marriage different from all other relationships. Praying together is the *spiritual* heart of a marriage. If decisions should be taken by mutual consent in those central physical and spiritual matters, how does it make any sense to argue that the husband is somehow supposed to be the leader and decision-maker in other, less important aspects of the marriage relationship?

No viable answer can be given.

In 1988 the complementarian position was carefully codified in the Danvers Statement, which was signed by many well-known pastors and theologians. But at this point, the Danvers Statement just gives up. It doesn't even acknowledge the existence of this major passage of Scripture.

5) Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3

There are all sorts of interesting things we could usefully discuss in Ephesians 5 and in 1 Peter 3. We could discuss the competing views on what Paul means by his "head" metaphor in Ephesians 5:23. We could discuss the different explanations of Peter's reference to Sarah calling Abraham "lord", which she said quietly to herself, in a muttered laugh of disbelief (1 Peter 3:6; Genesis 18:12). But the big point does not require us to consider what Paul meant by "head", or to interpret the details of Peter's reasoning. That's because the big point is not about what Paul and Peter say; it's about what they *do not* say.

We can look through Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 to search for an instruction to husbands that they should rule their wives, or that they should lead them, or that they should exercise authority over them, or that they should make decisions for them. But we will not find it, because no such instructions exist.

Paul tells husbands to *love* their wives. He says it three times. Peter tells husbands to *live considerately* with their wives, and to *honour* them. But neither of the apostles gives to men the instructions which complementarians give.

The Danvers Statement presents the supposed duty of men to lead their wives as very important. It claims that neglecting or denying their duty of leadership will lead to destructive consequences in

families (Danvers Statement, Affirmation 10). But it is not legitimate to *invent* a command of God and say that it is very important for men to obey it.

When complementarians say God requires that husbands should rule their wives, or lead them, or exercise authority over them, or make decisions for them, they are adding a tradition of men to the word of God.

6) New Testament ministries of women

When discussing the ministries of women in the New Testament, the general approach of complementarian interpreters is to downgrade or minimise what the women did.

There would be much we could usefully discuss about the weakness of their interpretations. But the clearest big point is the difficulty that they have with the example of Priscilla teaching Apollos in Acts chapter 18.

They say: oh, that was just a private conversation about theology between some random believers. But if we pay attention to the context, that won't do.

If you've read the story, you'll know what happens.

A church-planting team of three people arrives in Ephesus – Paul, Priscilla and Aquila. Paul is able to share the gospel in the synagogue, and gets positive responses from Jews there. They want him to stay and continue teaching, but he decides to go travelling.

So, when he goes travelling, *who* does he leave there, to care for the new group of believers? It has to be Priscilla and Aquila. They are the two members of the team who remain.

When Apollos arrives, Priscilla and Aquila hear him speak, and are concerned. Though he is learned, and a powerful speaker, Apollos needs to understand the way of God more accurately. So Priscilla and Aquila take him aside and teach him.

Commentators in the early centuries well understood that Priscilla's name is put first, before her husband's, because she was the chief teacher (for example, Chrysostom, *Homily 30 on Romans*; Chrysostom, *First Homily on Priscilla and Aquila*).

Now, why should the powerful Apollos listen to Priscilla and Aquila or take any notice of them – especially since the chief teacher is a woman? Because they are *Paul's co-workers*, whom he left there, to teach and care for the new believers.

When they correct Apollos, that isn't just a private conversation between random believers. As the remaining members of the team, responsible for shepherding the new believers, they exercise their authority to correct him.

Luke includes this story to show how Paul extended his ministry through the male and female co-workers that he trained up. It illustrates the method that Paul describes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 (NIV):

"The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others".

7) 1 Corinthians 11

First Corinthians 11:2–16 is the difficult passage about hairstyles or head-coverings.

Paul gives some corrective instructions for both men and women, when they are leading the congregation by prophesying or by praying aloud. The Corinthians knew what went on in Corinth and what was going on in their churches, so they wouldn't have found his instructions hard to understand. But for us it is more difficult. There's a lot of debate about the background.

Complementarians use this passage in their headship theology. They assign a controversial interpretation to Paul's head metaphor in verse 3, and they add words to verse 10 and make it say the opposite of what it actually says.

In my new book, with a lot of help from Phil Payne, I offer a reading in which everything falls into place, and I list eight respects in which complementarian interpretations of this passage are in conflict with Paul's actual words.

But we don't need to go into any of that here, because the big point, again, is very simple. *However one interprets the passage, the plain and undeniable fact is that in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul places no limit on the scope of women's ministries.*

He affirms women prophesying to both men and women. He affirms women praying aloud in the presence of both men and women. He does not prohibit women from preaching, or from teaching men, or from pastoring or leading a church, or from any other ministry activity.

The complementarian restrictions on women's ministry are absent from this passage.

8) 1 Corinthians 14:34–35

These verses say three times, in three different ways, that women in the church must be completely silent.

Here's the NIV of verses 34–35:

[1] *Women should remain silent in the churches.*

[2] *They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.*

[3] *If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

(Of course, "church" doesn't mean a building; it means the gathered congregation of those who follow Jesus.)

The most notable feature of these words is that they do not state Paul's own view.

Paul has been teaching in chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 about how to regulate men's and women's vocal contributions in the gathered church, in accordance with their spiritual gifts, so that their contributions are honourable, and loving, and orderly. Women cannot make vocal contributions in accordance with their gifts if they are not allowed to speak!

Most complementarian interpreters freely accept that Paul *cannot mean* what these verses *actually say*: that women in the church must be silent and not speak.

The leading complementarian theory is that Paul only means here to forbid one particular kind of speech by women – the judging or evaluation of prophecies, which they say would contradict “male headship”. But that theory is not viable. It is in conflict with the plain words, which are emphatic and unqualified.

If the no-judging-of-prophecies theory were correct:–

- Paul misleads his listeners by plainly stating a total ban on all kinds of women’s speaking, when supposedly he only means to ban women from judging prophecies.
- He misleads his listeners some more, by repeating the total ban three times, for maximum emphasis.
- He misleads them by plainly saying that the ban on speaking applies when women are *in the church*, even though, supposedly, he only means it apply *when prophecies are being judged*.
- He irrationally includes, as his only specific example of the application of the ban, the asking of questions out of a desire to learn, which is a *different activity* from the one that he supposedly means to ban.
- He contradicts what he has just said in verse 29 about who should evaluate prophecies. In v29 he says “the others” should weigh what is said – that is, the other prophets should weigh the prophecy. The “others” are both men *and women*.
- Indeed, he contradicts the whole thrust of his teaching in chapters 11 to 14, which is that every member should contribute in the church in accordance with their spiritual gifts – which means that women with speaking gifts should use them, and should *not* remain silent.

The rule that women must not judge prophecies is not there in the text.

Here’s the big point: *looking at what those two verses plainly say, we can be confident that those two verses do not state Paul’s own view.*

There are just two realistic possibilities for understanding what is going on here.

The first realistic possibility is that he is quoting a particular group of opponents, in order to disagree with them in what he says next (in verses 36 to 40).

The second realistic possibility is that the two verses are a later addition, which came about because a comment written into the margin in an early copy got added into the main text when the letter was copied again. There are other examples of that happening in the New Testament manuscripts.

Because of the particular features of the manuscript evidence, which have to be explained, I believe the second theory is probably correct – the later addition theory.

The Danvers Statement wisely places no reliance on these two verses. That is a wise reticence, for no one has found a satisfactory way of reading them as stating Paul’s own view. That is because those verses do not state Paul’s own view.

9) 1 Timothy 2

In 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy in Ephesus, with instructions about dealing with false teaching and the fall-out from it.

The favourite English version of the Bible for complementarians is the ESV. In the ESV, 1 Timothy 2:12 says:

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.”

This verse is massively important in complementarian thinking, as justifying general restrictions on the ministries of women.

The next two verses – verses 13 and 14 – mention Adam and Eve. Complementarian interpretations of verse 12 understand Paul to be stating a *general rule of conduct* – a rule which is based on *God’s will as revealed in Genesis*, in the story of Adam and Eve. They believe Paul is referring to a creation principle of male-over-female authority.

There is an important debate over whether Paul is really referring here to a *creation principle* or whether, in fact, he refers to the story of Adam and Eve to prompt Timothy to use it *as an illustration* of the danger of a deceived woman teaching a man.

There’s also an important debate about whether “exercise authority” is a correct translation. In my view, a better translation would be “overpower” or “overmaster”.

There’s also an important debate about the singular “woman” in verses 11 and 12. Is this a particular individual in Ephesus, whom Paul doesn’t want to name, or is he making some kind of generic statement? If he’s making a generic statement, who are the women who constitute the genus? Is it *all women*, or is it *some particular rich women* that he has just been talking about in verses 9 and 10?

There’s also an important debate about why the word “man” is in the singular in verse 12. Complementarians say it is OK for a woman to teach *a man*, as Priscilla did, but that women shouldn’t teach *groups of men* – which isn’t what Paul says.

But for present purposes, our big point is in the short phrase in verse 12: “I do not permit”.

In Greek, that’s just two words: *ouk epitrepō*, which could be translated either as “I do not permit” or as “I am not permitting”, depending on context.

I think “I am not permitting” fits the context better, but let’s stick with the ESV “I do not permit”.

This little phrase, “I do not permit” or *ouk epitrepō* sets up an insuperable roadblock to the complementarian interpretation. That is because Paul’s phrase is a conspicuous indication that he is *not* stating a general rule based on obedience to God’s revealed will.

Let me explain.

According to complementarian male-headship theology, Paul is saying it is wrong for a woman to exercise authority over a man (v. 12) *because* God created Adam before Eve (v. 13), and this sequence of creation is taken to imply that, by God’s design, it is wrong for women to have authority over men. It follows that to violate God’s creation design of male-over-female authority is to disobey God’s revealed will for men and women.

To disobey God’s revealed will is *sin*. To do so knowingly is *rebellion* against God. Accordingly, the Danvers Statement says that it is *sinful* for women to “resist limitations on their roles” (Danvers Statement, Affirmation 4).

But if Paul is speaking of something that is sinfully disobedient to God’s revealed will, how are we to explain Paul’s choice of words? Paul cannot give or withhold permission to sin, to disobey God, to

rebel. The nature of the rule, which complementarians say Paul is stating, is inconsistent with Paul's choice of words "I do not permit" or *ouk epitrepō*.

Imagine yourself as a prominent Christian leader, teaching – let's say – the sanctity of human life and the sinfulness of murder, and supporting your teaching from Genesis because humans are made in the image of God, as it says in Genesis 1:26–27, and again in Genesis 5:3, and again in Genesis 9:6. Can you seriously imagine saying or writing: "*I do not permit* murder, for God made humans in his image"?

It is hard to imagine even the Pope speaking in such a way. That is because it is not your decision (or the Pope's) whether murder is right or wrong, and it is not up to you (or the Pope) to either permit or not permit it. Murder is against God's revealed will for human beings. To disobey God's revealed will is sin.

If for some reason you were determined to use the word "permit" to express the prohibition, you would convey that it is a general rule by depersonalising it, as in "God's word does not permit murder" or "It is not permitted to murder".

The example of murder is convenient because of the connection with Genesis. Murder, of course, is an extreme case. But whether a sin against God's revealed will is greater or lesser, the point is the same.

Now I acknowledge that Paul is writing his letter as an apostle, exercising his spiritual authority over a church which he personally built up. But even so, if Paul is meaning to express a creation-based prohibition, reflecting God's revealed will for men and women, which it is sinful and rebellious to disobey, his language of personally withholding permission is exceedingly odd. Indeed, it is so completely inappropriate that it is hard to find words which sufficiently express its strangeness.

As a pastor, you wouldn't say to your flock "*I don't permit* you to commit adultery" or "*I'm not permitting* you to steal".

The Bible is a big library of books, and it contains many general rules of conduct, but – unsurprisingly – there is nowhere in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, where someone states a general prohibition of wrong conduct with the expression '*I do not permit*' or '*I am not permitting*'. This is absolutely unprecedented.

What do complementarian scholars say in answer to this fundamental objection? How do they explain such an unprecedented and unsuitable choice of words for a supposedly general prohibition based on God's creation design for men and women?

I've surveyed the writings of complementarian scholars, and Mike Winger's videos, and I haven't been able to find an answer. (See endnote.)¹

The complementarian interpretation doesn't fit Paul's words.

The natural explanation for Paul's choice of words is that he is *not* expressing a general rule of conduct, a general prohibition; instead, he is imposing a restriction on a particular group of deceived women, to limit the impact of false teachings.

As Tim Mascara has put it, 1 Timothy 2 is not a blueprint; it's a bandage <https://timmascara.substack.com/p/reading-1-timothy-together-part-1>.

10) 1 Timothy 3 AND Titus 1

Paul provides lists of qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and in Titus 1:5–9.

Some reputable complementarian scholars acknowledge that these lists do not clearly exclude women. But others argue that the lists do exclude women because Paul includes in the lists a phrase which can be translated literally as “a one-woman man”. That’s found in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6. This phrase is variously translated as “the husband of only one wife”, “faithful to his wife”, “married only once”, “faithful to their spouse”, “faithful in marriage”.

The list in 1 Timothy 3 goes on to refer to the candidate’s household, and both lists refer to the candidate’s children.

There is an important discussion to be had over whether Paul is using male language generically in 1 Timothy 3:2 and in Titus 1:6 to indicate qualities that apply to both men and women.

We could also discuss the translation options for the word that introduces the lists – *dei* – which could mean “it is necessary” or could mean “it is fitting”.

And there’s an important discussion to be had about the real-life background:

- if there were already exceptions to men’s leadership in the Old Testament, and if there were already exceptions in wider society, and if Jesus’ and the apostles’ attitude to women was more positive than prevailing culture, and if women received and exercised the gifts of the Spirit, and if there were prominent women in the churches such as Priscilla, and Junia, and Lydia, and Nympha, and Phoebe, and so on, then – if there was to be a rule that eldership in the churches was forbidden to all women – it would need to be stated very clearly, so that there could be no possible doubt of it.

But here’s our big point. The critical question is this: Is Paul giving *indications of fitting candidates* for Timothy and Titus to consider, or is he laying down *mandatory qualifications* which are essential in all cases if a person is to be regarded as fit to be an elder in God’s church? *Our big point is that it makes no sense to read these lists as lists of mandatory qualifications.*

Remember that in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul wrote about the advantages of singleness for doing the Lord’s work. The result of the mandatory-qualifications reading would be that Paul himself would be regarded as *unfit* to be a local church elder, because he didn’t have a wife, and he didn’t have a household, and he didn’t have children. And the same would apply even to the Lord Jesus himself, who did not have a wife, or a household, or children. That would be an absurd conclusion.

The lists are not general mandatory requirements; they are indicators of likely candidates, suitable to the circumstances.

If the lists cannot properly be used to definitely exclude people who don’t have a spouse or children or a household, they cannot properly be used to definitely exclude women.

Our reading of the lists as indicators, suitable to the circumstances, is confirmed by the differences between the two lists. For example, the church in Ephesus is well established, so Paul is able to say in 1 Tim 3:6 that the candidate should *not be new convert*. But the churches in Crete where Titus needs to get elders appointed are new, so there is *no such requirement* in Paul’s letter to Titus, since that would prevent any appointments being made.

THE TWO BIGGEST POINTS

Now, from what we've covered, let's pick out the two biggest points.

Our choice of the two biggest points arises from what complementarians themselves see as central to their position.

Undoubtedly, the most important text for complementarian restrictions on women's ministry is 1 Timothy 2:12. Its centrality is often emphasized, both by scholars and by popular teachers. So, for example, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, George Knight says that verse 12 is the "clearest statement" which "insists on men being the primary leaders in the church" (1991 print, page 359). Mike Winger in his Women in Ministry video series says 1 Timothy 2 is the "most clear" passage limiting women's leadership in the Church (Part 12, *ALL The Debates over 1 Tim 2:11–15* at 0hr 1min and at 9hr 0min to 1 min).

So, I find it rather stunning that complementarian writers and speakers have no answer for our big point on verse 12: the problem that "*I do not permit*" is not the way to introduce a general rule of conduct which supposedly reflects God's revealed will – a general rule which it would be sinful to disobey.

If this is a general rule from God, then it is *God* who does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man – not *Paul*!

Complementarians insist that this *is* the kind of rule we have here – a general rule made by God. But then for Paul to say "*I do not permit*" makes no sense. How can this be Paul's policy decision, if it is God's rule?

Complementarians see this supposed rule in 1 Timothy 2:12, which limits women's teaching and authority, as *an extension from a more basic rule of male-over-female authority*. Because Adam was formed first, somehow it follows that men are responsible to exercise authority over their wives and over women. The second of our two biggest points is the most important of all, because it *goes to the root of this more basic rule*.

Our most important point is the complete absence from Scripture of any godly teaching, addressed to men, which says that ruling over women is what men ought to do.

John Piper is one of the main architects of complementarianism, alongside Wayne Grudem. He believes that the Danvers Statement is "prophetic" and that it "confronts men who are unwilling to lead their wives" (Piper, 'The Current State of Complementarity', Desiring God website, 2022). According to Piper, if a husband fails to provide spiritual leadership to his wife, this is "a devastating sin" (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 1991 print, page 44).

But if neglecting men's supposed duty to lead wives or women is a devastating sin, why from Genesis to Revelation does no prophet or teacher explicitly instruct men that they have such a duty?

Paul didn't say it. Peter didn't say it. Jesus didn't say it. God has not said it.

A red flag

To finish, I'd like to mention something that I bring out in my book *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women*.

Let's remind ourselves that there *is* one place in the Bible where someone gives a command that men should rule over women. It's in the book of Esther, and it was not given by the true God or on his behalf.

It originated from pagan "wise men". The command was issued by an enraged and vindictive pagan king. His queen had bravely refused his drunken order that she be treated as an object by being put on display at his state banquet, to be ogled by his inebriated guests.

In Esther 1:22, King Xerxes' command is that every man should be ruler over his own household, meaning in particular that every man should rule over his wife (see verses 16–20).

After the king's rage subsided, he occupied himself in an institutionalised form of sexual predation. Physically attractive virgins were seized for him from every province of his realm. Then each night he would rape a young woman, a virgin, whom he would afterwards discard into the section of his harem for used goods – not to be seen again unless called for (Esther 2).

Such was the man who gave this command. A pagan, a serial rapist, a loathsome sexual predator, is the *only* person in the Bible who commands men to exercise authority over women.

A clearer red flag is hard to imagine.

His base misuse of male power is a grim confirmation of God's warning in Genesis 3:16. The rule of men over women is the result of human disobedience. It is not a command from God to men.

Explore Further

For more on the traditional majority view of women's inferiority, and its rejection, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapter 2.

For more on the complementarian concept of "roles", see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapter 7.

For more on Genesis 2 and 3, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 5 and 6.

For more on women in the Old Testament, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 7 and 8.

For more on Jesus, the Twelve, and the Gospels, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 3 and 4.

For more on 1 Corinthians 7, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapter 9.

For more on Ephesians 5, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 10 and 11.

For more on 1 Peter, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapter 12.

For more on the New Testament ministries of women, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 13 to 17.

For more on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 18 to 20.

For more on 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 21 and 22.

For more on 1 Timothy 2, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapters 23 to 29.

For more on elders' qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1, see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapter 30.

If you are concerned about the impact of culture on interpreting the Bible, and about “slippery slopes” (where one change of view leads to another), see *True Complementarity: The way of Christ for men and women* (Apollos, 2026), chapter 31.

CONTACT US

Please send us your questions or comments by using the contact form.

Notes

1. For absence of explanation, see Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* 1981: 200–2; *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 1991: 180–1 (Moo); Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* 1992: 140; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* 2000: 120–3; Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* 2004: 65–9, 299–302; Blomberg, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* 2005: 168; Sandom, *Different by Design* 2012: 154–60; Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman* 2014: 205–12; *Women in The Church* 3rd edn: 155–61 (Köstenberger), 188–90 (Schreiner); Smith, *God's Good Design* 2019: ch. 2; Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 2nd edn 2020: 1152, 1161; DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church* 2021: 79–80; Kuruvilla, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 2021: sections 4.2.1–2. Yarbrough (*The Letters to Timothy and Titus* 2018: 175) while not tackling the difficulty head-on, says that Paul's governing phrase is “a tactful way of reminding Timothy of the division of labor that obtained in the congregational worship setting”. But this is unconvincing. If it was Paul's standard practice to prohibit teaching by women, there would be no sensitivity in reminding Timothy of it. For comparison, it was his standard practice to condemn sexual immorality, but one cannot seriously imagine him writing to Timothy, to be tactful: “I do not permit sexual immorality.” Moreover, in this letter, Paul's tactfulness is in not naming the misbehaving rich women, while he is consistently quite direct towards Timothy (see 1:3, 18–19; 3:15; 4:6–7, 11–16; 5:1, 21–23; 6:2, 11–14, 20–21). In n. 309 Yarbrough gives two references where “permit” is used, and these underline the difficulty: (1) in 1 Cor. 14:34, “it is not permitted” is a third-person passive, which is apt for stating a general rule laid down by a competent authority, unlike “I do not permit”; (2) in 1 Cor. 16:7 Paul says he hopes to visit the Corinthians at some point “if the Lord permits” – which the Lord may do at one time and not at another time. I raised this “I do not permit” problem in Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* 2019: 220. So far as I am aware, no complementarian reviewing or engaging with my book has offered an answer. Someone may point to how the Pharisees speak in Mark 10:4 (“Moses permitted to write a certificate of divorce”) and Jesus in Matt. 19:8 (“because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce”). The reference is to the effect of the regulation in the Mosaic law in Deut. 24:1–4 which forbade a man who divorced his wife to remarry her later; this implied that divorce was tolerated, and Jesus says why this was so. But here “Moses” is an abbreviated expression meaning “the law of Moses”, and these texts do not use the first person (“I permit”). Indeed, Moses' law does not anywhere say “I permit” or “I do not permit”, nor does even Jesus himself ever use any such expression when stating a rule of conduct.