



**WHAT WE BELIEVE
ABOUT GENDER
COMPLEMENTARITY**

commongroundchurch
sea point

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY

Questions around men and women abound in our culture and so it is helpful for us to have a grasp on what God says about the beauty and goodness of men and women, their distinctions and their complementarity. Although we have other papers that address niche questions, they are not the starting point for this topic, but part of a larger tapestry. With an aim at helping us get a grasp on God's vision for gender complementarity, we would commend the following essay to our people written by Andrew Wilson who is an apostolic and theological voice in our church community.

**Beautiful Difference:
The (Whole-Bible) Complementarity of Male and Female
by Andrew Wilson**

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and empty (tohu wa'bohu), and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God separated the light from the darkness, the day from the night, the waters above from the waters beneath, the sea from the land. He distinguished between the sun and the moon, fish and birds, livestock and creeping things and wild animals. As he breathed his life into human beings who bear his image, he differentiated between males and females. He marked off the days of work from the day of rest, Cain from Abel, the holy from the common. God's work of creation is, among other things, a series of distinctions that bring order to what is formless (tohu), and life to what is empty (bohu). The Jewish Havdalah prayer which ends the Sabbath puts it like this: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who distinguishes between sacred and profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the other nations, between the seventh day and the six days of labour."

Complementarity—"a relationship or situation in which two or more different things improve or emphasize each other's qualities"—is written into creation. There is a fit, a mutual enhancement, a beautiful difference, at the heart of what God has made. The cosmos is made up of all kinds of complementary pairs, with male and female serving as a paradigmatic examples: that is why cosmological complementarity is reflected in some human languages (der Tag / die Nacht, le ciel / la terre, el sol / la luna, and so on). The Jewish-Christian vision of sexual complementarity, as such, reflects our vision of cosmological complementarity—and ultimately, behind it, the beautiful difference between Creator and Creation, God and Israel, Christ and Church, Lamb and Bride.

NOT IDENTICAL, NOT TOTALLY DIFFERENT

Complementarity is thus markedly different from two other ways of thinking about the relations of created things. On the one hand, Jews and Christians do not believe that males and females are identical. We are not exactly the same, any more than are heaven and earth, or day and night. Genesis 1 is a story of order and life coming through separation, distinction, and two-ism rather than one-ism. When the distinctions collapse, there is no life. Life comes through beautiful differences: when the heavens interact with the earth, in the form of sun and rain and soil, you get plants and animals, whereas identical pairs are as barren as a cave (earth above and the earth beneath) or Jupiter (sky above and the sky beneath). Given the connections between sexual and cosmological complementarity, it is not surprising that abolishing the distinction between heaven and earth is connected to abolishing the distinction between male and female.

A comic example is provided by the contrast between the Jewish Jesus, reflected in the four Gospels, and the Gnostic Jesus we find in the Gospel of Thomas. The real Jesus is clear in his response to the Pharisees' question on divorce: "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?" (Matt 19:4). The Gnostic Jesus sounds as flowery and incoherent in his blurring of distinctions as his modern counterparts do: "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and the above like the below—that is, to make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female will not be female—and when you make eyes instead of an eye and a hand instead of a hand and a foot instead of a foot, an image instead of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom]" (Thom 22). Without distinctions, creation collapses into a squishy mess. Complementarity is not identity.

On the other hand, nor do Jews and Christians believe in the alterity of male and female, as if we are thoroughly different sorts of beings. We are not wholly same, but neither are we wholly other—and we must be careful that in our bid to ensure that sex distinctions are not erased, we do not cause them to be exaggerated. 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, and in Christ, the divisions that do exist within our shared humanity come crashing down: Jews are reconciled with Gentiles, masters serve their slaves, and males and females are united in Christ and made heirs together of the gift of life.

For a number of philosophers, both ancient and modern, the differences between males and females do not express complementarity and harmony, but otherness and conflict. Men and women are destined to strive with one another for mastery, not just at an individual level, but within civilisations as a whole: Western thought is male, linear, climactic and ordered, and involves imposing power over creation, while Eastern thought is female, curved, cyclical and chaotic, and involves surrendering to creation. This might sound familiar, even Christian, to some of us. But if we look closer we can see that it is not one of complementarity but of alterity: of absolute difference, or otherness.

It is framed in terms of conflict, triumph, competition, opposition, rivalry, and even violence. There is no peace between heaven and earth, or between male and female. There is no love.

In the pagan vision of identity, there is union without distinction; in the deist vision of alterity, there is a distinction without a union. But in the Christian vision of complementarity, there is union and distinction, same and other, many and one. In Christianity, male and female bear the image of God together, with neither male nor female able to fully express it without the other, and the clear distinctions that exist within creation are ultimately reconciled within the life of the Triune God (in whom we find identity and alterity, sameness and otherness, one and three) and in the incarnation (in which heaven meets earth and Word becomes flesh).

Before the world is created, we do not have primordial strife and violence, but perichoretic peace and joy within the Trinity. Our future hope is one in which heaven and earth come together, with the glory of the one transforming the other (which is why most of the pairs of Genesis 1 find themselves transcended in Revelation 21: there is no moon, no need for the sun, no sea, no darkness, no sexual intercourse, and heaven and earth are beautifully married.) The final destiny of the cosmos, and the marriage of Christ and the Church, reflect neither conflict nor collapse but complementarity, as the glory of the one permeates and suffuses the other. Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!

COMPLEMENTARITY AND CREATION

Given this theological framework, it should not be surprising that men and women are strikingly different in all sorts of ways that transcend cultural variations. Not only do these differences not disappear in purportedly sex-neutral societies; there is evidence to suggest that some of them actually increase, as people are freed to do what they actually want to do. (To take one widely reported example, differences in mental rotation between men and women are higher in countries with greater sexual equality.) The bell curves for men and women are centred in different places, and not just for obvious physical traits (height, strength, hair, and so on), but also for hormonal, psychological and interpersonal ones.

Men are typically more aggressive, competitive, fearless, likely to take risks, promiscuous and prone to violence than women, and testosterone is aligned with higher levels of confidence, sex drive and status assertion. Women are, on average, more prone to neuroticism and agreeableness than men. Consequently, men are generally clustered at the upper and lower extremes of society: men are not just more likely to be very rich or very powerful (which prompts all sorts of public debate), but also far more likely to be criminals, killers, homeless, excluded or imprisoned (which doesn't).

Male groups are more characterised by sparring, fighting, power structures and banter, while female groups are typically smaller, more indirect in confrontation, egalitarian in structure, verbally dextrous, and oriented around people rather than things.

Gendered trends can be noticed before children are particularly aware of which sex they are (to take a tragic example, 40 of 43 serious shootings by toddlers in 2015 were by boys), and even in our closest animal relatives (the male preference for trucks over dolls extends to rhesus and vervet monkeys). Julia Turner, the editor of Slate, commented recently that the boyishness of her twin sons had provided a significant challenge to her commitment to gender as a social construct, offering the fascinating remark that despite her egalitarian bona fides, “There’s a there there.” To which ethicist Christina Hoff Sommers mischievously responded in *The Federalist*: “Indeed there is. And it takes a liberal arts degree not to see it.”

I mention all this not to validate any or all of these differences as if science somehow renders them virtuous, let alone to excuse the male propensity to promiscuity and violence. I mention it for four reasons.

One: complementarity appears to be hardwired into us as human beings, even from the perspective of mainstream secular scientific and sociological research. The vast majority of human societies have known this intuitively, but in a culture like ours, where most of us have never fought for our homeland, died in childbirth, gone down the mines or settled on a frontier, it has become forgotten. Facts, however, are stubborn things.

Two: there is an interesting correspondence between many of these traits and the sorts of things we would expect to find if Genesis 1-4 was true, and the man (adamah = “earth”) had been given the task of guarding the garden against attack, and the woman (havah = “life”) had been identified as the mother of all living.

Three: at a pastoral level, it can be reassuring to hear that we are not imagining it when we observe, as we all do, that men and women are generally predisposed to different sorts of sins or weaknesses (#MeToo #ToxicMasculinity #HeForShe etc), and disciple people accordingly.

And four: it also sheds interesting light on the (very obvious) biological differences between men and women, and their significance. Imagine an alien visiting earth, and discovering that one sex was taller, stronger and hairier than the other, with sexual organs which were external and faced outwards, while the smaller partner’s sexual organs were internal, and served as the location of both sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Then imagine them discovering that generally speaking, one was better at forming relationships, holding small groups together and working with people, while the other was more suited to an external agency, risk-taking and working with things. Finally, imagine them being introduced to biblical categories for describing the sexes: towers and cities, warriors and gardens, priests and temples, the blood-spattered groom and the pure spotless bride. Which would our alien think was which?

COMPLEMENTARITY AND FAMILY

Christians are called to express the complementarity of males and females in this present age. This is not just a matter of obedience to specific biblical instructions—although that should be enough!—but as a way of putting beautiful difference on display for a world that needs to see it and rarely does. So when the world asks, “What do you mean when you say that God is neither distant from us (like Islam says) nor collapsible into us (like paganism says)?”, the relationship between men and women is our go-to illustration. And the primary context in which it is displayed is the family.

The most obvious form of this is marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32). In marriage, husbands and wives play the parts of Christ and the church, demonstrating what love, fidelity, difference, union, sacrificial leadership and mutual service look like in practice. The husband should love his wife as a head loves its body and Christ loves the church: by giving himself up for her, sanctifying her with the water of the word, and presenting her in splendour. (It is significant that Paul pictures the husband as engaged in traditionally feminine tasks like washing, cleaning and ironing here: Paul is knowingly and deliberately subverting the Greco-Roman picture of what male headship looks like.) The wife, correspondingly, should submit to and respect her husband as the church submits to Christ.

Is the submission one-way here, or are husbands and wives called to submit to one another? Paul has just described the Spirit-filled church as a place of “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21); he then unpacks that description for a standard ancient household, applying it to husbands and wives, fathers and children, and slaves and masters. Does the mutuality of submission (5:21) override any differences in the way that submission is expressed (5:22-6:9)? Or does Paul mean that only wives, children and slaves are to submit (to husbands, fathers and masters, respectively)?

The answer, in all probability, is neither of these: wives and husbands are called to submit to each other—as indeed are parents and children, masters and slaves—but not in identical ways. Christ and the church serve each other, but we do not do so in the same fashion: Christ serves us by dying and rising to rescue us, and we serve him by responding in faith to his leadership. (Both of us offer ourselves as a sacrifice for the other, of course, but in very different ways; if we were to conflate the two then the entire gospel would unravel.) Tom Wright puts it well: “Paul assumes, as do most cultures, that there are significant differences between men and women, differences that go far beyond mere biological and reproductive function. Their relations and roles must therefore be mutually complementary, rather than identical. Equality in voting rights, and employment opportunities and remuneration (which is still not a reality in many places), should not be taken to imply such identity.

And, within marriage, the guideline is clear. The husband is to take the lead—though he is to do so fully mindful of the self-sacrificial model which the Messiah has provided. As soon as ‘taking the lead’ becomes bullying or arrogant, the whole thing collapses.”

However, we would be mistaken to think that complementarity is limited to marriage. If it were, then anyone who is single, bereaved, divorced or abandoned would be unable to fully reflect what femaleness or maleness is. (The fact that a significant number of such people in our churches feel that way is an indication that we have some work to do here). In Scripture, however, male and female go all the way down: mothers are different from fathers, brothers are different from sisters, grandmothers are different from grandfathers, and so on. I have an obligation to protect my mother and my sisters in a way that does not extend to my father or my brother. Yet this does not imply that I am in authority over them, that I make decisions for them, or that they cannot be in authority over me. (My little sister runs an Accident and Emergency department in a London hospital. If our children have an accident, I do every single thing she says, no questions asked.)

Paul’s instructions to Timothy, likewise, assume sexual differentiation in his interactions with people in the family of God: “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” (1 Tim 5:1-2). So with my relatives, in my church family, in the workplace, and even on social media, I am to interact with older women specifically as mothers, and with older men specifically as fathers, not as gender-neutral units or sexless atomised workers. (This principle will apply differently in different contexts, of course; in the West, I would happily have my sister as a manager, authority figure or even Head of State, while in Yemen I might be cautious about eating in public with her.) Similarly, the way I interact with single men who live with our family is different in important ways from the way I interact with single women. And in case it needs saying, if we limit the scope of “treat younger women as sisters” to “just make sure you don’t have sex with them”, we miss Paul’s meaning here by a country mile.

COMPLEMENTARITY AND THE CHURCH

When we turn to the church, it is remarkably easy to forget this wider canvas of theology and anthropology, and get lost in the exegetical weeds over the meaning of *hupotassō* or *authentēō* or whatever it is. All of us, in the end, have to come to conclusions about the meaning of specific texts, and the way in which we will apply them in the local church. But the case for male eldership does not start there. It starts from the twin observations a) that elders are fundamentally guardians of the church, and b) that in every phase of redemptive history—from the garden to the tabernacle, to the temple, to the ministry of Jesus, to the New Testament church, and on into the eschaton—the individual(s) charged with guarding the people of God and protecting her from harm have been men.

It is widely accepted that the New Testament terms elders, shepherds and overseers are largely interchangeable (Acts 20:17-38; Tit 1:5-9; 1 Pet 5:1-4), and each of those terms evokes the responsibility of serving the church by protecting and guarding her against harm. Elders, biblically speaking, are guardians. Take each of these biblical words in turn.

SHEPHERD/PASTOR

The primary reason a shepherd (or “pastor”) exists is to protect the sheep from harm. Yes, he leads them into new pastures and prepares food and water for them, but the primary reason you employ a shepherd in the ancient world, rather than allowing the sheep to wander freely, is for protection: from injury, robbers, dispersal, wolves, and other wild animals. This comes through clearly in the key New Testament texts, in which shepherds lay down their lives for the sheep, and watch over the flock of God, whom he bought with his own blood; it also builds on the Old Testament imagery, in which shepherds, like David, are those who kill lions and bears in defence of their flocks, hold rods and staffs to guard them, and are called to protect their sheep rather than eat them. Shepherding spiritually, as physically, involves both protecting weak or injured sheep, and guarding the whole flock against enemies who would attack them.

OVERSEER/BISHOP

The English word “overseer” is a very literal translation of episkopos, and is certainly preferable to “bishop” given the resonances that word has, but it still conjures up images of call centre supervisors or at least a more managerial role. In Koine Greek, however, it had the sense of “guardian.” It may have been heard more like Ezekiel’s skopos (= watchman), which is how Calvin read it: elders are the “faithful watchmen” who “watch and take care of the flock, while other men sleep.” The language here is of being a lookout more than a line manager, a sentry more than a supervisor. The overseer’s role, of course, was the preservation of sound doctrine in the church, and this is what led to the distinction between bishops and elders in the late first century.

ELDER

The same is true, perhaps surprisingly, of elders. Greg Beale makes the point that the purpose of elders in the New Testament is to preserve the church during the eschatological tribulation. The period between Pentecost and parousia is marked by deception, false teaching, persecution and suffering, and the requirements for elders in the Pastorals should be seen against this backdrop: the guarding of the church so that she is not destroyed. To these references Beale adds not just [Acts 20](#), as we have seen, but also Paul’s first apostolic journey, in which he and Barnabas teach the disciples that “through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God” (14:22), and then immediately appoint elders in every church (14:23) as if this (eldership) is the solution to the problem (tribulations). Throughout church history, there have been persecutions in which bishops/presbyters/elders have died on behalf of the churches they serve. The same dynamic exists today—it is the elders who have been arrested in East Ukraine, for example—as hostile authorities target church leaders rather than congregations.

(Gregory the Great put it beautifully in the sixth century, commenting on Paul's statement that aspiring to an oversight was a noble thing: "Nevertheless it is to be noted that this was said at a time when whoever was set over people was usually the first to be led to the torments of martyrdom.") To the three Ds that many of us have used to summarise the responsibilities of eldership—doctrine, discipline, direction—we should perhaps add a fourth: death.

Taking these three words together leads to a clear conclusion: elders are guardians. And no sooner have we noticed that than we notice that in every period of biblical history, those charged with defending and protecting the people and/or the sanctuary of God are men rather than women, fathers rather than mothers.

Adam is put in the garden "to serve it and guard it" (Gen 2:15; the same pair of verbs is used by the Levites in Num 3:7-8; 18:7). Consequently, when the fall happens, it is his responsibility, and it is Adam rather than Eve in whom we all die. The patriarchs, obviously, are all men. 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 a sufficient zeal for Yahweh to kill their fellow Israelites (Ex 32:25-29). This remains true through the period of the first temple when there is a male priesthood operating alongside a male monarchy in Judah (Athaliah is never called a "queen" or given any legitimacy by the writer, and as such is the exception that proves the rule). It remains true through the second temple period, right up until the days of Zechariah and John the Baptist. Jesus calls twelve apostles who are all men, and gives them the responsibility of binding and loosing, teaching and governing the worldwide church. The qualifications for overseers in the New Testament church, the elder-shepherd-watchmen commissioned with protecting the church from wolves and false shepherds, are directed to men. And 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.

FATHERS AND BROTHERS

Because the eldership qualifications form part of this much larger biblical pattern, it is no surprise to find that overseers are assumed to be men, and in fact, required to be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2). This is hardly a sex-neutral requirement; 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. So is the requirement to lead his household well and keep his children submissive (3:4). So is the requirement to be able to teach (3:2), given that 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). So is the fact that Paul, after giving the qualifications for overseers and deacons, gives qualifications for "women" (3:11); whether we see this as a reference to women who serve as deacons (as I do) or the wives of deacons (like some interpreters), it clearly distinguishes between "overseers," "deacons" and "women/wives," making it almost impossible for Paul to have considered the latter to be a subset of the former.

As such, 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.

Occasionally the case is made that overseers/elders have to be men in this particular church, but not in others because the heresy afflicting the church is coming through wealthy and influential women. Quite apart from the fact that the only named false teachers in Ephesus are men (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17), this argument ignores the fact that the same requirement is applied to elders on an island several hundred miles away: “if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination” (Tit 1:6). Paul’s eldership qualifications are not limited to a specific situation in Ephesus; they are virtually identical in Crete, and presumably everywhere else. Elders—like Adam, the Levitical priests, Israel’s kings, the Twelve, and everyone charged with protecting the people of God from harm in Scripture—are men.

MOTHERS AND SISTERS

On the other hand, there is another way of telling the biblical story, which needs to be emphasised as well. Christ is identified as the seed of the woman, long before he is referred to as the seed of a man (Gen 3:15). Eve, far from being inferior to Adam (in Scripture the word *ezer*, or “helper”, is most commonly applied to God himself), is actually the one whose faith is associated with that promise coming to pass (Gen 4:1, 25). Women in the patriarchal period hear from and talk to God, and frequently outmanoeuvre their foolish husbands, sons or both (Sarai, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel). A slave woman is the first and only person in Scripture to name God (Gen 16:13).

Numerous stories of redemption in the Bible begin with women—Eve, Hagar, Leah, Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam, Samson’s mother, Ruth, Hannah, Esther, Elizabeth, and Mary—while Israel is being oppressed by foolish or evil men. Women judge Israel (Deborah) and win military victories (Jael). Women save their husbands (Abigail), their children (Jochebed), their city (the Tekoite woman) and their nation (Esther). Women prophesy (Huldah, Philip’s daughters), compose psalms and songs which appear in Scripture (Hannah, Mary), explain the word of God to men (Priscilla), host churches (Chloe), run businesses (Lydia), serve as deacons and patrons (Phoebe), co-labour with Paul in the gospel (Euodia, Syntyche), and are identified as apostles (Junia). And if there is a greater responsibility in human history than carrying the Messiah in your womb, I would like to hear about it.

In each of these cases, the women in question serve God’s people specifically as women. Many are described as mothers, sisters, or daughters. There is no blurring of the sexes in these stories as if men and women are interchangeable in the parts they play (“women can do anything men can do”). Sometimes Galatians 3:28 is given this sort of spin as if it was essentially a good statement of second-wave feminism *avant la lettre*.

But Paul is not blurring the distinction between the sexes here, or even making a point about leadership offices in the church; he is insisting that all of us are equally children of God on the basis of faith, regardless of sex, ethnicity or social status. Interestingly, the very next chapter is among the most sexed passages in all of Paul (sons, father, Son, born of woman, Abba Father, in the anguish of childbirth, slave woman, free woman, the Jerusalem above is our mother, etc), revealing the extent to which biological sex still matters, even as it doesn't in any way impinge on our status as justified, baptised, adopted children of God.

Rather, 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. As such, the women of Scripture debunk not just the identity of men and women (as if there are no sex distinctions at all), but also the alterity of men and women (as if men are doing all the important things and women are essentially passive observers). They present us with a vision of genuine complementarity in which men need women, and women need men, and the image of God is expressed as both serve together. Remove either, or diminish the value of either, and we are all impoverished. The church is a family, and we will only flourish to the extent that we value, honour and esteem both mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters.

True complementarity, then, is actually the basis for equipping and releasing women into ministry, rather than (as it has often become) an obstacle to it. Romans 16 is a great provocation here: it is hard to imagine a young woman in the church in Rome lamenting the lack of female role models in Christian service. She could look at Phoebe, a deacon who is a patron of many; Prisca, who risked her neck for Paul's life, and co-host of a house church; Mary, "who has worked hard for you"; Junia, a fellow prisoner of Paul's and noteworthy among the apostles; Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord; Rufus's mother, "who has been a mother to me as well"; and several others. Women comprise nearly half of the named individuals in this chapter. One of the downsides of championing eldership while (often) failing to appoint or recognise deacons—and there are several—is that of implying that serious Christian ministry, and the vast majority of our leadership development opportunities, formal ministry roles and salaries, are basically for men. If we do this while making all our major decisions in male-only groups, and keeping gifted women at a distance out of concern for purity and/or collegiality in our teams, we can end up replacing the glorious complementarity of Romans 16 with a jobs-for-the-boys environment in which women can serve as kids workers or backing singers, but not much else. We need to do better.

CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES

Three contextual factors in particular have made this more difficult for us. One is the cultural milieu of North American evangelicalism, in which (for better or worse) most of our theological influencers are situated. Both the conservative idyll of the 1950s and the progressive idyll of the 1960s loom larger in the US than elsewhere, and the discussion about men and women in the church has become intertwined with all sorts of other conversations about tradition, social change, order, race relations, sexuality, guns, abortion, economics and politics.

The last three decades have seen two multi-author volumes on the subject from opposite sides, both deeply rooted in the American intramural debate; I doubt I am unique in finding myself disagreeing with much of the exegesis of one, and disagreeing with much of the application of the other. (Nor, I suspect, am I unique in finding it amusing that one was published in blue and the other in peach.) That cultural context, in which the question of who serves as an elder is connected to questions about who speaks publicly in a church meeting, who makes decisions, who administers the sacraments and even who drives the family car, simply does not translate well into other parts of the world. At times, it has made us so concerned to stand our ground against the cultural tide that we have overcorrected and found ourselves in extrabiblical (or even unbiblical) territory: reading post-war middle America into the New Testament, demeaning our sisters, dismissing those who disagree with us as liberals, and defending heterodox views of the Trinity.

Another complication, especially in the West, is the tendency to see and organise the church in increasingly corporate rather than familial terms. In a family, everyone knows that both mothers and fathers have vital roles to play in leading together, and at the same time that there are some things which Mum does and some things which Dad does. In many cultures, it is common for a family to be headed by a husband/father who is ultimately responsible for the protection of the home, yet the vast majority of decisions are made by a wife/mother. In a business or corporate environment, however, esteem and honour are not attributed that way: they come through position, line management, public profile, financial oversight, formal authority and salary. So if, despite our theology, the church actually functions more like a corporation than a family—and there are all sorts of reasons why that may creep in—it is easy to see how our practice of complementarity could be reduced to who is called what sits where speaks when manages whom and is paid how much.

THE CHURCH IS A FAMILY, NOT A BUSINESS

This is what makes it so crucial that we practise what we preach in the church as a family. To deny that women 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. But for that to be grounded in reality, it is vital that the church is not just said to be a family, but seen to be a family; that we recognise fathers and mothers and honour and revere them as such, rather than (as can easily happen) operating with a fundamentally corporate model in which women are simply excluded from all the key positions or discussions. Application on this point will obviously vary widely according to culture, context, church size, ways of expressing family, and so on—and it will require the wisdom of both men and women to establish best practice!—but my guess is that it is an area on which those of us in the West have much to learn from our Majority World brothers and sisters. It may even be an opportunity for beautiful differences.