

Rethinking Complementarianism after 30 years

By Dr Robin Bunce

December 2017 marks an important anniversary: thirty years since the formulation of the [Danvers Statement](#), the document which launched complementarianism. Initially, the new doctrine of gender and sexuality gained considerable ground across much of the white, English-speaking conservative evangelical church. Yet in the last five years complementarianism has been beset by [abuse scandals](#) and [bruising theological climb downs](#). More recently still, the willingness of well-known American complementarians to stand behind Donald Trump, has thrown differences between British and American complementarians into sharp relief. Therefore, as complementarianism turns 30, it is no surprise that influential British theologian [Andrew Wilson has suggested that complementarian gender theology needs to be rethought](#).

In essence, complementarianism asserts that men and women are equal in 'value and dignity', but play different roles. Since the codification of the doctrine in 1987, complementarianism has developed along divergent paths in different contexts. Nonetheless, at root, complementarians affirm that 'some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men', and that the masculine role encompasses 'the principle of male headship in the family.' These roles, complementarians claim, are not arbitrary, merely conventional, or socially constructed. Rather, they are rooted in the God-given nature of manhood and womanhood. In the words of the Danvers Statement, '[d]istinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart.'

Since its inception complementarianism has created a great deal of debate. Wilson, who is taking part in the [THINK Future of Complementarity Conference](#) next summer, hopes the event will provide an opportunity to discuss gender in a constructive way. To this end, Wilson has suggested a new term 'complementarity', which he hopes will be less polarising than the harder-edged term 'complementarianism.'

Wilson is clearly onto something. Britain and America have radically different political cultures. Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in the 1830s that white American culture had developed an unprecedented and peculiarly sharp distinction between the 'separate spheres' appropriate to men and women. Therefore, it is no surprise that a church practice and theology that is based on rigidly gendered roles should emerge in white Churches in the US. Coming closer to the present day, as [Seth Dowland has demonstrated in his recent book](#), the theology of sexuality and gender was weaponised by the American Christian Right since the late 1970s. This simply has not happened in the United Kingdom to anything like the same extent. Therefore, complementarian positions, such as [John Piper's view that wives should submit to abuse 'for a season'](#); or [Wayne Grudem's support for Trump, even after Trump bragged about abusing women sexually](#); or [Mark Driscoll's claim that wives have a God-given duty to be constantly attractive and sexually available to their husbands](#), which make sense to white Evangelicals in the US, are abhorrent and incomprehensible to many Christians in the UK.

How far 'complementarity' will diverge from 'complementarianism' remains to be seen. However, any doctrine which affirms equality on the one hand,

and circumscribed gender roles on the other is likely to come unstuck. To understand why this tension ultimately defies resolution, it is necessary to look at the theological origins of complementarianism, and the development of the doctrine over the last 30 years.

While complementarianism was first codified in 1987, it began to take shape as a distinctive doctrinal position in the 1970s. Like most new ideas, it emerged to defend a specific set of interests. From the late 1960s, white American conservative evangelicals faced a new problem: they needed to defend male authority in church and family life, whilst evading the charge of chauvinism. The problem was a direct result of feminism, which developed a powerful critique of many aspects of patriarchy during the 1960s. From the late 60s, feminism had a profound influence on the church. Evangelical feminists argued that male domination was no part of the message of scripture. Inequalities and oppression of all kinds, they argued, were the result of the fall, rather than a feature of God's Kingdom.

By the mid-70s, Evangelical feminism had made a great deal of headway. Major northern European conferences endorsed female ordination as did most American Lutherans and Methodists. In Britain too, feminism won

victories. To take one example, the first female Elder was ordained by British Methodists in 1974. Conservative theologians responded with new arguments to counter growing egalitarianism. In the mid-70s George W. Knight III played an important part in developing the doctrine which, a decade and a half later, became known as complementarianism. Significantly, Knight's 1975 essay 'The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Male and Female' accepted the feminist claim that 'in their standing in and before Christ, male and female are equal.' However, he also asserted that men and women played different roles. It should be noted, that Knight's doctrine of equal but different, emerged not merely in the context of a conservative backlash against feminism, but also in the context of the still largely segregated American South. Several commentators have noted the family resemblance between the doctrine of 'separate but equal', which was used to justify racial segregation from 1896 until the 1950s, and 'equal but different', the essential logic of the complementarian position.

Knight's new theological position was quickly challenged, and the two essential criticisms continued to trouble complementarianism until the mid-90s. First, critics pointed out that the new doctrine relied on a modern sociological understanding of 'role', which was

unknown to the writers of the Bible. Second, critics argued that there was serious tension between affirming equality, on the one hand, and difference in role on the other. To say, for example, that the CEO of a multinational corporation and a cleaner are in all important respects equal, but merely different in terms of their role ignores the fact that the difference in their roles effectively negates their notional equality. The challenge for complementarian theologians, then, was to find a Biblical example of a relationship which embodied both true equality and a hierarchy of headship and subordination.

In 1995 Wayne Grudem came up with a solution to both problems. He argued that the Trinity represented a Biblical example of genuine equality of personhood and a difference of roles. God the Son, he claimed, is equal to and yet eternally subordinate to God the Father. Moreover, he claimed that the relationship between husbands and wives, was designed by God to reflect the relationship between Father and Son within the Godhead.

Grudem's ingenious re-imagining of the Trinity quickly gained ground in complementarian circles. However, as Grudem's doctrine of the Trinity spread, it changed. What is more, these changes in the doctrine exposed a problem at the heart of complementarianism. Over

time, as God the Son became associated with femininity, theologians began to downplay Christ's power, authority and glory. By 2014, John Starke and Bruce A. Ware's *One God in Three Persons* went so far as to argue that God the Son deserves less glory and honour than the Father, because of his subordination to the Father. Starke and Ware were not alone; in the next couple of years Rodrick K. Durst, Malcolm B. Yarnell and Michael J. Overy, stressed hierarchy rather than equality as the defining feature of the Trinity.

Between 1995 and 2015, therefore, the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity came full circle. Associating femininity with Christ had not emphasised the value and dignity of women, rather it led complementarian theologians to denigrate Christ. Rather than showing that different roles are compatible with equal status, theologians like Starke and Ware used the alleged difference between Father and Son as the basis to argue that Christ was not the equal of the Father. In that sense, complementarian theologians themselves found it impossible to maintain the view that different roles were compatible with equality of value – the essence of the complementarian position.

As complementarianism turns thirty, its future is unclear. The experience of last thirty years, however, is clear enough. Complementarianism succeeded in providing proponents of male domination with a fig leaf to hide their inherent sexism. However, even at a theological level it has failed to acknowledge the value and dignity of women as equals to men. If Wilson's 'complementarity' is to do more than pay lip service to the equality of men and women, if it is to be more than a rebranding exercise, British theologians will have to abandon the notion that gender determines the roles we must play. In other words, they must jettison the founding assumptions of 'complementarianism' along with the name.

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