

“Do Not Conform”: Thinking about Complementarianism as Contextualisation

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Introduction

Gender exists in culture; it is a social and cultural reality. Yet complementarians often speak as if gender roles are or should be settled. So it may seem rather optimistic to consider the movement as an exercise in contextualisation. My justification for considering it as such is two pronged. First, all theology and Christian practice is contextualisation—it may be unaware and unreflective, but it will contextualise. Second, there are points at which complementarianism is self-conscious of its relation to a cultural context.

When Claire Smith reflects on why Christians aren't able to agree about gender she suggests that “our own personalities and experiences provide the context for us hearing, understanding and accepting the

truth and wisdom of God’s word.”⁵¹ True. Is that something that we should overcome? No doubt “personalities and experiences” complicate the discussions, yet receiving God’s word in our context and applying it there is exactly what we *need* to do in order to understand it. An abstract comprehension with no application is likely no understanding at all.

I will describe a three-fold pattern of contextualisation and then I will use this pattern to explore four areas of complementarianism. While I am a complementarian, my goal in this paper is primarily observation; in passing I will offer some assessment and suggest some defences.

1. Patterns of Contextualisation

Three of Stephen Bevans’s models of contextualisation are particularly useful for evangelical theology: the translational, counter-cultural, and praxis-based approaches.⁵² I will note something of the basis and risks of each approach.

Translational approaches seek to express the faith in a new setting by finding parallel expressions. By and large “translation” here is a metaphor; it extends far beyond translating Scripture and Christian literature to every aspect of the Christian faith.⁵³ It draws from past expressions and ultimately from Scripture, but involves genuine re-expression.

God’s revelation is already enculturated; it is not delivered in a special revelation language or culture and the incarnation is the climactic

⁵¹ Smith, *God’s Good Design*, 218. The other reasons are “human frailty and limitations” which mean that “our knowledge of God and his will is partial and provisional,” and human sinfulness, which leads us to doubt the goodness of God’s word and to reject its authority.

⁵² Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*. The others he discusses are anthropological approaches which expect to find the content and forms of the faith in the culture and produce an indigenised theology; synthetic approaches which hold that the culture and the faith connect in ways which allow fuller insight into both but in which both retain “integrity”; and transcendental approaches which seek to discover and express the common religious experiences of all humans.

⁵³ “Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, evangelism, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organization, worship style”; Hesselgrave, “Contextualization,” 115.

expression of God’s accommodation to a culture. The Day of Pentecost ~~also~~ shows that the gospel can and should be given in a variety of languages ~~and~~ the New Testament is built on the translation, since it largely uses the Septuagint as its Scriptures. Translation is in the DNA of Christianity.

Yet, much may be “lost in translation.” There is a risk of subverting the message as it is accommodated to a new setting. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul deals with an attempt to “translate” the practice of Christian preaching into patterns associated with sophistic tradition and declares that it destroys the gospel (1 Cor 1:17—2:5).

The *counter-cultural model* is suspicious and critical of the culture it addresses, presuming that divine revelation challenges all cultures. Paul in Athens offers a trenchant critique of idolatry and finishes announcing divine judgement and calling for repentance (Acts 17:30–31).

The counter-cultural model risks denying the goodness of creation and the doctrine of common grace.⁵⁴ Despite the breadth and depth of the effects of sin, human culture is not only evil and corrupted. There is a risk of being hypercritical of culture.

These two models, together, reflect the dynamics of evangelical theology. Both look beyond their own context for a norm. The gospel declares that we cannot save ourselves or know God from our situation—he must enter our world and redeem it. So the human situation is not the source of our knowledge of God, but he makes himself known in our situation. Translation stresses the capacity of God to make himself known by his word to humans. Counter-cultural approaches stress that need for repentance in order to know God. Barth’s theology captures this dual relationship between God’s truth and culture. Hunsinger summarises:

Jesus Christ as the one Word of God is the truth in all fullness and perfection. His truth is original and sovereign; that of all other words, derivative and fiduciary. Their truth cannot complete, compete with,

⁵⁴ See Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*.

combine itself with, or transcend him. Yet his truth can do any of these things, as appropriate, with them: complete them, defeat them, combine itself with them, or transcend them.⁵⁵

A third model of contextualisation stresses *praxis*, insisting that genuine contextualisation starts from a concrete identification with people. It asserts that we contextualise as we seek to work for God’s kingdom and faithful action is the test of true understanding.

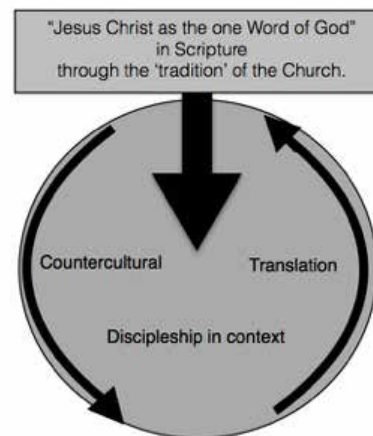
At the least, this approach recognises that “application” demands a concrete understanding of and commitment to a context. It goes further and says that we do not “understand” and then “apply”—rather we understand in action; and a reflective understanding comes *after* action. We must be “doers of the word” in order to understand it.

A praxis model can also reflect a strong doctrine of providence. Since God is present in and active in our circumstances, he leads his church into a fuller grasp of him and the implications of the gospel as we seek to obey him. There is genuine progress in theology as we confront new circumstances and seek to live faithfully in them and understand our faith in the light of that obedience.

The danger of a praxis-based contextualisation is that it lacks a critical element by which to test its actions. Rene Padilla comments on liberation theology, the obvious example of a praxis-based contextualisation, that it can be too pragmatic and use Scripture to justify practices (e.g., revolutionary war). It calls attention to the importance of the historical situation of the interpreter but risks treating the situation as “the text.”⁵⁶

A praxis-based contextualisation is insufficient, by itself. An evangelical contextualisation has to affirm “Jesus Christ as the one Word of

God is the truth in all fullness and perfection,” and look to him as our norm. Yet translation and counter-cultural contextualisation must be grounded in concrete obedience, and worked out by the Christian community in action.



So I propose an integrated model of contextualisation in which those seeking to follow the Lord in a particular setting bear the responsibility to express the faith in their context in ways which make it accessible but also show how it critiques their culture.

The rest of the paper uses this integrated model as a framework to examine complementarianism as an exercise in contextualisation.

2. Complementarianism and Contextualisation

a) Complementarianism as Counter-Culture

Complementarianism is decidedly, self-consciously, and boldly counter-cultural, especially against “feminism.” Claire Smith opens *God’s Good Design* setting her position against feminism which, she says, “is part of the cultural air we breathe.”⁵⁷ She observes a “head-on confrontation of feminism with the Christian God and with his purposes for man and women as *men* and *women*.”⁵⁸ While affirming good elements in feminism, Smith identifies the basic dynamic as one of conflict, since “the agenda of feminism is *different* from God’s agenda . . . most of the time.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Smith, *God’s Good Design*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 15. Grudem, *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, a significant book defending complementarianism, includes a section on “Standing against culture.” Jones, “Sexual Perversion,” 273, positions complementarianism in a culture war of cosmic proportions: “the real opponent in the Sex Wars . . . is not Christian feminism but the fiercely anti-Christian religious paganism that now surrounds us on every side.”

⁵⁵ Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth*, 248. This is from his reflections on Barth’s discussion of secular parables of the truth.

⁵⁶ Padilla, “Liberation Theology,” 42–46.

This approach rests on a basic assumption of complementarianism—that biblical revelation offers not only a message of redemption but also a normative worldview which includes an understanding of differentiated gender. In contrast, egalitarians hold either that the biblical teaching is egalitarian or that the Bible has no direct implications for views of gender roles. Roger Nicole sets out the first position with the summary assertion that in the light of the gospel “sexual differentiation vanishes, and women have access to the three main human functions marked by God with a special unction.”⁶⁰ Elaine Storkey expresses the second, arguing that one of the failings of complementarianism is that “it is trying to get from the biblical text something which the text is not trying to give.”⁶¹

The construction of a worldview from Scripture and the articulation of views of gender within that worldview are complex interpretive exercises. Having made that admission, I hope you will excuse me for using the term biblical “teaching” as shorthand for this complementarian conviction. It avoids lengthy circumlocution.

With the conviction that there is a biblical “teaching” about gender, complementarianism sets this against three related elements of contemporary Western culture. First, it opposes androgyny, “unisex,” and other trends which “blur” gender distinctions. It offers a distinctive construction of masculinity and femininity. Some US complementarians are explicit and prescriptive about this.⁶² Australian complementarians tend, I think, to be more cautious in describing such gender types.

Second, and more centrally, complementarianism is counter-cultural by insisting on prescribed roles for men and women, at least in

60 Nicole, “Biblical Egalitarianism,” 7.

61 Storkey, “Evangelical Theology and Gender,” 166.

62 Piper’s definition may be the best known: “at the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for, and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationships” and “at the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.” Piper, *What’s the Difference?* 22.

church and family. This is *more* counter-cultural than the idea that there are typical constructions of masculinity and femininity.

The most counter-cultural element of complementarianism is that it differentiates the roles of men and women in terms of authority. According to Smith, “women are not to be the authoritative teachers for the gathered household of God . . . they are to learn with quiet, willing and voluntary submissiveness” and “the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, and the wife is to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ.”⁶³

In contrast Hégy and Martos argue that gender roles should only be differentiated on the basis of sex-related physical attributes (such as reproduction) and only then “if they result in a balance of status and power between males and females.” In this argument, they appeal to modern Western culture.

Today, the unjust assignment of higher status and higher power roles to one gender . . . is understood sociologically as sexual discrimination or sexism. In the context of the Christian religion, it is becoming increasingly common to regard sexism as sinful and contrary to the will of God.⁶⁴

If Hégy and Martos are correct about current culture, then complementarianism is decidedly counter-cultural.

Yet we shouldn’t overstate how counter-cultural the position is. Australian popular culture often embraces highly differentiated constructions of masculinity and femininity. Anything approaching androgyny is limited to very small circles. What is more, recent work suggests that nearly 20 percent of Australians agree that “men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household” and almost 30

63 Smith, *God’s Good Design*, 35 and 115.

64 Hégy and Martos, “Understanding the Dynamics of Gender Roles,” 181.

percent think “women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship.”⁶⁵ So, when complementarianism defines itself as primarily counter-cultural, it may misread the culture. The wider culture is not dominated by an undifferentiated “feminism”; things are far more complicated than that.

A more profoundly counter-cultural account of men and women which focuses on Christian virtues needs to be developed. Piper seeks to do this, to some extent. His “mature masculinity” is gentle and kind; he affirms strength as a masculine virtue, but urges men to use strength in service, not domination. This needs to be pursued far more fully, especially in the discussion of femininity, ^{where Piper} which focuses primarily on the need to “affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men.”⁶⁶

b) *Translating Gender Theology*

There have been attempts within complementarian circles to strike a different note which is more accessible to contemporary culture. These stress freedom for men and women to “be themselves,” rather than to satisfy set gender types. They explore ways in which men and women can work together, even with somewhat different roles; and seek to displace issues of power and authority in marriage and church from the centre of the discussion.⁶⁷ They view relationships as primarily mutual and co-operative. Headship and submission are not denied, but they are not treated as the central dynamic of the relationship. All of ^{these} this can be seen as efforts to “translate” complementarianism for contemporary culture.

Padgett notes some of these trends when he argues that current complementarian teaching on gender roles is “revisionist.” On his telling, the position only developed in the 1970s as it dropped what he terms the traditional Christian view that women are “inadequate” or inferior and instead taught “that men and women are *equal* in being but that

65 Webster, K., et al., *Australians' Attitudes to Violence against Women*, 62.

66 Piper, *What's the Difference?* 54.

67 E.g., Alsop, “Practical Theology for Women”; Byrd, “John Piper’s Advice”; Trueman, “An Accidental Feminist?”; Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*.

their *roles* are different.”⁶⁸ I am not convinced by his ~~view which claims~~ that complementarianism and egalitarianism are equally revisionist. Yet he notices a genuine development in complementarian theology as it is explained for contemporary culture. Translating convictions into a new idiom and dealing with new questions are the ways in which theology develops. Christians with convictions about differentiated roles of men and women have had to re-think how they explain those differences, and in the process have somewhat developed their position.

There is a growing emphasis on “servant leadership” for male leaders, rather than stressing headship and authority in ministry.⁶⁹ In a similar vein complementarian churches and ministries explore ways in which women can be involved in public ministry, leadership, and decision-making.⁷⁰ These are attempts to translate complementarian convictions for an inclusive culture. Of course, some who are more committed to a counter-cultural vision of complementarianism will view them as cultural accommodation.

c) *Complementarianism as a Missional Obstacle*

Complementarianism is often associated with churches which are active in evangelism, yet their position on gender can create an obstacle for mission. Kathy Keller recounts a woman who found that Redeemer church would not ordain women elders reacting that “it was like finding out that your fiancé was a child molester.”⁷¹ The Danvers statement asserts that

68 Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 10.

69 Hammett, “Human Nature,” 300 claims “the best contemporary expressions of complementarianism find a moderating position . . . that involves servant leadership . . . following the pattern of Christ, and full affirmation of the value and giftedness of women.” See Frederick, “An Interpretation of Evangelical Gender Ideology,” 184.

70 E.g., “The church must boldly articulate a robustly positive perspective of womanhood and of woman’s role in the church. . . . If a local church remains silent on this issue, women will be unequipped to fulfill their covenantal calling. It is insufficient for churches that hold to male headship simply to compile a list of things that are permissible for women to do. We must go to the Scriptures and determine what is needful for women to do. Gender-aloneness was “not good” in the garden and the same is true in the church.” Hunt, “Women’s Ministry in the Local Church,” 37–38.

71 Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*, loc. 25.

complementarianism “should find an echo in every human heart”; but that is not the common experience. Claire Smith asks, “Who among us has not been the target of jokes and jibes about the church’s view on women? It would be nice to have a way out!”⁷² Roy Williams argues that views of sex and gender have been significant obstacles to Australian society accepting the church and its message.⁷³

No doubt, these issues create an obstacle, though recent McCrindle research found that when non-Christians who would consider changing their view of Christianity were asked to list significant “blockers” only 13 percent reported that the role of women was a major issue.⁷⁴

Smith engages the problem directly. She acknowledges that some people will think that complementarianism “is just too culturally abhorrent, too open to misunderstandings to do any good.”⁷⁵ Her response is that human sin “is the rejection of the goodness and wisdom of God’s word.” If God has revealed a pattern for gender roles, she argues, then to suspect this of being abhorrent and unacceptable is simply to accept the sinful premise. “We cannot change the substance of God’s truth to make the gospel more appealing. The gospel is more radical, more counter-cultural, more confronting than anything the Bible has to say about men and women, or wealth, or sex . . . it is entirely wrong-footed to think we can silence a ‘difficult’ part of God’s word in order to win souls for Christ.”⁷⁶

Not only are complementarian views potential obstacles to bringing others into a church community, they can also be obstacles to involving women (and men) fully in the mission of the church. At least some women feel disconnected and unmotivated by a church environment with all male, or overwhelmingly male, leadership. I certainly know about this

72 Smith, *God’s Good Design*, 17.

73 Williams, *Post God Nation?*; Aune, “Evangelical Christianity” presents evidence from the UK that women who do not fit traditional roles or marriage and motherhood are likely to leave complementarian evangelical churches. Gayle Kent kindly supplied me with the reference to Aune’s paper.

74 McCrindle Research, *Australian Communities Report*.

75 Smith, *God’s Good Design*, 233.

76 *Ibid.*, 233–34.

effect anecdotally, though I have not been able to find any research which investigates the issue.

I wonder how fully churches recognise these obstacles. Churches can consider how they can make their views of gender roles less of an obstacle—that is, how they can seek to translate. Yet if we do have convictions about gender roles and these convictions are biblical and theological and related to the gospel then they cannot be concealed. It will be better to teach on and advocate for them from time to time.

d) Complementarianism and Domestic Violence.

The most troubling aspect of complementarianism for me is the accusation that it allows or promotes domestic violence. Julia Baird raised recently this concern in a series of article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* this year.⁷⁷

Domestic violence and abuse, and violence against women seem to be increasing in Australia, though accurate statistics are not available. Certainly many women are affected by such violence and abuse.⁷⁸ Some of the literature on domestic violence from the 1970s asserted or assumed a direct connection between patriarchy and abuse of women.⁷⁹ Recent Australian reports have continued this theme, noting a correlation between violence against women and views of gender roles.⁸⁰ Yet the picture is more complicated, since more recent research has identified several other likely causes and some significant analyses of the data suggest that adult male

77 Baird, “Submission is a fraught mixed message” asks “if conservative churches preach the dominance of men, and submission of women, does this add weight to those who think men have a right—even a divine right—to control their partners?” In the following column, “Doctrine of headship a distortion,” she writes of a flood of reports which came to her of just this kind of abuse: “my inbox filled with stories of assault, and ministers told me privately of colleagues who’d preached that women should stay with abusive men.” A local Christian counsellor told her, “I have worked with numbers of women and children who have been the victims of a twisted view of male headship which gives men permission to do whatever they want in the family.”

78 For a detailed examination of the statistics see Phillips and Vandenbroek, “Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.”

79 Tracy, “Patriarchy and Domestic Violence,” 576–78.

80 For details see K. Webster, et al., *Australians’ Attitudes to Violence against Women*, 40.

abusers “could not be differentiated from non-abusive men on the sole basis of traditional (patriarchal) gender attitudes.”⁸¹

When regular church attendance is added to a patriarchal view, the picture changes further since “there is an inverse relationship between church attendance and domestic violence.” Some studies suggest “conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly are . . . the least likely group to engage in domestic violence.” Christian community with models of loving, non-dominating masculinity and improved confidence from this community all serve to reduce abusive behaviour.⁸²

Nevertheless, as Tracy suggests, patriarchal thinking is risk factor for abuse.⁸³ Complementarians must not simply protest the accusation; they must protect women in churches. This brings the “praxis” dimension of contextualisation most clearly into focus. The experience of women in complementarian churches must be taken seriously and complementarians have to take responsibility for the kind of church and family culture they are promoting.

It must be made patently clear that a Christian doctrine of headship is no pretext for abuse. There is no basis for a husband to force submission or to seek to control his wife, or to dominate her, or cause her to fear. It must be very clear that God is opposed to abuse and violence in marriage and in the family. He particularly warns husbands to be considerate to their wives and treat them with respect (Ephesians 5:28–30; 1 Peter 3:7). The model of love in the Bible, Jesus’ suffering for others, is the very opposite of abuse.

Complementarian churches should recognise that all-male leadership can make it difficult for women facing abuse to find help and protection from the church. There is a tendency to protect men (especially church leaders) from accusations. So, churches must ensure that women

who face abuse are confident they will be supported, identifying women to whom they can turn to report abuse and find help.

Approaches to complementarianism which do not view marriage as primarily a relationship of headship and submission go some way to ameliorate the risk of abuse.

Conclusion

I am only too aware that this paper is a brief study and has skated over serious issues, and probably skirted several as well. My goal was to show that viewing complementarianism as contextualisation may help those inside the movement and outside to understand it better. It helps to raise some of the hermeneutical issues involved and locates them, appropriately, in a cultural setting.

Complementarianism often presents itself as primarily counter-cultural. I have sought to show that the reality is more complex than that. Those of us who hold that the Bible offers a normative worldview which includes a view of gender roles in church and family must continue to think about how we express that in word and action in our cultural context.

81 Tracy, “Patriarchy and Domestic Violence,” 580.

82 Ibid., 581–84.

83 Ibid., 584.