

“This is a book I have been waiting for! Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher have done a beautiful job in explaining what complementarianism is (and isn’t!), showing how it is rooted in the Bible and describing what it might look like in action. This gracious introduction to a controversial and potentially divisive issue is eirenic, thoughtful and stimulating. I think this will be so helpful in all kinds of contexts as together we work out what biblical faithfulness looks like in the life of the local church and beyond.”

Gary Millar, Principal, Queensland Theological College, Australia

“Here’s a book for those looking for sound reasoning and humble guidance in regard to the practical application of complementarity in a variety of church contexts. Graham and Jane graciously and consistently apply what the Scriptures teach with a lack of rigidity yet with firm conviction in regard to the biblical call for men and women to express their godliness through gender.”

Nancy Guthrie, Author, Bible Teacher

“I much enjoyed reading this fresh, sensitive, thoughtful, well-informed and engagingly positive treatment of what is so often seen as just a troublesome and controversial topic. The authors leave space for readers to come to different conclusions in detail, under the shelter of a glad affirmation of the goodness of the word of God in every passage of Scripture. I especially valued the tone of gentle gladness allied to a confident affirmation of essentials.”

Christopher Ash, Writer-in-Residence, Tyndale House, Cambridge

“This helpful book will challenge you to think through the implications of your complementarian convictions and then put them into practice at your church. Every local church should consult it.”

**Colleen McFadden, Director of Women’s Workshops,
Charles Simeon Trust**

“Writing a book on complementarianism today is like lighting a match in the dry forest of Western society. It can ignite a raging controversy in a culture deeply conflicted about gender. But Jane Tooher and Graham Beynon commend complementarianism in a clear, and compelling way. Their book is biblically rich and wisely applied for God’s people as his beautiful design.”

Richard Chin, National Director, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students; Author, *Captivated by Christ* and *How to Read the Bible Better*

“This outstanding book is deeply grounded in the Bible, shows a clear grasp of the contexts in which our churches are working, and is thoroughly readable and highly stimulating. It will help you rethink your convictions. It will encourage you to value highly the ministries of women and men. It will challenge you to work out together what you believe about women’s ministry in the life of the church. It will provide excellent pathways towards implementation of positive complementary ministry.”

William Taylor, Rector, St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London, UK

“This is a brilliant book to help church leadership teams think through how they implement complementarian convictions. The authors are enormously sympathetic to the wide variety of personal and church experiences which readers will bring to these questions. They helpfully challenge whether complementarian churches actually embody equality and whether they manifest a genuine feel of family, rather than just asserting those things. Whatever your personal convictions on the relevant biblical texts, Graham and Jane ask really helpful questions to make sure that these convictions are lived out in a manner which produces a mutual flourishing of the sexes.”

**Matt Fuller, Senior Pastor, Christ Church Mayfair, London, UK;
Author, *Be True to Yourself***

“A really useful book. It clearly explains the various positions on complementarianism and the potential imbalances that each is prone to. You will be equipped to examine and understand your own position and to embrace it with clarity, conviction and joy.”

Jennie Pollock, Author, *If Only: Finding Joyful Contentment in the Face of Lack and Longing*

“Those of us who believe the Bible teaches distinct roles for men and women in church cannot presume to commend our view on the strength of our exegesis alone. We need urgently to show not only that it is true but that it is good. We need to be able to point to healthy local churches and ministries and say, ‘There! Like that! That’s how it’s done well.’ Tooher and Beynon have written a book that speaks directly and compellingly to this need. It’s a book that moves beyond the ‘what’ to the ‘how.’ Both authors have extensive ministry experience, which shines through in their writing. They understand that for most of us, the challenge is not so much what the Bible says but how to land it faithfully and fruitfully in the actual circumstances of mission and ministry in the 21st century.”

**Rory Shiner, Senior Pastor, Providence Church,
Perth, Western Australia; Author**

“We always need to teach the truth about what the Lord says, confident that it will be a blessing. This fine book gives us the courage to see that the complementarian position is good for us as we experience what it is like to belong to the family of God. It shows that as we truly model family in the church, we will be witnessing to the world around us about the transforming power of the gospel. Read it and see.”

Peter Jensen, Former Archbishop of Sydney

“There are many superb books on the theology of complementarianism, but this one is different! It gives complementarianism ‘legs’ and probes what it could look like on the ground in your local church. The emphasis is on exploring ways for men and women to minister together rather than settling for the status quo. I’ve worked at the coalface of complementarianism for 30 years, but my intuition tells me that this book has the potential to transform the complementary ministry of men and women for a new generation.”

Lesley Ramsay, Evangelist; Trainer; Bible Teacher

“In a day when polemics are often wielded on both the right and the left, it is refreshing to read an irenic and immensely practical book on what it means to embrace complementarianism. Beynon and Tooher’s book will help pastors and church leaders (and laypeople too!) to think carefully about what it means to include both men and women in the ministry of the church in a complementarian framework. I hope this book will be read widely and will lead to further clarity, understanding and humility as we work out what it means for both men and women to be involved in the ministry of the church.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Embracing Complementarianism* paints an engaging and persuasive picture of what complementarianism might look like in the local church. It is neither dismissive of alternative views nor prescriptive of the conclusions reached by the authors. Rather, it raises some vitally important questions about men and women serving together in ministry, and encourages pastors and churches to reflect deeply on their convictions about Scripture’s teaching in this area, and the way they are, or are not, put into practice. It’s a book to make use of, not merely to read and keep on the shelf. This is the book on complementarianism we’ve been waiting for!”

Kanishka Raffel, Archbishop of Sydney

“The abuse of power by some prominent church leaders in recent years has left many in our constituency wondering if the complementarian position is as toxic as many of our opponents would suggest. Certainly, those who define complementarianism purely on the basis of what women cannot do are shooting themselves in the foot and exposing their ignorance. So, what does it mean to be complementarian, and how can we be sure that our biblical convictions are having a positive rather than a negative impact on our church culture? In this book, Graham and Jane are not just asking us to consider the biblical principles but actually show us (and model for us) what it means to embrace them and live by them. If we believe that God’s design for men and women is for our good, then embracing it is not an optional extra for Christians but absolutely key if our families and churches are to flourish.”

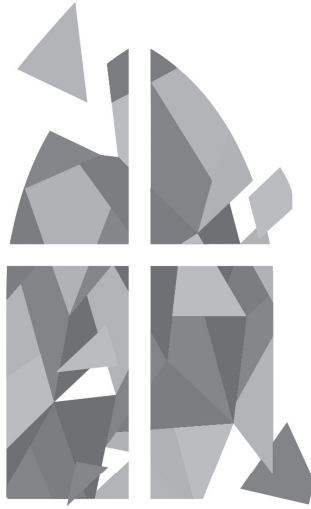
**Carrie Sandom, Director of Women’s Ministry,
The Proclamation Trust, London**

“Here is a fresh and envisioning guide to help church leaders move beyond an embarrassed defence of complementarianism to advancing a positive vision of men and women working together in a local church.”

Paul Rees, Lead Pastor of Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, Scotland

“Few issues have generated more controversy in our culture and the church in recent years than the relationship between men and women. Complementarian theology has been condemned by some as abusive, and its advocates have all too often taken a defensive approach. Drawing on their many years of church ministry and training experience in Britain and Australia, the authors present a compelling, positive vision for complementarianism that rejects outdated stereotypes in favour of a holistic biblical vision of God’s creational plan for men and women. Irenic in tone, culturally sensitive and exegetically rooted, this book will help reluctant complementarians to more joyfully embrace what they believe. Egalitarians evangelicals who read it will gain a better understanding of the convictions and concerns of complementarian brothers and sisters. It unpacks the practical implications of complementarianism for church life without being prescriptive and provides helpful reflection questions for individuals and groups.”

**John Stevens, National Director,
Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, UK**



EMBRACING COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher

the goodbook
COMPANY

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From Graham:

*To Fiona Hamilton, Paula Harris, Jo Scoones, Fiona Doel, and
Jo Thomson, who I've been privileged to work with.*

From Jane:

*To Phillip Jensen, Phil Wheeler, Marcus Nodder, John
Woodhouse, and Mark Thompson. Good bosses, and great
co-workers in the Lord.*



Complementarianism Today

When we've shared that we're writing a book about embracing complementarianism, we've been met with a variety of responses. Some people say, "Oh good! Something on this at last". But most people say, "Oh dear! That's going to be difficult".

Teaching about complementarianism often is. The last time Graham spoke on this at his church, the ripples started in the question time following the sermon, then continued into lunch following the service, and carried on for months. No one was acting badly, and the questions and discussions were all good and worthwhile—but there were lots of them. Talking about gender raises issues that can be awkward, controversial, and hard to navigate. No wonder many people think that it's a subject best avoided—why stir up a hornet's nest?

EMBARRASSED COMPLEMENTARIANISM?

Simply put, complementarianism is the belief that God made men and women equal and distinctive: equal in value and dignity, and distinctive in certain responsibilities and roles. It is a conviction which has historically been the normal position and practice of the church across the world, but which, in recent decades, has become a storm centre.

Some of that debate comes from changes in our wider society which have pressured and challenged the church. Issues of gender swirl around in our culture with alarming ferocity, and they connect to deeply held feelings about equality and justice. Saying that men and women are different, and that they might have different roles, has been out of step with most of Western culture for a long time. To say that a woman is not *allowed* to do something because she's a woman is baffling, to say the least. And, many in our culture would now consider the notion of "gender roles" to be not only weird but also morally wrong and potentially damaging to both women and men.

How you respond to such social change will depend on a number of factors, not least your own background. You might have accepted "traditional" roles for women and men without really thinking it through, because that has been your experience, or it is attractive to you and it seems to offer definite structures and security. If so, you'll probably feel disturbed by these cultural waves. You might respond by fighting back or suddenly wondering if you're a cultural dinosaur. Or, conversely, you might feel a resonance with our culture; perhaps you are worried or angry that the church really is perpetuating authoritarian male leadership and sexism, which at best limits women's gifting and at worst harms people. In which case, you will want to push for change.

But debate and angst do not just come from interactions with the surrounding culture; they are generated within the church as well. We want to please and honour God, but that means knowing God's will for a situation. So, understandably, we ask, "What does complementarianism look like?" or "What should women do or not do?" We might worry that we've mistaken traditionalism for right biblical understanding. Or we might see that the Bible teaches a complementarian position but feel uncomfortable

or embarrassed about it. Deep down, we'd really prefer that it didn't say such things.

None of that is helped by the growing divergence within the complementarian camp. There are several different possible positions on the roles of men and women, which can be confusing to navigate—and if their proponents are confident, and even strident, they easily cause worry and potential guilt for those who think they disagree.

Then we can add the track record of churches and the personal histories of individuals. Many women *have* been limited in what they can do in church life—and that might have been done for good or bad reasons, and might have been done lovingly, blindly or harshly. Some women have been treated appallingly, while others haven't but perceive that they have. Some will think their gifts have been slighted and the church weakened by limitation of their ministry, and they might be right. But our point for now is that none of us can pretend to come to this “cold”. We all have history of some sort. Sometimes that history is good and affirming; unfortunately, often it isn't. And each of us then brings our responses to that history to the table too. Church leaders must recognise that while complementarianism could be thought of as a relatively minor issue in church order, it has affected some people's relationship with church and their faith as a whole.

Given all this, it's not surprising that some in the church respond by ducking the issue: they stick with familiar patterns of church and ministry and in effect say, “Let's not rock the boat”. They might add that there are more important things to get on with (“There's a world that needs to hear the gospel”) and so we should leave contentious issues to one side. This might include comments about it being a “secondary issue” and “agreeing to disagree”. While there can be wisdom in such responses, and we will return to some of these elements, at worst this is simply sweeping it under the carpet. If

God has spoken about gender—and if he always speaks what is right and true, and if his ways are always good and freeing for us—then we ignore what he says at our peril.

EMBRACING COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Imagine being part of a church that wasn't confused, or reluctant, or reticent about complementarianism—but rather *embraced* it. Imagine being so convinced of what God says that you're able to express it confidently in what you say and do. Imagine being so compelled by the goodness of what God says that you express it positively in church life. Imagine if God's design for men and women wasn't something you were reluctant to accept or a little bit embarrassed about—but something you delighted in. And if you're thinking, "I can't imagine that I would ever feel like that (let alone other people in my church)", then we believe this book can help you. It's written primarily for people in church leadership—elders, staff members, church councils or leadership boards and so on—but not exclusively so. We hope that any engaged church member will find it helpful, although we acknowledge that some of its applications can only be implemented by a church's leaders.

Our conviction is that teaching and practising a more robust complementarianism leads people from a reluctant acceptance to a joyful embracing of God's word in this area. There are many books available which examine the biblical evidence for complementarianism and the arguments for and against. By and large, they do that well—but it is usually done from a position of trying to *defend* the complementarian position. While we will inevitably rehearse some of the same areas, we instead want to *advance* the complementarian position—to explore it and discuss it from the inside, as it were—and so help you embrace it.

So this book will try to do a few things differently to many others. We want to go *wider*—wider than the usual

discussion of contested passages and arguments that establish the complementarian position. While these have their place, we also need to consider wider issues such as gender itself, the nature of church, and the components of ministry. You can think of these as bigger pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into which complementarianism fits. But they aren't often discussed very much, or even at all.

We also want to go *deeper*: deeper into what “equal and distinctive” means in practice; deeper into how the issues of equality and distinctiveness are fleshed out in real church life; and deeper into the different practical decisions that have to be made. As a result, this book will basically assume a complementarian position rather than argue for one, although we will look at some of the key passages on the way through.

We also want to be *positive*. Much talk around complementarianism can be negative in tone, only really emphasising what women cannot do. At other times, the discussion is tinged with embarrassment about placing any limit on the role of women, and so it emphasises that limits only apply to a few areas of church life and moves quickly on. We want to strike a different tone: to embrace complementarianism as God's good design and spend some time exploring what it looks like.

CONCERNS WITH COMPLEMENTARIANISM TODAY

Let's begin by thinking about where complementarian churches are typically starting from. Here are four concerns we have about how complementarianism can often end up looking in churches in the West today. The danger of this type of general critique is that it may well not be true of you or your church, at least in its entirety. But we do believe that these are significant issues in a great many complementarian churches today, and so it is helpful to identify them.

Separatism

The first concern is separatism: that is, that women's ministry tends to get separated from other, general ministry. So, you end up with "normal ministry" for everyone, such as preaching and small-group Bible studies—and then there's women's ministry, which often involves a women's Bible-study group, one-to-one discipleship, counselling, toddler groups and so on. There is undoubtedly lots of great ministry happening in these settings, and there are sometimes male equivalents. There can also be lots of logistical reasons as to why things get organised like this, and even some advantages in having separate streams.

Our concern, though, is that if ministries become mainly separate, there isn't much complementing going on. While you won't find the word "complementarian" in the Bible (it's been chosen to sum up a position), it nonetheless captures a dynamic that's woven throughout Scripture—of men and women *complementing* each other: a synergy that comes through togetherness. If a church has mainly separate ministries, though, it can be hard to see how the contributions of men and women combine to give an outcome that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Focus on boundaries

The second concern is that complementarianism leads to a focus on boundaries. The question becomes: What can a woman do or not do? Where are the boundaries lines? Can a woman lead a mixed-sex Bible study, teach teenage children, lead the whole congregation in prayer, lead a Sunday service or preach a sermon? Of course, we have to answer questions like these because we have to make decisions about what will happen in practice. The concern isn't that those decisions get made; the concern is that the ministry of women sometimes then becomes all about *staying inside the permitted boundaries*.

In any area of the Christian life, if behaviour is reduced to a series of “yes/no” answers, the chances are that we’ve missed something of the dynamic that should be in play. Decisions in Christian life and ministry are rarely check-box answers. One author, Michelle Lee-Barnewall, draws a parallel with ethical questions.¹ Imagine, she says, if someone asked if they could drink alcohol or gamble as a Christian. It’s not a wrong question, and we would have to help them answer it so that they could decide how to live. But if our approach was to only give “yes/no” answers to those sorts of questions, we’d be missing something. We’d be missing a bigger perspective on what a holy life is all about, how sanctification works, and how it flows from the gospel.

Questions and answers that focus on boundaries usually miss the dynamics that shape the actual decision made. In a similar way, a focus on who can do what in church is likely to miss the beauty of the relational dynamics between men and women. Sadly, that’s the flavour of much complementarianism today.

De-contextualisation

The third concern is that much of the discussion of complementarianism in church life and ministry is de-contextualised. All ministry takes place in the context of churches, and our understanding of what a church *is* should shape everything that happens within them. Such an understanding of church includes its identity, the nature of Christian relationships, ministry and gifting, and much more. But a broader discussion of this kind of ecclesiology, and how it shapes complementarianism, rarely appears.

We can draw a helpful parallel with marriage. Here, too, there’s the question of what headship and submission mean and what they look like in practice. But the context for that discussion is our understanding of marriage more broadly. Headship and submission will look very different if you

think of marriage primarily as voluntary cohabitation or as an economic transaction, compared to viewing it as a union where husband and wife become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). They would certainly *feel* very different. So with church life, our understanding of the wider context of church shapes not only what happens but how it happens and what it feels like.

Individualism

Our last concern is individualism. In Western culture there is a deep prevalence of individualistic thought, and we need to be alert as to how that influences our thinking on this issue. One study analysed which countries were the most individualistic in their outlook. Which do you think were the top three? It was the USA, Australia, and the United Kingdom. In these three countries, more than anywhere else in the world, we tend towards individualistic rather than communal thought; we instinctively think of ourselves as an individual, “I”, rather than as a group, “we”.

We are usually unaware of this because it is simply the air we breathe. When we grow up in a society, we adopt its way of thinking without thinking! But that way of thinking about ourselves and the world then acts as a lens through which we view everything, including the issue of complementarianism. Within individualistic societies the questions get shaped in a certain way: “who am I, and what can I do?” The answers I get to these questions are then key to my identity and sense of fulfilment.

This relates to our society’s trend towards what has been called “expressive individualism”, where our identity is achieved by expressing who we are. Such an outlook will inevitably lean towards concluding that I must be able to do certain things to express who God has made me. It is good and right to ask how God has made me and what contribution I can make. However, we should realise that how we approach

these questions, and how we respond to them, risks being shaped more by the priorities of our individualistic culture than by the priorities of the Bible.

The biblical picture of humanity is that we were not made to live as individuals. Yes, we have an individual identity—but we're designed to live in community. God himself exists as a community of three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and he made us in his image. Moreover, God's plan of salvation is not to save individuals but to create a people for himself who reflect him in the way they live together. It is only in community that we truly know ourselves and flourish as the people God has made us.

Our concern then is that individualism has had a significant effect on how we think of ourselves and our ministries, and so has shaped our discussions and decisions around complementarianism. That needs to be challenged and examined; and that's what we hope to start to do.

HOW WE APPROACH COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Before we go any further, we need to outline the assumptions underlying our approach. This is key in any dialogue—if we have different approaches, we'll end up in different places. Here are four truths that will function as guiding principles in tackling the issues involved.

1. We accept God's word as good, right and authoritative
 Since the Bible is God's word (not Graham's or Jane's), it reflects his character. This is excellent news for us! God is completely holy, infinitely loving, utterly good and entirely sovereign. Therefore, what God says in his word about us is *always* right, and it is *always* for our good. It comes to us from one who is not sinful; he knows and wants what is best for us; he is able to give us what we need; and he has met our greatest need when, through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection,

he dealt with our sins for ever. The word of such a God is definitely good for us! This means we can confidently accept God's word as the final authority in all things, including on the subject of men and women. Any other authority we have—such as human reason, traditions or our experience—needs to be secondary to what God says in the Bible.

When we understand that God's word is good, right and authoritative in what it says about men and women, it helps us to:

- (i) fully embrace what God says positively and without embarrassment.
- (ii) not be legalistic in applying what he says within our churches.
- (iii) recognise the authority of God's word over all people for all time, and so to bow to him rather than our culture.

That leads us to our next principle.

2. We read and apply the Bible within our own culture

We do not read the Bible in a vacuum. We all read it from within a location in time and space and as part of a specific group of people. 21st-century Western culture has been shaped not only by the Bible but also by rationalism, modern science, anti-institutionalism, feminism, secularism and much more. In each of these there is a combination of both good and bad. When we are reading or explaining the Bible, it is always worth asking ourselves how much of what we are saying is actually from the Bible, and how much is coming from the cultural framework we are bringing to it.

The first step is to recognise that because we are naturally sinful, we all have a tendency to privilege our cultural perspective over the teaching of the Bible. The second step is to remember that God shows us the best way to live since he is good. With that confidence in the goodness of God's

word, the third step, then, is to test ideas and perspectives on the subject against what God explicitly says to us in Scripture. Some aspects of the Bible's teaching will resonate with our culture (for example, men and women are both in the image of God, have equal value and equal access to God and salvation, and so on). Others will challenge it (for example, the equality of men and women is strengthened, not diminished, by the differences between them, and these differences extend to what is appropriate and inappropriate in the exercise of ministry).

3. We hold this as a secondary but important issue

All truth matters, but not all doctrines are of the same weight and significance. It is important to get this clear.

First-order issues or doctrines: These are those necessary for salvation, and they form part of the historic orthodox faith—for example, the doctrine that the only way to be saved is by faith in Jesus Christ's death on the cross for your sin. Rejection of first-order doctrines are ultimately a rejection of true Christianity—those who reject them are not saved.

Second-order issues or doctrines: These are important issues that impact the life of the church both in the short term and in the long term—for example, the nature of the Lord's Supper or teaching on baptism. Christians who have come to different conclusions on these issues usually diverge into different churches, but they would still call each other a Christian brother or sister.

Third-order issues or doctrines: Christians may have different opinions on these, but they ought not to be held to be so fundamental as to make living alongside one another in the same local church too difficult. An example is the question of whether or not it is appropriate to drink alcohol.

Such definitions appear very neat, but in reality, the distinctions are often hard to draw.

So where does complementarianism fit? Clearly, you are not saved by what you believe about the relationship between men and women. In that sense it is not a first-order issue. Yet it is important. Given the question is directly addressed in the Bible, we cannot dismiss it as just a matter of personal choice. It certainly has big implications for the way we do church life. What is more, if in arguing for one side or another we end up dismissing parts of the Bible, or allowing them to be reinterpreted out of all recognition to the words actually written on the page, then we have a much more fundamental problem (see point 1)!

4. We respect people's conscience in application

Whenever we approach the topic of complementarianism, our consciences, and those of other people, are important considerations. No one has the right to bind another person's conscience more tightly than the word of God does. We need to respect each other's consciences, especially in details on which the Bible is silent or gives us freedom (1 Corinthians 10:27-29). Often among those who identify as complementarians, the differences of opinion are not so much about what the biblical passages are saying (although, of course, there is that) but rather about what complementarianism looks like in practice. We do not all have to come to the same conclusion in every area of practice! So, when we are in conversation with someone who differs from us on this issue—but who, nevertheless, delights in God's good word and wants it to shape the way they practise Christian ministry—we need to keep the conversation going and yet avoid walking all over each other's consciences. We need to learn how to live with difference in these cases.

Wherever we are on the spectrum of what the ministries of men and women look like in practice, we need to continually come back to God's word, so that our consciences can be aligned

to and changed by what God is saying. As we do so, we will find that there is so much scope for what complementarianism can look like that approaches will be varied, even among churches that share the four convictions we have just outlined. It is in this spirit of humility that we continue.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

For individuals

1. What are your immediate feelings and questions about complementarianism?
2. What has been your experience of church life in this area?
3. What aspects of your personal history shape your thinking and feeling?
4. Which of the concerns described resonate with you? Why?
5. Do you agree with the four principles as to how we approach this issue? Which might you struggle with?

For a group

1. What do members of our church instinctively think about complementarianism?
2. What stories would people tell about their experience and why?
3. Where do we fall short with regards to the four concerns raised?
4. What issues would come up if we discussed this as a leadership? As a church?
5. Where do we stand as a church on the four principles as to how we approach this issue?