
Young vs. Old Complementarians¹

Mark Dever

Pastor

Capitol Hill Baptist Church

Washington, D.C.

Ligon Duncan and I were recently at a gathering of forty or so pastors. We had a great time there. Wonderful fellowship. Much theological agreement. However, when the question of complementarianism came up, though there was large agreement on theological substance, there was dramatic disagreement on strategy for presentation.

The core of this essay is simply this—it is my observation that those older than me who are complementarian generally want to downplay this issue, and those younger than me want to lead with it, or at least be very up front about it.

Why is this? Is it because the older group is theologically unfaithful, or the younger group culturally insensitive? I don't think so. I don't know, but my guess is that there are at least a couple of factors playing into this difference. The two groups have different personal experiences, and the two groups have different theological assessments.

First, the two groups have different personal experiences. Normal for the older group is evangelicals as upstanding members of the society. They are mayors and bankers and respected persons in the community. The tendency is natural to do what would be culturally acceptable, as much as is possible (parallel to John Rawls and his idea of publicly accessible reasons). Normal for the younger group is being shouted at publicly, being told that they're narrow, intolerant hate-mongers because of their opposition to homosexuality or abortion or false religions. The tendency is to advocate biblical mandates in an unvarnished, open fashion, and yet to do this with an eye to explaining and demonstrating them as winsomely as possible. Both groups want to be faithful to Scripture and sensitive to culture, and yet their ideas of where the right balance is, differ.

Second, the two groups have different theological assessments. The older group is among peers who see women's ordination as an extension of civil rights for people of different races. The younger group is among peers who see women's ordination as a precursor for creating legal categories of gay rights. But having a certain skin pigmentation is to the glory of God; having a sexual partner of the same gender is sin. The younger group is more alarmed, not simply by the egalitarian position, but by what it is assumed that will eventually entail, either in those who allow it, or in those who come after them.

There are, of course, many evangelical feminists. Some Christians whom I most love and respect and have learned from are in this category. Just to take one example, I think of my beloved professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Roger Nicole, who is a father in the faith to me. My respect for him is huge. My debt to him is great. I was his teaching assistant for two years at Gordon-Conwell. He and his wife were and have been incredibly kind to me and my family. He prayed for me publicly at my installation at Capitol Hill Baptist Church. I got a letter from him just last week! However, on this issue, after years of being taught feminism at Duke, then at Gordon-Conwell, I had come to disagree.

"Well then," you might say, "why don't you leave this issue of complementarianism at the level of baptism or church polity? Surely you cooperate with those who disagree with you on such matters." Because, though I could be wrong, it is my best and most sober judgment that this position is effectively an undermining of—a breach in—the authority of Scripture. As my friend Ligon Dun-

can, the paedo-baptist, has often said, “If there were a verse in 1 Timothy saying, ‘I do not permit an infant to be baptized,’ we wouldn’t be having this conversation about baptism! There is such a verse about women serving as teachers/elders!”

Dear reader, you may not agree with me on this. And I don’t desire to be right in my fears. But it seems to me and others (many who are younger than myself) that this issue of egalitarianism and complementarianism is increasingly acting as the watershed distinguishing those who will accommodate Scripture to culture, and those who will attempt to shape culture by Scripture. You may disagree, but this is our honest concern before God. It is no lack of charity, nor honesty. It is no desire for power or tradition for tradition’s sake. It is our sober conclusion from observing the last fifty years.

Paedobaptism is not novel (sadly). But, on the good side, evangelicals who have taught such a doctrine have continued to be otherwise faithful to Scripture for five centuries now. And many times their faithfulnesses have put those of us who may have a better doctrine of baptism to shame! Egalitarianism is novel. Its theological tendencies have not had such a long track record. And the track record they have had so far is not encouraging.

Of course, there are issues more central to the gospel than gender issues. However, there may be no way the authority of Scripture is being undermined more quickly or more thoroughly in our day than through the hermeneutics of egalitarian readings of the Bible. And when the authority of Scripture is undermined, the gospel will not long be acknowledged. Therefore, love for God, the gospel, and future generations demands the careful presentation and pressing of the complementarian position.

ENDNOTES

¹An earlier version of this article appeared on the website of “Together for the Gospel,” www.T4G.org.