

**“The Competency of God’s Communication”:
Biblical Instruction on Women in Church Leadership –
a Fraternal Rejoinder to Revd Dr William Wan**

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In the April 2000 issue of this journal, Revd Dr William Wan listed several reasons why he believes in fully opening the door to women in church leadership. His concise article rested on four presuppositions, two of which he explicitly defended and two of which he appears to have assumed. These crucial foundations are: (1) differentiation of gender roles necessarily implies denigration of women; (2) the scriptures which deal directly with women’s roles in church are unclear; (3) New Testament theology touching on women in the church implies full egalitarianism; and (4) that “times have changed” is somehow relevant to Biblical exegesis (as distinct from missiological application). With all due respect to Revd Dr Wan and my fellow Christians who share his perspective, we need to explore the validity of these propositions.

First, it is commonly assumed that if one excludes women from church leadership it is because one believes that they are ontologically inferior to men and thus incapable of performing the function of pastor as well as a man. This is a natural assumption in the modern world. Sociologist Peter Beyer, writing about the impact of globalization on culture, notes that in modernity strong normative institutions, like the church, have lost much of their power to determine who may or may not do what. Instead, functional criteria have taken over. We discriminate now not by race, nationality, family connections or even gender but by the measurable ability of the person to carry out the task in a way that meets the goals of the organization. “Inclusion indicates only that discrimination should follow functional criteria, not that everyone should be treated equally.”¹ In other words, modernity would assume that if a woman can communicate as well as a man, provide pastoral counseling as well as a man, administer the sacraments as well as a man, and in every other way function as well as a man then there is no reason to exclude a woman from the pastorate.

There are some Christian roots to this functional perspective to one’s vocation. William Perkins (1558-1602), the seminal Puritan theologian, wrote,

Whom God calls, to them he gives competent and convenient gifts, or knowledge, understanding, dexterity to this or that, and such like; and thereby makes them able for the performance of the duties of their callings. Contrariwise, they that enter into any calling being utterly unable to perform the duties thereof, were never called of God.²

The rule, then, for discerning one's vocation is to see innate skills as significant, as gifts from God pointing to one's vocation. Puritans saw nature as God's "other book" besides the Bible that also revealed His will. Increase Mather articulated their views succinctly: "the [natural] Works of God have a voice in them, as well as his Word."³ Hence, if a woman has all the skills needed for the pastorate, the natural conclusion would be that a woman, if she has the inclination, could be the pastor of a church. The only problem with this approach is that there was a definite limit to what one could exegete from nature. The Bible set those limits. Someone might have great skills to be a robber -- strong arms, quick legs for running, a fearsome presence, a crack shot -- but since robbing was condemned by scripture, no one was legitimately called by God to that "vocation." Even legitimate vocations, like shop-keeping, had to be executed by Biblical instruction. Merchants who price gouged were often excommunicated or censured. In our modern world we would assume that since they were following the dictates of the market, they were just doing what must be done in that vocation. But the Christian position has always been that the Bible, as God's special revelation must always over-ride mere pragmatic ways.

In addition, creation theology, at which the Puritans were adept, would not support the "egalitarian" proposition that men and women are "equal," if equal is understood to mean interchangeable, nondifferentiated, the same. (Unfortunately, most "egalitarians" I have read and heard do not carefully define what they mean by "equal.") A quick look at the 100 meters sprint times from the Olympics will show that the sexes simply are not the same; there is an empirical difference between the sexes. Men are superior runners than women. A visit to any hospital's maternity ward would reveal that God has been quite insistent on differentiating between the sexes. Women are infinitely superior at being pregnant and giving birth than are men. Modern eyes have difficulty in seeing any significance to these phenomena because of a deeply fragmented worldview. Karl Barth's "*Nien*" to natural revelation and Rudolph Bultmann's assertion that one cannot believe in the resurrection and use electrical lighting speak volumes about Western modernity's inability to integrate a belief in God and life in

the natural world. Pre-modern Christians did not have this problem. To them, these natural phenomena were significant. Since God was the architect of nature, what occurred in it was some signal of the will and nature of God. Of course, an “egalitarian” may grant all this but question what female child bearing and male athletic prowess has to do with ecclesiastical leadership roles. However, the “egalitarian” proposition is that God has not designed any roles in the church for a specific sex. Therefore, since nature shows that God has, indeed, designed certain roles specifically for each sex, then the “egalitarian” proposition turns out to be a naked assertion. They are saying that although God confined fathering to men and child bearing to women, and so on, in this one area of ecclesiastical leadership, He has made an exception to His general tendency to differentiate between the sexes. They had best have very strong exegetical grounds to make such an assertion.

The Creation Narratives and Gender Role Differentiation

The functional approach was only half the assumption in Revd Dr Wan’s article. The flip side was that anyone who does not accept the functional approach must do so because they believe woman is not capable of the office. Revd Dr Wan assumes that if it can be established that the Bible teaches that women are ontologically equal to men -- that is, they are made equally in the image of God -- then there are no grounds for excluding them from all forms of pastoral leadership. Revd Dr Wan is certainly correct to state that the first creation narrative in Genesis 1:26-28 teaches that the human being, both male and female, is made equally in God’s image. However, to assume that such equal value in God’s sight necessitates interchangeable gender roles is an assumption not based on the text but on the modern worldview described above.

Revd Dr Wan states that “there is not the slightest hint of subordination of woman to man in the creation narratives.”⁴ If we had only the creation narratives and no inspired interpretation of them, we could argue (as has been done through most of Christian history), that since, in the second creation narrative (Genesis 2:15-24), the man was created first it appears that he has some kind of primacy. If not, why not create Adam and Eve simultaneously? How that primacy worked out in practice would be left up to the weight of scripture and wise guidance. But the creation of the man first is certainly more than a hint of male headship. In addition, the woman was created to help the man. While Revd Dr Wan is certainly correct to note that “helper” (*ezer kenegdo*) should not be interpreted as menial or inferior, he goes beyond that to insist it really means “equal,”

again implying that “equality” means interchangeable, undifferentiated, the same. The context simply does not bear this out. The man is created first and, by himself, given the task of naming the animals. The authority to name carries with it the implication of headship over. He becomes aware of a need within himself and God makes the woman for him. He then names the woman. To imply, as the “egalitarian,” position does, that the woman is simply a mirror image of the man in a female body, is not borne out in this text. The sexes are profoundly distinct. What in practice that means is a matter for debate. However, this creation narrative certainly more than hints at some kind of differentiation between male and female gender roles.

Fortunately, we are not left completely to our own devices in interpreting these texts. God inspired several passages in the New Testament which exegete the creation narratives for us. In one, the Apostle states, “For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” (1 Cor. 11:8-9.)⁵ In another, the Apostle states that women are not to be in authority over a man for the theological reason that “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” (1 Tim. 2:13.) Male headship (κεφελη) and other expressions of gender role differentiation are rooted in creation.⁶ It is the abuse and the ignoring of male headship that is a product of the Fall.

Finally, the assumption that differentiation of gender roles necessarily denigrates women runs contrary to the repeated and vociferous insistence of “complementarians” that they do believe that women are created in the image of God just as men are. Complementarians, as they call themselves rather than “heirarchicalists,” believe that women share the *imago dei* and have significant contributions to make to the church. They, however, insist that a fair reading of scripture does not allow for a functional approach to the pastoral office. The Danvers Statement, drafted by numerous leading evangelical leaders who are part of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, makes this clear.

Is God an Incompetent Communicator?

Revd Dr Wan’s second foundation is that the scriptures which deal directly with women’s roles in church are either unclear or are merely contextual. Admittedly, there is room for debate on what ministry roles the Bible precisely allows for women. However, it is the position of the “egalitarians,” or “feminists” as they call themselves in certain places, that there are absolutely no Biblical hindrances for women to any ecclesiastical leadership office. Therefore, all we must do to determine the validity of the egalitarian/feminist position is find any transcultural Biblical distinctions

of gender roles. The creation narratives, as interpreted by the New Testament, provides just such theologically rooted distinction of gender roles.

Let us explore the egalitarian/feminist proposition from another angle. Their proposition holds that God intended for women and men to have undifferentiated roles in ecclesiastical leadership. Specifically, they believe it was God's eventual plan to have gender be an irrelevant criteria to the selection of a senior pastor. Those of this position who are evangelical also profess to hold that the Bible was inspired by God. Whether or not they embrace the full factual inerrancy of the more conservative wing of evangelicalism, "evangelical feminists" claim to believe that God uniquely guided the composition of scripture and it is therefore authoritative. But these two propositions -- that God inspired scripture and that God intended there to be no gender roles in the church or family -- are at odds. On the one hand, they have to deal with a Bible that tells us that Jesus selected an all male apostleship, that "the head of the woman is man" (1 Cor. 11:3), that women are not allowed to judge prophesies (1 Cor. 14:34), that a woman should not have a discipling authority over a man (1 Tim. 2:12), that wives are to be submissive to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; 1 Pt. 3:1), and that husbands are the head of the wife in the same way that Christ is the head over the church (Eph. 5:23). All this from the book they claim to believe is uniquely inspired and authoritative. On the other hand, they claim that God intended us to believe in an interchangeability of gender roles. It would seem to me that the only way that the two propositions can be held together is if one also believes that God is an extra-ordinarily poor communicator. If I said, on the one hand, that I believe in "egalitarianism" and at other times that I believe that "man is the head of woman just as the Father is the head of Christ," that I don't believe women should judge prophesies, that a woman should not be the head over a church, and that wives are to submit to their husbands, I would either be accused of terrible inconsistency or poor articulation.

Of course, the egalitarians/feminists claim that there are contextual reasons for all of the above canonical statements. However, that is just my point. God, being omnipotent and omniscient, would have foreseen the context in which His Word was inspired and written down. If that context was going to so radically distort the revelation He was to bring, He could easily have altered it. He is the God who weighs empires in the balance and finds them to be but dust. He can certainly prevent a few local customs from obscuring what He intended to communicate. If God intended to tell us that the pastoral office is to be determined on a purely functional basis, that one's sex has no bearing on it, He certainly did a very poor job

communicating that to us. If, on the other hand, one believes that God does all things perfectly, including communication, then it is impossible to hold to “egalitarianism.”

The Theological Foundations

Thirdly, the egalitarian/feminists hold that there is no theological grounds for differentiating gender roles. We have, in our glance at the creation narratives, already seen that this is not so. In fact, the Bible makes a strong theological argument that man is the head of woman just as God the Father is the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). Being a Trinitarian, this is pregnant with meaning. The Son fully shares in the nature of God just as much as the Father and the Holy Spirit. Their relation to the Divine essence is described as “homousion.” It is equal, not merely similar. Yet, in the economic Trinity, the Son plays a subordinate role to the Father. There is no ontological hierarchy in the Trinity but there is an economic one. The Father wills, the Son submits. Any one who concluded that the Son, because He plays a subordinate role, is necessarily an inferior being, is deemed a heretic by historic Christianity. In the same way, there is no reason to assume that women are inferior to men just because they are designed for subordinate roles. The theological pillar of the “complementarian” position is rooted in solid Trinitarian theology.

The egalitarian/feminist position, though, is to place great weight on Galatians 3:28 -- “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The egalitarian/feminist argument that this scripture wipes away all previous rationales for gender distinctions was made most forcefully by my own former systematic theology professor, Paul K. Jewett in *Man as Male and Female*. Professor Jewett, whom I respect highly, argued that this text is the *loci*, the canon within the canon, for determining the role of women within the church. He understood that his interpretation brought him into conflict with the various passages in the New Testament, touched on above, that directly deal with this issue. Being a man of great intellectual integrity, he was unwilling to embrace the “God as incompetent communicator” thesis as a way of side-stepping those “difficult passages” (as Revd Dr Wan labels them). Instead, Professor Jewett simply stated that Paul was wrong in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and in 1 Timothy 2. A New Testament professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, whom I regard so highly I regularly ask him to write letters of reference for me, has stated that the “difficult passages” simply cannot be interpreted to support the egalitarian/feminist position.⁷ He says that one

must simply admit that those texts are errant, that they are not authoritative. Those of us unwilling to take that step have to go back to the text.

As Revd Dr Wan correctly noted, one of the essential hermeneutical principles is context. The context of Galatians 3:28, the surrounding texts, the epistle as a whole, the theological controversy it is about, simply has nothing to do with the role of women in the church. Galatians 3:28 is not in the midst of a passage dealing with gender roles. The epistle nowhere touches on gender roles. The controversy it was written to address is soteriological: what role does law-keeping have to play in salvation and sanctification? There is no contextual reason to apply Galatians 3:28 to gender roles over the relatively clear (not “difficult”) passages which directly address the issue. The two-fold (creation and Trinitarian) theological foundation of gender distinctions in the church and home are laid, as we have already seen, in passages, such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-17, that directly address the issue.

Relevance of the Zeitgeist

Finally, egalitarians/feminists put great weight on the fact that “times have changed.” While changes in culture are very significant for the way the Church carries out its mission, we must be very cautious about allowing cultural changes to alter our reading of the Biblical text. In fact, a change in culture should make us *more* careful of the presuppositions of that reigning culture lest we let the zeitgeist become the de facto canon. When we come to a controversial topic like gender roles in church leadership and someone takes a position that is at variance with nearly two millennia of Biblical interpretation and is, at the same time, also very much in harmony with Western modernity, we may legitimately question whether the motivation for the change in understanding is coming from solid Biblical exegesis or modernity itself.

Revd Dr Wan states that “progressive understanding” is a basic hermeneutical principle for understanding the Bible.⁸ I have never heard this described as a basic hermeneutical principle by any competent exegete. It is much too subjective to be a legitimate hermeneutical rule. Who is to say what is “fresh light” and what is mere human fad? This appears to be an open invitation to allow today’s reigning culture to become the de facto canon effectively cancelling out Biblical instructions which run counter to it.

Biblical exegesis has always been leading out of the text the meaning that is in it, not the imposition onto scripture the meaning that a particular

culture at a particular point of time wants the text to bear. Some want us to believe that new times will enable us to see old teachings that past cultures have prevented us from seeing. Patriarchal cultures, so the feminist argument goes, blinded the eyes of believers to the Bible's true, egalitarian meaning. This brings us back to the "God the incompetent communicator" thesis. If God really intended functional nondifferentiation on the basis of gender, He did a very poor job of getting that meaning through. Since the Reformation, Protestants have held to the perspicuity of scripture: that the Bible is clear on the points God intended to communicate. Since there are at least three major sections of scripture dealing with gender roles in the church and at least two (Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7) with gender roles in the family, it appears to be a topic on which God was determined to communicate. Each of them puts great emphasis on gender role differentiation. Since scripture is perspicuous, these texts have to be taken seriously.

The egalitarian/feminist position is that those texts restricting women were exceptions based on situations that no longer exist. As Revd Dr Wan puts it, except for the "peculiar problems" of certain churches, "women were in full partnership with men in the work of the gospel."⁹ Unfortunately, again, this runs directly counter to the explicit teaching of scripture. The apostle, after laying a theological foundation for gender differentiation based on the Trinity and on creation, states, "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice -- nor do the churches of God." (1 Cor. 11:16.) In another place (1 Cor. 14:33-38), the apostle prefaces his comments about the place of women in worship with "As in all the congregations of the saints" and concludes those comments with "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself is ignored." The question begs to be asked: If Paul had wanted to be more emphatic about the divine requirement of gender role differentiation, how could he have done it? The proposition that the differentiation of gender roles was local and contextual simply will not stand up to exegetical scrutiny.

Certainly, as Revd Dr Wan suggested, we should give the benefit of the doubt to any Christian who proposes to bring an innovation on the claim of new Biblical insight.¹⁰ However, the Bible is not a blank book. Its words are not infinitely flexible. Certainly people can misuse the Bible to support any doctrine or practice they want. But they cannot *properly* interpret scripture to support any proposition they like. Just because certain false practices were formerly justified by scripture, like the exclusion of musical instruments by some churches, and that over time most Christians

saw the error in those interpretations, does not mean that any past interpretation of scripture is open to being over-turned by the trends of the day. (The exclusion of musical instruments was confined mostly to Calvinists churches anyway; contrary to Revd Dr Wan's implication, evangelicals in the nineteenth century were arguably the driving force behind the abolition of slavery.)

Nevertheless, Revd Dr Wan is correct if he means to identify "progressive understanding" as a dynamic in the history of the Church. With the doctrines of the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, and, more recently, the inspiration and authority of scripture, Christians often ambiguously assumed these truths before being forced, by those who denied them, to carefully think them through. This was probably the kind of "fresh light" that John Robinson, the separatist Puritan, was referring to. (The Puritans were not, by the way, in search of "religious liberty" as the reigning American myth has us believe.) There has been nothing like controversy to motivate the church to go back to scripture and insist, again, that it be obeyed. For example, for most of church history, the reliability and authority of scripture was taken for granted. Even during the Reformation neither side questioned the trustworthiness of scripture. Only when, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theologians began questioning the reliability of the Bible were evangelicals motivated to develop careful doctrines of inspiration and ignorance. The "fundamentals," Carl F. H. Henry's multi-volume *God, Revelation and Authority*, and the Chicago confession on irenic were the result. Revd Dr Wan may be correct that the church today is being called to a progressive understanding of the role of women in the church and home. After all, for most of church history male headship has been taken for granted because patriarchal cultures supported it and the scriptures on gender roles in the church are relatively clear. Now that patriarchal cultures are breaking down, the practice of male headship is under attack. But since the Bible, egalitarian/feminists assertions notwithstanding, teaches male headship, the "fresh light" may come in the opposite direction Revd Dr Wan is expecting. Indeed, that already appears to be happening. In June 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest non-established Protestant denomination in the world changed their "Baptist Faith and Message," their de facto creed, to state that God has intended the office of pastor for men only. The "fresh light" then, is a renewed appreciation of Biblical gender differentiation in conscious opposition to the reigning culture.

Though some intellectuals like to scoff at any suggestion of "slippery slope," the past three hundred years has shown a lamentable trend in Protestantism to acquiesce, step by step, to the reigning culture and thereby

often end up in rank heresy. For example, a New England minister at the time of the Great Awakening, Samuel Webster, illustrates the way Protestant leaders have claimed to still embrace *sola scriptura* even while they turn away from the explicit teaching of scripture. Webster, a 1737 Harvard graduate and pastor at Salisbury, Massachusetts, rejected the doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin, a doctrine which was becoming increasingly unpopular as the Enlightenment changed the basic worldview of Western culture. Since the doctrine is "a natural impossibility" to Webster, "Tis in vain to pretend to prove it by scripture. For if the scripture be the word of God, impossibilities can't be found there. And if you should find them there, it must shake the credit of the revelation."¹¹ In other words, if scripture appeared to be teaching something out of keeping with the assumptions of the Enlightenment, our exegesis must be wrong. Keep going back to scripture, Webster tells us, until we get it to reconcile to the reigning rationalism of the day. Ministers like him eventually renounced belief in the Trinity and in hell. The Unitarian-Universalist church began with Christian ministers claiming to have significant "fresh light."¹²

I once heard a proponent of egalitarianism/feminism state that they will never endorse homosexuality. Just in the last few years, the recently retired professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, which enthusiastically embraced the "evangelical feminist" agenda, defended the legitimacy of certain homosexual practices. To those of us who understand that the egalitarian/feminist position involves a cutting of the line to the Biblical anchor, this is no surprise. Once one can negate so many relatively clear and emphatic Biblical commands, there is no more really effective canonicity left to the Bible. It becomes a blank slate onto which the fads of modernity may cast whatever fleeting images it wishes. But believers who trust in a perfect God who was capable of revealing His will clearly, cannot so easily cast away the Word of God for the trends of men.

¹ Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 59.

² Perkins, *On the Callings or Vocations of Men*, 461.

³ Increase Mather, *The Latter Sign Discoursed of*. Boston, 1682; according to Stout, *The New England Soul*, 102.

⁴ William Wan, "Women and Ecclesiastical Leadership", *Church and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 16-17.

⁵ All scripture is quoted from the New International Version.

⁶ Professor Wayne Grudem has done an exhaustive study on the word κεφαλη in classical and koine Greek and found that when it is used metaphorically it nearly always means "head" as in "authority over." (See *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.)

⁷ Because he stated this in a class lecture, rather than a published work, I am withholding his name.

⁸ Wan, 25.

⁹ Wan, 26.

¹⁰ Wan, 16.

¹¹ Webster, *A Winter Evening's Conversation Upon the Doctrine of Original Sin* (Boston: Green and Russell, 1757), 11.

¹² For example, Charles Chauncy, the grandson of a leading Puritan, published a 1784 book on universalism. Its title says it all: *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations, made manifest by the Gospel Revelations: Or, The Salvation of All Men the Grand Thing Aimed at in the Scheme of God.*

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