

Equal but different

The respective roles of women and men in the Society

Preamble

The controversy over gender distinctive roles between the so-called "Egalitarians" and their opposite numbers, the "Complementarians", continues to rage fiercely, and (as one writer has put it) "*the Internet has proven about as useful in encouraging respectful and gracious debate as it has in promoting the respect of women and restricting pornography*".

The question of consecrating women to the episcopate has triggered not only fierce debate, but also vitriol and recrimination on a scale unprecedented in modern ecclesiastical affairs. Simultaneously other questions, similarly connected with gender-specific roles and relationships, have taken centre stage in national politics with, for example, the passage through Parliament of legislation to make same sex marriage lawful.

When asked in April 2012 why it was that The Gospel Coalition had included a statement on Complementarianism in its founding document, Professor Don Carson explained "*not to do so would have been irresponsible in the present climate and context*". Crosslinks' statements on The Ordination of Women (issued in the wake of the 1993 legislation), on Human Sexuality (2005) and on Marriage & Divorce (2009) require equally responsible clarification and updating in the wake of rapidly changing attitudes within British society during the past twenty years and the escalating crisis over the ethics of human sexuality within the worldwide Anglican Communion. However any treatment of the practical and pastoral issues presented today must begin with an understanding of gender distinctives and gender-specific roles if it is to be either coherent or credible. For that reason this paper begins with the question of the respective roles of women and men as envisaged and taught in the Scriptures, before addressing the specific issues that are the subject of contemporary dispute.

Understanding the terms of the debate

More than 25 years ago the influential American writers Wayne Grudem and John Piper coined the term "Complementarian" in response to what they considered to be an aggressive feminist agenda being pursued under the guise of the term "Egalitarian". Their position was subsequently set out in The Danvers Statement (1987, published by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood - see www.cbmw.org).

In common with the French Republic's familiar *cri de coeur* (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*), the notion of absolute equality between all people is enshrined in the American Constitution. The fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther-King's epic "I have a dream" speech has drawn the attention of a new generation to the historic struggle of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. More recently the advocates of feminism seized on the ideal of egalitarianism, but began using it as a watchword not merely for equality of status but for complete identity of role between men and women. Grudem and Piper were alarmed at the trajectory of this self-styled egalitarian movement, perceiving that it could lead to an attempt to redefine marriage and, *inter alia*, to the rejection of New Testament norms for the church, with obviously serious implications for future generations of believers. Their response was to propose the term "Complementarian" to denote the normative biblical teaching that men and women were "equal but different".

(It is arguably unfortunate that the debate has been cast in these particular terms because of course the Bible is as strongly egalitarian as it is insistently complementarian. That is, the scriptures teach the absolute equality of men and women, made in the image of God, whilst maintaining clear differentiation by gender that shapes and controls the respective roles of, and vital inter-relationships between, the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. Consequently, although Complementarian v. Egalitarian has become the adopted vocabulary this paper prefers to use the phrase "equal but different" as a more accurate - and therefore more useful - handle to refer to the view maintained by Grudem and Piper et al).

This debate is not, of course, solely of relevance to so-called "western" societies, and it does not everywhere present an identical challenge. In many countries around the world it is the biblical teaching of egalitarianism that most urgently needs to be heard and, when propounded, proves to be sharply counter-cultural. The latest United Nations report on the status of women (published in 2011) records that one in three women experience physical abuse at the hands of men at some time in their lives and cites an alarming number of countries where a girl has a higher chance statistically of being raped than being taught to read and write. That in the beginning God made humankind male and female, equally in his image, and that in Christ there is "neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28), are profound truths that carry far reaching implications. It is therefore incumbent on gospel teachers and preachers to proclaim these truths cogently and consistently from the Scriptures and, lest they be overlooked as an integral part of that word which is to be taken to God's world, it is important for a mission society to impress this responsibility on cross-cultural gospel workers moving out of a western, liberal tradition into the wider world.

Movements for the emancipation of slaves (in the 18th century) and women (in the 19th and early 20th century) have, within western liberal democracies, long since secured a transformation under the law if not always in attitude and behaviour. However these legal provisions were often achieved despite - rather than because of - the advocacy of the Christian churches. Indeed the passive indifference or even, it has to be admitted, the active collusion of reformed churches with practices of heinous social injustice is a deeply troubling feature of post-Reformation church history (despite some notable and glorious exceptions e.g. William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect). Patriarchal societies have generally resulted not so much in the protection and flourishing of women as in their oppression and abuse. Today, given the enormity of that unfortunate history and the (commendable) insistence on protecting the rights and prerogatives of all under the umbrella of human rights legislation, it has proved difficult to articulate a biblical complementarianism in a way that commands a hearing. Instead, any questioning of a comprehensive egalitarianism provokes incredulity and antagonism in equal measure. Responsible bible teachers are nonetheless under an obligation to teach the whole counsel of God in this respect as much as any other.

The media has not been slow to muddy the waters, portraying the debate as a contemporary struggle for equality. This has further heightened the sense of alienation on the part of both Christian men and Christian women within Western societies, and produced confusion (and division) within Christian communities, especially where the doctrine of God as Trinity has not been taught with care and conviction.

Theologically, the biblical teaching that within the eternal Trinity there are three distinct persons - equally God, abiding in harmonious relationships where the Son submits to the Father, and the Spirit issues from the Father and the Son - establishes the concept of "equal but different". The New Testament portrays marriage in similar terms (see Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3) and insists on church order reflecting male leadership (see e.g. 1 Timothy 3:1-7). This makes sense of the otherwise surprising fact that Jesus selected only male apostles and makes it abundantly clear that this debate is about much more than equality.

Still, even where such a foundation is established, there remains the knotty question of precisely how "equal but different" is to be expressed appropriately in our contemporary society. It is clear from the pen of the Apostle Paul that even in the 1st century he was not insisting on a believing woman's complete silence in church (any more than he intended to proscribe for all societies the braiding of hair or the wearing of gold jewellery, or to prescribe greeting with a kiss or the raising of arms in prayer) and yet he does insist on adherence to the ordering of gender distinctives in creation (see 1 Timothy 2). So we need to ask:

1. What does adherence to the principle of "equal but different" involve for a mission society?

2. How should a biblically minded mission society handle sincerely held differences on the outworking of this principle? Can boundary lines be drawn for the fellowship and operation of the society whilst preserving proper scope for the exercise of conscience?

1. Adherence to the biblical principle of “equal but different”

A mission society is not church. We exist to serve churches in their engagement in God's mission. To that extent Crosslinks is not obliged to adopt a position on such questions as the propriety of women leading public services or preaching within a mixed congregation. However the fact that there is a teaching function inherent in the leadership roles of the Mission Director (MD), and those Team Leaders (TLs) who preach, as well as all those who are active mission personnel necessitates that we grapple with the outworking of this principle.

For instance, adherence to the precept of male teaching headship requires that at least some staff posts (i.e. MD and some TLs) should be regarded as gender-specific and therefore filled by suitably gifted and qualified men. Equally, those individuals who undertake gospel ministry in the name of the Society, whether in this country or abroad, should be required to adhere to the “equal but different” principle (see the summary statement at the foot of this paper) since they are operating under Crosslinks’ flag. The same requirement would apply for joining the panel of the Personnel Advisory Group (PAG) selectors and for appointments to the senior staff of the Society. Eligibility to become a Member of Crosslinks (which carries voting rights) involves a formal commitment to orthodox, biblical belief but election to Crosslinks' Council would additionally require affirmation of the “equal but different” principle. Recruitment of all mission personnel will likewise be affected, so that the principle would need to be explained, and its implications spelled out early in the selection process, including its relevance for secondment agreements.

However, because partner churches are not “Crosslinks churches” per se, no such confessional test can or should be applied. Instead it is recognised that partner churches will adopt a range of policies on this issue. Whilst the majority will vary from what is termed a "mild" complementarian position to a "moderate" - or even a "hard" - complementarianism, there will be others that embrace varying degrees of egalitarianism.

This will inevitably throw up complications working within denominational structures, and produce further challenges in our relationships within the wider Anglican Communion, all of which demand clarity of thinking and consistency of practice on our part.

2. The drawing of boundary lines and liberty of conscience

Even where the principle of “equal but different” is agreed there will, from time to time, arise differences of opinion on its outworking so that proper scope for liberty of conscience needs to be provided for (remembering always the Apostle Paul’s teaching about “the weaker brother” and the over-riding imperative of the gospel). Without therefore wishing to impose a wooden uniformity, some attempt needs to be made to establish what could be termed "boundary lines". These agreed parameters would then govern the practice of gospel proclamation, the exercise of pastoral oversight and the ethics of human sexuality within the Society.

Gospel proclamation

Since, as the Apostle Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost, men and women are equally imbued with the Holy Spirit women (as well as men) may clearly function as evangelists, proclaiming the gospel to anyone who will listen. On the other hand, anyone seeking to launch new churches should be male if they propose to lead those churches once they are established.

Pastoral oversight

Within the current structure of the Society the role of Mission Director (MD) includes the exercise of pastoral oversight over Crosslinks' teaching ministry - it therefore necessitates a male candidate. Likewise the Chairman of Council, exercising oversight over the MD, should be male, whereas the role of Vice Chair (which may entail chairing the Council on occasion) does not need to be gender specific.

The requirement for the Chairman of Council and the Mission Director to be male complies with the evangelical Christian doctrines to which Crosslinks subscribes. To do otherwise would conflict with the strongly held convictions of a significant number of the members of Crosslinks as evangelical Christians, and as provided for within Schedule 9 to the Equalities Act 2010.

The position of Operations Director needs to be gender specific only insofar as such an oversight role is envisaged and included.

The role of Team Leader (TL) need not be gender-specific except when there is a preaching and teaching element to the job (in the current structure that would indicate the Church and Member Team (CMT) and Ireland TMs be male, but not the TL of Means of Mission Team (MMT)).

Crosslinks' daily office prayers and bible studies may be led by any suitably competent member of staff, irrespective of gender, on the understanding that this does not constitute the exercise of a teaching ministry (see e.g. the provisions of Colossians 3:16). Prospective staff should be briefed that they would be expected to acquiesce in this, although no one should be required to lead should they prefer not to do so.

The Crosslinks short term programme raises a number of potential difficulties in this regard in the selection of candidates, their subsequent training and orientation, and when serving overseas in a team or seconded as an individual. The relative youthfulness of the participants may also render any dispute on these matters all the more difficult to resolve once abroad, so it is important that this issue is worked through in advance. Our policy is that the leading of group bible studies is neither restricted (see Colossians 3:16), nor required, allowing for conscientious convictions. The exercise of pastoral oversight must always be appropriately gender specific. The co-coordinator of the programme should include this issue in interviews and preparatory meetings, and invite any outside speakers accordingly.

[NB Two essays on this topic by J I PACKER (chapters 13 and 16) in *Engaging with the Written Word of God* (published by Hendrickson in October 2012) make useful reading for exploring the meaning and application of the relevant biblical texts].

Gender and human sexuality

Recognising our fallen nature Christians acknowledge universal corruption in the whole area of human sexuality. We also observe the signal importance attached by the Apostles to distinctive behaviour in this regard within Greco-Roman society. Since, according to the Scriptures, marriage is inviolably a covenant between a man and a woman (whatever the law of the State may say from time to time), anyone involved in a same sex partnership would be precluded from some aspects of involvement with the Society (see detail below). However, acknowledgment of Same Sex Attraction (SSA) would not preclude full involvement, provided a godly lifestyle is being pursued and adhered to. In all of this it is imperative to maintain that grace trumps legalism, and to bear in mind both the universality of sin and the possibility of repentance and a fresh start.

As a consequence the Society will conduct its affairs according to the following considerations:

A. The ordination of women to the presbyterate

In 1993 Crosslinks issued a statement that allowed freedom to disagree within the fellowship of the Society over the question of the ordination of women to the presbyterate. This was authorised by Crosslinks Council on the grounds that there was a legitimate difference of opinion between those who argued that such ordination was permissible because women are to be involved in gospel ministry (and such ministry need not involve disobedience to New Testament norms of church order) and others who objected that such a move would inevitably lead to women exercising an inappropriate leadership in the churches, and was therefore fundamentally wrong. It is generally agreed that the past twenty years have demonstrated that it is possible for women to be ordained and engage in effective gospel ministry without usurping a headship role, and many Crosslinks partner churches have staff teams that reflect this. However, the developments regarding the consecrating of women to the episcopate, and the removing of the so-called double integrity provisions of the 1993 legislation, suggest there was substance to the objectors' case.

The pressure today to conform to the popular egalitarian ethos renders it essential to distinguish between ordination per se and the function or role that such ordination leads to. For, whilst there may be room for disagreement on the former, it has to be insisted that this provides no justification for disregarding the apostolic directive on the practice of leadership in the local church. The effect of this insistence is that whilst a woman may be ordained she should not accept an ecclesiastical appointment that involves inappropriate leadership within a local church, and to do so would render her ineligible for active involvement in the Society. Likewise a man should not accept any appointment that involves him in acquiescing to such inappropriate leadership and to do so would entail the same disqualification.

The outworking of this for Crosslinks' relationships with local churches and broader denominational structures needs to be navigated carefully. We resolve that we will continue to work constructively throughout the Anglican Communion (including with provinces such as Uganda and Kenya, who take a different line on this issue) providing that no Crosslinks personnel are required to assume roles and responsibilities that would compromise their adherence to the policy of the Society.

B. The consecration of women to the episcopate

In accordance with its historical connection with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and its founding as Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (BCMS), Crosslinks is committed to working within the Anglican Communion. This is on the understanding that ultimately it is obedience to the Scriptures that counts, more than conformity to institutional structures. The consecration of a woman to the office of bishop would raise obvious difficulties for those holding a complementarian position, but such difficulties are likely to become critical only if and when a vow of canonical obedience is invited. Provided that this is not required we will always strive to work with anyone properly and duly appointed within the denomination.

This implies that whilst, as a matter of conviction, we might oppose the consecration of women to the episcopate, we would nevertheless determine to work with any such properly appointed person in the cause of the gospel, either in this country or overseas. However Crosslinks staff and mission personnel should not be expected or required to take a vow of canonical obedience to such a bishop against their conscience.

C. The consecration of men or women in civil partnerships as bishops

Depending on the extent to which the office holder was prepared to teach and maintain an orthodox stance on human sexuality, we may or may not be able to work constructively with such a bishop.

D. Marriage and divorce

In accordance with paragraph 2 of schedule 23 to the Equality Act 2010 and section 19 of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and in accordance with the strongly held convictions of a significant number of the members of Crosslinks, marriage is deemed to be between one man and one woman for life. Any variation

from this, apart from dominical provision (see Matthew 19), would possibly restrict and potentially preclude active involvement in the Society.

E. Civil partnership and same sex marriage

In accordance with paragraph 2 of schedule 23 to the Equality Act 2010 and section 19 of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and in accordance with the strongly held convictions of a significant number of the members of Crosslinks, anyone in a legally constituted civil partnership or a legally recognised same sex marriage would, in the absence of repentance, be precluded from active involvement in the Society.

F. Transgender assignation

In accordance with paragraph 2 of schedule 23 to the Equality Act 2010 and section 19 of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and in accordance with the strongly held convictions of a significant number of the members of Crosslinks, anyone who has undergone legally recognised transgender assignation would, in the absence of repentance, be precluded from active involvement in the Society.

G. Friends of Crosslinks

Notwithstanding all of these provisions, anyone and everyone is eligible to become a Friend of Crosslinks, since this carries no confessional test nor provides any right of influence over the Society.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

We understand from scripture that the fundamental nature of men and women, created in the image of God, is to be equal but different. That is, in Christ we are all one, being joint heirs of the kingdom of grace, and yet we remain differentiated according to gender, which carries specific and different roles. This applies to marriage where a husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and a wife is to submit to her husband, and to the local church where every believer is to engage in works of ministry, but leadership is to be male.

We acknowledge that the precise outworking of “equal but different” will vary according to culture, and whilst not wishing to legislate in detail, we recognise that the principle is established and modelled by the inter-relationship of the three persons of the Godhead, within the Eternal Trinity. We therefore affirm the abiding relevance and authority of the apostolic teaching of this principle and reject any suggestion that difference of role necessarily implies inequality of status.