

‘Throughout my career, I have been thankful for Christians whom God has uniquely gifted and called to challenge flawed theological assumptions that demean, obstruct and harm women, families and communities. Andrew Bartlett is one such person. Even more noteworthy is his profound devotion to the church, which inspires his theological analysis and published works. As a writer, theologian, speaker and colleague, Andrew has been used by God to influence not only people in the pews but also theologians around the world.

‘It is therefore an honour to recommend Andrew Bartlett’s new book, *True Complementarity*. He presents a positive vision of God’s purposes for men and women and shows how complementarian interpretations add to God’s word what is not there.

‘As even the United Nations rightly observed, faith leaders are a powerful force in empowering women, who in turn strengthen families and communities. The gospel issues Andrew addresses are not peripheral; they are essential to a faithful witness to Christ and, through the church, to human flourishing.’

Mimi Haddad, PhD, President, CBE International

‘Andrew Bartlett’s 2019 book *Men and Women in Christ* set a high standard in the handling of Scripture. The “devastating thoroughness” and “rigorous scrutiny” which I commended then continues now in a deeper and wider study that listens to many more voices, both contemporary and historical. There is much new material, including Chapter 31, which addresses the differences between the complementarian–mutualist debate and the debate over same-sex unions. This is required reading for anyone who assumes some easy equivalence. I was reminded of Paul taking every thought captive to obeying Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). Andrew’s evident desire and my hope, like that of the apostle, is that this book, by taking us back to Scripture, will bring us more into conformity with Christ – not tearing down his body but building it up.’

The Rt Revd Keith Sinclair, Chair of EFAC (The Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion), 2017–26, Bishop of Birkenhead, UK, 2007–21, National Director of the Church of England Evangelical Council, 2021–23, and Honorary Assistant Bishop in the diocese of Manchester

‘Few scholars are better equipped to navigate this debate than Andrew Bartlett. Having already earned the respect of readers for his careful handling of Scripture, Bartlett brings again to this work a rare qualification: the disciplined judgement of an international arbitrator, entrusted with resolving multinational disputes worth billions of dollars. That training and experience shows on every page. He weighs evidence fairly, distinguishes strong arguments from weak ones and refuses easy conclusions – all the while exposing where assumptions hide, where reasoning fails and where tradition has been mistaken for biblical authority.

‘Bartlett combines meticulous biblical scholarship, an extraordinary command of the history of interpretation, wide engagement with contemporary voices and analytical precision. This unique combination enables him to assess competing interpretations with exceptional clarity – and to produce one of the most comprehensive and rigorous studies yet seen on the vital and life-enhancing topic of what Scripture teaches about the way of Christ for men and women.

‘Whether readers ultimately agree with every conclusion or not, anyone who is serious about understanding Scripture’s teaching on this subject cannot afford to ignore this remarkable work – probably the best on the topic, one to which I will return with gratitude and admiration again and again for years to come.’

Terran Williams, MTh, co-pastor of Nova Church, Cape Town, South Africa, co-leader of the A2 Movement, and author of *What’s So Amazing About Scripture?* and *How God Sees Women*

After studying law at Oxford, **Andrew Bartlett KC** practised as a barrister for more than forty years. He has served as a judge in the UK. He is a highly rated international arbitrator, deciding multinational disputes. He has a BA in Theology (University of Gloucestershire; first class honours and Bible Society prize). He has served in several churches as an elder or churchwarden and has been involved for many years in ministry to international students. He and his wife rejoice in God's gift of three children and five grandchildren.

TRUE COMPLEMENTARITY

TRUE COMPLEMENTARITY

The way of Christ for men and women

Andrew Bartlett



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To Elisabeth, my truly complementary partner for more than half a century. I
have no sufficient words for my appreciation.

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1

Why this book?

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11 NIV)

Why?

If you care about the truth of God's word, and about people made in his image, this book is for you. If you want to live more like Jesus, it is for you. If you care about the honour of God's name, it is for you.

God has made men and women in his image. And he has made them to be truly complementary – to be human, and to be male and female. The same, yet also wonderfully different. This is the genesis of true community.

When human beings reject God's way and go their own way, his image is distorted, like a reflection in a bent mirror. Sin disfigures people. By disfiguring people, it builds a twisted culture. Power is misused. 'He will rule over you' (Gen. 3:16). But Jesus is fashioning a new community of people in the image of God.

'Complementarians' hold that men and women are of equal value in God's sight, yet God has allocated men and women different 'roles' – in marriage and the family, in the Church, and perhaps in wider society. Complementarianism is defined by its founding document – the 1988 Danvers Statement, which many respected scholars, teachers and pastors have endorsed.¹ The genius, the spirit, of complementarianism is that it appeals to God's word to resist and reverse a tide of cultural degradation and

¹ The Danvers Statement was written in 1987 and published the following year. It can easily be found online; see Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood 1988. The 'Purposes' section does not appear in the downloadable pdf. The Scripture references in the 'Affirmations' section do not appear in the version in appendix 2 of *RBMW*.

Why this book?

also to offer a ‘new vision’ which corrects past errors in the Church.² But there is a problem, both of theory and of practice.

Complementarianism declares a sincere commitment to be faithful to God’s word, but we will see on close examination that it still groans under the traditions of men.

The practice of complementarianism is supposed to lead to healthy communities, to harmonious, God-glorifying marriages, to men honouring women as joint heirs of the gift of life (1 Pet. 3:7). But painful testimonies of hurting people say that it does not. Is that because of ordinary human sinfulness, or is there something problematic in the nature of complementarianism, because it restricts and diminishes women? A recent book by Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher, which argues for a wholehearted embracing of complementarianism, recognises that people perceive and experience it as a focus on boundaries – on the question of what women are not allowed to do, simply because they are women. They lament this focus.³ Yet their own book exemplifies it, repeatedly coming back to that question.⁴

My aim in this book is twofold. First, to compare complementarian teachings with what Scripture says, and so to argue that on some crucial points they add to God’s word. Second, to present the Bible’s vision of true complementarity – of sameness and difference – of men and women walking together in the way of Christ, working humbly and joyfully together, creating healthy communities together and becoming more like Jesus. Unity in community.

Please do not mishear what I am saying. Complementarian scholars and teachers are brothers and sisters in Christ. Their aims are noble. They want to be faithful to God and to his word. They have rightly worked to correct a woeful error brought into the Church on the tide of human culture: the belief that women are inferior to men in their human nature. But I believe they have stopped short. They have not corrected the subjection of women to men. In this respect, they unwittingly insist on human traditions, saying what God has not said. And they restrict women’s use of the spiritual gifts which the Lord has given for building up the body of Christ and for blessing the world. By holding back women, they are holding back the gospel.

I have just spoken of ‘complementarianism’ as if it were a monolithic viewpoint, to be distinguished from a different view, commonly labelled

² *RBMW*: 10–11.

³ Beynon and Tooher 2022: 10, 14–15.

⁴ Beynon and Tooher 2022: 20–1, 33, 84, 102, 105, 106, 109, 110, 113–27, 130, 138, 141–6.

‘egalitarianism’. At a high level of generality, that is legitimate. But in real life, and in the details, things are very far from being so tidy. For example, among the worldwide conservative Anglicans in Gafcon, the majority view is against women bishops, yet Gafcon also includes conservative women bishops, as in Kenya. And we must speak of ‘complementarian teachings’ – plural – because they are many, and sometimes conflicting, and any individual complementarian will agree with only some of them. In the debate among Bible-affirming⁵ Christians over men and women, views of self-declared complementarians and self-declared egalitarians often overlap. And there is much variation and disagreement within the two overlapping groups. Many arguments on both sides of the debate need to be called out as unsatisfactory scholarship.

The conventional labels do not even begin to reveal the issues which need to be resolved. In *secular* egalitarianism, men and women are seen not as people in community, who owe obligations to God and neighbour, but as individual holders of equal rights, and therefore autonomous persons with a sovereign right to choose their own identities. In the context of the present discussion *no one*, even when labelled as egalitarian, accepts that godless philosophy. Yet so-called ‘complementarians’ agree that men and women are essentially *equal*. And so-called ‘egalitarians’ agree that God created men and women to be different and *complementary*. In preference to the term ‘egalitarian’, the biblical balance would be better expressed as ‘mutualist’, which points to both true equality and true complementarity.

Like sheep, human beings and human institutions have a tendency to stray. The seventeenth-century slogan *semper reformanda* means ‘always being reformed’. It can be a handy slogan, but it needs to be correctly applied. It is not calling us back to a set of interpretations held by one particular tribe within God’s Church. It calls us back to God’s word, to see what it really says, and to allow our lives to be reshaped into the likeness of Jesus.

The apostle Paul was delighted with the Bereans. Being of noble character, they examined the Scriptures every day to see if his message was true (Acts 17:11). That is the spirit in which I invite you to join me in this book, to examine the Scriptures together, to see what they say and what they do not say.

5 I use the terms ‘Bible-affirming’ or ‘Bible-honouring’ as shorthand for ‘accepting the authority of Scripture as God’s word’. The traditional term ‘evangelical’ remains valid globally but is in danger of losing its usefulness because in the USA it has become a political label.

Adding to God's word

Complementarian teachings say that leadership in the Church should be exclusively male. But Jesus did not say so.⁶

In these teachings, Genesis 2 and 3 show that God has appointed men to give benevolent leadership to women or to their wives. But there is no statement or command from God anywhere in Scripture that men ought to lead their wives, or women.⁷

In these teachings, 'male' and 'female' are qualities that should be taught. Masculinity is about leading women; and femininity is about being led by men. But the Bible nowhere says this and nowhere instructs what a man should do in order to be masculine or what a woman should do in order to be feminine. God has created us male and female. We can take joy in what he has made us. We do not need to work at being what we already are.⁸

In these teachings, there is a God-ordained principle that women may not lead men or exercise authority over them. But the Old Testament shows otherwise.⁹

In these teachings, the responsibility for making every decision in a marriage rests with the husband. But in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul teaches that husband and wife have the same authority, and he instructs that decisions about sexual relations and about praying together be made by mutual consent.¹⁰

In these teachings, Ephesians 5 mandates that husbands lead their wives and exercise authority over them. But this is not said in any command or statement of duty addressed to men in this text. The effect of Paul's teaching is that husbands must climb down from the high position where law and custom have placed them and serve their wives with humble love like lowly slaves. Because of their physical strength and social advantages, husbands bear an increased responsibility of self-sacrificial love and service towards their wives.¹¹

In these teachings, 1 Peter 3 shows that God's design has placed husbands in a position of one-way authority over their wives. But Peter does not say so.¹²

6 Chs 3–4 below.

7 Chs 5–6.

8 Ch. 7.

9 Ch. 8.

10 Ch. 9.

11 Chs 10–11.

12 Ch. 12.

Why this book?

In these teachings, women should not speak God's message in public to an audience which includes men. But on the day of Pentecost, under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit, women proclaimed the mighty acts of God in public, alongside men.¹³

In these teachings, certain tasks of leadership and teaching in the Church are restricted to men. But the apostles teach that God has distributed gifts of leadership and teaching to his people, and they make no distinction between gifts for men and gifts for women.¹⁴

In these teachings, it was only acceptable for Paul's co-worker Priscilla to teach and correct Apollos because she did so in private, not in public. But no such distinction between private and public teaching is made in the New Testament.¹⁵

In these teachings, either Junia was a man or she was not an apostle like Barnabas or Silas. But in Romans 16:7 Paul commends her as an outstanding apostle.¹⁶

In these teachings, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11 about a hierarchy of authorities, which supports restrictions on the ministries of women. But he does not say so. That interpretation is in visible conflict with what he says. That text places no restriction on the scope of women's ministries. Paul depicts men and women ministering together, in true complementarity.¹⁷

In these teachings, Paul instructs in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 that women should not participate in the weighing of prophecies. But that is not what the text says. And on close examination it appears that those two verses are not Paul's own view.¹⁸

In these teachings, 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits women from being pastors or elders. But that text does not mention pastors or elders.¹⁹

In these teachings, the same verse prohibits all women from teaching and exercising authority over men in a manner appropriate for a New Testament church elder. It is often said that this is the plain reading. But careful examination will show that it is not. Paul's language is not apt for a general

13 Ch. 13.

14 Ch. 13.

15 Ch. 14.

16 Chs 15–17.

17 Chs 18–20.

18 Chs 21–22.

19 Ch. 23.

Why this book?

rule of conduct. Nor does he use a word which is suited to the benevolent exercise of authority by an elder.²⁰

In these teachings, 1 Timothy 2:13 declares a creation principle of men's authority over women. But that is not what it says.²¹

In these teachings, the childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:15 stands for a woman's domestic 'role', and she will be saved if she adheres to it, but there is a much better interpretation of this strange verse, one that arises from the context, reflects Paul's train of thought, is centred on Jesus and offers hope to women.²²

In these teachings, Paul's lists of qualifications for church elders in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1 mandate that only men may be elders. But some prominent complementarian scholars, after careful attention to Paul's Greek text, candidly advise that this is not so.²³

In these teachings, recognising women as full partners with men – including removing restrictions on women's ministries – is a slippery slope which leads to acceptance of same-sex marriage. But this is a confused perspective, which misses the real issues about the authority of Scripture and the historic witness of the Church.²⁴

I do not mean that, in contrast, egalitarians have everything right. But I am convinced that the narrow way – affirming the difference and true complementarity of men and women while also affirming their full equality – is a good way, a liberating way, the way of Christ, a way that leads to fullness of life.

A deeper dive

In my 2019 book *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh light from the biblical texts*, I dipped my toes into the water of the very large debate about men, women and the Bible. I listened chiefly to two able, Bible-affirming advocates, one from each side, and adjudicated between them.²⁵

This book is a deeper dive and a wider survey. I have listened to a much wider range of voices, both historical and contemporary. I have dealt with many aspects of the debate in more detail than before.

20 Chs 24–27.

21 Ch. 28.

22 Ch. 29.

23 Ch. 30.

24 Ch. 31.

25 Wayne Grudem and Philip Payne.

Why this book?

In the former book, I tried to listen as a neutral and to adjudicate as a neutral. Many reviewers, not having personal experience of my day job as a judge and as an international arbitrator, could not imagine that such an approach could even be possible. But it happens daily in law courts and arbitral proceedings. Deliberately adopt an open mind on the issues being presented; listen carefully to both sides; assess the evidence; go where the best reasoning leads. Such concepts are not new:

To answer before listening –
that is folly and shame . . .

In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right,
until someone comes forward and cross-examines.
(Prov. 18:13, 17 NIV)

I reached firm conclusions which displeased both sides, though not in equal measure. Egalitarians were displeased because I found that Paul's head-and-body metaphor for husband-and-wife was stubbornly asymmetrical. The husband is called to a special responsibility of self-sacrificial love towards his wife. That is a complementarian conclusion. But hierarchical complementarians, who believe in a husband's God-given authority over his wife, were displeased because I did not find such a hierarchy in Scripture. And they were equally displeased with my conclusion on women's ministry. On that issue, I had expected to find reasonably strong and finely balanced arguments on both sides, meaning that any conclusion on it could only be tentative. But when I took hold of the arguments for restricting the ministry of women, to my surprise, they crumbled away.

The shape of this new book is different. While writing, I have been continually reminded of a phenomenon which I have seen over and over again in the conduct of legal cases: there is a momentum which starts to run in one direction only. Conviction grows. With every piece of new information which emerges – every new document unearthed, every new fact grasped, every new understanding of what that person really meant when they wrote that letter – the case of one side becomes stronger and the other becomes weaker. I have become more and more an enthusiast for what I believe to be the Bible's teaching on the mutuality and true complementarity of men and women. It is truly life-giving. My prayer is that this will be your journey also.

The Church is hungry for life-giving teaching which honours Christ and is faithful to God's word. My heart goes out to women who hear God's call to

serve him, yet also hear, from teachers they respect, that their service must be restricted. I believe we can have greater confidence in distinguishing between commands of God and traditions of men. The object of this book is to build that confidence by taking a broader approach. That is why it examines some of the issues in more detail, considers a wider range of biblical texts, and listens to more voices, including many from the past.

To an unexpected degree, this second voyage has been a voyage of discovery. When I started it, I had little understanding of the significance of the Great Commission for our subject (Matt. 28:18–20). I had no inkling that I would find a seventeenth-century egalitarian Christian philosopher.²⁶ And there have been many more surprises.

The difficult task of listening

In 2019, I lamented the disturbing polarisation which divided the Church on these issues. I contrasted the Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Movement, founded by Billy Graham and John Stott. The Commitment stated, ‘We recognize that there are different views sincerely held by those who seek to be faithful and obedient to Scripture’.²⁷

Sad to say, the polarisation has deepened. The world’s largest evangelical Protestant denomination – the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) – has had a small number of women pastors for at least sixty years.²⁸ But it has recently taken energetic action to expel churches which employ any woman whom they describe as ‘pastor’. Many argued for that action on the ground that *there is only one view held by those who seek to be faithful and obedient to Scripture*. That is a bold stance, given that our English versions of the New Testament mention the term ‘pastor’ only once, in Ephesians 4:11,²⁹ and in that passage there is not one word about a requirement that ‘pastors’ be men. In the ESV, which appears to be the version most favoured by complementarians, the term ‘pastor’ does not appear at all.

On the other side of the discussion, shrill voices have trumpeted the scandalous misdeeds of some bad apples among complementarian teachers and pastors as if that were proof of the wrongheadedness of their beliefs about men and women. But if a bad person believes the earth is a globe, their

26 François Poullain de la Barre; see ch. 2, under ‘Minority historical voices’.

27 Lausanne Movement 2011. Bartlett 2019: 1–4.

28 Barr 2025: ‘The first woman to be ordained in the SBC was Addie Davis in 1964.’

29 See, for example, AV, ASV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, CSB, NIV, NKJV, NET.

misconduct is not evidence that the earth is flat. While a few complementarians may be driven by base motives, perhaps even using a claim of adherence to Scripture as a cloak for maintaining domination, most of them are not like that. Most are kind-hearted, thoughtful, reliable, godly people, who want to follow Jesus by following Scripture as they have understood it.

The polarisation divides those who ought to be united. Jesus prays for the unity of those who will follow him (John 17:11, 20–23), so that the world will know that he was sent by the Father. In a Christ-centred view of the world, this is a vitally important objective. The apostolic instruction to make every effort to maintain unity (Eph. 4:3–6) requires a fresh conversation on a basis of mutual respect. But a good-faith desire to follow Christ does not guarantee ability to listen.

When my 2019 book was published, I expected it to be criticised from both sides, especially from the complementarian side. And that duly happened. Frank feedback can be very valuable if it relates to what one has written. What I did not expect was that reviews by complementarians would be written as if the reviewer had read a different book from the one that I wrote.

It is a fact of life that partisan commitments make it hard to listen well. But without listening there can be no learning. The Bereans listened well. I hope we may be Bereans together. Where I have misunderstood what others have written, I will be pleased to be corrected.

I repeat a plea I made to both sides:

To make progress towards unity it will be necessary for those who have taken up opposing positions in the evangelical debate to acknowledge that this is not a primary gospel issue, to look afresh at the biblical arguments, to take care to use only sound methods of interpretation, and especially to pay closer attention and give more weight to context and to the train of thought in the relevant texts.³⁰

Practical tips

While in this book I often disagree with what complementarian scholars have written, I also acknowledge much of value. I often cite them with agreement. It may be useful to know when I am relying on the work of a complementarian scholar. In case it helps, I have put the main names in

30 Bartlett 2019: 356.

a footnote below.³¹ My 2019 book was dedicated to ‘all scholars, whether complementarian, egalitarian or unaligned, who with sincere hearts and true faith have laboured to understand and explain God’s word concerning men and women’. This was sincere. I offer this new book in the same spirit.

For wider accessibility, I write as if the reader knew no Greek and no grammar. Where my explanations are not needed, I ask for patience, for the sake of others who may need them. Translations from the New Testament are my own, except where otherwise stated. My purpose is not to provide smooth English but to help readers get a reasonable idea of the individual words or phrases being discussed, without needing to consult a Greek New Testament or lexicon. I generally show Greek words in English letters and usually in their dictionary form.³²

For group study, there are questions at the end of every chapter except the first and the last. The book is designed to be read through, from beginning to end, but it can also be used as a reference source.³³ I hope we can continue the discussion at complementarity.org as a safe space for enquiry and interaction. Writing to a church where people were divided, Paul said: ‘In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2:5 NIV). By God’s mercy, may that be true of us.

Our first question

The terms ‘egalitarian’ and ‘complementarian’ are modern labels for two contrasting viewpoints. But what about the substance of those viewpoints – to what extent is the substance new, in either case?

To see the modern debate in perspective, we must ask a historical question. Before those two terms were invented, what did Christians generally believe about the nature of women, as compared with men? This is our question for chapter 2. Whatever our current view, it is sobering to see where we have come from.

31 These are the main complementarian (or in some cases patriarchal) scholars or teachers whom I cite: Arnold, Baldwin, Baugh, Beale, Beynon, Blomberg, Borland, Burer, Burk, Carson (Don), DeYoung, Doriani, Elliot (Elisabeth), Frame, Garriss, Grudem, Hensley, Hurley, James, Knight, Köstenberger (Andreas and Margaret), Kuruvilla, Mohler, Moo, Mounce, Orlund (Ray), Patterson (Paige, and Dorothy), Pawson, Piper, Ponder, Poythress, Roberts (Alastair), Sandom, Schreiner (Tom), Shaw, Smith (Claire), Smothers, Storms, Thielman, Tooher, Wallace, Weinrich, Wilson (Andrew), Winger, Wolters, Yarbrough.

32 When needed, I show the inflected form, where the altered form of the word reflects its grammatical function.

33 For the record, this book is guaranteed human. Nothing in it was drafted by the use of artificial intelligence (AI), nor have I relied on any online search answer provided by AI.

2

A brief history of women's inferiority

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.
(Rev. 5:10 NIV)

History matters

To understand where we are, it is necessary to know where we have come from. In the long history of the Church, both egalitarianism and complementarianism are unusual and novel – not completely so, but to a significant degree.

Through most of church history, women have been subordinated to men's leadership not only in marriage or in the Church but across all spheres of human life. Until recently, the key reason given for subordinating women was their inferiority to men – an inferiority not merely in rank but in their human nature. This inferiority was learned not from Scripture but from human philosophy and culture.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle lived in the fourth century BC. His writings had an enormous influence on the Church. He justified the rule of man over woman by reference to man's greater powers of reasoning and greater ability to rule. He writes:

the male is more fitted to rule than the female, unless conditions are quite abnormal . . . As between male and female this relationship of superior and inferior is permanent.¹

¹ Aristotle, *The Politics* 1.12, in Sinclair 1962. Locations of quotes from ancient sources are styled here in the format '1.12', meaning 'book 1, chapter 12'.

In the soul the difference between ruler and ruled is that between the rational and the non-rational . . . Thus the deliberative faculty in the soul is not present at all in a slave; in a female it is inoperative . . .²

What does he mean by abnormal conditions in which a woman rules? This occurs where rule over a household is based on money instead of on merit. He explains:

Husband and wife live together in a sort of aristocracy. That is to say, the man is master, as is right and proper . . . the natural superior. But sometimes it is the wife who takes charge, as may happen when she is an heiress. In that event authority does not go by merit but by money and influence . . .³

Aristotle's predecessor, Plato, is sometimes held up as an enlightened outlier because, in contrast to Aristotle, he believed in the essential similarity of men's and women's souls. This sounds better until one appreciates his scheme of thought. According to Plato, a soul who failed to live well as a man, not mastering his passions, would be appropriately reincarnated as a woman and afterwards, if still persistent in evil and wickedness, as an animal.⁴ The superiority of the male was even held up as justifying male same-sex unions as preferable to the love of women. According to Plato's *Symposium*, the common sort of men love women no less than boys, but those men who are inspired by the Eros of the Heavenly Aphrodite turn only 'to the male, delighting in what is by nature stronger and possessed of more intelligence'.⁵

The traditional belief in men's superiority of merit has often been seen as reflected even in the forms of our language. To be good is to have *virtue*, to be *virtuous*, associated with Latin *vir*, meaning 'man', in distinction from 'woman'.

After centuries of debate – especially in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries – by the late 1980s the majority view in the Church had shifted to a recognition of the true equality of women's nature with men's. Here are three statements from 1988 and 1989, from Roman Catholics, from egalitarian

2 Aristotle, *The Politics* 1.13.

3 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* 8.10, in Thomson 1955.

4 Plato, *Timaeus* 42. Likewise, in *The Republic*, book 5, 455, Plato says through the mouth of Socrates that in all occupations women are the weaker partners.

5 Plato, *Symposium* 181c, in the speech of Pausanius, in Allen 1991.

Protestants, and from other Protestants, who began calling themselves complementarians.

- 1 (Roman Catholic) 'The biblical text provides sufficient bases for recognizing the essential equality of man and woman from the point of view of their humanity.'
- 2 (Egalitarian Protestant) 'The Bible teaches that woman and man were created for full and equal partnership.'
- 3 (Complementarian) 'Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons'.⁶

A similar shift took place in the Orthodox churches.⁷ These reassessments of the nature of women do not represent an adoption of feminism, but they were partly triggered by waves of feminism, which drove the Church back to the Bible to look again at what the Bible really taught about women. When women's leadership or women's ordination are opposed by parts of the Church today, the reasons given do not usually include the traditional reason of women's innate inferiority.

The traditional majority view of women

The traditional majority Christian view regarded women as inferior to men in both rank and nature. Men, because of their innate superiority, were to be the primary leaders in all spheres of life.

When comparing women with men, the majority opinion was that women were less intelligent, less able to reason, more prone to sin, and unfit for the kinds of leadership which men were able to provide. Some teachers believed that this was the way God originally created them, while others understood women's defective nature to be a result of 'the Fall'. Some believed that God originally created women inferior and the Fall made this inferiority more severe.⁸

The traditional majority view was supported by clear writings of the church fathers only a few hundred years after New Testament times, especially in the

6 No. 1 is John Paul II 2018: section 6. No. 2 is from the Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality, published by Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE International 1989). No. 3 is from the Danvers Statement, affirmation 1 (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood 1988).

7 See Witt 2020: 211.

8 More on this in ch. 5 below.

fourth and fifth centuries. Summarising the range of pre-Reformation views, complementarian scholar Daniel Doriani states:

Some theologians believed women were intellectually inferior to men, and prone to deception, others held that they were simply less interested in reason. Some believed the sensual nature dominated women. One way or another, most theologians doubted that women had the moral and intellectual capacity to meet the doctrinal and apologetic needs of the church's public life.⁹

The traditional view of women as naturally inferior remained the majority view until the twentieth century. It is found in the writings of Christian teachers through the ages, including some of the faith's best-known luminaries:¹⁰

In about AD 190, Clement of Alexandria considers it will help women to be modest if they reflect on the inferiority of their nature:

For nothing disgraceful is proper for man, who is endowed with reason; much less for woman to whom it brings modesty even to reflect of what nature she is [T]he mark of the man, the beard, by which he is seen to be a man, is older than Eve, and is the token of the superior nature.¹¹

In about 400, John Chrysostom considers women unable to handle matters of importance:

If the more important, most beneficial concerns were turned over to the woman, she would go quite mad. Therefore God did not apportion both duties to one sex . . . Nor did God assign both to be equal in every way . . . But taking precautions at one and the same time for peace and for decency, God maintained the order of each sex by dividing the business of human life into two parts and assigned the more necessary and beneficial aspects

9 Doriani 1995: 235–6. Note that Doriani's history is not always reliable. For example, he misses that the early modern debate over whether women have souls was satirical (see 219). In 1595, Valens Acidalius wrote (anonymously) *Disputatio nova contra mulieres, qua probatur eas homines non esse* ('New argument against women, by which it is proved that they are not humans'). After some readers took it seriously, it was placed on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books. See Watson [no date].

10 For brevity I give a limited selection of citations here. In the course of the book, there will be many more.

11 Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 2.1; 3.3 (ANF).

to the man and the less important, inferior matters to the woman. God's plan was extremely desirable for us . . . so that a woman would not rebel against the husband due to the inferiority of her service.¹²

In about 418, Augustine of Hippo cannot think of any use for woman as man's helper except to bear children:

If it were not the case that the woman was created to be man's helper specifically for the production of children, then why would she have been created as a 'helper'? Was it so that she might work the land with him? No . . . a male would have made a better assistant. One can also posit that the reason for her creation as a helper had to do with the companionship she could provide for the man . . . Yet for company and conversation, how much more agreeable it is for two male friends to dwell together than for a man and a woman! . . . I cannot think of any reason for a woman's being made as a man's helper, if we dismiss the reason of procreation.¹³

Even in God's original and 'very good' creation (Gen. 1:31), fleshly woman was given a mind of smaller intelligence than spiritual man, and this is part of Augustine's explanation for the Fall:

That a man endowed with a spiritual mind could have believed this [the lie of the serpent] is astonishing. And just because it is impossible to believe it, woman was given to man, woman who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by the superior reason.¹⁴

In about 1258, Albertus Magnus (the teacher of Aquinas) teaches that men's intellect moves men to do good, while women's sensual nature and lack of intellect drive women into sin:

For a woman is a flawed male and, in comparison to the male, has the nature of defect and privation, and this is why naturally she mistrusts herself. And this is why whatever she cannot acquire on her own she strives to acquire through mendacity and diabolical deceptions. Therefore,

12 Chrysostom, *The Kind of Women Who Ought to Be Taken As Wives* 4, in Clark 1983: 37.

13 Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 9.5, in Clark 1983: 28–9.

14 Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 11.42, in Clark 1983: 40.

to speak briefly, one must be as mistrustful of every woman as of a venomous serpent and a horned devil . . . the female is more prudent, that is, cleverer, than the male with respect to evil and perverse deeds . . . In this way, the woman falls short in intellectual operations, which consist in the apprehension of the good and in knowledge of truth and flight from evil . . . sense moves the female to every evil, just as intellect moves a man to every good.¹⁵

In 1273, Thomas Aquinas – perhaps the greatest theologian of the Catholic Church – is sure that adult women are defective in their ability to reason:

Now the reliability of a person's evidence is weakened . . . sometimes, without any fault on his part, and this owing . . . to a defect in the reason, as in the case of children, imbeciles and women . . .¹⁶

In about 1535, Martin Luther likewise considers that women's weak minds make them inferior to men:

For woman seems to be a creature somewhat different from man, in that she has dissimilar members, a varied form and a mind weaker than man . . . For as the sun is more glorious than the moon, though the moon is a most glorious body, so woman, although she was a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige . . . this sex . . . is inferior to the male sex.¹⁷

Around 1546, John Calvin sees women's very existence as secondary to men's and believes it is common sense that women are naturally subject to men:

the woman was created afterwards, in order that she might be a kind of appendage to the man . . .¹⁸

15 Albertus Magnus, *Questions Concerning Aristotle's On Animals*, book 15, question 11: Whether the male is better suited for proper behaviour [mores] than the female, in Resnick 2008: 454.

16 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, second part of part 2, question 70, article 3, answer (tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920).

17 Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1 – 5*, Gen. 1:27, in Pelikan 1958: 69.

18 Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, 1 Tim. 2:13, in W. Pringle 1856. Note: Calvin's Commentaries are conveniently available at Christian Classics Ethereal Library: ccel.org.

the woman was created for this purpose – that she might be a distinguished ornament of the man . . .

Let the woman be satisfied with her state of subjection, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex . . .

Unquestionably, wherever even natural propriety has been maintained, women have in all ages been excluded from the public management of affairs. It is the dictate of common sense, that female government is improper and unseemly.¹⁹

Calvin comments on John's account of the resurrection:

It may be thought strange . . . that he does not produce more competent witnesses; for he begins with a woman; but thus the saying is fulfilled, that God chooseth what is weak, and foolish, and contemptible in the world, that he may bring to nought the wisdom, and excellence, and glory, of the flesh.²⁰

Accordingly, when Jesus sends Mary Magdalene to the disciples with the news of his resurrection, Calvin writes:

this was done by way of reproach, because they had been so tardy and sluggish to believe. And, indeed, they deserve not only to have *women* for their teachers, but even oxen and asses.²¹

When the Church of England was established, the inferiority of women's nature was incorporated into its official teaching. A homily was appointed to be read in all churches, which contrasts wives unfavourably with husbands:

For the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind: therefore they be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weak affections and dispositions of mind, more than men be; and lighter they be and more vain in their fantasies and opinions.²²

19 Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 1 Cor. 11:7; 1 Cor. 11:12; 1 Cor. 14:34, in J. Pringle 1848.

20 Calvin, *Commentary on John*, John 20:1, in W. Pringle 1847. Note that Calvin applies the description 'weak and contemptible' to Mary Magdalene as a faithful woman, but to the male apostles only because they 'basely apostasized' (John 20:17–18).

21 Calvin, *Commentary on John*, John 20:17–18, in W. Pringle 1847 (emphasis original to the translation).

22 The second *Book of Homilies*, homily 18, 'The State of Matrimony'. The teaching of this homily is

In 1597, Richard Hooker – perhaps the premier theologian of Anglicanism – says men must make decisions for women because of women's natural imbecility:

things equal in every respect are never willingly directed one by another: woman therefore was even in her first estate framed by Nature, not only after in time, but inferior in excellency also unto man . . . [I]n ancient times . . . women . . . were in marriage delivered unto their husbands by others. Which custom retained hath still this use, that it putteth women in mind of a duty whereunto the very imbecility of their nature and sex doth bind them; namely to be always directed, guided and ordered by others.²³

In 1665, the Puritan theologian Richard Baxter advises men, before they decide to marry, to consider how much patience they will need in view of women's defective nature:

it is no small patience which the natural imbecility of the female sex requireth you to prepare. Except it be very few that are patient and manlike, women are commonly of potent fantasies, and tender, passionate, impatient spirits, easily cast into anger, or jealousy, or discontent; and of weak understandings, and therefore unable to reform themselves. They are betwixt a man and a child: some few have more of the man, and many have more of the child; but most are but in a middle state.²⁴

In 1755, the great evangelist John Wesley thinks the apostle Paul banned women's teaching because of women's particular gullibility and deceptiveness. He says of 1 Timothy 2:14:

this shows why she ought not 'to teach'. She is more easily deceived, and more easily deceives.²⁵

expressly endorsed by article 35 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.

- 23 R. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* 5.73. In the preface, at 13, Hooker says that his opponents (Puritan Presbyterians) concentrate on winning women to their cause because women are those 'whose judgments are commonly weakest by reason of their sex'. He reasons: 'if the cause which is thus furthered did gain by the soundness of proof whereupon it doth build itself, it would not most busily endeavour to prevail where least ability of judgment is.'
- 24 R. Baxter, *A Christian Directory, part 2: Christian Economics*, ch. 1: Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/43800. The quoted section was written about 1665, published in 1673. Haykin (2017), writing for The Gospel Coalition, recommends the sections on marriage in Baxter's *Christian Directory* without any word of caution concerning Baxter's unbiblical view of women.
- 25 J. Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament* (1755), p. 561. The quote is viewable at Internet Archive: <https://>

In about 1831, Methodist theologian Adam Clarke explains that women cannot participate in public life because the structure of their bodies makes them naturally inferior:

The structure of woman's body plainly proves that she was never designed for those exertions required in public life. In this the chief part of the natural inferiority of woman is to be sought.²⁶

In 1860, the Reformed theologian Charles Hodge declares the reason why a wife should obey her husband: it is because of the husband's superior natural attributes:

The ground of the obligation . . . is the eminency of the husband; his superiority in those attributes which enable and entitle him to command . . . This superiority of the man . . . thus taught in Scripture, founded in nature, and proved by all experience, cannot be denied.²⁷

In some parts of the Church, the traditional belief in women's innate inferiority has persisted into the twenty-first century, as exemplified in 2004 by US pastor Mark Driscoll:

when it comes to leading in the church, women are unfit because they are more gullible and easier to deceive than men. While many irate women have disagreed with . . . [Paul's] assessment through the years, it does appear from this that such women who fail to trust his instruction and follow his teaching are much like their mother Eve and are well-intentioned but ill-informed . . .²⁸

According to complementarian Sharon James, reviewing my 2019 book for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), 'the suggestion that Christians in a pre-feminist era believed in female "inferiority" owes more to radical feminist rhetoric than any understanding of church history'.²⁹

archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_explanatory-notes-upon-t_1755/page/560/mode/2up (accessed 13 April 2026).

26 A. Clarke, *The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, 1 Tim. 2:13.

27 C. Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Eph. 5:23.

28 Burk 2018, citing M. Driscoll, *Church Leadership: Explaining the roles of Jesus, elders, deacons, and members at Mars Hill*, Mars Hill Theology Series (Seattle: Mars Hill Church, 2004).

29 James 2020.

But that is incorrect. These historic views are well documented. They cannot be dismissed as invented by radical feminists, or fictional, or extreme, or unfairly selective, or taken out of context.

According to complementarian Dorothy Patterson, ‘Through the ages some have held that women are inferior to men, but the attempt to attribute such an idea to Scripture is unthinkable.’³⁰ But that is how they thought and how they read Scripture. From Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century to Charles Hodge in the nineteenth, these thinkers were in the mainstream of Christian thought. They include the illustrious names of Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Hooker, Baxter, Wesley. In the course of this book, we will see further expressions of these views. They have deeply impacted how Scripture is understood on matters affecting women.³¹

Inferior only in rank?

In most modern complementarian teachings, women are inferior to men only in their rank – that is, in their so-called ‘roles’, not in their inherent nature. In these teachings, the traditional word ‘inferior’ remains acceptable, provided that it is referring only to women’s *position* of being subordinate to men and not to their inherent *nature*.

James says that my historical understanding ‘ignores the distinction between function and ontology’. It ‘borders on slander toward the testimony of the body of Christ through the past two millennia, and, more broadly, is a caricature of history’.³² Following James, complementarian Douglas Ponder says the problem with my analysis of the traditional majority view is that I persistently misunderstand the use of the terms ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ in their historical contexts. Referring to Ambrose, Chrysostom, Aquinas and Calvin, he says: ‘In every case . . . the context makes clear that the use of “superior” and “inferior” refer not to worth or dignity, but to order and subordination.’³³

But these critiques are wide of the mark. To quote what traditional commentators wrote and taught is not slander but truth, though it may be unpalatable truth. Certainly, the word ‘inferior’ can be used to say that one

30 *RBMW*: 379.

31 See especially chs 5, 11, 21, 23.

32 James 2020.

33 Ponder 2024: 152–4. He derives this critique from James 2020, who radically misread my 2019 book as conflating ‘function’ with ‘ontology’.

person is in a lower position than another (what James calls 'function'). But it can also be used to say that a person is inferior in their human nature (what James calls 'ontology'). In traditional commentary, both of these uses of 'inferior' are found, because both kinds of inferiority are applied to women.³⁴ Even when this particular word is not used, the belief in inferiority of nature is apparent. When Calvin describes woman as an 'appendage' or 'ornament' to man, this does not give her equal worth; it devalues her in her very being.

And there is a bigger point, which James and Ponder miss.³⁵ In the thinking of the traditional majority, which is contaminated by Greek philosophy and culturally distorted perceptions, *it is women's innate inferiority of nature which justifies their inferiority of position*. We have already seen this in Chrysostom, Hooker and Hodge. This belief is regularly expressed with great clarity.

Augustine says:

it is a natural order among humans that women serve men . . . because it is justice that the weaker reason serves the stronger . . . it is clear justice that those who are pre-eminent in reason should be pre-eminent in mastery.³⁶

Aquinas says: 'woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates'.³⁷ In 1558, the Reformer John Knox forcefully asserts that it is women's innately inferior nature which requires that they do not govern but remain under male government. He writes:

Who can deny but it is repugnant to nature, that the blind shall be

34 For example, Ponder (2024: 151) refers to Ambrose, *Paradise*, ch. 4 (in Savage 1961: 301), which reads: 'Hence, although created outside Paradise, that is, in an inferior place, man is found to be superior, whereas woman, created in a better place, that is to say, in Paradise, is found to be inferior.' In this quotation the terms 'inferior' and 'superior' are visibly used to denote differences of *quality*, not of position, and this is confirmed by the context (see Ambrose's next two sentences). Ambrose refers to the woman's inferior *position* in a different chapter (ch. 10).

35 So also Grudem 2004: 83 n. 31.

36 Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch* 1.153. My translation of 'Est etiam ordo naturalis in hominibus, ut serviant feminae viris . . . quia et illic haec iustitia est ut infirmior ratio serviat fortiori . . . clara iustitia est, ut qui excellunt ratione, excellant dominatione' (PL 34:590).

37 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 1, question 92, article 1, reply to objection 2 (tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920). For a fuller quotation, see ch. 5, under 'Men and women fully in God's image?' There has been much debate about the meaning of Aquinas's related statement: 'As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 1, question 92, article 1, reply to objection 1). While 'misbegotten' is the traditional translation for *occasionatus*, it seems to mean something more like 'produced by an accidental factor'. This derives from Aquinas's Aristotelian view of human reproduction, of which the default outcome is a male but which may get diverted into producing a female.

appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? And . . . that the foolish, mad, and frenetic shall govern the discreet, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women, compared unto man in bearing of authority. For their sight in civil regiment [= government] is but blindness; their strength, weakness; their counsel, foolishness; and judgment, frenzy, if it be rightly considered.³⁸

But what about intelligent, godly women?

Curiosity makes us wonder: with this view of women's inferiority and susceptibility to sin, how did the majority thinkers cope with the actual existence of intelligent, godly women? They might read about Abigail in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 25). They might meet such a woman. They might even talk with her.

For such occasions, they had an instinctive strategy for avoiding cognitive dissonance. They classified such women as anomalous exceptions: since men are the intelligent and godly sex, these are women who are like men. Hence, Baxter's description of exceptional women as 'patient and manlike'.

Sharon James writes: 'The great theologian Richard Baxter cheerfully accepted that in some pastoral matters, his extraordinary wife Margaret displayed superior wisdom' – as if this were evidence of a positive view of women's nature.³⁹ But it is not. Baxter regarded his wife as extraordinary – for a woman. This was the standard strategy for maintaining a view of women as inherently inferior in their nature, despite the real-life evidence to the contrary.

In a homily on Romans 16, Chrysostom refers to exceptional, godly women in the Bible and invites his listeners to reflect on their '*manly* and heroic temper'.⁴⁰ In a homily on Matthew 23, he contrasts the women of his own day with exceptional New Testament women who had manly qualities: they 'went about with the apostles, having taken unto themselves *manly* courage, Priscilla, Persis, and the rest . . . even travelling into far countries . . . the business of those women was to spread the word'.⁴¹

Augustine follows the same strategy. Confronted with the phenomenon of

38 *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*. Knox's *Blast* was against all rule by women in the civil sphere, from magistrates to monarchs, and in particular Henry VIII's daughter, Queen Mary. He argued that it was men's duty to enforce against women the curse of Gen. 3:16 ('he will rule over you'). I have modernised his spelling in the quotation.

39 James 2020.

40 Chrysostom, *Homily 30 on Romans* (NPNF) (emphasis added).

41 Chrysostom, *Homily 73 on Matthew* (NPNF) (emphasis added).

an intelligent, godly woman, he reconciles her existence with his beliefs about women by characterising her as like a man rather than a woman. Praising his own mother in a philosophical discussion, he says: 'our mother exclaimed in such a way that we, entirely forgetting her sex, thought we had some great man in our midst'.⁴² In another place, he describes her as 'in woman's garb truly, but with a man's faith'.⁴³ So, in Augustine's thought, a woman could make spiritual or intellectual progress in this present life by becoming more like a man and less like a woman. Yet such progress was exceptional. The general situation was, as Augustine said: 'he rules and she obeys. He is ruled by wisdom, she by the man'.⁴⁴

Augustine's contemporary, Jerome, had mutually beneficial relationships with some very intelligent and godly women.⁴⁵ He takes the usual strategy to an extreme. In his way of thinking, if an exceptional woman adopts a devout, ascetic and sexually abstinent lifestyle, she becomes, in effect, a man. After Lucinius and Lucinius' wife Theodora both took a vow of abstinence, Jerome wrote to Lucinius:

You have with you one who was once your partner in the flesh but is now your partner in the spirit; once your wife but now your sister; once a woman but now a man; once an inferior but now an equal.⁴⁶

This strategy meant that it was unnecessary to think about whether the range of moral and intellectual abilities of men and women might in fact be the same.

Ambivalence

Historian Elizabeth Clark eloquently describes the church fathers' strange mixture of appreciation and denigration of women:

The most fitting word with which to describe the Church Fathers' attitude

42 Augustine, *The Happy Life* 2.10, in Schopp 1948: 56. This quotation and other supposed evidences of Augustine holding positive views of women's nature are presented in Allen and Uryase 2024: ch. 5; Allen's more optimistic interpretations of Augustine are not well supported by the sources. Allison 2025, whose historical survey is largely based on Allen, only came to my attention after the draft of the present book was submitted to the publisher.

43 Augustine, *Confessions* 9.4 (NPNF).

44 Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees* 2.11, in Teske 1991: 111.

45 Marcella and Paula. For their stories, see Cohick and Hughes 2017: ch. 9.

46 Jerome, *Letter 71 to Lucinius* 3 (NPNF).

toward women is ambivalence. Women were God's creation, his good gift to men – and the curse of the world. They were weak in both mind and character – and displayed dauntless courage, undertook prodigious feats of scholarship. Vain, deceitful, brimming with lust – they led men to Christ, fled sexual encounter, wavered not at the executioner's threats . . .⁴⁷

For an analogy of the effect of philosophy and culture on traditional commentators, we may combine two different versions of the pastime of bowling. In the version that is popular in North America, a spherical ball is bowled in a straight line to knock down some pins or skittles. In the southern British sport of lawn bowls, a biased ball is bowled with a curving trajectory to make its way past other balls to the desired position. When traditional commentators wrote about women, this was like trying to bowl in a straight line with a biased ball. For a short distance they would travel on the straight track of Scripture; then the cultural bias would divert them off the straight path.

Around the year 200, Tertullian describes the marriage of Christian believers in glowing terms, representing it as an equal partnership of mutual teaching, mutual exhortation and mutual sustaining (see chapter 9 below).⁴⁸ Yet he also writes about women with fierce negativity, viewing them as inferior in nature. In the notorious chapter 1 of *On the Apparel of Women*, he states that every woman is an Eve, 'the devil's gateway'. He says: 'you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man.'⁴⁹ His idea is that the devil chose to attack Eve because, as a woman, she was morally and intellectually weaker than Adam. He does not explain how his view of Eve's supposed weakness and Adam's supposed strength can stand alongside his view that Eve 'so easily' persuaded Adam to eat the forbidden fruit.

Around the same time, Clement of Alexandria expresses more views about women. Alongside the strongly negative view which we saw above,⁵⁰ in another work he states that woman has the same inner nature as man and is capable of the same self-control, virtue and 'manliness'. At first, this sounds as if he regards women as fully equal with men in their human nature. But that impression is rather spoiled by his conclusion: 'Women are therefore to

47 Clark 1983: 15.

48 Under 'Early commentary'.

49 Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* 1.1 (ANF) (emphasis added by the translator). For a fuller quotation, see ch. 28, under 'Step 5: Explaining verse 14'.

50 See under 'The traditional majority view of women'.

philosophize equally with men, though the males are better at everything, unless they have become effeminate.⁵¹

Chrysostom sometimes affirms the original equality of man and woman – including equality of status, of esteem and of pre-eminent authority – and that the rule of male over female only began after the disobedience (also known as ‘the Fall’).⁵² Yet he sometimes imagines male-over-female authority prior to the disobedience.⁵³ In a homily on 1 Corinthians 11, he gets in a tangle, trying to oppose the Arian heretics by affirming the full equality of the Father and the Son while still holding on to his patriarchal perspective on marriage. For the purpose of his argument against the Arians, he asserts a wife’s equality in honour: ‘For what if the wife be under subjection to us? It is as a wife, as free, as equal in honor.’ But he quickly takes it away again, saying: ‘Do not therefore strain the example of the man and the woman to all particulars. For with us indeed the woman is reasonably subjected to the man, since equality of honor causeth contention.’⁵⁴

In his view of women’s ministry, Chrysostom does not apply to his own time what he sees in the New Testament. His understanding of early Christian history is that in apostolic times exceptional women were preachers and teachers of the word (see his *Homily 73 on Matthew* and *Homily 31 on Romans*), while inconsistently he regards all women – and especially the women of his own time – as lacking competence for ministries of leading and teaching.⁵⁵ Doriani realistically notes that the ‘critical reader easily detects some tension’ in Chrysostom’s works.⁵⁶

Augustine in one place refers to woman as having a nature like that of man in regard to her rational intelligence.⁵⁷ Yet he does not say that a woman’s

51 Clement of Alexandria, *The Miscellanies* 4.8 (translation from ANF, but for clarity substituting ‘better’ for ‘preferable’; the footnote refers to an earlier version in which the men are ‘best at everything’). See further *The Miscellanies* 4.19, where Clement says that women, like men, are capable of attaining perfection. Perhaps he is inconsistent or perhaps he regards a woman’s perfection as being at a lower level than a man’s.

52 See his *Homilies on Genesis*, homily 14, homily 16 and homily 17.

53 As in *Homily 17 on Genesis*, in his discussion of Adam’s excuse in Gen. 3:12.

54 Chrysostom, *Homily 26 on 1 Corinthians* (NPNF).

55 In *Homily 73 on Matthew* (NPNF), Chrysostom draws a polemical contrast: ‘Then the business of those women was to spread the word; but now to appear beauteous, and fair, and comely in countenance. This is glory to them, this salvation; but of lofty and great works they do not even dream . . . the woman’s whole study is upon the care of ornaments of gold, and raiment, and the other adornments of the person, and how to increase their substance’. See further ch. 23, under ‘Novelty of complementarian interpretations’.

56 Doriani 1995: 227. For more information on Chrysostom’s views, see ch. 5, under ‘Men and women fully in God’s image?’

57 But he sets this in the context of her subjection to man, corresponding to the ‘appetite of action’ being subjected to ‘the deliberation of the mind’ (Augustine, *Confessions* 12.32 (NPNF)): ‘just as

mind is *as good as* a man's. We have already seen that he viewed women as of small intelligence and declared himself unable to imagine any use for a woman as man's helper except in regard to procreation. Elsewhere he reads into John's Gospel an idea that man corresponds to spirit while woman corresponds to flesh, and this is why man must rule.⁵⁸ This idea is derived from Greek philosophy; it is entirely absent from Scripture. We will further see in chapter 5 that Augustine does not regard woman as being in the image of God to the same extent as man.

Luther writes in his *Commentary on Genesis*:

if the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects. For the punishment, that she is now subjected to the man, was imposed on her after sin and because of sin, just as the other hardships and dangers were . . . Therefore Eve was not like the woman of today; her state was far better and more excellent, and she was in no respect inferior to Adam, whether you count the qualities of the body or those of the mind.⁵⁹

Yet we have seen Luther's conflicting statement in his *Lectures on Genesis* that woman was created with a weaker mind than man.

In Genesis 2:18, God says he will make a helper corresponding to man. Calvin writes (in his *Commentary on Genesis*) that 'Moses intended to note some equality'.⁶⁰ But when he visits the same topic in his *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, as we saw above, he belittles woman as an 'appendage' and 'an inferior aid'.

About 1706, Matthew Henry wrote that in Genesis 2, when the woman was made from Adam, she was 'not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him'.⁶¹ Here, he seems to recognise women as created equal to men as persons

there is in his soul one element which controls by its power of reflection and another which has been made subject so that it should obey, so also, physically, the woman was made for the man; for, although she had a like nature of rational intelligence in the mind, still in the sex of her body she should be similarly subject to the sex of her husband, as the appetite of action is subjected to the deliberation of the mind in order to conceive the rules of right action.'

58 Augustine, *Tractate 2 on John* (John 1:6–14), 14 (NPNF).

59 Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, Gen. 2:18, in Pelikan 1958: 115. Likewise, in the same work, commenting on Gen. 2:23, Luther wrote: 'had that innocency continued, the government of the man and of the woman would have been equal and the same' (tr. in Lenker 1904).

60 Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, Gen. 2:18, in King 1847.

61 Henry [no date], on Gen. 2:21–25.

and equal in authority. And yet Henry goes on to teach that women are not equal to men, either in rank or in nature.

He gives two explanations for women's inferior rank. One is that woman was made inferior as a judgment for disobedience; the other is that she was made inferior in the original creation. The judgment explanation is found in his comments on Genesis 3:

She is here put into a state of subjection. The whole sex, which by creation was equal with man, is, for sin, made inferior, and forbidden to usurp authority, 1 Tim. ii. 11, 12. The wife particularly is hereby put under the dominion of her husband, and is not *sui juris* – at her own disposal

The 'original creation' explanation is found in his comments on 1 Corinthians 11:8:

She was naturally, therefore, made subject to him, because made for him, for his use, and help, and comfort. And she who was intended to be always in subjection to the man should do nothing, in Christian assemblies, that looks like an affectation of equality.

Henry sees women as inferior not only in their position but also in their minds. Commenting on Paul's 'head' metaphor in Ephesians 5:23, he writes: 'The metaphor is taken from the head in the natural body, which, being the seat of reason, of wisdom, and of knowledge, and the fountain of sense and motion, is more excellent than the rest of the body.'⁶² In other words, in his created nature, man is more excellent than woman in reason, wisdom and knowledge.⁶³ With such a view, it must have appeared strange that the book of Proverbs personifies wisdom as a woman.⁶⁴

Ambivalence arose not only from the tussle between scriptural truths about women and cultural views of them. It could also be driven by a mismatch between the majority beliefs and conflicting experience of the Holy

62 Henry [no date]. From Romans to Revelation, Henry's commentary was completed after his death by others, working from his notes and sermons.

63 Henry's belief in women's created inferiority of nature is also seen in his commentary in regard to Gen. 3: 'It was the devil's subtlety, 1. To assault the weaker vessel with his temptations. Though perfect in her kind, yet we may suppose her inferior to Adam in knowledge, and strength, and presence of mind' (Henry [no date]).

64 See Prov. 8:1 – 9:12. (Of course, this does not justify an opposite view – that women are wiser than men. In Prov. 9:13–18, folly is likewise personified as a woman.)

Spirit's powerful work through women. Historian Alec Ryrie describes how John Wesley accommodated his conventional beliefs to his experience:

Wesley, whose instincts were patriarchal and who accepted that the 'ordinary rules of discipline' forbade women to preach, was willing to believe that God overturned such rules in special cases and that some women manifestly had exceptional gifts for preaching. When the Essex Methodist Mary Bosanquet made the jump from leading classes to preaching in the early 1770s, she did so against Wesley's advice. Yet he admitted that 'her words are as fire, conveying both light and heat to the hearts of all that hear her'. She continued preaching five times weekly into her seventies.⁶⁵

Traditional reasons against women's leadership or ordination

The tradition of excluding women from church leadership was formed in a context where the majority view of women was that they were innately inferior to men.

The clearest early statements by recognised teachers insisting on maleness as a requirement for bishops or priests are from around the end of the fourth century.⁶⁶ They reveal the strong influence of the unbiblical notion of women's natural incompetence.

We have already seen Chrysostom's belief in woman's unfitness for public leadership ('she would go quite mad'). He is sometimes more polite, but he firmly believes that women cannot be bishops *because of their inferior nature*. According to him, only a minority of men have the needed capability, and no women have it. He says:

when one is required to preside over the Church, and to be entrusted with the care of so many souls, the whole female sex must retire before the

⁶⁵ Ryrie 2017: ch. 7.

⁶⁶ My reference to 'recognised teachers' distinguishes these writings from anonymous documents of uncertain provenance and value, such as the so-called *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (written late in the fourth century), which was certainly not written by the apostles, and which forbids women to teach (3.1.6). We may see how far the unknown author has strayed from our Lord's teaching at 2.4.26, where readers are exhorted to honour the bishop because he is 'your ruler and governor; he is your king and potentate; he is, next after God, your earthly god' (ANF). And he seeks to micro-manage the lives of women, specifying that they should bathe at the tenth hour of the day (1.3.9). Note that at an earlier time (early third century), Tertullian inferred from the silencing of women in 1 Cor. 14:34–35 that they should not ordinarily baptise or teach (he makes an exception for baptism in cases of necessity when no bishop, priest or deacon is present): *On Baptism* 17.

magnitude of the task, and the majority of men also; and we must bring forward those who to a large extent surpass all others . . .⁶⁷

Epiphanius wrote a tract against heresies in which he condemns the ordination of women 'to the episcopate and presbyterate', quoting some scriptures but without explanation.⁶⁸ In that same tract, he does not mince his words when he declares how women's minds differ from men's: 'Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited . . . Now then, servants of God, let us adopt a manly frame of mind and dispel the madness of these women.'⁶⁹ With such a view of women, it is unthinkable to allow them to be leaders in God's Church.

For the canon law jurist Guido de Baysio (1296), the difference between men and women is the difference between perfection and imperfection, and this explains why women cannot be ordained:

Women are unfit to receive ordination, for ordination is reserved for perfect members of the church, since it is given for the distribution of grace to other men. But women are not perfect members of the church, only men are.⁷⁰

What should we conclude? These brief quotations are of course insufficient on their own, and we will review more sources later in the book. But egalitarian William Witt has undertaken a much wider historical survey. He offers this summary:

From a variety of sources – eastern, western, patristic, medieval, Reformation, Catholic, Protestant – the following has been the key argument: women cannot be ordained or indeed exercise any positions of leadership in the church because of an inherent ontological incapacity. Women were characterized as less intelligent, more sinful, more susceptible to temptation, emotionally unstable, incapable of exercising leadership.⁷¹

67 Chrysostom, *Treatise on the Priesthood* 2.2 (NPNF).

68 *Panarion* 49, 2–3. Epiphanius cites first his opponents' reliance on Gal. 3:28 and the examples of Miriam and of Philip's four daughters as women prophets, then his own reliance on Gen. 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 11:8; and 1 Tim. 2:14. See Williams 1987.

69 *Panarion* 79, 1–2, in Williams 1987.

70 *Rosarium super Decreto*, causa 27, quaestio 1, chapter 23, in Wijngaards 2001: ch. 11.

71 Witt 2020: 28–9. Doriani (1995: 235–6) says the Church's ban on women's ordination 'rested primarily on a straightforward interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 and related passages in 1 Corinthians'.

Alongside this cultural belief in the inferiority of women's nature, Sandra Glahn identifies some further factors which contributed to a decline in women's participation in public ministry after New Testament times. First, there was a redefinition of priesthood. Straying from the New Testament understanding of the priesthood of all believers, the Church adopted the Old Testament pattern of a male priesthood. Related to this, there was a tendency to return to Old Testament practices of ceremonial cleanness, which resulted in women's exclusion because of menstruation. In addition, in the early days, women were needed to assist with women's baptisms, for reasons of decency, but the shift from believers' baptism to infant baptism did away with this need.⁷²

Complementarian William Weinrich challenges the idea that the prohibition of women's ordination was decisively driven by the belief in women's inferiority of nature. He argues that the prohibition 'did not rest on some idea of a natural inferiority of women to men in intellect or spiritual stature'.⁷³ As evidence, he cites some forceful remarks of Chrysostom about women being more spiritual than men. But Weinrich has misunderstood. In the passage to which Weinrich refers, Chrysostom is chastising some men: contrary to the natural state of things, some *women* are more spiritual than they are! In the next few sentences, Chrysostom emphasises the natural superiority of men over women, and how shameful it is when men do not demonstrate their natural superiority.⁷⁴ He has a regular habit of praising women in order to rouse men to the greater virtue of which he considers them to be naturally capable.⁷⁵ This is fully consistent with Chrysostom's

But that statement fails to address how the belief in women's inferiority impacted on how Scripture was interpreted.

72 Glahn 2023: 24–5. Some theologians advanced further reasons. In the thirteenth century, Richard of Middleton argued that women cannot be ordained because they could not receive the tonsure (special haircut) which was required: Richard of Middleton, *In quartus sententiarum resolute questiones* (commentary on the fourth book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*). See 'Middleton, Richard of', Sokol Books: <https://sokol.co.uk/stock/middleton-richard-of> (accessed 19 November 2025).

73 RBMW: 274.

74 Weinrich's citation is from Chrysostom's *Homily 13 on Ephesians*, which is a flight of rhetoric directed against unspiritual men. Chrysostom continues: 'Hearken about the women of old; they were great characters, great women and admirable; such were Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Deborah, and Hannah; and such there were also in the days of Christ. Yet did they in no case outstrip the men, but occupied the second rank. But now it is the very contrary; women outstrip and eclipse us. How contemptible! What a shame is this! We hold the place of the head, and are surpassed by the body. We are ordained to rule over them; not merely that we may rule, but that we may rule in goodness also; for he that ruleth, ought especially to rule in this respect, by excelling in virtue' (Chrysostom, *Homily 13 on Ephesians* (NPNF)).

75 For example, in his *Homily 31 on Romans* (NPNF), commenting on Paul's commendation of Mary in 16:6, he says: 'How is this? a woman again is honored and proclaimed victorious! Again are we men put to shame. Or rather, we are not put to shame only, but have even an honor conferred upon

belief that *no women* and only some men are capable of undertaking the great task of presiding over the church and caring for many souls.

Weinrich also cites a fifth-century canonical regulation from Gaul (modern-day France), which says: 'Even though she might be learned and holy, a woman shall not presume to teach men in assembly.'⁷⁶ He takes this to show that 'ultimately and officially considerations of intellect and sanctity were not determinative'.⁷⁷ This canon is important evidence, but Weinrich mistakes its significance. First, a general conclusion about the key reasons why the ban came into existence and was officially maintained cannot be derived from the wording of one particular church canon. Second, this canon does not give a reason for the ban. Third, the wording reflects the expectation that a woman is normally not learned or holy. Fourth, in the historical context of the church fathers' view of women's inferiority, the canon merely confirms that the real-life existence of women who were viewed as exceptional was not seen as a reason for allowing them to teach men.⁷⁸

The publication of this canon also shows something else. It is no. 37 in a fascinating collection of 102 canons which opens a window on church life at the time. They comprise a wide miscellany of practical points – evidently issues which had arisen and on which guidance was felt to be needed. So this canon tells us that women's participation in leadership in the Church remained a live issue even in the late fifth century.⁷⁹ This is consistent with other evidence, which we shall consider in chapter 4.⁸⁰

In modern times, when the supposed inferiority of women's nature can no longer be defended, the practice of excluding women from leadership – if it is to be continued – requires some other justification. In regard to the Orthodox Church, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel writes:

[T]he arguments put forward today against the ordination of women are by and large no longer the same as those used in past centuries. Among

us. For an honor we have, in that there are such women amongst us, but we are put to shame, in that we men are left so far behind by them. But if we come to know whence it comes, that they are so adorned, we too shall speedily overtake them.' For more on Chrysostom's views on why women should be restricted, see ch. 23, under 'Novelty of complementarian interpretations'.

76 The reference is to canon 37 of the *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua*. See Koziol 2017: 11.

77 *RBMW*: 277.

78 At *RBMW*: 277, Weinrich also refers to a Roman Catholic argument based on the fact that Mary the mother of Jesus was not a priest. This is not a persuasive argument. The fact that one particular devout woman with a unique calling was not a priest or among the twelve apostles does not show that no woman may be gifted and called by God to lead.

79 Likewise, canon 41 prohibits women from baptising.

80 Under 'Was Jesus giving a pattern of male leadership for his Church to follow?'

contemporary Orthodox theologians, we hardly hear any more arguments based on the inferiority of women and the hierarchy of the sexes . . . or the responsibility of Eve in the Fall.⁸¹

To replace the belief in women's inferiority, the Orthodox have reached for arguments based on a tradition of male leadership and a symbolic understanding of Christ's maleness and the presiding priest's representation of Christ in the Eucharist.⁸² Roman Catholics have similarly looked to a tradition of male leadership and to a theology of the Eucharist in which only a man may represent Jesus.⁸³ In contrast, low-church Protestants have formulated a new analysis of Scripture, which (broadly speaking) keeps some of the old conclusions on restricting women while offering new reasoning which involves a redeployment of the sociological language of 'roles'.⁸⁴

Why was Christian faith attractive to women?

Ancient writers noticed that the Christian faith attracted women. Celsus was a critic of Christians in the second century. He mocked Christian teachers for being 'able to gain over only the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children'.⁸⁵ It made sense that women were attracted to Christian communities because of the attractiveness of Jesus and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and also because those communities treated women better than Greco-Roman society generally. Over time, the improved treatment of women was a major factor in the growth of the gospel across the Greek and Roman world.⁸⁶

Protesting against my historical analysis of the traditional majority view, Ponder writes:

as secular scholar Tom Holland has admits [*sic*], the foundation for 'human rights' in the West is none other than the same Christian tradition

81 Behr-Sigel 1991: 176, cited at Witt 2020: 211.

82 Witt 2020: 212 (and with further discussion in his chs 11–14).

83 See further ch. 4, under 'Was Jesus giving a pattern of male leadership for his Church to follow?' and ch. 23, under 'The Bible does not clearly say'.

84 See later chapters, especially ch. 4, under 'Jesus' agenda for the ministry of men and women'; ch. 7, under 'Masculine and feminine "roles"'; chs 23, 26, 28; ch. 30 under 'Family "role" differences?'

85 Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.44 (ANF). See further 3.49; 3.55.

86 Stark 1996: 95–128.

that authors like . . . Bartlett want to condemn as a harmful relic of an ignorant and misogynistic era in the past. If this were so, one wonders why in every place that Christianity spread women were better treated than in their former pre-Christian societies. In other words, if the *core* of the traditional Christian view of the sexes were indeed the 'innate inferiority' of women, then one should expect precisely the opposite effect of what actually transpired when Christianity took root in various cultures.⁸⁷

We can leave aside here the fact that I nowhere referred to traditional commentators as ignorant or misogynistic. The important point is that Ponder's view is historically fallacious. He perceives an inconsistency between the improved treatment of women in Christian communities and any claim that the traditional majority view, at its core, saw women as innately inferior. But there is no such inconsistency. Kindness is a Christian virtue, and this can – and did – include kindness to those seen as innately inferior.

Attending to historical realities, two different comparisons must be made. One is a comparison between the Church's traditional majority view and a more accurate understanding of Scripture; the other is a comparison of the Church with the Greco-Roman world:

- *Compared with how the Bible is now more accurately understood*, most of the church fathers and their successors held a worldview that belittled women and did not regard them as equal in nature to men. Few commentators today would write that a man's beard is the token of his superior nature (Clement of Alexandria), that, if the important matters of life were turned over to a woman, she would go quite mad (Chrysostom), that woman is of small intelligence (Augustine), that sense moves the female to every evil, just as intellect moves a man to every good (Albertus Magnus), or that women must be directed by men because of the very imbecility of women's nature (Hooker).

However:

- *Compared with the general outlook in the Greco-Roman world*, the Christian faith brought a great improvement for women, even though distorted by cultural patriarchy. In the new fellowships of Christian believers, women were treated with consideration and care. Female slaves

⁸⁷ Ponder 2024: 155 (emphasis original).

were no longer to be used sexually at their owner's whim. Husbands were commanded to be faithful to their wives and to love them self-sacrificially. Female babies were no longer exposed to die simply because they were female. Women were taught the Scriptures alongside men. They were valued as sisters in Christ.

So, compared with the pagan world around them, the church fathers and their successors were doughty defenders of women. But compared with Scripture, the majority held a diminished view of women.

Minority historical voices

From time to time in church history, voices were raised in defence of less unbiblical views of women's nature. Here is a small selection.

In the second century, Irenaeus rejects the idea that women are morally weaker than men. Concerning the serpent's approach to the woman in Genesis 3, he writes:

And if thou sayest that it attacked her as being the weaker of the two, [I reply that], on the contrary, she was the stronger, since she appears to have been the helper of the man in the transgression of the commandment. For she did by herself alone resist the serpent, and it was after holding out for a while and making opposition that she ate of the tree, being circumvented by craft; whereas Adam, making no fight whatever, nor refusal, partook of the fruit handed to him by the woman, which is an indication of the utmost imbecility and effeminacy of mind. And the woman indeed, having been vanquished in the contest by a demon, is deserving of pardon; but Adam shall deserve none, for he was worsted by a woman, – he who, in his own person, had received the command from God.⁸⁸

In the fourth century, Basil the Great, referring to Genesis 1:27, expressly affirms that women, like men, are according to the image of God, and he adds a ringing affirmation of the moral and intellectual equality of their

⁸⁸ Irenaeus, *Fragment 14 (ANF)*. But note the culturally fashioned language. Though rejecting the woman's weakness, he refers to Adam's moral and intellectual weakness as 'effeminacy'. For a balanced understanding of Irenaeus's outlook, we note that in *Fragment 32*, when referring to the relation of Miriam to her brother Moses, Irenaeus says that both nature and the law place the woman in a subordinate condition to the man.

human nature: 'The natures are alike of equal honor, the virtues are equal, the struggles equal, the judgment alike.'⁸⁹

In the fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (or Cyrus) writes:

he [God] offers to both men and women the same laws since the difference is not in the soul, but in the outward appearance of the body . . . For women possess reason (as do men), are capable of self-knowledge, and know what they must do; knowing equally what to avoid and what to pursue. Sometimes women are even better than men at finding what is advantageous and they are good advisors. Because of all of this, not only men, but also women are allowed entrance into the divine temples, and the law does not permit men, while prohibiting women, from participation in the divine mysteries, but invites women, equally with men, to be initiated in and to be instructed in the holy mysteries. And, of course, the rewards of virtue are set before women as before men since the struggles for virtue are in common.⁹⁰

Around 1405, Christine de Pizan declares that women's reasoning powers are the equal of men's:

If it were the custom to put the little maidens to the school and they were made to learn the sciences as they do to the man children, it follows that they should learn as perfectly and they should be as well entered into the subtleties of all the arts and sciences as they [the boys] be . . .⁹¹

In the following centuries, in early modern Europe, there was much debate about the nature of women. In 1509, a maverick German theologian and polymath argued not only that women's nature was equal to men's in nobility and essence but that in the exercise and operation of their souls women were superior to men. He perhaps did this to curry favour with a female ruler or

89 Basil, *On the Origin of Humanity*, discourse 1: 'On that which is according to the image'. He continues: 'Let her not say, "I am weak". The weakness is in the flesh, in the soul is the power. Since indeed that which is according to God's image is of equal honour, let the virtue be of equal honor, the showing forth of good works' (in Harrison 2005: 45).

90 Translated in Crego 1993: 122–3. However, Theodoret does not appear to have seen this equality of women's nature as having implications for women's leadership, whether in the Church or in marriage.

91 From C. de Pizan, 'The City of Ladies', National Archives: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/medieval-society/source-6d-christine-de-pizans-book-of-the-city-or-ladies (accessed 1 February 2026).

as a deliberate philosophical provocation.⁹² A notable contribution was made in 1673 by François Poullain de la Barre, who wrote a philosophical treatise on the equality of the sexes. He argues that observation shows popular opinion of women is mere prejudice, and the reasons adduced against the equality of the sexes are 'all idle, and fruitless'. He says that Scripture, rightly understood, is not at all contrary to his view: 'The Scripture speaketh not a word of Inequality'.⁹³

In 1859, Catherine Booth wrote in defence of the American revivalist Phoebe Palmer. Asserting that women, in their nature, are fitted to grace a platform or pulpit, Booth argues: 'God has given to woman a graceful form and attitude, winning manners, persuasive speech, and, above all, a finely-toned emotional nature, all of which appear to us eminent *natural* qualifications for public speaking'.⁹⁴

The minority voices increased considerably in the nineteenth century. The Salvation Army, to which Catherine Booth belonged, became the first major denomination in the UK to employ women as preachers and to formally affirm their eligibility for any office, in 1870.⁹⁵ Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, conservative evangelicals were more open to women's ministry and leadership than they later became.⁹⁶ In the twentieth century, restrictions on women's ministry increased for a while. But the church-wide argument about women's *nature* reached a critical turning point in the 1980s, when both Protestants and Catholics finally reached a majority position which recognised women as fully equal to men in their human nature as created by God. This does not mean that women and men are identical. It means that women and men have the same range of moral and intellectual abilities, including the potential for wisdom and good judgment. Women are fully human.

92 Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus*, written in 1509 to Margaret Augusta, Queen of the Austrians and Burgundians, printed in 1529. English translation available at Early English Books Online, Library Digital Collections, University of Michigan: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A75977.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext> (accessed 1 February 2026).

93 F. Poullain de la Barre, 'The woman as good as the man, or, The equality of both sexes written originally in French and translated into English by A.L'. For complete text, see Early English Books Online, Library Digital Collections, University of Michigan: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A55529.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext> (accessed 22 October 2024).

94 Booth 1859 (emphasis original). In the same year, Palmer herself wrote, on the same topic, *Promise of the Father: Or, A Neglected Speciality of the Last Days*.

95 The Salvation Army 2018 (in 1870, it was still called 'The Christian Mission'). See also The Salvation Army 2025.

96 See Larsen 2007. A shorter version of Larsen's essay is available (Larsen 2017).

Complementarianism is not the traditional view

Beynon and Tooher start their book with a historical claim:

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 . . .⁹⁷

Such a claim is often made, but it is factually incorrect. The recognition of women as equal with men in value and dignity has not been 'the normal position'. Further on in the book, they substantially correct themselves, saying:

We must recognise our own history here and the tendency there has been to think of women as inferior . . . some people have taught that women do not bear God's image as fully as men. Others have cast them as dangerous temptresses, because sin came into the world through them . . . the call to recognise the equal worth of women is actually a novel voice in church history.⁹⁸

To be more accurate, what is novel in church history is the *majority acceptance* of women as created fully equal to men in their human nature. On reaching that point, the majority finally came back to the position of Jesus, who said nothing even remotely like the traditional majority view of women's inferiority. What he did say about women, and how he treated them, will be the subject of our next chapter.

Jesus came to redeem people from every tribe, language and nation, men and women alike, and to make them co-rulers. His redemptive gift to all of his people is declared in the new song which John saw and heard:

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.
(Rev. 5:10 NIV)

⁹⁷ Beynon and Tooher 2022: 9.

⁹⁸ Beynon and Tooher 2022: 45.

Summary of chapter 2

1. Until recently, the key reason given for the subordination of women to men was women's inferiority – both in rank and in nature. This view of women was derived not from the Bible but from human philosophy and culture. After centuries of debate, especially in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, by the late 1980s the majority view in the Church had shifted to a recognition of the true equality of women's nature with men's.
2. The traditional majority view of women as naturally inferior is found in the writings of Christian teachers through the ages, including some of the faith's best-known luminaries, such as Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin.
3. In the thinking of the traditional majority, women's innate inferiority of nature justifies their inferiority of position.
4. Majority thinkers coped with the actual existence of intelligent, godly women by viewing them as anomalous – as women who were like men.
5. Majority thinkers were ambivalent: sometimes praising women, sometimes denigrating them. Ambivalence arose not only from the tussle between cultural views of women and scriptural truths about them. It was also driven by experience of the Holy Spirit's powerful work in women.
6. In the tradition of excluding women from leadership or ordination, the key argument was women's innate inferiority and unsuitability for leadership. When this view of women could no longer be defended, new arguments were found for justifying the tradition of excluding women from leadership or ordination.
7. Both in early times and later, the Church was attractive to women. That is not inconsistent with the Church's view of women as innately inferior. Compared with the pagan world around them, the church fathers and their successors were doughty defenders of women. But compared with Scripture, the majority held a diminished view of women.
8. From time to time in church history, minority voices were raised in defence of women's nature.

9. Complementarian scholars rightly reject the traditional majority view that women are innately inferior.

Questions to consider

- 1.** What are your thoughts, feelings and questions about the traditional majority view of women's inferiority?
- 2.** Have you observed or experienced ambivalence about women in churches?
- 3.** Did anything in this chapter inspire you or challenge you? Will you think or act differently in some way?

3

How Jesus treated women

Gesturing to his disciples with his hand, he said: ‘See my mother and my brothers – for whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother and sister and mother.’
(Matt. 12:49–50)

Alone with a woman

When churches teach a rule of conduct which is contradicted by the conduct of Jesus, we know that something has gone wrong.

The ‘Billy Graham rule’ says that a man should not be alone with a woman who is not his wife. But Jesus was tired, and he sat down by Jacob’s well. The Samaritan woman came while he was resting there. They were alone. To her surprise, he spoke first. Soon, they were deep in personal conversation.

When Jesus’ disciples came back from the town, they were astonished to see that he was talking with her. But because of that conversation, many in her town believed in him (John 4:1–39).

Why were the disciples astonished? In part, probably, because she was a Samaritan (v. 9), but chiefly because she was a woman (v. 27).¹ Evidently, they did not expect Jesus – their teacher, their rabbi – to speak with an unknown woman, and alone. That was against convention. It was inappropriate, even dangerous. In the second century BC, ben Sira of Jerusalem had taught that women were much more wicked than men:

Turn away your eyes from a shapely woman,
and do not gaze at beauty belonging to another;
many have been seduced by a woman’s beauty,
and by it passion is kindled like a fire . . .

Any wickedness, but not the wickedness of a woman! . . .

¹ See the Greek, or most English versions other than KJV.