

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 6

Human Sexuality, Marriage, and Gender

Lesson 19

Complementarity

Equal in Dignity, Distinct in Role

“The Biblical Vision of Male-Female Relationships”

Key Texts: *Ephesians 5:21–33; 1 Timothy 2:11–15; 1 Corinthians 11:3–12; Galatians 3:28; 1 Peter 3:1–7; Titus 2:3–5*

“But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.”

1 Corinthians 11:3, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 17 established that gender is a creation ordinance, the binary distinction of male and female carrying the authority of the Creator. Lesson 18 established that marriage is a creation ordinance, the lifelong covenant of one man and one woman designed to proclaim the mystery of Christ and the church. Lesson 19 brings the Unit 6 discussion of human sexuality, marriage, and gender to its conclusion and its practical apex: complementarity. The doctrine of complementarity holds that men and women are equal in dignity, value, and worth before God, both made in His image, both standing equally before God in the matter of justification, both equally the objects of His redemptive love, and yet distinct in their God-given roles within marriage and the church. Equal dignity does not require identical function; ordered relationship does not require hierarchy of worth. These two affirmations, held together with equal theological seriousness, constitute the doctrine of complementarity that the biblical testimony consistently establishes and that the church is called to embody and to commend.

The doctrine of complementarity is contested on two fronts simultaneously, and the lesson must engage both with equal precision. On the left, from the perspective of theological egalitarianism, the objection is that the role distinctions the complementarian affirms are cultural residue rather than creation ordinance, that Paul's creation-order arguments in Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 are time-bound accommodations to the patriarchal culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, and that the new creation in Christ has rendered the functional distinctions of the old creation obsolete. On the right, from the perspective of patriarchalism, the distortion is the confusion of the ordered complementarity that the creation narrative establishes with the domination, subordinationism, and diminishment of the female that the fall introduced as its perversion. The complementarian holds the middle position against both distortions: the role distinctions are real and permanent (against egalitarianism) and they are ordered rather than hierarchical in the sense of diminishment (against patriarchalism).

This lesson proceeds in six sections. We begin with the definition of complementarity and its two foundational affirmations: equal dignity and distinct role. We then examine the equality of nature in full biblical detail, establishing that the complementarian's affirmation of equal dignity is not a rhetorical concession to cultural pressure but a genuine and fully theological conviction grounded in the imago Dei and in the gospel. The third section examines the distinction of role in marriage, developing the specific content of servant headship and intelligent submission from the key Pauline texts. The fourth section examines the distinction of role in the gathered church, addressing the biblical case for the male eldership with the exegetical precision that the debate requires. The fifth section responds to the two principal objections, the egalitarian and the patriarchalist, with the arguments that the biblical testimony supplies. We close with the vision of complementarity as a living portrait of the gospel: the beauty that the practice of complementarity displays when it is embodied as God designed it.

A note on the pastoral sensitivity required by this lesson: the doctrine of complementarity touches the most intimate dimensions of the relationships between the persons in the congregation, their marriages, their vocations, their places in the community of faith. It is a doctrine about which genuine Christians who are equally committed to the authority of Scripture have reached different conclusions for reasons that deserve respect even when they do not deserve agreement. The lesson holds the complementarian position with theological conviction and exegetical confidence, and it does so without the contempt for those who hold different positions that sometimes marks the intra-evangelical debate on this question. The goal is to present the strongest possible biblical case for the complementarian position, a case that is genuinely persuasive because it is genuinely grounded in the biblical testimony, and to do so with the humility and the charity that the seriousness of the question and the genuine difficulty of some of the relevant texts demand.

I. Complementarity Defined: The Two Foundational Affirmations

Equal in Dignity, Distinct in Role, Both Affirmations Fully Theological

A. The Definition and Its Two Inseparable Dimensions

Complementarianism is the position that men and women are equal in dignity, value, and worth before God, both bearing the image of God without qualification or diminishment, both standing equally before God in the matter of salvation, both equally the objects of the Father's love and the Spirit's sanctifying work, and yet distinct in their God-given roles within the specific covenantal relationships of marriage and the gathered church. The two affirmations, equal dignity and distinct role, are not held in tension as competing values that must be balanced against each other; they are held together as complementary dimensions of a single theological reality that the creation narrative, the Pauline epistles, and the character of the Triune God all consistently affirm.

The definition requires two qualifications that are essential for its correct understanding. First, the role distinctions that complementarianism affirms are specific: they apply within the covenantal structures of marriage (the husband-wife relationship) and the gathered church (the office of elder-pastor). They do not apply to every relationship between men and women in the public square, the workplace, the civic community, or the broader cultural life of society. The complementarian does not hold that women are in general subordinate to men in general, or that women may not exercise authority over men in any context. The role distinctions are covenantally specific: they apply where the creation narrative and the Pauline epistles specifically establish them, and they do not apply by extension to contexts that the creation narrative and the Pauline epistles do not address.

Second, the role distinctions are not a concession to cultural convention that the church has historically endorsed and that it is now free to modify in response to cultural change. They are grounded in the creation order that Genesis 2 establishes and that Paul consistently appeals to in the relevant texts, not in the cultural patterns of the ancient Mediterranean world that Paul was accommodating, but in the permanent structure of the creation whose features Paul cites as the basis for the role distinctions he establishes. The creation-order grounding of the role distinctions is the single most important exegetical claim in the entire complementarian argument, and it is the claim that most directly addresses the egalitarian's primary objection that the Pauline role distinctions are culturally relative. If Paul's arguments for the role distinctions are grounded in the creation order rather than in ancient Mediterranean culture, then the role distinctions are as permanent and as authoritative as the creation order itself, which is the creation ordinance character that this lesson defends.

B. The Trinitarian Analogy: Functional Order Without Hierarchy of Worth

The most powerful single theological resource for the complementarian's defense of the compatibility of equal dignity and distinct role is the Trinitarian analogy that Paul introduces in 1 Corinthians 11:3: "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ" (NASB 1995). The statement establishes a parallel structure of headship relationships: God is the head of Christ; Christ is the head of every man; the man is the head of the woman. The critical theological point is the headship of God over Christ, the relationship between the Father and the Son within the immanent Trinity, which Paul places in parallel with the headship of man over woman in the covenant of marriage. The Father is the head of the Son; and yet the Son is not inferior to the Father in essence, dignity, or worth. The Son is fully God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father; and the Son voluntarily submits to the Father in the economy of the Triune God's redemptive work. Functional order within the Godhead is fully compatible with essential equality of the divine persons.

The Trinitarian analogy does not establish that men are superior to women in nature, worth, or dignity, any more than the Father's headship over the Son establishes that the Father is superior to the Son in the divine nature. What it establishes is that the ordered relationship between male headship and female submission in the covenant of marriage is not the relationship of the superior to the inferior but the relationship of persons who are equal in

dignity and distinct in function, the same relationship that characterizes the Trinitarian persons in their economic relations. This is the most theologically profound defense available against the patriarchalist distortion of complementarianism: the model of headship is not the dominating authority of the superior over the inferior but the self-giving love of the Father who sends the Son and the voluntary, trusting submission of the Son who goes as the Father sends, a relationship of perfect mutual love and perfect functional order that is simultaneously the most complete expression of equality and the most complete expression of ordered relationship in the history of the universe.

The Trinitarian analogy also illuminates why the complementarian's affirmation of equal dignity is not a rhetorical concession but a genuine theological conviction. If the Father's headship over the Son is compatible with the Son's full divine dignity, if the eternal Son's submission to the Father in the economy of redemption does not compromise one iota of the Son's co-equal divine nature, then the husband's headship over the wife in the covenant of marriage is compatible with the wife's full human dignity as an equal image-bearer of the same God. The complementarian does not hold the equal dignity of women as a concession to the culture's egalitarian pressure; she holds it as the same conviction that the doctrine of the Trinity requires of every Christian who confesses the co-equal, co-eternal, co-essential Godhead of the three persons.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Galatians 3:28, NASB 1995

II. Equal in Dignity: The Full Theological Case for Women's Equal Worth

The Imago Dei, the Gospel, and Galatians 3:28 Correctly Understood

A. *The Imago Dei as the Ground of Equal Dignity*

The equal dignity of men and women before God is not the complementarian's grudging acknowledgment of the culture's egalitarian premise; it is the direct and necessary implication of the doctrine of the imago Dei that Unit 3 of this series established. Genesis 1:27 declares that God created the human creature "in the image of God", and it declares this without qualification or differentiation by sex: the image of God is borne equally by male and female, in both the male and the female expression of the human creature's creaturely identity. The image of God is the ground of human dignity, and the imago Dei is equally borne by male and female; therefore male and female are equally dignified in the sight of the Creator who made them both in His image. This is not an inference that requires cultural sensitivity to reach; it is the direct theological implication of the creation narrative that the complementarian affirms with the same theological conviction with which she affirms the role distinctions that the same narrative establishes.

The specific implications of the equal imago Dei for the church's engagement with the dignity and the worth of women are comprehensive and demanding. Every human woman, regardless of her cultural context, her social location, her economic status, or her ecclesiastical role, bears the image of God and is therefore entitled to the full respect, the full protection, and the full honor that image-bearing implies. The church that holds the complementarian position must be the church that is most aggressive in defending women's dignity against every form of the patriarchalist distortion that reduces women to instruments of male desire, that dismisses women's intellectual and spiritual contributions to the community of faith, or that treats the functional distinction of role as a license for the diminishment of the person who serves in the responsive role. The complementarian position is not compatible with the condescension, the dismissal, or the exploitation of women that patriarchalism

produces and that the history of the church has sometimes tolerated and sometimes endorsed. The image of God forbids it absolutely.

The equal dignity of women is also established by the New Testament's consistent account of women's full participation in the spiritual life of the community of faith. Women were among the first witnesses of the resurrection, a fact of enormous theological significance in the culture that dismissed women's testimony as legally inadmissible (Luke 24:1–12). Women were among those who received the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and Acts 2:17–18's citation of Joel 2:28–29 establishes that the Spirit's prophetic gift is poured out on male and female without distinction. Women served as deaconesses in the early church (Romans 16:1–2), as teachers and disciplers of men in specific contexts (Acts 18:26; Titus 2:3–5), as founders and leaders of house churches (Acts 16:14–15, 40; Colossians 4:15), and as co-laborers with Paul in the gospel mission (Philippians 4:2–3; Romans 16:3–7). The complementarian's affirmation of the office of elder-pastor as reserved for qualified men does not eliminate, diminish, or condescend toward any of these dimensions of women's full and Spirit-gifted participation in the life of the community of faith; it defines a specific office within the gathered church's governance structure rather than limiting the full range of women's ministry.

B. Galatians 3:28: The Soteriological Equality and Its Proper Scope

Galatians 3:28 is the egalitarian's primary proof text and the complementarian's most important interpretive challenge: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NASB 1995). The verse appears in the context of Paul's argument that the inheritance of Abraham's blessing comes through faith in Christ rather than through the works of the law or through the ethnic, social, or sexual identity of the recipient. The three pairs that Paul lists, Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female, are three distinctions that the Mosaic law treated as differentiating for the purposes of covenant standing before God, and Paul's point is that all three have been transcended in the one-in-Christ standing that faith produces: in the matter of justification and covenant standing before God, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, between slave and free, or between male and female.

The egalitarian argument from Galatians 3:28 is that if Paul's abolition of the Jew/Greek and slave/free distinctions has social and structural implications, if it implies that the church should not treat Jews and Greeks differently, and that the institution of slavery is incompatible with the gospel, then the abolition of the male/female distinction should have the same social and structural implications: the church should not maintain role distinctions between men and women in the marriage covenant and the gathered church. The argument has a certain surface plausibility, but it fails at the point of Paul's own consistent practice: the same apostle who wrote Galatians 3:28 also wrote Ephesians 5:22–24 (calling for the wife's submission to her husband), 1 Timothy 2:11–13 (establishing male eldership on creation-order grounds), and 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (distinguishing the roles of men and women in the gathered church's worship). If Galatians 3:28 was Paul's comprehensive abolition of all role distinctions between male and female, then Paul was comprehensively contradicting himself in his other letters, which is the least plausible of all the available interpretations of his letters.

The complementarian's interpretation of Galatians 3:28 is both more exegetically natural and more internally consistent: the verse addresses the equal soteriological standing of all believers before God in the matter of justification and covenant membership, not the elimination of every functional and structural distinction between male and female in every social and institutional context. The text says "you are all one in Christ Jesus", a statement about the unity of believers in the one Mediator, about equal access to the righteousness of God through faith, about the equal standing of all before the throne of grace. It does not say "there are no role distinctions between male and female in marriage and the church." That is a conclusion the egalitarian imports into the text from the principle she has brought to it, not a conclusion the text itself establishes. The same Paul who affirms the equal soteriological standing of Galatians 3:28 affirms the role distinctions of Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2; the exegetically responsible interpreter of Paul must hold both affirmations together rather than using one to eliminate the other.

III. Distinct in Role: Servant Headship and Intelligent Submission in Marriage

The Ephesians 5 Pattern as Gospel Embodiment

A. The Husband's Servant Headship: The Cross as the Model

The Ephesians 5 account of the husband's role is frequently misunderstood by both its defenders and its critics, because both sometimes reduce it to an account of authority and submission without attending to the specific content that Paul gives to the husband's headship. The primary description of the husband's role in Ephesians 5 is not "the husband rules his wife" but "the husband loves his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her." The specific content of the love Paul requires of the husband is the self-giving, sanctifying, glorifying love of the One who "gave Himself up" for His bride, who sacrificed Himself for her flourishing, who loved her without condition of her merit or her performance, and whose love has as its goal not the husband's own satisfaction but the wife's own sanctification and glory: "that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:27, NASB 1995).

The cruciform shape of the husband's headship is not a metaphor that softens the headship into something more culturally palatable; it is the theological substance of what Christian headship is. The husband who exercises his headship as domination, who uses his role to serve his own preferences, to assert his own authority, and to demand his wife's compliance without regard for her dignity and her flourishing, has not merely practiced poor relational dynamics; he has misrepresented the gospel that his marriage is designed to proclaim. The cross is the permanent correction of every dominating, self-serving, exploitative exercise of headship: the head who lays down his life for his bride is the head who embodies the specific form of the love the passage requires. The specific standards Paul establishes for the husband's love are not the standards of benevolent superiority but the standards of costly, sacrificial, servant-shaped love: "Husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church" (Ephesians 5:28–29, NASB 1995).

The practical content of the husband's servant headship is a matter that requires pastoral development beyond what a doctrinal lesson can fully provide, but its theological shape can be established here: the husband's headship is the leadership of the servant who serves rather than the authority of the master who commands; the protection of the one who gives himself rather than the domination of the one who takes for himself; the vision of the one who is responsible for the household's direction and its wellbeing rather than the passivity of the one who abdicates responsibility to his wife while claiming the prerogatives of headship. 1 Peter 3:7's account of the husband's responsibility adds a further dimension: "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered" (NASB 1995). The husband's headship is accountable to God: the husband who fails to honor his wife as "a fellow heir of the grace of life", as an equal image-bearer and an equal heir of the kingdom, finds that his failure damages his own relationship with God as well as his relationship with his wife.

B. The Wife's Intelligent Submission: Voluntary, Theological, and Strong

The wife's submission in Ephesians 5:22–24 is perhaps the most frequently misunderstood and the most pastorally sensitive element of the complementarian account of marriage. Both defenders and critics of the submission language have sometimes treated it as though submission were primarily a behavioral requirement, a pattern of deference and compliance that the wife is obligated to maintain as a matter of role performance. But the specific character of the submission that Paul describes is more theologically rich and more personally demanding than behavioral compliance: it is the voluntary, theologically grounded, deeply personal responsiveness of the one who has understood the mystery of the Christ-and-church relationship and who has chosen, in the light of that understanding, to honor the headship structure that God has designed for the covenant of marriage.

The submission is voluntary: Paul does not address husbands and tell them to require their wives' submission; he addresses wives and calls them to give their submission. The submission cannot be coerced; a coerced submission is not submission in the sense the text describes. The submission is an act of the wife's own will, made in the freedom of her own theological understanding and her own love for the God who has designed the structure and the husband who embodies it in her specific marriage. The submission is theologically grounded: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (v. 22, NASB 1995). The "as to the Lord" is not primarily a motivation ("because the Lord commands it") but a theological framework: the wife's submission to her husband is a specific form of her submission to the Lord, made intelligible by the Christ-and-church mystery that the marriage covenant embodies. And the submission is strong: the Proverbs 31 portrait of the capable wife displays the specific strength, wisdom, industry, and initiative that the complementarian's account of submission both requires and celebrates. Submission is not passivity; it is the active, intelligent, theologically informed choice to honor the headship structure that God has designed for the covenant.

Titus 2:3–5's instruction to older women to teach younger women "to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored" (NASB 1995) adds the communal and testimonial dimension of the wife's submission: the wife who lives in the intelligent, voluntary, theologically grounded submission that Ephesians 5 describes is not merely fulfilling a private marital obligation; she is displaying, in the most intimate and the most visible of all human relationships, the character of the church's trust in and responsiveness to the Christ who is her head. The specific phrase "that the word of God will not be dishonored" establishes that the wife's practice of the complementarian pattern is a testimony, that the quality of her life in the covenant of marriage reflects either honor or dishonor on the gospel that the marriage covenant is designed to proclaim. The complementarian pattern of marriage is never merely a private domestic arrangement; it is always a public theological witness.

"Husbands, in the same way live with your wives in an understanding way ... and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered."

1 Peter 3:7, NASB 1995

IV. Distinct in Role: Male Eldership in the Gathered Church

The Biblical Case for the Office of Elder-Pastor as Reserved for Qualified Men

A. The Primary Text: 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and the Creation-Order Argument

The biblical case for the reservation of the office of elder-pastor to qualified men rests primarily on two texts: 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, supplemented by the qualifications for the office of overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. The primary text for this lesson is 1 Timothy 2:11–15: "A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint" (NASB 1995).

The complementarian's case for the creation-order grounding of Paul's instruction rests primarily on verses 13–14, where Paul grounds the instruction of verse 12 in two features of the creation narrative: the order of creation ("it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve", citing Genesis 2:7, 21–22) and the order of the fall ("it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression", citing Genesis 3:1–6, 13). The creation-order appeal in verse 13 is the same appeal that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 ("for man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake") as the basis for the male-female distinction in the gathered church's worship. In both

passages, Paul's argument is explicitly and deliberately grounded in the creation narrative rather than in the cultural conventions of his own time.

The egalitarian's most common response to this creation-order argument is to claim that Paul is appealing not to the creation order as a permanent theological structure but to a cultural reading of the creation narrative that was common in the ancient Mediterranean world but that the contemporary interpreter is not obligated to endorse. On this account, Paul's "for it was Adam who was first created" is a Jewish midrashic argument of the kind that establishes cultural appropriateness rather than theological necessity. But this reading is very difficult to sustain against the text: Paul does not appeal to cultural appropriateness in verse 13; he appeals to the sequence of the creation acts as narrated in Genesis 2. The sequence of creation, Adam formed first, then Eve, is not a cultural convention; it is a historical and theological feature of the creation narrative that Paul treats as having permanent normative significance for the structure of the gathered church. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to claim that Paul is wrong about the theological significance of the creation sequence, a claim that carries the weight of asserting that an apostolic argument grounded in the creation narrative does not carry the authority of the apostle who made it.

B. *The Scope, the Qualifications, and the Women Who Lead*

The complementarian's account of male eldership requires careful precision about the scope of the restriction it identifies, because both the over-application and the under-application of the restriction have produced pastoral distortions that the text does not support. The restriction that Paul establishes in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man", applies to the specific context of the gathered church's authoritative instruction and governance, not to every context in which a woman might teach or exercise influence over a man. Women teach men in a variety of contexts that the New Testament explicitly commends or describes: Priscilla instructs Apollos "more accurately" (Acts 18:26), older women teach younger women (Titus 2:3–5), Deborah leads Israel (Judges 4–5), and Paul commends a number of women as co-laborers in the gospel mission (Romans 16; Philippians 4:2–3). None of these instances of women's teaching, leadership, and influence over men is in tension with the 1 Timothy 2:12 restriction, because none of them involves the exercise of the specific authoritative teaching and governing function of the elder-pastor office within the gathered church.

The qualifications for the elder-pastor office in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 are specified in terms that assume a male occupant: the overseer must be "the husband of one wife" (v. 2, *mias gynaikos andra*, literally "a man of one woman"), and the elder must manage his own household well, keeping his children under control (v. 4–5), descriptions that presuppose the male head of a household in the ancient Mediterranean domestic structure. These qualifications are not exhaustive descriptions of the elder's character that apply only to married men with children; they are illustrations of the character that must be displayed in the office, grounded in the typical domestic context of the first-century male householder. But the male-gendered character of the qualifications is not incidental: it reflects the creation-order grounding of the office that 1 Timothy 2:13–14 establishes and that the consistent practice of the apostolic churches, whose elders and overseers are consistently male throughout the New Testament, embodies.

The women who serve the gathered church in roles other than the elder-pastor office are not thereby serving in lesser roles or contributing lesser gifts. The gifts of teaching, wisdom, discernment, pastoral care, service, mercy, and administration that women bring to the body of Christ are as genuinely Spirit-given and as genuinely necessary for the health of the community as the elder's gifts; and the restriction of the elder-pastor office to qualified men does not diminish, discount, or condescend toward any of these gifts or the women who bring them. The complementarian congregation that has reduced women's ministry to a small set of peripheral roles and that has failed to cultivate, to honor, and to deploy the full range of Spirit-given gifts that women bring to the body of Christ has not embodied complementarianism; it has practiced a form of the patriarchalist distortion that the complementarian position explicitly rejects. The goal of the complementarian's account of the elder-pastor office

is not the minimization of women's ministry but the specific, creation-order-grounded structuring of the gathered church's authoritative teaching and governance function that the apostolic pattern establishes.

V. Against Egalitarianism and Against Patriarchalism

The Complementarian's Two-Front Defense of the Biblical Middle Position

A. Against Egalitarianism: The Creation-Order Arguments Are Not Culturally Relative

The egalitarian's primary argument against the complementarian's role distinctions is the cultural relativity claim: that Paul's instructions about women's roles in Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 are time-bound accommodations to the patriarchal culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, that their cultural conditionedness is evident from the specific cultural forms they take (head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11, the household code structure of Ephesians 5), and that the contemporary church is entitled, indeed, obligated, to distinguish between the timeless theological principle that underlies the cultural application and the specific cultural application that is no longer binding. The contemporary application of the timeless principle, on this account, is the full equality of men and women in every dimension of the church's ministry and governance.

The complementarian's response to the cultural relativity argument is twofold. First, it draws attention to the character of Paul's actual arguments: Paul does not ground his instructions about women's roles in the cultural conventions of the ancient Mediterranean world; he grounds them explicitly and consistently in the creation narrative. The appeal to the order of creation ("it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve," 1 Timothy 2:13) and the appeal to the purpose of the creation of woman ("man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake," 1 Corinthians 11:9) are not cultural arguments; they are theological arguments grounded in the permanent structure of the creation that Genesis 2 establishes. The egalitarian who claims that these arguments are culturally relative must explain why Paul chose to ground a culturally relative instruction in a creation-order argument rather than in the cultural conventions that actually determined the instruction, a question that the cultural relativity account has never satisfactorily answered.

Second, the complementarian's response draws attention to the hermeneutical principle that the cultural relativity argument implies and its consequences for the authority of the New Testament's ethical instructions more broadly. If Paul's creation-order arguments for women's roles are culturally relative because they were written in a patriarchal cultural context, then by the same hermeneutical principle, Paul's arguments for numerous other ethical instructions that were written in the same cultural context are equally subject to cultural relativization. The egalitarian who claims that the creation-order arguments for women's roles are culturally relative but that Paul's equally culturally embedded arguments for other ethical positions are not culturally relative owes a principled hermeneutical account of the distinction, an account that is not, in fact, available in the egalitarian literature in a form that is exegetically and hermeneutically consistent. The complementarian holds that Paul's creation-order arguments carry the same hermeneutical authority as his other theologically grounded ethical instructions, and that the consistent and principled application of that authority requires the complementarian's role distinctions.

B. Against Patriarchalism: Headship Is Not Domination, Submission Is Not Inferiority

The patriarchalist distortion of complementarianism is in some respects the more dangerous error, because it is the distortion that is most likely to be practiced within communities that formally affirm the complementarian position. Patriarchalism, the confusion of the ordered complementarity that the creation narrative establishes with the domination, control, and diminishment of women that the fall introduced as its perversion, has been and continues to be a real presence in communities that formally defend the biblical account of headship and submission. The complementarian's account of headship must therefore be as clear and as forceful in its rejection of the patriarchalist distortion as it is in its defense of the role distinctions against the egalitarian alternative.

The specific features of the patriarchalist distortion that the complementarian must explicitly reject are several. First, the treatment of the husband's headship as a license for the unilateral, self-serving exercise of authority over the wife without accountability to the self-giving, cross-shaped character of the headship that Ephesians 5:25–29 requires. The husband who makes unilateral decisions affecting his wife and family without genuine consultation, who dismisses his wife's wisdom and her counsel, who uses his role to serve his own preferences rather than his wife's flourishing, is not practicing servant headship; he is practicing a domination that the fall produced and that the complementarian position explicitly rejects. Second, the treatment of the wife's submission as a license for the husband's control of every dimension of the wife's life, including her intellectual, vocational, and spiritual development. The wife's submission is the voluntary, covenantally specific, theologically grounded responsiveness to her husband's servant headship; it is not the surrender of her personhood, her intellectual life, her vocational gifts, or her Spirit-given contribution to the community of faith to the husband's unilateral management.

Third, and most urgently: the complementarian position provides no cover for abuse. The husband who uses his headship role to abuse his wife, physically, verbally, emotionally, sexually, or spiritually, has not exercised the servant headship that Ephesians 5 requires; he has committed an act of violence against the image of God that the *imago Dei* absolutely forbids, and the church's response to domestic abuse must be unambiguous: the abused wife is not required to remain in a situation of ongoing harm in the name of submission, and the church that fails to protect her and to hold her husband accountable has failed both her and the gospel. 1 Peter 3:7's warning that the husband who fails to honor his wife as a fellow heir of the grace of life will find his prayers hindered is a specific divine judgment on the patriarchalist distortion of the headship that the complementarian position consistently teaches: the God who designed the headship structure will not bless the misuse of the structure, and the church that takes the complementarian position seriously must take the accountability of the one who holds the headship with equal seriousness.

“Do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man ... For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve.”

1 Timothy 2:12–13, NASB 1995

VI. The Beauty of Complementarity: A Living Portrait of the Gospel

When Practiced as God Designed It, Complementarity Displays the Mystery of Christ and the Church

The doctrine of complementarity is not primarily a defensive position, a set of boundaries drawn against egalitarianism on the one side and patriarchalism on the other, though the defense is necessary and the lesson has devoted significant space to it. The doctrine is primarily a positive vision: the vision of what the male-female relationship looks like when it is lived according to the Creator's design, when the husband's servant headship and the wife's intelligent submission are both practiced in the fullness of the theological understanding that the Christ-and-church mystery supplies. This positive vision is not a utopian fantasy; it is a theologically grounded description of what the Spirit's work in the lives of believing men and women produces when it is allowed to shape the specific dynamics of the covenant relationships that the creation narrative and the Pauline epistles describe. The beauty is not the beauty of perfect performance but the beauty of genuine theological orientation toward the mystery that the marriage covenant is designed to embody.

The specific beauty of the husband's servant headship is the beauty of the cross applied to the domestic sphere: the man who lays down his preferences for the sake of his wife's flourishing, who listens more than he speaks, who leads by serving rather than commanding, who takes responsibility for the direction and the wellbeing of his household without taking the credit for its successes, this man is displaying in his marriage the specific quality of the love that Christ showed to the church, and his marriage is a living testimony to the character of the God who

gave His Son for a bride who had done nothing to deserve the giving. The specific beauty of the wife's intelligent submission is the beauty of the church's trust in Christ applied to the domestic sphere: the woman who honors her husband's headship not because she is commanded to but because she has understood the theological mystery of what the covenant represents, who brings the full strength of her wisdom, her gifts, and her Spirit-given contribution to the marriage partnership while honoring the structure that God has designed for the covenant, this woman is displaying in her marriage the specific quality of the trust that the church shows to the Christ who is her head.

The cumulative witness of a congregation of complementarian marriages, marriages in which husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church and wives honor their husbands as the church honors Christ, is one of the most powerful apologetic witnesses to the truth of the gospel that the church can offer to a watching world. The world has seen domination; it has seen exploitation; it has seen the reduction of the marriage covenant to a consumer contract that is dissolved when it ceases to satisfy. What it has rarely seen is the specific, costly, beautiful, cross-shaped love that the husband's servant headship embodies and the specific, voluntary, strong, theologically grounded trust that the wife's intelligent submission embodies. When a watching world sees these, it sees in the domestic sphere the same story it is invited to believe in the cosmic sphere: that there is a God who gave Himself for a people who did not deserve the giving, and that the people who have received the giving have been so transformed by it that they now live in its pattern in the most intimate dimensions of their own lives. This is the beauty of complementarity, and it is a beauty that the church is called not merely to defend but to embody and to display.

Unit 6 concludes with this lesson, and the Anthropology series now turns to Unit 7: the cultural mandate and human vocation. The three lessons of Unit 6 have established the biblical doctrine of gender (Lesson 17), marriage (Lesson 18), and complementarity (Lesson 19) as creation ordinances whose authority is grounded in the Creator's design, confirmed by the Lord Jesus, developed by the apostle Paul, and displayed in the mystery of Christ and the church. Every departure from these ordinances, in the contemporary culture's gender ideology, same-sex redefinition of marriage, and egalitarian or patriarchalist distortions of the complementarian pattern, is a departure from the good design of the Creator who made humanity as male and female and declared the result very good. The Unit 6 conclusion is simultaneously the Unit 7 beginning: the same image-bearing creatures who are called to embody the creation ordinances of gender, marriage, and complementarity are called to exercise the cultural mandate of Unit 7, to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to exercise the vice-regal stewardship of the image of God in every domain of creaturely life. The whole person, rightly ordered in gender and in covenant, is the person who is equipped to exercise the cultural mandate in the fullness of the Creator's design.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”

Ephesians 5:25, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Complementarianism	The theological position that men and women are equal in dignity, value, and worth before God, both bearing the image of God without qualification, both standing equally before God in salvation, and yet distinct in their God-given roles within the specific covenantal relationships of marriage (husband-wife) and the gathered church (the office of elder-pastor). The role distinctions are grounded in the creation order that Genesis 2 establishes and that Paul appeals to in Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2, and therefore carry the permanent authority of the creation ordinance rather than the relative authority of cultural convention. Complementarianism stands against both egalitarianism (which denies the creation-order role distinctions) and patriarchalism (which distorts them through domination and diminishment).
Egalitarianism (Theological)	The theological position that holds men and women to be not only equal in dignity (which is biblical) but also fully interchangeable in function and role in every context, including the leadership and governance of marriage and the gathered church. Theological egalitarianism typically argues that Paul's creation-order arguments for role distinctions in Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 are culturally relative accommodations to ancient Mediterranean patriarchalism that the contemporary church is not obligated to apply. The complementarian response holds that Paul's creation-order arguments are grounded in the permanent structure of the creation narrative rather than in the cultural conventions of his time, and therefore carry permanent normative authority.
Patriarchalism	The distortion of the complementarian account of ordered complementarity that confuses the creation narrative's ordered relationship of servant headship and intelligent submission with the dominating, controlling, and diminishing treatment of women that the fall introduced as its perversion. Patriarchalism treats the husband's headship as a license for self-serving authority rather than a call to self-giving service; treats the wife's submission as the surrender of her personhood rather than the voluntary, theologically grounded responsiveness of one equal to another; and provides no protection for women against abuse committed under the cover of headship language. The complementarian explicitly rejects patriarchalism as a distortion of the creation ordinance rather than an expression of it.
The Trinitarian Analogy (1 Corinthians 11:3)	Paul's parallel in 1 Corinthians 11:3 between the headship of God over Christ and the headship of man over woman in the covenant of marriage: "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ." The analogy establishes that functional order within a relationship of fully equal persons is not a contradiction but the specific form in which the Triune God's own inner life is organized: the Son submits to the Father in the economy of redemption without any diminishment of the Son's co-equal divine nature. Therefore the wife's submission to her husband in the covenant of marriage does not imply the wife's inferiority of nature or dignity; it is the ordered relationship of two equal persons in the specific covenantal structure that God has designed for the marriage covenant.

Male Eldership	The complementarian position that the office of elder-pastor within the gathered church is reserved for qualified men, on the basis of the apostolic creation-order argument of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (“for it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve”) and the male-gendered qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 (“the husband of one wife”). Male eldership does not restrict women from teaching, serving, leading, or contributing their Spirit-given gifts to the body of Christ in a wide range of contexts; it defines the specific office of authoritative teaching and governance within the gathered church as a covenantally specific role reserved for qualified men on the basis of the creation-order arguments that Paul makes.
Creation-Order Argument	The hermeneutical principle by which Paul grounds role distinctions in the permanent structure of the creation narrative rather than in the cultural conventions of the ancient Mediterranean world. The creation-order arguments appear in 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 (“man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake”, citing Genesis 2:18–23) and 1 Timothy 2:13 (“it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve”, citing Genesis 2:7, 21–22). The creation-order grounding is the complementarian’s primary defense against the egalitarian’s cultural-relativity objection: if Paul’s arguments are grounded in the creation narrative rather than in ancient cultural conventions, then the role distinctions they establish carry the permanent authority of the creation ordinance.
Galatians 3:28 (Complementarian Interpretation)	The complementarian’s interpretation of Paul’s declaration that “there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” as a statement about the equal soteriological standing of all believers before God in the matter of justification and covenant membership, not as a comprehensive abolition of every functional and structural distinction between male and female in every social and institutional context. The complementarian notes that the same Paul who wrote Galatians 3:28 also wrote Ephesians 5:22–24 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and that the most internally consistent interpretation of Paul’s teaching holds both the equal soteriological standing of Galatians 3:28 and the creation-order role distinctions of the household and church texts together.
Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26)	The married couple who instructed Apollos “more accurately” in the way of God after hearing him speak in the Ephesian synagogue. The joint instruction of Apollos by Priscilla and Aquila is cited by egalitarians as evidence that women’s teaching of men is not restricted by the New Testament. The complementarian notes that the instruction occurred in a private context rather than in the gathered church’s formal assembly, and that it involved the joint instruction of the married couple rather than Priscilla’s sole authoritative teaching over Apollos. The incident is compatible with the complementarian’s account of the 1 Timothy 2:12 restriction as applying to the specific context of authoritative teaching and governance in the gathered church, not to every context in which a woman might teach or influence a man.
Domestic Abuse and Complementarianism	The complementarian’s explicit rejection of the use of headship language to justify or to minimize domestic abuse. The husband who uses the language of headship to justify physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or spiritual abuse of his wife has not practiced servant headship but has committed violence against the image of God that the imago Dei absolutely forbids. The church’s response to domestic abuse must be unambiguous: the abused wife is not required to remain in a situation of

	ongoing harm in the name of submission, and the church that fails to protect her and hold the abuser accountable has failed both her and the gospel. 1 Peter 3:7's warning that the husband who fails to honor his wife as a fellow heir of the grace of life will find his prayers hindered is a specific divine judgment on the patriarchalist distortion of servant headship.
Beauty of Complementarity	The positive vision of what the male-female relationship looks like when the complementarian pattern is embodied as God designed it: the husband's servant headship displaying in the domestic sphere the self-giving love of Christ for His church, and the wife's intelligent submission displaying in the domestic sphere the church's voluntary and trusting responsiveness to Christ. When practiced in the fullness of the theological understanding that the Christ-and-church mystery supplies, complementarian marriages constitute a living proclamation of the gospel, a specific, costly, beautiful, cross-shaped witness to the character of the God who gave Himself for a people who did not deserve the giving, in the most intimate and the most visible of all human relationships.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe both affirmations of complementarianism with equal theological seriousness: the equal dignity of women as image-bearers of God and as equal heirs of the grace of life, and the creation-order role distinctions within marriage and the gathered church as permanent features of the covenantal structure that God has designed. Neither affirmation may be held lightly or instrumentally, neither the equal dignity as a rhetorical concession to cultural pressure nor the role distinctions as a cultural tradition that the church has always done things. Both are genuine theological convictions grounded in the creation narrative, developed by the apostle Paul, modeled in the character of the Triune God, and displayed in the mystery of Christ and the church. The complementarian who holds only the role distinctions without the equal dignity has not understood complementarianism; and the egalitarian who holds only the equal dignity without the role distinctions has not understood the full reach of the creation narrative's account of the male-female relationship.

We must also believe that the creation-order arguments of Paul are genuinely creation-order arguments, that the appeal to the sequence of Adam's and Eve's creation in 1 Timothy 2:13 is a theological argument about the permanent structure of the creation rather than a cultural argument about the social conventions of the ancient Mediterranean world. This conviction is the single most important exegetical claim in the complementarian's engagement with the egalitarian alternative, and it must be held with the exegetical confidence that the text itself warrants: Paul chose to ground his instruction in the creation narrative, and the responsible interpreter must take that choice seriously rather than substituting a different account of Paul's argument for the account Paul himself provides.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the Trinitarian analogy of 1 Corinthians 11:3 produce in you a genuinely doxological response to the ordered complementarity that the marriage covenant embodies. The Father's headship over the Son and the Son's willing submission to the Father in the economy of redemption is not a grudging limitation on the Son's divine dignity; it is the specific form in which the eternal, mutual, self-giving love of the Triune God expresses itself in the history of the world's salvation. The husband's servant headship and the wife's intelligent submission in the covenant of marriage are not grudging limitations on the equal dignity of either spouse; they are the specific form in which the self-giving love of Christ and the responsive trust of the church are embodied in the most intimate of all human covenants. Let the wonder of the Trinitarian analogy produce in you the wonder of the marriage covenant's specific beauty.

Desire the specific qualities that the complementarian pattern requires of both spouses: for husbands, the specific quality of the servant who leads by giving rather than the master who rules by commanding; for wives, the specific quality of the strong, wise, theologically informed partner who honors the headship structure not from weakness but from theological understanding. Both qualities are demanding; both are beautiful; both are possible only by the Spirit's work in the hearts and the wills of those who have understood the mystery they are embodying.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Ephesians 5:21–33, 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 in sequence, attending to the specific creation-order arguments that Paul makes in each passage. For each creation-order argument, identify: (a) the specific feature of the creation narrative to which Paul appeals; (b) the specific role distinction or instruction that Paul grounds in the creation-order argument; (c) the specific way in which the creation-order grounding distinguishes Paul's argument from a merely cultural argument. After working through all three passages, reflect: does the cumulative weight of Paul's consistent creation-order grounding persuade you that the role distinctions he establishes are permanent and creation-ordinance-

grounded? If not, what specific additional exegetical or theological evidence would be required to persuade you?

- Identify one specific marriage in your congregation that most visibly embodies the servant headship and intelligent submission of the Ephesians 5 pattern. What specific qualities of the husband's leadership and the wife's responsiveness make the Christ-and-church mystery visible in that marriage? Then identify one specific marriage in which the complementarian pattern is most distorted, either by the husband's dominating patriarchalism or by the couple's functional egalitarianism, and reflect on the specific pastoral intervention that would most effectively help that marriage move toward the Ephesians 5 pattern. What formation, what accountability, and what community support would be most helpful?
- **Read Wayne Grudem and John Piper (eds.), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (1991, revised 2006), chapters 1–2 (Piper's "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity" and Grudem's "Purposes, Premises, and Postulates").** These two chapters provide the most comprehensive and the most widely cited Reformed complementarian account of the doctrine available in the English-speaking tradition, and they have shaped the complementarian's engagement with the egalitarian alternative more than any other single source. For the egalitarian position stated in its strongest form, read William Webb's *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* (2001), which provides the most sophisticated hermeneutical defense of the egalitarian position available in the evangelical tradition. Reading both will equip the student to engage the debate with the exegetical and hermeneutical precision it demands.
- Prepare a five-minute account of the complementarian position suitable for delivery to a congregation member who has heard that complementarianism is just another word for male chauvinism. The account should include: (a) the equal dignity affirmation and its full theological grounding in the imago Dei and the gospel; (b) the creation-order role distinctions and their specific covenantal scope (marriage and the elder-pastor office); (c) the explicit rejection of the patriarchalist distortion, including the absolute prohibition of domestic abuse under the cover of headship language; and (d) the Trinitarian analogy as the theological model that demonstrates the compatibility of equal dignity and functional order. After preparing the account, identify the single most difficult point to communicate clearly and develop a more accessible formulation of it.
- Spend time this week meditating on the closing sentences of Section VI: "When a watching world sees [the servant headship and the intelligent submission], it sees in the domestic sphere the same story it is invited to believe in the cosmic sphere: that there is a God who gave Himself for a people who did not deserve the giving, and that the people who have received the giving have been so transformed by it that they now live in its pattern in the most intimate dimensions of their own lives." What would it specifically look like for the marriages in your congregation to function as this kind of gospel witness to the watching world in your specific community? What specific qualities of the husband's servant headship and the wife's intelligent submission would be most visible to and most compelling for the specific non-Christian neighbors, colleagues, and family members that your congregation members encounter in their daily lives?

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before working through this lesson, where would you have located yourself on the spectrum from complementarianism to egalitarianism? What specific considerations, biblical, theological, experiential, or cultural, most strongly shaped your prior position? Has the lesson moved your position, confirmed it, or complicated it? Identify the single argument or single text that has most significantly engaged your thinking, and share why.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 carefully and in full. What is the specific order of headship that Paul establishes in verse 3? What creation-order arguments does Paul make in support of the male-female distinction he addresses in this passage (vv. 8–9)? And how does the qualification of verses 11–12 (“in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman”) modify the asymmetry of the preceding verses without eliminating it? What does the combination of asymmetry and interdependence suggest about the character of the ordered complementarity Paul describes?
- Read 1 Timothy 2:11–15 in the context of the entire chapter. What is the primary pastoral and theological concern that drives the chapter’s instructions? What specific creation-order arguments does Paul make in verses 13–14, and what specific features of the Genesis 2–3 narrative does each argument appeal to? Does the creation-order grounding of the instruction in verses 13–14 make the instruction permanent and transcultural, or does it merely use creation-order language to express a culturally conditioned preference? What determines the answer to this question hermeneutically?
- Read Galatians 3:23–29 in full. What is the primary argument of this passage about the relationship between the law, faith, and the inheritance of the Abrahamic promise? In what sense is it true that in Christ Jesus “there is neither male nor female” (v. 28)? In what sense is this statement not true, in what senses do male and female remain distinct even in Christ? How does the literary context of Galatians 3 determine the proper scope of the “neither male nor female” declaration?
- Read 1 Peter 3:1–7. What does Peter’s instruction to wives (vv. 1–6) assume about the theological framework of the wife’s submission? What does the specific example of Sarah (v. 6) contribute to Peter’s account of the wife’s submission? And what does the instruction to husbands in verse 7, particularly the warning that failure to honor the wife as a fellow heir will hinder the husband’s prayers, establish about the accountability of the one who holds the headship role?
- Read Titus 2:3–5. What specific qualities and behaviors does Paul instruct older women to teach younger women? How does the phrase “so that the word of God will not be dishonored” (v. 5) establish the testimonial dimension of the wife’s practice of the complementarian pattern? And what does the instruction for older women to teach younger women suggest about the positive and expansive role of women in the church’s formation ministry, within the complementarian framework?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the Trinitarian analogy of 1 Corinthians 11:3, the Father’s headship over the Son and the Son’s willing submission, is the most powerful theological resource for demonstrating the compatibility of equal dignity and functional order. Do you find this argument persuasive? Does the analogy require a specific account of the immanent Trinity (the eternal relations of the Trinitarian persons) or does it merely require an account of the economic Trinity (the roles the Trinitarian persons play in the history of salvation)? What difference does the answer make for the stability and the force of the Trinitarian analogy?
- The egalitarian argues that Paul’s creation-order arguments in 1 Timothy 2:13–14 are an instance of Jewish midrashic interpretation that establishes cultural appropriateness rather than theological necessity, and that the contemporary church is not obligated to follow Paul’s interpretation of the creation narrative in

reaching its own conclusions about women's roles. How would you respond to this argument? Does the character of Paul's argument, as a divinely inspired apostle making a creation-order case, require us to accept the conclusion that his creation-order argument establishes? What is at stake hermeneutically in the answer to this question?

- The lesson argues that the submission Paul calls for in Ephesians 5:22 is voluntary, theologically grounded, and compatible with the full strength of the wife's personhood, gifts, and contribution to the marriage and the community. Does the text support this account of submission? Are there specific features of the Greek word *hypotasso* (ὑποτάσσω) and its usage in the New Testament that bear on whether the submission is voluntary or coerced, active or passive, temporary or permanent? How does the theological framework of "as to the Lord" shape the character of the submission?
- The complementarian position draws a sharp distinction between the specific covenantal contexts (marriage and the elder-pastor office) where the role distinctions apply, and the wide range of contexts (the workplace, the civic community, mixed-gender ministry teams, etc.) where they do not. Is this distinction exegetically warranted and hermeneutically principled? How does the complementarian determine which contexts are and which are not covered by the 1 Timothy 2:12 restriction? And what specific criteria, drawn from the biblical text itself rather than from pragmatic considerations, determine whether a given context involves the kind of authoritative teaching and governance that the restriction addresses?
- The lesson closes with the claim that complementarian marriages, when the pattern is practiced as God designed it, function as living proclamations of the gospel, specific, embodied, publicly visible witnesses to the character of the God who gave Himself for a people who did not deserve the giving. Do you find this claim compelling? Can you identify specific marriages in your own experience in which the servant headship and the intelligent submission of the Ephesians 5 pattern have functioned as genuine gospel witnesses to those outside the faith? And conversely: can you identify specific cases in which the patriarchalist distortion of the pattern has done damage to the gospel's witness? What does the contrast between the two suggest about the stakes of the doctrine for the church's mission?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies domestic abuse as the most urgent pastoral application of the anti-patriarchalist dimension of the complementarian position, and states explicitly that the church's response must be unambiguous: the abused wife is not required to remain in a situation of ongoing harm in the name of submission. Does the congregation you serve have specific, clearly communicated, and consistently practiced protocols for identifying and responding to domestic abuse? If not, what specific steps, in training, in policy, in pastoral practice, and in community culture, would most effectively develop those protocols? And how would you communicate to the congregation that the complementarian commitment to servant headship is the theological opposite of the domination that abuse represents?
- The lesson argues that the complementarian congregation that fails to cultivate, honor, and deploy the full range of Spirit-given gifts that women bring to the body of Christ has practiced a form of the patriarchalist distortion that the complementarian position explicitly rejects. Evaluate the congregation you serve against this standard: are the Spirit-given gifts of the women in the congregation fully cultivated, fully honored, and fully deployed in the range of ministries that the complementarian framework permits? What specific gaps exist, and what specific initiatives would most effectively address them? And how would you communicate to the congregation that affirming women's full gift-deployment in the ministries available to them is as much a part of the complementarian commitment as affirming the male eldership?
- Unit 6 concludes with this lesson, having addressed gender (Lesson 17), marriage (Lesson 18), and complementarity (Lesson 19). Reflect on the cumulative theological formation that the three lessons of Unit 6 have provided. What specific convictions about the male-female relationship have been deepened or clarified? What specific pastoral challenges in your context are most directly addressed by the Unit 6 material? And what specific formation, in preaching, in teaching, in small-group discussion, or in pastoral

care, would most effectively translate the theological content of Unit 6 into the practical life of the congregation you serve?

- The lesson's treatment of the beauty of complementarity describes what the servant headship and intelligent submission of Ephesians 5 look like when they are practiced in the fullness of their theological meaning. In the marriages within the congregation you serve, which specific dimension of the complementarian pattern is most inadequately embodied: the husband's servant headship, the wife's intelligent submission, or the mutual honor and service that Ephesians 5:21 calls for as the context of both? What specific preaching, formation, or pastoral care would most effectively develop the dimension you have identified? And how would you hold the call to development together with the grace that the gospel offers for the failures and the distortions that every marriage embodies in some measure?
- The Anthropology series now moves to Unit 7: the cultural mandate and human vocation. Before entering Unit 7, reflect on the continuity between Unit 6's account of the ordered complementarity of the male-female relationship and the cultural mandate's account of the human creature's responsibility toward the created order. How does the ordered complementarity of the human community, the specific forms in which male and female together image the God who creates, governs, and develops the potential of the created order, shape the way the cultural mandate is exercised? What does it mean for the cultural mandate to be exercised by an image-bearing community that is specifically constituted as male and female, in the ordered complementarity of the creation's design?

Prayer Focus

Open this nineteenth lesson of the Anthropology series, the capstone of Unit 6 and the lesson that concludes the series' treatment of human sexuality, marriage, and gender, with a reading of Ephesians 5:21–33 in full, slowly and meditatively. Read it as the doxological conclusion of Unit 6: the passage in which the specific creation-ordinance structures of gender (Lesson 17) and marriage (Lesson 18) find their fullest theological expression in the mystery that Paul reveals in verse 32. Read the specific account of the husband's love as a description of the love that Christ has shown to the church, the self-giving, sanctifying, glorifying love that the cross enacted and that the marriage covenant is designed to embody in the domestic sphere. Read the specific account of the wife's submission as a description of the church's voluntary, trusting, theologically grounded responsiveness to the Christ who has given Himself for her. And then read verse 32 with the theological wonder that the revelation deserves: "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." The mystery that began in the garden of Eden, in the very good creation of God who formed the woman from the man's side and who declared the union very good, this mystery has been revealed as the embodied proclamation of the covenant of the Son of God with the people He redeemed. Let this revelation produce in you the worshipful response that it deserves: the response of the one who has understood that the most intimate of all human covenants was always, from the beginning, the proclamation of the most extraordinary of all divine covenants.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of complementarity to deepen your worship of the Triune God whose own inner life is the model for the ordered complementarity of the human community. Begin with the Father, who in His headship over the Son does not diminish the Son's co-equal divine dignity but exercises the headship of the One who sends the Son into the world in love, whose headship is the headship of self-giving love rather than of self-serving authority, and whose relationship with the Son is the eternal model for the servant headship that Christian husbands are called to embody. Move to the Son, who in His submission to the Father does not surrender one iota of His co-equal divine nature but exercises the voluntary, trusting, theologically grounded responsiveness of the One who goes where the Father sends and does what the Father gives Him to do, whose submission is the submission of love rather than of compulsion, and whose relationship with the Father is the eternal model for the intelligent submission that Christian wives are called to embody. Conclude with the Spirit, who is at work in the marriages of the community of faith producing the specific qualities of servant headship and intelligent submission that the Ephesians 5 mystery requires, who takes the theological reality of the Christ-and-church covenant and makes it a living, embodied, publicly visible reality in the specific marriages of the specific men and women who have been united to Christ through faith and who are even now being conformed to the image of the Son.

Pray together at the conclusion of Unit 6 in three specific directions. First, for the marriages of the congregation: that the specific married couples in the community of faith would increasingly embody the Ephesians 5 pattern in the specific quality of the servant headship and the intelligent submission that the passage describes, not as a performance of a cultural tradition but as the theologically understanding, Spirit-empowered, doxologically motivated embodiment of the mystery of Christ and the church. Pray specifically for the marriages that are most struggling with the distortions of the pattern, the patriarchalist distortions where the husband's headship has become domination, and the egalitarian distortions where the covenantal structure of the one-flesh union has been dissolved into a merely contractual partnership. Second, for the single adults and the women in non-eldership ministry: that they would be genuinely honored, genuinely formed, and genuinely deployed in the full range of Spirit-given gifts they bring to the community of faith, that the complementarian framework would function as an affirmation of their gifts and their dignity rather than as a limitation on them. Third, in anticipation of Unit 7: pray that the theological understanding of the human creature as an image-bearing, whole-person, complementarily ordered community will equip the congregation to engage the cultural mandate of Unit 7 with the full richness of the theological account of humanity that the first nineteen lessons have provided, knowing that the God who made them male and female, who called them into the covenant of marriage, and who designed

the ordered complementarity of their relationships is the same God who commands them to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to exercise His vice-regal dominion over every domain of the created order.

“This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.”

Ephesians 5:32, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Ephesians 5:21–33; 1 Timothy 2:11–15; 3:1–7; 1 Corinthians 11:3–12; Galatians 3:26–29; 1 Peter 3:1–7; Titus 2:3–5; Judges 4–5; Acts 18:26; Romans 16:1–7; Philippians 4:2–3*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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