

Rethinking Complementarianism

Sydney Anglicans, Orthodoxy and Gendered Inequality

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Abstract

Complementarianism, that is, Christian teaching focusing on men's leadership and women's submission as an ideal pattern of relationships and gendered behaviour, has been identified both as a boundary marker with little lived currency and as a contributing factor in instances of intimate partner violence. This contradiction raises a question; does complementarianism have little felt effect or does it have significant—and violent—social consequences? In this article, drawing on Scott's analysis of Secularism as discourse I consider complementarianism as a religio-political discourse. Through analysis of published church material and stories gathered through interviews with parishioners and church staff, I explore how complementarianism is constructed and implemented in the Sydney Anglican Diocese. I argue that complementarianism is not a distinctively Christian theology, but a discourse, or story, told in community which constructs orthodoxy and both creates and limits gendered and religious identity.

Keywords

complementarian – gender – secularism – Anglican

1 Introduction

I sit beside Belle,¹ a member of staff at a Sydney Anglican church, at her kitchen table. She reflects on her time at bible college saying:

I was in this lecture ... it was week 1 of year 1 at bible college, and we were doing, 'What do we learn from Genesis about humanity?' So, I say, 'Equality! we learn that men and women are equal, that God created both of them.' And our lecturer said, 'oh I don't like that word.' He wouldn't write equality on the board. ... he wouldn't use the word "equal." Even, *Equal but Different* has equal in it! I was like, this is not contentious in my mind.

Despite believing that men and women are created equal, Belle tells me that for all her adult life she has felt like she was 'trespassing' whenever she showed leadership. Although Belle believed firmly in equality, she had learned that leadership was for men, not women. While at university, Belle understood that the best way for her to work in Christian ministry would be to marry a minister. With some sadness, Belle says she never considered full-time ministry as 'a particular path' she could have followed. Admittedly, the Anglican church she had attended as a young adult had given her various opportunities to lead and serve. However, these opportunities were limited and gendered; they were 'in an all-female context.' Belle recalls, 'I never led a service there ... I was given opportunity but within a very clear framework of who I was meant to speak to and not.' With some hesitation, she adds, 'I don't think at the time I recognized that it was constricting, but I think in retrospect I realize it is.' That framework, which simultaneously provides and restricts opportunities for women in the church, is commonly known in church communities as complementarianism.

In this article, I consider the construction and contradictory consequences of complementarianism, as it circulates in the Sydney Anglican Diocese. Complementarianism is a Christian teaching which, adhering to a binary heteronormative framework, tells a story of how men and women are equal but different. As a result, men should lead and women should submit, in the home and in the church. Complementarianism has been identified both as an identity marker, an ideal which is not lived, even among those who claim the identity (Aune 2006; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Gallagher 2004), *and* as a contributing factor in instances of intimate partner violence in evangelical faith

1 I interviewed Belle in December, 2019.

communities, including the Sydney Anglican Diocese (Baird and Gleeson 2017; Lowick and Taylor 2019; Powell and Pepper 2021, Sessions 2018; Sharp 2014; Truong, Sharif, et al. 2020). At the same time, there are women in the Sydney Diocese who have written of the ways in which living according to a complementarian framework affirms the truth of the Bible, and has led to their spiritual flourishing (For example, Smith 2012, 226–232; Treweek 2014, chap. 2; Hartley 2015). This contradiction raises a question: does complementarianism have little felt effect or does it have significant—and violent—social consequences?

To work through this question, I suggest thinking differently about complementarianism. Usually understood as a matter of theology, there is much debate within evangelicalism, between complementarian and egalitarian theologians and clergy. There are already several comprehensive egalitarian evangelical theological challenges to complementarian exegesis (For example, Giles 2002, 2017, 2020; Mowczko 2013, 2020). Typically, these debates do not focus on the social consequences of either position,² rather they are concerned with which biblical *interpretation* is correct. The central question typically being, what does the text of the bible really mean? (George 2016). This results in something of a stalemate; a question of who has ‘better’ theology, rather than productive dialogue (Murphy and Sterling 2016). As American historian (and former complementarian) Beth Allison Barr (2021, 32) writes, ‘in many ways, the debate between egalitarians (those who argue for biblical equality between men and women) and complementarians (those who argue for a biblical hierarchy that subordinates women to men) is in gridlock.’

Given the protracted theological debate, which focuses on biblical interpretation, rather than social consequences, to work through the contradiction posed above, I move away from challenging complementarianism as exegesis or theology. Instead, I consider it a religio-political discourse. In her study of the Pentecostal church Hillsong, Marion Maddox (2013) suggests that headship theology is part of larger discourses on church authority, lending legitimacy to hierarchical power structures, at all levels of church (and secular) governance. I suggest that to understand and destabilize headship theology, complementarianism should be named and analyzed as a specific discourse with identifiable language practices, and multiple, contradictory consequences. This allows me to set aside the question: is complementarianism *true*? (and the implied ques-

2 While Kevin Giles (2020) does explore how headship theology facilitates, permits or endorses men's violence against women, his approach is largely to present an exegetical or hermeneutical challenge. Giles encourages readers to hear the bible correctly and uses the biblical text to show readers shortcomings of complementarianism as theology.

tion, can I still be a Christian if I am not a complementarian?). Instead, I ask, how is complementarianism *constructed* and what does complementarianism *do*? While Barr (2021) seeks to retrieve a more gender-egalitarian Christian theology and practice through a re-reading of church history, I focus on how understanding complementarianism as a discursive operation of power can provide paths for thinking and doing non-complementarian models of Christianity. I suggest that complementarian discourse uses gender to construct orthodoxy, and create and limit religious identity. However, it also aligns with secular discourse (Scott 2018) and the systems of gendered binaries and inequalities embedded within secularism.

This initial exploration of what complementarian discourse does is grounded in both my study of, and lived experience in, the Sydney Anglican Diocese. Typically, but not always, churches in the Sydney Diocese profess a reformed evangelical theology, and are socially conservative. Anglican theologian Kevin Giles (2020, 12) describes the diocese as ‘predominantly evangelical by confession and complementarian by conviction.’ The website for Moore Theological College,³ lists ‘gender complementarity’ as one of the college’s key values. One formal outcome of this, is that in Sydney, women cannot be ordained as priests or bishops. In recent years, it has also led the diocese to express strong opposition to LGBTIQ advocacy, perhaps most publicly signaled by the donation of \$1 million dollars to the ‘vote-no’ campaign preceding the Australian plebiscite on same-sex marriage, in 2017. Although alternate views certainly circulate within the diocese, I suggest that complementarian discourse constructs opposition to women’s ordination (as priests) and same-sex unions as a marker of adherence to Scriptural authority, and therefore of evangelical Anglican identity. Indeed, ‘for the majority of the diocese’s adherents, Sydney’s discourse regarding women and homosexuals demonstrate their adherence to true faith and sound doctrine, while other churches capitulate to contemporary social mores’ (Foye 2016, 85). In other words, in Sydney Diocese, identifying as complementarian, and therefore objecting to homosexuality and women’s ordination becomes a sign of orthodoxy.⁴

3 Michael Jensen (2012, 5) notes that with ‘few exceptions’ the majority of Sydney Clergy are trained at Moore College. Marcia Cameron (2016, p. 86) describes Moore as the ‘powerhouse’ of the diocese.

4 For an example of this link, see the ‘How we Began’ section of the website for the Sydney Anglican based parachurch group, Equal but Different. The website suggests that allowing women to be ordained and to lead congregations results in the blessing of same-sex unions and that these actions ‘represent an unambiguous rejection of biblical authority and truth.’

To advance a process of thinking differently about complementarianism, in this article, I do three things. First, I outline the contours of the complementarian narrative and sketch a picture of complementarianism as discourse. Secondly, I explore the contradictions and violence embedded in the language of complementarian discourse, particularly the phrases, ‘counter-cultural,’ ‘plain teaching’ and ‘equal but different.’ Thirdly, I consider what complementarian discourse is doing in the lives of two Christian young adults, Alice and Chris. Borrowing from Lauren Berlant’s (2010) work on ‘cruel optimism,’ I suggest complementarian discourse operates in their lives as a *cruel* discourse, which promises ideal relationships, but which does not help individuals realize these ideals. I argue that complementarian discourse produces a vision of the Christian good life, while covering the fact that upholding gender complementarity also works to align complementarian discourse with secular discourse. As a result, the hierarchical gendered binaries of secular and humanist discourse—man/woman, public/private, lead/submit—in which ‘difference’ is too often tied to ‘inferiority,’ are embedded into complementarian discourse and celebrated in the phrase, ‘equal but different.’ This works to obscure the inequality and violence of gender complementarity. Consequently, complementarian discourse does not produce a distinctively Christian vision of the world or necessarily achieve its promise. Rather it is closely aligned with the hierarchical gendered binaries which are embedded in secular, humanist discourse. As a result, although it informs how Christians understand themselves, allowing them to perceive their lived faith as in line with scripture, the oppositional logic, inequality, and violence of those gendered binaries—whether potential or actual, invisible or visceral—underscore complementarian discourse.

2 Methodology

To map the contours and consequences of complementarian discourse in the Sydney Anglican Diocese, I have listened to and analyzed both the public statements, sermons and printed literature of diocesan leaders, and the lived experience, stories or testimony, of individual Anglican people, both clergy and parishioners. I use *God’s Good Design: What the bible really says about men and women* by prominent Sydney Anglican writer and speaker, Claire Smith (2012) as a key text which contributes to complementarian discourse. Indeed, this book was described to me by one Sydney Anglican woman as ‘the bible for complementarianism.’ The stories included here are drawn from twenty-five interviews conducted with staff and parishioners—all names are pseudonyms—

across three Anglican churches in the South Sydney region between July 2019 and June 2020, as part of my PhD fieldwork.⁵ I draw on the interview data below.

The three church sites were the large inner-city church, St Barnabas Broadway,⁶ which draws significant numbers of youth and young adults, and two smaller suburban parishes. I attended all three churches regularly for 12 months, initially onsite and then online while various stay-at-home health regulations were in place during 2020. All parishioners and clergy at these churches were invited to complete a survey which asked about their church involvement, and their views on male headship and women preaching. They were also invited, both on the survey and through announcements in church notices, to volunteer to be interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted in person, recorded and around 60 minutes in duration. From March to June 2020, interviews were conducted over Zoom. I separated and collated the stories participants told me by the themes which were present in the interview material. I looked for how they negotiated, navigated and sometimes rejected complementarian teaching.

In terms of positionality, I am an Anglican woman, confirmed in 1999, and I often feel as though I began my fieldwork at least twenty years ago. To badly paraphrase the Apostle Paul, as a young adult, if anyone had reason to be proud of their contributions to the Diocese, I did. I taught Sunday school, co-led youth-group, and served on a parish council. I was a Sydney Anglican of Sydney Anglicans. The Sydney Diocese is my spiritual home. But it does not always feel like home. This personal contradiction started me on the path of thinking about the lived contradictions of complementarian discourse.

3 Contours of Complementarianism

Typically, complementarianism is thought of as a theology of gender which centers around an understanding of men and women as created equal in value and worth, but different in terms of the ministry and teaching opportunities each may take on in the church, and the gendered roles they should perform within the family home. Advocates of complementarianism ground this frame-

5 Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Western Sydney University Human Ethics Research Committee in June, 2019, approval number: H13296.

6 Rev. Mike Paget, the senior rector at St Barnabas Broadway chose to have the church named. All participants from this church knew the church would be named, but that they would be given pseudonyms.

work on biblical texts such as Genesis 1–3, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2 (Smith 2012). It is clearly stated on the website of Sydney-based organization, Equal but Different: in marriage, ‘men are called to loving, self-denying, humble leadership, and women to intelligent, willing submission.’ In the church, ‘this complementarity is expressed through suitably gifted and appointed men assuming responsibility for authoritative teaching and pastoral oversight.’ No corresponding practice for women is listed.

The problem for teachers of complementarianism is that an increasing body of journalism and research suggests that in marriages, complementarian ideals are rarely lived, and that in fact, they may contribute to intimate partner violence. Gallagher and Smith (1999), in their study of 130 evangelical Protestants in America, observed that while the majority of the participants claimed to agree with complementarian ideals, the hierarchy of husband’s headship and wife’s submission is largely in name only. Kristin Aune (2006), in her research with a British evangelical congregation, notes that while the church employed the language of headship and submission, headship rhetoric is tempered by ideas of service, so that marriages appear more equal, more egalitarian. This is echoed by Sydney Anglican minister, Michael Jensen (2012, 140), who has suggested that ‘amongst complementarian Christians that I know, marriages are remarkably egalitarian’ because they have been transformed by the Spirit of God.

However, many marriages which are modelled on complementarian principles do not look egalitarian at all. In their investigation of domestic violence within the Australian church, Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson (2017, n.p.) observe that all the women they spoke to ‘claimed the teaching of submission contributed to their abuse.’ Likewise, Erica Hamence (2018, 110), associate pastor at St Barnabas Broadway, writes ‘if we hear the voices of women who have experienced domestic violence, we will notice the pattern that teaching about headship, authority and submission was used against them.’

Despite this, the Sydney Anglican Diocesan (2018) report, ‘Responding to Domestic Abuse,’ which rightly states ‘the bible should never be interpreted to justify or excuse any form of abuse’ (5), later notes, that Synod ‘affirms that the relationship of loving, sacrificial leadership of a husband and the intelligent, voluntary submission of a wife is the Biblical pattern of marriage’ (45). It would seem that theological challenges to complementarianism have not led diocesan leaders and synod representatives to set aside the complementarian model of marriage and ministry. Therefore, to advance a project of understanding and countering the contradictory and violent social consequences of complementarianism, it is time to change how we think about it. To borrow from feminist philosopher, Joan Scott (2018), whose work on secularism as a discursive oper-

ation of political power encouraged me to consider complementarianism in similar terms, I want to consider a discourse of complementarianism.

4 Complementarianism as Discourse

Joan Scott (2018, 4) uses the phrase ‘the discourse of secularism’ to show that she ‘is not treating secularism as a fixed category of analysis but as a discursive operation of power whose generative effects need to be examined critically in their historical contexts.’ In doing so, Scott challenges the notion that gender equality has always been a secular value. According to Scott, secularism creates and rests on systems of binaries (state/church, public/private, science/nature), which are used to mark out gendered, religious, racial and cultural others. Scott reminds us that historically, hierarchical and unequal gender-complementarity has been a founding—and lasting—feature of secularism (I return to this below as I discuss the language of ‘counter-cultural’ and the positioning of gender-complementarity as a mark of Christianity). Invoking gender equality as a sign of Western secularism (and necessary value for citizens of Western nations) is a relatively recent political strategy, deployed against Islamic peoples.⁷ Accordingly, Scott (2018, 9–10) posits that:

[S]ecularism is a political discourse, not a transcendent set of principles, or an accurate representation of history. Like all discourses, though, it has a purpose and a set of effects that produce a particular vision of the world—a vision that shapes and is accepted as reality, even as it misrepresents history.

Using Scott’s approach, it is possible to analyze complementarianism not as a fixed theology or private faith, but as a shared discourse and operation of power, which creates both the ideal Christian and its suspect, inferior other. This approach demonstrates how both complementarian theology and the influence of complementarian leaders, is not simply a natural consequence of reading or interpreting the bible ‘correctly,’ rather it is discursively constructed.

Foucault (1972), of course, teaches us that discourses do not merely describe the social world, rather, they produce and shape reality. Discourses are ‘prac-

7 Illustrating how notions of gender-equality are mobilized by governments, Saba Mahmood (2011), demonstrates that in the American led ‘war on terror,’ rhetoric which links gender-equality to Western democracy, and gender-inequality to Muslim-majority nations, was used to justify military intervention.

tices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 2010 [1972], 49). The collected sermons, teachings and statements of complementarian Christians, form a discourse of complementarianism which shapes the way individuals Christians understand their place in the church, and the place of the church in society. This discourse could be thought of as a path to a Christian good life as it promises such rewards as happier, stronger (heterosexual) marriages and thriving ministries. The more often this complementarian story is told, the clearer that path becomes. At the same time, other paths become harder to follow. As Sara Ahmed (2019, 41) reminds us, 'The more people travel on a path, the flatter and smoother the surface becomes. When something is smoother, it is clearer; the more a path is followed, the easier it is to follow.' Complementarian discourse creates a smooth path for Christians to follow, an ideal through which Christian men and women can signify their faith. In doing so, complementarian discourse constructs orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Consequently, other ways of doing Christianity are rendered less than ideal, even suspect.

Exploring complementarianism as discourse should not be seen as dismissing the experiences of Sydney Anglicans, particularly Sydney Anglican women who profess that living and working according to a complementarian framework has led to their flourishing.⁸ Instead, it is a way of questioning how such testimony encourages, and also how it limits, disciplines and potentially harms, those who read or hear it. I suggest that this testimony and teaching not only encourages and disciplines, it also contributes to a wider discursive field, which shapes and limits what is to be a sincere and orthodox Christian. For example, when Claire Smith (2012, 128, emphasis in original), denounces those who 'believe in headship and submission *in principle* but have nothing like it *in practice*' saying 'this is no way to treat God's demand of us,' the sincerity of the readers' faith, indeed their Christian identity, is called into question.

8 To be clear, it is not my claim that complementarian Christian women are not genuinely living or *doing* Christianity. Just as Orit Avishai (2008, 422) wrote of orthodox Jewish women, that 'the message is that orthodox is what orthodox does: *This is who we are and this is what we do*,' complementarian women may contend that complementarian Christianity is who they are and what they do. However, women I interviewed overwhelmingly spoke of their frustrations with complementarian ministry and marriage, with one woman even calling it a 'survival strategy'. The more conservative women I spoke with were reluctant to call themselves complementarian, oscillated between complementarian and egalitarian, and often used phrases such as 'middle of the road,' or 'leaning towards,' when describing their position. Consequently, my concern here remains how complementarian discourse constructs orthodoxy in a way that limits what counts as orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Consequently, to explore complementarianism as discourse does not diminish the influence clergy and leaders have within their communities. Neither does it disregard the added weight which comes from believing a particular leader, belief or behaviour is authorized by God.⁹ Rather, considering complementarianism as a specific discourse, with its own set of language practices, shows how religious influence and authority is discursively constructed, and then exercised through discursive practices. It is useful to remember Foucault's (1995 [1975], 27) assertion 'that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge.' A Christian leader has influence because they have theological knowledge. This authorizes them to speak theologically, to offer their reading of the bible as true. I agree with Anglican theologian Steven Ogden (2017, 4) when he states that 'the leader, as guardian of the tradition embodies certain norms. ... this is partly because, the leader is divinely authorized, making his/her readings *true*' (emphasis in original). Yet as Ogden (4) also points out, 'ecclesial discourses determine who can speak and what counts as true.' I contend that it is important to name and analyze complementarianism as one such ecclesial discourse as this demonstrates how theological knowledge, orthodoxy and orthopraxy are discursively constructed. When complementarianism is viewed as a discourse which both creates the ideal Christian subject (the complementarian Christian) *and* the suspect, inferior other (the egalitarian Christian, the 'secular' other), it becomes clear that the ongoing debate between complementarians and egalitarians is always already unequal. Complementarians have the presumption of orthodoxy; egalitarians must fight to be heard as honoring Scripture. In the following sections, to explore how this is achieved, I turn to the language of complementarian discourse, beginning with the phrase 'counter cultural.'

5 Counter-Cultural

Complementarian discourse claims to offer a distinctly Christian teaching, which is set in opposition to feminism and secular society (as well as more egal-

9 This is, of course, a particular concern in instances of domestic and family violence. Theologian Kevin Giles (2020, 40) is right to remind us that 'the Christian abuser believes he has divine approval for the way he acts in his home.' In my discussion of the phrase 'equal but different,' I suggest the very language used to teach complementarian belief upholds this assumption of approval as it can be used to cover over, or even sanction, gendered violence.

itarian or progressive forms of Christianity). For Smith feminism maps uncritically onto secular society in general. Smith (2012, 12), opens *God's Good Design* by stating:

Feminism is now an accepted part of our society. It is unremarkable. ... it is the status quo. ... But for those of us with the courage and eyes to see it, not everything feminism has brought is good, and this is nowhere more the case than in the head-on confrontation of feminism with the Christian God and his purposes for men and women as *men* and *women*.

Here, feminism is a pervasive presence in society, in constant tension with Christianity. Smith describes the bible as 'completely contrary to the feminist values that rule Western cultures' (172). In discussing Genesis 1–3, she hopes to show the 'counter cultural things these chapters have to say to us about men and women,' particularly regarding marriage (179). Smith teaches that men, like the Biblical Adam, have a 'God-given responsibility to lead' (175–176), while women (wives) should follow, and dedicate themselves to work in the home; the 'ideal' wife of Proverbs 31, is upheld as a woman whose work is focused on the home and family (203). The idea of being counter-cultural regarding gender and sexuality, is also evident in the words of Rev Dr Mark Thompson, Principal of Moore Theological College. Writing for The Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission, Thompson (2015, 35) suggests that as a result of 'the juggernaut-like success of the LGBTI movement and the extraordinary power of its radical gender agenda' anyone who stands against this 'agenda' should 'expect to be victimized and marginalized.' Thompson, like Smith, claims to offer a specifically Christian, counter-cultural view of men and women, which is positioned as in conflict with secular society.

Through the language of counter-culture, complementarian discourse tells a story of complementarity and difference determined by gender as Christian and decidedly *not* secular. My point here, is not that there are *no* tensions between Christianity and 'secular' culture, however, upholding gendered complementarity as the norm for men and women works to align complementarian discourse *with* secular discourse. Australian political writer Annabelle Crabb (2014, 8) suggests that across Australia 'our attachment to the male-breadwinner model is deep and robust'. Scott (2018, 31–32) argues that 'complementarity', is a feature of secularism:

Gender difference was inscribed in a schematic description of the world as divided into separate spheres, public and private, male and female. In fact, in this context the association of women with religion was not a relic

of the past but an invention of the discourse of secularism itself ... Public and private were, like a heterosexual couple, portrayed as complementary opposites.

When complementarian discourse is read alongside secular discourse, gender complementarity is a point of alignment, not a point of tension. Just as the discourse of secularism today creates a 'stark contrast between Islam and the West' and works to 'obscure an older history in which ... secularists represented life in terms of idealized and unequal spheres—political/religious, public/private, reason/affect, man/woman' (Scott 2018, 17–18), the language of 'counter-culture' works to obscure this alignment between secular and Christian culture.

According to sociologist Sally Gallagher (2004, 231), this depiction of tension is a strategy employed to identify and bolster the faithful, as evangelicalism 'thrives' when 'it is embattled' and 'gender is a key marker of this embattledness'. Gallagher (2004, 231) suggests that although most (American) evangelical households are 'pragmatically egalitarian ... they retain the "counter cultural" ideal' of headship and submission. By claiming to present God's 'counter cultural' design, complementarian discourse positions heterosexual gender complementarity as a distinctively Christian ideal for Christian men and women. As a political technique of complementarian discourse, this creates a story of secular (western) culture as pervasively feminist. This produces (and limits) Christian understanding of how men and women are to relate to each other, and how they engage with society. It obscures similarities between Christian and secular discourse, therefore producing an image of what it is to be faithful, and of what—or who—is causing the ideal Christian to be embattled. I now move to focus on how 'plain teaching' and 'equal but different' further the work of producing and upholding this story.

6 Plain Teaching

Invoking the idea of 'plain teaching' is a disciplinary technique which can be used to control theological knowledge as it suggests the Bible has one clear message. It encourages—or requires—listeners to fall into line, rather than question or deviate. The language of 'plain teaching' works to silence other readings of the bible as claiming to know the one, true or plain meaning of Scripture is to simultaneously 'accuse others who disagree of distorting scripture' (Foye 2016, 175). Other readings are suspect. Indeed, the person who pursues an alternative reading is suspect. This is evident in the words of The

Archbishop of Sydney, Glenn Davies (2019, 11), when he spoke against Anglican bishops who blessed same-sex marriages saying:

My own view is that if people wish to change the doctrine of our Church, they should start a new church or join a church more aligned to their views—but do not ruin the Anglican Church by abandoning the plain teaching of Scripture. Please leave us.

Similarly, Smith (2012, 12) warns the ‘plain’ meaning of the bible is lost when Christians are influenced by feminism:

The dust of feminism has settled on the pages of our Bibles and obscured God’s word. What the Bible once said clearly about men and women is no longer clear to us. The plain meaning of texts no longer seems plain.

In both these examples, we see how the language of ‘plain teaching’ works to reinforce the language of counter-culture by declaring a right way of reading the Bible, and therefore of being a Christian (the person who follows the plain teaching). It also limits Christian possibility by producing a wrong way of being a Christian and reading the Bible (someone who might affirm women preaching, or be a feminist, or support queer relationships).

Catherine,¹⁰ an Anglican ministry student who proudly calls herself egalitarian, has felt the alienating consequences of refusing to align with ‘plain teaching.’ Reading the bible in an egalitarian way places Catherine on the wrong side of the norm, forcing her off the complementarian path. She says:

you have a slightly different view on something, and people think, therefore, you’re not a Christian. ... I don’t think any person who is seeking Jesus wants that to be the comment that people think about them when you’re interpreting Scripture.

She confesses that she sees the appeal in adhering to a ‘plain’ reading of scripture, sometimes praying, ‘God, can I just be complementarian? It would be so much easier because that’s what everyone else thinks, so why can’t I just believe that?’ However, Catherine also sees a contradiction with the idea of plain teaching; it only applies to passages ‘related to women,’ while ‘on other passages [Complementarians] are happy to do all the contextual work, but

10 I interviewed Catherine by Zoom in May, 2020.

when it's about women and men, they're like, nah, this is the plain reading of the text.' Catherine's experience demonstrates how the language of 'plain teaching' is used as a disciplinary technique which reinforces both the idea of conflict between Christian and secular society, and that there is one correct way to be a Christian. Similarly, Emily,¹¹ who came to faith in the Anglican church as a teenager and is now in her thirties, says, 'My experience of Sydney Anglicans is they only teach one specific theology and they never let the cat out of the bag that there are multiple theologies on every single point that they're teaching.' Because she often had divergent views on what should be a theological priority, pushing her previous churches to speak more about social justice and less about marriage, Emily felt like she didn't align, as 'you could only really belong when you fit a specific mould and you were, you know, well off, got your family together, married, with kids.' To recall Ahmed (2017; 2019), if complementarian discourse is a script or path, then for women like Catherine or Emily, following the path might mean that other people would stop doubting the authenticity of their faith. It would be easier to fit in. 'Plain teaching' paves the complementarian path. It is a discursive trick and disciplinary technique used by advocates of complementarianism to teach those in their communities that to read or live otherwise means you are out of line.

Rebecca,¹² who works for a church, suggests that, ironically, instead of encouraging deeper reading and respect of Scripture, the notion of 'plain teaching' prevents people engaging with the Bible, because it reinforces the belief that there is a correct view taught and endorsed by the diocese. She says:

I think in Sydney, church is more of an authority than scripture. ... we've had dynasties of people who have led the church and shaped the way that the church valorizes certain things and not others ... Sydney Anglicans like to think that they're rigorous bible people, but what that ends up doing is forming a pretty high bar for the average person to jump over when they're engaging with Scripture.

As a result, instead of engaging with the text, people might opt to retell the 'plain teaching' they are taught. They follow the path that complementarian discourse shapes. Invoking 'plain teaching' is used to signal alignment with right faith and a high regard of scripture, but it works to obscure and erase other ways of reading the bible, and can actually discourage deeper individual

11 I interviewed Emily in March, 2020.

12 I interviewed Rebecca in October, 2019.

engagement with the text. It also obscures the complexity with which Anglicans in Sydney navigate both the bible and cultural discourses. This is evident in the uses and consequences of the phrase ‘equal but different,’ which I turn to now.

7 Equal but Different

When I asked Sydney Anglicans to define complementarianism, their answers regularly began with the key belief that men and women are ‘equal but different.’ They understood this to speak primarily to the question of women’s participation in church. For instance, one rector¹³ I interviewed suggested:

the complementarian position teaches that men and women are equal but different and that women have a role in teaching, but they’re not to teach men, because women should always be subject to male headship.

This principle was in some ways flexible; some people applied this pattern of relating to a church setting only, possibly only limiting the position of senior rector to men, while others thought it also applied to marriage. Smith (2012, 144) grounds this position in the creation account, teaching that:

God intended the woman and the man to have different complementary responsibilities: submission for the wife, and leadership for the man. ... God formed the woman as a helper suitable for the man ... equal in every way, but with the distinct and different responsibility of helping.

This language of equal *but* different is problematic. The *but* in ‘equal *but* different’ detracts from the notion of equality because there is a conceptual slippage between ‘difference’ and inferiority. This slippage occurs because as the gendered difference of complementarian discourse aligns with secular discourse, it also aligns with the binary logic of humanism—self/other, man/woman, public/private—which is premised on ‘the notion of “difference” as pejoration’

¹³ Clergy and church staff I spoke with used a range of titles—often interchangeably—such as rector, pastor and minister. The term ‘priest’ was typically, but not always, avoided. Some had titles relating to specific areas of ministry. The senior rector or senior minister leads the parish, and is ordained as presbyter (or priest). Details and requirements of ordination to the diaconate and presbyterate in Sydney are outlined on the Ministry Training and Development website (<https://www.mtd.org.au/ordination/policy>).

(Braidotti 2013, 15). That is, as gender complementarity is common to both complementarian and secular discourse, both are inscribed with hierarchical gendered value and power imbalances. It is this slippage between difference and inferiority which embeds inequality into complementarian discourse, allowing actual relationships to be characterized by violence, even as it simultaneously promises ideal relationships for men and women. As Erin Sessions (2018, 5) reminds us, 'the unequal distribution of power and the adherence to rigid hierarchical gender roles reflects gendered patterns in the prevalence and perpetration of violence.' Similarly, Truong et al. (2020)¹⁴ suggest that across various faith communities in Australia, including but not limited to the Sydney Anglican Diocese, a belief that men and women are 'equal but different' is a barrier to truly addressing gendered inequality and ending domestic and family violence. This is echoed in a report of key findings from the National Anglican Family Violence Project (Powell and Pepper 2021, 20) which showed that in Anglican communities, perpetrators of violence 'misuse Christian teaching and positional power' and that 'in some cases, participants said that their abusive partners used obligations around the sanctity of marriage, the headship of the husband, and the imperative to forgive to control them.' One Sydney Anglican woman I interviewed, Alice,¹⁵ who hesitantly describes herself as complementarian, told me she saw 'a clear line between having conservative complementarian views and not hearing the voices of women.' In her own experience, this meant her

14 There is very little research on domestic and family violence in Australian faith communities. Truong et al. (2020, 3) provided an important exploratory report, yet with participants coming from a range of faith backgrounds, but in all cases from 'urban areas across four Australian states,' the authors stated that 'results are not generalisable to any particular group or community'. Naomi Priest (2018, 31) pointed out that 'there is no current empirical quantitative analysis available in regarding the prevalence of domestic violence and associated responses within faith communities.' Kevin Giles (2020, 7) suggests this general lack of research may be due to reluctance of church leaders to accept that such violence exists in their communities. Stepping into this gap, Miriam Pepper and Ruth Powell (2019), drawing on National Church Life Survey data, demonstrate that approximately two-thirds of Australian clergy have had to respond to reports of domestic and family violence, and state that while mainstream Protestant clergy (including Anglican) commonly offer support by way of counselling, they are less likely than other Protestant clergy to know about, or refer, survivors to external support services. Following this, the top line report of the National Anglican Family Violence Project (Powell and Pepper 2021, 5), suggested that the likelihood of experiencing intimate partner violence within Anglican communities 'was the same or higher than in the wider Australian community' and that 'prevalence of intimate partner violence among church-attending Anglicans was the same or higher than among other Anglicans.'

15 I first interviewed Alice in November, 2019, and a second time, by Zoom, in May, 2020.

previous church leadership initially did not believe her when she reported her abusive partner.

The language of 'equal but different' works to make inequality both invisible and acceptable by labelling it 'equality.' Consequently, the phrase is doing work which is reminiscent of what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012 [1989], 45) called a cover story or 'family myth, even a modest delusional system,' which husbands and wives used to cover or accept the problems and inequalities in the way they shared different and *unequal* tasks while needing to believe that their division of labour was fair and equal.

An awareness of 'equal but different' as a cover story was expressed to me by Emily, who understood complementarianism as teaching that 'men and women were created with distinct roles,' but saw this as covering inequality rather than promoting equality as:

there are some roles that women cannot fulfill ... for example, preaching in a church, but, whilst there are separate and distinct roles, complementarianism would say the genders are still equal ... For me that doesn't make sense. Once you start saying someone can do something but can't do something else, or saying someone is the head of the family and someone is not the head of the family, that to me automatically creates a structure or a hierarchy that says the genders aren't equal.

Similarly, Phoebe,¹⁶ a ministry student in her twenties, understands the language of 'equal but different' to be a cover for sexism and inequality, saying:

I've heard stories about people at college being really overt, like basically overt sexism. And hiding under the guise of complementarianism. Oh, we all have different roles, but men, just happen to be in every leadership role ever. But it's fine because we have different complementary roles. I think it should be gifts not gender.

In both these examples, we see how the language of 'equal but different' operates as a cover or excuse for inequality. The language of 'equal but different' shapes Christians' understanding of gender as a nonnegotiable heterosexual binary, linking the roles of men and women in the church and home to an inherent or God designed difference. This language promises equality, and offers an ideal pattern for Christian husbands and wives to live by, however, the danger

¹⁶ I interviewed Phoebe in March, 2020.

of this linkage is that it both justifies and excuses the limitations, inequalities and violence which result from a gendered division of labor. For instance, Debbie,¹⁷ a married woman in her fifties who became a Christian as a teenager, said that:

I thought that when you accepted the Christianity thing, that it was a package, so if you wanted salvation, if you wanted Jesus, you also had to have headship. ... so, if there was a dispute about something, it would always have to be the woman submitting.

Holding to such a story might make for easier decision making in disputes, however, it can simultaneously become a cover for domestic violence. As Gillian¹⁸ explained:

you'll have a situation where somebody might be in an unsafe marriage, and they are made more unsafe because the church thinks it is perfectly fine to share around all the women's groups, please pray for this woman that she'll be more able to love, submit and respect ... women are always the ones at fault and whose job it is to make things better, so we'll pray that they are given more of the Holy Spirit to make things better.

To counter the violence which is present in the gendered binaries of this cover story, it is important to break the conceptual slide between difference and inferiority. To avoid this slide, I suggest adopting Braidotti's call to shift away from 'dialectical oppositions 'either/or'' and towards 'immanent relations of 'and/and'' (Braidotti 2019, 67). In the context of church or Christian marriage, this would allow for a subtle yet important shift from 'equal *but* different' to 'different *and* equal' This would allow the promotion of equality *and* a celebration of the diversity that exists across *and* between all people. That is, equal *but* different prescribes roles based on presumed inherent sex-difference. Whereas, 'different *and* equal' recognizes and welcomes diversity, including diversity or difference of experience, and upholds equality of all peoples. In the case of ministry, difference would no longer be a cause for exclusion from the pulpit or ordination, rather it becomes a reason for inclusion. Employing what could be considered strategic essentialism—itsself a product of discourses which position women as inherently different to men (Lloyd 2005)—several

17 I interviewed Debbie in February, 2020.

18 I interviewed Gillian in June, 2020.

people I spoke to suggested women should preach, because they bring different experiences and readings of the text to the pulpit.

Illustrating this, some participants who were aiming to celebrate diversity, used the language of 'equal but different' to explain their views. While their thinking was moving toward 'different and equal,' it seemed that claiming the complementarian label was necessary to maintain a distinction between themselves and their ideological others. For example, Andrew,¹⁹ a minister who supported and trained women to preach, said:

God has made women to be stronger in other ways and with different things, so that kind of makes me want to describe my thinking as complementarian. I do think men and women are different, whereas egalitarian, feels flat in a way that I don't think that men and women are.

Interestingly, while Andrew used the notion of celebrating gendered difference to show how his position was not 'egalitarian,' his explanation for the benefits of hearing women's sermons is similar to that given by Catherine, the egalitarian student we met earlier. Andrew was thankful he could learn from women, who because of their 'experience of society, see and notice stuff in the bible and characteristics of God that I don't notice, because I'm a man.' While Catherine felt that:

women can bring a different way of experiencing scripture to God's people ... a different story or a different way of seeing the world, or the way in which a woman might have experienced God in her life.

Catherine and Andrew are both navigating the place of women in the church, and they both believe that men *and* women can learn from women, and the experiences of women. However, the similarity of their position is covered by the work of complementarian discourse. Below, I consider the stories of two Sydney Anglicans, Alice and Chris, to open a discussion of navigating the contradictions of lived complementarianism.

¹⁹ I interviewed Andrew in May, 2020.

8 Returning to the Contradictions of Lived Complementarianism

Complementarianism has contradictory consequences in the lives of Christians. It is viewed alternatively as a path to flourishing, an unlived ideal or boundary marker, and as a contributing factor to domestic violence. Here, I share the stories of two Sydney Anglicans, Alice and Chris, to consider how viewing complementarianism as discourse, with specific language, helps to understand contradictions.

Alice is now a staff member at an Anglican church. As indicated above, she ties men's violence against women directly to complementarian teaching, specifically the reluctance to have women preach:

I think we assume that the more conservative we are the safer we are. And, therefore, the more faithful we are. I've talked to friends at college, men who were off to be senior ministers, who said, 'I don't really know, and there is room for ambiguity and I'm not quite sure about women preaching, but just to safe, I won't let women preach.' ... I'm not buying the safe thing anymore. You can't convince me that it's safer not to have women preach, or that's more faithful in some way. Because we know by the research and what the practice looks like. It's not safer for women in terms of violence. It's not safer for women in terms of the culture that it creates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Alice believes that women should preach. This places her at odds with those who adhere to the 'plain teaching' that women should not teach men. She tells me that when she was at bible college, 'there was a suggestion that because I was convicted that women should preach in churches and have leadership roles ... that I automatically took a step towards less faithful in the eyes of Anglican circles.' Alice still calls her reading of the bible complementarian, but said 'there is complexity to my complementarianism.' She explains:

If I had to boil it down, which I don't like doing, I would say that the senior minister role is set aside for a man to have first responsibility for a church. I think that it is less so in marriage. ... I'm still wrestling with that. But I think marriage looks like a pretty equal partnership, except for first spiritual responsibility. It's a husband's responsibility first to make sure that the people in his household are being fed with truth ... Not complete responsibility, it doesn't mean other people in the home can't teach the Bible.

Six months after first meeting Alice, I asked how she and her husband are going, and what her complementarianism means for the marriage. She softly replied, 'It means almost nothing, if I'm honest with you ... it's not a priority.' Alice clarified, 'not because I've changed my position on it, but because we haven't had the conversation. My husband is wrestling with more significant stuff.' Alice quietly laughed, then admitted, 'so, I don't see heaps of linkage between what I claim to believe and what actually happens.' Alice clung to complementarianism in name, and accepted the gap between her professed belief and her lived faith.

Chris,²⁰ a university student who described himself as being 'quietly' and 'conservatively' complementarian, was also actively negotiating what his complementarianism meant in his life. He said:

if conservative means sticking to the bible, then I want to be as conservative as possible, but if it means sticking to tradition, I'm happy to be open to reform, if I can be convinced that that is going back to the bible. ... So, I guess I'm happy for my practice to waddle around.

Chris went on to say he hoped his practice of complementarianism 'looks like egalitarian practice.' Like Andrew, he used the language of 'equal but different' to advocate women's equality and their greater involvement in the church *and* to uphold gendered difference, thereby signaling why he did not consider himself an egalitarian:

I think men and women are different and I think that's a good thing to enjoy, and I guess where men and women work together well, it is better than when gender is erased, so, I guess, maybe if I was to characterize egalitarian it would be there is no difference between men and women, both men and women are you know, equally capable so should we just encourage everyone to do something.

Both Chris and Andrew needed to hold on to 'difference' to explain why it was good to encourage women in ministry; they brought something men did not. Chris also needed to hold to the labels 'conservative' and 'complementarian' to show he was adhering to Scripture. Here, the complementarian language of 'equal but different' allowed him to support opportunities for women, while also signifying he was not egalitarian (that is, suspect). At the same time, Chris was 'nervous about applying this framework too heavily to day-to-day rela-

²⁰ I interviewed Chris by Zoom in May, 2020.

tionships,' saying that if you consider 'man being like Jesus, woman being like church, like, I think as soon as you start equating somebody to God—I get very uncomfortable.' As a result, for Chris, being complementarian reminded him that he had a 'responsibility to be gentle and servant hearted.' It was a call to 'model Christ-like behaviour in a situation.' To do that well, Chris believed, 'you quietly do that by yourself and you don't tell everyone that you're being Jesus in the situation.' To offer one way of accounting for these lived contradictions of complementarianism discourse, it is useful to recall Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. Cruel optimism is 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic' (Berlant 2010, 94). Cruel optimism describes the emotional connection that ties an individual or community to their imagined ideal future, or good life, even when that future proves unattainable. Even when it becomes clear the good life cannot be realized, a person continues to work for it, rather than set aside the investment they have already made.

When we compare Alice's marriage in which the complementarian model meant 'almost nothing' with her previous relationship in which she was abused, the ideal of headship and submission has been both impossible fantasy and toxic reality. Claiming a complementarian identity, even in a moderate way, helped Alice combat the exclusionary consequences of complementarian discourse, particularly the rhetoric of 'plain teaching', and the violent consequences of asymmetrical relationships based on the principle of men's headship partnered with women's submission.

In the experiences of Alice and Chris, we see how complementarian discourse works to inform one's sense of self, one's behaviour. Alice tells me she does not have a character of submissiveness yet she willingly sits under the teaching of the senior rector; Chris tried to quietly model Jesus in every situation, and thinks the church works better when men and women are equally involved. The label 'complementarian' retained valency as an identity marker, regardless of how complementarian or egalitarian their lives look, as it gave them vocabulary with which to give meaning to their actions. Being 'complementarian' allowed them to see themselves as biblical or orthodox, in short, as Christian. To let go of the label might mean letting go of their identity. There is an impossibility and toxicity in the gendered ideals present in complementarian discourse. The ideals that promise a Christian good life are centered on asymmetrical patterns of relating that uphold gendered power imbalances which lead to gendered violence. Yet, complementarian discourse continues to shape identity as it creates and limits the field of possibility for Christian men and women as they consider their place in the church and home.

9 Conclusions

Complementarian discourse has the capacity to produce *and* limit the ways evangelical Christians can conceptualize and speak about themselves. It frames how Christians understand gender, (in)equality, difference, and gendered violence. It frames the relationship(s) between men and women, and between the church and 'secular' society. Complementarian discourse is sustained through language which depicts ideals, but is underscored with inequality and violence. The claim of complementarian discourse to be 'counter-cultural' and distinctively Christian, means that the gendered power imbalances and violence of systems of binaries are mapped onto the complementarian belief that the Christian God made men and women equal, *but* different. The language of 'equal but different' can be used to limit women's participation *and* to advocate for their greater involvement. There is violence in how the language of 'plain teaching,' is used as a disciplinary technique, silencing other readings of the bible, and enforcing the complementarian model is the only acceptable way of living as a Christian. Complementarianism, as an identity maker, retains currency, even when it is an impossible ideal or a violent reality, because calling oneself 'complementarian' is an indicator of one's status as a true, sincere Christian person. There is common ground between those who identify as complementarian and egalitarian, yet the oppositional logic and exclusionary nature of the language of 'counter-culture' and 'plain teaching' obscures this.

What then, does complementarian discourse do? It obscures the way gender complementarity aligns Christianity with secular and humanist norms. It excuses and covers inequality and violence. It produces the limits of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and so it minimizes the depth and variety of Christian experience. There are the women who, like Alice, see the harm of complementarianism, yet hesitantly claim the label. There are ministers who try to differentiate between a complementarianism which covers for violence and a 'properly construed complementarianism' which 'invites men and women to receive and realize their given differentiation in the midst of actual relationships' (Jensen 2012, 142). This should not detract from the fact that all complementarian teaching, contributes to the field of complementarian discourse, which is underscored with violence. It would be pertinent then, for Christian teachers and leaders to consider how they might be contributing to complementarian discourse, and to the maintenance of an ideal, which though helpful for some, is either too impossible or too violent for others. There may be a 'properly construed,' non-violent, complementarian theology, which by some accounts looks egalitarian. If this is the case, it might be time for church lead-

ers to set aside the language of complementarian discourse and then reclaim, even rename, this theology.

I'd like to close with the story of a church warden, who when asked where she would place herself on the complementarian to egalitarian spectrum, told me '[It's] formulaic crap. ... I don't believe in binaries.' What she did believe in was 'the equality of all people.' She wanted theology 'to acknowledge that everyone is different, and a *person*, in front of God. There is a gap in between the binaries and grace is in the gap. So, I'm not going to go either way. I'm going stick with grace, in that gap.' For Christians who want to counter gendered inequality and gendered violence, it is crucial to realize that inequality and the subsequent potential for violence is embedded in the language of gendered binaries. Indeed, in all systems of binaries, including the complementarian/egalitarian binary. Instead of advocating one side or the other, they (we), may need to live with humility in the gap between the binaries, embracing the possibility of being different *and* equal and (still) Christian and (quite possibly) feminist.

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