

Complementarianism in Mixed Groups

Complementarianism

Men & Women – equal and different

The Bible teaches that men and women are **equal** in value and dignity, both made in the image of God. We delight in this precious and powerful truth, and therefore equally value, appreciate, and treasure both men and women. The Bible also teaches that men and women are **different**, and one expression of this is in the spheres of marriage and church life. In these spheres we are to express an order to our relationships, including some different and **complementary** roles.

Teaching and leadership

In the church, the Bible gives two areas where this order is to be expressed: teaching and leadership (1 Tim 2:12). But it's complex:

1. On the one hand, we are all to teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16), whether male or female. For example, in the church gathering women are to pray, speak words of encouragement, even prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5).
Let's call this 'lower case t teaching'.
2. On the other hand, male leadership of the family is paralleled by male leadership of the church, such that a woman is not to exercise the 'authoritative teaching' or 'eldership' role over men (1 Timothy 2:12). This is not based on ability or value, but an ordering of relationships.¹ In light of this, we restrict the preached sermon in our adult mixed-gender gatherings to men; as well as the office of 'elder'.²
Let's call this 'capital T Teaching'.

The clearest expression of 'capital T' situations are our public church gatherings and the teaching that takes place through the sermon, along with the pastoral oversight of our church. Some examples of 'lower case t' situations are: an interview in a church service, a song leader sharing a verse or word of encouragement, praying at a prayer meeting, or a conversation over coffee.

The obvious question is: where does a Growth Group fit?

Applying this to our growth groups

¹ A beautiful example of an ordered relationship that does not suggest different value or dignity is the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. Verses like 1 Corinthians 15:28 depict the Son as "subject to" the Father, and yet the Bible portrays Father and Son as equal in worth and dignity (John 10:30, 17:5). In the words of one ancient creed, "the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal", "as the Father is; such is the Son".

² The family analogy is helpful here. The first sort of teaching is the brother-sister relationship, where it is appropriate and beautiful for all in the family to speak truth to one another. The second sort of teaching is like the father, who as the head of the family bears the ultimate responsibility for guiding the family into the truth.

At EV, our groups currently operate **somewhere in the middle**.

- *Not 'capital T Teaching'* - We don't consider the growth group leader role an eldership or a preaching (authoritative teaching of the church) role, so we don't directly apply the restrictions of the Scriptures in the way we would to eldership or public preaching to a mixed congregation.
- *Yet sometimes starting to look like 'capital T' Teaching roles* - In the way that we have structured things, Growth group leaders often grow into leaders who exercise considerable pastoral responsibility (which is similar to an eldership role). Additionally, the leader functions in some ways that are similar to the authoritative teaching role. As they prepare to lead and as they chair the discussion, they inevitably carry significant influence over what is taught.

This means that a Growth Group leader's role sits somewhere between a 'lower case t teaching' situation, and a 'capital T Teaching' situation, at least in the way that our groups operate.

Out of a desire to properly honour the shape of God's word on these matters, here is what this looks like in practice for us in our mixed-gender groups:

- Because of the similarities to 'capital T' situations, we have chosen to reserve the role of growth group leader (of a mixed group) for men. In this we seek to reflect the ordered relationships of the household of the church.

One implication is that the male leader will bear a greater responsibility for the direction and health of a mixed group than a female co-leader. This ought to be understood and apparent in some ways (even if subtle), such as leading the first group meetings in a new year, and/or the majority of the meetings.

- However, since a meeting of the group can sometimes be essentially a well-hosted group of brothers and sisters speaking the truth in love to one another (a 'lower case t' situation), we often have women facilitate mixed groups a few times each term.

And just as all Christian brothers and sisters bear some level of sibling responsibility to care for, support, and pray for one another, so the female co-leader is encouraged to share and assist in the support and care for the pastoral needs of the group, and particularly to oversee the pastoral care of female members.

To summarise, we have:

- Men leading men's groups
- Women leading women's groups
- Men leading mixed groups, accompanied by a female co-leader where possible (depending on the people available).