

Christian women differ in understanding how to fulfill God's will at home and church

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Theologians continue to debate interpretations of gender roles in the home and church. But how do women live out their understanding of God's will?

Four individuals share how God directed them to either an egalitarian or complementarian view and how they live out their calling.

Sacrificing for family

Married nearly five years, Courtney Fenton of Hannibal, Mo., wanted to be married but wasn't sure she wanted to have children. But the day she married, "something switched" in her brain, and the desire for little ones grew. Now with a 2-year-old boy and a 3-month-old girl, Fenton is a stay-at-home mom.

"I wanted to be in control of how they were raised. ... For me, it was a choice," she said.

She and her husband, Tim, decided together to follow the complementarian interpretation of Scripture. Tim, as the head of the family, provides for them, and Courtney cares for the children and the home.

To make the choice work, they've had to make some economic sacrifices. The Fentons have no television and no Internet access on their computer. They plan shopping trips and don't make spur-of-the-moment purchases. Giving up what they view as desires is "worth it" to be able to stay at home with her children, Fenton said. "To be there, living with my kids, is more

satisfying than stuff."

With a degree in communications, Fenton started her career with a public relations firm, but she "hated it." Although she had a better PR experience with a not-for-profit Christian camp, she said she doubts she will return to the field.

She doesn't regret earning her degree. "Education is vital to my children," she said. "It helps that I went to school and had those experiences." She may seek a degree in education in the future. "It would help my family and would be an option later," she said.

The church she attends has strongly supported her family's decision. Most of the 20- to 30-something families at [Believers Church in Hannibal](#) have chosen a similar path, and the women have developed a support group.

Becoming a "Mr. Mom" household



Like Fenton, Rebekah "Becki" Johnston of Lawrence, Kan., didn't envision

herself as a mother. She knew she wanted to marry husband Chad but felt she would find life's fulfillment in her career. She holds a master's degree in physician assistant studies, which she earned before getting married, and works in primary care.

She didn't plan to have children because she "didn't fit the standard role of mom as cook/cleaner/arts-and-craft maker, etc.," she said. Her husband fits that bill in the family, and his gifts fill the gaps in her own.

Johnston struggled with the decision because she grew up in a "very traditional" Lutheran church. "Growing up in a church that did not allow women to preach or vote in the church made me feel that I was somehow rebelling against God," she said.

But as she grew closer to the Lord, she said, God showed her how she could minister to others through her work.

"I ... realized that God gave me my gifts for a reason. ... Had I tried to fit into the mold of a stay-at-home mom, I wouldn't be able to use the gifts God gave me in the best way possible," she said.

She recently took a new position so she will become the primary breadwinner, and her husband will stay home with the couple's daughter. "The gifts that God did not give to me he, instead, gave to my husband, and I feel confident that our atypical situation is what God intended for us," she said. Her husband will take over duties on the home front in September.

Members at [First Baptist Church in Lawrence](#) support the Johnstons' decision. "The feeling of the church is ... a happy family at home will only benefit our larger church family," she said.

Study changes a mind

Candi Finch of Fort Worth was a self-described feminist until God used

women's studies at Southeastern and [Southwestern Baptist Theological seminaries](#) to lead her to embrace a complementarian view of gender roles in the church and home, she said.

As a college sophomore, she took a class in gender and communication under a "radical feminist" professor who declared if the women in class did not consider themselves as feminists, they were lying to themselves.

She was drawn to the message of "first- and second-generation" feminists—equal pay for equal work and women's right to vote—and started reading everything feminists wrote.

She rejected the secular idea that the Bible is the "greatest source of oppression," but felt "feminists were right about some things that the church should support."

Committed to ministry since her junior year in high school, she headed to Southeastern, where she earned a master of divinity degree with a concentration in women's studies and where Dorothy Patterson taught at the time. In biblical theology of womanhood, she examined all passages about women from Genesis to Revelation.

The deeper she delved into Scripture, the more convinced she became that God was moving her to a complementarian understanding.

"I appreciate complementarianism because it dealt with the actual text more," she said. "The other view dealt with culture rather than the Greek. ... Complementarianism is more faithful to the biblical text and hermeneutics."

Finch sees complementarians as divided over being a stay-at-home mom or having a career and believes the choice isn't "biblically mandated," she said.

She is an associate professor in women's studies at Southwestern Seminary and Patterson's assistant as she finishes a doctorate degree. She's single but plans to stay at home when God blesses her with a family.

Feeding the soul makes a better mom

Victoria White of Richmond, Va., grew up in an "incredibly conservative" Baptist church in Louisiana that nearly blocked her desire to attend seminary. Now, she serves as chaplain in a senior care facility. Like Finch, college professors influenced her view of gender roles, which she sees as a blend of egalitarianism and complementarianism.

She attended Rose College, a Presbyterian school, intending to major in physics. But after a taste of required religion courses, she switched majors, and a professor encouraged her to seek a seminary degree. Because leaders at her church would not write an endorsement letter, she had to join another congregation.

At the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, she met husband Mark. "I was on an academic track, headed for a Ph.D. I had determined not to marry a pastor," she said. "And Mark didn't want to marry while he was in seminary."

The couple completed master of divinity and master of theology degrees together. Now they have two small children, and her husband is pastor of Chamberlayne Baptist Church in Richmond.

Although she admits she struggles with the guilt of being a working mom, she believes pursuing her career is the right decision for her family. "Because I use my brain in ways that feed my soul, ... I'm a much better mom. When I am with my children, I'm completely theirs," she said.

She keeps her perspective by concentrating on symmetry, rather than balance. "Balance sets up failure. I see life as symmetrical lines, a

symmetry that ebbs and flows," she said. She picks up the slack when he studies and prepares for sermons, and he picks up what needs to be done when her job demands extra attention.

White believes men and women are equal before God and she and her husband "can do whatever it is that God has called us to do," she said. "But it's important for me to complement Mark's ministry. ... The church needs that, and Mark needs that. ... It's more about being there for my husband because I love him, not because of my credentials."

Their church sometimes takes a mixed approach, as well. "I think they would like it more if I didn't work ... to be available to Mark and to help out around the church," she said.

Yet "they love to see us lead worship together," she added. White filled in for about six months while the church was without an associate pastor last year.