

Editorial: Complementarianism isn't supercalifragilisticexpial-idocious

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"Winds in the east, there's a mist coming in, like something is brewing, about to begin," sings Dick Van Dyke playing the part of Bert in the Disney version of *Mary Poppins*.

Something is brewing, indeed.

To hear one leader after another speak to the messengers Wednesday morning at the Southern Baptist Convention, that something must involve an assault on God's design for men and women.

The code word is complementarianism.

To open his report Tuesday, August Boto, interim president of the SBC Executive Committee, named several measures for gauging the health of the SBC, including Cooperative Program receipts, baptisms, seminary enrollment and the number of member churches.

Nowhere among those measures did Boto cite a decline in adherence to complementarianism.

Yet throughout the seminary reports given Wednesday morning, the word complementarianism was heard repeatedly as one seminary president after another pledged his institution's commitment to complementarianism. One might think adherence to the doctrine is a measure of SBC health. Why the repeated refrain?

For the uninitiated

According to a summary posted to the website of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, complementarianism is the belief that God created men and women as possessing an equal essence expressed in differing roles, with men being given authority over women in both the home and the church.

As a result, complementarians do not believe in any biblical justification for women serving in leadership positions such as the pastorate.

Egalitarianism is another view of God's design for men and women.

According to the same summary, egalitarianism is the belief that God created men and women equal in all respects and gave both the responsibility "to rule over his creation." Therefore, egalitarians believe women may serve in leadership positions in equal measure to men.

Complementarianism is ensconced in the SBC's guiding doctrinal statement titled the [Baptist Faith and Message](#) amended in 1998 and 2000. As a result of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, women no longer could teach theology to men and were in one way or another removed from their teaching positions in Southern Baptist seminaries.

Seminary presidents double down on complementarianism

During a joint report of the six seminary presidents given Wednesday morning at the SBC, the presidents almost uniformly committed to complementarianism.

- Danny Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological

Seminary, stated his institution's commitment to complementarianism alongside an apparent equal commitment to equip women for God's call to serve.

- Jeff Bingham, acting president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, stated his institution will not move doctrinally and is committed to the entire Baptist Faith and Message, as well as welcoming the diversity within the SBC.
- When Chuck Kelley, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, was asked what seminaries are doing to include women in leadership, he committed to the complementarian position as stated in Scripture, stating emphatically and to strong applause that his seminary "will not have a woman as a preaching professor."
- Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued that the current health of his seminary is a direct result of the SBC's stand for biblical inerrancy and the doctrines expressed in the Baptist Faith and Message, also stating his institution's commitment to complementarianism, which precludes any woman from teaching in an SBC school of theology.

Complementarianism as the repeated refrain

Not only were seminary presidents somewhat quick to commit to complementarianism, so was J. D. Greear, newly elected president of the SBC. During his press conference Tuesday, he also committed to complementarianism.

Interestingly, most recitations of the SBC refrain came in response to questions about how the SBC will protect people, particularly women, from sexual abuse and harassment and how the SBC will include women in

leadership.

In answer to the question of women in leadership in the SBC, one might understand reference to the official stance. In answer to the question of protection, I did not hear a clear connection made or explanation given for how complementarianism instructs the SBC to protect against sexual abuse and harassment.

In fairness to the seminary presidents and Greear, each did state their commitment to making seminary campuses in particular and the SBC in general a safe place.

However, to those taking the SBC leadership to task on this issue, men simply stating the official position smacks of hiding behind words, appearing to legitimize the dodge with appeal to biblical authority. The insinuation is anyone disagreeing with complementarianism does not take the Bible seriously. Many who are questioning SBC leadership are not arguing the authority of the Bible because they do take the Bible seriously.

A possible prescription

Just as a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, perhaps the male leadership of the SBC needs to spend some time thinking through and communicating how their God-given roles of leadership in the home and church should empower them to protect women and children against sexual abuse and harassment.

In claiming such authority, they need to be able to give a clear and compelling response to a church and world serious about wanting to know what the SBC will do to make good on their expressed belief in the sanctity of all life.

At this point, the brewing storm demonstrates trust is broken and will not be restored simply by singing “complementarianism.”

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