

# **Voices: Complementarianism: Separate but equal by another name**

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In their June 2018 annual meeting in Dallas, Southern Baptists doubled down in their embrace of complementarianism as the proper interpretation of Scriptures that declare the headship of men over women in marriage, the home and the church (1 Corinthians 11, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, among others). In a joint report to the convention, the presidents of the six Southern Baptist seminaries reaffirmed their complementarian interpretation of these passages, falling in line with the 2000 revision of the Baptist Faith and Message.

But much has changed since that revision. The #MeToo movement, born out of the revelations that high-profile men have abused women or remained silent in their awareness that others were doing it, have brought the subject of male/female relationships back to the forefront.

It might have stopped there as far as the SBC is concerned until some of their own leaders were found to be among the abusers. Charges that their biblical justification for male dominance has contributed to the problem has sent them scrambling for a way to frame their position in a more palatable light.

Southern Baptist leaders are asserting complementarianism as their best rationale for the SBC's now-infamous resolution on the subject of male leadership in 1984, which made no mention of complementarianism at all. The resolution disallows women in leadership roles because "the man was first in creation and the woman was first in the Edenic fall," a distortion of

1 Timothy 2:13ff.

## **What is complementarianism?**

Complementarianism (not “complimentary” with an i) asserts God created humans as male and female, but with different roles, which, in the marriage relationship are intended to complement each other, making their marital oneness complete.

Southern Baptist leaders are simply co-opting this view for a different purpose to justify locking women out of leadership roles in the home and church. It is an accommodation for women. They are equal in essence, they say, but divinely unqualified to serve in a leadership capacity. It is as if they are saying, “Men can’t bear children. Women can’t pastor churches.”

A moment of reflection reminds us we have been down this road before in the history of our country—not concerning the role of women, but with African-Americans and the civil rights battles of the 1950’s and 60’s. It is called “separate, but equal,” and it leads us to rediscover an evil that figured prominently in the evolution of race relations in the United States.

## **Separate, but equal**

The phrase grew out of a Louisiana law from 1890, which was first called “Equal, But Separate.” The concept justified segregation as long as black people were afforded equal opportunities and facilities for education, transportation or jobs and formed the foundation for institutional racism in this country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Separate, but equal,” when unmasked, was an accommodation—that is, it provided no true equality, but gave the appearance of an effort to do so, as if just saying it made it so.

The doctrine was challenged in two landmark Supreme Court rulings. The first case was *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, and upheld segregation of public facilities, so long as equivalent facilities were provided for each group. Experience proved that impossible, mainly because only a half-hearted effort, at best, was made in addressing the spirit of the law.

Fifty-eight years later, in 1954, the high court struck down racial segregation in the public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, effectively reversing *Plessy v. Ferguson* by finding that separate facilities, by their very nature, were unequal. The reasoning of the court effectively concluded no one is equal whose separation is mandated, and true equality is realized only when black students are fully integrated into the public schools and afforded full access and opportunity.

*Brown v. Board of Education* was not an end-all solution to racial segregation, but the decision went a long way toward acknowledging the real problem. “Separate, but equal” had become a mask, justifying all kinds of Jim Crow laws manifested in “white only” restrooms, drinking fountains, and seating in public places, just to mention a few.

“Separate, but equal” was a ruse, propagated to justify segregation in word, while it thrived in deed. It was meant as a semantic fix, without any intention of altering the practice of favoring whites over blacks.

## **“Separate, but equal” and complementarianism**

The complementarian explanation for the difference between men and women in positions of authority is the same kind of manipulation. Those holding this view are quick to assert they consider women to be fully equal to men. Their roles, they say, are just different.

But when women are locked out of positions of leadership and influence based on their gender alone, they are no more “equal” than blacks were equal to whites in the Jim Crow era. Separate is not equal when that designation is forced by one group on another, no matter how their so-called equality is rationalized.

In effect, what proponents of complementarianism have done is to distort certain legitimate aspects of the complementary roles of male/female relationships by extrapolating a further use of it to justify gender discrimination. In the end, they are keeping women “in the back of the bus,” by denying their divinely ordained calling to preach, teach and lead.

Complementary roles in all human relationships bear a certain validity. Husbands and wives should indeed complement each other. So should friends, church members and fellow-believers.

But complementarianism for the sake of maintaining separation, under the guise of equality, is disingenuous. #MeToo is a way for any woman who has been abused to lend her voice to the growing chorus of those who have been victimized.

It is time for us to ensure gender discrimination in the church is not given cover by co-opting a valid view of relationships and twisting it into something it is not. It is time the oppression of women is exposed for what it really is. It is time to recognize women are just as validly called of God to any place of service as are men. And it is time for the church to repent of any way it has either overtly or tacitly validated gender abuse among us.

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