

**Headship Theology/Complementarianism as a
North American Movement:
Implications for the Current Gender Debate**
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Explanatory notes: This was an outline for lunchtime discussion for the LLU School of Religion about 5 years ago—I don't have the exact date. The following points should be noted:

- I have attempted to fill in a few details of what was I shared in my oral presentation but have not attempted to update the content.
- This paper was written before the publication of Gerry Chudleigh's excellent book "A Short History of the Headship Doctrine in the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (written in 2014). I would encourage readers to read that book as well as various responses and critiques. My presentation is an outline of a discussion over lunch—his is a much more detailed scholarly research treatment of some very similar terrain. I'll leave it to readers to determine whether my outline adds anything substantial to the discussion.
- As noted at the time, in our understanding of denominational uniqueness, Seventh-day Adventists do not always trace parallels between what happens within the church and religious and cultural trends outside the church. I think such study is worthwhile. This is not for the purpose of proving or disproving particular positions but it does help put our theology in context. My thesis here is that some aspects of gender and theology that are currently attributed to either historic Adventists stances or cultural factors outside of North America may, in fact, reflect factors that are relatively new and more distinctively North American.

What is Complementarianism?

- Complementarianism is patriarchy by a different name. It is also sometimes known as "headship theology." After much debate, the term "patriarchy" was rejected because of perceived negative connotations. But the former terms (headship theology and complementarianism) are terms for what is considered to be "Biblical patriarchy." Complementarianism is based on a viewpoint that patriarchy is an essential element of Christianity. To deny patriarchy and the authority of men over women is to deny the authority of God over the church and the very core of the gospel.
- Complementarianism focuses on both the home and the church. It affirms the role of women as wives and mothers, the importance of separate roles in the home, submission to the "benevolent" headship of the husband, and restrictions on women's roles in the church and upon pastoral leadership and ordination. Women can be very active in the church and ministry but this activity must take place within defined boundaries that maintain separate spheres and submission of women to the headship of men.
- This form of gender emphasis began as an underground movement on the right flank of evangelicalism in the '80s. The movement went public 1988, at the

Evangelical Theological Society meeting at Wheaton College. The formation of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) was announced at that time.

- It is now a key “litmus test” issue for the Gospel Coalition, a rapidly growing, interdenominational, neo-Calvinist movement that is a defining point of identity for many evangelicals of a more fundamentalist stripe (and not just among those in traditionally Calvinist denominations).
- A big debate in current complementation circles focuses on the disturbing discovery they have made that within their own circles most couples that embrace it in theory are, in reality, living fairly egalitarian lives. The marriages are collaborative, both couples are often/usually employed, and both work together on household tasks and child rearing. They aren’t practicing what they preach!

What Complementarianism is not:

- Complementarianism is not a product of older generations clinging to the past. In fact, it represents a sharp departure from egalitarian trends that have been visible across the theological spectrum for many decades (some of the earliest churches to ordain women were fundamentalist and evangelical).
- Complementarianism is not a product of gender-traditional world cultures. It is clearly rooted in a North American theological and ecclesiastical context.

Complementarianism theology tends to correlate with the following (largely neo-Calvinistic) beliefs:

- A kind of militant emphasis on divine decrees and the absolute sovereignty of God. From this perspective, justice becomes “whatever God decrees.” While not all complementarians are Calvinists, the majority of its avid spokespersons are allied with the Gospel Coalition.
- A strong emphasis on Biblical inerrancy (this is a more “dictatorial” perspective than what is common among
- Advocacy of a return to a traditional view of hell and opposition to any attempts to “water down” the notion of conscious, eternal torment in flames for the lost. This is associated with divine strength as opposed to a “wimpy” God who is too weak and deal decisively with sin.
- An emphasis on the wrath of God, the blood of Christ, and a strictly forensic atonement in which Christ’s death was the one way to appease God’s wrath.
- Opposition to open theism.
- Affinity for a kind of foundationalist/presuppositional apologetics that renders what Thomas Kuhn might call “anomalies in the paradigm” irrelevant. Epistemology determines reality and anything that would raise questions about the epistemic justification of an inerrant Bible is automatically reduced to being unknowable. This last point is linked to heightened suspicion of science and the scientific method.

More on Neo-Calvinistic Influence with the Adventist Church

The following section highlights the multiple theological shifts in certain sectors of the church that I would suggest are reflective of the issue mentioned above.

- Headship theology, sometimes now presented as if it were Adventist orthodoxy is not a part of our heritage. So using this perspective to buttress current ordination arguments is evidence of new and “outside” influence on the church.
- After flirtation with fundamentalism in its early days (Adventists had initially courted the fundamentalists but it was “unrequited love”—the fundamentalists did not respond favorably) Adventists embraced a nuanced view of revelation and inspiration. I would suggest that it was similar to that ultimately adopted by Fuller Theological Seminary when it *broke* with fundamentalism. We now see significant voices within the Adventist Church that seem to be advocating a view of Revelation and Inspiration more similar to that of the neo-Calvinists and other fundamentalist leaning evangelicals.
- The Adventist view of the “destruction of the wicked,” following Ellen White’s “Great Controversy” model, has emphasized elements of God respecting the free choices people have made rather than a punitive model of torment. Although Adventists continue to deny an eternally burning hell, I do see evidence that some Adventist theologians are now stressing the punitive/torment/suffering model and downplaying the concept that the fate of those outside of the eternal kingdom is primarily an act of God’s respecting the free choices they have made.
- Once again, following Ellen White, Adventists have had a complex view of the atonement. Following the “Great Controversy” perspective, we have emphasized the importance of a loving and free human response to the character of God and a repudiation of the lies of Satan as integral to atonement. One can find language from a variety of “models of the atonement” in the work of Ellen White. The new emphasis on the forensic (legal appeasement of a wrathful God) is rising in significance within some quarters of Adventist theology could be seen as further evidence of a shift toward neo-Calvinistic positions.

Summary Concerns:

- Headship theology/complementarianism is associated with trends that repudiate much of Adventist history and common Adventist beliefs in areas such as the nature of inspiration, a “character of God” emphasis as part of a “Great Controversy” perspective, the atonement, science, etc. It represents a significant shift in trajectory rather than holding fast to the Adventist past. A case can be made that the current gender traditionalism is more new than old, more cultural rather than Biblical, and more North American rather than a product of the world church.
- We need to at least be alert to cultural “contraband” with positions that some describe as “the Biblical position.”

