

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEMENTARIAN POSITION

Considering Implications and Exploring Practices in the Home and the Local Church”

January 18, 2012

Opening Remarks: Framing the Conference

Dr. William J. Hamel, EFCA President



Welcome! It is great to see so many gathered for our 2012 EFCA Theology Conference. And what a joy it is to be meeting in the recently completed Waybright Center. What a wonderful gift the Lord has given to TIU. We are thrilled to be using these new facilities for our Conference.

Let me also say that there has been a great deal of prayer and planning that have gone into this Conference. We are excited to see how the Lord uses our time together, and we continue to pray that He will bless each person here, and the local churches in which we serve, in and through the Conference.

My opening remarks will be more than a brief greeting. I believe it is important for me to take some time to frame the Conference. I will do so by focusing on a few key issues.

Rationale for Conference

First Rationale: How did we arrive here? I begin with the title of this conference, which, by the way, has raised some good questions. We wrestled with a number of titles, but we decided it was important for us to begin with our EFCA Conference-approved position regarding credentialing, including complementarian in the title made our focus clear. Apart from this clear title we would likely have created wrong expectations.

Acknowledging our position on ordination, we want to understand the best articulation of the position. There is a great deal of misunderstanding, so our goal is to aid in “understanding” the position biblically, and what this means in the EFCA. Agree or disagree, at least we are doing so from a common understanding/statement. Please note that we also used the expressions “considering” and “exploring” which carry a humble, teachable posture as we engage in this important discussion.

Second Rationale: Clarify the EFCA position. Complementarianism is our Conference position regarding the credentialing of men and women for the ministry of the gospel. A paper written in 1979, “The Ordination of Women” became a foundational discussion point, which eventually led to the 1988 Conference affirming that ordination would be for men, spelled out in Steps Toward Credentialing. Some are unaware that this is the EFCA’s position for its national credential. Many now in the EFCA were not a part of that discussion in the 1980s. Moreover, it is variously understood and misunderstood, and because of this we believed it was important to give a biblical defense of our position so that we have a clearer sense of what it means.

Goals

First to reaffirm the Conference decision regarding credentialing, recognizing that if we are going to carry on a credentialing discussion in the future, it is vital for us to know and understand our present position, or where we are and have been. A second goal is to clarify this issue in a new day and to respond to contemporary questions. Finally, it is important to think through and discuss what this means in practice, which is evident in the expressions “considering” and “exploring.” It is important to think through what this means in the context of local EFC churches.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEMENTARIAN POSITION

Considering Implications and Exploring Practices in the Home and the Local Church”

January 18, 2012

Opening Remarks: Framing the Conference

Dr. William J. Hamel, EFCA President



History

It might be helpful to say a brief word about the history of this issue. There were some, very few, women who were ordained in our Free Church past. Josephine Princell was one of them. Former President Tom McDill recalls that two other women had been ordained to the mission field before 1950, though he is not certain of the precise dates and the name of one: Naomi Skoglund, a Free Church missionary to the Congo, was ordained by the Swedish Free Church.

From my understanding of our history, there was no formal, conference study on the issue. Instead, based in our congregationalism, it was just done. I also find that the statement that the Free Church did ordain women in the past should be nuanced. It is true they were ordained, but most often, though not always, it was ordained to the ministry of evangelism or missions. Since the merger to become the EFCA in 1950 there have been no national ordinations of women. There are a few local church ordinations of which I am aware, but in that instance the ordination is not recognized nationally.

As stated above, the Conference decision to ordain men nationally happened in 1988 (cf. *Steps Toward Credentialing*, p. 4, IV.A.1: "The ordination credential may be issued to candidates who (1) are male in gender; . . .") At that time, the Conference also recognized and affirmed women serving in vocational ministry by granting a Christian Ministry License for those serving in qualifying ministries (cf. *Steps Toward Credentialing*, p. 6, IV.B). This Certificate is available to both men and women, and changed to a Certificate of Christian Ministry in 1997 for those engaged in vocational ministry. These permanent Certificates are recognized by the Conference to this day. These are the only official statements regarding men and women and credentialing by the Conference of the EFCA. This leads me to what this means regarding authority and application in the EFCA.

Authority/Application

How does our national credential apply to a local EFCA church? What kind of authority does it have? Because of our congregationalism, there is a distinction between our requirements for a national credential, which is complementarian, and what happens at the local church level, which the Conference does not mandate. In the EFCA, the authority has to do with the national credential, nothing else. This means local churches are autonomous to do as they will.

When we approach this issue many misunderstand the balance/tension between our local church autonomy and our interdependency. Local EFCA churches are autonomous, which means they are at liberty to do what they desire within the confines of the EFCA Statement of Faith. In fact, a local church could call a woman to be teaching/preaching pastor and that local church could even ordain her, but that local church ordination would not be recognized nationally. The reason for this is the Conference decision of 1988 to ordain only men. This is the tension between local church autonomy and interdependency in a denomination. We take this seriously. But it also means we live with and feel the tension.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEMENTARIAN POSITION

Considering Implications and Exploring Practices in the Home and the Local Church”

January 18, 2012

Opening Remarks: Framing the Conference

Dr. William J. Hamel, EFCA President



If the previous example addressed the local church, this example addresses how this may be applied nationally. Following the Conference mandate we will only ordain men. But we will not only ordain men who are complementarian in their own personal position. We will also ordain men who are egalitarian who know the EFCA's position on ordination and her ethos. Some like this; others do not. Some consider it a strength; others consider it a weakness. Like the local church, we feel a similar tension.

This is also true for the faculty at TEDS, our Free Church divinity school. It is important they know the EFCA position, but it is not mandatory for faculty who teach at TEDS to be complementarian. This explains why over the years there have been strong proponents of both positions on the faculty. But this resulted in confusion leading some to conclude that the EFCA does not have a position. Once again we feel the tension.

Let me list one more reason some may not know our position. Though the EFCA is complementarian nationally as applied to credentialing, we do not lead with this issue, i.e. we are not a one-issue denomination/ministry. This is not the one issue that defines us. If there is one issue that ought to define us, and we work hard at defining us, it is the gospel. Certainly we have to work hard to figure out the entailments of the gospel in all of life and ministry, including men and women in ministry, but we will not allow those entailments to become the one issue that defines us and causes us to misunderstand the gospel. *This has been and continues to be the expected ethos of the EFCA.*

The Conference has determined we are complementarian in our practice of ordination. This means we will teach it humbly yet without apology, because we believe it is what the biblical text teaches. It also means we will work hard at discerning what that means in life and practice at home and in the local church, and when we do that we will also do that humbly and charitably.

EFCA local churches and pastors are mostly complementarian in their understanding and practice. As one data point that is not anecdotal and yet neither is it scientific, one of our District Superintendents looked at the responses of those seeking ministry in the EFCA through MinisterConnection and how they responded to the question of understanding the role of men and women. To a person, unanimously, every respondent strongly affirmed women, strongly affirmed full engagement in ministry as far as possible, and yet reserved the role of teaching/authority/elder to men.

All of these things led us to conclude it was vital for us to have this discussion so we can grow in our "understanding." And as I have pondered and prepared for this Theology Conference, I am grateful to be a part of the Free Church. We are unique. We do have a national position on ordination, but local churches are still autonomous. Those denominations that are explicitly complementarian in their ordination credential would not likely allow a male who may be egalitarian to be ordained. Those denominations that are explicitly egalitarian in their ordination credential may not allow one, male or female, who may be complementarian to be ordained.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEMENTARIAN POSITION

Considering Implications and Exploring Practices in the Home and the Local Church”

January 18, 2012

Opening Remarks: Framing the Conference

Dr. William J. Hamel, EFCA President



What I often find is that those who embrace the Free Church position, which is complementarian, do not take this theological position far enough practically. In practice, they become similar to the Traditionalist position; viz. women can do virtually nothing. Then, almost by default, those who would generally be supportive of the complementarian position slide towards the egalitarian side since women are not allowed to do much beyond the nursery and kitchen. I think leaders of local Free Churches need to work hard at the exegesis so they understand this issue biblically and theologically. But then they also need to work hard, to be intentional about saying and figuring out what women can and should do, and be intentional and purposeful about that with the goal of recognizing the gifting and calling of women for ministry and affirming, equipping and empowering them for ministry.

Format/Schedule/Plenaries/Panels

Regarding the schedule, we will address three major issues: 1) The cultural and ecclesiological landscape and accompanying challenges, 2) biblical teaching, which will be the heart of this Conference, and 3) the EFCA, thinking through the application of this biblical truth in the context of local church ministry.

We have scheduled 90 minutes for each of the plenary messages. This means about 60 minutes for the lecture, followed by about 30 minutes for questions and answers. Because of this time for Q & A following the lectures, our speakers will not be part of the panel discussions. They will, however, have an opportunity to make a final statement at the conclusion of the third and final panel, on Friday.

The time and place we will engage in a robust and charitable dialogue is in the panels, when we will focus the application of the position in the context of life and ministry in the local church. This is where the EFCA adage “the significance of silence” comes into play, i.e. we will debate the ways in which we apply this truth but not divide over it. This will be done specifically during our panel discussions. More will be said about the panels later.

Speakers

Our speakers really need no introduction since they have been associated with TEDS for so long. Dr. Don Carson has served at TEDS since 1978. He serves in the role as Research Professor of New Testament. He has written or edited more than 50 books. Dr. Bob Yarbrough served as professor of New Testament department at TEDS from 1997-2010, at which time he returned to Covenant Theological Seminary where he presently serves as Professor of New Testament.

We are grateful to have these gifted instructors and churchman with us. Not only are they committed to the gospel, but they are also committed to understanding and living its entailments in all of life. Thank you for being with us.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEMENTARIAN POSITION

Considering Implications and Exploring Practices in the Home and the Local Church”

January 18, 2012

Opening Remarks: Framing the Conference

Dr. William J. Hamel, EFCA President



Final Word

There is baggage with the term complementarian, and similarly with egalitarian. There can be stridency on both sides. This does not mean that the issue is irrelevant or does not matter. It does. But how we engage in this discussion is important. More often than not, it generates more heat than light. Even hosting this Theology Conference, we know the temptations. But being gospel people, we are confident in the Lord and in the transforming power of the gospel that we will be enabled to engage in discussion in a manner worthy of the gospel.

As we address practices, I think some of you will be surprised at the variety of ways local churches seek to live this out faithfully, within a complementarian understanding. This is another way that understanding and growth should be fostered. I would guess that some who talk about a negative ethos in the EFCA and who are frustrated by our position would wish that we become egalitarian. That is a different issue than addressing real hurts, perceptions, ethos that can and must be addressed. The former we can't do anything about (unless through a Conference decision to become other than what we are); the latter we must do something about, and we are in and through this Theology Conference.

Sadly, I do think there is a sentiment that the EFCA is not favorable to women. Some of it is based on true, real-life instances which gave rise to the sentiment; some of it is based on hearsay and other less than reliable things. All of it, however, creates a perception, and for many, perception equals reality. This is another reason why having this conference is important. Part of this is not just to gain understanding. It is also to hear and address perceptions, both real and imagined, any hurts and pains, and to change the negative ethos that exists among some. We are praying that the Lord, in His mercy, will allow us to make good and godly progress.

As we state in the theme, which reflects one of our major goals of this Theology Conference, we pray that we might deepen our understanding of the complementarian position. And from this foundation, we will humbly and graciously consider implications and explore practices in the home and the local church. In this realm of implications and practices, there will be differences. We will live with tension and learn from others. But what we will not allow is that we embrace a position and allow it to remain in the abstract. Biblical truth/theology is intended to be known, believed and lived. We will disagree, but at least we are attempting to live under and apply God's truth in and to our lives, our homes and the local church.

In sum, that which we believe is taught in Scripture we will teach and apply with conviction, courage and without apology. With those who affirm the same foundation yet have different expectations, limitations or parameters, we will engage in robust and loving dialogue, seeking to understand and grow in the application of this truth. That which we believe is unclear or not taught in the Scriptures; we will say so and not make demands or commands out of silence.

Prayer:

