

Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian

A KINGDOM CORRECTIVE
TO THE EVANGELICAL
GENDER DEBATE

Michelle Lee-Barnewall

Foreword by Craig L. Blomberg
Afterword by Lynn H. Cohick



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian*
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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lee-Barnewall, Michelle, 1966–

Title: Neither complementarian nor egalitarian : a kingdom corrective to the evangelical gender debate / Michelle Lee-Barnewall ; with a foreword by Craig L. Blomberg ; and an afterword by Lynn H. Cohick.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Academic, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037203 | ISBN 9780801039577 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Sex role—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Evangelicalism.

Classification: LCC BT708 .L435 2016 | DDC 270.082—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015037203>

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Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from ancient classical texts are from editions of the Loeb Classical Library.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To John

With deep gratitude for your faithful
and loving presence in my life

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Foreword

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG,
DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT,
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Debates dealing with gender roles in church and the family have been just about as prominent as any other theological controversy throughout my Christian life. Growing up in the old Lutheran Church in America, I met ordained female pastors already in the late 1960s. Coming to evangelical faith through parachurch ministries and being nurtured by them in high school (Campus Life) and college (Campus Crusade for Christ), I discovered a lot of opinions about what men and women should or should not do that were nonissues for the LCA at that time. By the late 1970s in my seminary years, one of my professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School opined that Christians who found no timeless restrictions on women's roles in home or church were "either exegetically incompetent or biblically disobedient"! During my doctoral studies in Scotland, a small group of us who were all in the New Testament program decided to study the key passages and the key scholarly sources over a number of months and meet periodically to discuss our findings. Little did I know that this would one day lead to several writing projects of my own on the topic.

By the late 1980s, when I began teaching at Denver Seminary, I discovered that two main sides in the debate had crystallized, referring to their perspectives as either hierarchicalism or biblical feminism. In keeping with secular feminism, the latter group spoke primarily in terms of women's *rights*. In

keeping with secular power structures, the former group spoke primarily in terms of men's *authority*. After further study, I came to the conviction that I was a hierarchicalist, but just barely. I saw the only office closed to women in New Testament times as that of elder or overseer, and I saw the twentieth-century functional equivalent of that office restricted to the senior pastor in a church with multiple pastoral staff or the sole pastor in a church too small to have additional pastoral staff. But in keeping with the dominant rhetoric of the day, I still thought largely in terms of rights and authority.¹

By the 1990s, the two camps had largely adopted different labels for themselves: the hierarchicalists now calling themselves complementarians, and the biblical feminists calling themselves egalitarians. New parachurch organizations had been formed to support each position: The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), representing complementarians, and Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), representing egalitarians. One of my colleagues, who chaired our counseling department and was active in CBE, suggested that we coedit a book on the topic, inviting four scholars—with a man and a woman on each side—to defend the two positions. This led to the publication in 2001 of *Two Views of Women in Ministry*.² Not long before the book was ready to go to press, I had completed a lengthy essay on gender roles in Paul for an anthology of perspectives on various topics in Pauline theology to be published by Brill.³ I found myself articulating a perspective that did not correspond terribly closely to that of any of the four contributors to our book with Zondervan. I showed it to my coeditor and to the editor at Zondervan with whom we were working, arguing that it was a third position, neither complementarian nor egalitarian. I saw a slightly distinctive role for men in the home and church, but it was something that gave them not added privileges but added responsibilities—to love their wife or their congregation in sacrificial ways as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it (Eph. 5:25). My coeditor and I were convinced that it represented a third approach, but our editor didn't agree. As a strong egalitarian himself, he said I was still clearly complementarian. But he did agree that my piece would make for a good appendix in our book, which is where it appeared.⁴

1. Blomberg, "Not beyond What Is Written."

2. Beck and Blomberg, *Two Views of Women in Ministry*.

3. Due to delays in the project, it would not be published for another five years. See Blomberg, "Neither Hierarchicalist nor Egalitarian."

4. Beck and Blomberg, *Two Views of Women in Ministry*, 329–72. In the revised edition of 2005, I expanded the article to become one of the two complementarian chapters, so that there was a clear difference between the two complementarian options.

A similar exploration in a paper for a conference later in the 2000s led me to suggest that perhaps the key texts in Paul, all of which refer to men and women with terms that could very easily be translated as husbands and wives, prevented only *married* women from occupying the one “buck-stops-here” position in church leadership.⁵ Thinking that my respondent would at least be pleased that I was moving so close to her full-fledged egalitarianism, I got a blistering response instead, explaining that this was why evangelical feminism was still necessary, and that there is no such thing as someone who is almost an egalitarian. Either you are one fully or you are the opposition!

The amount of evangelical literature on this topic has tailed off noticeably in the last decade. Most people probably imagine that just about every position that can be articulated has been; all that remains is for them to decide which position they will adopt for themselves. Amazingly, Michelle Lee-Barnewall breathes considerable fresh air into this conversation. She narrates in detail how previous movements within Christianity that gave women greater public prominence stressed their unique *value* and the contributions that only women (or so it was believed) could make to the church and the world and the *responsibilities* they had to fill those roles. Only in the 1970s did biblical feminism emphasize *rights* and *freedoms* to the degree that they did, coming on the heels of the civil rights movement.

Lee-Barnewall focuses also on the key biblical values stressed in the passages so often discussed in conversations about gender roles. When one can sufficiently bracket modern causes and read the text carefully in its original contexts, one sees that *unity* and *inclusion* prove more central than equality or freedom. A concern for love and humility, rather than one of authority and privilege, pervades the scriptural texts and contexts. If it should turn out that there are any roles reserved for men, this is in no way to give them unique *privileges* but rather to require distinctive *responsibilities*. What a contrast with the standard complementarian preoccupation with headship as leadership! Lee-Barnewall also discusses the difference between servant *leadership*, in which leading still predominates, and *servant* leadership, in which service comes first. She notes the typical scenario in which a man first becomes a strong leader and then tempers his exercise of authority in that role with the spirit of a servant’s heart. But then she highlights those rare individuals who begin by serving God with their spiritual gifts, no matter how menial a role they play among God’s people. Only subsequently, when

5. The paper was subsequently published as Blomberg, “Gender Roles in Marriage and Ministry.”

others have admired and imbibed their spirit for a significant length of time, are they then offered leadership roles. This is the model to be sought and commended, whenever possible.

Throughout her book, Lee-Barnewall assiduously refuses to answer the question of whether certain roles or tasks are limited to one gender. She recognizes that eventually one has to answer this question, but she does not want to duplicate past debates over privileges and power. She acknowledges that this will frustrate readers who want more than anything to be able to pigeonhole her as either complementarian or egalitarian. As the book's title suggests, however, she is rejecting both classic options in favor of a different approach altogether.

What would happen if leading proponents of the classic positions could actually come together in a spirit of love, unity, humility, and selflessness, with everyone vowing to study the texts and the issues afresh with commitments to no prior agendas and with no polemic that those who came out in a different place from them are in any sense academically or spiritually deficient? I have no doubt that there would be differing conclusions, but I also strongly suspect that the extremes in each camp would be eliminated. I could hope that people would conclude that there was room in the church of Jesus Christ for multiple perspectives, that at times we would have to agree to disagree in love, but that we could mutually support and encourage one another even when our churches and parachurch organizations differed in their perspectives. Denver Seminary, where I have taught for about thirty years, has far more often than not modeled this ideal and experienced these outcomes, so I know that my vision is not merely utopian.

I also know that readers unacquainted with Dr. Lee-Barnewall will wonder what kind of spirit she personally embraces as she promotes such a beautiful but often absent approach. After knowing her for almost a decade, I can assure readers that she very consistently models exactly what she promotes. She is one of the brightest people I have ever met who does not wear her learning on her sleeve but exudes a spirit of kindness and other-centeredness without vacillating on her core convictions in life. She has perennially been one of the most popular professors at Biola University, where she teaches. I commend her book to you with great enthusiasm. Take it, read it, and be transformed in your spirit on these topics!

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a long but immensely rewarding journey. As I look back, it is humbling and gratifying to see how much I am indebted to others for their support, resources, and advice.

First, I want to thank Baker Academic for their willingness to take a chance on yet another book on the gender debate. I am grateful for the skill and efforts of the Baker staff for their various contributions in getting this project to its final stage. In particular, my editor, James Ernest, was instrumental in guiding me throughout the process, and I especially appreciate his insight, wisdom, and willingness to give a hard word when needed.

Thanks go to Koninklijke Brill NV for permission to reprint from my article, “Turning Κεφαλή on Its Head: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Eph. 5:21–33,” in *Christian Origins and Classical Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, vol. 1 of *The New Testament in Its Hellenistic Context*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, 599–614 (Leiden: Brill, 2013). The information in the article provided the foundation for chapter 8. Previous versions of chapters 6 and 8 were presented at meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Financial support came from several places, providing me with precious time and other resources to work on the project. I am thankful for a Lilly Theological Scholars Grant from the Association of Theological Schools, which enabled me to work on the first part of the historical chapters and set the entire project in motion. A seventh-semester research leave and a sabbatical from Biola University gave me the time to complete critical portions of the book. These were supported in part by a Biola Research and Development Grant and a grant from the Biola Biblical and Theological Studies Division.

I am very grateful for the support of my administrators: my deans, Clinton Arnold and Scott Rae, and before them, Dennis Dirks and Michael Wilkins; my division dean, Douglas Huffman; and my chair, Matt Williams. Not only did they provide the necessary research leave and sabbatical for me to see this project through to completion, but also their constant encouragement helped me believe that this was something worth pursuing.

My friends and colleagues have contributed much appreciated help and support. Craig Blomberg, Craig Keener, and Mark Strauss provided valuable assistance at the project's early stage, when it was still just an idea looking for a publisher. Numerous Southern California friends and colleagues gave much needed help through prayer, encouragement, and reading and commenting on portions of the manuscript. Thank you Kenneth Berding, Joyce Brooks, Edward Curtis, June Hetzel, Moyer Hubbard, Lisa Ishihara, Joanne Jung, Joy Mosbarger, Ron Pierce, Betty Talbert, and Katie Tuttle. Historians Jonathan Den Hartog and Kristin Kobes Du Mez graciously shared their expertise in American religious history and read the chapters on the background of the evangelical gender debate. Their efforts were especially appreciated since I was moving outside my specialty and very aware of the need for extra help. Of course, any mistakes or misstatements that remain are mine, the result of my own shortcomings.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, John. Not only did he endure days, months, and years with a preoccupied wife, who spent far too much time in her office, but also his constant encouragement, eagerness to discuss the issue with me, and challenge to speak boldly inspired me, kept me going to the end, and taught me much about what it means to live together as men and women in the kingdom.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps(s).	Psalms(s)	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	John	John
Mark	Mark	Acts	Acts
Luke	Luke	Rom.	Romans

1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	Philem.	Philemon
Gal.	Galatians	Heb.	Hebrews
Eph.	Ephesians	James	James
Phil.	Philippians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Col.	Colossians	1–3 John	1–3 John
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians	Jude	Jude
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	Rev.	Revelation
Titus	Titus		

Other Ancient Sources

Aristotle

<i>Eth. eud.</i>	<i>Ethica eudemia (Eudemean Ethics)</i>
<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Ethica nicomachea (Nicomachean Ethics)</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politica (Politics)</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetorica (Rhetoric)</i>

Dio Chrysostom

<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes (Discourses)</i>
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Dionysius of Halicarnassus

<i>Ant. rom.</i>	<i>Antiquitates romanae (Roman Antiquities)</i>
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Hippocrates

<i>Morb. sacr.</i>	<i>De morbo sacro (The Sacred Disease)</i>
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Josephus

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquitates judaicae (Jewish Antiquities)</i>
<i>C. Ap.</i>	<i>Contra Apionem (Against Apion)</i>

Philo

<i>Decal.</i>	<i>De decalogo (On the Decalogue)</i>
<i>Mos.</i>	<i>De vita Mosis (On the Life of Moses)</i>
<i>Praem.</i>	<i>De praemiis et poenis (On Rewards and Punishments)</i>
<i>QG</i>	<i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesis (Questions and Answers in Genesis)</i>

Somn. *De somniis (On Dreams)*
Spec. *De specialibus legibus (On the Special Laws)*

Plato

Tim. *Timaeus*

Plutarch

Conj. praec. *Conjugalia praecepta (Advice to Bride and Groom)*
Cor. *Marcus Coriolanus*
Frat. amor. *De fraterno amore (On Brotherly Love)*
Galb. *Galba*
Pel. *Pelopidas*
Praec. ger. rei publ. *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae (Precepts of Statecraft)*

Seneca

Clem. *De clementia (On Mercy)*
Ep. *Epistulae morales (Moral Letters)*

Xenophon

Mem. *Memorabilia*

Bible Versions

LXX Septuagint, Greek Old Testament
 NASB New American Standard Bible
 NIV New International Version
 NRSV New Revised Standard Version

Introduction

A large part of the impetus for this book comes from what I have learned as I have talked with numerous men and women about the topic of gender over the years. As I have spoken with both complementarians and egalitarians, I have noticed some things that many of them have in common. First is the conviction on both sides that this is an extremely vital issue for the church, the importance of which is reflected in the energy that is spent defending views and the emotion with which these views are often presented. At the same time, however, there is a growing sense among many that neither position quite encapsulates what they sense is the biblical view, along with the desire to explore the topic beyond the bounds of the current positions.

Since I have increasingly found myself in the same situation, I am proposing that we may find a better solution by going back to the biblical text to see, not which of the two current positions—complementarian or egalitarian—is correct, but rather whether there might be a different way to configure the issue itself. Thus I would like to reexamine the context of gender in Scripture rather than defend one particular view. Like many of the people with whom I have spoken, whether professors, pastors, or laypeople, I have come to believe that the topic cannot be completely defined by either the complementarian or the egalitarian viewpoint, and that there is room, perhaps even a necessity, for an alternative way of conceptualizing gender issues. The goal of this book is to demonstrate why a new viewpoint is needed in evangelicalism today and to present a trajectory for reframing the debate.

The Evangelical Gender Debate: Complementarian and Egalitarian

The current state is perhaps best seen in the publication of two significant books: John Piper and Wayne Grudem's complementarian contribution, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*,¹ and Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis's egalitarian response, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*.² Piper and Grudem present their view as biblical "complementarity," which reflects "both equality and beneficial differences between men and women," the latter including a special leadership role for men in the church and the home. They argue, "The Bible teaches that men and women fulfill different roles in relation to each other" and that these roles, including the unique leadership role of men, are based "not on temporary cultural norms but on permanent facts of creation."³

Pierce and Groothuis describe the position of biblical equality, in which "the appropriate outworking of the biblical ideal of equality is for women and men to have equal opportunity for ministry in the church, and shared authority with mutual submission within marriage."⁴ Egalitarianism "rejects the notion that any office, ministry or opportunity should be denied anyone on the grounds of gender alone."⁵ *Discovering Biblical Equality* was purposely intended to mirror its complementarian counterpart, following a similar format, being approximately the same size, and even presenting a cover that looked much the same except for the orange-brown color intentionally contrasting *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*'s blue cover. The books illustrate how the evangelical gender debate has primarily developed as a choice between two sides, the complementarian and egalitarian positions, and highlight the specific questions over which the battle lines have been drawn. In particular they involve issues of male leadership and authority versus the rights of women to participate in all ministry positions and share equally in decision making in marriage.

In this way the debate presents two clearly identifiable sides with two generally distinct positions. Although there may be variations within the positions

1. Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.
2. Pierce and Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality*.
3. These roles, which existed from creation, were then disrupted by the fall. Piper and Grudem, "Vision of Biblical Complementarity," 35.
4. Pierce and Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 19; see also Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 19.
5. Pierce and Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 13.

themselves,⁶ the general situation is characterized by identifying with one of the two positions. The purpose of this book is to question whether this is the best way to frame the discussion and to suggest a different way.

There is no doubt that the current structure has produced many benefits. As the two sides battle, arguments are sharpened, ancient sources are scrutinized more carefully to provide additional supporting evidence, technology enables scholars to access a larger body of evidence more easily, and weaknesses in both positions are exposed, defended, and corrected. However, while this situation has led to some very meaningful gains in understanding, it may have also reached the point where further entrenchment in the respective positions may unintentionally obscure other significant observations and ideas. When the dominant goal is to defend one's position, it is extremely difficult to consider the possibility that answers may not lie exclusively on one side, to see the beneficial arguments on the other side, and to explore new areas.

The Limitations of Debate

In her book *The Argument Culture*, linguist Deborah Tannen asserts that our culture is permeated by a “pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight.”⁷ While she acknowledges that such an approach is useful in the right context, it has become overemphasized to the point where it often gets in the way of solving problems rather than aiding.⁸ The assumption is that opposition is the most desirable option (*ibid.*, 3–4), and Tannen suggests that other means, such as “exploring, expanding, discussing, investigating, and the exchanging of ideas,” may yield more fruitful results in some endeavors (8).

The answer may not be the exclusive domain of one side but rather may lie elsewhere. If this is the case, we cannot discover the entire truth in a debate in which the only option is to choose from two positions. Tannen explains,

6. E.g., some egalitarians believe that *kephalē* in 1 Cor. 11 means “source” (e.g., Kroeger, “Classical Concept,” 268; Fee, “Praying and Prophesying,” 149–55). Others contend that it means “preeminence” (e.g., Cervin, “Rebuttal”). Some complementarians hold that male leadership means only leadership at the “most authoritative level,” or the “highest office” in the church, e.g., limiting the position of senior pastor or elder to men (e.g., Blomberg, “Complementarian Perspective,” 145, 181). Others place more restrictions on women, including prohibiting them from teaching Bible and doctrine in the church, colleges, and seminaries (Moo, “What Does It Mean?” 186).

7. Tannen, *Argument Culture*, 3.

8. *Ibid.* Although Tannen wrote in 1998, it does not seem that this trend has abated, and if anything, would seem to have accelerated.

“Opposition does not lead to the whole truth when we ask only ‘What’s wrong with this?’ and never ‘What can we use from this in building a new theory, a new understanding?’” (19). Limiting ourselves to an either/or choice does not leave enough room for improving either side or exploring a different understanding.

As Tannen further observes, “When the problem is posed in a way that polarizes, the solution is often obscured before the search is under way” (21). Our methodology should make room for a different kind of answer, but a “culture of critique”⁹ does not allow for another position. Although criticism certainly has its place, so do other methods such as integrating ideas from different fields (19).

Some evangelical scholars have expressed similar concerns about the gender debate. Timothy George calls for the pursuit of truth in a context that recognizes individual fallibility and the potential contribution from those of the opposing position. He also states his concerns for the effect of the conflict on relationships among the members of Christ. In searching for a “way beyond the polarization,”¹⁰ George discusses three questions for those involved:¹¹

1. “What do I owe to the person who differs from me?” While we are not obligated to agree with that person, we do owe him or her love. As a result, we are to be good listeners, seeking to understand the person’s aims and asking whether there is anything valid in his or her position.
2. “What can I learn from those who differ from me?” In recognition of his or her own fallibility, each interpreter should be prepared to learn that he or she is wrong and the other person is right. Seeking after truth is more important than winning discussions or protecting reputations.
3. “How can I cope with those who differ from me?” We must remember that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Consequently, our goal is not to demolish our opponent but rather “to win him or her over to a new and, we trust, better understanding.”¹²

He calls for both sides to recognize their mutual commitment to historic Christian orthodoxy and to allow this greater context to be the basis for a

9. Ibid., 7. Tannen defines “critique” as “not a general term for analysis or interpretation but rather a synonym for criticism.”

10. George, “Egalitarians and Complementarians Together?,” 267.

11. George attributes the original questions to Roger Nicole from his essay, “Polemical Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us,” in *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publishers, Mentor, 2002), 10. Cited in George, “Egalitarians and Complementarians Together?,” 277–82.

12. George, “Egalitarians and Complementarians Together?,” 278–79.

unity under which differences can be discussed.¹³ With this underlying unity, perhaps there can then be “honest confrontation of ideas and truth claims as well as a conciliatory spirit that is open to convergence and reconciliation.”¹⁴

As Tannen and George have noted, there are significant limitations in assuming that the truth of an issue is to be found in one of two sides.¹⁵ As a result, the contours of the debate may be in need of reexamination and adjustment. A more fruitful approach at this point may be to expand or re-design the shape of the gender discussion rather than simply reinforcing the two current positions. In searching for the most accurate way to understand the biblical text, we must be open to exploring another way of viewing the issue itself.

Searching for an Alternative

Recently some evangelicals have made moves to provide a different answer beyond the current complementarian/egalitarian divide. For example, there have been some modifications to both sides. Many complementarians have shifted their position so that the emphasis is on male headship not so much as a position of authority but rather as one of servant leadership. The term “complementarian” moves away from negative connotations linked with terms such as “hierarchical” and “traditionalist,”¹⁶ reflecting an understanding of gender that concentrates on the creation differences between men and women and how Christians are to manifest these differences in the church and the home.¹⁷

13. *Ibid.*, 285.

14. *Ibid.*, 283.

15. As one historian describes, “Traditionalism and feminism have become the ideological poles which, to a large degree, have set the limits of creative discussion” (Bendroth, “Search for ‘Women’s Role,’” 122–23).

16. Piper and Grudem say this is why they prefer the term “complementarian.” “We are uncomfortable with the term ‘traditionalist’ because it implies an unwillingness to let Scripture challenge traditional patterns of behavior, and we certainly reject the term ‘hierarchicalist’ because it overemphasizes structured authority while giving no suggestion of equality or the beauty of mutual interdependence” (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, xiv).

17. Thus differences in roles, including male leadership, are based on “permanent facts of creation” (Piper and Grudem, “Vision of Biblical Complementarity,” 31–59). As Saucy and TenElshof explain, “This complementarity means that two important realities are grounded in the very nature of all men and women: (1) They are different by nature, and (2) they require each other for fullness of their humanity. If such is the nature of man and woman by creation that they exist as co-humanity in a complementary relationship, this truth must find expression in all of life, including church ministry” (“Problem in the Church,” 29–30).

On the other side, the stress on the significance of gender differences by complementarians has pushed egalitarians to wrestle with this issue within the context of equality and ministry opportunity based on giftedness. In other words, if ministry is based on calling and giftedness, egalitarians must explain whether and why gender matters. The subtitle of Pierce and Groothuis's book, *Complementarity without Hierarchy*, reflects this desire to show how gender remains relevant in an egalitarian position. In regard to terminology, "egalitarian" or "biblical equality" is often preferred to "evangelical feminist," which helps to avoid negative associations with secular feminism.¹⁸ Furthermore, egalitarians are generally associated with the more conservative part of the movement that split from the progressive evangelical feminists in the 1980s.¹⁹

Others have proposed finding a "third way" beyond the two positions. Some discuss the importance of restoring relationships between people on both sides and working together. George proposes that as some prominent evangelicals and Catholics worked together to create the Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) statement regarding their common faith commitments and mission, so too might egalitarians and complementarians work together to affirm their shared mission and commit to studying together in a new ECT (Egalitarians and Complementarians Together) project.²⁰

Some scholars, like Sarah Sumner, do not explicitly identify themselves with either side. Sumner believes that the debate has been inappropriately reduced to one of roles when it is more fundamentally one of relationships.²¹ In this way she challenges evangelicals to approach the issue differently, and her proposed area of relationships may be one in which evangelicals, as Tannen has noted, can do more "exploring" and "expanding."²²

This study explores how the issue itself might be reframed according to significant biblical categories. Since it is currently set up according to two distinct and opposing sides, it tends to produce questions along preset lines, which then limits the types of answers that can be given and profoundly impacts how we view the issue. These questions revolve around whether men

18. On our use of "secular" and the relationship of religion and feminism, see chap. 1, note 4.

19. See the following chapters for a more detailed account of the evangelical feminist movements. For a specific description of the split in evangelical feminism in the 1980s, see chap. 3, notes 36 and 85.

20. George, "Egalitarians and Complementarians Together?," 282–88. Sumner (*Men and Women*) also speaks in her book about the importance of repentance and restored relationships in the Christian community in regard to this issue.

21. Sumner, *Men and Women*, 30–31.

22. Tannen, *Argument Culture*, 6.

have a special authority or leadership role or whether women have equal access to ministry roles and are equal participants in decision making in marriage.

However, the issue might be helped by applying categories such as love, unity, and holiness. Also there may be considerable implications to seeing the gospel as something that is paradoxical and reverses traditional norms and expectations. The key may be asking not so much whether Scripture promotes equality or authority as how—in a kingdom understanding—gender relates to love and unity between husbands and wives, among the many members of the body, and ultimately between Christ and his bride. We may gain more not from merely asking what rights a person has or who has power but by seeing why unity matters and how it is accomplished by power manifested through weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), such as was exhibited through the cross. This does not mean that questions of rights and authority do not matter. Instead it implies that our perspective on them may shift when we see them within a larger context.²³

Consequently, the purpose of this book is to demonstrate how the debate as it is presently structured, as a choice between the two current sides, can benefit from a different framework and additional questions. The ways of the kingdom are often at odds with a natural mind-set, since the Christian faith itself is based on the cross as foolishness to the world but the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18). There are compelling reasons to ask whether the New Testament ethic for women and men might follow a similar pattern—something that turns the world’s order upside down and is understandable only in light of a kingdom theology.

Reconsidering a Theology of Gender

In order to begin establishing the need for new categories, part 1 examines some ways in which evangelicals have historically understood gender and how these shifted in ways that reflected larger social trends. This idea about the impact of the larger culture is not new; nor is it limited to our conception of gender. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow explains in reference to the effect of

23. Many of the themes that this study will present are not absent from the current discussion. E.g., complementarians and egalitarians disagree on the implications of “unity” and “oneness” for the new community as seen in passages such as Gal. 3:28 (e.g., Johnson, “Role Distinctions,” 156; Bilezikian, “Biblical Community”). However, we will attempt to show how they can reconfigure our understanding of the other categories that have been more prominent in the debate.

society on religion, and here on the widespread changes in American culture following World War II, “to the extent that American religion is a social institution, embedded in and always exposed to the broader social environment, it could not help but have been affected by these changes.”²⁴ To see cultural influence does not necessarily mean that our current categories are not biblical. However, if our definitions consistently reflect the dominant cultural forces in their particular era, then we should seriously consider the possibility that there is still something missing from our current biblical worldview on gender.

Although both egalitarians and complementarians have accused the other of following the larger culture, this book explores how all sides have been impacted by social trends, and more important, how the overall trajectory of the debate aligns with these patterns. Evangelicals in America followed the general movement toward an increasing individualism and preoccupation with personal over corporate concerns. This rising individualism, along with changing conceptions of the boundaries and value of the family, helped to shift evangelicalism from being driven by a core concern for the good of the larger society to the quest for personal fulfillment as seen in the immediate family and then the acquisition of individual rights. In this way social trends influenced the overall movement of conceptions of gender toward an increasingly individualistic concern even as evangelicals seemed to vacillate between more complementarian and egalitarian manifestations.

To illustrate this trend, chapter 1 discusses the mid-nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century, dwelling on the influence of the Victorian ideal of womanhood on the first evangelical feminist movement. The connection between domesticity and womanhood characterized a notable period of activity for American evangelical women, as they sought a greater public role based on their identity and corresponding duty as the primary moral guardians of society. Chapter 2 traces how two successive world wars, and World War II in particular, caused Americans to turn to home and family as a refuge. During this period, the typical evangelical home tried to follow the ideal model of the husband as the authority figure and sole provider for the family and the wife as full-time homemaker. Chapter 3 discusses the rise of egalitarianism in the 1970s and its affinities to the secular feminist movement with its emphasis on personal fulfillment and individual rights.

Part 2 turns to the biblical text. Chapter 4 briefly introduces categories that have reframing potential and that are applied in the following chapters. In contrast to an increasing focus on the individual in evangelicalism, the New

24. Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, 5.

Testament testifies to a dominant corporate concern for the unified people of God who live as his holy temple and so demonstrate his ways in Christ.

The Old Testament identifies Israel as the people of God, and the New Testament places the spotlight on the church, the temple of God. The body of Christ is not the exclusive province of one race, class, or gender. However, the radically inclusive community is not one in which differences do not exist. Rather it is one that manifests unity in its members' love for one another in the context of such diversity as they are called to build up one another.

This love is characterized and accomplished by a reversal of understanding, for the kingdom values of Jesus—who states that the last will be first, and the first will be last—stand in direct opposition to those of the world. An other-centered orientation by all is crucial to unity, for Paul defines love as following Christ's example as one who did not use his rights but instead laid down his life for others. The continued presence of hierarchies provides the vehicle for exhibiting this aspect of the kingdom of God, as the strong are to be considerate of the weak (1 Cor. 8; Rom. 14–15), the members of the body that seem less honorable are to be given greater honor (1 Cor. 12:23), and leaders such as elders are seen not as those with more privileges but as those called to set an example in suffering like Christ (1 Pet. 5:3).

The relational aspect inherent in the concepts of inclusion and oneness leads to a perspective that is different from and more corporate than the idea of "equality," and the reversal of status and privilege points to a more transcendent understanding of "authority" and "leadership" at stake in the kingdom. While these traditional subjects may still be present, these larger themes may be more representative of kingdom priorities and so provide a more foundational perspective from which to explore biblical concepts of gender.

Consequently, the chapters in this part explore how these themes impact our understanding of gender. Chapters 5 and 6 examine gender in ministry. Chapter 5 investigates the way in which inclusion, rather than equality, may be more relevant for understanding the new relationships among the people of God and the impact of passages such as Acts 2 for gender. Once people are included in the body of Christ, the priority is a willingness to sacrifice for one another rather than individual benefits for members of the group. Chapter 6 considers how the concept of "reversal" challenges our understanding of authority and leadership in the New Testament, including the meaning of the popular term "servant leadership." "Servant" describes not merely the manner of leadership but also a critical part of its essence. Furthermore, leaders are to imitate Christ, not only as a "servant" but also as a

“slave,” for the sake of promoting unity in the church as the believers follow their example of self-giving love.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the biblical view of marriage, focusing on Gen. 2–3 and Eph. 5:21–33 and their relationship to each other. Egalitarians and complementarians argue about whether or not the Genesis passage presents a hierarchical relationship between Adam and Eve. This part demonstrates that it is better to see their relationship as characterized by differences that are to lead to unity in their “one flesh” relationship and that also illustrate their shared obligation to obey God.

In considering the connections with Paul’s discussion of marriage in Eph. 5, we will examine how Paul views marriage as being exemplified by the Genesis “one flesh” relationship, as related to the husband’s role as the “head.” Examining the head metaphor in its ancient context will reveal that the passage should be understood according to a reversal that follows the example of Christ. While the head is the “leader,” it unexpectedly forgoes the privileges and benefits of headship and instead loves the body by sacrificing for it. This humility is key to the desired unity between husband and wife, as well as between Christ and the church.

God’s unified church, the holy temple of his Spirit, thus provides a critical and underutilized component for the discussion. A natural desire is to concentrate attention on personal good and individual roles, leading to well-intended questions that highlight rights or proper positions of authority. But this method can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing our conception that the individual is the central concern. However, if we begin from the perspective of God’s purpose for the church as a whole, we see that these concerns are transcended and put into larger perspective as the members are called to love one another following the example of Christ, who purposely relinquished his rightful privileges for our sake.

Conclusion

While this book tries to present some fresh ideas for the gender debate, there are some things it does *not* attempt to do. First, it does not present a detailed and systematic examination of all the passages traditionally associated with the debate. To engage every text is beyond the scope of this book, especially when the main purpose is to argue for the need for an alternative perspective.

Second, I offer a proposal for moving in a different direction, rather than outlining specifics of what the end result might look like. Because the discussion

can be so contentious, it seems more fruitful at this point not to present something that may appear to favor one “side” over the other. Rather, I attempt to be as evenhanded as possible in critiquing both positions for the sake of a larger goal, which is for both sides to reconsider the nature of the debate and to examine critically their own positions while not having to surrender present concerns.

Third, I am not trying to propose a way that is entirely different from the complementarian and egalitarian positions since I am not denying that equality and authority can be valid categories. However, since the greater purpose of the book is to consider our orienting perspective, I argue that the dominant categories may not be the most appropriate ones with which to ground our understanding of gender. While these issues may be present, they must be viewed within a larger kingdom perspective, and I try to point out the way in which this other framework impacts these categories.

Since the kinds of questions we bring to the text determine the kinds of answers we receive, we will reconsider those questions. The principle aim has generally been to define what women can or cannot do. Approaching the issue in this way with the primary goal of determining what is allowable can cause us to miss another explanation of gender that could reframe the way we understand the issue, in particular as it relates to God’s greater purposes for his people.

The apostle Paul knew the importance of formulating proper questions. In his discussion in Romans on the gift of grace in Christ Jesus, he proclaims, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20). Paul anticipates that one can draw the conclusion that there could be an advantage to sin in that it leads to more grace, so he asks preemptively, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?” (Rom. 6:1). But Paul does not address the question by merely answering yes or no. Instead he changes the trajectory of the discussion by exhorting, “May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom. 6:2).

By responding in this way, Paul demonstrates the need to see the implications of grace in Christ in a different way. One view begins from the perspective of sin and presumes a somewhat mathematical relationship between sin and grace. If sin leads to grace, and increased sin leads to increased grace, why not simply keep sinning more to get more grace? But Paul says that such a question is misleading, perhaps even dangerous, because it misunderstands the nature of sin and grace and the believer’s new life in Christ. Christ’s followers not only receive grace, resulting in justification, but also are freed

from slavery to sin. If they are no longer under sin's tyranny, why would they consider wanting to sin more?

Instead of asking how much a person can sin, a better perspective considers the nature of grace, what believers have become in Christ, and the subsequent implications for how they are to live. To see grace in terms of what it allows one to do (i.e., to sin) is to live according to the old mind-set. The new mind-set reorients them toward how their new identity in Christ has transformed their relationship to sin and so enables them to live properly in relation to God.

Thus the answer to the question is essentially no, but it does not come simply as a prohibition ("Do not sin!"). Instead Paul sets it in the context of the believers' new life and identity. His goal is not just to provide a command to be followed but also to help them understand that rather than being something desirable, sin is a slave master from whom they have been freed, and grace transforms as well as pardons. The proper perspective, therefore, is not to ask whether one can still sin but to see implications of being someone who has been freed from the power of sin through Christ and how this impacts one's desires and goals.

Consequently, Paul's answer does not concentrate on a rationale for a prohibition as much as it fundamentally reorients believers to view their lives in a different way. His concern is not simply on behavior (to stop sinning) but for them to be people who see sin for what it truly is and how Christ has freed them from its merciless grasp. Paul's answer is intended to shift their perspective, so he answers the original question, "Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?" in light of their newfound freedom from sin. Since sin is the enemy from which they want to be freed, of course they should not continue in sin. To ask that question means that they have not fully understood the ramifications and nature of God's grace.

We can learn from Paul's answer in contrast to what could have happened if he had simply replied yes or no as we consider gender. As evangelical Christians, we often want to know what we can or cannot do, or what we should or should not do. As the gender debate has concentrated on specific activities, it runs the same risk of creating a theology defined by an external pattern of prohibitions and allowances. Various biblical and theological arguments are brought to bear to support a theology that concentrates on form and praxis, and in particular, as related to individuals. As a result, the discussion is dominated by practical questions such as "Can women be elders?" "Can women teach men?" and "Do men make the final decision in marriage?"

I understand the need to address the practical questions, but I also ask whether there is room to suspend them for a moment to reexamine Scripture without these predetermined goals. To use a modern analogy, we can easily see the problems of a theology of spiritual formation grounded on a question such as “Can Christians drink/smoke/gamble and so on?” These questions are formed by our desire to know precisely how to live, but if we present them as our *starting* point, we take a shortcut that causes us to miss the larger picture and perhaps do more harm in the long run. Not many people would say that Christian spirituality is defined simply by conformity to external rules, and the same is true in a theology of gender.

The focus on authority, leadership, equality, and rights tends to lead to yes or no answers that do not prompt deeper questioning. It is not that these do not matter, but rather that there is a way to reconsider them. The New Testament can reorient us in the purpose and implications of our new identity in Christ, including the corporate dimension as the people of God in relationship with him and with one another.

In this book, I propose the need to step back for a moment from the pressing questions of the day to ask whether they represent the best way to approach the issue. I also present some other possibilities. While our current questions have a definite practical value, are there other questions we should be asking, ones that are more foundational to the topic? In other words, can we gain a more robust understanding of the role of gender in the kingdom of God, which may then help us answer our specific questions?

A principal point of this book is that more transcendent kingdom concerns can profoundly challenge how we view the current debate. For example, Paul asserts that the critical topic is not our rights, important as they are, but how the giving up of rights can be necessary for the gospel and for the sake of unity (e.g., 1 Cor. 9; Phil. 2:1–11). While rights can be a legitimate issue, there is a kingdom value that supersedes rights and is more representative of kingdom ways. On the other side, the gospel redefines considerations of power and authority in terms of humility, sacrifice, and suffering, not simply as qualifiers but as essential components, even starting points. I suspect that the full implications of Christ’s example of giving up the benefits of his status for our sake are yet to be discovered.

Thus this study seeks to provide the rationale for enlarging our perspective by reconsidering gender according to categories that are more transcendent. In various ways God is presenting a witness to the world through the life of the church, called to unity and holiness, and so issues

of rights, authority, individual benefit, and duties must flow out of this larger understanding. As a result, we may gain new insights on old topics as we interact with essential kingdom themes that speak of our corporate identity in Christ in the new age and how the church is to glorify God as the body of Christ.