



STATEMENT DW252

A Woman's Place: The Evangelical Debate over the Role of Women in the Church

By Roland Cap Ehlke

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A woman's place is in the home — that's what they used to say. Today, few would say that. So what is a woman's place — in society, in the home, and in the church? The question is both delicate and momentous. Are there God-ordained gender specific roles for women and men? Or are there no differences beyond the obvious biological differences?

Much of the world has already settled the issue. In the United States, women's suffrage was enacted almost a century ago. While still not a reality, equal pay for equal work has become a *sine qua non* of political correctness. Working moms are the norm; single mothers who are heads of households are commonplace. Indeed "half of all U. S. babies born in 1998 were to unwed mothers."¹ While we have yet to elect a woman president, there is no public debate about the appropriateness of women in politics.

Then there is the church. While much of liberal Protestant Christianity has become accustomed to women in the pulpit, most conservative churches have resisted this trend. Thus British theologian Alister McGrath writes, "Feminism has come to be a significant component of modern western culture....Feminism has come into conflict with Christianity (as it has with most religions) on account of the perception that religions treat women as second-rate human beings."²

At the turn of the century evangelicals are embroiled in an ongoing discussion about the role of women in ministry, at times heatedly so. This article will consider how this debate among Christians who take the Bible very seriously has taken shape. We will look at the sides and the issues involved, identify key Bible personages and passages used by both sides, and consider where this debate might be headed.

THE SIDES

The two main positions are known as egalitarianism and complementarianism. Egalitarians hold to the view that women should be able to do whatever men do in ministry, while complementarians see the role of women as different — that is, complementary to that of men.

In *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, Bonnidell and Robert Clouse (themselves egalitarians) subdivide the two into a total of four groupings: traditionalist, male leadership, plural ministry, and egalitarian.³ Such designations cover a spectrum from a very conservative, limited role for women to one of complete equality. A closer look at the two basic approaches will help define them even more.

Complementarians: Tradition and...

At times the complementarians are referred to as traditionalists. Complementarians, however, insist that their position is not only traditional but also *Scriptural*. Theirs is not a case, they say, of blindly following tradition in the face of scriptural evidence to the contrary.

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Complementarian writers and publications include Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Crossway, 1992) and *Women, Creation and the Fall* (Crossway, 1990); Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (Baker, 1995); Lucy Mabery-Foster, *Women and the Church: Reaching, Teaching, and Developing Women for Christ* (Word, 1999) (although Mabery-Foster is more a complementarian in practice than in principle — see below); and John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 1991).

This last-mentioned book was the 1993 Christianity Today book of the year and is considered a benchmark complementarian publication. It contains The Danvers Statement, a confession of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). Members include such well-known Christians as Gleason Archer and Beverly LaHaye. The Council's "Board of Reference" includes Harold O. J. Brown, Jerry Falwell, Carl F. H. Henry, D. James Kennedy, John MacArthur, Jr., J. I. Packer, John Piper, Paige and Dorothy Paterson, Pat Robertson, R. C. Sproul, and others.

Although in many respects they are conservative, complementarians are not easy to pigeonhole, often agreeing in principle yet not in practice, and even coming to surprisingly different conclusions. Complementarians such as Covenant Seminary's Jeram Barrs go so far as to allow women to teach men, even at a seminary level, albeit with the permission of male leadership. Says Barrs, "The headship over both men and women is given to elders in the church," who are men.⁴

Egalitarians: Evangelical Feminists

While complementarians vary in applying the Scriptures, egalitarians, also known as biblical or evangelical feminists, generally agree that women can do whatever men do in the church. There are exceptions, however, such as Gretchen Passantino, codirector of the apologetics ministry Answers in Action. Although Passantino holds to the defining egalitarian view that female subordination was the result of the Fall and generally believes that mutual submission should be the rule in the Christian home and church, she resists being categorized in either camp and does hold the unegalitarian view that only men should administer the sacraments.

The *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* cites Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty's 1974 volume *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, now in its third edition (Eerdmans, 1992), as being among the "first book length treatments" of biblical feminism.⁵ Numerous others have followed, including Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, 2d ed. (Baker, 1985) and *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Zondervan, 1997); Clarence Boomsma, *Male and Female One in Christ: New Testament Teaching on Women in Office* (Baker, 1993); Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Baker, 1997); Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1992); Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (InterVarsity, 1986); Aida Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Hendrickson, 1995); and Ruth A. Tucker, *Women in the Maze: Questions and Answers on Biblical Equality* (InterVarsity, 1992).

The list, like its complementarian counterpart, is instructive not only as an inventory of who's writing the books, but also as to who's publishing them. A number of mainline evangelical publishers are leaning toward egalitarian writers.

Egalitarians have their own organization, Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), which publishes a scholarly journal, *Priscilla Papers*. Supporters include Stuart Briscoe, F. F. Bruce, Anthony Campolo, Paul DeVries, Bill Hybels, and Ruth Tucker.

THE ISSUES

The issues are complicated and far-reaching. We sense the seriousness of the debate when Bilezikian writes in *Community 101*:

A few years ago, a group of people advocating a view of women's roles in the church that I consider to be destructive to biblically defined community held a meeting in Chicago and were given air time on a national Christian radio network. During the show, the host phoned me and put me on the line to debate with them some of

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*the issues now covered in this book. As the discussion progressed, it became evident that this group treated with derision the view of community I was defending....This book would not have been written without the incentive provided by that incident.*⁶

Bruce Ware, who teaches at Southern Seminary and is president of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, maintains, "There is so much confusion in our culture over what is manhood and what is womanhood...there is so much need for clarity and biblical understanding in the midst of a very confused culture."⁷ For many people, the place of women in the church has involved difficult personal decisions. Kathy Keller, on the staff of a large evangelical church in Manhattan, recounts how she left the denomination in which she grew up because she became convinced that its ordination of women was unscriptural.⁸ Obviously, convictions and feelings run deep on both sides of the debate.

Preaching, Teaching, and Leadership

Egalitarians maintain that women should be able to preach from the pulpit, teach, and lead. According to Bilezikian, there is nothing men are permitted to do that women cannot also do; it is not a matter of leadership, but of "mutual submission and reciprocal servanthood."⁹ The only factor that decides who conducts various ministries within the church is the talents or gifts Christians have from God.

Ware thinks differently. He argues that God has established an order within creation and designed how people can function best: "If we violate that design we harm ourselves....We need to yield to biblical teaching...it will be good for women in the church to yield to authority...because it is God's design." Lucy Mabery-Foster, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, feels that women should not be head pastors or elders.¹⁰

While agreeing with such sentiments, Barrs regrets that churches have been so "chauvinistic" and calls for a wider use of women's gifts and more sensitivity to their needs. Passantino observes that while men have had the most visible roles in churches, women often end up doing most of the work.

Agreement on Scripture?

Both sides insist that secular feminism is not a determining influence on their interpretation of the subject. Rather, they look to Scripture. Egalitarian Sarah Sumner, a professor of theology and ministry at Azusa Pacific University, says, "But one thing is for sure — none of the conservative Christians involved in this debate are challenging the authority of Scripture. What is being challenged is the authority of tradition."¹¹

According to egalitarians, complementarians have confused tradition with Scripture. Over the centuries, church leaders have misused Scripture to support misogynist views of women. For example, the distinction the Reformers made between public (for men) and private (for all) ministry, says Bilezikian, was a carryover from Roman Catholicism. Just as many Christians misused the Bible to support slavery, many have done the same here. The official statement of Christians for Biblical Equality declares, "The few isolated texts that appear to restrict the full redemptive freedom of women must not be interpreted simplistically and in contradiction to the rest of Scripture, but their interpretation must take into account their relation to the broader teaching of Scripture and their total context."¹²

Far from seeing merely a "few isolated texts," complementarians contend that role differentiation is woven into the warp and woof of Scripture and confront egalitarians with 20 centuries of biblical interpretation. They also point to distinctions between traditional gender roles and slavery, insisting the Bible never endorsed slavery as divinely instituted, while it does set forth sex roles, which — properly understood — are not disparaging to women.¹³ Mary Kassian says biblical interpretation "is at the crux" of the debate, and "I am interested in being as faithful as I can [to the Word]."¹⁴

Within the evangelical world, then, the debate marks a division among people who claim a high view of Scripture as God's Word. This brings us to the heart of the discussion. What are the Bible texts under question? We will look at some of the crucial biblical personages who have been brought into the debate and then turn to some of the main passages.

Key Biblical Figures

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The debate frequently gets into studies of numerous Bible figures, including Old Testament women such as Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron, Deborah the judge, Huldah the prophetess, and Esther the queen. In the New Testament, discussion turns to the women who were the first to announce the resurrection, Phoebe the deaconess (or servant), Junias, and Priscilla.

“Why were there no women among Jesus’ twelve disciples?” asks egalitarian Ruth Tucker. Her answer: “The most compelling explanation of Jesus’ failure to call women to be among the twelve has to do with decorum. The potential for scandal was too great.”¹⁵ Complementarians simply point out, “Jesus did not select a single female apostle.”¹⁶

We will look at two representative women. Both are often at the center of the debate.

Priscilla: Faithful Wife and Teacher

When Priscilla and Aquila heard [Apollos], they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately (Acts 18:26).

Egalitarians point to Priscilla as an example of a woman teaching a man. In five of the seven passages mentioning Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, she is named first. More than that, “for all practical purposes, Priscilla and Aquila acted as a seminary faculty for a promising male pastoral student....That a woman should have been permitted to play such a determinant role in the training of a key leader has not always been easy to accept.”¹⁷

Complementarians see Priscilla as one of numerous women who were fellow workers with men in the early church.¹⁸ Yet their prominence does not undermine the essential principle of male authority. Priscilla carried out her instruction in an informal home setting, not in a public assembly, although some complementarians approve of women teaching publicly as long as the teaching is submitted to pastoral authority.

Junias: Who Was This Person?

Greet Andronicus and Junias...They are outstanding among the apostles (Rom. 16:7).

The debate arises here because Junias seems to be a feminine name. Apparently, it was not a common name, and early extra-biblical references to this person are rare — and mixed. Epiphanius (315–403), a bishop in Cyprus, wrote, “Iounias, of whom Paul makes mention, became bishop of Apameia of Syria.”¹⁹ In Greek, “of whom” is masculine, showing that Epiphanius considered Junias a man. About the same time, John Chrysostom (347–407) made reference to Romans 16:7 and stated, “Oh! How great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!”²⁰ Chrysostom was not making a case for female authority in the church, but he was acknowledging the prominence of this early Christian woman.

Egalitarians such as Rebecca Merrill Groothuis reject arguments that make Junias a man or that take “outstanding among the apostles” to mean simply “esteemed by the apostles.”²¹ But people on both sides of the debate seem to agree that one should not make too much of examples. More important for establishing doctrine are clear-cut passages that set forth teaching that applies to the church through the ages.

Key Biblical Passages

Some of the most significant passages are the Genesis account of Creation and the Fall, Jesus’ attitude toward women as recounted in the four Gospels, Peter’s discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives (1 Pet. 3), and several pertinent passages in the letters of Paul. We will look at four of the central passages in the discussion.

Genesis 1–3: Order of Creation and the Fall

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”...To the woman [the Lord] said, “...Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen. 2:18; 3:16).

Does the role of women (and men) go back to creation itself? Did God establish an “order of creation”? Or are the authoritative roles men assumed the result of the original fall into sin?

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The opening of the official statement of Christians for Biblical Equality contrasts with that of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood:

CBE

The Bible teaches the full equality of men and women in Creation and in Redemption....The Bible teaches that both man and woman were created in God's image...[and] were created for full and equal partnership.²²

CBMW

Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood. Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart.²³

Because the issue goes back to these basic premises, Ware sees the two views as "exactly opposite" and without a possibility of compromise. If the cause of male authority is the fall into sin, then Christians need to work at undoing it. "Is it not imperative," asks egalitarian Clarence Boomsma, "that in harmony with Christ's redeeming work, we do all that is possible to remove the effects of the curse on Eve from marriages, in societies, and especially within the church?"²⁴

Many complementarians see a role differential in God's creating Adam first and then Eve as a helper for him; they point to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 as underscoring this. Egalitarians find no such order in the creation account and argue that Paul's words do not endorse it.

1 Corinthians 11: The Meaning of "Head"

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor. 11:3).

What is the meaning of the word "head" (Greek *kephalé*)? Having examined the evidence, complementarian Elisabeth Elliot concludes, "The answer is perfectly clear: the man is subordinate to Christ who is the supreme Head, while the woman is blessed by being subordinate to the man. Each is assigned a place, and each finds fulfillment in accepting that God-given order."²⁵

Using a computer word search, Trinity International University professor and CBMW vice-president Wayne Grudem did an extensive study of *kephalé* as used in over 2,000 contexts in ancient Greek literature.²⁶ The basic meaning is the physical head of the body, but he also points to 49 cases he says clearly refer to authority.

Bilezikian argues, however, that "source" or "origin" is a better translation for head.²⁷ "The head of [authority over] the woman is man" thus becomes "the source of woman is man," a reference back to Eve's being formed from Adam. A professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Aida Spencer, speaks of head in terms of sacrifice and service, as in Ephesians 5, where Christ the head of the church is its Savior.²⁸

Complementarians such as Ware will agree that Paul's teaching on headship in 1 Corinthians 11 carries the idea that Christ originates (eternally) from the Father and that woman originates from man. They point out, however, that Paul cites this order in the Godhead and creation as the basis for authority and submission in these relationships (see, e.g., v. 10).

1 Timothy 2: The Meaning of Women Keeping Silent

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent (1 Tim. 2:11-12).

Some, like Bilezikian, see this passage as "the main argument" or the "big stumbling block" in the entire debate. There is a counterpart to this passage in 1 Corinthians 14:34: "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission." Egalitarians view the injunction to silence as applying to

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Paul's time and situation. Referring to 1 Timothy 2:9–15, Craig S. Keener writes, "If Paul does not want the women to teach in some sense, it is not because they are women, but because they are unlearned. His principle here is that those who do not understand the Scriptures and are not able to teach them accurately should not be permitted to teach others."²⁹

In *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, the book's contributors understand the passage as clearly delineating role distinctions. While allowing a fair amount of latitude in application, editors Köstenberger, Schreiner, and Baldwin conclude that 1 Timothy 2 forbids women to teach and exercise authority (Greek *authentain*) over men: "At a minimum, our understanding of the text would prohibit women from functioning as teaching pastors or teaching elders/overseers of churches. In our context this means that women should not proclaim the Word of God from the pulpit to the congregation of the saints."³⁰

Galatians 3:28: Oneness in Christ

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

This oft-quoted verse has been called "the most socially explosive statement in the New Testament."³¹ In 1853, Luther Lee used this passage as his text when preaching at the ordination of Antoinette Brown, "the first woman fully ordained in a recognized American denomination."³² For egalitarians it opens the door for women to participate in every form of ministry. "Of all the passages concerning women in the New Testament," assert Scanzoni and Hardesty, "only Galatians 3:28 is in a doctrinal setting; the remainder are all concerned with practical matters.... All social distinctions between men and women should have been erased in the church."³³

Complementarians find in the verse a statement of human justification before God through Christ alone — without regard to personal distinctions — that in no way does away with God-ordained roles. Mabery-Foster holds that "Paul was making a theological statement about the fundamental equality of male and female Christians in their standing before God. So any ideas about how this truth should work itself out in social relationships cannot be drawn from this verse."³⁴

What Lies Ahead?

On both sides of the issue, there is concern and uncertainty over where it is headed. Gretchen Passantino speaks of a gradual "blurring of the lines." Gilbert Bilezikian sees a process of "gradual change" moving toward egalitarianism through which Christians will come to a shared understanding of Christian ministry, but fellow egalitarian Aida Spencer sees a hardening of positions. Lucy Mayberry Foster agrees that the debate is divisive. Kathy Keller says it is ironic that the most liberal secular feminists are now ready to see role distinctions between the sexes (although hardly from a biblical perspective). There is also confidence. Many take the attitude that the truth will win out. In the words of Mary Kassian, "Truth has a way of being preserved." Meanwhile, several important items loom on the horizon.

Complementarian Divide

As indicated above, while agreeing on principles of male headship and role distinctions, complementarians differ on some matters of interpretation and application. For example, Mabery-Foster is a moderate complementarian when it comes to understanding biblical passages on a woman's role in home and church.³⁵ Nonetheless, she takes an egalitarian view on the pivotal question of whether female submission was a part of God's original design.³⁶

More immediately crucial for the practice of the church is disagreement over women as teachers. It often comes down to Paul's words in 2 Timothy: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man." Mabery-Foster, Keller, and Barrs have no problem with women teaching men, even teaching theology at a seminary level. Keller explains that Paul's words have to do with teaching that involves authority: "What is being forbidden is not teaching as in the imparting of information...but it's teaching that is authoritative that you can't reject." Acceptable female teaching does not involve "church discipline" and is "subject to the further authority of the elders." Other complementarians consider the prohibited teaching as referring to "preaching the word...and the teaching of Bible and doctrine in the church, in colleges, and in seminaries."³⁷

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In such deliberations, the attitude of the people involved becomes important. Kassian speaks of weighing the “appropriateness” of any given teaching, noting who the audience is, and, of course, considering whether it involves authority over men. Obviously, for complementarians there is no simple answer to these thorny applications.

Feminism and Other Issues

Both sides stop short of calling the other side heretical. Yet as the debate gathers steam, it is bringing other issues to the fore. What, for example, is the relationship of the Persons within the Trinity? Remaining consistent with his view that “head” in 1 Corinthians 11 means *source* and not *authority*, Bilezikian contends there is no eternal and inherent subordination among the Persons of the Trinity.³⁸ Ware warns that such teaching tampers with the doctrine of the Trinity for the sake of a feminist agenda.³⁹

Although He is neither male nor female, God reveals Himself in the masculine terminology of Father and Son. Moreover, the first human being He created was a man, Adam. The second Adam, Christ, was born of a woman, but He, too, was a man. On the other side, egalitarians cite Bible verses describing God in feminine terminology, as when Jesus said to Jerusalem, “How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (Luke 13:34).

Most complementarians refrain from saying it, but some fear a slippery slope within egalitarianism. If, for instance, the prohibitions of Paul regarding female leadership were merely cultural, might not the same be said of his prohibitions regarding homosexuality? In a chapter entitled “The Slippery Slope,” Kassian relates the stories of three Christian feminists who took that slope to total rejection of the God of the Bible,⁴⁰ although she readily acknowledges not every egalitarian slides down on the slope. Egalitarian Spencer says there is only a slippery slope when people get away from the Bible’s authority.

Gaining Ground

Is either side gaining ground in this debate? Most participants would rather not speak that way, since they want to look at one another as brothers and sisters who are carrying on a discussion. Yet key publishers seem to be turning toward egalitarian writers. Complementarians Köstenberger, Schreiner, and Baldwin perceive that their position increasingly runs against the grain of modern culture: “If such obedience [to scripture] involves a certain amount of suffering and being misunderstood, this, after all, has always been part of the calling of followers of Christ, and we live in a time where being conservative may be the most radical thing of all.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, the Southern Baptist Convention and Campus Crusade for Christ have endorsed complementarian statements, in part, says Ware, because they see the need to “hold the line” in what is wrongful and dangerous cultural trend.

It is our hope at Christian Research Institute that this overview will help elucidate the debate for the JOURNAL’s readership. We trust it will stimulate our readers to become acquainted with some of the key people and publications, study the issues, carefully examine the Scriptures, and prayerfully consider what is at stake.

Despite the present impasse over Scripture, the ongoing study of Scripture is especially crucial. It is a Reformation principle that the Scriptures are clear and that interpretative problems arise not because of the Bible’s lack of clarity but because of human tendencies, such as the inclination to color God’s Word to fit our needs and desires. The Bible, with Jesus Christ at the center, holds the key for both men and women. Everyone involved in the discussion needs to continue to return *ad fontes Scripturae*, to the source.

We all do well to recall Paul’s words to his young coworker Timothy, whose “sincere faith” had been passed down from his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice: “From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15–16).

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