

Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy

by Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Eds.) (2005)
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The gender debate, which addresses issues of authority and equality between males and females, began in the Garden of Eden. According to Scripture, sin entered the world because the *created* (Adam and Even) disobeyed the *Creator* (the LORD God). Due to their disobedience, God placed a separate curse on each of them, introducing a timeless gender-based conflict for dominance (Gen. 3:16).

The gender debate is rekindled in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Pierce, Groothuis, & Fee, 2005), a major theological work of 29 essays presented in support of biblical egalitarianism. This scholarly effort is in response to the controversial notion of complementarianism or “the male leadership position” (p. 14), specifically addressed in Piper and Grudem’s (1991) seminal work, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*.

A few broad headings serve to consolidate the essays in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, beginning with the historical, biblical, and theological essays; and, ending with essays of a more hermeneutical, cultural, or practical focus. A multitude of theological scholars contributed to this work, addressing the role of women throughout Church history, with key biblical texts pertaining to culture, society, and the nature of God, along with interpretations of various scriptural and theological issues. These scholars presented analyses from a biblical egalitarian worldview. This anthology concluded with practical suggestions for putting these perspectives into action.

Pierce et al. (2005) defined opposing views of the gender debate – egalitarianism and complementarianism. The egalitarian (*biblical equality*) view accepts the authoritative design of society, church, and family while contesting the prohibition against serving in specific roles based solely on gender. From a hermeneutical perspective, the egalitarian position suggests a complete absence of role restrictions for the image-bearers of God. The complementarian (*hierarchy*) view – argued on behalf of

its proponents in their absence – assumes gender differences, which “empower men and restrict women” (p. 15), are actually complementary. However, the editors pointed out that egalitarians also agree with the complementarity of genders, although they do not support the hierarchical concept of men having authority over women. From a hermeneutical perspective, the complementarian position suggests that God created males and females in His image; therefore, they complement each other by design in gender-specific roles.

Pierce et al. (2005) edited a thoroughly researched, well-written, comprehensive resource (528 pages) with a clear, concise, and articulate voice. There were three stated goals for this book. The first was to explain and defend the dynamics of egalitarianism in a more practical way. The second was to advance a discourse that would attract unconvinced evangelicals. The third, and most aggressive goal, was to convince everyone that God’s design for humanity is complementarity without hierarchy.

Whether the editors met their goals is subject to additional debate. This was, in fact, a thorough defense of biblical egalitarianism. However, in addressing the two opposing theological views (egalitarianism and complementarianism), Pierce et al. (2005) accurately conceded, despite the “common ground that we share ... two distinctive positions emerge” (p. 15). It is the heart of this book: male leadership versus gender equality. However, there are other significant differences between the egalitarian and complementarian worldviews; although, the brevity of this review restricts the discussion to two issues: one theological and one hermeneutical.

A theological difference centers on the Trinitarian concept of *subordinate yet equal*. Kevin Giles (“The Subordination of Christ and the Subordination of Women”) rejected the complementarian notion that “the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father” (p. 334), accusing it of being neither historical nor orthodox.

Instead, he asked the reader:

Those who argue for the eternal subordination of the Son in function or being claim that their theology of the Trinity is entirely orthodox.... Should we then accept the eternal subordination of the Son? I think not. I will argue that to teach the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in being or role, person or function, is to teach contrary to the way the best theologians have interpreted the Bible across the centuries and to reject what the creeds and Reformation confessions of faith affirm. (pp. 335-336)

However, many theologians (e.g., Grudem, Mohler, Land, Lewis, etc.) support the concept of eternal subordination of Jesus to the Father as both historical and orthodox. This goes back to “Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin and the Nicene Creed” (p. 336) and some Calvinists, such as Hodge, Berkhof, and Knox. Giles was unable to provide biblical support for the egalitarian position. In fact, he cited Grudem’s (1994) *Systematic Theology* in an attempt to support his own argument: “Grudem says that to reject eternal role subordination is to reject what all orthodox Christians have believed from the Council of Nicaea onward” (pp. 335-336).

One alarming hermeneutical difference (for complementarians) was in the writings of New Testament scholar, Howard Marshall. His essay from Colossians 3:18-19 and Ephesians 5:21-33 is entitled, “Mutual Love and Submission in Marriage.” He began with the statement, “Colossians and Ephesians both have a fairly clear division between the doctrinal and the practical” (p. 186), referring to the “concealed hermeneutical trap for readers.... Since much of it can be seen as still appropriate in the modern world, it is tempting to assume that whatever Paul says here should be applied without significant modification to our situation” (p. 187).

As a complementarian (and CBFA member), this reviewer finds Marshall’s perspectives on biblical authority rather disturbing, even unsettling. The theological concept of *Sola Scriptura* is a foundational and fundamental doctrine of the Church. It says the Bible, in its original autographs, is the inspired (God breathed), infallible (completely true), inerrant (without error) word of God, and the sufficient rule pertaining to faith issues and doctrinal practices. Marshall continued his Arminian efforts to usurp the final authority of the Bible. He stated:

We must go beyond the letter of Scripture when the trajectory of scriptural teaching takes us further.... All recognize that the Christian revelation takes us well beyond the Old Testament revelation (and

renders some aspects of it obsolete). By analogy, the growth in understanding of Christian revelation under the continuing guidance of the Spirit may lead us to apply some culturally specific parts of the New Testament in a way that does not compromise its supreme authority for us. (pp. 201-202)

Again, this reviewer takes issue with Marshall’s analogy and calls into question the logic he used to support it.

Jesus Christ testified that He did not come to abolish (oppose) the Old Testament Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill both (Matt. 5:17). The New Testament confirms this (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:23-25; Eph. 2:15). Christ was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Luke 24:44), and the only One able to satisfy the Law’s demands for sinless obedience (Gal. 3:10-13) and sacrificial death (Heb. 9:26; Rom 5:6; 1 Cor. 15:13). His work is complete. Nothing else needs to change because He already accomplished His purpose on Earth. Christ confirmed this on the cross when He said, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The culture that rejected Him in the 1st century is very much like the culture that rejects Him today. Things have changed in many ways over the millennia, but many in society still consider the gospel of Christ counterintuitive to societal wisdom and contradictory to cultural norms.

Marshall’s earlier comment, “the trajectory of scriptural teaching takes us further” (p. 201) is disconcerting. He is not alone, however, as William J. Webb (“A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: The Slavery Analogy” and “Gender Equality and Homosexuality”) and Gordon D. Fee (“Praying and Prophesying in the Assemblies,” “Male and Female in the New Creation: Galatians 3:26-29,” “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry,” and “Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate”) also take comparable lines of reasoning. While these essays may appear innocuous at first, they implicitly deny the Bible as the final authority in matters of faith and doctrine. This removes the focus away from scriptural interpretation, placing it within the ability of humanity to judge Scripture’s suggestions and implications. This is a dark and scary road with slippery slopes and a community of trolls lurking about, with names like Relativism, Postmodernism, and Semi-Pelagianism. Although perhaps unintentional, the essays of Marshall, Webb, Fee, and Giles (among others) open the door to a glut of possible biblical interpretations, while giving license to a variety of heretical camps under the seemingly harmless banner of *Free Will*.

Pierce et al. (2005) successfully edited this thoroughly researched, well-written, comprehensive resource (over

528 pages) in support of the biblical egalitarian, evangelical feminist, Arminian, free will camps. They presented a clear, concise, and articulate voice. This was, in fact, a thorough defense of biblical egalitarianism. For the price (about \$20 in paperback), this book would be a valuable addition to any CBFA member's library, or anyone serious about the study of faith integration in business. Although there may be theological, philosophical, or hermeneutical differences of opinion between the reviewer and the editors and contributors of this work, it is worthy of a high recommendation, even as a resource of opposing views. Within the Business curriculum, this work may be useful as either a primary or a secondary text for upper level courses in Leadership, Entrepreneurship, or the History of Management.

REFERENCES

- Pierce, R. W., Groothuis, R. M., & Fee, G. D. (Eds.). (2005). *Discovering biblical equality: Complementarity without hierarchy* (2nd ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

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