Creating a Culture of Equality as Witness to the Truth: A Philosophical Response to Gender Difference

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Introduction: Some personal confessions

I have a confession to make: I am as convinced of egalitarian practices in the church and home as they come. However, I have another confession that is perhaps more startling for us Christians for Biblical Equality.¹ I believe that it is quite possible—indeed, quite likely—that the raw biblical material underdetermines an answer to many of the questions raised in contemporary gender debates. Specifically, I am thinking of debates over how church polity should be structured regarding gender as well as how the Christian husband/wife relationship should be structured.²

What I mean by stating that the raw biblical material underdetermines an answer to these questions is simply this: There are no strictly exegetical arguments that could persuade a committed hierarchist to become egalitarian, and, conversely, there are no strictly exegetical arguments that could convince a committed egalitarian to become a hierarchist. This is not to claim that there are no strictly exegetical arguments for these respective views. Indeed, as an egalitarian, I find many of the exegetical arguments for egalitarianism to be quite strong and many of the exegetical arguments for hierarchism to be quite weak.³ But, I suppose that my hierarchist sisters and brothers maintain equal confidence in the strength of their opposing exegetical arguments. So, exegetically speaking, it appears to me as though these rival camps are at a stalemate.⁴ Consider, for example, the words of one prominent hierarchy proponent and Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) president on the current state of the debate:

I think the debate between egalitarians and complementarians at ETS has, for the most part over the past couple of decades, . . . been amicable. There has been no rancor or hostility, for the most part, yet there are strong convictions on both sides. Yet it appears to me that neither side is backing down as it were. Both sides in this debate continue to be quite convinced they are right and the other view is wrong. I don't anticipate that to change in any significant way in coming years. I think the complementarian view has been represented very well—for which I am grateful. There have been fine papers given, good support for the complementarian view that I think has resulted in more confidence for complementarians.⁵

Whatever we think of the hierarchist position, then, we must grant that—at least subjectively—hierarchists are in the same epistemic position regarding their views as we egalitarians are regarding our views. (“Epistemic” comes from the Greek word for “knowledge.” The philosophical subdiscipline of epistemology is thus the study of whether and how we have knowledge.) Though we might find hierarchist views to be in certain respects deplorable, we must also admit that they are not all altogether implausible. Well-trained, knowledgeable, honest, and godly biblical exegetes can rationally justify their hierarchist position biblically. They may not be able to convince us exegetically that their views are correct, but we cannot convince them exegetically that their views are wrong, either. So, again, the exegetical stalemate persists.

A helpful analogy from philosophy of religion

If we find ourselves in something like the position described above (as I believe we do), we are actually in pretty good company. Many Christian philosophers today believe that Christians are in an analogous position regarding our belief in the existence of God. The philosophical movement known as Reformed epistemology (RE)—led by one of the world’s leading philosophers of religion, Alvin Plantinga of the University of Notre Dame—holds that the raw evidence from natural theology and Christian apologetics is perhaps sufficient to justify rationally belief in God, but is certainly insufficient to compel the unbeliever rationally toward belief in God’s existence.⁶ In other words, given the raw evidence from natural theology and apologetics alone, there is epistemic parity between theism and atheism.⁷

One might think that such a concession would put the Christian philosopher at a disadvantage with respect to the atheist philosopher, or would at least be reason for giving agnosticism or skepticism more serious consideration. Not so, according to Plantinga. Instead, Plantinga uses this epistemic parity (a view that both arguments are equally compelling rationally) as the very foundation for RE and hence for his larger Christian apologetic. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for a Christian philosopher, Plantinga began his career in religious epistemology by arguing that all of the major theistic arguments are unsuccessful at proving God’s existence.⁸ However, in that same work, Plantinga argues that all of the major atheistic arguments are equally unsuccessful at proving that God does not exist. For Plantinga, belief in God is in the same boat as a number of our other properly held basic beliefs, such as perceptual beliefs (“I see a tree in front of me”), memory beliefs (“I had cereal for breakfast this morning”), belief in the existence of other minds (“I am not the only conscious person in the world”), and so on. As Kirk R. MacGregor describes, properly basic beliefs are those beliefs “which flow naturally from our experience, thereby presenting themselves to us as given, but cannot be proved by that experience; consequently, in the absence of any defeaters (i.e., logical or empirical
disproofs), these beliefs are rational to hold.”

Reformed epistemology and gender debates

Making the analogy explicit, then, just as the Reformed epistemologist believes that there is epistemic parity between theism and atheism with regard to the raw evidence of natural theology, so we might say that there is epistemic parity between egalitarianism and hierarchyism with regard to the raw evidence of biblical exegesis. Biblical exegesis is perhaps sufficient to justify rationally egalitarian views, but is certainly insufficient to compel rationally the convinced hierarchist to adopt egalitarianism (and vice versa). When one’s entire theological outlook is predicated on a hierarchal ontology, one will not become convinced of an egalitarian position just by learning that 1 Corinthians 14:33–38 is not a prohibition against women teaching in church, for example. A deeper change must take place: one that involves a radical re-orientation of theological perspective—something that perhaps only the Holy Spirit can ultimately bring about.

This is precisely where another part of the analogy with RE can be helpful. Recall that, according to RE, the warrant of Christian belief is largely independent of the raw evidence for it. Instead, the warrant of Christian belief is largely the result of the experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. So, too, we might say that the warrant for egalitarianism is largely independent of the raw evidence of biblical exegesis, one way or the other.

That is not to say that exegesis is somehow unimportant or that we deny the authority of Scripture. Rather, it is to say that the primary grounds for holding to egalitarian views are deeper than an exegetical argument or two. For every exegetical argument, there is an exegetical counterargument. And, surely, we do not base our foundational belief in equality on the outcome of these technical exegetical battles. Rather, our belief in equality is a properly basic belief. Given our experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the claim Jesus Christ has on our lives as his disciples, we simply cannot help but find ourselves convinced of the radical equality of gender (as well as race, nationality, etc.). And rightly so. Rather than egalitarianism resting on a few exegetical arguments, it is rooted in our entire biblical theology and Christian experience. In the same way, we would not stop believing in the deity of Jesus or the reality of the Trinity if new exegetical evidence showed that John 1:1b is best translated as “the Word was a god” or that Jesus’ Great Commission did not originally include the Trinitarian formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). These beliefs are grounded in so much more than bare exegetical evidence alone. As John Wesley would say, they are grounded in the whole “scope and tenor” of Scripture—the theological story spanning from Genesis to Revelation. Moreover, they are confirmed in our experience of the risen Christ, whose Spirit is at work in our lives and in the life of the church.

We thus might modify the nonevidentialist thesis above for the purposes of the gender debate as follows:

Exegetical evidence is neither necessary nor sufficient to warrant egalitarianism. However, since exegetical evidence is equally unsuccessful at proving egalitarianism to be unwar-
ranted, there must be some other way to come at this question. Given the epistemic symmetry between egalitarianism and other properly basic Christian beliefs, such as belief in the incarnation and Trinity, egalitarianism can—as with these other properly basic beliefs—be warranted by non-exegetical, theological and experiential grounds, which are common in the lives of egalitarian Christians.

Affirming this proposition does not mean that we abandon good exegesis; rather, it means that we focus more energies on developing a more coherent and compelling biblical/theological narrative as well as fostering a culture within our Christian communities that promotes greater equality.

Egalitarian practice as witness to the church and society

I have no delusion that everyone will be convinced by my above proposal. Some staunchly exegetical biblical scholars might hold out for the day when the exegetical evidence for egalitarianism is so compelling that it can be rejected only on pains of irrationality. Others might agree that gender views are indeed properly basic given the scope and tenor of Scripture and our Christian experience, but will argue that these grounds point decidedly toward a hierarchal position rather than an egalitarian one. Does not this latter objection undermine my whole proposal? If we have agreed that exegetical arguments are ultimately unpersuasive, and, if we allow further that both egalitarianism and hierarchism can be properly basic given the scope and tenor of Scripture and Christian experience, what resources do we have left for adjudicating between these competing views? I believe that we are left with precisely the resources that Christ desires for us to use: the evidence of our lives.

By faithfully, humbly, and patiently practicing our egalitarian commitments within our own realms of life, we become what Christian philosopher Paul K. Moser calls personifying evidence for our beliefs. Through our witness to the equality established by Christ, our lives literally serve as evidence for our egalitarian beliefs to others within the church as well as the larger society.

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of hierarchy.” This means that it is not enough for egalitarians simply to fight for more leadership roles for women. Instead, we must live in such a radically egalitarian way that it subverts the whole notion of hierarchical leadership in the first place. As John Howard Yoder argues,

To let a few women into an office that men have for generations wrongly restricted and that did not even exist in the apostolic churches may be a good kind of “affirmative action,” but it is hardly the most profound vision of renewal. To debate about feminine access to the patriarchally defined ministry is like trying to say that Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, or Indira Gandhi transformed the nature of power politics.

The transformation that Paul’s vision calls for would not be to let a few more especially gifted women share with a few men the rare roles of domination; it would reorient the notion of ministry so that there would be no one ungifted, no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated. Only that would live up to Paul’s call to “lead a life worthy of our calling.”

Instead of the transformative vision that Yoder finds in Paul, I am afraid that too often we egalitarians spend our energies in the power politics of our current patriarchally defined hierarchical structures. But, by doing so, we are confronted with Hauerwas’s criticism straight on: The problem for egalitarians and hierarchists alike is the egalitarian inability to live in a way that enables us to articulate what difference it makes that we are or are not Christians.” In short, there is an intimate connection between the truth-claims of the church and her ethical witness.

In the same way, the truth of the message of equality in Christ is dependent on the church, the body of Christ, living in a way that promotes equality. Echoing Hauerwas, we can say that the truthfulness of our egalitarian witness is compromised when we accept the practices of the “culture of hierarchy.” This means that it is not enough for egalitarians to simply fight for more leadership roles for women. Instead, we must live in such a radically egalitarian way that it subverts the whole notion of hierarchical leadership in the first place. As John Howard Yoder argues,

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Conclusion: Some personal reflections

A friend and former professor of mine, known affectionately as Brother Tim, has a long history of standing up for women’s equality within the church (as well as equality for minorities and social outcasts). As a former missionary and now professor of religion and philosophy at our denominational college, he also happens to be a licensed minister in our denomination. But, while our denomination’s official constitution is ambiguous regarding women in ministry, current practice leans heavily in a hierarchal and thus restrictive direction.
When discussing gender issues with others in our denomination, Brother Tim is more than happy to pull out his Greek New Testament and refute—on exegetical grounds—any view that would prohibit women from serving in ministry. However, more than anything else, Brother Tim’s life provides the evidence for his egalitarian commitment. One anecdote—among many that could be told—will have to suffice for now. When Brother Tim first became a religion professor after being a licensed missionary for many years, standard protocol at that time required that he either become fully ordained or have his ministry license revoked. But, because ordination was denied to women on a de facto basis (as well as to some minorities who were offered a “separate but equal” commissioning track instead), Brother Tim simply and straightforwardly refused his own ordination. He knew that the consequence of this decision could cost him his ministry license. But he wanted to identify with those who could aspire to no more than licensure, if that. As it turned out, no one had the nerve actually to revoke his license. So Brother Tim continues to this day to be licensed but not ordained, an anomaly that serves as an ongoing reminder of de facto injustice and as personifying evidence of the truth of his commitment. Brother Tim believes so strongly in equality that he was willing literally to put his credentials on the line for that truth.19

Such personifying evidence seems much closer to the kind of evidence Christ and the apostles put forward for the truth of their claims. And while—as with exegetical evidence—such personifying evidence might not convince everyone, it nevertheless still serves the greater purpose of being a continual witness to truth regardless of others’ response. And, sometimes, as in the case of Brother Tim, it might actually convince a hierarchist of the truth of egalitarianism. My life is a personal testimony of this truth.

Notes
2. The notion that the Bible might underdetermine an answer to our questions is by no means a novel one, nor is it peculiar to the gender issue. John Howard Yoder argues (rightly, in my opinion) that the reason the Bible underdetermines an answer to the gender debate is that we are asking the wrong questions of Scripture. In his Body Politics (Scottdale, Penn.: Harold, 1992), Yoder argues:

   What is sweeping across the map in our century is the debate about women in ministry. Assuming that there is one role called “ministry,” whether sacerdotal or episcopal in focus, some denominations agree that women can carry that role, and others, both some of the very Catholic and some of the very Protestant, deny it.

   The mistake that dominates this debate, the reader will recognize, from the perspective of the Pauline vision, is not in the answers but in the question. There is not (i.e., there should not be) one “ministerial” role, of which then we could argue about whether it is gender specific. There are as many ministerial roles as there are members of the body of Christ, and that means that more than half of them belong to women. The roles least justified by the witness of the New Testament—quite regardless of the gender debate—are those of priest and of (supercongregational) bishop, precisely the ones that some men have traditionally held alone and want to keep for themselves. (60, italics original)

For another example of an argument for biblical underdetermination from a completely different theological debate, see David M. Ciochetti, “Suspending the Debate about Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 51, no. 3 (2008): 573–90, esp. 589: “A careful consideration of . . . the Bible’s underdetermination of free will theory should . . . lead us to suspend the debate.”

3. For a recent example of exegetical arguments for egalitarian church polity that I find masterful, see Kirk R. MacGregor, A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology, ch. 8, “Women in Ministry,” 231–64. MacGregor, however, takes a decidedly hierarchist position on the husband/wife relationship, though he does not offer any arguments for this latter stance.

4. In a recent book review of Mignon Jacobs’s Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits, Susan M. Haack perceptively notes that “Jacobs’s book is also a potent portrayal of the power of presuppositions in textual interpretation” (Ethics and Medicine 25, no. 1 [2009]: 63). I think we would do well to consider the role that presuppositions play in biblical exegesis, even among those committed to inerrancy.


7. For more on the strengths and weaknesses of RE, see my thesis, “Nonevidentialism, Pluralism, and Warrant: Plantinga, Hick, and the Epistemological Problem of Religious Diversity,” M.A. thesis, Trinity International University, 2009. In my thesis, I am more critical of RE than I am here. However, it should be noted that the analogy I draw below does not depend on the relative merits or demerits of RE per se, but rather on its applicability to the gender debate.

8. Alvin Plantinga, God and Other Minds.


10. Indeed, even so notable a skeptic as David Hume admits that he cannot follow his skepticism when he leaves his study and goes to play backgammon with his friends. Solipsism is the view that I am the only person who exists, and everyone else is illusory, therefore, my belief is my rule.

11. In this context, the term “warrant” is used to denote the property which—or enough of which—distinguishes knowledge from true belief. Thus, one might have a true belief that does not count properly as knowledge if it is not warranted. When the true belief (or believer) has enough warrant, then the belief can properly count as knowledge.


14. Stanley Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2001), 231.
15. Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe, 231.
18. As a denominational historian, he is also happy to discuss our denomination’s rich heritage of women in ministry, which is uniformly ignored or disregarded today. Few are willing to accept Brother Tim’s challenge—and for good reason.
19. Timothy Paul Erdel, “Appeal for Commissioning,” an appeal addressed to the credentialing committee, Missionary Church, North Central District (Elkhart, Ind.), Mishawaka, Ind., 23 July 1996, printout (photocopied). The story is a bit more complex than I can present here. At the time, our denomination had two “separate but equal” tracks: full ordination or “commissioning.” Most pastors were expected to become fully ordained after being licensed for a certain number of years. However, women ministers as well as pastors of the newly emerging Hispanic churches in the denomination were put on the commissioning track instead of full ordination. Brother Tim thus appealed to be placed on the commissioning track instead of the full ordination track, which was almost exclusively reserved for white males. Along with his objection to the de facto position on women in ministry, Brother Tim also objected to the implicit distinction between minority and white pastors (a distinction that was done away with almost as soon as it was brought to light), as well as generally objecting to the notion of ordination based on his own Anabaptist theological commitments. Cf. idem, “What Is Biblical Ordination?” study document prepared for the President and District Superintendents of the Missionary Church, Inc. (Fort Wayne, Ind.), Bethel College, Mishawaka, Ind., February 1998, printout (photocopied).