

Brokering Peace

Egalitarian Theology Meets the “Mommy Wars”

Sarah Lindsay

Most of us have heard about the Mommy Wars: the tension between mothers who stay at home and those who work. In this conflict, mothers who work are portrayed as selfish, pursuing wealth and personal fulfillment at the expense of their families. Those who stay at home are judged for wasting their energy and creative potential on diapers and Pinterest-worthy boxed lunches. The war burdens and demoralizes mothers, ensuring they feel either constantly criticized or perpetually unable to “have it all,” whatever that means. In the end, neither side wins because no mother escapes the sense that she is doing it wrong—no matter what choice she makes.

The American evangelical church and particularly complementarian churches tend to glorify mothers who stay at home. They often frame this as a response to feminism which they perceive as denigrating stay-at-home mothers. Especially in the context of the Mommy Wars, it’s hard to deny that some feminists accuse women who stay home with their children of wasting their potential and accepting a patriarchal social order. But it is simply not true that all (or even most) feminists look down on stay-at-home mothers. Still, feminists make a convenient enemy for complementarian churches who wade into the Mommy Wars firmly on the side of stay-at-home mothers.

Egalitarian theology offers a path toward peace by honoring the God-given gifts and callings of all women—at all stages and in all paths of life. As numerous commentators have pointed out over the thirty years since the phrase “Mommy Wars” first appeared, all mothers—working or not—suffer when their choices are continually criticized. While each side may see itself as advocating for a better model of womanhood, a war by its very nature destroys rather than builds up. Instead of joining the conflict, egalitarian churches can bridge the damaging divide and support mothers and families more broadly.

At its core, egalitarian theology recognizes that women and men alike can be called and gifted for ministry in any role. And this is good news for those burdened by the Mommy Wars: women’s gifts are not limited to the domestic sphere nor are women who use their gifts in their homes wasting them. The church should free women to pursue God’s calling in their lives, recognizing that all women, even those who happily stay at home, have passions and talents beyond motherhood. Moreover, not all women have the option to stay home; these mothers need support rather than judgment or pity from their church communities.



Egalitarian theology rejects the notion that all women are called to motherhood but it does not undermine stay-at-home mothers. Instead, egalitarian theology affirms and supports women in their varied callings, which may or may not include children and which may include balancing parenting and other work.

Egalitarian churches can support both working and stay-at-home mothers in two distinct ways. First, they can recognize the value of women as complete human beings. Second, they can acknowledge that men are also called and gifted as parents. When churches treat women as whole human beings who cannot be reduced to mothers or non-mothers, women have the space to flourish. And when churches focus broadly on parenting rather than specifically elevating mothering, they ease the heavy burden to mother perfectly.

Egalitarian theology focuses on the creation of all humans, men and women, in the image of God. Because men and women equally represent the *imago Dei*, they do not need to operate in separate spheres. There may be some disagreement among egalitarians about whether or not “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics, beyond basic biology, are innately connected to gender. But we all agree that these characteristics do not prevent women from taking on roles, including leadership roles, outside the home.

Egalitarians question the notion that every woman’s highest calling is to be a wife and mother. Many women are wives and mothers and some devote themselves exclusively to these roles. But if God gifts women just as he gifts men and allows them to serve just as men serve, then women should not be limited to serving in the home.

Egalitarian theology frees mothers from the guilt of the Mommy Wars by embracing women as whole human beings—and this has implications for all women, not just mothers. When motherhood is a woman’s highest calling, there is little space for women who are single or childless. Even older mothers whose children have left home may feel excluded from full participation in the church. But our theology should acknowledge and support women’s varied callings regardless of whether they are married or have children or whether they stay home or work.

Egalitarian theology can also bridge the Mommy Wars by shifting the focus from mothering to parenting. When a woman’s highest call is to be a mother, the church expects her to parent well. Rarely does anyone either within or outside the church assign the same importance to fatherhood. Fathers are undoubtedly seen as important but complementarians insist on separate spheres of action and tend to see men as less nurturing than women. Thus women’s gifts are best suited to the home, while men’s are best used outside the home.

Of course, this worldview widens the scope of men’s gifts and talents and narrows the field of opportunity for women, reinforced by the exclusion of women from certain roles within the church. Additionally, this view of motherhood places unfair pressure on mothers instead of evenly distributing

the challenges of raising children on both parents.

In egalitarian theology, men and women do not occupy separate spheres of action, which frees women to participate in traditionally male-dominated roles, such as pastor. Allowing women to fully use their gifts is, rightly, a major focus of egalitarian theology but it carries an important corollary: men are also freed to participate in traditionally female roles.

Egalitarian churches should support fathers who choose to stay at home and subvert the assumption that women are naturally more inclined toward childcare. Churches should affirm that fathers can be, and indeed are, competent parents. For the record, awkward jokes about poorly-dressed children on the Sunday of the women’s retreat unnecessarily reinforce the myth that women are better parents. And this idea again puts more weight on mothers’ shoulders, weight that all parents should carry. Egalitarians emphasize co-parenting, easing the burden of society’s unrealistic expectations.

Egalitarian theology rejects the notion that all women are called to motherhood but it does not undermine stay-at-home mothers. Instead, egalitarian theology affirms and supports women in their varied callings, which may or may not include children and which may include balancing parenting and other work. Moreover, in breaking down the notion that men and women occupy separate spheres, egalitarians offer a balanced view of motherhood that neither denies its importance nor idolizes it. This view also encourages fathers to fully engage and participate as parents. Supporting women primarily as humans created in the *imago Dei* leads to a greater respect for all women in all walks and stages of life.



Sarah Lindsay has a PhD in medieval literature, and she currently lives in the western suburbs of Chicago with her husband and three daughters. She is passionate about empowering women to use their gifts to the fullest extent both in and beyond the church.