

Text or Pretext

Loving Scripture, Living Egalitarian

J.W. Wartick

I was raised complementarian. More importantly, I was raised in something of a theological echo chamber where my complementarian convictions went undisputed. All diligent Bible readers would obviously conclude that men were to lead, and even more obviously, that women were not to be pastors. What could be simpler?

By college, I had only a working understanding of why I was complementarian. Nevertheless, my confidence in that position was quite strong—strong enough that when I met a young woman on campus studying to be a pastor, I concluded she must not take the Bible very seriously. After all, how could she? Complementarianism was the plain and simple teaching of Scripture.

Indeed, the myth that egalitarians do not take Scripture seriously exists both in complementarian circles and outside the church. In a conversation with a friend who is an atheist, I was surprised to hear that, though he respected my commitment to the equality of men and women, he did not believe I could also have a high view of Scripture. I was taken aback, given that my commitment to egalitarian theology stems from deep and intentional exploration of Scripture.

Why do so many people assume that egalitarians dismiss the Bible's teaching? How do we confront this misconception? Most importantly, *do* egalitarians take Scripture seriously? Is it possible to hold a high view of Scripture while also advocating for equality of men and women in church and home?

I ran full-on into this theological dilemma as a somewhat naive college student. On the one hand, I had my presuppositions about egalitarians. On the other, I was confronted by a woman studying to be a pastor and capable of engaging with me on biblical topics throughout the whole of Scripture. She did not strike me as someone who would so readily dismiss what the Bible taught on one issue, having clearly done a great deal of thinking on so many others.

I strove to explore the issue more deeply. I realized that when she asked why I opposed women in ministry, my trite—and only—response was: “The Bible says so.” I couldn't even articulate why I thought as much; it was just an assumed background belief.

Confronted with a challenge to my convictions, I responded like so many do. Instead of examining the

arguments of those with opposing views, egalitarians, I explored a great deal of complementarian literature. I began my inquiry with a book questioning the role of women as pastors, produced by my own denomination's publishing house.

What struck me was not the depth of the complementarian argument, but rather the constant emphasis on a few verses, ripped from their context and narrowly applied to one issue—women's role. I was even more troubled when the author argued for the eternal subordination of God the Son to the Father as an analogy for male-female relations. It disturbed me that a complementarian theologian would enlist the doctrine of God to make points in biblical anthropology.

Then, on a vacation with my then-girlfriend, I discovered something I didn't even realize existed: a scholarly egalitarian book. While browsing the shelves of a

bookstore, I saw Philip B. Payne's *Man and Woman: One in Christ*. The title was intriguing, so I picked it up and started paging through it. My astonishment at his opening sentences was great:

My belief in both inerrancy and the equality of man and woman may seem absurd to many on each side of the egalitarian/complementarian divide. How can a thinking textual critic with an enlightened egalitarian view still cling to the notion of biblical inerrancy? Conversely, how can someone who believes everything taught by God's inspired Word come to the position that the Bible permits women to teach and exercise authority over men in the church? ¹

The rhetorical questions he asked were the same questions I was suddenly asking myself, and they were the same questions others had posed when I began questioning the complementarian position. I walked out of the bookstore with my new purchase in hand and spent much of the rest of the weekend devouring it.

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Payne's book and the many other scholarly egalitarian works I later read revealed that my preconceptions about egalitarians were entirely mistaken. Time and again, I found that my own reading of Scripture was simplistic. By contrast, the egalitarian reading took into account the whole wisdom of God. Complementarian scholars often cited a single verse or two torn from their context to prove their position while egalitarian scholars read and engaged the entire passage in its canonical,

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historical, and biblical context. The depth of egalitarian scholarship was matchless.

My journey into egalitarian theology is not unique but it helpfully indicates that presuppositions about egalitarians run deep. I was raised in the church, went to private Christian schools, and even attended a conservative Lutheran university. At no point did I seriously interact with egalitarian theology. The notion of women being pastors was dismissed as blatantly contradictory to various proof texts, and no egalitarian theologians were engaged.

This allowed for the idea that egalitarians do not take Scripture seriously to thrive unchallenged in my mind. It also suggests that those who oppose egalitarian theology may do so out of ignorance rather than serious study and

out to those who disagree with us. It is easy for egalitarians to become frustrated when people make assumptions about our beliefs, especially our respect for Scripture. But we can gracefully engage those false assumptions with further discussion, in the hope that increased dialogue will prompt a theological shift. Moreover, we can simply demonstrate through our actions and writing that Scripture is, in fact, the very reason we are egalitarian to begin with. The simplest way to overcome a presupposition is to demonstrate exceptions to it.

Finally, my experience underscores the immense importance of a support network during this difficult theological shift. When I became an outspoken egalitarian, I was drawn into heated disputes with friends and family who believed I had abandoned my faith, or at the very least, was sliding down a slippery slope. Because they shared my former false presupposition about egalitarians' disregard for Bible teaching, they assumed that I must necessarily abandon faith in Scripture's trustworthiness. I did lose friends, and those who stayed with me asked why I had changed so thoroughly. What I needed—and received—was the support of many egalitarian friends who provided a shoulder to cry on and a place to vent, and who guided me in further research as I continued my prayerful journey.



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rejection of egalitarian thought. A humble approach to those with whom we disagree can open doors to broader study of egalitarian thought. Rather than meeting dismissal with dismissal, we can direct complementarians to thorough, thoughtful studies by egalitarian scholars.

My journey also proves that presuppositions can be challenged and even overcome. As we advocate for the full partnership of men and women in the church and home, we ought to be reaching

1. Payne's own words here show the very kind of misconceptions about egalitarians that often come up, thus pointing to the fact that few acknowledge the true breadth of the egalitarian position.