Evangelical Feminism

A New Path to Liberalism | By Wayne Grudem | Reviewed by Kevin Giles

Evangelical Feminism is written to further a cause that has consumed the author’s working life: the permanent subordination of women as God’s ideal. It judges all fellow evangelicals who disagree on this matter to be “theological liberals,” or implicit liberals. The fundamental seismic fault in the author’s thinking is that he cannot differentiate between the interpretation of Scripture and Scripture itself. For him, if anyone rejects his interpretation of the key texts on which he and other hierarchs base their case for the permanent subordination of women, then that believer is by definition rejecting the authority of Scripture. What this means is that the methodological challenge to interpret Scripture rightly in its given historical and cultural context and to apply what is said rightly in another historical and cultural context is solved by assuming and asserting that “my interpretation” tells you exactly what the Bible says. When an author claims that one’s interpretation of God’s word is God’s word without any caveats, then, by implication, one is claiming to speak for God. The author is asserting that what he says the Bible says is what God says, and, thus, if you disagree with him, you are disagreeing with God. This is, of course, how the Roman Catholic Church solves the challenge of interpretation. In the end, it is the Pope who tells the faithful what the Bible is saying on any controversial matter. In both the Protestant and the Catholic versions of this methodology, inerrancy lies not in the Scriptures, but in the interpretation given by someone claiming to speak for God.

As long as hierarchs argue in this way, there is no possibility of finding common ground on the question of the status and ministry of women. To begin an honest and open dialogue, we have to agree that the issue is not the authority of Scripture, but how Scripture is to be interpreted and applied. Evangelical egalitarians do not reject the authority of Scripture; they reject an interpretation of the Scriptures that suggests that God’s unchanging ideal is the subordination of women.

There are two contrasting ways of interpreting Scripture to prove the subordination of women. First, there is the historic interpretation of the biblical texts on women. For long centuries, many theologians and biblical expositors said that the Bible teaches that men are “superior,” women are “inferior,” and women are more prone to sin and error than men. For these reasons, women are the subordinated sex. In the historic position, men and women are differentiated not simply by “roles,” but because God made them men and women. Women are second in rank or status because Eve was created second. In other words, women are subordinated on the basis of the chronological order of their creation, not on the basis of a supposed creation-given, pre-fall hierarchical social order in which woman are subordinate to men. Most contemporary hierarchs, as well as all evangelical egalitarians, reject this historic interpretation that women
are ontologically inferior to men, even though it held sway for eighteen centuries and was adopted by some of the greatest theologians of the past.

Secondly, there is the novel post-1970s interpretation of a selected number of biblical texts on women that is now adopted almost word for word by all contemporary hierarchists and rejected by all egalitarians. This says men and women are equal, yet role-differentiated, which, when unpacked in plain speech, means that women are permanently subordinated to male authority. Women’s subordination, it is added, is not a consequence of sin or a reflection of cultural values, but is predicated on a hierarchical social order established before the fall. It is the ideal that is pleasing to God and, as such, is unchangeable. Why this humanly devised theological construct should be judged the only true interpretation of Scripture escapes me. The Bible never suggests that men and women are “role-differentiated,” and says much to the contrary. Instead, we are differentiated in our very being as man and woman by God’s creative act (Gen. 1:27). The term “role” refers to the part a person plays. It belongs to the world of the theater and the study of humanistic sociology, not the Bible. In creation, man and woman are both bearers of the image of God and both are given authority to rule God’s world (Gen. 1:27ff). The idea that there is a once-given, unchanging, unchangeable hierarchical social order established before the fall that permanently sets men over women is a figment of male imagination. It speaks more of the male will to power than of anything found in the Bible. The Bible makes the subordination of women a consequence of the fall (Gen. 3:16). The gender equality of the two differentiated sexes, and marriage between them, are definitely creation-givens, but social ordering is not. Social ordering is always a human construct that human beings can change. History proves this point. “Created second” only speaks of chronological order, not social order or hierarchy. What is more, the whole Bible is predicated on a forward-looking eschatology where the “new creation” in Christ introduces something altogether new (2 Cor. 5:17). The perfection of creation lies in the future, when the new creation will be brought to its consummation on the last day. In the Garden of Eden, the Devil was present and sin possible. This will not be the case when the new creation is fully realized. Hierarchists may have the very highest view of Scripture, but, by making their theory the “glasses” or grid through which the Bible’s teaching on women is to be interpreted, they dishonor Scripture by not allowing Scripture to speak in its own terms.

Further, the author of this book names his opponents. Among those he accuses of being explicit or implicit deniers of the authority of Scripture are some of the most respected and godly evangelical leaders in the world: John Arnott, Jack and Judith Balswick, Linda Belleville, Gilbert Bilezikian, Darrell Bock, Clarence Boomsma, Peter Davids, Craig Evans, Gordon Fee, R. T. France, J. Lee Grady, Joel Green, Rebecca Groothuis, Stanley Grenz, Stan Gundry, Mimi Haddad, Jack Hayford, Bill Hybels, Walter Kaiser, Craig Keener, Richard and Catherine Kroeger, I. Howard Marshall, Alvera Mickelsen, Roger Nicole, Grant Osborne, Alan Padgett, Ronald Pierce, David Scholer, Aida Spencer, Sarah Sumner, Anthony Thiselton, David Thompson, Ruth Tucker, William Webb, and Don Williams. I am honored to be named on such a list of convinced conservative evangelicals. The author also specifically names most of the more prestigious
evangelical seminaries, accusing them of allowing people to teach who he thinks undermine the authority of Scripture by suggesting men and women should be valued equally and equally allowed to use God-given gifts of leadership. In my mind, his long list of convinced evangelicals who are egalitarians counts against his thesis. Surely, if most of the best theologians in the evangelical world are convinced that the Bible makes gender equality God’s ideal, they cannot all be mistaken and crypto liberals! Perhaps it is the author who has it wrong. Could it be he who is reading his agenda into the Bible? I think so.

When it comes to detail, so much of what the book asserts dogmatically is not factual. For example, the first page of the book says, “Liberal Protestant denominations were the pioneers of evangelical feminism” (15). This is simply not true, and the contrary evidence is well documented in evangelical books. The roots of late twentieth-century evangelical egalitarianism lie in the work and writings of some of the emancipationists in the late nineteenth century. In working for the abolition of slavery, key figures in this movement concluded that, if Blacks should be recognized as full human beings with leadership potential, so too should women. In this period, well researched and informed books by conservative evangelicals appeared, arguing that the Bible made the equality of men and women, differentiated by God, the ideal. A classic example is Catherine Booth’s little book, Female Ministry; Or Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel. With her husband, she founded The Salvation Army. She was no theological liberal.

In the center of the book is a section entitled “Feminist Views that Undermine or Deny the Authority of Scripture.” I question the choice of the word “feminist,” an emotive term that, in socially conservative Christian circles, is anathema. Because the word has so many negative overtones, few people, Christian or otherwise, use it today. If “feminism” simply means insisting that women are full human beings, or valuing men and women alike and granting them equality of opportunity, it is a lovely word. The problem is that the word carries many other connotations, including anti-femininity and lesbianism. Thus, many secular women today who are committed to equality for women, especially younger ones, eschew the term. So too do the evangelicals that this book disparages. Evangelicals who believe God’s creation ideal is gender equality, not sameness, speak of themselves as “egalitarian evangelicals,” “evangelicals for biblical equality,” or by the term I prefer, “egalitarian-complementarians.” To call contemporary evangelical egalitarians constantly “evangelical feminists” is the equivalent of egalitarians calling those they disagree with “evangelical misogynists,” which would be both untrue and unfair.

One evangelical scholar who seems especially singled out is William Webb. He is repeatedly accused of “denying the authority of Scripture.” Webb has written a very thought-provoking book, widely endorsed by leading conservative evangelical scholars, seeking to outline a method of interpreting Scripture following clues in the Bible itself that suggest the Bible anticipates the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women, but not the acceptance of homosexuality. According to Dr. Grudem’s methodology, such emancipation is true of slavery, but not of women. He wants us to believe that, although the exhortations to women and slaves stand side by
side, those pertaining to women are transcultural and timeless while those to slaves are time-bound and culturally limited. But such a hierarchist claim, that the exhortations to women and slaves are to be contrasted, not compared, is special pleading. Across the centuries, many Christian scholars have argued that these exhortations to wives, children, and slaves are all of one nature and intent. Few of the many contemporary scholarly studies of these exhortations to members of the extended household find the differences that hierarchists insist exist. Absolutely no one without a hierarchical agenda can find any basis for differentiating these exhortations. Webb is absolutely right. There is profound teaching in the Bible that indicates that neither the subordination of women nor the institution of slavery is a timeless, transcultural social structuring or ordering that is pleasing to God. Christians have to choose between accepting that emancipation is true in both matters or not true in both matters.

About one hundred fifty years ago, some Christians endorsed slavery, thinking that the Bible endorsed this institution. If slavery was taken for granted in the Bible and regulated, they reasoned, then slavery must be acceptable to God. Brave evangelicals, like Theodore Weld, who dared to argue in support of the great egalitarian principles in the Bible—such as man and woman being made in God’s image and alike given authority to rule God’s world, love of neighbor, and oneness in Christ—were unmercifully deprecated and opposed by other evangelicals.

In a similar manner to his treatment of Dr. Webb’s book, my own work on the Trinity received severe criticism from Dr. Grudem. His view is that the persons of the Trinity are ordered hierarchically as men and women are, and the Father has greater authority than the Son, as men have in relation to women. To make his case, the author repeatedly claims his ideas on the Trinity are what the creeds and the great theologians across the centuries taught. In my book The Trinity and Subordination, I sought to show that, in fact, the creeds and the great theologians across the centuries disagree with him. In my later book The Father and the Son, I have a long chapter on the biblical teaching that has led orthodoxy to endorse a co-equal Trinity. In both books, I speak of “the tradition,” and very carefully and explicitly define what I mean by this technical term. “The tradition” for Protestant theologians is how the best theologians across the centuries have understood the Bible. I consistently show that I am talking about “the biblical interpretative tradition.” Most Christians and most informed evangelicals have always believed that how Christians have interpreted the Bible in the past, especially if this teaching is codified in creeds and confessions, is an important secondary authority to Scripture that should be considered carefully in interpreting any passage or when considering any doctrine. Thus, to find myself being condemned for denying the authority of Scripture by making “the tradition of the church” my “supreme authority” (117) is not factual. He himself constantly appeals to the writings of past theologians. Indeed, he makes interpretive “tradition” his main argument in support of his novel doctrine of the Trinity.
In chapter 27 of *Evangelical Feminism*, the author returns to his hierarchical understanding of the Trinity by quoting just one text, 1 Corinthians 11:3, in support. He then turns to “tradition,” appealing to a list of theologians who he thinks endorse his doctrine, including Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin, and adds that his view is what the creeds teach. The fact is that not one of these theologians speaks of “eternal role subordination.” Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin emphasize divine unity, excluding eternal subordination absolutely. The Athanasian Creed, the definitive statement on the Trinity for Western Christians for fifteen centuries, is a direct contradiction to his views! This creed declares that the divine three are each “almighty” (one in authority), “none before or after, greater or lesser” (no hierarchical ordering), and “co-equal,” yet at the same time affirming that the three persons are to be eternally differentiated, not by their “roles,” but by their differing relations of origin. The novel doctrine of the Trinity that the author of *Evangelical Feminism* has popularized undermines the primary confession of the Christian faith, “Jesus is Lord” (the supreme ruler), directly contradicts the creeds (like the Athanasian Creed), and is advanced by no one before 1970 when his view was developed to defend the case for the permanent subordination of women. In this chapter on the Trinity, Gilbert Bilezikian comes under strenuous criticism as denying that there are “any real differences” between the Father and the Son (210), since, in its view, to deny the permanent subordination of women or the eternal subordination of the Son is to deny “real differences.” Absolutely no evangelical egalitarian denies human sexual differentiation, and even many secular feminists emphasize sexual differences. When it comes to the Trinity, too, neither Gilbert Bilezikian nor I deny eternal divine differentiation. We affirm and emphasize both divine threeeness and divine unity, never setting one against the other. What we deny is that the Son is ontologically and/or eternally role-subordinated—and the latter implies the former. The word “difference” in no dictionary, nor in everyday speech, ever means or implies subordination. Things or people can be different and equal.

As might be expected, the book includes a chapter on both the word *kephalē* (head), which Dr. Grudem argues once more means “authority over” (193–98), and a chapter on the verb *authentein* used in 1 Timothy 2:12 (199–204). This verb, he claims, alludes simply to ordinary authority that is denied to women. Such arguments demand a hearing and are not to be dismissed out of hand without careful consideration. The problem is that some of the finest minds in the evangelical world have examined both these arguments and have not been convinced. To give the meaning “authority over” to *kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11:3 simply does not fit the context, as Anthony Thiselton, for example, in his erudite commentary on 1 Corinthians points out.1 Why say men have authority over women and then immediately speak positively of men and women leading in prophecy and prayer in the congregation? Prophecy for Paul, we should note, is “second” to the ministry of apostleship, while teaching comes below prophecy and is “third” (1 Cor. 12:28). All agree that the verb authentein can have a negative or positive force. Grammatical or lexical arguments, no matter how pedantic they are, cannot prove one way or the other what the verb must mean in 1 Timothy 2:12. As with *kephalē* in 1
Corinthians 11:3, the context of the passage is the most important indicator of the word’s meaning within the range of legitimate semantic possibilities. In 1 Timothy 2, authentein is used of what Paul forbids, and then he backs up his ruling by reminding his readers that Eve was the one deceived by the Devil—I take it implying the women at Ephesus have also been deceived by the Devil (1 Tim. 2:14). Surely, this suggests a negative connotation. It is also to be noted that Evangelical Feminism’s case for the neutral meaning of authentein is based on the work of a fellow hierarchist, H. Scott Baldwin, who ignores the cognate noun forms of this verb that, in the first century, definitely had very negative meanings.2

Possibly the most bizarre section in the book is chapter 5, where the author castigates Gordon Fee for his “sophisticated academic attempt to evade the Bible’s authority” by calling into question the textual authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35—the passage where Paul tells women to keep silent after he has spoken of them praying and prophesying in church (50). Because Dr. Fee begins by noting that, at first sight, what Paul says in close proximity could be read to be contradictory, the author accuses him of solving the problem of “difficult to reconcile” texts in Scripture by adopting “the liberal tendency” to dismiss the text he does not like (52). Textual criticism is a valid enterprise for evangelicals. When Dr. Fee first put this case in his 1987 commentary on 1 Corinthians, he admitted no early handwritten manuscript actually omitted these words, despite the fact that they are not found in the same place in all manuscripts. Nevertheless, on the basis of this textual movement and on a number of internal issues, Dr. Fee made a good case for questioning authenticity. He is not being “liberal” in doing this. If hierarchists disagree with him, they have to bring forward compelling evidence to make the case, not simply denounce Dr. Fee.

What is equally sad about this chapter is that significant textual discoveries have been made since Dr. Fee presented his interpretation, but Dr. Grudem fails to mention them. For example, Philip Payne has come forward with manuscript evidence to show that this text was marked as uncertain by some early scribes, and there is evidence to suggest some early manuscripts did not have these words. The detailed and somewhat technical evidence Dr. Payne accumulates is summed up and evaluated very positively by another world-renowned textual critic, Eldon Jay Epp, in his book Junia, the First Woman Apostle (2005). None of this is engaged in Evangelical Feminism. Having introduced the name of Junia (see Rom. 16:7), I note that the author does not mention the almost certain fact that she was a woman apostle, one of those Paul says are “first in the church.” How does his theory that women are to be subordinated to men in the church match up with this reality?

Sadly, many Christians, male and female, continue to think that the subordination of women in our age is God’s ideal. They are inclined to believe this not just because three or four texts interpreted in a particular way seem to teach the permanent subordination of women (just as many texts may be read to support slavery), but also because they have been taught that egalitarians are secular feminists in sheep’s clothing who in reality deny the authority of
Scripture. The truth is that all egalitarian evangelicals hold to a high view of Scripture, and we speak for the equality of the sexes because we believe the Bible compels us to speak for an egalitarian and complementary understanding of man and woman. Does not the Bible, on its first page, as a prologue to all that follows, speak of man and woman created alike in the image of God and appointed alike to rule God’s world? Does not Jesus have the very highest view of women, and does not Paul teach that the charismata (gifts) for ministry are given non-discriminatorily to men and women?

To conclude, let me stress the facts:

1. Egalitarians endorse the authority of Scripture, but not the authority of human interpreters. To dispute an interpretation is not to dispute the authority of Scripture itself.

2. We do not embrace the several secular feminist agendas. We are motivated to work for the full emancipation of women on exactly the same ground as other evangelicals have opposed unjust rulers, slavery, apartheid, racism, human trafficking, and ignoring the poor. It is not secular humanism, existentialism, Marxism, or any other “ism” that motivates us, but the Bible.

3. We embrace sexual differentiation; what we deny is that the permanent subordination of women is God’s unchanging ideal. No evangelical egalitarian is arguing for a dreary unisex society or church and never has. We want the equal contribution of women as women and men as men, complementing each other.

4. We accept without question or dissent what the creeds and confessions actually say about the Trinity: the divine three persons are one in being and authority. They are “co-equal.”

5. On male “headship,” the situation is more complex. I, for one, hold that the answer lies in a sound method of interpretation that fully acknowledges cultural contexts. Paul lived in a world where the subordination of women was taken for granted and patriarchy prevailed. Paul subverts this patriarchy by saying that “headship” in a Christian marriage involves serving one’s wife with agapé love, even to the point of giving one’s life for her. The challenge for both hierarchists and egalitarians is how to apply these words in a culture that insists on the equality of the sexes.

It is my hope that the erroneous arguments put forth in *Evangelical Feminism* will be overcome as more and more Christians discover, firstly, that the partnership understanding of marriage advocated by Jesus and Paul as the ideal is the most enriching, and, secondly, discover that allowing women to use the charismata that Paul insists are given without discrimination to men and women will enrich the life of the church.

Notes


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