Are We on the Same Page?

An evangelical response to Germaine Greer’s The Whole Woman,

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LAST NIGHT I WAITED AT STARBUCKS UNTIL IT WAS TIME to pick up two of our teenage daughters after a home Bible study under the auspices of our conservative evangelical church. While nursing my Coffee of the Day, I could not help overhearing a young adult woman, with Bible open at an adjacent table, discipling four other university-age females. Their informal conversation ranged over a number of topics, and on each one the leader had a forceful and confident opinion. I winced especially when I heard her advise them that the Bible was very clear that a woman should remain silent and never teach a man. As far as I could tell, the group simply nodded assent to this insight and scribbled it down in their journals. As I drove through a darkened suburban neighborhood to pick up my own daughters a few minutes later, I could not help wondering whether the teaching my kids were receiving was any different.

I also realize that the participants in that coffee huddle at Starbucks would not be able to distinguish members of Christians for Biblical Equality from secular feminists. In their minds, the two movements are equally wrong, unbiblical, and for all intents and purposes, synonymous. To their way of thinking, CBE is simply a case of selling out to cultural trends, and a kind of feminist Trojan Horse within the walled fortress of evangelicalism. Evangelical feminists are simply those who uncritically parrot the values of secular feminism. To be fair, this assessment is not unique to relatively uninformed groups; it dominates in academic circles today as well.

In the majority of academic contexts in America today, the notion of an evangelical feminist is a contradiction in terms. In fact, a recent issue of Religious Studies News, the journal of the American Academy of Religion, reports on a major study of the tensions experienced by progressive evangelical women functioning in the largely feminist academy. Appropriately enough, the article is entitled: “Living on the Boundaries.” “Evangelical women in the academy,” the authors write, “are in an unusual position because we move back and forth across what remains for most people a rigid boundary between feminism and evangelicalism.”

This Berlin Wall has been built up from both sides. As Nicola Creegan and Christine Pohl accurately observe, “Some evangelical leaders and academics have been very vocal in describing every kind of feminism as a grave threat to the theological foundations of the Christian faith and to the moral order more generally. . . . On the other side, feminism is hostile to evangelicalism and is defined in part against it. Evangelicals and fundamentalists, linked together, are seen as a threat to the very existence of liberated women and their spirituality.”

These examples are perhaps sufficient to illustrate that there is a considerable lack of clarity at both the popular and scholarly levels about exactly what evangelical feminists stand for vis-à-vis the standard platforms of conservative Protestantism on the one hand, and secular feminism on the other. The onus is really on us to clarify our convictions in relation to those advocated by both sides. This is part of the tension of “living on the boundaries.”

An aging warrior’s literary postscript

Germaine Greer’s 1999 book The Whole Woman provides an opportunity to do precisely this in relation to the thought of one of the world’s most widely read secular feminists. Greer, who years ago authored the feminist classic The Female Eunuch (1970), is an aging feminist warrior. In this literary postscript, Greer reflects on the still-dubious status of women in the West at the dawn of the millennium. As she puts it, “[O]ur lives are nobler and richer than they were, but they are also fiendishly difficult” (p. 4). “On every side,” she mourns, “we see women troubled, exhausted, mutilated, lonely, guilty, mocked by the headlined success of the few” (p. 20). If it were possible, the culture seems even more masculine—“outrageously misogynist”—now than it was thirty years ago, if movies, professional sports, video games, modern rules of warfare and neo-capitalist economics are any reliable indicators (pp. 19–20).

The Whole Woman is itself a sometimes outrageous, sometimes paranoid (as when she interprets the commercialization of food preparation as an attack on female domestic competence, or when she sees the whole field of gynecology as nothing more than a blatant male campaign to control women’s reproduction). Yet the book is also often a deeply insightful and frequently very witty Jeremiad indeed. It is organized into four main sections: body, mind, love, and power. Underneath these headings are over thirty brief chapters on topics ranging from shopping to fathers to girl-power.

Most evangelical readers will feel uncomfortable about such things as Greer’s insistence on a woman’s right to

PRISCILLA PAPERS/Fall 2001: 15:4  3
decide personally about abortion (pp. 91–100), and her assumption that the struggles for lesbian rights and the ordination of women are really “aspects of the same struggle” (p. 3). On the other hand, there is much here to which we could respond with a hearty “Amen!” Surprisingly, she describes this still imperfect world of oppression as the “unregenerate human world” (p. 11). She deplores women’s inordinate fixation on cosmetics and other beauty products as oppressive and demeaning behavior, stimulated by ubiquitous media images from Barbie dolls to Baywatch.4 And she makes a strong case against the abuse of human embryos in experimental reproductive technology.5

Greer is still feisty, and the book is a kind of call to arms. But overall it strikes one more precisely as sardonic, and expressive more of sorrow than anger over the failure of feminism to achieve more constructive changes in the past three decades. Greer uses the adjective whole not in the sense of comprehensiveness but of healthiness; what she has in mind in the phrase “the whole woman” is a still far-from-achieved ideal of healthy, authentic womanhood. The Whole Woman, if she actually exists anywhere, would have more than the debilitating malaise of unhealthiness that continue to characterize the experience of too many women today. According to Greer’s dream, “She would be a woman who did not exist to embody male sexual fantasies or rely upon a man to endow her with identity and social status, a woman who did not have to be beautiful, who could be clever, who would grow in authority as she age (p. 9).

There are countless incidental remarks in this book that might be discussed; debated, but our goal here is to consider the larger picture. The purpose of our presentation will be to compare and contrast Greer’s overall analysis and recommendation with ones that are explicitly rooted in a biblical understanding of our gendered humanity, our fallenness and our hope of healing. We begin then with this latter vision.

**A biblical vision of humanity**

The biblical vision of humanity is that there are two fundamental ways of being human: being human as a male and being human as a female. Females and males are not two separate species, but two distinct expressions of a common humanity. God’s original design for the two distinct sexes of humanity may be summed up in a simple formula: Equality plus difference equals interdependence.

1. **Equality.** First, both males and females can lay an equal claim to being human. Both, according to the first chapter of the Bible (specifically, Gen. 1:27), possess God-likeness to the very same extent. Neither males nor females can presume to suggest that they are ultimately a bit more like God than the other is. To state the matter in reverse, we can say without equivocation that God is no more like a man than God is like a woman. Insofar as we can identify distinctive characteristics of men and women respectively, we can safely say that they are all equal reflections of the infinitely larger nature and character of God. God embodies (and transcends) all that is involved in womanliness and manliness. This is the essential element of equality.

2. **Difference.** Second, men and women are not the same. We are different. Sexual differentiation is fundamental and profound. It pertains to far more than variations in reproductive organs. It is naive, moreover, to assume that we are completely the same on the “inside” and differ only in our arbitrarily assigned “earth suits.” There is more to our differences than incidental physical features. To treat women essentially as though they were men, and men as though they were women, is to deny reality and to participate in a kind of suppression of our respective true identities. The unisex dream thwarts our fulfillment and encourages an alienation from who we really are. Differences extend far beyond the merely physical to the psychic and emotional, and play in differentiated value systems, ways of seeing, and even perceptual grids. The Christian doctrine of the bodily resurrection suggests that sexual differentiation is more than a temporary arrangement; being male and being female are experiences that are fundamental to who we are as persons and are destined to continue on even into eternity.

3. **Interdependence.** Third, we were designed for interdependence. On our own, as males and females respectively, we live with a fundamental incompleteness. We were deliberately created as sexually differentiated beings in order to draw us toward bonding with the other. Our sexual differentiation is the fundamental impulse toward the building and sustaining of community. Neither sex is an island. Neither sex is self-sufficient. We need each other in order to know what it means to be fully human, and it is in experiences of togetherness and common cause that we begin to approximate more closely the life of God.

The Triune God is a community of differentiated persons in unity, and interdependent humans of both sexes best reflect the image of this Triune God when they too live in a similar mysterious tension of unity and diversity. We cannot hate each other, or ignore and marginalize each other, and expect to become fully human ourselves. Through dehumanizing treatment of the other we ensure our own dehumanization. In the ancient language of Scripture, “it is not good for a man [or woman] to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Arguably, sexual intercourse is a profound symbol of this interdependence, but the broader experience of male-female interdependence goes well be-

**Germaine Greer**
yond the bed; it does not even require marriage or coitus.

This term *interdependence* may sound at face value an awful lot like *complementarity*, and perhaps if we only had to worry about etymology it would be safe enough to treat them essentially as synonyms. But in the politically charged context of evangelical gender debates today, *complementarity* is code for a more restricted and diminished understanding of women’s proper place in the scheme of things, and in truth more accurately be designated *supplementarity*. So we choose our words carefully and stick with *interdependence* and envision the relationships between men and women in terms of creative synergism.

**What went wrong?**

Someone has said that of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, the doctrine of sin is the one most easily verified empirically. There is so much plain evidence of it staring us in the face every day. The historic Fall and the resultant pervasiveness of sin mean that the human experience as we know it is a far cry from what the Creator originally designed and intended. This is certainly true of the ways in which we have come to relate to one another as males and females. They have grown twisted and dysfunctional as a result of sin. It may be helpful to consider how this pathology extends to each of the three elements of God’s original formula: equality, difference, and interdependence.

The first and most obvious effect of sin has been the demise of female equality. Women’s physical vulnerability has proven to be the opportunity for domestic and systemic oppression, and through these the erosion of a substantive experience of equality with men. This appears to be what was predicted, though not prescribed, by the Genesis 3:16 prophecy concerning Eve’s husband’s domination and rule over her. Over time, as is always the case, these visceral realities of oppression became legitimized and reinforced by hierarchical ideologies and cultural traditions. Understandings of how women and men ought to behave are the essence of what we know as gender roles—humanly devised sets of expectations. Regrettably, the religious traditions of the world have generally done more than their share along these lines. Within the Christian tradition itself, pivotal texts in both Old and New Testaments have been read through patriarchal lenses to buttress these oppressive ideologies by providing the appearance of divine sanction.

Most of us are all too familiar with the argument that women enjoy with men an equality of being (that is, an ontological equality) while at the same time are expected to behave are the essence of what we know as gender roles—humanly devised sets of expectations. Yet for all the “neatness” of this solution, there is the pervasive and nagging suspicion that such an ordering of gender relations on God’s part would never have been purely arbitrary. It could not have been that God could have quite happily gone either way—either men or women could lead; it didn’t really matter to God, just as long as someone did and they both agreed to it. It could not have been that men won out through a mere roll of the dice. No, the prevailing mindset involuntarily reasons, there must be some qualities intrinsic to being a woman that disqualifies her from leadership. And since we are also conditioned to think of the emergence of leaders as a process of “the cream rising to the top,” it follows that women must be the opposite of the cream. Theirs must also be an inferiority of essence—a substantive inequality.

Though at an intuitive level most women recognize that this verdict of inequality and inferiority is false and unjust, it is incredibly difficult not to capitulate to it to some degree in the formation of one’s self-perception. Low self-esteem is pandemic among Western women. It is often triggered in the identity crisis period of adolescence, and the psychic passivity it produces is one of the major causes of depression and a major obstacle to feminism being able to advance more aggressively. This phenomenon has led feminist theologians such as Germany’s Dorothe Sölle to suggest that female sin takes on a unique form exactly the polar opposite of the characteristically male form of sin, namely, that overreaching of the self known as pride or hubris. By contrast, the characteristically female manifestation of sin is self-annihilation and self-abuse, the under-assertion of the self.

This is where the Feminist Movement came in during the 1960s. Known initially and pejoratively as “Women’s Lib,” its aim was to liberate women from the various forms of domestic and structural oppression in the societies of the West. At the heart of this movement was the desire to affirm the legitimacy of women (not least, to women themselves), and to demonstrate that their abilities and competencies were equal, not inferior, to those of men. Building on protracted late-nineteenth-century women’s struggles to gain access to university education and the right to vote, the Feminist Movement from the 1960s onwards did much to raise societal consciousness of residual injustices and gain many more and better places for women in the professions and marketplace outside the home. The popular image of the shrill, disheveled, even witchlike “women’s libber” was such a public-relations liability for the movement that the term was gradually abandoned, and with it an explicit focus on a motif of liberation. In its place the movement developed a more civilized rhetoric focused on the pursuit of gender equality.

What we should be most interested in is *The Total Woman* is Greer’s analysis of what went wrong, and what should be done about it. Here is her answer: She is convinced that the feminist movement made a serious tactical error when it dropped the rhetoric of women’s liberation in favor of a campaign for rights and opportunities equal to those that men already appear to enjoy. What has only now emerged clearly in retrospect, she argues, is
that any quest for mere equality will be by definition much more conservative and compliant in spirit than a radical liberation movement like the one from which contemporary feminism originated. The heart of the matter is that the quest for equality was content with gaining admission for women to a world order that was designed by men and that continues to operate according to male values and motives.

I think I am faithful to Greer’s meaning when I say that, in her view, supposedly liberated women are obliged to live their days in an alien space, and in this strange environment they can hope to succeed only by performing in ways that are contrary to what it really means to be a woman. Until the world system is changed, women will still not be able to be themselves. The world order remains misogynist, and it is as though women who participate in it are on the rack. In order to be successful, they must pretend they are men. As Greer puts it, “real women are being phased out” (p. 4).

Moving in the right direction

I take Greer’s comments to suggest that the more insightful leaders of the Feminist Movement are beginning to acknowledge their regrettable neglect of the second element of the biblical vision for male-female relationships, viz., difference. The unisex agenda has been, frankly, a disaster. It has tried to defy Nature, and as is invariably the case in such instances, it has lost the contest. Greer’s passion at this point in her career—and she is almost apologetic for speaking up at her advanced age—is for women to believe that being a woman is a legitimate thing, and it is permissible to embrace one’s sexual identity and be oneself. It is good and right not to be a man. The mission of women, she says, ought to be more than gaining access to the bastions of power in a male-created system; it is to work for structural changes to that world so that it is a truly hospitable environment in which women can find fulfillment as women. This should prompt women to ask questions such as: “Should we accept altruism as part of the psychological make-up of the whole woman, or should we insist that she concentrate upon self-interest?” (pp. 12–13). The female’s potential is to an unacceptable extent being defined entirely in terms of the male’s actual (p. 3).

Along these lines, I naturally gravitated to her chapter on fathers and fathering (pp. 217–26), and was challenged by her suggestion that the most significant contribution of fathers to their daughters’ lifelong wholeness is to validate them—to ascribe legitimacy to who they are as persons and as women—and to do this consistently over time in word, attitude, and action.

The more progressive feminists today, like Greer, seem to be moving toward a stronger affirmation of gender difference. And these progressives include evangelical feminists such as Calvin College professor Mary Stuart Van Leeuwen. In her widely acclaimed book Gender and Grace (IVP, 1990) and elsewhere, Van Leeuwen advocates a “differentiating feminism” that recognizes the differences between men and women and validates their respective strengths. We have much to learn about how the genders relate, she argues, including how men and women alike still tend to see male experience as “normal” and female experience as “deviant.”

In summary, equality is essential, but so is a validation of difference. Difference is good, and an acknowledgment of this is a prerequisite to female liberation and the realization of the divine design for humanity. Along these lines it is instructive to observe the outpouring of contemporary support for the research and writing of Harvard professor Carol Gilligan on the importance of giving women a “voice.” It is equally interesting to find another feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, suggesting that the methodological key to feminist theology is its desire to give expression to women’s different experience and perspective. In the past, she laments, this difference has been scorned and neglected. The result has been that “Christian theology has been enormously impoverished by drawing on the experience of only one half of humanity”—men.

So far, I think, Greer and biblical feminists are pretty much still on the same page. But my main criticism of Germaine Greer is that she has yet to come to terms with the third and culminating element in the biblical vision of gender relations: interdependence. Men are virtually invisible in this book, and when they are acknowledged they come across as little more than objects of hostility and perpetrators of pain. As perhaps the most extreme example of this, the book includes a deeply disturbing chapter entitled “Loathing,” which is about the many faces of misogyny. The tone is set on the first page, where Greer throws down this gauntlet: “A few men hate all women all of the time, some men hate some women all of the time, and all men hate some women some of the time” (p. 293).

It is Van Leeuwen who has observed that many radical feminists are simply “women who have been so damaged by various forms of male abuse that only by staying vocally or surreptitiously angry can they continue to feel at all human.” It seems to be a description pretty applicable to Greer. Yet without a passion for interdependence, which is an essential piece of the wholeness puzzle, the well-intentioned feminist movement will continue to founder or at best make gains at an agonizingly slow pace. The internationally regarded Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann recently wrote that “one can only accept another when one has first found oneself.” Caring people might go one step further; they might say, “One can only accept another when one has first found oneself in the other.”

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian well acquainted with the realities of human hatred and violence in his former homeland, has eloquently presented the options we have...
when faced with otherness. The options are exclusion or embrace. The first is “an unflinching will to exclude”; the alternative is the desire to create space for the other, to embrace. Volf reminds us that an embrace involves two movements. The open arms illustrate the desire for inclusion—the “sign of discontent at being myself only.” But there is also the closing of the arms around the other, symbolizing both incorporation and enrichment.15

**The divine design**

At the outset I posed the question of whether Germaine Greer and biblical feminists like those in Christians for Biblical Equality are really on the same page. “Being on the same page” is an interesting figure of speech when you stop to think about it. The image that comes to mind for me (as you might expect from a “preacher’s kid”) is of two people singing from their respective copies of the hymnal. Any hope of intelligibility and harmony depends on whether they are singing from the same page. Obviously, by dismissing the role of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring into reality the things for which all feminists dream, one might legitimately argue that Greer refuses to sing from our hymnal.

But another way of interpreting the image is to think of people reading the same novel at different times and different rates. One might be nearing the conclusion, while the other has her bookmark way back in the middle somewhere. I think Germaine Greer, and for that matter Van Leeuwen and the other “differentiating feminists,” are already reading way ahead of those who are still fixated on the quest of mere gender equality. For Greer and these others understand that equality is not enough without a validation of difference. But there is more yet to be read in order to really grasp the plot of the story, and in the biblical revelation we get to “cheat” and read the ending first. There we understand that the divine design is ultimately to overcome the oppressive and estranging consequences of sin in male-female relationships, and to unite the two in a reconciled mutuality of gracious interdependence.

Biblical evangelicals know where all this is headed, and we should be leading the way in this direction. You can always make better time if you know where you are headed. The challenge for evangelical feminists like ourselves, then, is to find a way to embrace the themes of gender equality and difference within the larger, encompassing orbit of the true interdependence of males and females.

Let us engage this vitally important discussion.

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**Notes**


2. Ibid.


4. Her sober analysis of such alarming developments as the increase of Body Dysmorphic Disorders among women is balanced by such remarks as: “Preoccupation about her appearance goes some way towards ruining some part of every woman’s day” (25).

5. “If IVF [In-Vitro Fertilization] begins human lives only arbitrarily to end the huge majority of them in the quest for a single successful outcome it is in essence an unethical procedure” (89).


7. Prompted by this issue, there has developed an auxiliary theological debate over the inner dynamics of the Trinity, and in particular whether or not we have in the divine Christ’s obedience to the Father a paradigm of role-subordinate equality in personal essence. The issue has become almost esoteric as debate has moved to whether Christ’s subordination to the Father was a temporary expedient in the interests of the Atonement on a Roman cross, or an eternal feature of their Father-Son relationship.


13. Van Leeuwen, 303.
