A historical case can be made that Christianity has, all things considered, been good for women. It has not been the mighty agent of gender oppression that it is sometimes made out to be. Still, contemporary Christians can hardly feel smug about the track record of our religious tradition. We live with the uncomfortable awareness that our faith has not been as affirming as it should have been, or as empowering for women as it certainly needs to be from now on.

Over the course of the last couple of centuries in the West there has been a notable rise in female expectations for having a voice, greater personal dignity, equal opportunity, and individual autonomy. Concurrently there has been a growing impatience with what have been perceived as vestiges of gender patriarchy and oppression in our culture. Along the way certain gains for women stand out as landmarks, such as civic confirmation of a woman’s right to own property, to attend university, and to vote. The so-called feminist movement, which is generally thought to have begun with the publication of Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), is just the latest phase of this gender evolution.

These developments are forcing Christians (sometimes, truth be told, rather reluctantly) to go back and examine carefully some of our working assumptions about God’s will for the sexes, and our views of how men and women ought to relate to one another in the home, church, and society. Christians ponder whether the feminist movement could be God’s chastening instrument to prod the church into embracing the fuller implications of its own Gospel, or perhaps just another temptation to parrot the destructive values of secular society.

At the risk of masking the considerable diversity of viewpoints within our circles, it may be suggested that evangelical opinion has coalesced into two broad and competing responses. While these two competing perspectives are identified by various labels, the most common self-designations are complementarian and egalitarian. Both sides have polemic labels for the other (e.g., hierarchalist and feminist), but generally the complementarian and egalitarian designations prevail. Both sides claim to subscribe to the unqualified authority of Scripture. Both affirm the ontological equality of women and men in the image of God, and both seek God’s best for men and women alike.

The pivotal difference of opinion between the two perspectives is whether or not the Bible teaches a normative order for gender relations—an order or gender template that inevitably shakes down into certain restrictions on the roles and functions that women should perform in home, church, and society. Complementarians hold that the male has a unique and God-given leadership role to perform. The essence of maleness is to lead benevolently, and the essence of femaleness is to affirm, nurture, and receive male strength and leadership. By contrast egalitarians deny the desirability of, or need for, differentials of power and freedom in gender relations. Instead, God’s design is much as it validates and celebrates gender difference. However, it maintains that ideally such gender relations should be free from preconditions or limitations that might restrict a person’s right to determine how they will live and serve in a given relationship. Like the persons of the Trinity, uniquely-gifted women and men should be at liberty to...
find their best way of relating to others and of living in the world. Neither generalizations about gender nor gender profiling have a place in such a vision. Prejudgments about what constitutes an acceptable or unacceptable gender role inevitably generate iron templates that restrict individual freedom and crush the human spirit. On the other hand, when men and women are allowed to relate to one another in acknowledged equality, complete freedom, and genuine love, we will be able to stand back and witness the mystery of humanity as male and female unfold before our eyes. This is the egalitarian desideratum in a nutshell.

Traditionally, Christians have assumed that the Bible affirms gender hierarchy, and there is general acknowledgment on both sides that patriarchal thinking colors numerous parts of the Word of God. However, many evangelical Christians today are increasingly uncomfortable about continuing to espouse this position. They see the damage that it is doing to the credibility of the Gospel, and the anger, pain, and low self-esteem it seems to be inducing in so many women. Still, they are convinced that their allegiance to the Scriptures obliges them to retain a hierarchical paradigm for gender relations. They see no alternative short of abandoning the authority of the Bible. If it was up to them, they would be egalitarians, but their hands are tied. Scripture gives them no choice. In conservative evangelical circles it is widely assumed that one has to choose between egalitarian ideals and biblical faithfulness.

From the beginning egalitarians have contended this assumption. Evangelical egalitarians insist that they subscribe to the authority of the Bible every bit as much as complementarians. They just interpret the authoritative text differently and, to their minds, more accurately. Evangelical egalitarians argue that the real difference between them and their complementarian brothers and sisters is not their doctrine of Scripture, which is essentially the same; it is about their respective approaches to the content of the Bible they both regard as authoritative. The real issue between them is not biblical inerrancy but hermeneutics.

Egalitarians realize that if their view is to gain ground in the conservative evangelical community, its compatibility with biblical inerrancy must be demonstrated. They argue that neged is best translated “corresponding to,” or as one to whom you relate face to face (that is, as your equal). This is not the word an author would choose to describe a Girl Friday or helpful assistant. The meaning of the phrase negedô, therefore, may best be conveyed as “a partner corresponding to him.” Once properly understood, then, it is thoroughly egalitarian.

We recognize the same clarifying effort in a common egalitarian take on the crucial term kephale, which Scripture uses more than once to describe the man’s position relative to the woman (I Cor. 11:3-16, Eph. 5:21-33). Almost always kephale has been translated into English as “head,” giving these texts a patently hierarchical character. Alternatively, a good number of egalitarians propose that the term is better translated “source” in these contexts. They make a rather compelling case that kephale embodies ideas of resourcing, providing and giving both life and nourishment. As such it has a richer and “thicker” meaning than the one normally conveyed by the English word “head.” By making this substitution they then propose to prevent any inference of gender hierarchy or unequal privilege from the use of this word. Not all egalitarians agree that hierarchical authority connotations can be completely excised from these passages quite so simply, but we rec-
ognize this nonetheless as an example of the egalitarian effort to clarify meaning.

A third example of the egalitarian’s clarifying task takes us to the Petrine epistles, where we find a reference to the wife (and presumably all women) as the “weaker vessel” (I Peter 3:7, KJV). As a result of this King James turn of phrase, the concept of the woman as the “weaker vessel” has been branded deep in the consciousness of Christians in the English-speaking world for centuries now. Subsequent alternative renditions of “weaker sex” (RSV) and “weaker partner” (NIV, TNIV) continue to employ the word “weaker,” and therefore have done little to ameliorate the perception that the woman is in some way intrinsically the lesser. This little phrase “the weaker vessel” has perpetuated a tremendous amount of stereotyping of women. Chauvinistic Christians have enjoyed speculating on whether the weakness in view here is muscular, emotional, moral, mental, or perhaps some combination of all of these. Few translations of Scripture have been more hurtful to the dignity of women.

The problem from an egalitarian perspective is that the entire verse in which this phrase is found has been poorly rendered in virtually all English Bible translations. In the NIV it reads: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” A proponent of egalitarianism might point out, this appears to be the sense intended in the text. According to some egalitarians the main flaws or misleading elements are these. First of all, the NIV begins with the phrase “be considerate as you live with your wives.” Taking this phrase to mean that men are to be understanding and considerate has generated all sorts of patronizing attitudes and sexist jokes. It is a translation that suggests that men are supposed to try and gloss over the multitude of ways in which women are inferior and even irritating. A man is to overlook these faults in his spouse, for after all, as the NASB puts it so cruelly, “she is a woman.” But in fact men are not called here to be considerate. Rather, they are to be perceptive. Of all the English translations, the old KJV actually wins out here when it reads: “Dwell with them according to knowledge” (synoikountes kata ginosin). And what is it of which the savvy husband is supposed to have knowledge? Simply this, that despite her inferior status and diminished privilege in society, his wife is in fact his equal in the eyes of God (an equal heir). The way he cohabits with her ought to reflect this uniquely-Christian insider information. It will certainly involve being considerate, but a consideration rooted in the knowledge that society does not treat women as they really deserve.

In its original Greek form the phrase translated “weaker vessel” is asthenester skeuei. The Greek root has a semantic range that extends well beyond the idea of being weaker to include sick, ill, and—most significantly—powerless. Of these various options, it seems that the latter—that is, powerless—is in mind here. This choice involves no stretching of the facts, for the identical root word is translated “powerless” in Romans 5:6, where the text reads: “When we were still powerless (asthenon), Christ died for the ungodly” (NIV).

A number of considerations point to the egalitarian conclusion that it is actually woman’s lesser social power that is in view here. Certainly the word, as it is used elsewhere in Scripture, allows for the possibility of this interpretation, as when Scripture says that “God chose the weak things (asthenon) of the world to shame the strong” (I Cor. 1:27-28). Patristic usage is likewise supportive. Yet perhaps the weightiest consideration in favor of interpreting the Petrine term this way is that it fits so well with the overall ethos of the epistle. Peter writes to oppressed and marginalized people experiencing discrimination, who as a result were, from a societal perspective, relatively powerless. The burden of proof, in other words, lies with those who would want to interpret the phrase in terms of female physiology or constitution. In summary, the Apostle Peter is suggesting that the woman (or wife) is, in the contemporary idiom, “the less-empowered one.”

Finally, the term that husbands are to show towards their wives has been translated as “honor” or “respect.” The term “respect” (which the NIV employs) is certainly preferable, since the term honor is more susceptible to misinterpretation as signifying a patronizing deference that would encompass opening doors, helping with heavy groceries, and lending an arm for support on icy streets. By contrast, respect is something to which one is intrinsically entitled. As egalitarians point out, this appears to be the sense intended in the text.

In conclusion, the clarified meaning of this verse (I Peter 3:7) may be translated this way: “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an insightful way, showing respect to them as less empowered ones who are actually equal heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” A proponent of egalitarianism might point out that those who persist in using the unfortunate phrase “the weaker vessel” in a pejorative sense are committing precisely the fault that the Apostle Peter is eager to excise from the social life of the church. He wants Christian domestic relationships to reflect the respectful mutuality between men and women that will exist in heaven, but which is not yet a restored reality on earth.

The task of restricting application

The second strategy by which egalitarians seek to com-
mend their interpretation of the Bible on gender is to demonstrate that certain texts which have traditionally been regarded as normative for all time were in fact applicable only to the unique situations they originally addressed. This contextual line of interpretation seeks to put a fence around the relevant biblical passages in such a way that their potential application is restricted to local contexts in historically distant times. The authority of certain biblical statements, then, is held not to extend beyond the cultural settings in which they were initially expressed. So if the first task is one of clarifying gender norms, the second task of the egalitarian camp is one of restricting or setting aside biblical material that is not, nor was ever meant to be, applicable to our circumstances today. This is the egalitarians’ restrictive task.

Perhaps we can illustrate this by considering a restrictive egalitarian interpretation of the second chapter of First Timothy. Here the Apostle begins by making plain his desire that the Ephesian Christians live exemplary lives of godliness, modesty and goodness so that the Gospel will advance with maximum credibility and appeal (vv 1-10). To this end he then says that women should learn in quietness and full submission, and be silent rather than teach or exercise authority over a man. He offers, in what appears to be a theological rationale for this directive, the observations that Adam was formed first, then Eve; and that Adam was not the one deceived first, but the woman. He concludes with the remark, equally famous and enigmatic, that women will “be saved through childbirth—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety” (vv 11-15).

The traditional interpretation of this passage has been that women are to be in full submission to men, and that part of being in such submission is that they will not presume to teach men or usurp their rightful authority. While complementarian Christians differ among themselves on how rigorously this mandate should be enforced in the various spheres of human relations, they are in agreement that the passage articulates a norm of gender hierarchy that is both trans-cultural and timeless. The most substantive defense of the complementarian perspective to date, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (1991), takes precisely this position. Contributor Douglas Moo concludes his assessment of this passage by saying: “We must conclude that the restrictions imposed by Paul in I Timothy 2 are valid for Christians in all places and all times.”

The Apostle’s apparent theological rationale for his position seems to be conclusive. He appeals to the orders of creation and the fall. He says: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (13-14). The statement strikes the reader of today as shocking. It appears to attribute superiority to the man on the basis of Adam’s chronological primacy of origin (primogeniture), and added inferiority to the woman on the basis of Eve’s chronological primacy in sinning. Eve, the archetypal woman, is second in the order of creation but first in the order of sinning. The implications are clear: she is morally inferior to the man, or at least more gullible. And behind this, she is ultimately ontologically inferior. Paul’s statements seem to lend weight to the view that women are particularly unsuited to teach or lead men since they are inferior in these ways.

It is hard to imagine that the Apostle Paul could ever actually have said such things to beloved female co-workers like Junia, Lydia, or Priscilla. The tone of his remarks seems harsh and strangely dissonant with what we have come to recognize as the Apostle’s spirit. Not altogether surprisingly, therefore, there are a few evangelicals who question the Pauline authorship of this epistle, and more than a few who concede his authorship but remain miffed with the Apostle Paul for having said the things he did in the way he did.

The most common egalitarian response to this passage is to employ the hermeneutics of restriction. Egalitarian scholars tend to conclude that this text applies only to the unique context of first-century Ephesus. That situation was probably complex, and its overall dynamics admittedly are less than transparent to the contemporary reader. Still, egalitarians note that there was plenty of heresy circulating in and around the Ephesian church (as Ephesians itself, and Paul’s two epistles to Timothy, make plain), and it is suggested that a fair number of women in the congregation had become easy prey for the false teachers in their midst. On the basis of extensive research Catherine and Richard Kroeger have concluded that this false teaching was a gnostic-like heresy particularly popular among Ephesian women. While the evidence marshaled in support of this theory may be less than conclusive, it is possible that the Ephesian heresies included the notion that women were superior to men in matters of spiritual insight (and ought therefore now to be their teachers), and that domestic responsibilities and child-raising were now beneath their dignity. Whatever the problem was, the Apostle’s response is almost identical to his response to a situation in Corinth (see I Cor. 14). The women could continue to learn (and that permission is significant), but they were to do so in quietness, in full submission and in silence.

Paul’s subsequent use of theological arguments (Adam’s primacy of origin, and Eve’s primacy in sin) in favor of his position is problematic for egalitarians, but even this difficulty is not insurmountable. It just so happens, egalitarians explain, that these Pauline arguments very closely match interpretations of Genesis that were current in the Jewish synagogues. “Within the synagogue, which provided a model for early church life and structure,” writes Manfred Brauch, “male dominance was traditionally certified by a reading of the chronological sequence of Genesis 2 in terms of male priority.” Moreover, the rabbinic tradition inferred from the biblical account of the Fall that “women were by nature more vulnerable to deception than men.” There is conclusive evidence of this kind of thinking in the writings of Philo and the wisdom of Ben Sirach.

It is argued, then, that this is another case of Paul the pragmatic polemicist making use of familiar rabbinic spins on Old Testament material when it suits his own objectives. The rabbinic style of discourse sanctioned ad hominem argumentation, and Paul himself indulges in it else-
where.23 These embarrassing statements about men and women, then, do not reflect Paul’s own understanding of the meaning of Genesis 2 and 3 at all. They are not being presented as serious theological propositions at all. They are homiletical or oratorical devices. They were meant to bring a cohort of bumptious Ephesian women back in line and to restore peace and decorum to the worship life of that church. That was all these remarks were meant to achieve, and there was nothing more to them.24 If such egalitarian arguments are allowed to stand, readers are left with a purely contextual interpretation of First Timothy 2. The prohibition of female teaching and leading becomes circumstantially limited. It cannot be treated as a universal norm.

And because Paul’s supporting arguments are viewed as ad hominem ones, belief in the absolute authority of the apostle’s meaning and intent remains intact.

**The task of discerning movement**

Authors who defend and commend an egalitarian interpretation of the Scriptures often practice these two strategies (clarifying and restricting) in various combinations. Some material is considered normative and trans-cultural, and simply needs to have its real meaning clarified. Other material is considered no longer directly relevant to our current situation, and needs to be set aside or taken off the table.

Egalitarians pursuing these two hermeneutical tasks of clarification and restriction have actually developed quite a number of persuasive and even compelling arguments in favor of their revisionist line of interpretation. They have convincingly demonstrated that at least some traditional interpretations have been shaped less by what a particular text actually says, and more by the socially-conditioned eyes through which the church habitually viewed the biblical landscape.

But for all of this one has to wonder whether these two hermeneutical strategies can by themselves ever conclusively convince the twenty-first century evangelical community that the egalitarian option is actually the more biblical of the two possibilities. The clarifying work done by some egalitarian apologists occasionally appears contrived, and seems to bear the stamp of special pleading. The same must be said of some egalitarian efforts to dismiss certain biblical statements as relevant only to a specific situation in one of the ancient churches. Such efforts remain problematic because they depend on often unsubstantiated speculation about the socio-political conditions addressed by the different biblical writers. While these interpretations may be plausible, there is not always sufficient textual, archaeological, or historical evidence to make them conclusive.

The deeper problem for egalitarians is that these two strategies, by themselves, cannot excise all the hierarchical assumptions and attitudes that persist, explicitly or implicitly, in the Bible and even in the New Testament. By means of these two strategies egalitarians can make a strong point here, win an argument there, and so forth. They can keep the complementarians honest. But hierarchical thinking cannot completely be eradicated from the New Testament by these means. It is too entrenched to be overcome by these methods alone. Obviously the apostolic writers encouraged acquiescence to the hierarchical structures of their day (including patriarchy) for the sake of the Gospel’s reputation. What we would like to see alongside this is more evidence that the inspired writers were aware of, and sensitive to, the unjust and outrageous burden this accommodating approach placed on the shoulders of slaves, women, and other less empowered members of the community. Clearly the apostles were concerned that in Christian relationships the existing harsh patriarchy be mellowed and made more benevolent. What is less clear is whether in gender matters the “finalized ethic” towards which the Gospel points was very much on their personal radar screens yet.

Perhaps for these reasons we are just beginning now to see the emergence of a third hermeneutical approach among evangelical egalitarians. This has been described as a “progressive”25 or “redemptive movement”26 hermeneutic. It is the effort to discern the overall direction the Holy Spirit is taking the church as he unfolds God’s will in a progressive way. It seeks to trace across the pages of Scripture and the annals of biblical history the trajectory of the Spirit as he brings us back to the personal wholeness and full relational harmony that have eluded us since the Fall.

Scripture’s teaching on gender relations can be envisioned in two ways: static or teleological. The static vision essentially locks the Christian community into the gender norms prevailing at the time the New Testament was written. The latter discerns a path from tragedy to redemption, a process to which we are called to contribute. It attempts to discern the trajectory of the Spirit as God continues to lead the church forward along a vector established by the central impulses of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This teleological perspective generates what we may call the discerning task of egalitarian hermeneutics. This approach focuses on a goal, a not-yet-realized endpoint toward which the biblical revelation is inexorably moving.27 It embraces the concept of progressive revelation as the best way to account for biblical directives (not to mention disturbing biblical silences) that we would be obliged otherwise to consider embarrassing or morally repugnant.

Theologian Austin Farrer once said of his friend C. S. Lewis’s approach to apologetics: “We think we are listening to an argument; in fact, we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction.”28 Gender egalitarianism is no longer a concession to be artfully wrested from Scripture. It is the vision towards which its inspired contents actually point. Here then is the vision that energizes the teleological approach to biblical hermeneutics. God’s original design for full equality and mutuality in gender relations—a design revealed in the remarkable first few chapters of Genesis—was perverted by the Fall. The consequences of human sin distorted gender relations in a most disastrous way. God’s original intentions for gender mutuality and equality rapidly deteriorated. Almost universally these patterns have become reinforced by patriar-
chel ideologies.

Ever since, however, the Spirit of God has been at work to redeem this dysfunctional situation, to restore the original design of gender equality and mutuality, and to liberate humanity from every vestige of prejudice and oppression. This redemptive work began modestly and proceeded slowly. The relatively primitive period in which the Old Testament was written has been appropriately designated as an age of patriarchy. Women had very prescribed spheres of influence and few rights or opportunities. Male privilege was rampant and unquestioned during those centuries, and the pages of the Old Testament reflect that reality. As the inspired biblical documents indicate, God’s historic revelations to the ancient people of Israel provisionally accommodated prevailing assumptions about gender. Some Mosaic legislation and prophetic utterances sought to soften the harsh impact and injustices of prevailing patriarchal practices, but for the most part the system was allowed to persist. It was a man’s world and it remained so. Plotting the trajectory of the Spirit through the Old Testament must begin with recognition that the way things were then is not necessarily the way God intends them to be now. The seeds of the Kingdom took root in patriarchal soil without initially disrupting the soil very much at all.

The high-water mark of biblical revelation, and the zenith of God’s plan of redemption, was the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The four Gospels portray Jesus as teaching God’s truths with unprecedented clarity, revealing the heart of the hidden God, and modeling the new humanity for everyone to see. The ministry of Jesus was characterized by a bold new egalitarian attitude towards women. This was in fact one of the most strikingly counter-cultural features of his earthly ministry. It was not so much what he said, as how he related to women, that was revolutionary. Among other things, we should never underestimate the significance of the fact that women were privileged to be the very first witnesses to the resurrection.

The remainder of the New Testament builds upon the work Jesus began and the truth Jesus proclaimed. Whenever the practices of the early church moved towards gender inclusiveness they were counter-cultural, and as such were faithful extensions of Christ’s own attitudes towards women. Nonetheless, New Testament church practice did not always reflect as strongly or as consistently as Jesus did the trajectory of the Spirit on gender issues. The proclamation of the Gospel was once again accommodated to the realities of the context, in this case to first-century Palestinian Judaism and then to the social norms of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. Like the books of the Old Testament, the writings that eventually coalesced as the canon of the New Testament were “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16) and are therefore inert. At the same time we must recognize that the New Testament writers, especially the Apostle Paul, occasionally counseled compliance with reigning views of gender and gender roles in order to maximize social acceptance of the Gospel message itself. So it is that one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary students of Scripture is to discern the trajectory of the Spirit through the pages of the New Testament. This requires putting aside, and refusing to treat as normative, biblical statements or arguments that are apostolic accommodations to contextual realities. A key to correct interpretation of the Spirit’s intent is to measure the content of the epistles against the ultimate bench-mark of Jesus’ own attitudes and behavior towards women.

The more accurately we discern the Spirit’s direction back then the more reliably we will be able to extrapolate to the Spirit’s will in the gender issues of our own day. As realists we expect that gender alienation and inequality will persist in varying forms and disguises in our fallen world. It will be difficult to root out. At the same time we believe that the church is called to be a prototype of the coming Kingdom of God. The church is intended to be in the vanguard of the movement back to Eden.

In the past evangelicals have welcomed and readily applied the hermeneutical principle of progressive revelation to deal with awkward portions of the Old Testament revelation. What may be revolutionary about this hermeneutical approach, and what is potentially controversial, is that it extends the progressive principle into the New Testament. According to this paradigm, it may not be appropriate to view every New Testament statement as an ultimate and finalized expression of the driving force of the Spirit’s prompting revealed therein. The traditional view assumes that Scripture contains a permanently-binding template for gender relations. The template is built by assembling all relevant scriptural statements on the topic. This is the view held almost universally by both complementarians and egalitarians alike. Both assume that the apostolic writings of the New Testament consistently express the zenith of insight into God’s plan for gender relations. The clarifying and restricting tasks of egalitarian hermeneutics are usually pursued on this traditional assumption that New Testament statements consistently reflect a single, static and trans-cultural paradigm for gender relations.

This teleological approach assumes otherwise. If it is correct in maintaining that the ethical trajectory of the Spirit does not always reach its perfect fulfillment in the inspired teaching and implicit attitudes of the New Testament writers, how then are we to distinguish between trans-cultural truths and biblical statements that are more provisional in nature? Webb’s book Slaves, Women and Homosexuals is devoted to answering precisely this question. It describes eighteen criteria by which readers of Scripture can detect the difference between the trans-cultural absolutes and transitional material. The most helpful and conclusive of these criteria are the ones that help the student detect “movement” within Scripture itself. The evi-
dent movement within Scripture on the topics of slavery and women warrant the expectation that the movement is intended to advance beyond the imperfect expressions and even conflicting signals within Scripture itself. By contrast, the evident lack of movement within Scripture on the topic of homosexual behavior would suggest that there is no warrant for extrapolating out to an ethic that affirms such behavior.

Obviously another key to discerning the true trajectory of the Spirit is to have one’s mind thoroughly immersed in the richness of biblical narrative, doctrine, language, and symbol. A crucial prerequisite to any Christian or Christian community’s ability to discern correctly the movement and direction of the Spirit is the degree to which their imaginations have already been baptized into the flow and thought-world of the Bible. In this way, and only in this way, will they entertain only those possibilities compatible with their prior grasp of Christian truth as a whole.29

**Spirit trajectory and biblical inerrancy**

This third method of egalitarian hermeneutics can comfortably incorporate clarifying and restrictive techniques, but it is also open to another perspective where appropriate. This distinctive feature of the redemptive movement hermeneutic can be illustrated by a potential interpretation of the so-called headship (lit., kephalē) passage of 1 Cor. 11. In First Corinthians the Apostle Paul provides direction to the church at Corinth on what they should believe, how they should behave, and how they ought to administer themselves. The passage before us in chapter eleven is about propriety in worship services, and specifically about the importance of head-coverings (or veils, or hairdos) for women who are praying or prophesying. The men are not to wear such head-coverings, but the women are.

The apostle is insistent that the Corinthian women dress this way, even though he does not spell out exactly why. One plausible speculation is that it was another means by which the young Corinthian church could discreetly build credibility and avoid giving unnecessary offense.30 The idea that Paul’s teaching here is a judicious accommodation to prevailing sensibilities is strengthened by the fact that he has just finished saying two verses earlier: “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way” (I Cor. 10:32-33).31

The apostle appears to marshal at least three distinct arguments in defense of this practice. Of particular interest to us is the first. It is an argument based upon a slightly Christianized (for it factors Christ in), but still essentially Jewish, understanding of the order of creation (vv 3-12). It introduces an unabashedly hierarchical sequence: God, Christ, man and woman. Each of the top three is the head or kephalē over the one below: “The kephalē of every man is Christ, and the kephalē of the woman is man, and the kephalē of Christ is God” (v 3). Almost invariably kephalē has been translated “head” in English, which gives the English reader a strong impression of hierarchical arrangement. In what appears to be a reinforcing reading of the creation account, the woman is said to have been created “from man” and “for man” (v 9). Her subordinate status in relationship to the man is based on the order of creation (woman from man) and the purpose of her creation (woman for man). In other words, her derivation from Adam’s side gives him some sort of proprietary status over her, and her reason for existence is essentially to serve his needs. But the task of interpretation gets more complicated by what the Apostle then adds. Immediately he goes on to say: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” (vv 11-12).

Complementarians usually interpret the first part of this passage as a clear affirmation—in fact, one of the clearest and least ambiguous affirmations in all of Scripture—of a normative gender hierarchy. The subsequent reminder that men and women are interdependent (as the Genesis account of pre-Fall conditions made clear) does nothing to overturn the basic hierarchical thrust of Paul’s previous remark. It serves merely to pre-empt any excessively harsh or prejudicial applications of this divinely-sanctioned hierarchical paradigm. It is Paul’s way of saying that the man is not totally above the woman, even though he still is to some extent. Each really needs the other, and they both ought to realize this and reflect this realization in how they relate to one another.33

A common egalitarian interpretation is quite different. It holds that no longer does the apostle personally “buy into” the obsolete hierarchical thinking he has just presented in the first part of this section. But he is willing to lay it out nonetheless because he calculates that it will probably carry weight with those of his readers who still think this way. Pragmatic polemicist that he is, Paul is quite prepared to utilize any argument he can get his hands on in order to make his case compelling. Finally, though, he shows his own hand when he says: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.” In the Lord—that is, from the perspective of truth as it is in Jesus—none of this hierarchy stuff holds water anymore. It has now been revealed to the church that men and women are in fact mutually interdependent, and if there is any privileged position to be had it is held by God, from whom all things ultimately come. What the Apostle is saying here in verse 11 about how things are “in the Lord,” then, does much more than cushion the harshness of his earlier statements about kephalē headship. It completely invalidates gender hierarchy as anything applicable to Christians. For what conceivable reason, after all, would any Christian want to function according to what verses 3-10 suggest instead of living “in
A redemptive movement hermeneutic allows for a yet a third “take” on this passage. It is willing to acknowledge that there is a legitimate contradiction between what Paul says first about headship, and what he adds later about how things are “in the Lord.” But unlike the two earlier approaches, this hermeneutic also allows for the possibility of a real and less than fully-resolved tension in the Apostle’s own mind between the hierarchical concepts he elaborates in verses 3-10 and the egalitarian statement he makes in verse 11. In a sense the Apostle Paul is thinking out loud here, and as readers we are privileged to witness the greatest theologian in Christian history trying to get his head around a dawning truth. Eventually he tilts in the direction of how things are “in the Lord,” of course, but he is not quite ready to delete or erase the earlier statements he made. They remain, so to speak, on the table. Paul has a handle on the truth, but in his humanity he is still just a bit tentative about it, and it shows. It is not necessary to probe to excess Paul’s private psychological outlook, or to resolve a host of intriguing questions associated with it. It is sufficient to acknowledge that where such tension can be detected in Scripture, we have an indication that there is some shifting and growing going on in the biblical author’s grasp of the trajectory of the Spirit.

Obviously such a redemptive movement hermeneutic challenges our conventional understanding of biblical inerrancy. It suggests that the authors of scripture themselves may have been in a process of Spirit-directed theological growth and formation as they wrote. This is an uncomfortable suggestion to anyone who has embraced and defends the traditional doctrine of inerrancy. We have assumed that through the inspiration and superintendence of the Holy Spirit the authors of Scripture always and only wrote perfectly polished and “finished” truth statements.

Emil Brunner acknowledged that “there is a certain element of depreciation of women” in this passage here. He added: “Along with other elements this forms part of the garment of the times in which the message of the New Testament is clothed. But it is a disappearing element. The way in which Paul speaks in his letters of and to his women fellow workers bears scarcely any traces of the metaphysic of I Cor. 11.”

We are scarcely surprised at this, for Brunner was after all Neo-Orthodox. He believed the Bible could be the Word of God without it needing to be inerrant.

When evangelicals begin to say similar things, we become understandably disoriented. Some years ago in his book \textit{Man as Male and Female}, Paul Jewett tried to make sense out of this passage by suggesting that the passage reflects a tension between Paul’s inherited Jewish views and the newer insights that now flowed out of his encounter with the living Christ. “Because the two perspectives—the Jewish and the Christian—are incompatible,” Jewett wrote, “there is no satisfying way to harmonize the Pauline argument for female subordination with the larger Christian vision of which the great apostle to the Gentiles was himself the primary architect.”

Jewett interprets Paul’s subsequent caveat that in the Lord there is gender interdependence to be “the first expression of an uneasy conscience on the part of a Christian theologian who argues for the subordination of the female to the male . . . .” This was too much for Harold Lindsell, who concluded in \textit{The Battle for the Bible} that Jewett was alleging in effect that Paul was wrong and the Bible was in error about subordination. The matter became something of a watershed issue in the debate over biblical inerrancy within evangelicalism in the 1970s.

Therefore, Evangelicals who espouse inerrancy ought to be careful in how they express the existence of “diversity” within the New Testament, and how the trajectory of the Spirit is understood to be manifest in its pages. But it would be unfair to accuse William Webb, for example, of suggesting that the Apostle Paul was in error in I Cor. 11. Instead he explains in very careful and respectful language that the apostolic qualification that male-female relationships are actually different in the Lord (v. 11), “amounts to a ‘seed idea,’ setting up the potential for further movement that would be mostly unrealized in Paul’s ministry setting…. Within his own day Paul merely uses mutuality in Christ (11:11) to take the edge off of patriarchy and then carries on without further discussion…. As with Gentiles in Paul’s day, and as with slaves later in church history, the fuller implications of gender equality and mutuality in Christ are only starting to be realized.”

\section*{Conclusion}

This paper has endeavored to show that the case for gender egalitarianism can best be made through a combination of the three hermeneutic strategies of clarifying meaning, restricting applications, and discerning movement. Some things the Bible says about gender are normative and merely need to be clarified. Other things the Bible says about gender are merely contextual and ought to be treated in that restricted way. Still other things the Bible says concerning gender ought to be understood as only partial and limited expressions of the full implications of the Gospel.

If clarifying meanings and restricting applications are the only hermeneutical approaches the egalitarian cause employs, its attempt to prove the compatibility of gender egalitarianism with biblical inerrancy may ultimately fail. But we have pointed out that there is a third and supplementary approach that warrants serious consideration from evangelicals. A progressive hermeneutic pays more attention to signs of shifting and movement within the great continuum of salvation history, and is not alarmed by promising tension and growth within even the New Testament itself. In practice the church has already embraced this hermeneutical principle in its acknowledgment that slavery was sanctioned in the New Testament even while the seeds of its eventual overthrow were sown in the same pages. At the same time evangelicals can be assured that this approach will not lead us down any “slippery slope” to sanctioning homosexual behavior because we find no redemptive movement on that issue in Scripture.

We cannot tell how much of the complete gospel vision for gender relations was consistently grasped by the differ-
ent New Testament writers, or how deeply each one chose to embrace this vision in their attitudes, priorities, leadership decisions and personal behavior. As we have already said, it is not our place to speculate on the private mind-set of the biblical writers. But if these writers were permitted, as they evidently were, to retain certain technically deficient world-view assumptions without any apparent impairment of their ability to compose infallible Scripture, it seems at least possible that these same writers labored with less than fully-informed understandings of other issues as well. Presumably biblical authors did not have to be perfect in every way to qualify as effective instruments of divine inspiration.

We should not be too quick to dismiss or condemn the redemptive-movement hermeneutic as incompatible with our historically high view of Scripture. It contains too much promise for a breakthrough in our standing impasse on these interpretive issues to be dismissed out of hand. Moreover, it does not imply that Scripture is ever wrong, just that it is right in a way that we did not fully understand before. It also contains a salutary reminder that we must prioritize the fundamental drift of Scripture over exegetical inferences from isolated texts. On this matter I allow William Webb to make the final appeal in his own words: “As a community born to the 21st century, we must not be limited to a mere enactment of the text’s isolated words. It is our sacred calling to champion its spirit.”

Glen G. Scorgie is currently a professor of theology at Bethel Seminary San Diego. He is a past president of the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association and also involved in the ministries of the Chinese Bible Church of San Diego. He and his wife, Kate, an associate professor of graduate education at Azusa Pacific University, are parents of three college-age daughters. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Evangelical Theological Society meetings in Toronto in November 2002.

Notes
1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Far West regional meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society in April 2001, and also at the annual meetings of the ETS in November 2002. I am grateful for the feedback I received on both occasions, and am especially indebted to Joe Hellerman of Biola University and Ronald Youngblood for their comments.
2. Compare Craig Blomberg and James Beck, eds., Two Views on Women in Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), and Bonnidle Clouse and Robert Clouse, eds., Women in Ministry: Four Views (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989).
3. Both sides have official organizations to promote their respective causes—the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) and Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE). Each side vigorously maintains web-sites, produces books, publishes magazines and organizes conferences, and publicizes official statements of their positions.
5. Evangelical scholar and Bible translator Dick France observes that “the patriarchal culture which lies behind much of the masculine language of the Bible is itself also part of the data to be translated, and it is a question how far the translator may properly obscure it.” The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), s.v. “The Bible in English.”
6. We disregard here the occasional instances in which egalitarians choose to question the authenticity of a problematic biblical text.
10. I am grateful for the help of my teaching assistant Aaron Smith in developing this section.
13. Compare Prov. 21:13, Acts 20:35, 1 Cor. 4:10, 1 Cor. 12:22, 2 Cor. 11:21, 2 Cor. 13:3, 9; 2 Cor. 12:10. Similar meanings can also be found in Josephus and the patristic writings. For example, “Happiness is not a matter of lording it over one’s neighbors, or desiring to have more than weaker men, or possessing wealth and using force against inferiors” (“The Epistle of Diognetus,” in The Apostolic Fathers, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989], 303).
15. Rebecca Groothuis concurs that the text means that “women were in a weaker position socially than men and their welfare depended upon their husbands’ considerate treatment of them.” She adds: “In terms of social status, women were inferior to men; but spiritually they are men’s equals, and it is the spiritual reality that should guide the behavior of Christian husbands.” The idea is that Christian husbands are not to take their cues from a patriarchal and oppressive culture, but from the counter-cultural truths of their new-found Christian faith (Rebecca Groothuis, Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 175-76).
17. See, for example, Brian J. Dodd, The Problem With Paul (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996).
18. For example, Groothuis, Good News for Women, chap. 9; R. T. France, Women in the Church’s Ministry: A Test Case for Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), chap. 3; Stan


22. See also Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 207.

23. See, for example, Thorsten Moritz, *A Profound Mystery: The Use of the Old Testament In Ephesians* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 56-86. Moritz offers an explanation for the well-known fact that Eph. 4:8 does not quote Psalm 68:18 accurately. He proposes the explanation that Paul is actually going with an au courant and deliberately-distorted rabbinic twist on this text from the Psalms. Paul then used it in *ad hominem* fashion to make a Christological point.

24. Rebecca Groothuis has very recently proposed a related explanation. She suggests that Paul’s remarks in verses 13-15 are actually a biblical allusion or analogy that happened to come to Paul’s mind as he reflected on the problems in Ephesus. She argues that “the thing that happened between Adam and Eve in the Garden is the very thing that Paul wants to keep from happening . . . at Ephesus” (Groothuis, “Leading Him Up the Garden Path,” *Priscilla Papers* 16, no. 2 [Spring 2002]: 12).


29. This point is stressed in Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*; see pp. 3-6, 194-97, 264-68.

30. Admittedly, the head-covering imperatives appear to accord with neither Roman nor Jewish precedents.

31. A similar eagerness to commend the Gospel is evident throughout the New Testament.

32. I am not even counting the Apostle’s undecipherable reference to doing so “for the sake of the angels” (v. 10).


36. Ibid., 113.


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**Books Mentioned in This Issue**

These may be purchased through CBE’s Book Service or online Book Store (www.cbelInternational.org)

- Craig Blomberg and James Beck, eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001)
- Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002)