

The Logic of Equality

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Introduction

On an Internet discussion in which I participated, one hierarchist stated essentially that women should not be encouraged to preach because, by doing so, they would “dishonor God.” Indeed, this conclusion is entailed by the patriarchal position: according to God’s creational ordinance, a woman is forbidden the “role” whereby she might speak publicly and authoritatively, particularly to men, about the gospel of Christ and the truths set forth in God’s word. This article will question the validity of this view and will argue for the conclusion that “complementarity without hierarchy” is the proper biblical interpretation.

Method

No theology merely repeats the words of the Bible, for this would entail simply quoting Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Theology uses terms, phrases, and methods of organization other than the Bible’s own in order to communicate what is said in Scripture so that people may better understand its content and apply it to their lives. We engage in this project with certain philosophical presuppositions, including those pertaining to metaphysics, the human constitution, ethics, and logic. In this article, we will presuppose that (1) the laws of logic are universally and necessarily valid despite the fall¹ and (2) the Bible is true and logical, and so rejects the possibility of a contradiction. This is a classic hermeneutical lens by which all inerrantists read and interpret the Bible. A literalist hermeneutic, on the other hand, does not pay attention to either (1) or (2), but opts to read biblical texts in a simple and “straightforward” fashion. Reading the Scripture theologically, however, rules out interpretations that are logically incoherent.

Rejoinder

Hierarchists typically charge that the biblical equality position is not reasoned from Scripture, but from outside of it by the fallen, culturally conditioned human intellect. A key egalitarian argument maintains that, if men and women are intrinsically equal (as hierarchists affirm), then this logically rules out the assignment of an intrinsically equal person to a role of permanent and comprehensive subordination based solely on an intrinsic quality (such as gender).² Yet, this sound and solid argument does not impress the hierarchist. Looking to Scripture, he may not find it stated anywhere, and so concludes that it is not a biblical argument. He then argues, by the analogy of the Trinity, that there *can* be an assignment of an intrinsically equal person to an eternally subordinate role based on an intrinsic quality.³

In response, it must first be noted that the “equal in being, unequal in role” argument is not stated explicitly anywhere in Scripture either. Second, the logic of the egalitarian argument is not addressed or engaged, but is, instead, ignored as unbiblical. Thirdly, the patriarchal reasoning is often circular in that it seeks to prove the conclusion (“equal in being, unequal in role” for women) by

appealing to claims of evidence (subordination of Son to Father) that presuppose the truth of the conclusion.⁴ This conclusion simply begs the question and is no different from saying, “Women should not be pastors because pastors should be men.”

The argument set forth

- (1) The laws of logic are universally and necessarily valid despite the fall.
- (2) The Bible is logical and rejects the possibility of a real contradiction.
- (3) The Bible teaches that men and women are spiritually and ontologically equal.
- (4) It is not logically possible for woman to be spiritually and ontologically equal to man and at the same time to be universally subordinate to man solely on the basis of the intrinsic quality of her gender.
- (5) Men and women share equality in being and in the essentially human functions.

Objections to the argument

Those who object to this argument disagree with either (3) or (4). Aristotle, as well as most church leaders throughout history (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas), rejected (3) and accepted (4). In this view, women are not equal to men. Maleness is by nature superior to femaleness in the essentially human capacities, namely, reasoning, communicating, making decisions, holding responsibility, and discerning spiritual truth (all of which are essential properties of leadership). Therefore, it consistently follows that men, and only men, are fit to govern their homes and churches, make important decisions, teach the body of believers, and ascertain and determine the guiding will of God in particular situations. The rationale for this position is simply that women *cannot* do these things as well as men can. Such an objection is biblically false, yet internally coherent in that a woman’s inferior function follows her deficient being.

Those who agree with (3) but not (4) try to honor the biblical truth of equality (thank God!), but fail to be consistent. This is because the full humanity of the woman is not honored or recognized. Woman is subordinated to man solely by virtue of her femaleness; this is the decisive factor that assigns her to a place of subordination. Although woman is said to be equal in her essential being, she is considered subordinate (unequal) because of her essential being. Such a contradictory conclusion is incoherent and denies that the Bible is logical (2).

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Objections to (4) by way of analogy

Hierarchists have attempted to discredit (4) by way of analogy. For example, the current political leader of my country is in a role of authority and I am in a role of subordination to him or her, yet we both share basic human equality. However, this analogy monumentally fails to do the work assigned to it. While there are many instances of functional subordination (such as a teacher and a student), these relationships do not illustrate the concept being communicated in (4). The kind of subordination at issue here is that which is personally necessary, comprehensive in scope, and permanent in duration. In other words, it is universal and never contingent.

Another analogy often given is that of a parent and child. Yet this also does not illustrate the universality addressed in (4) any more than does the political leader analogy. It is a false analogy because children are not permanently under the authority of their parents. Children are subordinate to their parents for a specific period of time because, as children, they are not equal in human capacities (reasoning, communication, etc.). Children, however, are able to grow up into those capacities and, therefore, into a position of authority that is equal to, and in some cases greater than, that of their parents, as the current political leader of my country is now in a position of superiority over her or his parents. However, women never “grow up” into a position of authority equal to that of a man in the patriarchal view.

Another approach is to use instances in the Bible where God prefers one people group over another. One such analogy is that of the Levites having priestly authority over the other twelve tribes of Israel. However, this is also flawed because, in female subordination, as Rebecca Merrill Groothuis puts it, “The male is consistently advantaged with respect to the female, and the female is consistently disadvantaged with respect to the male. The Levites, however, were not consistently advantaged with respect to the people; they were denied the right of the other tribes to own and inherit land (Num 18:20).”⁵ This means that the Levites were consigned to the same subordinate place in patriarchal society as women and slaves: people who could not own land.

This analogy also fails to illustrate the permanence of female subordination. As we all know (and are thankful for), the Levitical priesthood was not a permanent ordinance, but was provisional, and ended when Christ instituted the new covenant concept of the priesthood of all believers, both male and female. Using the analogy of the Levites is about as effective as pouring new wine into old wineskins.

The Trinity and eternal subordination

After the failure of the previous analogies, by far the most complex and commanding one usually offered next is the analogy from the Trinity. If the Father and the Son are equal in being yet in everything for all eternity relate according to a hierarchical order of authority and subordination, then is not the logic of “equal in being, unequal in role” vindicated and (4) is shown to be either incoherent or irrelevant? Thus, the doctrine of God is used to illustrate woman’s equality with, and universal subordination to,

man. Such a doctrine is supported by an impressive list of Scripture references (Prov. 8:22; Mark 13:32; John 5:30, 14:28, 14:30, 17:3; Acts 2:36; 1 Cor. 15:24–28; Col. 1:15; Rom. 8:26; and Heb. 3:2). The thesis of “equal in being, unequal in role” allegedly stands or falls on whether or not it is a valid and coherent analogy.

On the surface, the argument seems convincing. However, on a closer look, it is striking that such a list of proof texts parallels that of the Arian and semi-Arian exegesis that reduced the Word to a demigod.⁶ This realization requires us to examine and test the logic that lies behind this view of the Trinity with the utmost theological care, and it is my contention that this analogy is incoherent. Moreover, even if it happened to be a true picture of Trinitarian relations, which it is not, it would still fail to serve as a valid analogy to that of female subordination. I have eight reasons to support my conclusion.

First, Christ did not take up the task of redemption because he was Number Two to the Father—as if he were an employee fulfilling the duty his boss assigned him to do. The Bible teaches that the Son was subordinate to no one—yet he humbled himself, gave up his equality with God, took on the form of a servant, and became obedient to death on a cross (Phil. 2:5–11).⁷

Second, the Son’s form of self-humiliation was temporal, not eternal. Christ’s humiliation was temporal because it coincided with the needs of and status of his creatures. It did not coincide with an eternally subordinate status. Before the incarnation, the Son was not subject to obedience. We learn from Hebrews 5:8 that, during the incarnation, obedience was a new experience for him—something he learned. Gilbert Bilezikian makes these illuminating comments:

Three remarks must be made about this text. (1) The fact that he learned obedience “although” he was a Son indicates that the nature of his Sonship excluded the necessity of obedience. He learned obedience despite the fact that he was a Son. (2) The fact that he “learned” obedience indicates that it was something new in his experience as Son. Obedience was not a mark of his eternal relation to the Father. He learned it for the purpose of ministry. (3) The fact that he learned obedience “through” what he suffered indicates that obedience was required in relation to his suffering and that it was not an eternal condition. Christ’s experience of obedience was confined to his redemptive ministry as suffering servant.⁸

Third, the self-humiliation of the Son in the incarnation is the grounds and model for the servanthood of all believers living in community (Phil. 2:1–11). With respect to the structure of our relationships, *this* should be the ethical conclusion we draw from the incarnation, not “roles” of authority and subordination decided solely on the basis of gender.

Fourth, this temporal humiliation does not indicate eternal subordination. To make such an inference from the incarnation is a textbook example of a non sequitur: the conclusion does not follow the premise. Looking at the language of the creeds and confessions of ancient Christianity, one cannot furnish evidence that “begotten” and “begotten before all worlds” means “eternal

subordination of the Son to the Father” or “eternal authority of the Father over the Son,” especially in light of the wording “God of very God” and “one being with the Father.” In fact, the creeds testify that Christ “for us and for our salvation came down from heaven,” showing that, for the accomplishment of redemption, he humbled himself to a temporal subordination. Yet, somehow, many hierarchists insist that this understanding of the incarnation deviates from these historic testimonies of the faith.

Fifth, the terms “Father” and “Son” designate a distinction in personhood that should not warrant simplistic anthropomorphisms. God is Father, but he does not have a wife. Jesus is God the Son, but he doesn’t have a divine mother.⁹ The Holy Spirit “overshadowed” Mary, not the Father. “Father” and “Son” are masculine terms, but God is not male (God is spirit, John 4:24). In childhood, a father governs and is responsible for the son, but the Father and the Son are equal in power and glory (John 1:1, 14:9–11, 16:13–15, 17:1–5).¹⁰ Fathers are older than their sons, but the Father and the Son are co-eternal.

Sixth, subordination that extends into eternity cannot be merely functional, but must also be ontological. God’s authority is a quality that inheres with the attribute of his lordship. Authority, applied to God, means he has the right to govern all things as well as the ability to control all things. If we choose to use the term “authority” as a quality of God’s lordship, we must apply it to both Father and Son, for both share in the divine attribute of lordship. With this principle in mind, it follows that if the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, then the Father has a divine attribute that the Son does not have. And since eternity is an intrinsic quality of God’s existence, it logically follows that what the Son *is* eternally, he *is* in being. If the Son is eternally subordinate in function, then he is eternally subordinate in being.

Seventh, sitting at the “right hand” of God is not a position of subordination (how does anyone arrive at that conclusion?). Biblical texts that speak of Christ at God’s right hand are telling of Christ’s authority, *not* his subordination (e.g., Ps. 110:1, Acts 2:32, Eph. 1:20–21, Phil. 2:9, Col. 3:1, Heb. 1:3, 1 Pet. 3:22). Revelation 5:13 speaks of all the creatures in all creation praising the Father and the Son: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!” (TNIV). This glorious declaration of praise makes it clear that God and Christ are not separable from one another—with one person above and the other below—because both are equal in power and in glory!

Eighth, even if, despite the evidence to the contrary, Trinitarian hierarchy is accepted as true and coherent, it still fails as an analogy to male/female roles.¹¹ Orthodoxy teaches that the Father and the Son are one *being*; there are *no* differences in the divine nature/substance/being. Human nature is not analogous to divine nature because God is a unified being, while humanity in church and marriage is unified only relationally, not ontologically. The oneness of the Trinity in being/nature/substance is not shared in male and female relationships no matter how intimate. Therefore, as Groothuis states,

[A]ny subordination of Christ to God would necessarily be fundamentally dissimilar to the subordination of woman to man, which is decided by and deemed essential to the “deeper differences” of manhood and womanhood. Unlike woman’s subordination to man, the Son’s subordination to the Father cannot be grounded in or determined by his “different” nature.¹²

Further, man’s authority over woman is said to be necessary in order to determine who will make final decisions regarding faith and practice (decision making is an essential human capacity), yet the Father and Son are of one will! Therefore, any “subordination” in the Godhead would have to be wholly different from the subordination required of women. In Christ’s earthly ministry, the Father entrusts all judgment to the Son. Yet, the patriarchal doctrine of male authority would never permit a man to entrust all judgment to a woman, either in the church or within marriage!¹³

The evidence from obeying God’s will

Now, we come to the last and perhaps the most significant objection: The doctrine of male authority and female subordination is not about gender differences; it is about obeying God’s will. This objection—offered by some (but not all) hierarchists—is unique, because it tries to reconcile (3), that women and men are ontologically and spiritually equal, and (4), the impossibility of ontological equality with universal subordination, without questioning the validity of either of them. Therefore, a woman is just as capable as a man in her essential human capacities, yet she resigns herself to a God-ordained “role” where these capacities are largely prohibited from use. Hence, the two genders simply obey their prescribed roles as ordained by God according to his mysterious will.

Yet, if this position is to be accepted as a decree of God, then the truth behind it must be accepted. God’s decrees always teach us something about his nature and his creation. If God has decreed that women are to be universally and perpetually subordinate to men in all cultures in all times, then he has decreed this rank according to the criterion of gender. This, then, tells us that, on the basis of the essential being of a female, she is to be considered subordinate. This also teaches us that God is *partial* to men in that he respects the full use and application of the essential human capacities in men, yet denies and/or restricts their full use in women.

God decrees the creation of the woman with the *ability* to use such capacities (reasoning, communicating, making decisions, holding responsibility, and discerning spiritual truth) to full human potential, yet, at the same time, God allegedly decrees that, in woman, they are *not* to be used to their full human potential.¹⁴ Therefore, *not* using these capacities to their fullness allegedly glorifies God *more*, while using them to their fullness does not glorify—in fact, dishonors—God. Somehow, passages like Matthew 25:14–23 and 1 Peter 4:10–11, which teach one should use all one’s Spirit-given gifts to *God’s* glory, do not apply to women. Hence the question: Is God’s will at odds with the nature of his created order?

Surely, this cannot be. Because God has banned homosexual practices, we know something about the nature and meaning of sexuality within the created order. Similarly, if God has banned women

from preaching, teaching, leading, decision making, and holding responsibility (all of which are derived from essential human capacities), then this teaches us something about the intrinsic quality of female human nature: that it is *less* than that of male human nature.¹⁵

Concluding remarks

This debate is about hermeneutics and the presuppositions we bring to the biblical text. I have argued for the lens that reads the Scriptures as recognizing complementarity without hierarchy. I realize I have gone about this, not by means of exegetical argument, but by logical argument, and that this may be disconcerting to those looking for an inductive study based on particular proof texts. However, my purpose has been to evaluate the product of such a study, namely, the hierarchal hermeneutic of “equal in being, unequal in role.” Thus, I have reasoned from the whole to the parts (deductive reasoning), rather than from the parts to the whole (inductive reasoning).

My approach here is analogous to the reasoning that I would use in establishing biblical inerrancy. Since God is entirely truthful and has perfect knowledge, whatever he inspires (Scripture) retains his perfect knowledge and trustworthy character. Scripture is, therefore, inerrant. However, this does not, as Millard Erickson puts it, “spell out for us the nature of biblical inerrancy. Just as the knowledge that God has revealed himself cannot tell us the content of his message, so the Bible’s implication that it is free from error does not tell us just what such errorlessness would entail.”¹⁶

Similarly, the deductive argument for complementarity without hierarchy does not tell us exactly what complementarity without hierarchy entails. To say that the biblical principle of human equality (3) disallows the universal subordination of woman to man is not to say exactly how men and women rightly complement one another or how their respective roles and behaviors should differ within a particular culture. What we *do* know is that a theological study of this issue points to complementarity without hierarchy as the lens through which the biblical text should be read. And as we all know, the Bible has much to say on how believers should relate to one another in order for the church to be effective (Mic. 6:8; Matt. 7:12, 20:20–28; Luke 22:25–26; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:1–3).

Although I do not like controversy and find it embittering, emotionally taxing, and debilitating to fellowship, I am passionate about truth. And I believe truth is injured when people in the

body of Christ believe that it is good to forbid women to preach, because, if allowed to do so, they would dishonor God.¹⁷

Notes

1. The question is not whether logic is fallible, but whether one’s use of it is.
2. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 301–33. Adam Omelianchuk, “The ‘Difference’ Between ‘A and Not-A’: An Analysis of Alleged ‘Word Tricks’ and Obfuscations,” *Priscilla Papers* 20, no. 1 (2006): 9–12.
3. In this case, the intrinsic quality is the Son’s “Sonship.” Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), 116, 202.
4. The question is begged only if the hierarchist believes that the subordination between woman and man obtains the same kind of subordination within the Trinity, but the coherence of that subordination (equal in being, unequal in role) is precisely the issue under scrutiny. If it is not the same, the analogy, like others before it, fails.
5. Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 327.
6. Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Contemporary Doctrine of God and the Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002), 63.
7. I am indebted to Gilbert Bilezikian for the following points. See “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 1 (1997): 57–68.
8. Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping,” 65.
9. Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping,” 62.
10. Here I draw on the Johannine account to stress a theology of *perichoresis* whereby each of the persons inheres in one another, sharing a reciprocity of co-eternal oneness. The implication that should be drawn from this is what the Creed of Athanasius confesses: “And in this Trinity none is afore, or after the other; none is greater, or less than the other; but the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal.” See Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 228–38, for a treatment of this theme.
11. For a wonderful treatment of the “hierarchal” model, see J. Scott Horrell, “Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 3 (2004): 399–421.
12. Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 329.
13. Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 330–31.
14. I explore this more in depth in my article, “The ‘Difference’ Between ‘A and Not-A.’”
15. Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 323.
16. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 255.
17. I owe special thanks to Rebecca Merrill Groothuis for her many helpful suggestions in the composition of this article. I highly recommend her essay in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, which she co-edited with Ronald Pierce and Gordon Fee. Her book *Good News for Women* is an expanded version of the project undertaken in her essay. Doug Groothuis also has my gratitude. I also borrowed many insights from Gilbert Bilezikian’s “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping” as well as from Kevin Giles’s *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, both of which I highly recommend.

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The image shows the cover of the magazine 'PRISCILLA'. The title 'PRISCILLA' is at the top in a large, serif font. Below it, there is a quote: 'PRISCILLA AND AQUILA INSTRUCTED APOLLOS MORE PERFECTLY IN THE WAY OF THE LORD' (ACTS 18). The cover features a black and white portrait of a woman, likely Aquila, and a large, shiny gift bow on the right side. At the bottom, there is a small caption: 'McInelid V Paul Chilton' and '17 The Role in the E Movement David A'.