

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis's Contribution to Biblical Equality: A Personal Testimony and Lament

DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS

Biblical feminism is an oxymoron—or so I thought when I met Becky Merrill in 1983. She had leanings in this direction, but I did not let that stop me from being interested in her. But time makes fools of us all, especially when God undermines our convictions and replaces them with new insights into old issues. That year Becky joined the staff of The McKenzie Study Center, a campus ministry in Eugene, Oregon, which served The University of Oregon through teaching, writing, and discipleship. Fresh after receiving my bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1979, I joined this ambitious ministry, modeled on the vision of Francis Schaeffer. As a small team of under-funded but earnest evangelicals, we desired to defend and apply the Christian worldview at a secular university. Becky joined us to work as a graphic designer, editor, and writer—all before computers were used for this.

Becky and I began a friendship based on our common ideals and passions. I quickly found that she was a deep well of Christian commitment and insight. When I confessed that I had been researching for several years a book on the New Age Movement (as this hodgepodge spirituality was then called), she finally convinced me to start writing it, since, she said, I probably knew more about it than anyone else.¹ I had not thought of that. Becky also volunteered to edit the book before I sent chapters to InterVarsity Press. At first, I proudly resisted many of her changes; but we soon became a writing-editing duo of great sympathy and productivity. She edited all my books, including the voluminous textbook, *Christian Apologetics*.² Sadly, it will be the last book of mine to be clarified, enriched, and strengthened through her many hand-written comments. This is because Becky has a rare form of dementia which has stolen these abilities. There is no cure. She will only decline.

But this essay is not about Becky's editing of my writings, even though I dedicated *Christian Apologetics* to her. It is, rather, about her writing and ministry pertaining to biblical equality. When we married in 1984, neither of us had an inkling that she would become a leading writer defending what is now called *egalitarianism* or simply *biblical equality*. Nor could I imagine that *biblical feminist* (to use the old term) was not an oxymoron, but rather what the Bible teaches.

Our journey to biblical equality began in earnest in the late 1980s. Becky began to notice a bothersome pattern in sermons preached in various churches: Pastors often deprecated, snubbed, or made light of their wives. These creatures—so blessed to have the pastors as husbands—were not as rational as males. Females were more emotionally-guided than males and needed the protection, provision, and guidance that only a husband could give. Worse yet, these ascriptions of inferiority were extended to all (or nearly all) females simply because they were females.

This began to concern Becky, and me also, although I might not have noticed if not for Becky's comments, ruminations, and wise cracks. (She often saw things that I did not see.) Being a thinker with a strong sense of justice, Becky began to record her thoughts in notes, as she did her entire adult life—until recently. Unbeknownst to us, these stirrings would lead us to embrace and defend biblical egalitarianism.

Before explaining the nature and extent of Becky's contribution to biblical equality, I invite you to consider her work ethic. Studiousness and diligence are foundational virtues in the academic life.³ Without them, scholarship sinks into the ruinous rut of recycling, posturing, oversimplification, obfuscation, and mediocrity. Having recently looked over the extensive documentation that lay behind the scenes of her writing—notes, drafts, articles—I remembered with vividness (and not a little pain) the studiousness of this Phi Beta Kappa and Mensa mind. Becky believed in objective truth and the virtues necessary to gain knowledge.⁴ One cannot fully understand Becky's writing on equality without knowing that she was committed to three principles that guided all of her authorship and editing.

First, Becky was unflagging in her belief in *the inerrancy of the Bible*. She never countenanced any form of feminism or equalitarianism that brought into question or denied the utter truthfulness of holy scripture. As a life-long Christian and evangelical, Becky demanded the *Amen* of the Bible in order to form, hold, and defend strong beliefs. We were the Carl F. H. Henry and Francis A. Schaeffer kind of evangelicals when it came to biblical inerrancy. We still are. That means that the Bible, in the original autographs, is inspired in every word and is, therefore, infallible and inerrant in all that it teaches.⁵ Becky could sniff out theologies and interpretations that failed to hold a high view of scripture—however much the authors or speakers may have nominally affirmed it. Yes, she was a stickler—but never a pedant.

Second, knowing that egalitarians were often accused—rightly or wrongly—of twisting the scripture to support their position, Becky eschewed any hermeneutic untethered from *authorial intent as the key to unlocking the meaning of the sacred text* (see 2 Pet 3:16). NT scholar Gordon Fee⁶ and OT scholar Walter Kaiser⁷ were her guiding lights in this. She further took pains to establish that her interpretations were free from any postmodern hermeneutics.⁸ Becky was never driven by a pre-established *agenda* to find something in the text that was not intrinsically there to begin with.

Theological consistency was the third star by which Becky navigated the deep and dangerous waters of the egalitarian-traditionalist controversy. She was determined that the Bible

spoke with one voice, the voice of truth. Since truth is one, and because it is impossible for God to lie, every affirmation of scripture must logically agree with every other affirmation of scripture. This is known as *the analogy of faith*. While Becky holds no theological degrees, she is self-taught, an autodidact, gifted with great intelligence and spiritual discernment (see 1 Thess 5:21–23). For her, unless the entire Bible supported egalitarianism, she would not affirm it. We heartily agreed on this, which made our journey to biblical equality an unhurried one, full of questions, debate, and re-thinking.

When Becky became more confident of the egalitarian position, she envisioned a book carefully explaining what it was and what it was not. Logic would guide the quest, and history would put to rest the charge that secular feminism was the fire behind the quest for equality. She would also marshal the biblical case.

Baker Books gave Becky a contract for *Women Caught in the Conflict*, which was published in 1994.⁹ However, studiosness forbade her from making the biblical case in only one volume. The exegetical and theological apologetic awaited her next book. Becky traced the history of the gender debate in the church, clarified the issues at hand, and worked through all the basic logical and theological issues with great precision. She took pains to make clear that a biblically-grounded stance on gender equality did not lead to the endorsement of abortion or homosexuality.

Women Caught in the Conflict was endorsed by evangelical luminaries such as Richard Mouw, then a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and Kenneth Kantzer, who had been dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Kantzer also wrote the foreword. Reviews were, of course, mixed, but this book placed Becky in a small circle of articulate and conservative egalitarians. She began to write for the publications of Christians for Biblical Equality,¹⁰ was cited in many other works, and did numerous radio interviews—and some public speaking—on the topic. Her mellifluous voice and ready wit made her an ideal conversationalist (despite her shyness). When I once failed to be home for a radio interview of my own, Becky said to the radio station, “Well, I just came out with a book. Would you like to interview me?” They did. After I returned from a bicycle ride, Becky told me about this and we both laughed heartily, which is good medicine for the soul (Prov 17:22).

To promote *Women Caught in the Conflict*, Baker Books asked Becky to write a booklet, called *The Feminist Bogeypoman*.¹¹ Becky deftly considered all the standard caricatures of egalitarianism (which was then often called “biblical feminism”) and refuted them. She did so without rancor or polemics. *Rational arguments* were the source of her concern and the secret of her success.

Good News for Women, published by Baker in 1997, offered the developed exegetical theological apologetic that could not be included in *Women Caught in the Conflict*.¹² Becky scrupulously considered every major evangelical objection to biblical equality. She sifted through the case for equality,

discarding what she took to be illogical or unbiblical or both, and constructing a position she thought would appeal to all evangelicals. Her case was strong, but her hope for a fair hearing of her views was often dashed by angry reviews, caricatures of her arguments, and the *contempt* of some biblical scholars who would not countenance the arguments of one outside of the academic guild—especially *a woman*. Becky and I thought that the window was open for a frank, careful, and civil discussion of this issue among theologically conservative Christians. We did not expect the harsh disagreements and even vitriol often dished out against “the feminists.” It was painful to this stalwart evangelical to be told that she denied the full authority of the Bible, simply because her exegetical and theological conclusions differed from those of the traditionalists.¹³

Since the arguments leveled against her views did not expose any foundational weaknesses, she soldiered on, co-editing a book that may be her literary legacy for the movement: *Discovering Biblical Equality*.

Ronald Pierce, professor of OT at Biola University, contacted Becky in 2000 about a possible book project. Since he was in Denver for a meeting, he came to our home to discuss the project, which would be a major work defending and advocating biblical equality. We were all heartened by the vision, and Becky soon agreed. InterVarsity, the intrepid defender of egalitarianism, gave them a contract for this daunting project. As an alternative to the hierarchical book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*,¹⁴ this book would approach biblical equality from every angle: exegetical, theological, historical, and practical. This promise was fulfilled in 2005 when *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* was released.¹⁵ A result of five long years of writing and editing, rewriting and re-editing, this volume featured chapters by scholars such as Gordon Fee (the contributing editor), Craig Keener, I. Howard Marshall, Richard Hess, Aída Besançon Spencer, Linda Belleville, and others.

A work of this breadth and depth demanded much from Becky. We often joked of “the vast secondary literature” generated by this challenging project. This included various drafts of chapters, Becky’s edits and re-edits, email exchanges, and more. The rigor, diplomacy, patience, and dedication she invested in this work were remarkable and admirable.

Becky’s chapter, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role: Exploring the Logic of Women’s Subordination,” showcased what is likely Becky’s signature logical contribution to the gender debate: *the traditionalist claim that hierarchicalism does not demean women because they are women is false*. Becky worked on this argument (which is deeply philosophical) for several years, first presenting it in *Good News for Women*. I was impressed by her ardor in refining, sharpening, and strengthening this argument over several years. I urge my readers to study this thirty-page treatise, since no summary is sufficient. But perhaps the following captures the essential ideas:

1. Traditionalists claim that men and women are equal in their *essential being* before God and

humans. Women are not ontologically inferior as was taught in much of church history.

2. Traditionalists restrict all women from certain positions in the church, such as senior pastor, as well as being equal partners in marriage.
3. Given (2), traditionalists must restrict women's service not based on their lesser abilities, but because of their *essential being* as females.
4. Therefore (a), traditionalists cannot affirm (1) as well as (2).
5. Therefore (b), traditionalism entails a contradiction and is, therefore, false.

How I yearn for Becky to evaluate my little summary of her elaborate and eloquent argument to see if it works. I hope it does.

I can say as a professional philosopher trained in the analytic tradition (tight definitions, structured arguments, careful reasoning) that Becky's treatment of this topic sparkles with analytical gold. The merits of her argument were debated in a high-ranking philosophy of religion journal, *Philosophia Christi*. Adam Omelianchuk, a graduate student in philosophy and now a member of the *Priscilla Papers* Peer Review Team, defended and developed Becky's ideas against the challenge of the philosopher, Steven Cowan, who, in turn, responded to Omelianchuk.¹⁶ As her husband and as a philosopher, this did my heart good.

As meager mortals, careers are never completely within our control. As Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, put it in "To a Mouse: On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough" (1785):

But, mouse, thou art not alone,
In proving foresight may be vain,
The best laid schemes of mice and men,
Go oft astray,
And leave us nought but grief and pain,
To rend our day.

Becky's calling as a writer and editor is now over. As the Preacher wrote:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹²For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Eccl 9:11–12 NRSV)

In her early thirties, my wife found a passion based on reason and revelation. This was the logical outflow of her life as a thinker, editor, and dedicated follower of Christ. Her conviction was that *women and men are equally gifted for all manner of ministry in the church and co-leadership in marriage and child-rearing*. Becky never aspired to be a pastor and did not seek fame. She never preached a sermon. The truth is what compelled her. The power

she sought issued from the logic of arguments and the salience of ideas that should be neither ignored nor resisted. Along the way, she wrote two significant books, co-edited a major work, and wrote for a variety of publications, including *Christianity Today*, *Regeneration Quarterly*, *Eternity*, *Priscilla Papers*, *Mutuality*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, and *The Rocky Mountain News*. Most of her writing concerned gender issues, but she also published on the right to life,¹⁷ culture, ethics, and worship. She is a published poet and has edified many souls with her singing of worship songs.

This is my lament and testimony. I lament her losses and the loss to an evangelical world that will no longer benefit from new contributions from her careful thinking and her cogent and lucid writing. But lamentation is the proper response of the soul to the loss of a true good, the recognition of sadness and anger before the face of God. Perhaps sixty of the Psalms are Psalms of lament and one entire book of scripture bears its name.¹⁸ Jesus lamented on the Cross. Lament is that element of life under the sun that allows us to hurt before God and even with God. We look up as the tears fall down. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and I mourn over her suffering and over what is to come as dementia takes its cruel toll. And yet I am grateful to the Giver of every good and perfect gift for my wife's accomplishments, her passion, and her courage. I testify to that. Through it all, we try to remember the words of the Apostle Paul:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Cor 4:16–18 NIV; cf. Rom 8:14–18)

We lament now. We rejoice later. Yet we are thankful for all of God's gifts, the true significance of which awaits its time. Besides much else, I am grateful for Rebecca Merrill Groothuis's contributions to the cause of biblical equality, which is an integral part of Christ's mission to "set the captives free" (Luke 4:18).

Notes

1. See *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986); *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988); *Revealing the New Age Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990).
2. *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011).
3. Andreas Köstenberger, *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Scholarly Virtue* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).
4. Knowledge, I take it, is *justified true belief*, not merely true belief. This understanding goes back to Plato.
5. See *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* at http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086_CHID750054_CIID2094584,00.html. This was signed by evangelical leaders such as Carl F. H. Henry, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul and many others. It was released in 1978.
6. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

7. Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998).

8. Becky and I worked together to critique postmodernism. The result was *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity from the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). Although I am credited as the author, we considered listing Becky as the co-author, because her contributions were so substantial. This was true for all my books.

9. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). Republished by Wipf and Stock in 1997.

10. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and Douglas Groothuis, "Women Keep Promises, Too! Or, Christian Life is for Both Men and Women," *Priscilla Papers* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 1–9; *idem*, "Women, Religion, and the Culture War," *Mutuality* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 4; Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Think About It!" *Mutuality* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 4; *idem*, "Modern Feminism Goes to Seed," *Mutuality* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 5; *idem*, "Logical and Theological Problems with Gender Hierarchy: The Idea that Women are Equal in Their Being, Yet Unequal by Virtue of Their Being, Simply Makes No Sense," *Priscilla Papers* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 3–5; *idem*, "Questions that Mislead the Gender Debate," *Mutuality* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 4; *idem*, "Strange Bedfellows: A Look at Darwinists and Traditionalists and the Strategies They Share," *Priscilla Papers* 14, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 3–9; *idem*, review of Christel Manning, *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism*, *Priscilla Papers* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 18; *idem*, "Leading Him Up the Garden Path: Further Thoughts on 1 Timothy 2:11–15," *Priscilla Papers* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 10–14.

11. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *The Feminist Bogeywoman: Questions and Answers About Evangelical Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

12. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

13. Becky did not cotton to the term "complementarian," since both egalitarians and the other side hold that men and women are *complementary* to each other. The issue is equality in leadership. In her later writings, she referred to those denying biblical equality as hierarchicalists. This is an accurate description, since they place men above women in the hierarchy of value.

14. Wayne Grudem and John Piper, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

15. Ronald Piece and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

16. Adam Omelianchuk, "Ontologically Grounded Subordination: A Reply to Steven B. Cowan," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 169–80; Steven B. Cowan, "Complementarianism Unfazed," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 181–88. See also Omelianchuk, "The Logic of Equality," *Priscilla Papers* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 2008): 25–28.

17. See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Where do we go from Here? A Pro-life call to Arms," in Douglas Groothuis, *Christianity That Counts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). She also covered this in *Women Caught in the Conflict*.

18. See Glenn Pemberton's fine work, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012). See also Douglas Groothuis, "Learning to Lament," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 70–73, online: http://www.baptistcenter.net/journals/JBTM_10-2_Fall_2013.pdf.

DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS is professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary, where he is the head of the Christian Apologetics and Ethics program and directs the Gordon Lewis Center for Christian Thought and Culture. He received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Oregon in 1993. Dr. Groothuis has written numerous academic and popular articles, as well as eleven books, including *Truth Decay* (2000) and *Christian Apologetics* (2011), both of which won the Award of Merit prize from *Christianity Today*.



LEAVE A LEGACY
Remember CBE in your will

For more information, visit cbe.today/legacy.