

# Biblical Egalitarianism and the Inerrancy of Scripture

ROGER NICOLE

Since biblical egalitarianism is still viewed by many as inconsistent with biblical inerrancy, it is desirable to state in a very brief manner my position on this subject.

The matter of the place of women in the home, in society, and in the church is not an issue that can be conclusively determined by a few apparently restrictive passages that are often advanced by those who think that subordination represents God's will for women.

The starting point must be at the creation of humanity, as our Lord himself exemplified by quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in response to a question by the Pharisees (Matt. 19:4–5, Mark 10:6–7). The climactic point must be at the consummation of the redemptive plan in the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9, 21–22), as St. Paul notes in discussing marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33. These two moments are the only ones in which sin has not damaged the institution. Thus, the line that connects creation and the *eschaton* of redemption represents the relationship of men and women in its unadulterated form. What comes in between may include factors due to human "hardness of heart" (Matt. 19:8).

## Equality at Creation

The first two chapters of Genesis provide the fundamental statement of God's purpose in the creation of humanity. Both man and woman were created in God's image and likeness (1:26–27, 5:1–2), called human (Gen. 1:26, 5:2), were blessed alike (1:28, 5:2), jointly were given rule over the animal realm (1:26, 28), and were entrusted with the propagation of the species (1:28). Both sexes are here placed on precisely the same footing.

In Genesis 2, we have fuller details about the chronology in the creation of humans. Adam was created first (2:7), presumably with sexual organs that were provided in anticipation of the appearance of Eve. God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden and made an appeal to his mental capacity in distinguishing and naming the species of animals (2:19–20). This exercise would show animals in pairs, while he, Adam, was solitary (2:20). God responded to Adam's yearning by the supernatural creation of Eve (2:18, 21–22), and Adam responded to this divine provision by an enthusiastic cry of joy (2:23). The word "suitable" (2:18)

emphasizes equality, for it means "face to face." At this point, the book of Genesis provides the fundamental principle of marriage, which is stated by the Creator (Matt. 19:4) and to which both Jesus (Matt. 19:5) and Paul (Eph. 5:31) appeal:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh.  
(Gen. 2:24)

This passage constitutes the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman as exclusive and permanent as long as both shall live. Only death and adultery can dissolve this relationship (Matt. 5:31–32, 19:3–9; 1 Cor. 6:16).

God has placed marriage as the authentic means of the propagation of humanity and provision for the care of the young under the responsibility of a father and a mother, in the great majority of cases.

There is no mention of subordination until the end of Genesis 3:16, where God outlines the woman's punishment for her disobedience: "He [your husband] will rule over you."

In that context, only relations within the home are in view, not those in society or the church. This passage is not a commandment, but a prophecy that has been fulfilled extensively over the centuries in all the earth. Whatever we may do to alleviate God's curse is legitimate in the matter of subordination, no less than in providing some relief from the pains of the delivery of children (3:16) and the sweat in cultivating the ground and earning a living (3:17–19).

The seriousness of any tampering with the institution of marriage is demonstrated when polygamy is seen first in the home of a veritable scoundrel, Lamech, descendant of Cain (Gen. 4:19–24), while monogamy is reasserted on Noah's ark (Gen. 7:1–2, 1 Pet. 3:20). While Genesis 6:1–4 remains rather mysterious, it would appear that the terrifying human wickedness that precipitated the flood (Gen. 6:5, 7, 11–13) was at least in part due to certain wrong marriages (Gen. 3:2, 4). In this way, Satan himself bears witness to the centrality of marriage by directing his attack on the center rather than the periphery of human life.

## The Treatment of Women in Scripture

The oppression of women as "the weaker sex" has been over the ages a notable feature of human history, thus fulfilling and amplifying the divine prophecy of Genesis 3:16. In special revelation, however, God has shown by contrast a remarkable care and protection of women. God rebuked Abraham and Isaac for their stratagem to protect their own lives by endangering their wives (Gen. 12:10–20, 20:1–18, 26:1–11). The first theophany on record was granted to Hagar, a humble slave who had been wronged (Gen. 16:7–16). God showed concern for Leah the unloved (Gen. 29:31–35); for Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, the barren (Gen. 25:21, 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:11); for Tamar the victimized



ROGER NICOLE taught theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (1945–1986) and Reformed Theological Seminary (1989–2000). His publications include *Standing Forth* (2002) and *Our Sovereign Saviour* (2002). He is one of the founding members of Christians for Biblical Equality. A biography of Dr. Nicole currently is being prepared by Dr. David Bailey. It will

appear under the title *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Life and Legacy of Roger Nicole*.

(Gen. 38); for Rahab the believing prostitute (Josh. 6:22–23); and for Ruth the foreign widow (Ruth 4:14). The two main cases of resurrection in the Old Testament were occasioned by the plight of mothers (1 Kings 17:22–23, 2 Kings 4:36). A third case (2 Kings 13:21) appears to be a desultory event.

God's concern for women is potently expressed in the Mosaic legislation. In the Decalogue, Sabbath rest is provided and enjoined for women as well as for men; the honor due to one's mother is the same as that due to one's father; the murder of a woman is forbidden as severely as that of a man, because both are created in the image of God (Gen. 9:5–6); adultery, that sin that destroys the marital union, is forbidden to men as well as to women, as Jesus has shown in his interpretation (Matt. 5:32, 19:9); and the most serious covetousness that is forbidden is that of another man's wife. Thus, five of the Ten Commandments are specifically related to women, and all of them are enjoined to both sexes.

God's approach to the family is made manifest by at least fifty-six passages in the Old Testament wherein mothers and fathers are juxtaposed, followed by twenty-six such passages in the New Testament with the same feature. In Proverbs, father and mother appear twelve times in parallel passages. Twenty-eight times the Old Testament provides the mother's name for significant persons. One also finds numerous expressions such as "his mother's law" (Prov. 1:8, 6:20), "the mother's house" (Gen. 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song 3:4, 8:2), and "his mother got him a wife" (Gen. 21:21).

The solemnity of the burial of women also reflects their importance in early Israel; see the burials of Sarah (Gen. 23), the nurse Deborah (Gen. 35:8), Rebekah (Gen. 49:31), Leah (Gen. 49:31), and Rachel (Gen. 35:19).

Additionally, God's mercy is manifested in a special way in legislation regarding widows (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 24; 24:17, 19–21; 26:12–13; 27:19). The rights of a woman even in slavery must be protected (Exod. 21:7–11, 22–24, 22:16, 22; Lev. 19:20–22, 29).

Three offices in the Old Testament were so important as to warrant a special anointing from God: kingship, priesthood, and prophecy (1 Kings 19:15–16, Lev. 8:30). The position of queen is often acknowledged in other nations than Israel and particularly in the case of Esther. Athaliah "ruled the land" of Judah (2 Kings 10:3, 2 Chron. 22:12) between Ahaziah and Joash, but she was an interloper on the throne of David and is not actually called "queen" in Scripture. Clearly, the wife of a king exercised authority over the king's servants, male and female. In the home, the slaves, male and female, were subordinate to the mistress. In the *eschaton*, women and men share kingly authority (Exod. 19:6, Rom. 5:17, 1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 20:4, 6).

While the Aaronic priesthood was strictly limited to male descendants of Aaron, in the New Testament women also are priests, as stated in 1 Peter 2:5, 9 and Revelation 20:6, and as anticipated in Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6.

Miriam the prophetess, sister of Moses, wrote a song recorded in Scripture (Exod. 15:21). She was followed by Deborah (Judg.

4:4), Hulda (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chron. 34:22), Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3), and Anna (Luke 2:36), all of whom also were called prophetesses, while Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) and Jezebel (Rev. 2:20) wrongly claimed that same title. The climax of the Old Testament on this issue is surely the great prophecy of Joel 2:28–29: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons *and your daughters* will prophesy...on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." The repeated emphasis on "both men and women" reflects the divine breadth of spiritual blessing.

Not only this, but the most sacred function ever to be performed by a human being, to be the agent through whom the *Logos* entered into the human race, was entrusted to a woman, Mary the mother of our Lord (Luke 1:42, Gal. 4:4). Perhaps 1 Timothy 2:15 is a reference to this fact.

In the course of history, the Jewish nation was far from reflecting God's gracious concern for women. Because of the existence of the Old Testament Scriptures, the condition of women was somewhat better in Judaism than in surrounding cultures. Yet, there were lapses even with Abraham and Isaac, as well as more serious failures by Laban and Lot (Gen. 19:8), Judah (Gen. 38), and others, culminating in the atrocity of Judges 19. Polygamy, particularly among the rich and powerful, reached the scandalous excess of Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Nevertheless, the prophets protested vehemently about the oppression of the weak, using the word "daughter" nearly 150 times to describe the plight and destiny of the Jewish people.

In the period between Malachi and the New Testament, we observe some very chauvinistic elements in Ecclesiasticus (25–26, 42). Seven chapters (44–50) are devoted to praising twenty-four men, without mention of any woman, whereas Hebrews 11, in one chapter, names three women, and speaks of Moses' "parents," along with the faith of "women who received back their dead through resurrection" (Heb. 11:35). Jewish leaders often averred that it is not worthwhile to teach women and that, sometimes, one should avoid talking to them.

## Jesus' Treatment of Women

By contrast, the attitude of Jesus was revolutionary. In the Lukan story of the nativity, Elizabeth and Mary outshine Zechariah and Joseph, and Anna the prophetess matches Simeon. Jesus was willing to give private instruction to the Samaritan woman (John 4) and to Mary, sister of Lazarus (Luke 10:39, 42). He accepted the companionship and even the support of women (Luke 8:2–3). He entertained a special friendship with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (John 11:5). He validated the homage and repentance of a sinful woman (Luke 7:36–50), as well as the similar devotion of Mary (Matt. 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, John 12:3–8). Four parables center on the experience and life of women: the yeast (Matt. 13:33, Luke 13:21), the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), the importunate widow (Luke 18:1–8), and the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13). Jesus performed healing on women (Matt. 8:14–15, 9:22; Luke 13:11–16; Mark 7:24–30), and the three resurrections that he performed

were for the benefit of women (Matt. 9:23–25, Luke 7:12–15, John 11:43–44). After his own resurrection, Jesus appeared first to the women (Matt. 28:9) and specifically to Mary Magdalene alone (John 20:10–20). He commissioned women to be apostles to the apostles (Matt. 28:7, 10; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:9, 23; John 20:17).

In the first chapter of the book of Acts, Mary the mother of Jesus and the women are listed among those who joined in prayer with the eleven apostles in the upper room (Acts 1:14). In chapter 2, we have the fundamental account of Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit, initiating the Spirit's new relationship to God's

people made possible by Christ's ascension (John 16:7, Acts 1:3–4). A universal reference is anticipated by the use of many human languages rather than just the Hebrew tongue (Acts 1:4–12). This event also indicated a new economy for women: the first Scripture that Peter quoted in his inspired address was the great prophecy of Joel 2:28–32, emphasizing that "sons and daughters" will prophesy. Peter

actually adds to the text a second "they will prophesy" (Acts 2:18) to emphasize the participation by women in the gift of prophecy.

Luke concludes this narrative by saying that those who accepted the message were baptized and that about 3,000 souls were added to their number (Acts 2:41). Compare this with Acts 4:3 that lists "5,000 men," or again Matthew 14:21 that mentions "5,000 men, besides women and children." In Acts 5:14, Luke specifies, "men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." We are not surprised, therefore, to find in Acts 8:12 that "they were baptized, both men and women," and in Acts 16:15, "[Lydia]... was baptized."

In the Old Testament, circumcision as the sign of the covenant was anatomically perforce limited to men. In the New Testament, as baptism, the sign of the covenant is available to women as well. In the Old Testament, a woman's relation to the covenant was through a father, a husband, or perhaps a brother or a son; in the New Testament, it is direct: grace, not ethnicity or gender, is what counts. St. Paul expresses this in the triumphant cry, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Salvation is individually applied and received.

## Women in Christian Service

In terms of Christian service, St. Paul lists a number of activities that are particularly fitting for elder widows. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, he indicates that a woman may pray or prophesy in the church with her head covered. In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, he discusses various gifts of the Spirit "for the common good" without specifying whether men and/or women are recipients. He emphasizes the gift of prophecy as having a greater value for the church than the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14:1–25), saying specifically, "One who speaks in tongues edifies oneself, one who prophesies edifies the church" (1 Cor. 14:14). Philip the

evangelist had "four unmarried daughters who prophesied" (Acts 21:9). Whether this was a private activity or one performed in the church meetings is not specified, but it is mentioned together with the ministry of Agabus, who did speak in public (Acts 21:10–12, cf. Acts 11:28). It is a precarious position to assert that prophecy by a woman was deemed illegitimate in the early church. Whatever 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 forbid, it cannot be the exercise of a woman's gift of prophecy.

It is very instructive to consider what we may know about the women who are mentioned in connection with St. Paul's ministry. There are eighty-nine individuals listed, some of them by name, in Acts and St. Paul's thirteen epistles, as his companions. Out of these eighty-nine, twenty are women! In Romans 16:1–15, there is a mention of Phoebe, and salutation to twenty-eight persons, not counting mentions of church, household, brothers, and saints with others. Out of twenty-eight individuals, eight are assuredly women:

Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mother (who was also a mother to Paul), Nereus' sister, and Julia. The name of Junia must be added to these. Furthermore, some women must be assumed to be included in "the church that meets in Prisca and Aquila's house" (v. 5), the "household of Aristobulus" (v. 10), of Narcissus (v. 11), and "all the saints with Nereus and Olympus" (v. 15). The names of Patroba[s], Herma[s], and Olympa[s], with their accusative form, *-an*, could possibly be those of women, although being masculine is not ruled out. We know nothing whatsoever about these except that St. Paul greeted them. Apart from those three, there are sixteen masculine names, and, of these, only Urbanus is identified as a coworker of Paul.

In contrast to this, out of ten women referred to in this chapter, seven are described as participating in ministry. Phoebe is called a "deacon" (note the masculine form related to an office rather than the gender of the person who holds it) of the church in Cenchreae, "who has been a benefactor (from *proistemi*, "to rule, to help") of many people," including St. Paul (vv. 1–2). Prisca, to whom Luke refers as Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26), is named ahead of her husband Aquila. They undertook to explain God's way more accurately to Apollos, an adult man (Acts 18:26), and are called here St. Paul's "coworkers in Christ Jesus," a term used additionally only of Urbanus (v. 9) and Timothy (v. 21) in Romans 16.

Junia's name is listed with that of Andronicus, presumably her husband (v. 7), and they are called St. Paul's fellow Jews who came to faith before him. They are characterized as "outstanding among the apostles," which led Chrysostom to exclaim: "How great is the devotion of this woman, that she would be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!"<sup>1</sup> This appeared so incredible to Aegidius de Columna (c. 1245–1316) that, by a remarkable sex-change operation, he posited that the name should be a masculine Junias rather than feminine, as had been understood for more than a thousand years. Unfortunately for

---

*In the Old Testament, a woman's relation to the covenant was through a father, a husband, or perhaps a brother or a son; in the New Testament, it is direct: grace, not race or gender, is what counts.*

---

Aegidius, there is no evidence elsewhere for this name, while Lampe records more than 250 examples of Junia, mostly in Latin, as noted by J. D. G. Dunn in his commentary on Romans.<sup>2</sup> The feminine has been restored in most recent learned commentaries on Romans, including those by Lagrange, Bruce, Cranfield, Fitzmyer, Dunn, Moo, and Schreiner.

Mary (v. 6), Tryphena and Tryphosa, and Persis (v. 12) are described as “women who worked hard” or “very hard” in the Lord. This is the language used by Jesus for Christian workers (John 4:38), by St. Paul for his own apostolic ministry (Gal. 4:11, Phil. 2:16, Col. 1:29), and for that of his coworkers (1 Cor. 16:16, 1 Thess. 5:12, 1 Tim. 4:10, 5:17).

Surely, St. Paul would not, in 1 Timothy 2:8–15, condemn on the basis of Genesis 1–3 what he had so freely commended in Romans 16. Some claim that the solution is to posit that 1 Timothy is not authentically written by Paul, a desperate expedient that is wholly unacceptable to evangelicals and that would raise serious questions about Timothy’s place in the canon and even as to its inspiration.

The alternative appears to be that we are not at liberty to imagine that St. Paul condemned in Timothy what he had sanctioned in Romans. Then, in interpreting Timothy, our exegesis of St. Paul’s prohibition would have to remain at all times conscious of what he has permitted. The unity of the divinely inspired Word of God demands no less and permits no less.

### The Roles of Prophet, Priest, and King

What confirms this view is that the total course of Scripture, and of God’s purpose for men and women, is oriented in a way that is impressively gracious toward women. This is manifested in that in the New Testament, and supremely in the *eschaton*, sexual differentiation vanishes, and women have access to the three main human functions marked by God with a special unction. Here the New Testament reasserts what was only anticipated in the Old Testament:

1. They will be prophets, as articulated at Pentecost:

I will pour my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy...On my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Joel 2:28–29, cf. Acts 2:17–18)

2. They will be priests, a function that was restricted to the male descendants of Aaron in the Old Testament:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood... (1 Pet. 2:4–5, 9; cf. Exod. 19:6; Isa. 61:6; Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6)

The ultimate priesthood is coextensive with the divine election.

3. They will be kings:

You will be for me a *kingdom* of priests (Exod. 19:6)

You are a chosen people, a *royal* priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9)

He has made us to be a *kingdom* and priests (Rev. 1:6)

You have made them to be a *kingdom* and priests to serve our God and they will *reign* over the earth (Rev. 5:10)

They will be priests of God and of Christ and will *reign* with him (Rev. 20:6)

Ultimately, the whole body of the redeemed will be assimilated to the glorious Bride of Christ as indicated in Ephesians 5:27 and Revelation 19:7–8, 21:9–10. This will not be a demotion to a subordinate sex; it will be the supreme promotion for God’s people, women and men, to a union with Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 7, where St. Paul discusses marriage in its relationship to the Christian outlook, the reciprocity of husband and wife is spelled out in a way that is in sharp contrast to the Greek as well as the Judaic custom:

7:2 each man...each woman

7:3 husband...wife

7:4 wife’s body...husband’s body

7:5 mutual consent

7:10 wife must not separate...7:11 husband must not divorce

7:12 wife...7:13 husband

7:14 unbelieving husband...unbelieving wife

7:15 man or woman

7:16 wife...husband

7:28 you marry...a virgin married

7:33 please his wife...7:34 please her husband

(cf. 1 Cor. 10:11–12)

This is revolutionary! Thus, we see that only the glorious marriage of unsullied Adam and Eve could be an appropriate antetype to the supreme prototype of the union of the Redeemer, God Incarnate, with his elect people:

A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. (See Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:5, Eph. 5:31)

This is a profound mystery, yet I am talking of Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:32)

In the fullest sense, St. Paul was right: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). This is biblical egalitarianism.

## MAJOR ARGUMENTS BY HEIRARCHICALISTS

Argument	Response
1. Subordination of women is taught in Genesis 1 and 2.	1. This is flatly denied. The first time subordination is used is Genesis 3:16.
2. In Genesis 3:16, God commanded subordination.	2. This was not a commandment at all, but a prophecy that surely came to pass. Any alleviation of the curse of sin may be sought.
3. Equality of essence is quite compatible with subordination. It is true in the Trinity when the Son is equal to the Father but subordinate to Him.	<p>3. We need to distinguish subordination in function from subordination in essence. Subordination in function is occasional and transitory. Egalitarians have no difficulty in recognizing such in the relationship of CEO to employee, parent to child, colonel to sergeant, etc. Hierarchicalists actually permit this to be reversed, as in the case of a colonel who is the wife of a sergeant.</p> <p>All of these are equal in essence: the human essence. To assert a subordination of essence in the Trinity, however, is a most dangerous move in the direction of Arianism. This is precisely what the word <i>homoousios</i> (of the same essence) was intended to deny. Passages like John 14:28, 10:18, etc. relate to the state of humiliation in the incarnation of the <i>Logos</i>. Subordination in essence violates John 1:1, 10:29, etc. No subordination, any more than anteriority, is implied in the names Father and Son in the Trinity (see Kevin Giles, <i>Trinity and Subordinationism</i> [Westmont, Ill.:InterVarsity, 2002]).</p>
4. Jesus chose twelve male disciples. Perhaps the seventy-two disciples were also all men (Luke 10:1).	4. And so no women betrayed him, denied him, or partook of dispute about who was the greatest (Luke 9:46)! Jesus included women among those who were following him (Luke 8:2-3). Perhaps the seventy-two disciples were not all men (Luke 24:28). The choice of the twelve may have been made in recognition of who was likely to get a hearing at that point in time and place.
5. God endorsed and blessed a patriarchal society in the Old Testament and through much of the Christian era.	5. God projected his revelation against a hierarchical background and included many elements that were to help women who were victimized. Some people imagine that God blessed the Crusades, which were a major blunder of the Christian church.
6. Paul enjoins silence to women in the church (1 Cor. 14:34).	6. Since he permits women to pray and prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5, 13), it is clear that this is not a blanket prohibition against making any sound. He forbids women to disturb the worship by questions that could be answered at home. In Corinth, apparently some women were the culprits, but men and children are not free either to disturb the worship. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul does not say one word to suggest that women should not speak in tongues in the church.
7. In 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Paul expressly forbids women to teach or take authority over a man. His argument is based on the order of creation and on the fact that Eve permitted herself to be deceived by Satan.	<p>7. This passage contains a significant number of exegetical difficulties. Surely, the propriety of teaching is not a function of age. Jesus taught many people who were born before him, including Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:49, John 2:4). If gullibility is a disabling factor against teaching, it is incomprehensible that women could teach other women (Tit. 2:3) or children (Prov. 1:3, 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:5). These, rather than adult males, are the ones who could most easily be led astray by gullible teachers.</p> <p>Because of the many difficulties in this whole passage, I follow the principle "Do not doubt in darkness what you have seen in the light."</p>

## Hermeneutical Approach

In an article entitled “Hermeneutics and the Gender Issue,”<sup>3</sup> I show that hermeneutics has first of all to recognize the difference between the *literal* and *metaphorical*. Clearly, there are some things in Scripture that are metaphorical, as when God says, “I will come down.” God teaches us in terms of the kind of world in which we live, and so we need to understand the representation that is made, without necessarily going to a literal application that God has eyes and ears and feet that can step down, and so on.

Then, we must distinguish between what is *prescriptive* and what is *descriptive*. We may have a presentation in the Bible that is not meant to be an exemplary situation that we ought to follow, but is instead a presentation of things as they are or as they were. A sound hermeneutic is able to distinguish between what merely happened and what God actually requires of us.

Even in the prescriptive, we need to distinguish between what is *general* or *universal* and what is *personal* or *limited to a particular group*. A good example of this is when Jesus told the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. This is not a permanent instruction for all blind people, but it is for one particular case. Similarly, the commandment of God to annihilate the Canaanite nations was a commandment for one group of people for one time, and it is not a permanent commandment or lasting policy for the establishment of international law.

A distinction must also be made between what is *central* in the Christian faith and what is *peripheral*. In this respect, I should think that God’s gifts to the church through women are more central than constant debates over whether they may talk in church or teach and oversee men.

We must also discern between elements of conduct that are *essential* and *perennial* and those that are *occasional*, *situational*, and *provisional*. The latter should certainly be true of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament that became obsolete in the New Testament (sacrifices, circumcision, distinctions between foods, etc.). While it is extreme to make a sweeping assertion that 1 Timothy 2:8–15 is related merely to the cultural situation in Ephesus, a good case can be made that there were certain difficulties in Ephesus, such as its worship of Artemis, which called for correction of the wrongful tendency toward domination by the Ephesian women.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we must maintain the emphasis on *canonical* interpretation, where a position is repeatedly presented in varied parts of Scripture, and *fragmentary* interpretation, where a passage is lifted out of its biblical context and thought to teach something that is out of harmony with other biblical teaching. A good example would be to absolutize 1 Corinthians 14:34 when 1 Corinthians 11:5 expressly teaches that a woman may pray or prophesy in the church with covering on her head.

These hermeneutical principles lead me to believe that my view of egalitarianism is biblical. Proper humility demands of me that I not be too hasty in condemning people who do not see it that way. Therefore, I can get along rather well with people who do not share in that position. But, at the same time, I think I can

help them to make provision in their own frame of reference for a much more gracious and biblical approach to women, something which many people have achieved even better than I have.

## Conclusion

Inasmuch as the view outlined here has not achieved an almost universal recognition among evangelicals, as the inappropriateness of slavery has achieved since the nineteenth century, it is paramount that all evangelicals should strive to provide, particularly in the church, opportunities for our sisters to exercise the gifts of the Spirit that they have received, even where it is not thought permissible by Scripture for them to exercise the office of pastor or teacher. Thus, the church would not lose the benefits that God’s gifts were intended to provide, nor would our sisters be compelled to hide their light under a bowl (Matt. 5:15).

## Endnotes

1. John Chrysostom, *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers I*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen, 1994), 11:555.
2. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Bible Commentary 38 (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1998), 894.
3. Roger Nicole, “Hermeneutics and the Gender Issue,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. R. W. Pierce and R. M. Groothuis (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005), 355–63.
4. See Linda Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 203–23.

Having shared with six others the responsibility of drafting the original manifesto for the Christians for Biblical Equality, I stand firmly committed to the same. I believe that most, if not all, of the restrictions on women in society have no basis in Scripture, and that those maintained in the Church are based on an inadequate interpretation of a few restrictive passages, which put them in contradiction with the manifest special concern and love of God for women articulated from Genesis to Revelation. I do believe that, in the *eschaton*, all the redeemed will endorse biblical equality, since all of them will together constitute the bride of Christ.

Roger Nicole, Professor of Theology,  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida