

# Book Review

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## **Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without hierarchy**

IVP, 2004

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## **Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: an analysis of 118 disputed truths**

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### **Evangelicals and Women, Equality and Authority: Two new books, two evangelical Anglican perspectives**

As the Church of England prepares for several years debate about women bishops, two major studies on the subject of evangelical understandings of the role of women have recently been published by IVP. Two ordained evangelical Anglican women who hold different views – Clare Hendry and Anne Dyer here offer their assessments of these two volumes.

#### **Clare Hendry writes:**

When I was first asked to review these two books alongside Anne Dyer I had mixed feelings. Not yet more books on what Christian women should or shouldn't do! Why can't we just get on with serving God in the way we feel that God is calling us to do? Surely too much energy is being poured into debating the issues which take us away from the more important task of spreading the gospel? Yet this is an important and on-going issue. With the current debate in the Church of England over the possibility of women bishops, maybe I do need to go back to looking at the different positions and grappling with the biblical texts to see where I stand. It has been good, although challenging, to read these two books side by side. They are however no light-weight books and having read them through I want to reread them (in short chunks at a time) and take time to explore further the different positions they present.

One thing that I think it is crucial to be aware of is that, within both positions - those that hold to male headship and those that hold to saying there should be no difference at all in what a man and woman should be able to do - there are a variety of different ways that the position is held. For instance, although I come from the position that holds to male leadership, I have both taught and preached to mixed congregations. I realise that there would be some in my group who would not be happy with this because they believe that women should not teach men at all. Sadly, I am not sure that the complexity within both positions has always been acknowledged clearly enough in both books.

Above all, however, I believe that it is important to read both of these books, whatever position you hold. This is so that we can all become better informed and not jump to conclusions about what others think. It is vital that, as we come to engage in the debate on the issue of male headship, we seek to respect those who

hold a different position from ours. I was encouraged to see that in both books the authors seek to respect the other position and to be gracious in the way they engage with opposing views. Our engagement in this debate should be a good witness to the world and honouring to God. In the past this has not always been the case, so I urge people to read the books with open minds and with humility.

### **Discovering biblical equality: complementarity without hierarchy**

As I hold to the position that advocates male leadership, I thought that I should start by reading this book, that takes the opposite view, first. I tried to read it with an open mind and I was interested to get a better idea of the arguments from this position.

The book combines the work of twenty-three evangelical scholars who seek to explore the roles of women and men in the home, in the church and at work in wider society. The authors draw from a number of disciplines including hermeneutics, history and theology. The volume comprises a number of sections, first looking at the historical background and then moving on to examine the relevant biblical texts. From here it passes on to look at the issues from logical and theological perspectives before then addressing the issues from hermeneutical and cultural perspectives and concluding with a section on how finally you live it all out – the practical applications.

The various authors strongly feel that both the world and the church needed to hear and take to heart the message of biblical equality. The question they seek to answer is ‘Are there any aspects of leadership denied to women, reserved for men, strictly on the basis of what one cannot change – one’s gender?’. They state that although they recognise the patterns of authority in family, church and society they reject the idea that any office, ministry or opportunity should be denied on grounds of gender. They seek to put forward the case that you can have a complementarity of sexes without needing a hierarchy of roles and argue this from a position of ‘equality’.

While I don’t want to appear picky, I have to confess that I am not too happy with the way ‘equality’ is often used and so even the book’s title made me uneasy from the start. It seems that whenever the subject of differences come up from the angle of headship it is argued that men and women are *equal* and there should therefore be no *difference* in what they can do just because of gender. Although I can see how you could argue that, personally my understanding of Scripture leads me to a different conclusion. What seemed to come over from many of the writers is that where there is difference, particularly in terms of headship, there is inequality in a way that seems to suggest that one person is superior and one inferior. I am not sure that this follows. I believe that biblically my husband is the head of our family. He and I have different roles in our marriage but we are *equal* in worth and value. I don’t feel in any way inferior to him because he is head of our home, nor does he see me or treat me in any way as some kind of second class citizen.

I enjoyed reading the book’s historical review as I think we do have important lessons to learn from history. There have been some horrific examples of the way women have been treated as inferior and not given the opportunity to contribute to the Church. I am, however, not sure what valid contribution this review of history

makes to the debate: just because at times those who advocated male headship have done it in a way that I think is abusive and unbiblical, it does not mean that therefore male headship is necessarily wrong. I also wonder if the historical review is a little biased, although unfortunately my knowledge of those periods of history is not great enough to know - are there not examples of women who advocated male headship and also played an important part in the history of the church? Certainly I can think of a few partnerships where the wife was an important influence in the life of her husband and children and contributed to Christian ministry.

Whilst this book was obviously written to present the view of those who hold that gender should not stop you from taking any position in the church, I would have liked to have seen more interaction with the opposing views and perhaps a greater acknowledgement of the many positions within that understanding. I couldn't, for instance, always recognise my position in what they were presenting and then attempting to show to be flawed. You could, for example, read this book and think that the headship position never lets women preach or teach to a mixed congregation, because the man has to be the head. However, some within the headship position would allow women to preach as long as it is in a context where it is clear that a man is the overall head of the congregation. Although the authors suggest that the book should be read alongside one presenting the opposing views, I think it is still helpful to at least summarise the opposing position when attempting to interact with it.

Among the biblical and hermeneutical arguments advanced, I found rather unconvincing those that try to show a particular reading of a text should be taken because then the meaning fits in more with the context of those times and cultures - after all Jesus was often counter-cultural!

Overall, what I did appreciate about the book is the different approaches to the debate it provides, for example, historical and sociological as well as theological and biblical. I also appreciated the authors' desire to seek for biblical truth and I felt that I had a much greater understanding of this position and some of its complexities than I had before reading this book.

Would I recommend this book? Yes! However, after reading it, hopefully with an open mind, I still am not convinced of the position it puts forward. I struggle particularly with, amongst other things, the way that so often when discussing the arguments from those who advocate male headship it talks about men and women being unequal - a word that can imply superiority for men in their headship position and inferiority for women. I still think that having different roles does not mean that men and women are unequal. They are just 'different' and they complement each other.

### **Evangelical feminism and biblical truth: an analysis of 118 disputed truths**

We might well particularly ask why another book from Wayne Grudem on a topic that he has already covered in great detail, but this book does have something new to contribute to the debate. It was written to supplement Piper's and Grudem's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. It seeks to answer new arguments made by evangelical feminists and summarise new scholarly research (in an accessible format for non-specialists) within a user-friendly format of answers given

by Grudem to egalitarian arguments. He also provides an update of where he thinks the evangelical world is on this issue and gives a clear warning about where he sees these current trends leading: to an increasing liberal theology. Like the Pierce and Grootius volume, Grudem shows a strong desire to be godly in the way the topic is debated and disagreements are expressed.

In his first two chapters Grudem puts forward a positive view of men and women, looking at their similarities but also their differences. The bulk of the book (chapters 3–12) goes through the 118 arguments of the subtitle. These are arguments that Grudem has identified from evangelical feminists against male leadership. He groups these under various headings (e.g. 'evangelical feminist claims from Genesis 1-3' and 'evangelical feminist claims from history and experience') and attempts to answer them by setting out the case for male leadership in the church and home.

Grudem's final two chapters raise the concern that some evangelical feminists are in danger of heading towards liberalism in their theology. He argues that in their arguments for equal leadership they are implicitly denying the full authority of the Bible. Even when they don't deny it themselves they fail, Grudem says, to denounce others who do. I guess though that people holding that position would charge that those standing with Grudem could equally be accused of denying the full authority of the Bible in pushing for male leadership. Chapter 14 surveys the current position among many evangelical denominations and para-church organisations. Grudem concludes that evangelicals who believe in the Bible will ultimately have to choose between evangelical feminism and biblical truth.

The book also contains very extensive appendices. These include great resources including (for evangelical Anglicans) 'How Egalitarian Tactics Swayed Evangelicals in the Church' by Bishop Wallace Benn (reprinted from CBMW News, June 1997) and the Danvers Statement.

This book's style and layout contrasts with the first book but even more than is the case with that volume, Grudem's work needs to be treated as a reference book. Only the first two and last two chapters can and should be easily absorbed as a unit at one reading. The intervening chapters that make up the heart of the book (and the appendices) are, however, best approached as one might approach an encyclopaedia or reference book, selecting the appropriate sections as required. This is also not a book to be read through in large chunks but rather a great resource to dip into. In short bursts - with lots of time to think things through - is my recommendation! Overall, I found it very helpful in looking at various biblical passages and seeing how Grudem dealt with them in contrast to the approach of the other book.

In some circles Grudem does seem to have been given a bad press and painted as almost 'anti-women'. Yet in reading his book I hear him saying that he is as keen to see women as he is to see men using their God-given gifts for the good of the church. He also expresses the need for 'a deeper appreciation of the amazing wisdom of God in creating men and women so wonderfully equal in many ways, yet so delightfully different in many other ways'.

While I would, on the whole, place myself alongside Grudem and feel happy with many of his arguments, that is not to say that I would agree with all that he

says or like the way he always presents material. On pages 54 and 55 for example he has constructed a chart which outlines the views of different positions on such various things as God, Marriage, Sex, Crime. The five positions he outlines in relation to gender are

- no difference: all is one
- egalitarianism: removing or denying many differences between man and women
- equality and difference and unity: emphasising both equality and differences between man and women
- male dominance: overemphasising the differences between men and women
- no equality: 'might makes right'.

To be fair, Grudem does clearly state that this chart contains many generalisations and is dealing with broad tendencies but I find it far too simplified and as such unhelpful. I can think of many people who hold to a more egalitarian view in the way that ministry is carried out but who would never advocate that there are no differences between men and women. Both books have been published by IVP to help the debate between those advocating male headship and those who believe there are no differences between the genders concerning what they can do. It therefore seems to me that it is important the different positions are fully represented and so if this chart cannot do justice to them then I would suggest it should have been left out rather than give rise unnecessarily to offence (or, if included, it needed elucidating).

It was particularly interesting to read Grudem's lists of the activities he thought a woman could do and those he thought they couldn't do within the Church. Personally, I would have drawn up slightly different lists and included more teaching opportunities than Grudem, although with some conditions. It was encouraging to see his acknowledgement that within those holding to a male headship position, there is disagreement on how one applies the Scriptures. I myself came across these whilst teaching in a theological college. There were one or two students who were unhappy with me being allowed to preach in Chapel and yet who seemed happy with me teaching Pastoral Counselling. I imagine that this was because it was in the pastoral area rather than biblical or theological areas. But were they actually being inconsistent? Part of what I taught was biblical counselling, which dealt with the Bible and seeing how God's teaching applied to people struggling with particular issues and problems. Surely this was as much a woman teaching the Bible as what I was doing in Chapel? It is clear that, as with the group holding to an egalitarian position, there are differences within the group who hold to male headship in exactly how they work out and apply their understanding of Scripture in practice.

## Conclusion

What I found encouraging in both books was the stated desire by all the authors to be godly in the way that they debate and disagree. In the past there has been, I think, on both sides, a tendency to be arrogant and ungodly in the way that each side has claimed to hold the truth. It is important that we seek to hold to biblical truth but, having read both books and debated this issue of male headship over the years with gifted biblical scholars, I don't think it is always so clear. I have

myself come to a personal position over male headship but I can see some of the arguments for the other position and I cannot with integrity say that they are absolutely wrong and I am absolutely right. I think that there are texts which could be read either way.

Reading these two books side by side has made me even more aware that the way forward is not always as clear as we would like it to be. I have spent time debating with friends who hold a different position and am grateful to the contributors in *Discovering Biblical Equality: complementarity without hierarchy* as they have helped me better understand my friends' position even though I still remain to be convinced of it. In discussion I often feel that I am not always able to present as clearly as I would like to what I have come to believe, after many years of studying and prayer, is the biblical teaching on the position of women in the Church today. I am certainly no great Greek or Hebrew scholar! I therefore appreciate an author of Grudem's standing providing a resource for looking at the texts and I hope that Christian sisters and brothers who don't hold to my position would be prepared to read through this book in order to better understand this position.

But I am aware that on this issue there are areas in Scripture that maybe, this side of heaven, will not be clear. I respect my fellow female clergy who have, with a lot of study and prayer, come to the position that they feel it is right to lead and who believe that they are called into being a vicar of a church. Many of them are far better theological scholars than me! But, like them, I have to follow what I understand Scripture to be teaching and so, equally, I would encourage them, as I encourage people who hold to male headship, to read these two books with open hearts and minds. Let's keep reading God's word, studying and debating with each other in a spirit of grace and love but let us not forget that our primary task as followers of Christ is to proclaim the Gospel!

## **Anne Dyer writes:**

### **A second view...**

Well it is good to note that these two books have the same publisher in the UK, elsewhere books with such differing opinions arising from profoundly different theological paradigms would of necessity have different publishers (as is true with the original US publishers of these volumes). Here they are presented with covers of similar style, so that they could be bookends. However, their contents in both style and argument are so different that they read as though they could be referring to Christian life lived on different planets! Publishing them together might enable two sides of a huge divide to converse and debate, but in reading these two works together it feels more like they are shouting past each other.

Each book is a response. *Discovering Biblical Equality* (DBE) is a colloquium of papers responding to questions raised among moderately conservative evangelicals following the publication of the *Danvers Statement* in 1987 and then *Rediscovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* by Piper and Grudem in 1991. *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* by Wayne Grudem is a response in turn to the arguments

and concerns raised in various publications, many by the authors of the articles in *Discovering Biblical Equality*.

### Significance

These two books are very significant and should both be read by evangelicals who want to understand the growing gulf between parts of the constituency, particularly over the functions and responsibilities that can properly be carried out by women in church and family life. Some may say this is insignificant compared to the task of spreading the gospel, but the shape of our lives is saying something about the gospel, and fundamentally it is clear in these books that what is at stake is the definition of orthodoxy concerning the Trinity. These books are about the very nature of God, and the consequences of differing understandings for lived-out Christianity. Consequently, the systematic theology that underpins *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, and is so firmly challenged in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, will have consequences for all proclamation of the gospel.

### Style matters

Before I address the arguments of the texts, I must mention their presentation – because style is a type of content. On the covers of both books are images that are moving out of focus. On the cover of *Discovering Biblical Equality* there is a pair of scales, suggesting balance and argument. Inside, the articles are set out in a traditional format, where readers can dip in and consider one element of the contested ground. You will know how to read this book, and where to place it on the spectrum of opinion. In the opening introduction there is the suggestion that there are two evangelical views on men and women and their relationship to each other. I don't think so! There is actually a wide ranging and well nuanced spectrum. So it was disappointing for me not to read an article about gender and its construction. Theories abound on this matter alone, and much research is being done. As other articles explore the interface between the Bible and history and society, sociology and theology, I felt the lack of gender studies and their relation to Scripture.

The cover of the second book, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, was more concerning. In the foreground is a woman, behind and above her a man with his shirt off, moving into soft focus. This image reminded me of those 1980s tampon ads, a taboo subject just hinted at, a subject that is upsetting to mention. The cover, however, stands in stark contrast to the contents. This book is best described as an almanac. 118 questions are addressed, often given multiple answers. There are sections with tables and charts, bibliographies where books are carefully labelled according to the stable they relate to, a very illuminating section of statements collected from major churches and denominations relating to their views on women and leadership, and an index where as well as page numbers items are given an 'egalitarian claim number'. I am sorry to say that I could not work out what this meant or how it was calculated. The contents speak of a mind careful and dedicated to its cause, while at other times I thought the author presented as anal and obsessive. Most of all I was concerned in this book with the careless and abusive use of language. It really is not good enough to regularly speak of the 'effeminate left', or to refer to men who do not live according to the author's views

as 'wimps', or to refer to overly submissive women as 'doormats' or assertive women as 'usurpers'. Page after page of this kind of language use made this book feel to me like a 'howler', the letter sent by Mrs Weasley to Ron after he and Harry Potter had been bad. THIS IS A BOOK THAT SHOUTS AT YOU.

### **Content matters too**

At the heart of these works is a disagreement over orthodoxy. Grudem's work is part of an influential evangelical movement that considers the *eternal* economic (or functional) subordination of the Son to the Father to be orthodox. Usually Grudem chooses to refer to the Son's 'submission' and then use it as a model for the essential and necessary 'submission', often referred to in his work as 'subordination', of women to men in church and family life. The central section of *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* lays out the arguments again. It is a chicken and egg scenario – did the need to underpin the subordination of women lead to the re-emergence and renaissance of this theological view of the Trinity, or vice versa I wonder? Whatever the dynamic, they are now tied together in a necessary fashion. This theological approach, and its claim to be definitive and orthodox, is critiqued by Kevin Giles in the section of theological articles in DBE. He argues that the subordination of the Son to the Father is seen in the incarnation, but that the eternal functional subordination as argued for by Grudem is a new thing, emerging since the 1960s amongst evangelicals opposed to the full emancipation of women. It is new, he argues, because essential equality is affirmed at the same time as eternal functional subordination is asserted. The arguments here cannot be summarised for this review, you must read both sides for yourselves.

Grudem reads the Bible as supporting his approach, and all else in the book rolls out from this. Much then can be argued about the natures of men and women and whether or not they are fit for leadership roles. So, leadership is 'appropriate to manhood', 'qualities essential to mature manhood are a disposition to lead and to provide and to protect'. Considering women, 'essential to mature womanhood is a disposition to support such male leadership' (451). Not only the Bible and theology, but also his own experience tell him this is so. For example, 'I have never met a man who does not feel some measure of shame at the idea of being supported by his wife in the long term', or, when reflecting on a woman's desire to know that the man will provide in order that the groceries can be bought and bills paid, 'I have never met a woman who did not want her husband to provide that sense of security for her' (45). Well, he hasn't met me! Where I work, many male ordinands are supported through training by working wives without any sense of shame. Many senior women in society (Cherie Booth included) out-earn their husbands, without their husbands seeming to be emasculated.

Finally, there is in Grudem's work a strange division between, on the one hand, church and family and, on the other, society as a whole. In secular life he sees nothing wrong with women holding senior office, but this cannot translate into church or family. Sadly, most of us do not live such compartmentalised lives, the edges are blurred. This compartmentalised world view - Christian women leading in secular contexts, but not allowed formal leadership in the church - is

challenged by the articles in *Discovering Biblical Equality* that look at women's history. In this it needs to be remembered that evangelicals in non-conformist denominations have a long history of releasing women into leadership because of their gifts, as well as because of their understanding of men and women's equality before God.

*Discovering Biblical Equality* begins with two chapters looking at women's history, the first covers the Early Church through to the eighteenth century, and the second looks at the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is not about showing how women have been denied and abused in the past, although this is one sad conclusion from reading here, but about noting that we make decisions about gender and ministry within cultural contexts. Biblical hermeneutics, so much a part of deciding what can be allowed and not allowed, is also crucially influenced by context. There is much in both these books that considers where context can be influential and where its influence should be denied for the sake of preserving a proper sense of biblical authority, important to all of the authors here.

And so it is that in *Discovering Biblical Equality* the second section of the book contains a series of articles looking at the most contested biblical texts. The ground covered here is familiar to many of us, but there is a generation of Christians, not around through the ordination debates of the eighties and early nineties, that may never have looked in detail at these texts. Differing interpretations, implying quite different imagined churches in the past, are discussed in the two books.

The third section of *Discovering Biblical Equality* is concerned with theology and ministry, and includes a very good article by Gordon Fee on giving the Spirit priority in the shaping of ministry. This arises out of an overview of the difficulties in trying to see any set pattern or understanding of content of roles and functions in the New Testament texts. This article allows for the messiness of church, both in the past and known today, when the people of God try to be obedient and creative in mission at the same time. So section four is concerned with hermeneutics and section five with living out our calling. Throughout there is much of interest, especially to those who have been thinking but not reading in this area before. The text is small, and the footnotes are extensive, but this is a good and useful book to dip into. On the back cover Christina Baxter says she would recommend it to her students. I agree with her.

### Conclusion

So, some essential but demanding reading. Whichever paradigm is the one from which you view these issues, engaging with the other, or others, will help as we evangelicals struggle to understand each other and stay in some sort of conversation.

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