

Preface (2006)

A conservative backlash against radical feminism has reverberated through pop culture during the last twenty years; simultaneously, egalitarianism has been steadily encroaching to where it is now the cultural norm. Two decades ago few would have believed that American women today (some of them mothers and wives) would be fighting in the American armed forces in the deserts of Iraq. Although there are occasional protests against this newly regnant egalitarianism—even at the secular level—there is no question that the culture is predominantly egalitarian. Against this backdrop, the re-release of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism (RBMW)* is most timely, and it will continue to serve a vital role in shaping current evangelical attitudes about gender roles in the church and home.

While evangelical complementarians have delivered an impressive body of exegetical and theological argument, from the Danvers Statement in 1987–1988, to the *RBMW* in 1991, and to Wayne Grudem's *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* in 2004, there has been a continuing erosion of commitment to the church's classic understanding of what the Bible teaches about male-female role relationships. An increasing number of evangelical publishers (once bastions of conservatism regarding gender roles) are publishing books from a feminist perspective, and some of them now refuse to print anything that assumes or advances complementarianism. Likewise, well-regarded campus ministries have adopted and implemented functionally egalitarian patterns of ministry, and many evangelical faculties, even in the most conservative of institutions, promote egalitarianism.

Sadly, perhaps the most significant factor in the weakening of biblically defined roles in marriage, family, and the church is the teaching and practice within a growing number of evangelical congregations. Ministers are embracing egalitarianism; they no longer believe or teach what the Bible says about male and female roles. Among those ministers who continue to believe, a large number assume that gender distinctions are not of vital importance; consequently, their congregations follow the culture rather than the Bible. Increasing numbers of men entering the ministry have little or no formal training, so they lack a thorough grasp of biblical teaching so as to equip their officers and congregations with the truth.

As a result, there are complementarians conceding their biblical stance on the issue, wittingly or unwittingly. Some conservative evangelicals are serving in denominational settings where the battle over women's ordination was fought years ago; they tend to see this as an issue of the past. These leaders believe our

challenge is to empower women to serve more broadly and visibly, thereby unleashing the fetters in which the church has wrongfully bound them. They say that as long as women are not ordained to the pastorate, or maybe to eldership, Scripture is being obeyed. They claim that women can do anything in the church that non-ordained men can do, as if that secures a biblical view and answers all the practical matters relating to the ministry of women in the church. Still other evangelicals are looking for a middle ground between evangelical egalitarianism and complementarianism. Unfortunately, all of these proposals so far appear to be nothing more than a repackaging of egalitarianism.

It is clear that the upcoming generation has not been introduced to the church's time-honored understanding of the Scriptures on matters pertaining to gender roles. To this new generation we must stress that complementarianism is cause for celebration rather than apology because it provides the relational framework in which men and women experience covenantal privileges and responsibilities. Both men and women are image bearers of the living God and equals before the cross. When male and female live and work together as God intended, there is nothing more beautiful, satisfying, delightful, and God-glorifying—a truth to be lived and celebrated, shouted from the rooftops, and proclaimed in the streets.

By contrast, egalitarianism cannot come to grips with the unique creation of man as male and female, and its upholders assert that there is no legitimate difference between men and women in the home and church, at least not one that allows for male spiritual leadership. As a result, egalitarianism devalues God's creation design and redemptive calling of women. It fails to do justice to the distinctions that exist between the sexes and wrongly equates any acknowledgment of role distinctions with inequality and discrimination. Wise pastors, godly Christian women, and many others involved in ministry realize that preaching, teaching, and discipleship must promote a practical embrace of biblical womanhood in the local church.

We can make headway by emphasizing to our congregations the important distinction between masculinity and femininity. However, such distinction will further erode if the church continues to devalue it. Additionally, we must promote healthy, heterosexual, monogamous marriages. In order for this to happen, the church must make biblical application to contemporary marriage. Teaching and learning the biblical distinctions in our mutual marital responsibilities and ways of relating is essential. Contrarily, egalitarianism is part of the disintegration of marriage in our culture, whether explicit or implicit, witting or unwitting.

We must also lead Christian women toward a joyous embrace of godly, male leadership in the church as we simultaneously direct their men toward a self-denying, other-serving embrace of the leadership role. For this to happen, ministers

and other church leaders must teach what the Bible says about qualified church leadership, even amidst the opposing claims of egalitarians, which are becoming more pronounced and histrionic. They often view the exercise of male leadership as domination or abuse, so bravery is required when addressing the Bible's teaching on male-female roles and functions in the home and church. Meanwhile, many evangelicals have been stung by accusations of chauvinism; as a result, they want to placate the culture's suspicion of male clergy. They desire to reach a hostile culture and are afraid of alienating it with unpopular views. Such evangelicals believe the biblical view but don't preach and teach it, instead doing their best to disguise it in church life. However, blurring distinctions by means of covert androgyny will only further weaken our churches.

The current controversy necessitates a strong restatement of the complementarian position, mainly because Scripture is utterly clear on gender distinctives in both home and church. It is never safe to act contrary to biblical teaching; therefore, a Bible-embracing church will work to ensure that men and women in the congregation embrace it in its totality. Gender distinctives will be boldly, clearly, and lovingly proclaimed from the pulpit, as well as discreetly and appropriately applied in the context of discipleship. When God-given distinctives are denied, altered, or ignored, disaster occurs in marriages, families, and churches. Blurring spousal roles can lead not only to marital failure but also to gender confusion in children.

Another reason why complementarianism is vitally important to the spiritual health of Christian congregations is the cultural transition confronting them. Male-female role relationships, the definition of the family, homosexual rights—all of these are bellwethers of our culture. These indicate a mega-shift from a Judeo-Christian framework to a pagan worldview. Until about 1970, our culture fed off the residue of traditional Christianity; since that time we have seen a dramatic and rapid shift to an essentially pagan ethos. Unfortunately, this ungodly framework is being imported into the church by self-avowed Christian leaders through their compromise on the subject of biblical manhood and womanhood. Bruce Ware, professor of theology at Southern Baptist Seminary, says:

Today the primary areas in which Christianity is pressured by the culture to conform are on issues of gender and sexuality. Post-moderns and ethical relativists care little about doctrinal truth claims. These seem to them innocuous, archaic, and irrelevant to life. What they do care about, and care about with a vengeance, is whether their feminist agenda and sexual perversions are tolerated, endorsed, and expanded in an increasingly neo-pagan landscape. Because that is what they care most about. It is precisely here that Christianity is most vulnerable. To lose the battle here is to subject the church to increasing layers of departure and surely it will not be long until ethical departures (the church yielding to the pressures, for instance, of women's ordination to the pastoral ministry) will yield to even more central doctrinal departures, like questioning whether Scripture's inherent teaching about manhood and womanhood renders it fundamentally untrustworthy for the Christian life. I find it instructive that when

Paul warns about departure from the faith in the latter days, he lists first “ethical compromises and the searing of the conscience” as a prelude to the doctrinal departures.¹

Ware points out that ethical compromise is followed by doctrinal sellout. We evangelicals care about doctrine; however, if we capitulate to the current ethical reordering, doctrinal unfaithfulness is certain to follow. The church has been called to counter and bless the culture, not to copy and baptize it. All too often our churches reflect, rather than constructively engage, worldly culture. Perhaps worst of all, many evangelical leaders claim that if we want to reach the lost, we must become like them. This is a recipe for disaster. Dorothy Sayers refuted this notion: “It is not the business of the church to conform Christ to men, but men to Christ.”² That is precisely the challenge we face in this area of biblical manhood and womanhood. Will the church shape her values to the prevailing cultural mores and norms, or will she positively impact and influence our culture?

At the core of this topic lies the fundamental issue of biblical authority. If we write off, ignore, or distort the Bible’s teaching on gender roles, then we are bound to do so with everything the Bible teaches. Indeed, the Bible is so clear on male-female distinction that ministers find it challenging to uphold biblical truth from the pulpit, knowing what kind of reaction they may provoke in hearers who have been steeped in a feminist culture. This is where the manhood-womanhood issue becomes an issue of scriptural authority. Are we going to perform a hermeneutical twist when the Bible’s teaching makes us culturally uncomfortable, or are we going to let the lion loose, let God be God, and let his Word speak and rule in our lives? If we deny biblical teaching about manhood and womanhood, the possibility of a definitive interpretation is lost. If we can wrest egalitarianism from the Bible, we can pervert it to say anything we wish.

Pagan ideas underlie evangelical egalitarianism, based, as it is, on ideas borrowed from cultural feminism. Egalitarianism must always lead to an eventual denial of the gospel. When the biblical distinctions of male and female are denied, Christian discipleship is irretrievably damaged because there can be no talk of cultivating distinctively masculine or feminine virtue. One can only speak of a vague androgynous discipleship. But that’s not how God made us. We need masculine males and feminine females in order to generate the kind of discipleship that results in a commitment to complementarianism.

From the complementarian viewpoint, the gender controversy of the past twenty years has revolved around faithfulness to the Bible. Such was the emphasis when *RBMW* originated fifteen years ago, and it is the emphasis underlying this reissue of the book. We are reminded here of Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus and his exhortation to hold fast the Word and deal decisively with those who undermine it. All

too often, however, we are enticed by worldly substitutes. When facing hardship, we are apt to seek a friend before turning to the Psalms. When tempted to doubt God's provision, we turn to human leaders before going to the words of Jesus. When angry, we seek someone who will justify us rather than the wisdom of Proverbs. Within us all is the tendency to turn to the uninspired books of men ahead of the inspired Book of God. This fleshly pull has impacted how the current gender discussion is progressing. Complementarians continue to articulate a compelling vision of God's beautiful design for men and women, yet much of this articulation amounts to no more than a defense against the onslaught of new interpretations, definitions, and approaches from an egalitarian subset within evangelicalism.

Egalitarians often claim that we cannot look to the Bible to settle these types of disputes; rather, we should look to church history or elsewhere. Most of the new egalitarian arguments are rooted outside of the Bible and instead seek credibility through history, archaeology, and manipulation of original Bible language. Each of these arguments is an attack on one of the perfections of Scripture: its authority, sufficiency, verbal plenary inspiration, and clarity. When these areas are undermined, the inerrancy of Scripture is ultimately at stake. In 1978 the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* issued this warning:

We are conscious too that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible that God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once one has started. This means that at bottom independent reason now has authority, as opposed to Scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic Evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an Evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the Evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move further.³

Many of those leading the egalitarian movement continue to profess a high view of Scripture and a trust in the total truthfulness of the Bible, even while their practice contradicts their profession. Paul's charge to Timothy, "guard the good deposit" (1 Tim. 6:20), is what keeps complementarians in the battle and gives us the impetus to encourage one another to stand firm. So much is at risk in this debate: the health of the home and church; the way in which we understand the Christ-church paradigm; how we apply God's Word to the Christian life; and the way we raise masculine sons and feminine daughters.

In the middle of all of this, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* is still the bedrock text. The subtitle, *A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, continues to fit simply because the biblical arguments for complementarianism are the same. Unbiblical interpretations will come and go, but the Bible will maintain the same clear and consistent message of God's good design for men and women. That is why

many of the evangelical feminist arguments have changed in the last decade whereas the complementarian defenses have not. This is why the book you hold in your hand will be a valuable resource for decades to come, and it is our prayer that many in the body of Christ will embrace God's design for men and women, and that homes and churches will be strengthened as we yield ourselves to the Word of God.

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