

Excerpts from THE FEMINIST BOGEYWOMAN

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Q Isn't evangelical feminism simply the product of an anti-biblical, contemporary ideology that has infiltrated the church?

A This question has become a central point of contention in the evangelical debate over woman's "place" in the home and the church. Although traditionalists focus primarily on certain biblical proof-texts to make their case for unequal gender roles, their argument really begins with a set of assumptions about feminism and modern culture. The proof texts are then interpreted and applied in light of these assumptions. The traditionalist argument goes like this: Any deviation from "traditional" gender roles is "feminist," and anything feminist is entirely a product of modern culture. Because modern culture stands in total opposition to biblical values, any interpretation of the Bible that questions the "traditional" roles could only arise, not out of a genuine respect for the authority of Scripture, but out of a desire to use the Bible to justify an agenda that the church has imported from modern culture.

This particular view of how "feminism" relates to culture and Christianity is, in large part, what fuels the emotional firestorm that can so easily be ignited whenever evangelical Christians discuss this issue. Yet such assumptions should not go unquestioned. Is evangelical feminism a first step onto a slippery slope that will soon have us sliding swiftly into the blasphemous excesses of radical feminism? Or is it on a different road altogether, one that derives from a different source and aspires to a different goal, with a fundamentally different motivation?

Anxiety about where evangelical feminism is really coming from, and where it is really going, has created widespread misunderstanding about what exactly is at stake in the debate between evangelical feminists and traditionalists. This misunderstanding has itself become an element of the conflict, and has served only to heighten the hostilities. What is at stake is the opportunity for women to pursue their callings, whatever they may be, as well as the opportunity for both men and women to benefit from the full range of women's gifts and to learn from and relate to women as whole persons. What is not at stake is biblical authority, biblical morality, the integrity of the church, or the preservation of the family and civilized society.

It is crucial that we understand what evangelical feminism is and what it is not, and how its premises, goals, motivation, and historical roots differentiate it from other varieties of feminism. Otherwise, it will remain impossible for the ideas at issue to be evaluated fairly and discussed civilly. In other words, we need to level the playing field before anyone tries to win the game.

Q If those who advocate biblical equality aren't just imitating modern culture, then in what ways does evangelical feminism differ from modern secular feminism?

A Evangelical feminism has a different beginning and a different end. It arises from a different theology and a different history, and it aspires to a different purpose. Theologically, evangelical feminism is based on the biblical principle of the equality of all people before God. Other forms of contemporary feminism are generally based on the experience or consciousness of women; there is no higher authority. The difference, then, is between locating the source of authority in biblical revelation and locating it in a human-centered (or woman-centered) moral relativism.

Historically, the roots of evangelical feminism can be found in the goals and values of the nineteenth-century women's movement, which arose from an interaction of the political ideals of classical liberalism (equality under the law for all) with the religious zeal of the Second Great Awakening and, later, the Third Awakening (or Holiness Movement). The strong evangelical element in the movement for women's rights gave birth to an army of evangelical women who were serving as pastors, teachers, social reformers, and missionaries by the end of the century.

Although it is commonly assumed today that evangelical feminism is simply an offshoot of the modern feminist movement that began in the 1960s, quite the opposite was true in the nineteenth century. Early American feminism was driven in large part by the reformist idealism that arose from the evangelical awakenings during that period.

Because evangelical feminism is grounded in a biblical worldview, its purpose is quite different from the many varieties of modern feminism based on radical individualism. One important difference is between the desire to serve and the desire for power. Evangelical feminists desire that men and women be allowed to serve God according to their own unique gifts rather than according to culturally predetermined personality slots called "Christian manhood" and "Christian womanhood." Their ultimate goal is the good of the church and society rather than simply the empowerment of the individual woman.

On the other hand, mainstream secular feminists seek to acquire the same level of social power that men have, and the extremely radical feminists want to develop female power that is distinct from and superior to male power. Either way, the central motivation of most modern feminists appears to be the desire for power. And their primary goal is the fulfillment of the individual woman. There is occasionally some talk of improving society by having more women in positions of power, but that seems to be a secondary concern.

Another important difference is that modern feminists tend to think that women can win their equal rights and self-fulfillment without any help from men. In evangelical feminism, in contrast, the biblical principle of mutual submission leads to an emphasis on community rather than individualism. Biblical equality can only come about through the cooperation of both men and women. This is especially true in marriage. Contrary to the tenets of secular feminism, marital equality requires more than the wife becoming more assertive and independent; it requires that each partner exercise a self-giving, submissive love toward the other.

Q What are some of the reasons for the traditionalist fear of evangelical feminism?

A Generally speaking, people often fear change and resist anything that might "upset the apple cart." Some women fear feminism because they have the idea that it leads to divorce and/or to mothers neglecting their children. Men who identify masculinity with having authority over women fear the loss of their sense of manhood; and men who are simply afraid of women for whatever reasons fear losing control of the situation.

I think the fear that really drives the traditionalist backlash against all types of feminism is the fear of the slippery slope. Many evangelicals are unwilling even to consider any idea labeled "feminist" for fear they will find themselves sliding swiftly into all manner of radical, pagan feminist apostasy. Where does this fear come from?

The current constellation of cultural warriors in secular society has the antifeminists in the conservative, traditionalist camp and the feminists in the liberal, anti-Christian camp; thus, it is

assumed that a traditional view of morality can only lead to an antifeminist view of gender roles, and that any view that accords women more equality than they are allowed by today's traditionalists can only derive from a loose or relativistic view of morality that denies the binding authority of the Bible.

As a result, evangelical feminism is viewed as a package deal; that is, it cannot be purchased separately, but with it comes all the baggage associated with a culturally relative vision of morality. This explains why so many traditionalists are convinced that evangelical feminism's certain and ultimate outcome is the destruction of the family and society.

I have often wondered how mutual submission and shared authority in the home could destroy the family and society. Yet it seems that when traditionalists look at a married couple who submit to one another and make decisions together as equal partners, they see a slippery slope at the foot of which is the breakdown of all moral authority and social order. Why? Because traditionalists believe that egalitarian marriage can derive only from a humanistic, relativistic, and thoroughly unbiblical view of morality. And once the door to moral relativism has been opened wide enough to let in egalitarian marriage, then it is only a matter of time before all the other evils come bursting through and consume us all.

James Davison Hunter remarks that in the culture wars at large there is no common moral ground. The combatants on each side stand on irreconcilably different moral territories, and hence can only shout past each other. However, it seems to me that in the evangelical church, people are shouting past each other, not because they stand on irreconcilably different moral territories, but because it is the conviction of the traditionalists that this is the case.

The branding of evangelical feminism as secular and ultimately heretical stifles discussion and fosters fear among evangelicals. As a result, an idea that is debatable on biblical grounds tends to be dismissed before it is even fairly examined. And the question that goes begging is whether evangelical feminism is in fact on a slippery slope. Does it have within it the beginning of blatant and blasphemous error? Is it, in both essence and premise, identical with modern secular feminism? If the answer is "no," as I believe it is, then the errors of radical/pagan feminism cannot legitimately be invoked to discredit evangelical feminism.

Antifeminists frequently refer to those individuals who have moved from biblical feminism to radical or pagan feminism as "evidence" for the inevitability of this direction of movement. Yet there is a greater number of traditionalists who have become evangelical feminists: in fact, most evangelical feminists were once traditionalists. That does not mean that traditionalism leads to evangelical feminism, however. Simply because someone moves from Position A to Position B does not prove that Position A caused Position B. People can change their minds for a variety of reasons.

Q What is the biblical basis for equality between women and men?

A Biblical equality means that it is biblically illegitimate to limit a person's identity, status, vocation, or ministry opportunities solely on the basis of that person's gender; it does not mean that gender makes no difference at all in a person's identity or behavior. Because God shows no favoritism, but regards each person as a unique individual, we ought not presume to do otherwise.

The truth of the equality of all persons under God is grounded in creation. Genesis 1:26-28 and 5:1-2 state that both male and female humans bear God's image equally and without distinction; both have been commanded equally and without distinction to take dominion, not one over the other, but both together over the rest of God's creation for the glory of the Creator. The essential equality of all people is fundamental to the message of Jesus Christ, who insisted that the concern of his disciples be the exercise of submission and servanthood, rather than the effort to claim or attain status and authority (Matt. 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27). The truth of biblical equality is the basis of God's offer of salvation to all, as indicated in Acts 10:34 and Romans 2:11, which state that God shows no favoritism for one group of people over another. It is a characteristic of the new covenant, in which believers without respect to age, gender, or social status may be filled with the Holy Spirit and be gifted in prophetic ministry (Acts 2:17-18).

Biblical equality is a consequence of God's act of salvation in the new covenant, as indicated in Galatians 3:26-28, which states that we are all "sons," or heirs, in Christ, and that there is no longer any distinction in spiritual privilege or prerogative between Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. First Peter 3:7 also states that husband and wife are equal heirs of God's gift of life. Equality is reflected in the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6), and in repeated New Testament exhortations to believers to honor one another and to be humble and submissive toward one another (Matt. 23:8-12; Rom. 12:3, 10; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:3). The principles of equal respect and mutual submission are woven throughout the fabric of the Bible, especially the New Testament.

The biblical truth of women's equality with men is not a "new" idea imported to the church from secular culture; it is rooted in the first chapter of the Bible. As Genesis 3:16 indicates, however, the entrance of sin into God's created order destroyed the equality and mutuality of the relationship between woman and man; cultural patriarchy was the result. God revealed himself and his plan for his people by means of patriarchal cultures, but God progressively made known his redemptive plan whereby the essential equality of all people would be restored and the practice of male rule brought to an end.

This ethic of biblical equality was evident in Jesus' treatment of women as persons in their own right. It was also evident in the actions of Paul and the early Christians who sanctioned the service of those women who had been called by God to leadership and teaching ministries. Because of the existing customs of the surrounding patriarchal cultures, the approach of the New Testament church was to tolerate the cultural subordination of slaves and women, and yet to modify and moderate these customs, and ultimately to point beyond them to God's original intention for human relations.

Today, however, when non-Christians are not offended by an egalitarian gospel but are offended by a hierarchical gospel, we have no reason to perpetuate the cultural practices that were initially intended for Christians living in patriarchal societies.

Q What do you do about those Bible verses that seem to teach the subordination of women to male authority?

A First, I seek to understand individual Bible verses in light of the overall biblical principle of the essential equality of all human beings regardless of their gender, race, or class. Any biblical texts that seem to contradict this fundamental biblical truth need to be scrutinized

carefully, in order to determine their true meaning within the context of the cultural situations for which they were originally intended.

Second, I am aware that many of the passages employed to teach the universal subordination of women are not as clear-cut and straightforward as traditionally assumed. First Corinthians 11:3-16 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in particular are riddled with translational and hermeneutical ambiguities. Unless these texts can be shown unequivocally to be teaching what they traditionally have been understood to be teaching, however, the hierarchalist view is on biblically shaky ground.

The entire case for excluding women from church leadership and teaching positions rests on 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Without this text serving as a direct statement of a universal, transcultural principle of a male hierarchy within the body of Christ, there is no biblical case for restricting upper-level ministries to men. If this is not the only way legitimately to understand Paul's intent in writing this text, then the case for male rule is a wobbly one. And unless 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 can definitively be said to be setting forth a chain of command, a cosmic hierarchy of authority involving not merely man and woman but God and Christ as well, then the entire passage must be seen simply as a series of arguments Paul employed to persuade female believers in Corinth to wear a head covering during public worship.

Third, the more I study this biblically, the more aware I become of the missing pieces and weak links in the traditionalist biblical picture. In order to build a complete and consistent doctrine of the universal and God-ordained subordination of women to male rule, one must add to Scripture concepts not mentioned in its pages. Traditionalist teaching is frequently laden with words and phrases such as "chain of command," "covering," and "man as priest of the home"; but these common expressions are nowhere to be found in the Bible. These concepts rest almost entirely on an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 that assumes "head" is a metaphor for authority and this somehow makes a man a representative of God to his wife and family. That is far from obvious from either the text or the context.

Unless the two New Testament references to the husband as head of the wife can be shown indisputably to speak of every man's universal and God-ordained authority over his wife, traditionalists are left with the need to make a huge inference—namely, that the exhortation to women to submit to their husbands entails an exhortation to men to exercise authority over their wives. The fact that women are told to submit to their husbands, as all believers are to one another (Eph. 5:21), is in itself inconclusive. One must infer that this wifely submission is meant to be both unilateral and universal, and neither mutual nor culturally specific.

The Bible never actually commands men to assume authority over their wives. That is inferred from the chain of command idea, which is inferred from the idea that husbandly head means husbandly authority, which, in turn, is inferred from cultural preconceptions about the meaning of head and the role of the husband. Today we have books, radio messages, sermons, seminars, and magazine articles directly and repeatedly exhorting men to do something the Bible not once directly exhorts them to do—to assume leadership of their wives and families as God's representatives to them.

Rather than importing extra-biblical assumptions to shore up the weak links in the traditionalist system, it seems wiser to interpret "the husband as head" according to its biblical context. First Corinthians 11 doesn't help us too much here, because Paul employs "head" primarily as a word play or pun in the course of his argument; it is not explained or illustrated (although the order in

which the "head" relationships are stated in verse 3 suggests the meaning of "source" rather than "authority"). Husbandly "headship" is given some explanation and illustration in Ephesians 5:25-31, where the husband's role is described as life-giving, self-giving love. Here "headship" speaks more of mutual submission than male authority. Here, too, an understanding of "head" as a metaphor for source of life rather than authority is more compatible with the biblical context.

It also seems wiser to interpret 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as a prohibition intended for particular women in a particular circumstance. The traditional interpretation, which bans all women everywhere for all time from leading and teaching doctrine to men, contradicts New Testament evidence and approval of women who did exercise church leadership and teach correct doctrine to men.

Priscilla was one such woman, who with her husband taught correct doctrine to Apollos, a noted leader and teacher in the early church; and the teaching she offered Apollos was taken by him as authoritative (Acts 18:26). The fact that Scripture usually lists Priscilla's name first and her husband's second indicates that she probably was the prominent member of the teaching team; there is no evidence that she was teaching as a secondary partner under the "covering" of her husband's spiritual authority.

Finally, I recognize that the Bible does not spell out this issue of gender roles with cut-and-dried clarity. A case can be made, without sacrificing belief in biblical authority, for either equality or hierarchy. The doctrine of sexual hierarchy, however, must be reconciled somehow with the clear biblical teaching on the essential equality of all persons before God. A solution to this problem is routinely sought through recourse to the logically problematic notion that women are "equal in being but different in function." In other words, even though a woman's womanhood renders her subordinate to man's authority for the entire scope and duration of her life, she is nonetheless somehow "equal in being" with men. The egalitarian view, however, aligns readily with the overall spirit of the Bible, which proclaims the equality of all types of people within the redeemed community—whether male or female, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, and so forth. It would seem the burden of proof should be on the one who seeks a clear and consistent biblical mandate for a universal exception to this principle of mutuality and equality among the members of the body of Christ.

Biblical equality also has the theological advantage. The more I study this issue, the more convinced I become that a viable and biblically consistent theology of sexuality must be firmly grounded in the biblical teachings concerning the creation of both man and woman as equally imaging God, the priesthood of all believers, and Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity. The implications of these fundamental theological principles rule out any universal hierarchies or cosmic principles of male supremacy.

It is important that the case for biblical equality receive a fair hearing and enjoy a civil discussion in the evangelical community. This cannot happen, however, as long as people are afraid that there is an insidious, underlying, secularizing agenda to evangelical feminism. As an antidote to these fears, I have tried to explain the fundamental differences between evangelical feminism and other forms of modern feminism, and thus to show that evangelical feminism should not be dismissed as an antibiblical belief system that is derived primarily from modern secular culture. My hope is that a clarification of what is and is not at stake in this conflict will help lay the groundwork for a healthy debate on an issue that is, indeed, legitimately debatable on biblical grounds.

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