

Evangelical Gender Politics: Theory and Practice

Two organized evangelical perspectives on the role of women in church, family and society:

1. Complementarian position: “Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart.” (*RBMW*)

Organization: Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood
(<http://www.cbmw.org/>)

Journal: *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*

Key book: *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. 1993. ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem.

2. Egalitarian position: “The Bible teaches the full equality of men and women in Creation and in Redemption”

Organization: Christians for Biblical Equality
(<http://www.cbeinternational.org/>)

Journal: *Priscilla Papers*

Key books: *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*. 2004. ed. by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

Beyond Sex Roles. 1985. Gilbert Bilezikian.

Gender & Grace. 1990. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen.

Similarities in the perspectives

Both perspectives use an evangelical approach to Biblical interpretation—unlike mainline or secular approaches to gender issues.

Debates revolve around a small number of Biblical passages including creation/fall (Gen. 1-3), the “household codes” (e.g., Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Peter 2:11-3:7), Paul’s instructions on worship (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2-16 & 14:26-40; 1 Tim. 2), and women in the early church (e.g., Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia in Romans 16).

Both are new perspectives—despite claims to the contrary.

Traditional Biblical interpretation has been shaped by the widespread assumption that women are inferior to men. As this assumption became untenable in the latter part of the 20th Century, traditional limitations on women’s roles in church, family and society were questioned.

Developers of the egalitarian position attempted to re-read Scripture without the assumption that women were inferior. They concluded that limitations on women’s roles were not Biblical.

Developers of the complementary position kept limitations on women but developed a new rationale—women aren’t inferior, but they are different.

The Southern Baptist declarations that women should “submit herself graciously” to her husband’s leadership and that the office of pastor is limited to men (and subsequent purge of dissenters) were a break from earlier Baptist principles.

Both perspectives, but especially the complementary position, read modern concepts into the Bible. Femininity, masculinity and egalitarianism are not Biblical concepts.

The complementary position reflects a Victorian separate spheres ideology that is foreign to 1st Century Mediterranean society.

The egalitarian position makes gender largely irrelevant for roles in family, church and society.

The complementarian position makes holding a proper gender role an essential part of being a good Christian and draws fine distinctions between what women can and can't do.

The family

“[Genesis 3 suggests] that any role reversal at these basic levels of childcare and breadwinning labor will be contrary to the way [God] made us as male and female for our ordained roles. Supporting the family is primarily the responsibility of the husband. Care for the children is primarily the responsibility of the wife.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 43)

“The leadership pattern would be less than Biblical if the wife in general was to take the initiative in prayer at mealtime, and get the family out of bed for worship on Sunday morning, and gather the family for devotions, and discuss what moral standards will be required of the children, and confer about financial priorities, and talk over some neighborhood ministry possibilities, etc.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 39)

“In a well-ordered Biblical marriage, both husband and wife acknowledge in principle that, if necessary in some disagreement, the husband will accept the burden of making the final choice.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 40)

“Mature masculinity expresses its leadership in romantic relations by communicating an aura of strong and tender pursuit.... The wife may initiate an interest in romance and may keep on initiating different steps along the way. But... [a] feminine initiation is in effect an invitation for the man to do his kind of initiating. In one sense you could say that in those times the man is *responding*. But in fact the wife is inviting him to lead in a way as only a man can, so that she can respond to him.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 40)

The church

Generally, women are not allowed to be pastors or elders or teach men. Men are to exercise “primary leadership.”

Society

“Mature masculinity is sensitive to cultural expressions of masculinity and adapts to them (where no sin is involved) in order to communicate to a woman that a man would like to relate not in any aggressive or perverted way, but with maturity and dignity as a man.... [This means] learning manners and customs. Who speaks for the couple at the restaurant? Who seats the other? Who drives the car? Who opens the door?... Who walks on the street side? How do you handle a woman’s purse? Etc. Etc.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 41)

“[E]ven though a man will not take initiating steps of leadership with a stranger or with a colleague the same way he will with his wife, his mature manhood will seek a pattern of initiative appropriate for the relationship.... If, in the course of the day, a woman in the law firm calls a meeting of the attorneys, and thus takes that kind of initiative, there are still ways that a man, coming to that meeting, can express his manhood through culturally appropriate courtesies shown to the women in the firm. He may open the door; he may offer his chair; he may speak in a voice that is gentler.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 45)

“A mature women who is married, for example, does not welcome the same kind of strength and leadership from other men that she welcomes from her husband. But she will affirm and receive and nurture the strength and leadership of men *in some form* in all her relationships with men. This is true even though she may find herself in roles that put some men in a subordinate role to her. [For instance] Prime Minister and her counselors and advisors... college teacher and her students... judge and the court personnel... police officer and citizens in her precinct... counselor and her clients.” (Piper, *RBMW*, p. 50)

Evangelicals' views on gender and family

Smith Christian and Melinda Lundquist. 2000. "Male Headship and Gender Equality." Chapter 5 in Smith's *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*. University of California Press.

Research method: interviews with 187 evangelical Christians in 23 states in mid-1990s

What do evangelicals think about the family?

Evangelicals have grave concerns about the breakdown of the family; the majority blame "pervasive economic pressures and easy divorce" not hostile groups like "feminists, liberals, homosexuals, etc."

"Contrary to many media accounts, we did not find ordinary evangelicals eager to mobilize politically against the forces seen as threatening the family.... Instead, the majority of evangelicals think about dealing with family breakdown primarily in terms of individual—not political or institutional—influence and change. They want, first, to make sure that their *own* families are strong. Secondly, they hope somehow to persuade others about the importance of 'family values' and Christian faith.... Underlying this entire strategy is the deep evangelical commitment to effecting voluntary, individual change through interpersonal influence."

This is consistent with Emerson and Smith's (2000) research on evangelicals and race. Although evangelicals are opposed to racism, they ignore or deny how social structure contributes to racism.

Evangelicals and "headship" in the family

A small minority of evangelicals take the position that relevant Bible passages "clearly support male authority and leadership without qualification."

Another small minority take the position that relevant Bible passages "stand as clear endorsements of gender equality and mutual submission in marriage as God's highest calling."

Evangelicals and “headship” in the family, continued

The majority of evangelicals hold neither of these positions. Most evangelicals believe “headship and equality are entirely compatible, not contradictory, commitments.”

Few evangelicals “emphasized the submission of the wife; rather, most stressed the burdens and restraints headship places on the husband... [M]any... construed ‘headship’ in ways that explicitly undermined male domination and privilege.... In this view, headship appears to function not so much as to privilege husbands, but to domesticate and regulate them and to extract energy from them for the sake of their wives and children.”

“Economy of responsibility” in evangelical homes: husband gets acknowledged as “head” (but without final authority); wife gets “husband who is responsible and considerate of others, who privileges his wife’s needs above his own, and who is accountable to God, the local religious community, and the wider society.”

Many evangelicals saw “headship” as conditional on responsibility, accountability and self-sacrifice.

This arrangement is “formally patriarchal” but usually “functionally egalitarian.”

Most evangelicals believed the husband should have the final say in decision-making. However, the ‘final say’ male privilege is almost never used.

Evangelical gender beliefs and practices have been affected by (1) gender egalitarianism of larger culture and (2) structural changes resulting in demise of one-paycheck model.

These “‘external’ social and cultural forces... have not so much ‘contaminated’ evangelicalism, but rather have created a broad social context within which the tradition’s more egalitarian subcultural tools have become relevant and meaningful to a greater degree.”

Competing Evangelical Interpretations on Selected Bible Passages

Bible passage (TNIV)	Complementarian position	Egalitarian position
<p>“There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:26)</p>	<p>The passage refers to equality in union with the Lord, not with roles in the church or marriage.</p>	<p>Sex distinctions are irrelevant in the church.</p>
<p>“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church...” (Eph. 5:21-25)</p>	<p>Wives are to submit to husbands and not vice versa. The introductory statement applies only to those who are supposed to submit (wives, children, slaves). <i>Kephale</i> (head) connotes authority.</p>	<p>All Christians are to submit to one another. Husbands and wives are to engage in “mutual submission” (as are parents and children, and masters and slaves). <i>Kephale</i> (head) connotes source of blessing and life.</p>
<p>“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says (1Cor. 14:34)</p>	<p>Women shouldn’t preach or teach in church, but can participate in worship. (They don’t really have to “remain silent.”)</p>	<p>Either (1) Paul is responding to a particular problem in the Corinthian church or First Century culture; or (2) Paul is quoting something with which he disagrees; or (3) Paul didn’t really write this passage.</p>