

MODERN ARGUMENTS OF EVANGELICAL FEMINISTS

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The modern feminist movement has adapted itself to many different situations. While it used to present itself as an enemy of the Bible and traditional religion, it now boasts a large following of “evangelical” supporters who claim to be loyal to the Bible. Of course, most of the movement’s followers still promote the same radical causes as before, but Christians often do not see these people. Instead, they see soft-spoken evangelical teachers, ministers, and writers, who claim to support the Bible and understand it as it was intended. This new approach has made great headway in evangelical churches. New arguments are being presented, which Christians need to examine.

The Old Approach

Most of us remember the early days of the modern feminist movement in Europe and America. The National Organization of Women (NOW) was large and loud. Protagonists were fiery and shrill. This led to the famous designation of these women by conservative radio commentator Rush Limbaugh as “femi-nazis.” We were deluged with thunderous denunciations of the Bible. The cultures of Abraham and Moses degraded women. The teachings of Paul caused great suffering and injustice to women for all the centuries from then until now. Male dominance in the family, in society, and in the church was based, they said, on the traditional teachings of Judaism and Christianity. The fact that women were even more oppressed in Muslim countries did not make the situation in the Western world any more agreeable.

The feminist movement typified by Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan joined itself to radical religious and political causes. They worshiped Sophia, goddess of wisdom. They marched in the streets for pro-abortion laws. They favored a socialist economy. They openly flaunted lewdness and immorality. They promoted homosexuality. Whenever a conservative female candidate opposed a liberal male candidate, they supported the liberal and opposed giving any political office to a woman who was conservative, thus showing their agenda to be more important than furthering the influence of women in general. In public gatherings and discussions they would boo and heckle any brave soul who would quote the Bible to oppose them.

On the theological front there were those who defended and promoted the feminist agenda, but initially they were limited to the more radical, leftist adherents of the social gospel. They had long ago given up the idea that the Bible was God’s inspired Word, that always taught the truth. Fundamentalists and evangelicals stood together in opposing this liberal view.

However, during the 1970’s evangelicals who were courting approval from the liberal ecclesiastical and academic establishment discovered a way to bridge their differences on this issue. A key event was the publication in 1975 of a surprising book by Paul King Jewett,

professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. His book was entitled *Man as Male and Female*.¹ Jewett contended that the Old Testament did seem to promote male leadership, but that Jesus and Paul, more by their actions than their words, changed that principle to one of “partnership, not hierarchy.” Paul’s comments in which he limits church leadership to men and places men as the head of the home were simply mistaken—teachings left over from his unenlightened rabbinic past. Here was a link to the liberal establishment, and the back cover of the book bore the endorsement of Cynthia O. Wedel, past president of the liberal National Council of Churches.

Understandably, publication of this book by Jewett caused great controversy within the evangelical world, and great difficulty for Fuller Seminary with its donors. However, the seminary stood by its professor, jettisoned its original position for the inerrancy of Scripture, and has since become a bastion for modern evangelical feminism.²

While Jewett’s arguments were more biblically focused than the secular feminists’ were, yet he agreed with them that Paul’s statements in his epistles that assigned a subordinate place to women in the family and in the church were mistaken. Paul had indeed found the true principle: “there is neither male nor female, . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). But, according to Jewett, his former rabbinic training had blinded him to the practical outworking of that principle. Discussing Paul’s church practice in 1 Tim 2:12 (“I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”), Jewett declares:

“Paul . . . is assuming the traditional rabbinic understanding of that narrative [Gen 2:18-19] whereby the order of their creation is made to yield the primacy of the man over the woman. Is this rabbinic understanding of Genesis 2:18f. correct? We do not think that it is.”³

Jewett’s position was transitional. He failed to bridge the gap between inerrancy of the Bible and the feminist position. So he left the doctrine of inerrancy behind. However, this position provided a jumping-off place for later evangelicals who would still claim to uphold inerrancy.

The New Approach

Throughout the 1970’s, 80’s, and 90’s, the battle for the inerrancy of the Bible raged throughout the evangelical world, especially in America. Eventually, the supporters of inerrancy gained the upper hand, and it became dangerous for an evangelical to openly oppose the doctrine. So a new method was seized upon to get around Paul’s teachings. Instead of saying that Paul was wrong, now it became fashionable to say that Paul’s teachings are misunderstood by the modern reader. It is now a question of hermeneutics, not of inspiration.

According to the modern evangelical feminist argument, Paul was addressing a particular situation in his culture, and was not giving permanent commands. For example, he wrote that slaves should obey their masters; this did not mean that slavery was a good institution. In fact, he said slaves should seek their freedom if possible.⁴ In the same way, so the argument goes, Paul’s statements about women submitting to male leadership in the home and church reflect the

culture of the times, and are not to be taken as absolute and permanent guidelines in a different culture.

This last argument has been greatly expanded and strengthened by much research writing in recent years. A typical statement of this position is that of James Payton, professor of history at Redeemer University College in Ontario, Canada.⁵ He points out that in traditional Greek culture, respectable women did not appear in public alone and never conversed with men other than their families. Normally they stayed at home in comparative isolation from the outside world. The only women accepted in public male company were prostitutes, either the regular, uneducated prostitutes (the *pornai*) or the educated, “high-class” prostitutes (the *hetairai*). Payton notes especially the role of *hetairai* in Greek culture. They were often highly sought out by prominent male citizens for companionship. They were expensively and attractively dressed, and could converse knowledgeably on topics of interest. When a woman was observed conversing with men in public, it was assumed that she was of this type.

With this cultural world in mind, so the argument goes, one can see why Paul urged women in Ephesus not to speak out in public in the church, but to ask questions of their own husbands at home (1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:11-12).⁶ It was “shameful” for a Christian woman to speak out in public, since she would appear to those who did not know her to be a prostitute. Both churches involved in these passages (Corinth and Ephesus) were in the Eastern or Hellenistic part of the Roman Empire, where the Greek culture was still strong. Of course, the argument continues, since we do not have the same cultural setting today, and women can speak in public without such a stigma, there should be no restriction against women speaking in church. This argument finds evidence in Paul’s allowing Christian women to speak to men or mixed groups in other churches, which were in the Roman cultural part of the Empire (as in Rome and Philippi).⁷

In a similar way evangelical feminists say that the place of women in the home and family is greatly expanded in our popular culture than it was in Greek culture. Those few people who still desire male headship often provide an excuse for arrogance and even abuse. Therefore, there is no reason for Christian wives today to always have to obey or submit to their husbands. Rather, the principle of equality of Christians before the Lord should lead to a family in which both spouses share equal authority. For example, the organization Christians for Biblical Equality declared,

“The Bible teaches that husbands and wives are heirs together of the grace of life and that they are bound together in a relationship of mutual submission and responsibility (1 Cor 7:3-5; Eph 5:21; 1 Pet 3:1-7; Gen 21:12). The husband’s function as ‘head’ (*kephale*) is to be understood as self-giving love and service within this relationship of mutual submission.”

If there are differences in opinion, the husband is not to be the one to decide:

“In the Christian home, husband and wife are to defer to each other in seeking to fulfill each other’s preferences, desires and aspirations. Neither spouse is to seek to dominate the other but each it to act as servant of the other, in humility considering the other as

better than oneself. In case of decisional deadlock they should seek resolution through biblical methods of conflict resolution rather than by one spouse imposing a decision upon the other.”⁸

Some Counter-Arguments

Whole books have been written arguing these matters from both the feminist position and the traditional position regarding male headship in the family and the church.⁹ Here it is my intention only to bring up some points that show that the evangelical feminist arguments fall short of making their case.

The Analogy of Slavery

First, the comparison of the status of women to the institution of slavery breaks down. True, the apostles taught slaves to be obedient to their masters.¹⁰ Yet they never say that slavery as an institution is based on the created order. Slavery is a consequence of sin. In fact, Paul encouraged slaves to obtain their freedom.¹¹ In the OT slavery was approved for war captives, for certain criminals, and for those who could not get out of debt. At the same time there were provisions for slaves to obtain freedom, and Jewish slaves were to be freed after six years of service, or at the year of jubilee.¹² If we assume that Christians in the NT dispensation are to treat fellow believers at least as well as the OT Hebrews were supposed to do, then the seeds are sown for the destruction of the institution itself in Christian countries. However, if for any reason a Christian were to find himself as a slave today, he should obey the laws given in the NT just as the early Christians did. These laws do not change with different cultures. Any slaves today should still obey their masters if they are not able to obtain their freedom. Of course, if they are being held illegally, they have the right to resist or seek to escape. The argument used by evangelical feminists is fallacious at this point.

When we compare what the Bible says about slavery to what it says about gender roles in the family and the church, then the differences become clear. When Paul and Peter list the duties of husband and wife in the family, they both teach that the wife is to obey, to submit to her husband. Paul says the relation is as Christ to the church, and Peter notes that this principle still applies even when the husband is a non-believer and is harsh.¹³ The analogy of Christ and the church is instructive; this relation does not change in whatever culture one finds oneself. These are statements never made about the relation of a slave to a master.

Headship and Submission

It is true that the husband's being called the "head" of the wife in Ephesians 5 is not an entitlement for the husband to be harsh or cruel to his wife. He is to love and cherish her, to protect and provide for her, even as Christ cares for the church. Some evangelical feminists claim that the traditional interpretation of the headship of the husband can lead to terrible abuses.¹⁴ This is possible only when the biblical requirements for husbands are overlooked.

Any doctrine must be judged by its proper application, not by its abuse. Surely, a biblical headship of the husband is no cause for fear on the part of the wife or children, which seems to be Peter's very point in 1 Pet 3:6.

Feminists often point out that the word "helper" in Gen 2:18 does not imply that the person who helps is subordinate to the one who is helped. Often in the OT the same Hebrew term (*ezer*) refers to God as our helper.¹⁵ They also maintain that the statement in Gen 3:16 that the husband would rule over his wife is not a creation ordinance, but an undesirable result of sin. These understandings are brought to bear in their interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11-15, where Paul instructs women to submit to male leadership in the church on the basis of the creation order and the events of the Fall.

However, these arguments fail at the crucial point of showing that Paul was basing his argument on his own culture. By referring to Adam and Eve's creation and fall, Paul takes his argument out of his culture, and makes it refer to the whole of human history. Jewett had gotten away from that dilemma by saying that Paul simply was wrong in this passage. Modern evangelical feminists try to get around Paul's references by saying that "inspiration relates to the divine impulse and control whereby the whole canonical Scripture is the Word of God; interpretation relates to the human activity whereby we seek to apprehend revealed truth in harmony with the totality of Scripture."¹⁶ In other words, Paul's statements in 1 Timothy are not inspired in themselves (the old idea of verbal inspiration), but only the "themes" of the entire Bible are inspired. His statements are simply a theme applied to his culture. This interpretation is unacceptable if we are to hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, as it is classically understood.

Cultural Differences and Worship

Evangelical feminists make much of the changes in culture from the first century until now. James Payton contends that the restrictions placed on women in the worship services applied only in the Greek culture of the eastern part of the empire, and that the Roman culture, more practiced in the West, allowed more female leadership in the church.¹⁷ However, many of the examples Payton cites come from a Greek culture several centuries before Christ. In the days of the apostles, there was much travel and intermixing of these cultural empires. The East and the West were not totally distinct areas in the Mediterranean world. Phoebe traveled on business from Corinth to Rome; Aquila and Priscilla moved from Rome to Corinth to Ephesus and back to Rome again. We find Phoebe doing business in the "Greek" part and the "Roman" part of the empire. We see Aquila and Priscilla active in Christian witnessing and teaching in both parts as well.¹⁸

As we interpret these passages, there are three major principles that we recognize as true. First, individual commands of the Bible need to be compared with other commands and principles of the Bible in order to be interpreted properly. Second, there are commands given in the Bible for people in a certain situation or culture that may be different in other environment. Third, there are some laws based on the permanent moral law of God and the permanent features of his creation; these are applicable in all circumstances and cultures.

In applying the first principle to Paul's commands about women in worship, we do see that there are passages that restrict the activity or leadership of women in the church.¹⁹ On the other hand, other passages mention women as active in various types of ministry, including instruction, prophecy, and prayer.²⁰ By comparing these passages together, we can discover the total biblical teaching. It appears that women are allowed to participate in worship of the Lord in various ways, but that the officers of authority are to be men. Since the preacher is a teaching elder, the preacher is to be a man. Women, however, in the Bible are shown to be teaching other people, including men, in other settings. When women do various forms of ministry in and for the church, they are to be under the authority and direction of the male officers of the church. This position satisfies all the New Testament passages.

Second, the NT does give some instructions that are intended for particular cultural settings. Paul makes a point of this in 1 Corinthians 9, as he speaks of living in different ways in different cultures, obeying different sets of rules, so that he could win them to Christ. When the apostles and elders determined that Christians in Syria and Cilicia were to refrain from eating blood, they based that decision on the cultural situation in those areas.²¹ When Christian women are instructed to dress modestly and unostentatiously, the particular types of jewelry or hair styles mentioned are only illustrative of that culture.²² This is also true regarding the wearing of head coverings or veils, a practice that showed submission and modesty in the ancient culture (and some modern cultures as well).²³ Paul's instructions about women asking their husbands at home if they had any religious questions may well belong to this category, especially if speaking out in public was considered by that culture as indecorous.

Third, some of the NT instructions regarding women in worship are said to be based on the moral law and the permanent conditions of creation, at least during the age before the second coming of Christ. This seems to be the point in 1 Tim 2, where Paul bases his commands on the creation order and on the historical situation since the Fall. It is noticeable that, in this section, Paul especially speaks of the matter of authority: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man." The teaching here must be consistent with his working with Priscilla and other women. I believe that the solution is in the word "authority." It is "authoritative teaching" that he is concerned with, and this involves the preaching office. Certainly women can teach men in other venues, but in the church the spiritual leadership and authority is to reside in men. It appears that Priscilla and the other women who taught and ministered in other ways did so under the authority of the male leadership of the church.

Subordination and Equality

Underlying many feminist arguments lies a misunderstanding. Many evangelical writers claim that sexual equality for women and men implies an identity of roles, with equal authority. For women to be expected to submit to men in a way that men do not submit to women, is to make them unequal. They note that in the passage in which Paul says that wives are to submit to their husbands, he prefaces that command by the command to all the Christians, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."²⁴ This mutual submission, in the hands of these feminists, effectively wipes out the idea of the wife's submission to the husband as a particular role. To so submit, they say, is to deny the spiritual equality of men and women.

In order to reply, it is only necessary to note the submission of Jesus Christ to his Father. This submission did not begin in his time on earth, but has marked his state from all eternity. In addition, the Holy Spirit obeys the Father and the Son, as he does his work in the world today. When the members of the Trinity submit to other members of the Trinity, they do not demonstrate any inequality. In the heavenly economy, to serve is not to be less. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the same in substance, equal in power and glory, to paraphrase the Westminster Shorter Catechism #6. Yet one serves another and obeys and submits, while the other determines what is to be done. They do this in perfect love and agreement. In the same way the submission of women to the leadership of men in the church and the home in no way diminishes their spiritual standing, but rather enhances it.

¹ Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

² For a fascinating account of the progress of Fuller Seminary from its original place and purpose to its present position, see George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987). Harold Lindsell, an original Fuller faculty member, provides a look at the same process from a conservative perspective in two books: *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), and *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

³ Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, p. 119.

⁴ As in 2 Cor 7:21, and as hinted at in Phlm 16.

⁵ James R. Payton, Jr., "A Tale of Two Cultures: Understanding the Historical and Cultural Context of the NT Epistles," *Priscilla Papers* 16:1 (Winter 2002) 13-17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Passages normally cited include Acts 16:14-15; 18:26; Rom 16:1-7, 12; Phil 4:2-3.

⁸ These quotations are from "Men, Women and Biblical Equality," the official statement of Christians for Biblical Equality, 1989. It can be read at their website, <http://www.cbeinternational.org/>. Over the years this statement has been signed by many well-known evangelicals writers and leaders, including Carl E. Armerding, F. F. Bruce, Anthony Campolo, Gordon D. Fee, Vernon Grounds, David Allan Hubbard, William J. Hybels, Kenneth S. Kantzer, Richard N. Longenecker, A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Ronald J. Sider, and Lewis B. Smedes.

⁹ For example, in addition to Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, see Stanley J. Grenz with Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1995); the traditional view is defended by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1991); a book presenting both views is James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg, eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

¹⁰ As in Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-25; 1 Pet 2:18-25.

¹¹ See note 4, above.

¹² Exod 21:1-11; Lev 25:39-55.

¹³ Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1-6.

¹⁴ The CBE statement "Men, Women and Biblical Equality" says that their position will "help the Christian home stand against improper use of power and authority by spouses and will protect the home from wife and child abuse that sometimes tragically follows a hierarchical interpretation of the husband's 'headship.'"

¹⁵ As in Ps 121:1-2.

¹⁶ CBE Statement.

¹⁷ See note 5, above.

¹⁸ For Phoebe, Rom 16:1-3; for Aquila and Priscilla, Acts 18:2-3, 18-19, 26; 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3-5.

¹⁹ As 1 Cor 14:34-36; 1 Tim 2:9-15. Note also that the apostles were all men, and that it was assumed that elders and deacons would be men (1 Tim 3:2, 4, 8, 12; Tit 1:6).

²⁰ As Acts 1:14; 2:1-4, 17-18; 18:26; 21:9; Rom 16:1-2 (Phoebe called a "deaconess"), 3-7 (including Junias, "outstanding among the apostles"; this name in the Greek may be accented to be either feminine or masculine; the feminine name was very common in Rome, but the masculine form has not been found; see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2nd ed.; United Bible Societies, 1994] 475-76), 12-13, 15; 1 Cor 11:4-5; Phil 4:2-3; Col 4:15.

²¹ Acts 15:19-21.

²² For example, 1 Pet 3:3.

²³ 1 Cor. 11:3-10.

²⁴ Eph 5:21.