

# Book Review

**Dr. Kenneth M. Gardoski**

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology  
Baptist Bible Seminary  
Clarks Summit, Pa.

*Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy.* Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, gen. eds. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004.

This book is another egalitarian contribution to the ongoing debate over the role of women in the church and home. It is a collection of serious essays by renowned scholars meant to stack up against texts that defend the complementarian position such as Piper and Grudem's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. The editors hope to foster a dialogue that will draw in their detractors. Unfortunately, the choice to call themselves "complementarians"—the term established years ago by Piper and Grudem and others to describe their position—and label their opponents "patriarchalists" or "hierarchicalists" will not increase the congeniality of the conversation.

The book is divided into five sections with a total of twenty-nine chapters. Part one, "Setting the Stage (The Historical Backdrop)," offers three essays meant to provide a historical framework for the contemporary debate. Part two, "Looking to Scripture (The Biblical Texts)," presents ten essays which seek to make the biblical case for egalitarianism. Part three, "Thinking it Through (Logical and Theological Perspectives)," gives six essays to claim the theological and logical high ground for egalitarians. Part four, "Addressing the Issues (Hermeneutical and Cultural Perspectives)," contains five essays which set forth egalitarian hermeneutics and their application to societal issues such as homosexuality and abortion. Part five, "Living it Out (Practical Applications)," rounds out the book with five essays on "working out the principles of biblical equality in the church, in marriage and in our personal lives" (p. 19).

A thorough review of this formidable book (528 pp. long) would require much more than these few paragraphs; hence, only three brief observations will follow. First, the essays in part two on the biblical texts do not plow much new ground. After reading the egalitarian interpretations of classic key passages (e.g. 1 Cor 11:2-16; Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Tim 2:11-15; 1 Pet 3:1-7), one is left pondering their plausibility. Clark Pinnock put it best when commenting on Col 3:18 and similar texts,

The issue is not just whether there is a way to make verses such as "wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (Col 3:18) and similar texts say something other than they seem to say. It is the practical problem of getting people at large to believe that they do. The radical feminists and the traditionalists both argue that such texts are not feminist in content, and I suspect that their view, agreeing as it does with the "plain sense" reading so widely held, will prevail and not be successfully refuted by biblical feminists. Of course, the biblical

feminist interpretation is possible; the problem is that it does not strike many people, either scholarly or untutored, as plausible.<sup>1</sup>

An eye-opening essay in part three is Rebecca Merrill Groothuis's chapter on logic. Her argument against complementarianism is twofold and theological as well as logical: (1) it contradicts the theological principle of the spiritual and ontological equality of men and women; and (2) it violates the law of non-contradiction. Her second point actually undergirds the first: if it is logically impossible for women to be both ontologically equal yet functionally subordinate to men, and the Bible teaches that men and women are ontological equals, then the Bible *cannot possibly* teach the functional subordination of women. Of course complementarians say it does egalitarian logic notwithstanding. But what of Groothuis's assertion that "equal in being, unequal in role" is unbiblical and a logical impossibility? It fails on two counts. First, the "equal in being, unequal in role" construct does not violate the law of non-contradiction. The law states that A and non-A cannot both be true at the same time in the same respect. But complementarians do not claim that men and women are both ontologically equal (A) and ontologically unequal (non-A), or that they are both equal in role (A) and unequal in role (non-A).

Second, Groothuis's argument rests finally on the opinion that the functional subordination of women is bad because it makes them "inferior." It is not and it does not. Submission to proper authority according to Scripture is a good thing. Groothuis would not claim that submission on other counts besides gender (ability, giftedness) is also bad because it makes people "inferior." But why not? What is the difference? Do not ability and giftedness also have to do with "who we are"? God has made all of us ontologically and spiritually equal and yet has assigned us different roles based on various factors such as gender, ability, and giftedness. A woman's submission to her husband no more indicates her inferiority than a man's submission to his pastor indicates his. And both are deemed to be good by God. The issue in the end is not whether "equal in being, unequal in role" is logical or biblical, but whether one can accept it.

The final observation concerns part four on hermeneutics. Articles by Roger Nicole ("Principles and Questions of Gender") and Gordon Fee ("Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate") show how easy it is for evangelicals to agree in principle on hermeneutical rules and disagree so sharply on their implementation. Furthermore, by including an article by William Webb ("A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: The Slavery Analogy") this book only complicates the hermeneutical issue. On Webb's view, Paul indeed does command wives to submit to their husbands in Eph 5:22 and Col 3:18. Webb observes, "Some Christian interpreters water down the idea of submission in an attempt to make it more palatable today" (p. 397). This is ironic seeing as how Webb's fellow contributors seem to do this very thing. For example, Nicole argues in his chapter that while Paul *describes* "male authority in the ancient Greco-Roman household" in Eph 5:21–33 he does not *prescribe* it "for all times." However, says Nicole, the passage *does* prescribe a man's Christ-like love toward his wife (p. 358). This is the kind of watering-down of which Webb complains. So which is it? Does Paul prescribe the submission of wives to their husbands or not? Nicole says he does not; Webb says he does, but it is not applicable in our modern cultural context. One is left with the impression that even contradictory interpretations of the same

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<sup>1</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, "Biblical Authority and the Issues in Question," in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelson (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1986), 55, cited in James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg, eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 165, n. 16.

passage are acceptable so long as egalitarianism is upheld and complementarianism is overthrown.

*Discovering Biblical Equality* is an impressive collection of essays by well-known and respected evangelical scholars. It deserves serious attention by all those engaged in the ongoing gender debate. However, Thomas Schreiner has recently wondered “if egalitarians hope to triumph in the debate on the role of women by publishing book after book on the subject.”<sup>2</sup> It is doubtful that this new offering will do much to move evangelicals beyond the present impasse, and it is likewise doubtful that its arguments will sway the majority of evangelical Christians who recognize the plain meaning of texts when they see them.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Review of Slaves, Women & Homosexuals,” *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7 (Spring 2002): 41.