

3. An Assessment of Moderate Views

A. The Complementarian View.

My studies lead me to conclude that there is no biblical mandate for hierarchalism in either the church or society. Hierarchalism is a legacy from remote antiquity, originating in the post-Fall era of Gen 3. It was not designed by God, but was the result of human frailty. Jesus did not overthrow hierarchalism, as some feminists suggest. Instead, he worked within the hierarchal society of his time. He gave women greater respect, freedom, recognition, involvement, and responsibilities. This view of Jesus continued in the earliest churches for a limited time before patristic churches reverted to the patriarchalism that has become a dominant part of our Christian heritage for centuries.

Still we must ask, is hierarchalism necessarily evil? Is it inherently sinful? I think not. Certainly it often takes evil forms, but hierarchalism can be made workable. How so?

Complementarians have attempted to provide guidance for how their view plays out in daily life. Knight,³ for instance, works from his view of distinctive roles of husband and wife in Genesis 3 to address matters such as wives and mothers working outside the home, how husbands and wives make decisions (especially regarding job changes and relocations), caring for the children, allocating duties and responsibilities, and how male leadership and female submission play out in church life.

Similarly, Farrar⁴ emphasizes the partnership of man and wife and calls for sensitivity to gender differences. Urging men to take responsibility for leadership, he calls them to avoid "spiritual anorexia" and to develop spiritual

³George W. Knight III, "The Family and the Church: How Should Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Work Out in Practice?" *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 345-357.

⁴Steven Farrar, *Point Man: How a Man Can Lead a Family* (Portland: Multnomah, 1990).

endurance. Real men, he says, do not commit adultery, but maintain fidelity to their wives and develop a spirit of teamwork. He stresses the need to develop masculine sons and feminine daughters by being both a role model and an instructor of life-style basics.⁵ Following Piper's definition of *kephale* (headship; p. 261), Farrar urges men to view their wives with respect and sensitivity, aware that they are also made in the image of God, but to assume God-given responsibilities of leadership.

How this plays out for women involves also a much-improved view over that of *Fascinating Womanhood* and *Total Woman*. Emphasis is upon reviving the categories of *manhood* and *womanhood*, viewed in terms of woman being a complement to man and respecting his leadership.⁶ Maintaining an emphasis upon the home, hierarchal complementarians urge that homemaking be recovered as the principal task of a Christian mother.⁷ It is held that women must not exercise spiritual authority over men. However, numerous ministries are available to women, such as teaching women and children, writing, personal evangelism, and other public functions such as reading Scripture, offering prayer, making announcements, or leading songs—none of which involve authority over men.⁸

Hierarchal complementarianism cannot be said to be the biblical ideal, but in stressing that males be kind, loving and respectful instead of domineering and in working to ensure that women are able to develop their capabilities it is certainly much more workable than patriarchalism.

⁵See also George Alan Rekers, "Psychological Foundations for Rearing Masculine Boys and Feminine Girls," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 294-311.

⁶Elisabeth Eliot, "The Essence of Femininity: A Personal Perspective," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 394-399.

⁷Dorothy Patterson, "The High Calling of Wife and Mother in Biblical Perspective," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 364-377.

⁸H. Wayne House, *The Role of Women in Ministry* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1990): 148-158.

B. *The Egalitarian View.*

On the other hand, egalitarianism is certainly preferable as far as the ideals of the kingdom are concerned. My studies have led me to conclude, however, that there is no biblical mandate for egalitarianism either, although it was the pristine ideal in the pre-Fall era of Gen 1-2. It is recovered in the thinking of Jesus and is behind much of the practice of the earliest churches, but was later lost again in the strongly patriarchal world of the eastern Mediterranean.

However, is egalitarianism so necessary that all forms of hierarchalism must be obliterated? Feminists certainly want one to think so! However, neither Jesus nor the earliest churches took this radical view. Just as they did not overthrow slavery, but worked with that system and the evil sometimes present, so they did not overthrow hierarchalism, but worked within the system and the evil sometimes there.

In our changing world, however, cultural hierarchalism is receding. The current focus, however, should not be on cultural change but on basic elements of the Christian mindset, such as justice, mercy, peace, love, patience, unity, and tolerance. Evangelical feminists should abandon feminist "soap boxes" and recover an emphasis on these traditional Judeo-Christian attitudes.⁹

Bias against women in our culture¹⁰ from birth to old age has created tremendous desire for a new image for women and also a new image for men.¹¹ Maintaining

⁹For current views of feminist ethics, see the essays in Lois K. Daly, ed, *Feminist Theological Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Margaret A. Farley, "Ethics and Moral Theologies," *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (ed. L. M. Russell and J. S. Clarkson; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996): 88-91.

¹⁰See Rhoda K. Unger, *Female and Male: Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979): 26-52.

¹¹David C. McClelland, "Wanted: A New Self-Image for Women," *The Woman in America* (ed. Robert Lifton; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965): 173-192.

emphasis on the differences in the sexes, yet stressing mutuality, some are now calling also for a new image of maleness.¹² Spencer,¹³ frustrated that men seem to have only two rather poor options (to be God or the Devil), suggests ways equality can be achieved in relationships regarding shared parenting and other common tasks. Control must be replaced with love. Manipulation must be replaced with service. He concludes (pp. 177-179),

If we males are to assume our God-given responsibility to enable our wives to reach full splendor in the gifts God has given them as they will help us reach ours, we ought to go out of our way to provide them with the time, encouragement, and opportunity to discover and exercise those gifts. If we are to take our family responsibility seriously, we have to make our home, our spouses, our children, and at times our extended family, along with ourselves, the earthly priority for our concerns and actions. . . . If the scriptural imagery is true, if women express half the image of God, if they are, indeed, in the image of God, if they are, therefore, called by God to God's service, then we mutually complement one another.

An interesting work along this line is that of Welch,¹⁴ who stresses equity between male and female in achieving a working partnership in marriage. "The basic principle of equity means that we must allow all persons the opportunity to fashion their own lives, free from existing stereotypes," yet "equity implies certain things about the way we should live our lives together" (14). Traditional myths of what constitutes masculinity and femininity should be rethought with equity in mind. Both are useful concepts, but when employed carelessly can create harmful notions:

¹²Among others, Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); and Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, NJ. F. H. Revell, 1987).

¹³William David Spencer, "Equaling Eden: A Practical Male Afterword," in Aída Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1985).

¹⁴Don Welch, *Macho Isn't Enough!—Family Man in a Liberated World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

Traditionally male

rational
strong
independent
vigorous
public
conquering

Traditionally Female

emotional
weak
dependent
frail
private
nurturing

Several virtues have come to be attributed to females that are not female characteristics at all, but basic human characteristics: i.e., love, kindness, patience, self-control, humility. The same can be said for certain traditionally male characteristics. In any redefinition of male and female roles, attributes vital to the Christian mind-set must be recovered as foundational for society, not just for women (or for men).

Further, Welch argues for "*equity* for both sexes, rather than *equality* of the sexes" (p. 30). Required for equal partnership are consent, respect, trust, love, and sharing responsibilities. Matters are to be discussed as peers. Authority is held in common. The resolution of differences is more difficult when one person does not have the "right" to "run" the family, but equity demands that this more difficult way be taken. The devaluation of careers is the almost inevitable outcome of a truly equal two-career arrangement; each partner's career must be tempered by the career interest of the other. Sometimes partners may be asked to interrupt their own career for the sake of the other.

A responsible theology of women in the church for these changing times is surely to be found in terms of egalitarian principles and practice that are integral to core NT theology.

4. Conclusion

In our survey of views, it is apparent that evangelical feminism and hierarchal complementarianism have much in common, yet they differ radically in some ways from one another. Each has addressed significant problems regarding

women in our churches and in society and each has made major advances leading away from the unproductive extremes that control so much discussion of women today.

However, it is mandatory that participants in this discussion be aware that what is at stake is not egalitarian or hierarchal presuppositions for which some in each group seem determined to die, but the achieving of an understanding that will permit men and women alike to become whatever it is that God intended in the beginning. While neither hierarchalism nor egalitarianism is biblically mandated, egalitarianism is preferable in terms of biblical exegesis and the ideals of the kingdom. Christian ideals indicate that woman is not, and never was intended to be, man's servant—owned, dominated, with no life of her own. It is regrettable that many hierarchalists restrict woman's development of capabilities and exercise of abilities. It is regrettable that some egalitarians are involved in change for change's sake—rude, brash, impatient, unwilling to wait for people to come to an understanding.

In conclusion, my quest for a responsible biblical view of women has led me to abandon the hierarchal stance with which I began this study, and to accept egalitarian ideals concerning women in the church while avoiding the radical feminism behind much of today's ferment in society and consternation in the churches.

This means that the search for biblical truth is vital, that God is Father and Christ is Lord, that traditional Christian values remain supreme, that man and woman are equal in the sight of God, that the family is still central to God's plan, that there is no such thing as an "order of creation," that mutual submission is basic to male/female relationships and that women should have the same opportunities to develop as do men.

This means that discrimination and oppression of women should cease, that feminist "pushing and shoving" is out of place and that undue restrictions on women are wrong.

This means that there are significant differences between men and women, and that “masculine” and “feminine” qualities should be ascertained in terms of Christian values and principles rather than merely by traditional acceptance.

This means that certain paternalist restrictions have no biblical basis. For instance, those who hold that females cannot teach young boys who are past the age of 12, or that they cannot pray aloud with men in the room, or that they cannot speak in a worship assembly, etc., have absolutely no basis for such peculiar restrictions.

This means that women should be able to do anything of which they are capable and in which they are trained, such as, conduct personal evangelism, give greetings, make announcements, lead singing, read Scripture and write. It is imperative that women do these things, as all men should, in a spirit of helpfulness, genuineness, gentleness—in the spirit of Christ. Hierarchal complementarians are correct in removing many burdensome and unnecessary patriarchal restrictions and opening these wider arenas of service and opportunity to women. However, maintaining restrictions in the areas of church and home has no biblical basis.

This means that whatever women did in NT times, women should be able to do today. For instance, women served as deacons. Women led prayer and taught in the public worship. These do not seem right to hierarchal complementarians, but as they are plainly approved in the biblical text they should be options for women in churches today. The NT nowhere restricts the conduct of baptism or the Lord’s Supper to males. Egalitarians are correct to have women serve on committees and speak publicly.

The NT does not speak regarding women in leadership or preaching capacities. All named evangelists in the NT are male, as are all elders. However, as there is no validity to the “order of creation” argument, this situation should not be viewed as a “pattern” mandatory for all times and places, but merely as reflecting the culture in which the NT events were played out. Scripture does not teach that it is sinful for a

woman to preach or serve in a leadership capacity. Deborah (Judges 4-5) is instructive here. The leadership role she played in Israel’s military victory over the Canaanites was not common, but it did occur and was approved by God. Restrictions against women in leadership or public ministry roles then, as now, are dictated by culture and custom rather than biblical necessity. In fact, there will probably be an increasing number of Christ-like women who will undertake appropriate training for various ministries, thus recovering an early nineteenth century practice.

Finally, though many are bothered by questions about the “role” of women in the church, we must remember that reservations about the “role” of women in worship and leadership are not really the main issue. Instead, the principal concern should be the recovery of the egalitarian view of women that God had in mind in the creation. This means that the recovery of the biblical ideal of women should evidence itself in all areas of life. A recovery of this view would permit the church to demonstrate a biblically and theologically solid understanding of male/female relationships to a confused and troubled world.

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