

## **Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions**

by Wayne Grudem. Multnomah Publishers Inc., Sisters, Or. 2004.  
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The debate about women pastors, elders, and deacons in the church is still going on in many denominations around the world. It has led to discord within many congregations, divided families, broken friendships and even led to the formation of new denominations. And pressures in our culture for change are so great that no church or denomination and no parachurch organization can simply decide to avoid the controversy. Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-78), the most famous American woman of her generation, well-known for her views on educational and social issues, argued that there was nothing natural or universal about particular "masculine" or "feminine" role expectations. Her views were optimistic, liberal, and supportive of feminism. In an article *Women as Priests - a Challenge* (Redbook Magazine, June 1975) she discussed the ordination of eleven Episcopalian women on July 29, 1974, in Philadelphia. She called the ordination an "act of great courage." She noted that it fits a slowly emerging pattern. She stated "Women have gained enormously through those who preceded them in the struggle for feminine recognition." And "by strenuous efforts," she observed, "it may be possible for the opposition to hold back the tide for a little time. But, I believe, a priestly role for women is now inevitable." In September 1976, at its General Convention, the Episcopal Church approved the ordination of women and accepted the eleven women ordained in Philadelphia as priests. But the opening of women to priesthood was the beginning of a slippery slope. The Episcopalian and other mainline denominations have large contingents pressing for the endorsement of homosexual conduct as morally valid and the approval of homosexual ordination. In fact, the Episcopal Church on August 5, 2003, approved the appointment of a divorced-openly homosexual bishop.

As we consider what happened in the churches in the Western world, a clear connection can be seen between theological liberalism and the endorsement of women's ordination. The larger trend of allowing women to be ordained began with liberal Protestant denominations in the 1950s and spread to a number of evangelical groups in the 1970s. One of the numerous influential evangelical feminists in North America is Elaine Storkey. She pleads in her book *What's Right With Feminism* for the recognition of women in the Gospel ministry. Women too "have the skills and talents to minister to the people, serve the Church, and pastor and nurture the faith of others."

What is at stake in this controversy? *In Where Do We Stand? An Examination of the Christian's Position in the Modern World* Harry Blamires argues that what confronts us so often is not a Christianly informed case for or against the ordination of women, but a secularly-grounded argument for ordaining them and an inadequately informed Christian instinct that is vaguely against it. He believes that the whole basis of the campaign for women in priesthood or pastors presupposes that exactly what men have is denied to women. He says that this is what gives the campaign for women in ecclesiastical office its emotional impetus. He also claims that the campaign to ordain

women is only part of a wider movement toward universal participation in anything and everything without respect to regulated distinction of office or function. Wayne Grudem, who served as president of the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and as president of Evangelical Theological Society, believes it is "a watershed issue." In his *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* he states: "The issue is not whether we say we believe the Bible is the Word of God or that we believe it is without error, but the issue is whether we *actually obey it* when its teachings are unpopular and conflict with the dominant viewpoints in our culture. If we do not obey it, then the effective authority of God to govern His people and His church has been eroded." He also argues that it is a confessional issue. He points to the Southern Baptists, who in 2000 added this formal provision to its official doctrinal statement: "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture" (added to Article VI, "The Church").

The primary purpose of Grudem's book is to help Christians recover a noble Biblical vision of manhood and woman. He faithfully and carefully explains God's intent for men and women in home and church and answers a whole range of questions and excuses that are raised against the plain teaching of Scripture. He also shows that the controversy is relatively new in the long history of the church.

## **A New Issue**

According to Grudem, during the first eighteen hundred years of the history of the church, women played influential roles in evangelism, prayer, ministries of mercy, writing, financial support, political influence, private exhortation and encouragement and counsel, and teaching of women and children. But with very few exceptions, the church did not find it difficult to understand that only men should be elders and to have the role of teaching God's Word to the assembled church. But suddenly with the advent of modern feminism, many scholars have decided that the well-known Pauline texts such as 1 Timothy 2:11-14, forbidding women to serve as elders and pastors, are now obscure. Grudem states that modern evangelical advocacy of an egalitarian position probably began in 1974. On the basis of historical evidence he argues, therefore, that the inescapable conclusion is that the ordination of women as office bearers in the church is a very recent North American-European innovation accepted by a very small part of world Christianity.

## **Complementarian**

Grudem defines the traditional view as "complementarian." It stands for the view that men and women are equal but different - equal in value and personhood, but different roles in marriage and the church. This view is confirmed in Scripture in many ways. Grudem believes that this biblical position will lead Christian men and women to true joy and fulfilment as they live in accordance with the purposes God has given in His Word. We must clearly state what the complementarian view does not claim. It does not teach that the Bible prohibits women from "leadership roles" in society, in government, in

business, and so forth. It restricts certain kinds of leadership to men in marriage and in church. It does not rob the church of any workers, but encourages everyone to use their gifts according to Scripture. Grudem argues that although God restricts the office of elder or pastor to men, there are many other activities in the church in which women should be actively involved. Every Christian has spiritual gifts that can be used in the various ministries of the church. And Grudem discusses many ways churches can encourage women's ministries, while maintaining leadership of men in certain roles. He encourages churches to be careful not to prohibit what the Bible doesn't prohibit while they also attempt to preserve male leadership in the way Scripture does. And he gives guidelines that will help churches come to their own understanding of where to draw the line on what is appropriate for women and what is inappropriate. He says: "We must continually affirm that *all women* as well as *all men* have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to be used in the ministries of the church, and we should work hard to provide opportunities and encouragement for their various gifts to be used. But these gifts must be used in *accordance with Scripture* if we are to obtain God's fullest blessing on our work."

## **Egalitarianism**

Egalitarianism is the opposite to complementarianism. Throughout his book Grudem uses *evangelical feminist* to mean the same thing as *egalitarian*. With these terms he refers to the view that the Bible does not teach different roles for men and women in marriage or in the church that are based on gender alone (apart from physical differences). An egalitarian would say that there is no unique leadership role that belongs to the husband in marriage, and that all governing and teaching roles in the church should be open to both men and women alike. Egalitarian authors have claimed that women prophets were the same as teachers, that Paul's coworkers were elders, that older women were elders, that women homeowners were elders, that women deacons governed the churches, and that specific women such as Phoebe and Junia had governing authority over the churches. But as Grudem shows, these claims have not turned out to be persuasive.

An ally of egalitarianism is the secular culture, which in its more prominent expressions is strongly opposed to the authority of the Word of God, strongly opposed to the idea that any positions in society should be restricted to men, strongly opposed to the family as God created it to function. Grudem recognizes that not all people in our secular culture hold these positions, but a very influential part of our culture does, especially in the highly influential areas of the media, the entertainment industry, and secular universities.

Grudem is concerned about the large number of egalitarians who show a deeply troubling trend toward a liberal rejection of the authority of the Bible. He does not say that egalitarians are liberals, but that all liberals are egalitarians. He is convinced that the egalitarian position will lead to an increasing breakdown of families, and the weakening and effeminization of the church. It will also make it easier to relativize any of

the unpopular demands of Scripture.

## **Sin**

The headship principle as articulated by the complementarians does not put a woman into an inferior position. She is full of honour. The apostle Paul, who wrote so much about church leadership, never equated it with status, position, and domination. If a man lusts for power, he is committing a sin. Christians are saved to serve. The office of elder and minister is also synonymous with service. Grudem recognizes that male chauvinism has been a major problem. "For most churches through most of history the most serious deviation from biblical standards regarding men and women has not been feminism, but harsh and oppressive male chauvinism." The world is riddled with gender, racial and class hostilities that are rooted not in God's original design for human flourishing but in human rebellion. Men and women and all races are equally sinful as well as equally created in the image of God. Grudem hopes that one of God's purposes in this present controversy is to correct some wrongful assumptions of male superiority that have existed within churches and families in the evangelical world.

## **Experience**

Egalitarians often point to the claims of God's evident blessing on women's pastoral ministry, claims that God is calling certain women to be pastors and Bible teachers, claims about the uniqueness of this time in history, and claims that manhood and womanhood aren't really different. They say that if experience shows that women are qualified for serving as office bearers in the church, it must be right. But God never calls people to disobey His Word. Our decision on this matter must be based on the objective teaching of the inerrant Bible, not on some person's subjective experience, no matter how godly or sincere that person is. Scripture alone is our final authority. In this controversy, then, we must decide if the Bible or experience will be our standard of truth.

## **The Trinity**

Grudem argues that the headship principle, the idea of authority and submission in an interpersonal relationship, did not begin with a few patriarchal men in the Old Testament. Nor did it begin with the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. The idea of submission has always existed in the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity. The idea of authority and submission in interpersonal relationship *never began* - it has always existed in the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. Throughout her history the church has affirmed both the subordination of the Son to the Father with respect to their roles, and the equality of the Son with the Father with respect to their being. From eternity past to infinite eternity the Son is subject to the Father's authority yet equal to Him in being, in value, in personhood, and in honour. Men and women, therefore, should be equally honoured as bearers of the image of God. The doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, shows that someone can be subordinate in authority to someone else but still equal in being, equal in importance, equal in

personhood. And if the Father and the Son can be both equal and different in this way, then husband and wife in the image of God can be equal and different too. And thus the fundamental egalitarian objection, "If different, then not equal, and if equal, then not different," falls apart. This is why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important in this whole controversy.

## **Creation Order**

Paul does not base his teaching on headship on the expectations of powerful non-Christian Roman leaders. He teaches that the leadership role in the church is not appropriate for women, not because they are less capable or competent than men, but because of the order for men and women established by God in creation (1 Tim 2:13,14). Paul is not a male chauvinist. He simply recognizes the creation order. A man is a man. A woman is a woman. He does not abolish the distinctions between male and female. He stresses that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Women's submission to male leadership, therefore, is based on their having a different being, not an inferior being. For this reason he calls women to submit to the headship of man in marriage and in the church. Grudem points out that the creation order is also best for us, because it comes from an all-wise Creator. This creation order truly honours men and women. It does not lead to abuse, but guards against it, because both men and women are equal in value before God. It does not suppress women's gifts and wisdom and insight, as people sometimes have done in the past, but it encourages them.

## **Conclusion**

*Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth* is an invaluable resource for refuting the arguments evangelical feminists are using to redefine the role of women in the church and home. It has appendices with important information that cannot easily be found elsewhere, such as a collection of policy statements on women in ministry from several dozen denominations and parachurch groups. Grudem rightly argues that we may not sit in judgment upon the Bible. We may not interpret the Scriptures in the light of contemporary feminist or any other agenda. When we say that it is impossible to decide what the Bible says on this, we imply that God did not think it an important enough issue to give us clear guidance in His Word. We imply that God has left us instructions that are rather unclear or confusing on this issue. If we allow different views and practices on this issue to exist in the church, we are essentially admitting that both views are right. But that is what all egalitarians want - at least until they attain majority control, and then the complementarian view is not allowed. For example, in 1974 the United Presbyterian Church - USA decided that it would require all candidates for ordination to agree that they would participate in the ordination of women. This valuable and practical book is warmly recommended as a reliable reference work for pastors, theology students, elders and teachers.