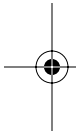


### 3

## THE PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURE

*The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God stands forever.*

ISAIAH 40:8



On a national level, conservative evangelicals have begun to polarize into two incompatible groups: complementarians and egalitarians. For example, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis<sup>1</sup> is an egalitarian. She believes that ministry roles are interchangeable for men and women who are suitably gifted. Though not a professor herself, she is scholarly and well-studied, having written two books.<sup>2</sup> She also is a strict inerrantist.

Wayne Grudem is a complementarian. He believes that certain ministry roles, such as pastor, preacher and elder, should be filled only by men. Like Groothuis, Grudem upholds the doctrine of inerrancy in the sense that he believes all Scripture is authoritative and true and inerrant in the original manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> Currently he serves as a professor of theology at Phoenix Seminary. Before that, he was one of my teachers at Trinity Evangelical Divinity



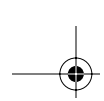
---

<sup>1</sup>Douglas Groothuis, her husband, currently serves on the faculty of Denver Seminary.

<sup>2</sup>Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994) and *Good News for Women* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1997). She has another book coedited with Ron Pierce, to be published by InterVarsity Press in 2004.

<sup>3</sup>For a more in-depth discussion, see Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1980).





School.<sup>4</sup> By my request, he played the role of second reader for my doctoral dissertation. I benefited greatly from his input. Thanks in part to Dr. Grudem, I became Dr. Sarah Sumner.

In 1995 Wayne Grudem copioneered the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). He also cofounded a newsletter called the *CBMW News*, which later became the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (JBMW)*.<sup>5</sup> With John Piper, he also coedited an extensive book entitled *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.<sup>6</sup> Though Piper and Grudem have been extremely influential in Southern Baptist circles, neither is Southern Baptist. John Piper is Baptist, but he belongs to the Baptist General Conference. Wayne Grudem is a Vineyard charismatic who believes that women can prophesy and speak in tongues at church as long as they don't preach the Sunday sermon or teach men. Not all complementarians agree with everything said by Piper and Grudem, the two leading voices for that group. But there is a strong consensus among many complementarian leaders that God has established gender-based roles for marriage and ministry.

Egalitarians are organized in a group called Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE). Conservative Christian scholars such as Ron Pierce and Gordon Fee are members of CBE; they and many others have a built a biblical case for women in leadership. I am not a member of CBE.

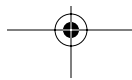
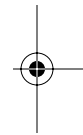
### EVALUATING CHURCH TRADITION

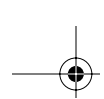
As one might expect, complementarians and egalitarians are often caricatured. For example, complementarians are tagged as legalistic (insensitive to

<sup>4</sup>When I was Wayne Grudem's student, he and I engaged sometimes in fairly lively discussions during his class. Yet both of us were able to refrain from personalizing the other's argument. I remember being in K-41 lecture hall one afternoon in a class of seventy or eighty students when Dr. Grudem and I bantered back and forth in front of everyone in hearty disagreement about the mystery of predestination and free will. After class Dr. Grudem and I rushed to make sure that neither felt offended by the other. And we didn't.

<sup>5</sup>Wayne Grudem has written other books as well, most notably *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>I have met John Piper only once for approximately fifteen minutes when I chauffeured him to the train station near Trinity.





the spirit of the law), and egalitarians are labeled as lax (inattentive to the letter of the law). Both accusations may to some extent manifest an element of truth, but neither is entirely fair.

Unfortunately, complementarians are often referred to as “traditionalists” rather than as “complementarians.” Egalitarians, in turn, are frequently labeled as “feminists” rather than “egalitarians.” It’s true that most egalitarians consider themselves to be evangelical feminists, but that is not the same as being a radical feminist or a secular feminist who holds a low view of the Bible. Egalitarians, then, are evangelical feminists, ones who hold a high view of the Word.

One more thing every reader needs to know—complementarians and egalitarians are conservative Protestants.<sup>7</sup> That is, both sides believe in the primacy of Scripture. In other words, both sides agree that the authority of Scripture is higher than the authority of church tradition.<sup>8</sup> While tradition is duly honored, it should always be subjected to the God-inspired authority of the Word. Practically speaking, then, Scripture should prevail if tradition ever seems to contradict it.

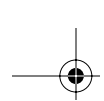
Curiously, the current debate has not been focused on evaluating the biblical accuracy of the tradition. In fact, most born-again believers apprised of this debate are unapprised of the influence of tradition. Very few conservatives have been taught to consider the biases against women that tradition has taught us to bring into our reading of the text. On the contrary, we have been assured that the Spirit will be faithful to prevent us from such error. Unfortunately that assumption is mistaken.

Think about it. If the Spirit of God guided everyone’s reading such that none of us ever made errors, then Spirit-filled Christians would all agree on

<sup>7</sup>There may be Christians outside the evangelical Protestant camp who would see themselves as complementarians or egalitarians. But for the most part this is an in-house debate.

<sup>8</sup>John Wesley preached the rule of testing all tradition (along with reason and experience) against the Bible. Wesley said, “I allow no other rule, whether faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures.” Wesley counted reason, experience and tradition as secondary sources that serve to confirm, evaluate and apply what is found in Scripture. See Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), p. 127.





what is the right interpretation. In reality, fellow elders sitting side by side on the same church board don't always see eye to eye. The Spirit guides our reading and enlightens our understanding, but he doesn't grant us perfect comprehension. Nor does he prevent us from being partial. It is our responsibility, therefore, to test our assumptions against the biblical text as we try to understand the text itself.

### THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF WOMEN

Most Christians don't know it, but complementarians and egalitarians have something else in common. Both are trying hard to bring reform to the church's view of women. But they are doing it in two different ways. Whereas complementarians want Christians to believe that women's *worth* is equal to men's, egalitarians want Christians to believe that women's *rights* are equal to men's.<sup>9</sup> Both are revising church tradition.

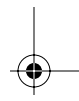
Church tradition says that women are by nature lower than men. Indeed, most of the church fathers promoted this traditional belief. For instance, in the third century A.D. Tertullian wrote a poignant treatise entitled "On the Dress of Women" and presented it to a female audience. The treatise includes these exhortations:

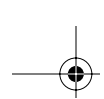
If there dwelt upon earth a faith as great as is the reward of faith which is expected in the heavens, no one of you at all, best beloved sisters, from the time that she had first "known the Lord," and learned (the truth) concerning her own (that is woman's) condition, would have desired too gladsome (not to say too ostentatious) a style of dress; so as not to go about in humble garb, and rather to affect meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve,—the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition. . . .

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on

---

<sup>9</sup>Egalitarians very much agree that women's worth is equal to men's. But as they see it, her worth entitles her to exercise equal rights.





this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die. And you think about adorning yourself over and above your “tunics of skins” (Gen 3:21)?<sup>10</sup>

The influence of Tertullian is incalculable. This is the same theologian who coined the word *Trinity*, developed certain aspects of the doctrine of original sin and defended the two natures of Christ. Yet it was he who believed that women are to blame for the entrance of sin into the world. Tertullian is famous for having uttered the words “God's judgment of this sex lives on.”

When one pastor heard me say this, he responded defensively, “The teaching of Tertullian is way too distant and removed to have any bearing on what contemporary Christians think of women.” In one sense, I agree. Today hardly a believer would ever want to say that women “must of necessity” bear “the guilt” of original sin. Neither Piper nor Grudem would ever want to say that either. Today we're not arguing about women's perpetual guilt for the fall of humankind because conservative evangelicals don't believe that. As Christians, we trust in the atonement of Christ to take away the sins of all who put their faith in the Messiah. With that, we tell ourselves that we do not believe that women are inferior to men. But as I will try to show throughout the rest of this book, our theology of women is not so pure.

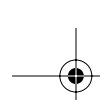
Let's take another look at Tertullian. As a matter of principle, Tertullian considered it impossible to believe that Paul the apostle ever would have allowed a Christian woman—“this sex”—to baptize any person, much less teach a man. In his treatise “On Baptism” he interjects, “For how credible would it seem, that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with




---

<sup>10</sup>Tertullian, “On the Dress of Women,” trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 4:14.





over-boldness, should give a female the power of teaching and of baptizing! 'Let them be silent,' he says, 'and at home consult their own husbands' (I Cor 14:34-35)."<sup>11</sup>

Is it fair for us to imagine that Tertullian may have been biased? I say it is. For if everyone agreed with Tertullian's point of view, then women would be forbidden even to "learn with over-boldness." I suppose that would mean that women could not attend seminary or study the Bible privately too much. Instead, women would be required to hold back.

### HOW THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF WOMEN IS BEING REVISED

Of all the seminaries in the United States, I chose to attend Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, specifically because the men on the faculty maintain a very high view of Scripture. For five years I had the privilege to study with professors such as Dr. Wayne Grudem, Dr. Douglas Moo,<sup>12</sup> Dr. Ray Ortlund Jr.<sup>13</sup> and others. All three of these professors are strict complementarians; that is, all of them believe in limited roles for women in church leadership. Yet none of them are forwarding Tertullian's belief that women should be prohibited from learning.

In contradistinction from church tradition, the award-winning book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, says it is misrepresentative for anyone to say that complementarians believe women should not be privileged to study the Scriptures. As one contributor puts it, "There are no role distinctions for learning from Christ . . . certainly women *are* to learn and apply the Word of God. This is vitally important."<sup>14</sup> Moo agrees. Commenting on I Timothy 2:11, he goes on to say, "That Paul wants Christian women to learn is an important point, for such



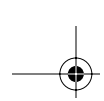
<sup>11</sup>Tertullian, "On Baptism," trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:677.

<sup>12</sup>Dr. Moo now teaches at Wheaton College.

<sup>13</sup>Dr. Ray Ortlund Jr. now serves as a senior pastor in Atlanta.

<sup>14</sup>James Borland, "Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), p. 118.





a practice was not generally encouraged by the Jews.”<sup>15</sup>

As you can see, each man openly counters church tradition. Indeed, for the most part, nearly all evangelicals have dramatically departed from Tertullian’s way of thinking about women. We have also departed from the traditional views of three other luminaries of the past: Ambrose, Augustine and Aquinas. There’s a noticeable difference between the views of these church fathers and the views of my complementarian professors at Trinity.

Consider Ambrose, the bishop of Milan from 374 to 397. In his treatise “On Paradise,” Ambrose wrote, “In fact, even though the man was created outside Paradise (i.e., in an inferior place), he is found to be superior, while woman, though created in a better place (i.e., inside Paradise) is found inferior.”<sup>16</sup> Apparently, for Ambrose, no qualification needs to be made. To him, it was a brute fact of nature that men are superior to women. But for Ortlund, it is not. Ortlund proclaims that the equality of personhood, value and dignity for the entire human race is a brute fact of Christian theology.<sup>17</sup> Or to quote Piper, “boasting in either sex as superior to the other is folly.”<sup>18</sup>

Next, take Augustine—probably the most renowned theologian in church history. Augustine believed that God did not create the woman for any reason other than procreation. Explicitly he said:

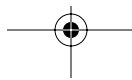
If it were not the case that the woman was created to be man’s helper specifically for the production of children, then why would she have been created as a “helper” (Gen. 2:18)? Was it so that she might work the land with him? No

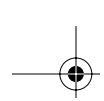
<sup>15</sup>At the same time, Moo says the apostle Paul’s point is to explain the manner in which women should learn. See Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11-15” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), p. 183.

<sup>16</sup>Ambrose, “On Paradise,” quoted in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, ed. Thomas Halton, *Message of the Fathers of the Church 13* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983), p. 30.

<sup>17</sup>See Ray Ortlund Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1—3” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), p. 100.

<sup>18</sup>See John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), p. 49.





because there did not yet exist any such labor for which he needed a helper, and even if such work had been required, a male would have made a better assistant. One can also posit that the reason for her creation as a helper had to do with the companionship she could provide for the man, if perhaps he got bored with his solitude. Yet for company and conversation, how much more agreeable it is for two male friends to dwell together than for a man and a woman! . . . I cannot think of any reason for woman's being made as man's helper, if we dismiss the reason of procreation.<sup>19</sup>

I cannot overemphasize how dissimilar this view is from today's conservative views on both sides of the debate.

I remember one day in the library when Wayne Grudem asked me in a puzzled tone of voice, "What are you going to do when you graduate?" I told him, "I don't know." Politely he conveyed that I might not be able to find a job for myself that would utilize my theological training, but never did he suggest that my purpose in life was strictly for procreation.

Third, it is revealing to read a line from Thomas Aquinas.<sup>20</sup> He said that women are dominated by sexual appetite and that men are ruled by reason.<sup>21</sup> (How true is that?) Another thing Thomas said was that women depend on men for everything in life while men depend on women only for procreation.<sup>22</sup> Obviously things have changed. Many pastors today heavily depend on women to do most of the work. Women are the ones who usually care for the poor and visit the sick and pray for those in need. Women run the nurseries, answer the church phone and organize most church events. Contemporary pastors rely so much on women that many Christian women feel used. Aquinas did not have a category for using Christian

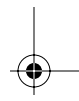
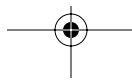


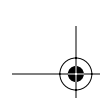
<sup>19</sup>Augustine, "Literal Commentary on Genesis," quoted in *Women in the Early Church*, pp. 28-29. I use Clark's wording because her translation of Augustine is relatively easy to understand.

<sup>20</sup>Though Aquinas is often associated with Roman Catholic thinking, it is unreasonable to imagine that his influence in Christendom is neatly contained within the confines of the walls of the Catholic church. For one thing, he predates the Reformation by three hundred years; for another thing, his Aristotelian theology was celebrated throughout the Western church.

<sup>21</sup>See Ruth Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), p. 164. Tucker and Liefeld use the language of Will Durant, who in turn summarizes Aquinas.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.





women, because he did not see women as useful. Aquinas went even further, reducing the value of women as mothers. He said, “Children ought to love their father more than their mother.”<sup>23</sup> Though many conservative pastors think it’s good to be traditional in their thinking about women, surely we can see that it is not. If anyone ever dared to preach a truly traditional sermon on the nature of women, they would instantly be judged as bigoted and unfit to teach the Word.

Piper and Grudem understand this. In the preface of their book, they insert as an opening caveat, “We are uncomfortable with the term ‘traditionalist’ because it implies an unwillingness to let Scripture challenge traditional patterns of behavior.”<sup>24</sup>

## TWO NOVEL IDEAS

If the church fathers were prejudiced against women, and we know it, then we should be careful not to absorb their bias. Traditional Christian thinking is not the same thing as biblical thinking about women. Even someone as conservative as Daniel Doriani says that Tertullian’s rhetoric is “loaded with . . . misogyny.”<sup>25</sup> Thus I pose the question, Why would anyone look to a misogynist for help in discerning the biblical teaching on women? Misogynists are called misogynists because of their degrading view of women. The word *misogyny* literally means “hatred of women.”

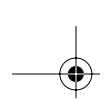
It is unwise to enshrine Tertullian as a leading authority on the proper role of women in the church. And yet, certain professors seem to do this. William Weinrich, for instance, argues for an all-male pastorate partly on the basis of

<sup>23</sup>The full quote is: “Strictly speaking, however, the father should be loved more than the mother. For the father and mother are loved as principles of our natural origin. Now the father is principle in a more excellent way than the mother, because he is the active principle, while the mother is a passive and material principle. Consequently, strictly speaking, the father is to be loved more.” See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, quoted by Sister Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 B.C.-A.D. 1250* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 405.

<sup>24</sup>Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. xiv.

<sup>25</sup>Daniel Doriani, “Appendix I: History of the Interpretation of I Timothy 2” in *Women in the Church*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), pp. 222-26.





church tradition.<sup>26</sup> He recognizes that “misogynous remarks and opinions of inferiority do exist” within the tradition.<sup>27</sup> But he summarily dismisses those misogynous remarks.<sup>28</sup> He cites Tertullian as a “representative voice” of the viewpoint that contends that “to men alone” it is given “to be pastors and sacramental ministers.”<sup>29</sup>

It’s critical for Christians to embrace church tradition, but not when it is unbiblical. When it comes to core issues of doctrinal truth, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the teachings of the church fathers are instructive. But when it comes to other issues, such as the identity of Christian women, which are far less developed—and far less grounded in Scripture—the teachings of the church fathers need to be reconsidered and reformed.

It was customary, not biblical, for the church fathers to denounce the nature of women.<sup>30</sup> Most people in their culture did the same.<sup>31</sup> Women were



<sup>26</sup>For instance, he cites the *Statuta Ecclesiae antiqua* written by Gennadius of Marseilles (c. A.D. 480), which says, “A woman, however learned and holy, may not presume to teach men in the assembly” (*in conventu*). See William Weinrich, “Women in the History of the Church: Learned and Holy, But Not Pastors,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), p. 277.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

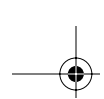
<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.* Weinrich argues that the language of the Gennadius’ *Statuta*—“however learned and holy”—as well as the exaggerated language Innocent III used of Jesus’ mother—“that Mary stands higher than all the apostles”—indicates that ultimately and officially considerations of intellect and sanctity were not surprising nor affirming of women in leadership. Throughout church history, Mary has been praised for her motherhood and faith in God. She is not representative of women in church leadership. Similarly, for it to be said that even learned and holy women “may not presume to teach men in the assembly” does not decisively indicate that Gennadius respected women as equals of men. He might have been saying that even when a woman is holy and learned, she is inferior to men. This kind of attitude is prevalent, not unusual.

<sup>29</sup>Weinrich, “Women in the History of the Church,” p. 273.

<sup>30</sup>Tertullian, for instance, lived in a Roman culture conditioned by Cynics, Stoics, Neo-Pythagoreans, Neo-Platonists and Gnostics—all of whom practiced asceticism. In an ascetic culture, virginity is praised whereas marriage and women are degraded. See M. Rosamond Nugent, *Portrait of the Consecrated Woman in Greek Christian Literature of the First Four Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1941), pp. 1-5.

<sup>31</sup>Much of early Christian thought was shaped by some combination of the dissimilar influences of Plato and Aristotle, neither of whom was Christian. Whereas Plato believed that men and women were of the same nature and could act out the same virtues and functions, Aristotle believed women are a “privation of man” and thus are passive and irrational in relation to men and thus unequal in virtue. See Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, pp. 79-88.





seen as gullible and seductive and inferior.<sup>32</sup> Today this might sound crazy, almost fabricated, as if some radical, godless feminist made it up. But it's true, and Christians need to know it. In the past, the question of women's place in the church was a no-brainer. Women were assigned to subordinate roles because women themselves were thought to be essentially inferior.

Today we have rejected this idea. Today both sides of the current debate insist that women are not inferior to men. It's important for us to hear this because the concern keeps being raised that women in church leadership is a novel idea in church history. What I'm trying to say is that *women's equal worth* is a novel idea in church history. Both ideas are relatively new to Christian thinking. The commonly known phrase that men and women are "equal before God in personhood" did not come up until recently.<sup>33</sup> In that sense, evangelical feminism is no more revolutionary than the very conservative teachings of Grudem.

It's embarrassing for us to talk about this since most of us aren't informed about our history. No one ever told us that our Christian heritage is filled with awful ideas about women. No one ever told us about the residue of tradition and how it might be tainting our opinions. It's tough news to discover that our reading of the Scripture may not be as objective as we think.

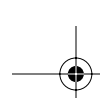
Besides that, it's a little overwhelming to process the suggestion that God might desire to use the likes of us to reform a long tradition of the past. Most of us don't even read history, much less expect God to use us to make history. How many of us today are thinking about the way that our generation fits into the universal schema of church history? It's probably no big deal when any of us find out about historical transitions in the church. We can read about Luther and the Protestant Reformation without being riveted inside.

---

<sup>32</sup>There were exceptions. In A.D. 404, for example, Jerome said of a woman named Paula, "no talent was ever more tractable than hers. She was slow at speaking and quick at listening. . . . She had memorized the Scriptures . . . but even more she followed the spiritual understanding of Scripture. . . . She chanted the Psalms in Hebrew and her diction echoed no trace of the distinctive Latin character of the Latin language." See Jerome, Epistle 108, as translated and quoted by Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>33</sup>To view the Danvers Statement, see <[www.cbmw.org/AboutCBMW](http://www.cbmw.org/AboutCBMW)>.





But it takes faith to believe that God might be calling our generation to move the church into a more biblical practice.

Of course the Bible has not changed, nor has the timelessness of its truth. What has changed is our confidence in the tradition.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was your initial reaction when you read the excerpts from Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine and Aquinas?
2. What is the difference between a biblical view of women and a traditional view of women?
3. What do you think about the church being informed by men such as Tertullian, whose writing about women is “loaded with misogyny”? Do you trust the early church fathers to have passed down a right interpretation of verses in the Scripture about women?
4. In what sense is the teaching of “women’s equal worth” a revolutionary idea in the church?

