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# “EQUAL IN BEING, UNEQUAL IN ROLE”

*Exploring the Logic of Woman’s Subordination*

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

According to Aristotle, the male is “by nature fitter for command than the female.”<sup>1</sup> According to John Piper and Wayne Grudem, male authority and female submission are integral to the “deeper differences,” the “underlying nature” and the “true meaning” of manhood and womanhood.<sup>2</sup> Men have the inherent right and responsibility to direct the affairs of others. Women are meant to be in submission, to have their affairs directed by men.<sup>3</sup> It seems that in both Aristotelian thought and evangelical patriarchy, the subordination of women to male authority follows from what is understood to be the created nature of maleness and femaleness.<sup>4</sup> Authority is deemed natural and fitting for men, and submission is deemed natural and fitting for women.

Yet there is one respect in which evangelical patriarchy has departed from Aristotle—and from the Western theologians and philosophers who have followed in his intellectual footsteps.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle maintained that it is precisely *because* “the male

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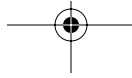
<sup>1</sup>Aristotle *Politics* 1259.b.3.

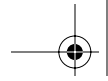
<sup>2</sup>John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers,” in *RBMW*, pp. 60, 87.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 78-79; and John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in *RBMW*, pp. 35-52.

<sup>4</sup>In this essay the *nature* of a thing is understood to mean its inherent character, intended purpose, defining qualities, essence or being.

<sup>5</sup>In *The Less Noble Sex* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), Nancy Tuana develops the thesis that “Aristotle’s conception of [woman as] the misbegotten man held sway in science, philosophy, and theology at least until the nineteenth century” (p. ix).





is by nature superior, and the female inferior, [that] the one rules, and the other is ruled.”<sup>6</sup> Historically, male superiority was assumed to inhere primarily in a natural male advantage in morality and rationality. But when evangelical patriarchalists today claim that male leadership is natural and fitting given the deeper differences of masculinity and femininity, they accompany this claim with protestations that women are not morally or rationally deficient with respect to men; rather, men and women are “equal in being” but “different” (that is, unequal) in “function” or “role.”<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle’s conclusion—that men are by nature fitter for command than women—has been retained. Aristotle’s premise—that men are by nature morally and rationally superior to women—has been rejected (which leaves the rationale for the conclusion somewhat unclear). Today it is undeniable that many women *are* morally and intellectually qualified for leadership. Although some patriarchalists may wish to categorize such women as “exceptions,” the ban on women assuming “male” leadership roles is without exception. No matter how stellar a woman’s spiritual and intellectual qualifications, this can *never* overrule the unalterable fact of her female nature, which dictates that in church and home she must not have authority over a man but must support and submit to man’s authority over her.

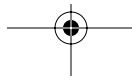
But notice that in evangelical patriarchy a woman’s subordination still follows—necessarily and permanently—from what she necessarily and permanently *is* by nature (namely, female). Her personal being decides and determines her subordinate status. Piper and Grudem concur: “Scripture and nature teach that personal manhood and womanhood are indeed relevant in deciding . . . who gives primary leadership in the relationship.”<sup>8</sup> Men’s authority and women’s subordination are integral to “what true manhood and womanhood *are*.”<sup>9</sup> The essence of masculinity is

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle *Politics* 1254.b.10.

<sup>7</sup>I will refer to nonegalitarian evangelicals as *patriarchalists* or in some cases *subordinationists*, since these terms identify most clearly the key concepts—male rule and female subordination—that distinguish this view from that of evangelical egalitarians. For the use of the term *patriarchy* to identify the doctrine of male leadership, see Steven Tracy, “Headship with a Heart: How Biblical Patriarchy Actually Prevents Abuse,” *Christianity Today*, February 2003, pp. 50-54. Tracy defines patriarchy as “the affirmation of male authority over females,” which is the sense in which I use it here. The issue at stake in this debate is precisely the concept of patriarchy—and not of hierarchy or tradition or complementarity (all legitimate concepts in themselves). For further discussion of the terminology issue, see the introduction to this volume.

<sup>8</sup>Piper and Grudem, “Overview,” p. 87. Conversely, they feel dismayed that “‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ as such are now often seen as irrelevant factors in determining fitness for leadership” (p. xiii).

<sup>9</sup>Piper, “Vision,” p. 34, emphasis added.





a sense of leadership, and the essence of femininity is a disposition to submit to male leadership.<sup>10</sup> In other words, men are to lead because authority is a constitutive element of masculinity, and women are to submit to male leadership because submission is a constitutive element of femininity. A man is fit to lead by virtue of his male nature. A woman, by virtue of her female nature, is not.

Despite the rhetoric of “roles” and “equality,” it seems that a fundamental similarity remains between Aristotle and the evangelical patriarchalists of today. Woman’s subordinate status is—as it has always been—decided solely by woman’s female being. Whether woman is deemed unable to rule because of her mental and moral inferiority (historic patriarchy) or whether just *being* female makes a woman unfit for authority or decision making (today’s patriarchy), it appears to be on account of a prior assumption about the meaning and nature of womanhood that women are not expected or permitted to share authority equally with men. By virtue of her female being a woman is fit to be subject to man’s will and unfit to exercise her own will with the freedom and authority accorded a man. Nothing she *does* either confirms or negates this state of affairs. Aristotle would have agreed.

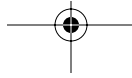
#### *Unpacking the Rhetoric of Roles*

Although evangelical patriarchy is similar to traditional patriarchy in key respects, it also trades heavily on the distinctive and historically novel claim that women are “equal in being but unequal in role.” In other words, women are the equals of men spiritually and in their “being,” but when it comes to living out the meaning and purpose of manhood and womanhood, women must submit to male rule. This distinction between being and function—or ontology and role—is fundamental to the doctrine of male leadership today. The distinction between equal being and unequal role serves as the hermeneutical lens through which the biblical data are interpreted. It is the theoretical construct that permits evangelical patriarchalists to interpret the submission texts as universal statements on the creational “roles” of manhood and womanhood, while also acknowledging biblical teaching on the spiritual and ontological equality of man and woman.

The “role” relationship of woman’s subordination to man’s authority is typically presented as a matter of “complementarity,” “mutual interdependence” and “beneficial differences” between the sexes, without any implication of woman’s inferior-

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 35-36.





ity.<sup>11</sup> The carefully chosen terminology serves to make this position appear plausible and persuasive to modern ears. Who can deny that there must be different roles, functional distinctions and a certain order in any human society? Or that male and female are complementary? Given the choice of rhetoric, it all sounds quite sensible and acceptable. As a result, many evangelicals find themselves perplexed by two antithetical interpretations of biblical teaching on gender relations—egalitarianism and patriarchalism—both of which appear to be plausible in some respects and problematic in other respects. It can seem to be a toss-up.

But what if it is not logically possible for the same person to be at once spiritually and ontologically equal *and* permanently, comprehensively and necessarily subordinate? What if this sort of subordination cannot truthfully be described as merely a “role” or “function” that has no bearing on one’s inherent being or essence?

I believe we can choose between the two biblical interpretations by assessing each one in light of two fundamental premises. The first premise is theological: according to Scripture, women and men are equal spiritually and ontologically—a point that is uncontested in the gender debate. The second premise is logical: the foundational and indisputable law of noncontradiction, which states that A and non-A cannot both be true at the same time in the same respect.<sup>12</sup> The law of noncontradiction is not a mere human construct that God’s truth somehow transcends. Rather, it is necessary and fundamental to all meaningful discourse and communication—including God’s revelation of his Word in Scripture. That is why biblical scholars who hold to the Bible’s infallibility seek to resolve apparent contradictions in Scripture: it is axiomatic that if the Bible contradicts itself, then it cannot be true in all that it affirms.<sup>13</sup>

Evangelical patriarchalists contend that women are unequal in a different respect from the way they are equal. I will argue that given its nature and rationale, woman’s unequal “role” entails woman’s unequal being. Thus it contradicts woman’s equality in being and so renders contradictory (and therefore untrue) the evangelical patriarchal interpretation of Scripture that sees woman as equal but subordinate. This leaves only two logically tenable options. Either (I) women are created by God for perpetual subordination to men and so are not equal to men in

<sup>11</sup>John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “Preface,” in *RBMW*, p. xiv.

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle *Metaphysics* Gamma 3.1005b.

<sup>13</sup>See Ronald H. Nash, *Life’s Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 194–201, 207.



their nature/being/essence, or (2) women are created equal with men and so cannot be permanently, comprehensively and necessarily subordinate to men. But option 1 contradicts premise 1. Since Scripture cannot contradict itself, option 2 is the only position that is both logically and biblically tenable.

In part one of the chapter it will be argued that the *equal being/unequal role* construct fails to defend the subordination of women against the implication of women’s inferiority.<sup>14</sup> First, I will consider what is meant by spiritual equality and ontological equality (equality of being) and will show how evangelical patriarchy fails to honor and acknowledge such equality. Although spiritual equality is entailed by ontological equality, it will be addressed separately because of its particular relevance to this debate. I will then consider the nature and significance of the “different roles” that patriarchalists assign to women and men and will argue that these “roles” are not just about function but are fundamentally a matter of ontology or being. The purpose of these considerations will be to show that evangelical patriarchy neither respects women’s equality nor limits women’s subordination to a merely functional role. Instead, the nature of women’s inequality in “function” implies, by logical necessity, women’s inequality in being.

In part two of the chapter I will respond to key counterarguments—ways in which proponents of patriarchy have attempted to defend the efficacy and validity of the *equal being/unequal role* construct against objections to it.<sup>15</sup> This will include a brief critique of the analogy that patriarchalists draw between women’s subordination in “role” and what they see as the eternal “role subordination” in the Trinity. I will argue that even if there were an eternal subordination of the Son to the Father, the analogy fails fundamentally.

## PART I

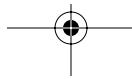
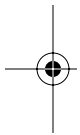
### *Equality in “Being”*

A biblical understanding of human equality should begin with Genesis 1:26-28, where women and men together and without distinction are declared to be created in God’s image and are given authority over all creation. In both their being (the divine image) and their calling (authority and dominion) men and women are cre-

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<sup>14</sup>The material in this chapter will build on and develop ideas presented in Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), especially pp. 27-83. Hereafter *GNFW*.

<sup>15</sup>Less compelling counterarguments will be addressed in footnotes in part one.





ationally equal. On the basis of this foundational text, as well as the overall teaching of Scripture,<sup>16</sup> evangelical egalitarians affirm an equality of human worth and human rights between women and men; that is, whatever human rights there may be, they belong no less to women than to men (since women are no less human than men).<sup>17</sup> From this follows an equality of consideration, whereby women and men alike have opportunity to earn and attain the place in church and society that is appropriate for each individual's God-given abilities and calling.

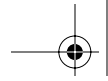
While this understanding of human equality resembles that of classical (nineteenth and early twentieth century) liberal political philosophy, it is here grounded in and justified solely by the biblical revelation of God's creational design for male and female humanity. This happens to be one point at which secular culture got it right, doubtless due in large part to the West's Christian heritage (a more prevalent influence in earlier centuries than at present). A task of the biblical thinker is to agree with culture where it agrees with the Bible.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>See chapters four through twenty-two in this volume; see also *GNTW*, especially chaps. I, 4-8.

<sup>17</sup>Nineteenth-century American feminists believed women's rights were simply the basic human rights applied equally to women. (See chapter twenty-four in this volume for discussion of early feminist thought.) In the feminist and broader cultural ideologies of recent decades, the notion of "rights" has often been abused and overextended. This is not the sense in which I speak of "rights" here. Claiming one's right to something is not, in itself, an unbiblical concept. Paul, for example, occasionally spoke of having rights, such as the right to receive recompense for his labor or to take "a believing wife" along with him in Christian ministry (I Cor 9:4-12). Another example is the Syro-phenician woman who argued her case with Jesus, claiming (in essence) her right to ask for healing for her daughter. Jesus applauded her response and granted her request (Mk 7:24-30).

<sup>18</sup>Some seem to have missed this point entirely, insisting—evidently on the basis of a similarity between the equality of biblical egalitarianism and the equality of classical liberalism—that biblical egalitarianism is invalid because it is not grounded primarily in Scripture but is dependent on extrabiblical political premises. See, for example, Thomas R. Schreiner, review of *Good News for Women*, *Themelios* 23, no. 1: 89-90; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 187 n. 16, 200; and Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 33, 277, 281, 291 n. 16. Both Schreiner and Sumner misconstrue my remarks in *GNTW*, pp. 46-47, where I simply describe the classical liberal understanding of equality (which nineteenth-century feminists put into practice) and note that this understanding of equality is the logical and ethically consistent outworking of fundamental biblical principles. Thus the political philosophy serves as an illustration of—not as a justification for—the sort of equality that is most consistent with the tenets of Scripture. At no point is biblical gender equality grounded in or morally justified on the basis of classical liberalism or feminism. For a historical and cultural analysis of the relationship between biblical equality and feminism, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994; reprint Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1997).





Although there are variations in ability between individuals, the human equality between women (as a class) and men (as a class) assures that women are inherently able to participate equally with men in the various distinctively human activities.<sup>19</sup> Due to both cultural and biological factors, there are some generalizable differences in behavior between women and men, and these differences not only determine different sexual and reproduction functions but may also make certain social roles generally (although not universally) more suitable for one gender than the other. However, these differences do not warrant the traditional notion that women are deficient in rationality and so are suited to be subordinate to men. Rather, the generally different aptitudes and proclivities of male and female point to ways in which women and men can complement one another as they live and work together in the context of a full recognition of their essential equality in maturity, giftedness, and social and spiritual value.

It should be evident from these observations that egalitarians do not affirm an equality of identity or sameness between women and men. Male and female are not identical. Sexual differences exist, and these differences make a difference. Sexual roles, therefore, are not interchangeable between men and women.<sup>20</sup> Egalitarians and patriarchalists agree that women and men are not equal in the sense of being identical and that the differences between men and women are complementary and mutually beneficial. But there is considerable disagreement as to the nature, meaning and significance of these differences.

There are a number of different ways in which people, or groups of people, can be said to be equal.<sup>21</sup> It seems that evangelical patriarchalists reject all types of equality between men and women, except equality in “being” (essence, nature, ontology) and human value. The question before us is whether the patriarchal paradigm in fact acknowledges female humanity to be fully human, equal in value to male humanity.

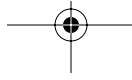
If women and men are both fully human, then women (as a class) and men (as a class) share equally in the distinctively human capacities, and no woman can be deemed inferior to a man in any such area solely on account of her womanhood. Distinctively human capacities are those that distinguish humans from other creatures. For example, higher intellectual functions such as rationality, ethical reason-

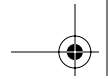
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<sup>19</sup>More on this below.

<sup>20</sup>A sexual role has to do with sexual functions (marriage, parenthood, etc.). Ministries such as teaching the Bible and shepherding a church are not sexual functions.

<sup>21</sup>See *GNFW*, pp. 45-49, where different kinds of equality are explained and delineated.





ing and the ability to analyze abstract concepts are unique to humans.<sup>22</sup> Therefore it cannot be said that any given woman is any more or less likely than any given man to be fully equipped—in her God-given being—for such higher functions of the mind. More specifically, if women and men are equal in essence or being, then female humanity does not, in and of itself, suffer from a net deficiency of the valuable qualities and inherent capacities distinctively characteristic of human nature and human behavior.<sup>23</sup>

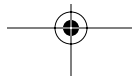
Yet the doctrine of male rule presupposes that woman is uniquely designed by God *not* to perform certain distinctively human activities. In order to be true to her divine design and her God-given femininity, woman must not engage in these activities (which, per patriarchy, are no longer distinctively human but reclassified as distinctively masculine). By contrast, there are no uniquely human behaviors from which male humans must abstain in order to be true to their masculine being. No, masculinity is defined precisely in terms of certain distinctively human activities that only men are deemed fit to do—namely, the spiritual discernment and high-level cognitive/rational behaviors involved in making decisions and directing and taking final responsibility for one or more other human beings.<sup>24</sup>

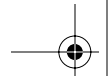
According to the patriarchal paradigm, women do have their own uniquely fem-

<sup>22</sup>At least some angels are probably also endowed with such capabilities, but the comparison here is with earthly creatures. Some animals may have some rational function but certainly not at the level of which humans are capable.

<sup>23</sup>Of course some individuals, male or female, will be less gifted in certain distinctively human activities than other individuals, whether by difference in training or innate ability. But this is a matter of variation between individuals; the point at issue here is variation between womanhood and manhood. That is, is being female in and of itself sufficient to render a person inferior, or likely to be inferior, in uniquely human capacities?

<sup>24</sup>The question of women's inherent *ability* to perform these tasks can elicit considerable equivocation among patriarchalists. The historically traditional view—based (erroneously) on I Timothy 2:14—is that women are constitutionally unfit for leadership because they are more easily deceived. This rationale for women's subordination is largely rejected today; but see Thomas Schreiner and Daniel Doriani, who have proposed a rationale similar to the traditional one, in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), pp. 145-46, 262-67. (For a response to their view, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Leading Him up the Garden Path: Further Thoughts on I Timothy 2:11-15," *Priscilla Papers*, Spring 2002, pp. 11-12.) More recently, Robert Saucy also offers an ontological basis for male leadership when he suggests that the implications of the difference in "spirit" between maleness and femaleness (a notion he takes from M. Scott Peck) could provide a rationale for women's subordination to men. Robert L. Saucy, "The 'Order' and 'Equality' of Galatians 3:28," in *Women and Men in Ministry*, ed. Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. TenElshof (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), p. 154.





inine activities not shared by men—for example, bearing and rearing their young and being submissive and obedient to the master of the home. But note that these activities are not unique to human beings; rather, childbearing and nursing are shared with females of all mammal species, and submission to the household master is shared (albeit in a different sense!) with a wide array of household pets.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, it is a privilege and joy for women to bear and rear children. The point is not to diminish the value of motherhood but to note that while childbearing and nursing are distinctively female capabilities, they are not, in and of themselves, among the distinctively human capabilities (such as high-level rationality).

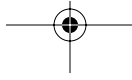
Patriarchal men, for their part, govern their homes and churches—making decisions, teaching the whole body of believers, ascertaining and making final determinations of God’s will for their families—and women do not. Furthermore, women *could* bear authority and responsibility for these things equally with men, but they do not because they are not permitted to do so. Men, by contrast, do not bear or nurse children, simply because they are not *able* to do so. The one is the “can’t” of permission denied; the other is the “can’t” of personal inability. This is not a case of equally dividing different opportunities and abilities between the sexes.

Nonetheless, those who insist that the woman must submit her mind and will to that of the man who is the master of the household also insist that the woman is equal to the man in her humanity and human value. But the full humanity of womanhood is not honored or recognized when what is deemed constitutive of femininity is shared by the lower species while what is deemed constitutive of masculinity is unique to the human species. This delineation of male-female “difference” fails to acknowledge the full humanity of woman. This is not to say that people with less ability in any of the distinctively human functions are somehow less human. However, when all women—purely by virtue of their womanhood—are denied opportunity to fully engage all the uniquely human capacities (to the degree of their ability), this logically implies that womanhood per se is characterized by a deficit of certain distinctively human traits.

Always, with patriarchy, it is the female human’s *being* that is the decisive factor; it alone is sufficient to consign her to being subordinate. Because her human being is female, she is subordinate. As Raymond Ortlund puts it, “A man, just by virtue

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<sup>25</sup>If this analogy seems a bit strong, it should be noted that Piper and Grudem (“Overview,” p. 87) draw a comparison between the woman and the animals in Genesis 2, arguing that just as the animals were to be submissive to the man, so was the woman.





of his manhood, is called to lead for God. A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood, is called to help for God.”<sup>26</sup> So while woman is said to be equal in her essential being, she is deemed subordinate precisely because of her essential being. Yet the notion that woman is equal *in* her being yet unequal *by virtue of* her being is incoherent.

Could this inconsistency be reconciled by asserting that woman is equal in her *human* being but not equal in her *female* being? It seems not. There is, after all, no generic humanity; human “being” is either male or female. If I am equal in my human being, then I am equal in my female human being, because female is what my human being is. Or, conversely, human is what my female being is. At all times and in every respect, my “being” is essentially and intrinsically female and human. If I am unequal as a *female* human being, then I am unequal as a human being.

Given the above considerations, it seems warranted to conclude that patriarchy cannot fully acknowledge woman’s human equality in being but rather implies her inferiority in being. This is even further in evidence when we examine woman’s *spiritual* place in the patriarchal scheme of things.

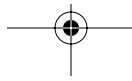
### *Spiritual Equality*

The human spirit—that which enables us to know and communicate with God—is inherent in the divine image. This spiritual capacity is definitive of and unique to human beings, among all God’s earthly creatures. Scripture is clear that women and men equally bear God’s image and rule over God’s creation (Gen 1:26-28). God, at creation, gave spirituality and authority to male and female alike. This is the divine, uncorrupted, creational design. Nowhere in the Genesis creation account is this qualified by any mention of different kinds of spirituality or different degrees of authority for man and for woman.<sup>27</sup>

If women and men are equal before God, then surely God desires the same sort of relationship with female believers that God desires with male believers. There is no reason to believe that God’s treatment and expectations of women with respect to spiritual concerns should be significantly different from God’s treatment and expectations of men. By extension, we in the church have no basis for treating women as somehow less fit for certain spiritual gifts and ministries. Nor should we expect any woman to have a more distantly removed or “different” sort of relationship

<sup>26</sup>Raymond C. Ortlund, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3,” in *RBMW*, p. 102.

<sup>27</sup>The Fall did not normatively change the male-female equality established at creation; see *GNFW*, chap. 5. See also chapter four in this volume.





with God simply because she is a woman.<sup>28</sup> Equality before God means that every believer may approach God, and minister to God, on the same terms—through Jesus Christ alone, in submission to the Holy Spirit.

So let us consider how the truth of spiritual equality fares in the context of woman’s subordination to man’s authority. In evangelical patriarchy today, the authority reserved exclusively for men is largely a *spiritual* authority. That is, within the contexts of marriage and the church, the exposition of God’s Word and the discernment of God’s will (and the decision making that follows such discernment) are deemed the “final responsibility” of men alone. Although there occasionally appears some general expression of concern that women not appear too authoritative (i.e., masculine) in everyday interactions in society at large—Piper, for example, wants to ensure that if a woman gives a man directions to the freeway, she does so in a properly feminine (submissive) manner<sup>29</sup>—the primary concern appears to be the exercise of spiritual authority.

Evangelical patriarchy teaches that the man is divinely charged with responsibility and authority to discern God’s will on behalf of himself and his wife and children. Whether or not he gives consideration to his wife’s insights, interests and expertise (as patriarchal teaching typically urges him to do), his “final decision” concerning God’s will for the family has binding authority.<sup>30</sup> As George Knight puts it, “Because the headship of the husband is established by God, the husband who fulfills that role does so as a servant of God, and the leadership given to him in this role expresses God’s authority in the marriage.” Given that the husband’s authority over the wife represents the authority of God, a wife “should submit to her husband as she submits to the Lord.” Such submission is analogous to “the godly submission a Christian renders to the Lord Jesus.”<sup>31</sup>

Patriarchal doctrine requires, in both marriage and the larger believing community, that men obey and hear from God directly while women obey and hear from God by hearing from and obeying the man or men in spiritual authority over them. A woman does not have direct authority under God but is under the spiritual au-

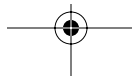
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<sup>28</sup>Individuals (both male and female) will, of course, have different kinds of relationships with God. But these differences will be due to a host of factors relating to the unique circumstances of each person; they will not be strictly on account of gender.

<sup>29</sup>Piper, “Vision,” p. 50.

<sup>30</sup>See Wayne Grudem, “Wives Like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them: I Peter 3:1-7,” in *RBMW*, p. 207. However, the wife is exempted from obeying a decision that is overtly immoral.

<sup>31</sup>George W. Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church,” in *RBMW*, p. 174.





thority of man, who mediates to her the Word and the will of God for her life. Woman's traditionally subordinate place within the social relationships of church and home is largely a consequence of the subordinate place in which she is believed to stand in the spiritual order. But note that this arrangement is not, as is often claimed, spiritual equality plus social inequality.<sup>32</sup> It is, quite simply, spiritual inequality.

According to key representatives of evangelical patriarchy, God has invested the man with the spiritual authority "to decide, in the light of Holy Scripture, what courses of action will most glorify God" for his family.<sup>33</sup> The man is "finally responsible" for both his own and his wife's moral and spiritual condition.<sup>34</sup> The husband's authority "expresses God's authority in the marriage."<sup>35</sup> The man's role in the family has him "standing in the place of Christ,"<sup>36</sup> to "act *as* Christ" and "*for* Christ" with respect to his wife,<sup>37</sup> obligating him to "protect [his family] from the greatest enemies of all, Satan and sin."<sup>38</sup> But if these things be true—if, indeed, only a man and never a woman can be deemed fit to serve as a stand-in for Christ, and if every married woman actually *needs* a man to serve in this capacity for her (which must be the case if the man's "headship" is to be an act of love and service rather than presumption and condescension)—then it follows that men and women are not on the same spiritual level at all.

Nowhere does the Bible say that it is a man's job to discern the will of God, take responsibility for another person's spirituality and protect others from Satan and sin. If God has given responsibility and dominion to both male and female (Gen 1:26-28), if we all stand on equal ground before God (Gal 3:26-28), if women are

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<sup>32</sup>However, a fair description of the situation in the New Testament church *would* be spiritual equality with social inequality (due to the cultural patriarchy of ancient times). Nothing in the New Testament stipulates that a man must have authority over and responsibility for his wife's spiritual condition, as many patriarchalists today advocate. The apostle Peter commended Christian women who refused to submit to their husbands' false religious beliefs, yet urged these women to be submissive to the social roles of the time (1 Pet 3:1-6). Evangelical patriarchalists today actually invert the New Testament situation by advocating, in essence, an inequality in *spiritual* rights and responsibilities for women in a cultural context in which women generally experience equality in *social* rights and responsibilities. See *GNFW*, pp. 36-39. See also chapter ten in this volume.

<sup>33</sup>Ortlund, "Male-Female Equality," p. 482 n. 50.

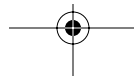
<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup>Knight, "Husbands and Wives," p. 174.

<sup>36</sup>Piper, "Vision," p. 38. This is qualified by the comment that a husband "must not be Christ to his wife."

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, and Piper and Grudem, "Overview," *RBMW*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup>Piper, "Vision," p. 37.





equal heirs of the grace of God (1 Pet 3:7) and if all believers together—both men and women—form God’s new priesthood (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10), then there is no reason for anyone to take this sort of spiritual responsibility for anyone else. If Jesus Christ is a female believer’s Lord and Savior in the same way that he is a male believer’s, then surely no Christian woman has need of a man to stand in the place of Christ for her.

Despite popular evangelical teaching, the New Testament never says the man authoritatively represents God as the priest of the home.<sup>39</sup> This teaching may derive from a misunderstanding of the analogy Paul draws in Ephesians 5:21-33 between a husband as “head” of his wife, and Christ as “head” of the church. Patriarchalists readily perceive that Paul did not mean that the husband is like Christ in redeeming his wife from her sins, for this would contradict biblical teaching elsewhere. Yet neither did Paul mean that the husband—like Christ—has the authority to serve as a priestly mediator between God and his wife; for this contradicts biblical teaching that Christ is the one mediator between God and humans (1 Tim 2:5, see also Mt 11:27; Jn 14:6). What Paul *was* saying by means of this analogy is evident from his description of the husband’s Christlike ministry of life-giving, self-giving love for his wife (Eph 5:25-30).<sup>40</sup> As Christ loves, nurtures, provides for and sacrifices his own life and special (divine) prerogatives for the church, so should the husband for his wife; as the church submits to the ministry of Christ (and as believers submit to one another, Eph 5:21), so should the wife to her husband.<sup>41</sup>

Under the new covenant, every believer is a representative of God (2 Cor 5:20) with direct access to God through Christ our high priest (Heb 4:14-16). Designating masculinity as a condition for the authoritative discernment and mediation of God’s will denies the equal access to God through Christ that the new covenant provides to all believers.<sup>42</sup>

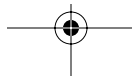
A male hierarchy of spiritual communication and command also violates the status and identity that every believer has in Christ. The New Testament teaches that God gives all believers the responsibility and prerogative to use their gifts, to

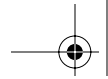
<sup>39</sup>Some go even further, proclaiming “the husband as prophet, priest and king.” See the workshop by this title at the conference cosponsored by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood held March 20-22, 2000, in Dallas.

<sup>40</sup>There is no implication in the text that the husband has *spiritual* authority over his wife, although the husband’s *civil* authority was assumed, given the culture of Paul’s day. On the “head” metaphor, see chapter eight in this volume.

<sup>41</sup>See *GFW*, pp. 152-55, 164-70, 180-82.

<sup>42</sup>See discussion of Galatians 3:28 in *GFW*, chap. I.





preach the gospel, to teach other believers, to discern and obey the Word and will of God, to serve as priests unto God, to have the mind of Christ, to exercise spiritual authority in the name of Christ and to represent Christ to the world at large. Yet patriarchalists alter the teaching of God's Word by denying to women a measure of each one of these God-given privileges and responsibilities, allocating to men the lion's share of what the Bible speaks of as the status and calling of all believers.<sup>43</sup>

Patriarchalists consign women to a permanently inferior status in a hierarchy of spiritual authority, calling, responsibility and privilege, all the while insisting that women are not spiritually inferior to men but that women and men stand on equal ground before God. This position is logically incoherent and so cannot be true. Women do not stand on equal ground before God if God has permanently denied them spiritual opportunities and privileges to which every man has access.

#### *Difference in "Role" or "Function"*

To say that two people differ in function is not necessarily to say that one is personally superior to the other. Therefore when we are told that men and women are equal yet have different functions, we can readily agree with the face value of that statement. There are many instances in which equals have different roles—even roles of subordination and authority—yet with no entailment of personal inequality.<sup>44</sup>

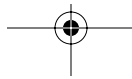
We can affirm that there are role differences between men and women without necessarily affirming that spiritual authority belongs by divine right to men. The latter belief does not follow from the former, and to reject the latter is not to reject the former. This conceptual distinction was not missed by respondents to a *Christianity Today* readers' poll on gender issues. A significant number of people who agreed that men and women are "equal in personhood and value but different in roles" also rejected the idea that men should have primary leadership in churches and homes.<sup>45</sup> The existence of gender role differences neither entails nor justifies a permanent hierarchy of male authority.

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<sup>43</sup>The spiritual authority that patriarchalists reserve exclusively for male believers actually goes beyond the biblical ministry of *all* believers in that the man's priestlike spiritual authority encroaches upon the unique mediatorial ministry of Christ. See *GNFW*, pp. 115-17.

<sup>44</sup>There has been persistent misrepresentation and misunderstanding on this matter. Schreiner, for example, asserts that "the basic point of Rebecca Merrill Groothuis's *Good News for Women* is that one cannot logically posit both equality of personhood and differences in role" (Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," p. 200). In fact, I affirm quite the opposite of this "basic point." See *GNFW*, pp. 49-52, where I show that many types of role differences *are* compatible with personal equality.

<sup>45</sup>Agnieszka Tennant, "Adam and Eve in the 21st Century," *Christianity Today*, March 11, 2002, p. 61.





Although functional differences often are compatible with personal equality, this is not always the case. Advocates of male authority seem to have difficulty acknowledging that the *reason* for the difference and the *nature* of the function determine whether such a difference can logically coexist with equality of being. As it happens, the reason for and the nature of woman’s subordination logically exclude woman’s equality.<sup>46</sup> The vocabulary of evangelical patriarchy reflects and reinforces this conceptual confusion. For example, woman’s lifelong subordination to male authority is routinely referred to as merely a “role difference” or “functional distinction.” Semantic strategies such as these subsume the disputed concept (woman’s subordination) under a larger—and largely undisputed—conceptual category (role differences, functional distinctions), thereby appearing to legitimate the disputed concept ipso facto.<sup>47</sup>

By these and other means, patriarchalists implicitly present their *equal being/unequal function* defense of woman’s subordination in the following form:

1. Different function does not necessarily entail personal inferiority or superiority.
2. Woman’s subordination and man’s authority involve different functions.
3. Therefore the subordination of woman to man’s authority has nothing to do with female inferiority or male superiority; these are male-female role differences, pure and simple.

The argument is invalid. The premises are correct, but the conclusion does not follow logically from them. While the notion that equal beings may have different roles is certainly legitimate, it is not applicable to, or descriptive of, the male-female authority relations prescribed by evangelical patriarchalists. Patriarchy involves different functions, to be sure, but the different functions are grounded in supposed differences in the nature, meaning and purpose of manhood and womanhood. To describe as merely “roles” the different functions that follow from these ontological/teleological differences is to equivocate and obfuscate.

“Equal in being but subordinate in role” *can* accurately describe instances of functional subordination; however, it does not serve as a description of *every* rela-

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<sup>46</sup>This will be argued below. Also, see *GNFW*, pp. 49-56, 60-63.

<sup>47</sup>On rhetorical strategies of patriarchalists, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “Strange Bedfellows,” *Priscilla Papers*, Fall 2000; see also Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 187-90.





tionship of subordination to authority, and it cannot accurately be applied to woman's subordination. Female subordination is not functional subordination; therefore it cannot be justified on those grounds.

Functional subordination is typically determined either according to an individual's abilities (or lack thereof) or for the sake of expediency in accomplishing a specific task; therefore such subordination is limited in scope or duration. An example of functional subordination for the sake of expediency would be a person who serves on a committee under the direction of a coworker who is otherwise her equal in the organization; her subordination is limited to the task at hand, and it ends whenever the committee completes its work or she leaves the committee. An example of functional subordination based on unequal ability would be a student who is subordinated to his teacher—but only in the context and for the duration of the class.

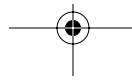
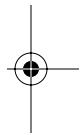
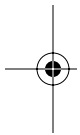
Functional subordination is not necessarily limited in both scope and duration. If the subordinate's deficiency in ability is permanent (if he either cannot or will not overcome the deficiency), then his subordination in that area of deficiency will be permanent. If the unequal ability is innate, then the resulting subordination does reflect the person's inherently inferior ability in that particular area. But it need not indicate the subordinate's inferiority as a person, because the subordination remains limited in scope to the area of deficient ability; the person may far excel the average person in even more important areas of function.<sup>48</sup>

Female subordination differs from functional subordination in its scope, duration and criterion. The subordination of women is limited neither in scope nor in duration. It is not based on inferior ability or designed to accomplish a temporary task. It is comprehensive (encompassing all that a woman does), permanent (extending throughout the life of a woman and applying to all women at all times) and decided solely by an unchangeable aspect of a woman's personal being (femaleness). Although femaleness is, in fact, irrelevant to ascertaining a person's innate abilities in the higher human functions involved in leadership, decision making and self-governance, these are precisely the functions from which women are permanently excluded; thus the inferiority of female persons in these key areas is clearly implied.

When subordination follows necessarily *and justifiably* from the subordinate per-

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<sup>48</sup>See *GNFW*, pp. 50-51. For an example of functional subordination with limited duration and unlimited scope, see section below entitled "False Analogies."





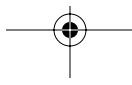
son’s unalterable nature, the subordinate *is* inferior in at least some aspect of her being; in this case, the scope and duration of the person’s subordination will reflect the extent and significance of the inferiority. Because the subordination that is demanded by women’s unalterable (female) being is of comprehensive scope and permanent duration—excluding women from a wide range of high-level, distinctively human functions—it implies an extensive and significant personal inferiority. But in this case the subordination is *not* justifiable, because women are not, in fact, innately inferior in these distinctively human capabilities. Put more formally and succinctly:

1. If the permanent, comprehensive and ontologically grounded subordination of women is justified, then women are inferior persons.
2. Women are not inferior persons.
3. Therefore women’s subordination is not justified.<sup>49</sup>

Another way to distinguish functional subordination from female subordination is in terms of the concepts of necessity and contingency. Something that is contingent obtains (is the case) only in certain contexts or under certain conditions. It is thus dependent, or contingent, on these contexts or conditions; it is not always and necessarily true. Unlike functional subordination, female subordination is not contingent. Because a woman is always and necessarily female, she is always and necessarily subordinate. No condition or context in this life nullifies her subordination to male authority.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup>See *GFW*, pp. 44-45, 49-56, 60-63, 74-77, for further explanation of these issues. Robert Saucy (“‘Order’ and ‘Equality,’” pp. 153-54) tries to debunk my claim that woman’s permanent subordination implies woman’s inferiority by arguing that if woman is rendered unequal because her subordination is permanent, then the mere passing of time must make a person unequal (which is nonsensical). However, I do not say that permanent subordination *necessarily* implies personal inequality. The issue is not simply permanence but whether the subordination is truly functional. Subordination can allow for equality of personhood *only* if it is a *functional* subordination—which female subordination is not; moreover, it *is* possible for functional subordination to be permanent (see *GFW*, pp. 50, 74-75). Saucy (“‘Order’ and ‘Equality,’” p. 154) appears to attempt another *reductio ad absurdum* argument when he claims that I say subordination renders a person inferior only if the subordination is *not* based on inferior abilities (also nonsensical). But my point is not that female subordination actually *renders* women inferior but that it logically *implies* women’s inferiority, and that women’s subordination is unjustified precisely because women are *not* inferior to men in leadership ability.

<sup>50</sup>Some patriarchalists believe the “pattern of male leadership” extends throughout the next life as well. See, for example, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), p. 940.





Given evangelical patriarchy's theological premise that God designed man and woman at creation for a (benevolent) male-rule relationship, it is necessary for a woman to be subordinate to male rule if she is to be true to the divinely designed meaning of womanhood. Not to submit would be unnatural and unfitting. Her subordination to male authority is thus a moral necessity, rooted in ontology—in the way God made man and woman to be from the beginning. Philosophically speaking, this is a hypothetical necessity, because it follows from a certain premise. *If* God created man to rule woman and woman to serve man, *then* a woman's submission to male authority obtains necessarily, solely by virtue of her womanhood. Her subordination is not contingent on her voluntarily taking on this "role."<sup>51</sup>

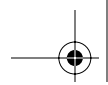
Functional subordination, on the other hand, is dependent on limited contexts or occasional conditions. A blind person submits to the authority of his seeing-eye dog in the context of negotiating a busy street. A student is subordinate to her teacher, given the student's inferior ability in the subject being taught. In these cases, subordination is limited in scope or duration because it is contingent on conditions that do not always and everywhere obtain. But because female subordination is necessary (context independent), it is both permanent (enduring throughout a woman's life) and comprehensive (including all that a woman does; in all things she must be submissive).<sup>52</sup>

It should be evident from these observations that woman's subordination does not fit the definition of a "role." A role is a part that is played or a particular function or office that is assumed for a specific purpose or period of time. Anyone with the requisite abilities can play the part. By definition a role is not synonymous with or inexorably tied to who a person is. Yet the "roles" of male authority and female subordination are deemed essential to God's creational design for true manhood

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<sup>51</sup>Saucy objects to my depiction of woman's subordination as necessary and not voluntary, insisting that it is indeed voluntary because nobody can force a woman to submit to her husband's authority (Saucy, "'Order' and 'Equality,'" pp. 157-58). But this seems to equivocate on the meaning of *voluntary*. Normally an act is considered voluntary if one can choose either to do or not to do it without censure. But when something is the law—whether civil law or God's law—those who are under the law are obligated to obey it, and disobedience incurs some form of censure. (Referring to the biblical "command" for wives to submit, Grudem ["Wives Like Sarah," p. 207] notes that "submission to one's husband is not optional for Christian wives.") Even more to the point, woman's subordination is grounded in her female being, not in her will. The rationale for women's subordination is not that they choose of their own volition to be subordinate but that they are created to be subordinate.

<sup>52</sup>Some milder forms of patriarchy today allow women to have authority over men so long as it is not "final authority" or spiritual authority. Nonetheless, a married woman must be submissive to her husband's authority in every area of her life.



and womanhood. Indeed, Piper and Grudem state that their concern is not merely with “behavioral roles” but with the “true meaning” and “underlying nature of manhood and womanhood.”<sup>53</sup>

A woman can have many roles in life—teacher, office administrator, physician, writer—but none of these roles is seen as *essential* to true womanhood. That is because these roles are truly roles—chosen or appropriate for some women but not for others. Submission to male authority is the only “role” that is deemed essential for every woman who would be truly feminine and fulfill the purpose for which God created womanhood. That is because this “role” serves the role of constituting the meaning of femininity, of identifying a woman as a *real* woman. Female submission to male authority, then, is a “function” only in the sense that it is a *necessary* function of a woman’s true being.

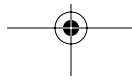
That submission is considered to be inherent in what a woman is by nature (and authority inherent in what a man is by nature) is evident in the patriarchalists’ slippery-slope argument that egalitarianism leads logically to acceptance of homosexuality.<sup>54</sup> Their thinking is that once we say gender is irrelevant for deciding who is to have “primary leadership,” the next “logical” step is to say the gender of one’s marriage partner is also irrelevant. Just as a woman is meant to marry a man and not another woman, so a woman is meant to be submissive to a man and not to share authority equally with a man. Patriarchalists believe that gender differences in status and authority are as natural and essential to manhood and womanhood as is heterosexuality. To eliminate the former entails eliminating the latter, because it consists of eliminating what is inherent and universally normative in the gender distinction. The elimination of a mere role would not evoke such comparisons and predicted consequences.

It should also be noted that although role theology has become central to evangelical patriarchy, nowhere does Scripture use the term *role* or any synonym for it with reference to the responsibilities of believers toward God or one another. At no point do we read that God designed us—and requires us—to “play a role.” No, God’s concern is for each of us to *be* a righteous person and to use whatever gifts of the Spirit we have been given for the good of the church and the glory of God. The Bible’s focused exhortation is that we are *all* to be Christlike, to follow the example of Jesus’ earthly life—in humility, faithfulness, submission to God and spir-

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<sup>53</sup>Piper and Grudem, “Overview,” p. 60.

<sup>54</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 82-84 and 85-87.





itual authority (in Christ's name) over all the powers of evil.

The consistency and clarity of this biblical message stands starkly against the notion that women do not have direct authority under God and so must submit spiritually to men, who are the primary wielders of spiritual authority in the body of Christ. This doctrine of spiritual inequality posing as "gender role difference" simply doesn't fit with the Bible's clear, core message.

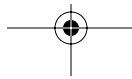
### *When "Role" Plays the Role of "Being"*

Regardless of how patriarchal gender relations may be explained or masculinity and femininity defined, the fact remains that woman's subordinate "role" is determined exclusively and necessarily by her personal nature; that is, *solely* on account of her *being* female she *must* be subordinate. Therefore woman's "role" designates not merely what she does (or doesn't do) but what she is. She is female; she is subordinate.

It may sound quite plausible to insist that woman's subordination and man's authority are merely roles assigned by God and so do not entail woman's personal inferiority. Roles, by definition, do not necessarily bespeak qualities of personal being. But patriarchal gender roles are not roles in accordance with the usual definition. These "roles" have a one-to-one correspondence with being. Where the "being" is, there the "role" is also. "Female being" corresponds precisely to "a role of subordination to male authority." The word *role* is used in a way that renders its meaning basically synonymous, or redundant, with *being*.

Female subordination and male authority may be semantically reduced to "roles" or "functions," but in reality they serve as modes of being—permanent personal identities, built into each one's personal makeup by the Creator himself. Thus when the man rules and the woman obeys, each is only doing what each is inherently designed to do.

As a blind person is not fit to negotiate unfamiliar territory on his own, so a woman is not fit to preach God's Word with authority or to discern God's will for her own life apart from her husband's spiritual authority over her. The female person and the blind person must each have someone do for them what they are not fit to do for themselves. However, the state of being blind does not bear the weight of ontological necessity or the implication of personal inferiority that woman's subordination does. Under patriarchy, a woman's deficiency in personal authority is regarded as ordained by God's creational decree. But a blind person—even if blind from birth—is not deficient in sight by virtue of God's creational design for





humanity. His limitations are not intrinsic to and demanded by his essential, created nature. Nor are his limitations as deep or as wide as a woman's. He is deprived of a physical function; he is not denied a spiritual ministry or the governance of his own life under God. Moreover, blindness is not necessarily a life sentence; it can sometimes be reversed.

Could it then be accurate to say that a blind person's "role" is to be sightless? No, this is simply the way the person *is*; it is a mode of being, not a mode of behavior that is assumed for a specific purpose (as is a role). If a blind person's lack of sight cannot rightly be described as a role that has no bearing on his state of being or personal ability, then (*a fortiori*) neither can woman's creationally based lack of authority in key areas be accurately spoken of as a role that has no ontological entailment.

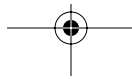
Thus the theoretical distinction between woman's being and woman's subordinate role evaporates under scrutiny. Woman's lifelong subordination to man's authority is not merely a role that is independent of and ontologically isolated from her being. Rather, the role is determined by the being and obtains solely because of the being. Where there is female being, there must of necessity be subordinate function. When one's "role" is grounded in one's essential being and obtains in all things and at all times, one's "role" defines one's personhood. Women are subordinate persons—by nature and definition. Their subordination is constitutive of and essential to their personhood.<sup>55</sup> But this is not ontological equality. Nor is it merely a matter of playing a role; rather, it is about *being* what one intrinsically *is* by virtue of the God-ordained nature and meaning of one's sex.

The basis for women's subordination (God's design and purpose for womanhood), as well as the "functions" in which women are subordinate (spiritual discernment, decision making and self-governance), is all about being. Woman's nature or ontology, her life purpose or teleology, her will, intellect and moral understanding, her spiritual responsibilities before God—these are matters as close to the heart of a person's being as anything ever could be. They define and characterize what a person *is*. The suppression of women (and not men) in these critical areas of personhood is not meaningfully described merely as women's "different role."

The nature of and rationale for female subordination, then, make it fundamentally unlike functional subordination. Its nature (necessary, permanent and com-

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<sup>55</sup>See the excellent discussion of "role difference" in Giles, *Trinity and Subordinationism*, pp. 179-88.





prehensive) and its rationale (God's creational design) place woman's subordination foursquare in the realm of being. In woman's "equal being and unequal role," the "role" is as much about woman's being as is the "equality." Thus evangelical patriarchy does not have woman being unequal in a different respect from the way she is equal. Rather, a woman is unequal (subordinate) in the same respect that she is equal—by virtue of her being, as a constitutive element and necessary consequence of her being. Therefore woman's equality (as biblically defined) and woman's subordination (as defined by patriarchalists) cannot coexist without logical contradiction. Evangelical patriarchy's *equal being/unequal role* construct must be deemed internally incoherent.

## PART 2

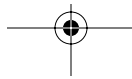
### *"But It's About God's Will, Not Gender"*

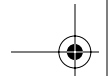
Defenders of the *equal being/unequal role* distinction may insist that female subordination does not imply woman's inferiority because it is not determined by or grounded in a woman's female nature; rather, it is determined by and grounded in God's will alone. In other words, authority is not essential to manhood, nor is subordination essential to womanhood. Rather, women have a subordinate "role" and men have an authoritative "role" (or "office," the term of choice for some). And women and men are assigned permanently to their "roles" not because of their gender but simply because God, for reasons of his own, has commanded that women "function" in a "role" of subordination to men.<sup>56</sup>

But if God has commanded subordination of all women and only women—such that femaleness is the necessary and sufficient criterion that decides a person's permanent and comprehensive subordination—then God has indeed decreed a subordination that is determined by female gender. That is, God has set up an arrangement whereby the question "Who is to be in charge, and who is to be subordinate?" is answered solely according to gender.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Sarah Sumner offers an argument to this effect in *Men and Women in the Church*, p. 278. She calls this the "Scotist" view—that we cannot, nor need we, understand the reasons for God's commands. She claims Piper and Grudem hold this view; yet these men affirm that the nature, meaning and deeper differences of manhood and womanhood are relevant to deciding who submits and who has authority, thus affirming an ontological basis for gender "roles." But perhaps the Scotist perspective often serves more as an ad hoc argumentative strategy than as a principled conviction.

<sup>57</sup>This is precisely the case in determining authority in marriages. For church leadership, maleness is necessary but (unlike male rule in marriage) not sufficient; other qualifications must be met as well.





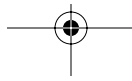
A crucial point at issue here is whether God has in fact decreed such a thing. If God’s Word makes it clear that women are not ontologically inferior to men, and if—as has been argued above—the permanent, comprehensive and necessary subordination of women logically implies the ontological inferiority of the female gender, then we must conclude that God has *not* decreed such a thing and that biblical texts understood to convey such a decree have been wrongly interpreted.

Furthermore, the idea that woman’s subordination is not in any sense determined by or grounded in what a woman *is* or what God designed her to *be* is contrary to the ways of God in that it separates God’s will for creation from his design for creation. Ontology and teleology become detached, irrelevant to one another. In what other area of theology would this be asserted? Can the will of God be deemed to be at odds with the created nature of things? Would God require—has God ever required—of us anything for which he did not design us? God’s decrees always tell us something about his character, our humanity, the very nature of things the way God created them. For example, God’s ban on homosexual relationships tells us about—and is grounded in—the created nature of sexuality, its meaning, design and purpose. Surely if God has banned women from leadership in key areas and consigned women to be subordinate to male leadership, this tells us something about the created nature of womanhood and manhood.

The idea that what women may and may not do is ontologically disconnected from what women can and cannot do is also contrary to the whole tenor of New Testament teaching—that whatever one has been given one should use by investing it in and for the kingdom of God (e.g., I Pet 4:10-11). Being and function, fruit and gifts, personal character and public ministry are tandem expressions of faithful service and obedience to Christ. Biblically, one does not stop short of serving God’s people in a way for which one has been divinely gifted and prepared, any more than one takes on a ministry role that one is not personally or spiritually equipped to handle.

At least one patriarchalist has a clear view of the fallacy of using role language to describe what it means to be a man or a woman. German theologian Werner Neuer writes:

A person does not play the role of a man or a woman, but he is a man or she is a woman. Sex is no role, that can be changed at will like stage roles, but is a fundamental aspect of human existence from which no one can escape. It carries with it quite definite tasks and modes of conduct. And language must reflect this state of affairs. . . . Sex is concerned with being and not with roles. . . . In the cause of truth we





should therefore give up talking about the roles of the sexes.<sup>58</sup>

Neuer states the patriarchal position sans the role rhetoric: “The Christian view of the sexes starts from the premise that both men and women are in every respect God’s creatures and of equal value, but that in their *being* they are fundamentally distinct. Consequently they have different tasks to fulfill.”<sup>59</sup> That is, the different “functions” or “tasks” (male authority and female subordination) are grounded in and determined by the ontologically distinct male and female beings.

Indeed, it seems the typical patriarchal view is not just that God has *willed* that women and men have these “distinct functions” but that because God’s creational design is for women to be subordinate to men, these “roles” are in some sense uniquely fitting expressions of personal manhood and womanhood. God has designed men and women such that true femininity inclines toward submissiveness and true masculinity inclines toward personal, directive leadership.<sup>60</sup> Few patriarchalists today consistently claim or believe that submissiveness does not in some sense “fit” with the nature of womanhood, or that men are not by virtue of their manhood more suited to be in authority than are women.

What many patriarchalists actually believe about the being (and not merely the “function”) of women is reflected not only in their discussions of the subject but also in their day-to-day interactions with women and men in churches and Christian ministries. What, I wonder, would the church look like if people consistently believed—in both theory *and* practice—that superior male function does not bespeak superior male being (but only God’s apparently arbitrary will)? It is difficult to imagine, but it seems certain that women would not be treated the way they now are. If women were truly regarded as no less than men in their intrinsic capacities and inbuilt resources for leadership, decision making and spiritual understanding, then men in leadership would routinely utilize women’s abilities fully in such areas as financial and administrative management, ministry to both men and women, moral and theological reasoning, spiritual gifts and insights, and biblical exegesis and exposition. Furthermore, women would not be consistently interrupted, dismissed, patronized or ignored when they speak up in classrooms or staff/faculty/board meetings of Christian organizations. Rather, men would listen to, respect,

<sup>58</sup>Werner Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), pp. 29-30.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23, emphasis added. Neuer apparently does not acknowledge that such a difference or inequality in being implies women’s inferiority in being.

<sup>60</sup>As noted earlier in this chapter, this is the view of Piper and Grudem, who are representative of many, especially those of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.



appreciate and seek out women’s counsel and expertise in all the areas where gifted women stand to contribute to the important tasks of shepherding God’s flock and sharing the gospel of Christ with the world at large.

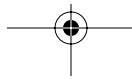
People’s actual treatment of women often belies their professed belief that only the role is inferior, not the person. It is, after all, not possible to live out an implausible belief. Role theology would have us believe that although the subordinate role is not demanded by the nature of the female person, a woman who is truly feminine will play the role of submission to male authority because God ordained at creation that this is to be the woman’s permanent role, and only the woman who plays this role is fulfilling her purpose and true identity as a woman.

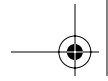
However, it is illogical to maintain that there is no basis for the role in the nature of the person when the role is one of moral necessity given the nature of the person, and when the role is perceived as defining one’s personal gender identity and as having been established by God at creation. In what other area of life do we freight a mere *role* with such ontological significance? Creational design, personal nature, gender identity—this is the stuff of *being*, not of a mere role or function. The concept of “role” is simply playing the role of “being”!

The logical connection between woman’s being and woman’s subordinate “role” is attested not only by common sense but also by common experience—an experience all too common for countless women who have followed God’s call into Christian ministry.

### *False Analogies*

Many attempts to defend woman’s subordination against the implication of woman’s inferiority resort to some kind of argument by analogy: that is, if other instances of “role difference” are compatible with equality in being, then woman’s subordination in “role” is compatible with her equality in being. But are such analogies valid, or are they comparing apples and oranges? We have already seen that not all differences in function or role logically permit personal equality. Many of these arguments attempt to justify woman’s subordination (which is incompatible with personal equality) by likening it to a role that *is* compatible with personal equality. In order to refrain from falling into such logical errors, one must have a keen eye for the critical differences between female subordination and functional subordination. Subordination is necessarily personal and not merely functional when (as in female subordination) its scope is comprehensive, its duration is permanent, and the criterion for its determination is one’s unalterable ontology.





One argument-by-analogy often put forth is that if a child's subordination to a parent does not imply the child's inferiority in being, then neither does a woman's subordination to her husband imply that the woman is inferior in being.<sup>61</sup> But this is a classic case of false analogy. The child's subordination is *like* female subordination in that it is comprehensive and ontologically based; however, it is *unlike* female subordination in that its ontological basis—childhood—is a temporary condition. It is also unlike female subordination in that the child's parental governance follows justifiably from the child's lack of experience and inferior skills in decision making. The child's subordination ends when its purpose has been accomplished and the child is sufficiently mature to make independent decisions.

Because the nature of childhood warrants the child's subordination, and childhood is a temporary condition that all humans undergo, the subordination of child to parent does not imply the child's inferiority in fundamental personhood. The child, for that matter, could grow up to hold a position of authority over her own parents. (A woman can never "grow up" to have authority over—or even equal with—a man.) Of course, the grown child will still owe respect and honor to her parents as a permanent obligation. However, the point at issue is not whether a woman should respect and honor her husband (as she certainly should) but whether she should submit to his rule.

Space does not permit a response to all such spurious arguments-by-analogy.<sup>62</sup> The rest of this chapter will address two key theological analogies that are often advanced in order to justify woman's subordination.

### *The Priests and the Levites*

Some have argued that because God assigned the Levites, especially those in the Aaronic priesthood, to a special religious function from which other Israelites were excluded, this shows, by analogy, that the doctrine of male authority in marriage and ministry does not violate the essential equality of women and men.<sup>63</sup> This argument is flawed both analogically and theologically.

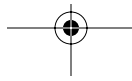
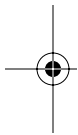
It is true that each arrangement grants to some people a religious status that is denied to others, based entirely on physical attributes of birth. However, the analogy fails at several key points. Unlike male authority and female subordination, the

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<sup>61</sup>Ortlund argues along these lines in "Male-Female Equality," p. 104.

<sup>62</sup>See *GNFW*, pp. 49-52, 60-63, for additional examples and discussion.

<sup>63</sup>See, for example, James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 44-45; and Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," p. 201.





special role of the Levites did not meet all the characteristics of criteria, duration and scope, which together render a superior-subordinate order fundamentally ontological rather than merely functional.<sup>64</sup>

Although the Levitical priesthood is roughly analogous to male authority in terms of its lifelong duration and its basis in unalterable physical being, its scope is a different matter. The scope of female subordination to male authority is comprehensive. A married woman is subject to her husband’s authority in every area of her life. There is no area in which a woman has any authority, privilege or opportunity that a man is denied.<sup>65</sup> The male is consistently advantaged with respect to the female, and the female is consistently disadvantaged with respect to the male. The Levites, however, were not consistently advantaged with respect to the people; they were denied the right of the other tribes to own and inherit land (Num 18:20). In patriarchal agrarian societies, land ownership was deemed supremely desirable and a mark of social status—a right generally denied the less privileged classes (such as women and slaves). It was also denied the Levites. Thus there remained a sense of equality or parity between the Levites and the other Israelites in that each group had its own advantages and disadvantages.

Furthermore, while God chose the Levites to perform a ministry of lifelong duration, it was not a permanent decree as is the (supposed) divine decree that women be subordinate to male authority. The authority/status difference between women and men is deemed an essential feature of God’s creational design; thus it is permanent not only in the sense that it endures throughout a person’s lifetime but also in that it pertains to all men and women everywhere for all time. The Levites’ role, by contrast, was not permanent but provisional, in that it pertained only to a temporary religious system at a particular time and for a particular purpose in history.

It should also be noted that men in the Levitical priesthood did not have the sort of spiritual authority over the people that men today are given over women in the church and home. In the Old Testament, spiritual authority in this sense—whereby certain individuals spoke for God and made the will of God known to others—was exercised less by the priests than by the prophets (among whom were women).

Moreover, there was a discernible purpose and reason for God’s choosing the Levites for a special spiritual status. Intrinsic to God’s rationale was the fact that

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<sup>64</sup>See previous section “Difference in ‘Role’ or ‘Function’”; see also chart in *GFW*, p. 45.

<sup>65</sup>As noted in the “Equality in Being” section above, this is not effectively countered by the claim that there is functional parity between male and female because only women can have babies.





this arrangement was *not* permanent or inherent in creational design but served a specific and limited function until the new covenant in Christ. The Bible characteristically does not reveal God's universal commands without also revealing the moral or theological reasons for the commands. Yet there is no discernible reason why God would have chosen men for permanently superior spiritual status. The only possible *logical* rationale would be that all men are spiritually superior to all women—a supposition for which no evidence exists, and which today's proponents of male authority deny.

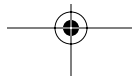
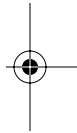
God chose the Levites to serve on behalf of all the firstborn sons of Israel, who by right belonged to Yahweh. In lieu of demanding the firstborn of every family, God set aside the Levites as his own (Num 3:11-13, 40-51). In this sense the Levites were playing a role. It was for symbolic, illustrative and instructional purposes that God formally consecrated the priests and Levites for their special role of representing God's holiness to the people and representing Israel before God (Num 8). The Levitical priesthood was justified during the time of the old covenant, because God had ordained that certain individuals who possessed physical attributes and pedigrees deemed worthy by human standards should serve as an object lesson for the people, a visible picture of an invisible God who is utterly perfect and supremely worthy.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, God's ultimate covenant purpose was for *all* his people to serve as his priesthood (Ex 19:6; Is 61:6). The representative ministry of the Levitical priesthood prevailed only until the new covenant instituted the high priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of all believers.

Everything that was prefigured in the Levitical priesthood has now been fulfilled forever in Jesus Christ, who is the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15), the one Mediator between God and humans (1 Tim 2:5) and our high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, which supersedes the order of Aaron (Heb 6:19-20; 7:11-28). The perfect representation of God has now been given once and for all in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Jn 14:9; Col 1:15, 19; Heb 1:3), and this leaves no room for addition, development or duplication in the form of men who believe they stand in the authority of Christ vis-à-vis women.

In the new covenant, physical distinctions such as race and gender no longer demarcate unequal levels of religious privilege (Gal 3:26-28). No one in the body of Christ is excluded from the priestly responsibilities of representing God's holiness to the world, offering spiritual sacrifices to God, representing God before other be-

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<sup>66</sup>See *GFW*, pp. 31-36.





lievers and interceding for others before God. The failure to perceive and honor the pivotal difference between priesthood in the old covenant and priesthood in the new covenant is a fundamental theological flaw of evangelical patriarchy.<sup>67</sup> This point of confusion is reflected in the attempt to defend a special spiritual status for Christian men by comparing it to the Levitical priesthood of the old covenant.

### *The Subordination of the Son to the Father*

Support for the claim that woman's unequal role does not bespeak woman's unequal being is often sought in the analogy of the relationship of God the Son to God the Father.<sup>68</sup> It is argued that the Father and the Son are "equal in being" yet in all things and through all eternity they relate to one another according to a hierarchy of authority and obedience; thus the analogy of the "eternal functional subordination" within the Trinity illustrates and vindicates woman's permanent and comprehensive subordination to man's authority. As with the Levitical argument, I believe the trinitarian argument fails to hold up either analogically or theologically.

*False analogy.* Christian orthodoxy affirms that God and Christ are of the same substance and nature; they are not just equal in being but *one* in being. There is no difference between the divine nature of the Father and the divine nature of the Son.<sup>69</sup> Thus human nature is not analogous to divine nature. God (three Persons sharing one divine nature) is a unitary being, while humanity (billions of persons sharing human nature) is a category consisting of a multiplicity of beings. There is a oneness in nature/essence/substance between the Father and the Son that is absent from any male-female relationship.

Therefore any subordination of Christ to God would necessarily be fundamentally dissimilar to the subordination of woman to man, which is decided by and deemed essential to the "deeper differences" of manhood and womanhood. Unlike woman's subordination to man, the Son's subordination to the Father cannot be grounded in or determined by his "different" nature. Although subordinationists consider Christ's eternal subordination to be an inherent, unchanging element of the Godhead, it evidently obtains by virtue of Christ's relationship as Son to the Father, not by virtue of his nature being different from the Father's. (Yet here, too,

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<sup>67</sup>See *GNFW*, chaps. I and 4, especially pp. 31-36, 115-17. See also chapters ten and sixteen in this volume.

<sup>68</sup>See, for example, Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 459-60.

<sup>69</sup>See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), pp. 337, 339.





they assume a false analogy. A son is not permanently subordinate in all things to his father.)

It has often been stated that one purpose of male leadership in marriage is to determine who makes the decision when husband and wife cannot agree. The properly submissive wife will act against her own best judgment if the husband's "final decision" is contrary to her will. But the members of the Trinity are always completely one in will.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the subordination prescribed for women, there could be no subordination in the eternal Trinity that would involve one divine Person acting against his own preference or best judgment under orders issued from the contrary will of another divine Person. When the Father sent the Son, it was not along the lines of an earthly father who says, "Well, son, here's what I'm going to have you do," at which point the son learns what he had better do or else. Rather, with Father, Son and Holy Spirit of one mind on how to redeem sinful humans (as they always are on every matter), it was the Son's will to go as much as it was the Father's will to send him (Phil 2:5-11).

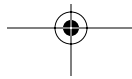
Moreover, in Christ's own description of his earthly ministry, he states that the Father has given him all judgment and authority (Mt 28:18; Jn 5:21-27; 17:2).<sup>71</sup> Even during his earthly incarnation, when Jesus did only the Father's will (Jn 5:30; 8:28-29), the relationship of Father and Son was not at all like that of husband and wife in a patriarchal marriage, where the husband holds final decision-making authority and is neither expected nor required to share this authority with his wife.

Even if there were an eternal subordination of the Son to the Father, it would fail to model the key elements of woman's lifelong subordination to man. What would female subordination to male authority look like if it were truly analogous to a subordination of the Son to the Father? First, the authority of the man and the submission of the woman would not be decided or demanded by their different male and female natures. Second, there would never be an occasion in which the

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<sup>70</sup>Although Paul exhorts believers to be of one mind (Phil 2:2), this refers to unity and harmony in relationships, not to the complete and consistent oneness in will and desire that characterize the members of the Trinity.

<sup>71</sup>Patriarchalist Steven Tracy acknowledges this aspect of the Father-Son analogy and says this should challenge men to "exercise biblical headship by giving women authority in various spheres of life and ministry." Males, however, must still retain "final decision-making authority" over females (Tracy, "Headship with a Heart," p. 53). This sort of arrangement, however, falls short of the analogy of the Father's giving "all judgment" to the Son. Note also that even in Tracy's benevolent construal of patriarchy, the woman has no direct authority under God; she has only the authority her husband decides to give her.





man’s will would or should overrule the woman’s will; the man therefore would “send” the woman to do only what was in accordance with her own will. Third, every husband would willingly and consistently share all authority with his wife, acknowledging her full authority to make judgments and decisions on behalf of both of them. In short, the oneness in being of the divine Persons, which results in oneness of will, precludes invoking the Trinity as either illustrating or vindicating the doctrine of woman’s subordination to man.

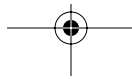
*Theological problems.* The oneness in nature and will of the divine Persons not only renders any “eternal functional subordination of the Son” disanalogous to female subordination but also brings into question the logical coherence of the doctrine itself. What could be the logic of one person always functioning subject to the authority of another person without some cause or ground for this continuous subordination in the respective natures of the two persons? And how could there be a permanent, unilateral “order” of authority and obedience between persons who are always of one mind and will, who have the same perfect knowledge and understanding, the same perfectly righteous desires, the same infinite and inexhaustible wisdom and love? How could there even be any sense or purpose in such an arrangement?

Philippians 2:5-11 states that during his time on earth in human flesh, Jesus put human limitations on his equality with God by choosing to take on the role of a servant. He “became obedient” (Phil 2:8 NRSV). The time of Christ’s earthly incarnation was not business as usual for God the Son and God the Father; it was an epic—although temporally limited—change in their relationship. Hebrews 5:7-8 states, “Son though he was, he learned obedience” while he was on earth in the flesh, and God heard his prayers “because of his reverent submission.” Since this was the first time the Son needed to be obedient to the Father, he had to learn how to do it. It was not until his earthly incarnation that the Son “*became* obedient” and “*learned* obedience.” There is no indication of an *eternal* order of the Son’s obedience to the Father’s authority.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, when Christ humbled himself to become human in order to redeem fallen humanity, it was not so much a demonstration of the Son’s submission to the Father as a demonstration of the nature and being of the Father. As F. F. Bruce notes, “Nowhere is God more fully or worthily revealed as God than when we see him ‘in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor 5:19).”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup>See Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping,” *JETS* 40, no. 1 (March 1997): 65.

<sup>73</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 80.





In the incarnation, the Son became functionally subordinate to the Father only with respect to his work as our Redeemer. Thus Christ's subordination is limited in both scope and duration, since the work of redemption has a beginning and end point in time. But if, as patriarchalists typically argue, Christ's subordination is not limited temporally and functionally but pertains in all things throughout all eternity, then it is not a functional subordination; it is a personal subordination. Subordinate is what he always is, what he always has been, what he always will be; it necessarily defines and characterizes the person and identity of the Son throughout all eternity.

The idea that Christ's subordination is eternal yet merely functional (and thereby compatible with ontological equality) is incongruent. An eternal subordination of Christ would seem logically to entail his ontological subordination.<sup>74</sup> As Millard Erickson concludes, "A temporal, functional subordination without inferiority of essence seems possible, but not an eternal subordination."<sup>75</sup>

The doctrine of an eternal "role" subordination of the Son to the Father not only is rife with logical and theological difficulties but utterly fails as an analogy to woman's subordination. Thus it serves neither to illustrate nor to vindicate the claim that woman's subordination and woman's equality can coexist without contradiction.<sup>76</sup>

### *In Conclusion*

Whether within a marriage or within the Trinity, subordination is not functional but ontological when it defines and characterizes a person in all his or her aspects, in perpetuity—when subordination is thereby inherent in the very identity of a person. To attempt to legitimize such subordination by declaring it to be a "role" that has no bearing on the "equality in being" of the subordinated person is a rhetorical sleight of hand. Saying it doesn't make it so—or even logically possible.

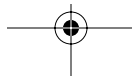
Truly functional subordination *can* logically coexist with equality of being.

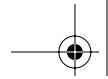
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<sup>74</sup>Those who affirm the Son's "eternal functional subordination" deny that the Son's subordination is ontological. Thus my argument is not that these proponents of trinitarian subordination are heretical but that they fail to acknowledge this theological and philosophical entailment of their position. Robert Letham's ruminations illustrate how the notion of eternal functional subordination collapses into ontological subordination. See Letham, "The Man-Woman Debate," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 67-68. For a response, see *GNFW*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>75</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), p. 309.

<sup>76</sup>See chapter nineteen in this volume for a more detailed theological critique of the doctrine of Christ's subordination.





However, neither female subordination nor an eternal subordination of the Son to the Father fits the definition of functional subordination. Female subordination is not about performing a function as much as it is about being—*being* female, *being* submissive to male authority. Because women’s subordination is not merely a function or a role but is fundamentally ontological, it contradicts the biblical teaching of the essential equality of women and men. Similarly, any eternal subordination of the Son would seem logically to entail the Son’s ontologically inferior status and so to contradict biblical teaching on the oneness of God and the absolute equality in being of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Woman’s inferior “role” cannot be defended by the claim that it is ontologically distinct from woman’s equal being. In female subordination, being determines role and role defines being; thus there can be no real distinction between the two. If the one is inferior, so must be the other. If, on the other hand, woman is *not* less than man in her personal being, then neither can there be any biblical or theological warrant for woman’s permanent, comprehensive and ontologically grounded subordination to man’s authority.<sup>77</sup>



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<sup>77</sup>I am grateful to Douglas Groothuis and a half-dozen other writers and scholars who critiqued earlier versions of this chapter.

