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Introduction

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If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32). So promised Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church and the cosmos. The cause of Christ is advanced only as truth is recognized, affirmed and lived out with wisdom and integrity. Truth must be brought to the world as well as to the church. Doctrine that falls short of the truth not only impedes believers from walking in the full freedom of the gospel of grace and truth but also hinders unbelievers from coming to salvation through the work of Jesus Christ.

This book is born of the conviction that both the world and the church urgently need to hear and take to heart the message of biblical equality, because it is at once true, logical, biblical and beneficial. The essential message of biblical equality is simple and straightforward: Gender, in and of itself, neither privileges nor curtails one's ability to be used to advance the kingdom or to glorify God in any dimension of ministry, mission, society or family. The differences between men and women do not justify granting men unique and perpetual prerogatives of leadership and authority not shared by women. Biblical equality, therefore, denies that there is any created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy *based solely on gender.* Egalitarianism recognizes patterns of authority in the family, church and society—it is not anarchistic—but rejects the notion that any office, ministry or opportunity should be denied anyone on the grounds of gender alone. This is because women and men are made equally in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27), are equally fallen (Rom 3:23), equally redeemable through Christ's life, death and resurrection (Jn 3:16), equally participants in the new-covenant community (Gal 3:28), equally heirs of God in Christ (1 Pet 3:7), and equally able

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to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for life and ministry (Acts 2:17).

Consequently, any limits placed on the gifts and abilities of women should be challenged through a rigorous investigation of the biblical texts—rightly interpreted and harmonized with the whole of God's Word. Biblical egalitarianism (as opposed to any brand of secular or pagan feminism) is biblically based and kingdom focused. It does not rest its arguments on secular political movements or a theologically liberal denial of the Scripture's full and objective truth and authority for all time. Moreover, biblical egalitarians apply the basic historical-grammatical method of interpretation and the best principles of theologizing to their task. They make no appeal to "women's consciousness" as normative; neither do they feel free to dispense with or underplay any aspect of sacred Scripture, since it is all equally God-breathed and profitable for all of life (2 Tim 3:15-17). Biblical equality, while concerned about the false limits and stereotypes that have fettered women, is not "woman centered" but God-centered and concerned with the biblical liberation of both women and men for the cause of Christ in our day and beyond. For when women are denied their gifts and callings, men suffer from the omission as well.

The Purpose of the Book

This book is part of an ongoing controversy among evangelical Christians over the meaning of gender, ministry and marriage. Though varying expressions of an exclusive male leadership have persisted in the church and home over the last two millennia, a remnant has always been present to speak on behalf of biblical equality between men and women. This voice became stronger and clearer after the Reformation, especially at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and during recent decades has been expressed by a host of evangelicals who hold firmly to the inspiration and authority of Scripture. This volume is built on the faithful work of those who have preceded us.

A threefold goal has guided the writing and editing of this collection of essays. First, we have sought to present a positive explanation and a fresh defense of biblical equality in a format that may be useful as a resource for teachers, students and laypersons who have a serious interest in "the gender question." To this end, the book is academic and persuasive in tone and may be read alongside similar texts that defend the male leadership position.[1]

[1]Such as John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), or Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. TenElshof, eds., *Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001).

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Second, we have sought to foster a dialogue that will draw in those who share our evangelical heritage yet disagree with or have questions about the biblical equality position. In order to offer a fuller, more informative picture of gender equality, we have widened the scope of our discussion beyond the usual biblical texts to cover a range of theological, historical, hermeneutical, psychological and practical perspectives. Thus we hope that there were will be something in this book that will be helpful and relevant for everyone. We are convinced that an ongoing constructive dialogue among evangelicals can lead us all to a better understanding of God's Word and God's will for our life together as the body of Christ.

Third, and perhaps most important, we wish to encourage women as well as men to celebrate God's gift of gender complementarity in the context of mutually shared partnerships, without the trappings of male hierarchy that traditionally have accompanied such relationships, whether in marriage, in ministry or in the context of cross-gender friendships. Further, it is our desire that women called to ministry will be better able to discover and develop their gifts and exercise them in fruitful ministry.

Evangelicals and Gender: Two Views

While there is a spectrum of views on this topic, the most fundamental divide is over one basic question: Are there any aspects of leadership denied to women and reserved for men strictly on the basis of what one cannot change, one's gender? Many of those who answer yes prefer to be called "complementarians" because they believe that the differences between men and women—differences which, in their view, empower men and restrict women in certain ways—are complementary. Yet this term must be challenged because egalitarians also believe in gender complementarity—but *complementarity without hierarchy.* How, then, should we speak of the differing views?

It is vitally important to meaningful discussion—especially between Christians—to use terms that are accurate and respectful representations of each view. Speaking of and to each other in a Christlike manner is crucial. Toward this end, we must take a moment to offer a brief explanation of how we really differ on this issue. Though there is much common ground that we share, at the end of the day two distinctive positions emerge.

Male leadership. This position sets forth a male leadership that restricts women from full participation in certain ministries and decision-making responsibilities. The emphasis is on male leadership rather than shared leadership in the church and home. For the greater part of church history this position has been expressed in

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such terms as *patriarchy, hierarchy, headship* (interpreted to mean "leadership"), *authority* and *tradition.* However, such language has been shunned recently by many proponents of the view, due to some negative connotations and misuse. Despite its drawbacks, however, this terminology continues to identify accurately the essential distinction of the position. According to this view, men are seen as responsible under God for the leadership of both church and home, though they should serve in these roles with an attitude of humility. Women may have a limited degree of input into leadership and decision making, but in the end they must submit to the decisions of their husbands and/or male church elders (though disagreement still exists within this position as to how exactly this theory is to be worked out in practice).

The long tenure of this view as the majority opinion in the church has led to it being called "the traditional view." But since this could be perceived to have a negative implication (being *only traditional* as opposed to being *biblical*), and because the traditional view had understood women to be personally inferior to men, new terminology was sought. By the end of the 1980s the idea of "biblical manhood and womanhood" expressed in terms of gender "complementarity" became the language of preference for a number of proponents of male leadership.[2] Concurrent with this terminology is the contention that God created male and female as equal but "distinct" (to be "complements" of one another) *and* that female submission to male leadership is inherent in the gender distinction (from which it would follow that belief in gender equality must somehow deny gender complementarity).

Gender equality. For those holding to gender equality, the most common descriptives have been *evangelical feminism, egalitarianism* and *biblical equality.* As with the terms applied to the male leadership view, there have been negative implications and pejorative uses of these terms in the debate. For example, though *feminism* accurately describes the aspect of this position that seeks to be more supportive of a woman's freedom and opportunity to serve alongside men in ministry and marriage, the qualifier *evangelical* is helpful in distinguishing evangelical feminism from the unbiblical aspects of liberal religious and secular feminism. The term *egalitarian* has been used by some opponents to suggest that evangelicals who hold this position admit to no significant gender differences between men and women other than the anatomical, though such an extreme egalitarianism has never been held by evangelical proponents of gender equality. Finally, *biblical* is added to the concept of gender

[2]Piper and Grudem, "Preface," *RBMW,* pp. xiii-xv; Saucy and TenElshof, "A Problem in the Church," in *Women and Men,* pp. 26-30.

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equality in order to distinguish evangelicals from those who seek gender equality primarily because of cultural pressure, personal agendas or equal-rights politics, rather than out of obedience to the Bible.

With regard to the idea of "complementarity," it should be noted that from the time of the first wave of the modern women's movement at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many have argued that women should participate equally with men precisely *because* they bring complementary gender qualities to marriage, ministry and society. Thus the most recent term for the male leadership position has often been employed by those who have held the opposite view![3] Of course, the difference lies not in the basic meaning of the term ("to complete one another") but in the different implications argued by each side. In the gender debate, this term may well be more helpful in identifying a point of agreement between the opposing views than indicating their disagreements. This is why we have chosen to use the term in our title, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy.*

Though we speak strongly in favor of unity, points of agreement and dialogue, it must be noted at the start that we see no middle ground on this question. The notion of complementarity is helpful and must be pursued, but two essential questions remain. Are all avenues of ministry and leadership open to women as well as men, or are women restricted from certain roles and subordinated to male authority on the basis of gender alone? Likewise, do wives share equally with husbands in leadership and decision making in marriage, or does the husband have a unique responsibility and privilege to make final decisions, based on his gender alone? The answers to these questions will continue to distinguish clearly between the male leadership and gender equality positions.

In view of all these considerations, it is probably most fitting to refer to those who believe in restricting leadership to men as simply advocates of male leadership, or patriarchalists (because they affirm male authority over women), or traditionalists (since they reflect what has been the dominant tradition of the church, however much they may critique some extreme aspects of this tradition), or hierarchicalists (because they affirm hierarchy at a point where egalitarians affirm equality).

The debate between those who promote male leadership and those who promote gender equality cannot be rightly settled by name calling, issuing propaganda or evading this divisive issue. It can be approached with integrity only through care-

[3]See, for example, Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 132; also Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen et al., eds., *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 23-24.

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ful scholarly investigation of what the Bible teaches about the nature, gifts and callings of women and men. To that end this book is offered. *Discovering Biblical Equality* is the first multiauthored volume to comprehensively, systematically and consistently articulate an egalitarian position based on the tenets of biblical teaching.[4] While the authors are aware of and responsive to the traditionalist alternative, the overall spirit of the book is more affirming of God's gifting of women and men than it is critical of those who dispute biblical equality.

An Overview of Discovering Biblical Equality

All five sections of the book contribute in different and complementary ways to an understanding of biblical equality. Part one provides a needed historical backdrop to the contemporary debate. Ruth Tucker skillfully surveys the changing roles of women in ministry from the early church through the eighteenth century. Janette Hassey focuses on the pivotal but often neglected topic of evangelical women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Some may be surprised to learn that an egalitarian perspective within evangelicalism did not wait for the secular feminism of the 1960s.) Ronald Pierce takes stock of more recent developments among evangelical egalitarians, with a bibliographic survey of the 1970s through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Part two zeroes in on the crucial topic of biblical support for gender equality and challenges traditionalist interpretations and applications. Richard Hess investigates the foundational Genesis passages on human origins, roles and destiny and finds no created hierarchy of gender. Ronald Pierce engages the challenging topic of women under the Old Testament law by putting the Jewish theocracy into a larger perspective. Linda Belleville considers the many and varied women leaders in the Bible and explains their significance to the gender debate. Jesus' treatment of women is a crucial matter, since he was God incarnate. Aída Besançon Spencer finds that Jesus affirmed women in ways often missed by students of the Bible and draws out the implications of this important truth. Gordon Fee offers a compelling explanation of the ecclesiological significance of Paul's declaration that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Craig Keener, Gordon Fee, I. Howard Marshall, Linda Belleville and Peter Davids address key New Testament passages taken by some to imply a divinely mandated subordination of women; they argue that this conclusion does not follow from

[4]Earlier multiauthored volumes include Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), and Kathy Keay, ed., *Men, Women and God: Evangelicals on Feminism* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1987).

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a close reading and analysis of the texts. They leave no stone unturned in their careful assessment of these important and often-misunderstood passages.

Part three explores critical theological dimensions of the gender debate, with respect to Spirit gifting as the criterion for ministry (Gordon Fee), the nature of authority in the New Testament (Walter Liefeld), biblical priesthood and the pastorate (Stanley Grenz), gendered language for God (Judy Brown) and the doctrine of the subordination of Christ (Kevin Giles). Rebecca Merrill Groothuis offers an analysis of a key hermeneutical principle used by patriarchalists to justify women's subordination—that women are equal to men in being but permanently unequal in role—and finds it logically wanting.

In part four Roger Nicole and Gordon Fee discuss the purpose and place of hermeneutics (the method of biblical interpretation) in the gender debate. William Webb's exposition of a "redemptive hermeneutic" draws out parallels between the texts on slavery and the texts on women's submission. In another chapter Webb argues that endorsing biblical equality does not lead to the sanctioning of homosexual practices. Sulia and Karen Mason show that evangelical egalitarianism, unlike modern secular feminism, logically leads to supporting the value of unborn human life and opposing abortion on demand.

Part five offers practical information and insights on working out the principles of biblical equality in the church, in marriage and in our personal lives. Joan Burgess Winfrey writes of the need for proper self-esteem in women, a need best answered by the egalitarian viewpoint. Judith and Jack Balswick paint a helpful and insightful picture of marriage as a partnership of equals. Cynthia Neal Kimball discusses both the natural and the cultural differences between men and women as they bear on our life together in the church. Mimi Haddad and Alvera Mickelsen present ways that the message of biblical equality can be shared creatively and practically with the church. Alice Matthews concludes this volume by wrestling with the vexed issue of how traditionalists and egalitarians can get along and even move toward reconciliation in Christ, despite their deep differences.

All of the contributors to *Discovering Biblical Equality* have applied their expertise to the cause of helping Christians discover the truth, goodness and joy of gender complementarity without hierarchy. They do so out of their love for Christ and God's Word, as well as their desire to see the kingdom of God flourish more fully. It is our hope and prayer that the reader may be like the noble Bereans who, with open minds and hopeful hearts, examined the Scriptures to test the truth of Paul's message (Acts 17:11).