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Making Grace Visible: Anabaptist Theology and Spiritual Activism

Thomas N. Finger

Thomas N. Finger recently completed his monumental work, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*. Editor Gary Deddo had a chance to speak with him about his own background and the development of this work.

DEDDO: Tom, could you tell us a little about your background and your relationship to the

Anabaptist tradition?

FINGER: My family of origin was not particularly religious, though we did attend a Presbyterian church occasionally, beginning when I was about ten. My parents and relatives were mostly business people, climbing the economic and social ladder. My background was very far from Mennonite or evangelical. But I seem to have

had a recessive gene, because I was deeply interested in big religious and philosophical questions from the time I was twelve. I sought to answer them through intellectual inquiry but dropped out of college (actually, flunked out), largely due to discouragement and accompanying emotional struggles. While I was a dropout, I finally became a Christian in a way that seemed ridiculously simple: by simply asking Jesus into my heart. So I thank God for allowing me to get to that low point where I was humble enough to accept whatever God offered. I had a definite conversion experience—though I certainly don't think that everyone must. That was over forty years ago, but it still seems like only a few years. It was wonderful to enjoy a fairly simple, lively faith at first. But I gradually realized that God had not simply wanted to rescue me, but wanted to make me into everything for which I had been created. So I began the frightening journey back into academia—in an evangelical context, which was brand new.

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Biblical Gender Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy

In October IVP released a lengthy, multidisciplinary book on gender issues—*Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (hereafter DBE)—edited by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, with Gordon D. Fee as contributing editor. Jim Hoover recently interviewed Ron and Rebecca.

HOOVER: With as many books out there on the subject of men and women in the church, what was the impetus for this project? What makes it stand out from others in the field?

GROOTHUIS: There seemed to be a clear need for a single resource that covered the main issues and arguments for biblical equality. I wanted people to see that biblical equality makes sense from every angle; it's not just a matter of exegeting a few controversial biblical proof texts—or, in some cases, “proof words.”

PIERCE: DBE is the first comprehensive scholarly collection of essays from an egalitarian perspective to have been published in North America in the past thirty years.



Ronald W. Pierce



Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

HOOVER: You've subtitled the book *Complementarity Without Hierarchy*. Is that just deliberately provocative, or is there something substantive that you are trying to get at?

GROOTHUIS: It is not intended to be deliberately provocative, but it does make a point—namely, that the idea of male-female complementarity is not the issue at stake in the gender debate. Indeed, the concept fits as well with gender equality as with gender hierarchy. It is axiomatic that male and female are complementary; that is, they complete and correspond to one another.

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Anabaptist Theology, continued from page 1

DEDDO: Some of our readers might be curious to know what a good Anabaptist is doing publishing in evangelical circles. Can you shed some light on the relationship you see between the two?

FINGER: Though I did not fully realize this then, I was initially attracted to Anabaptism because it offered a creative way of integrating two valid features of Christian faith that other Christian groups affirm one-sidedly. Not, however, because it offered some easy compromise, some fifty/fifty solution, but because it offered very creative ways of both understanding issues—for example, social vs. personal dimensions of faith—and proposing viable solutions. Early on I sensed that Anabaptism carried significant ecumenical potential and was not really “sectarian.” I discovered this standpoint in 1970 but didn’t join a Mennonite congregation until 1980.

As I finished seminary, Vietnam protests were in full swing, but I had no clear idea of what a Christian sociopolitical outlook might be. At that time, most evangelicals claimed to be apolitical, though many were quite far to the right and supported the Vietnam war. During Ph.D. studies in a very different, left-wing environment my social and political questions became acute. This, for me, was the basic problem: Evangelicals seemed really interested in personal conversions alone. Their converts either became apolitical or maintained, uncritically, whatever social outlook they held before. Evangelicals couldn’t really address sociopolitical issues. Liberal Christians, however, seemed really interested only in changing social structures, and seemed to have a very shallow personal faith. How could the personal and social dimensions of Christian faith fit together? It was as I wrestled with this amidst protests and campus shut-downs over Vietnam that Anabaptism offered a fresh answer. For Anabaptists, I learned, faith is personal, since it involves decisive commitment to Jesus. Yet it’s also social, since this involves commitment to the overall way of life that Jesus taught, and to communities which made, and continue to make, that commitment.

DEDDO: Could you tell us a little about your more formal training and how it contributed to the for-

mation of this book?

FINGER: I received my Ph.D. in a liberal setting but spent a year in Germany with Wolfhart Pannenberg. My main concerns were issues discussed among evangelical, neo-orthodox and liberal Protestants. But through some hints in John Howard Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus* and Robert Friedmann’s *Theology of Anabaptism*, I began to see that while Anabaptists/Mennonites had written very little formal, or explicit, theology, a profound implicit theology underlay their practical Christianity. Yoder hinted at how this perspective might creatively resolve some main contemporary theological issues. From then on, I understood

the explication of this implicit theology to be my main scholarly task.

DEDDO: What of interest to our readers can you tell us about current developments in Anabaptist theology and church life? And how might your book intersect them?

FINGER: Ever since the Reformation, most Anabaptists/Mennonites have been neither highly educated nor culturally sophisticated—mostly because mainstream society forced them to the margins. Not until the 1940s did American Mennonites have a few visible Ph.D.s. By the 1960, they were doing sophisticated work in New Testament and ethics. Constructive, or systematic theology, in Anabaptist perspective began about 1980. My book seeks to survey this field and interact with other Anabaptist theologians—as well as with Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox believers—on some main issues. These developments reflect greatly increased Mennonite involvement in higher education and mainstream society, but also a quest for Anabaptist identity. When identity is no longer defined by ethnicity and culture-specific behavior, it must be defined, in part, by theological convictions.

In my view, two intra-Anabaptist debates are most important. First, how much emphasis should be placed on Anabaptist distinctives—peace, believers’ baptism, etc.—and how much on commonalities with other Christians? Some theologians rightly worry that as Anabaptists become more mainstream, they will blend in and lose the unique things they have to offer. But this effort can lead to trashing beliefs as widely shared

THOMAS N. FINGER

A Contemporary ANABAPTIST Theology

BIBLICAL. HISTORICAL.
CONSTRUCTIVE



as Nicaea and Chalcedon. Other Anabaptists value approaches and beliefs affirmed by other Christians. But this can lead to granting academic methods or a broad ecumenical consensus a priority. I argue that some ecumenically shared beliefs, rightly articulated, far from diluting Anabaptist distinctives, can help express them more strongly.

Second, Anabaptists/Mennonites have always stressed ethics and community. Yet a strong tendency to ethical and social reductionism exists among Anabaptist theologians. At the same time, this predominantly ethical, practical emphasis is leaving many Anabaptist churches and their members exhausted and spiritually hungry. I argue that the spiritual dimension, rightly understood, far from diluting ethical, communal and socio-political activities, can greatly strengthen them.

DEDDO: In the researching and writing of this book did you have any “aha” moments where you recognized something really important that you or others had overlooked?

FINGER: The book took over seven years to write. Such experiences were not so much single moments as repeated ones of deeper wonder and excitement. I kept being amazed at how implicitly “sacramental” Anabaptists have been—in the practical sense of making invisible, spiritual grace visible through every facet of their physical lives and work. Yet their explicit theology—which was often somewhat unclear—downgraded the physical world, and especially their bodies. I was increasingly amazed at how profoundly Pilgram Marpeck understood this, and, often far better than other Anabaptists, gave it explicit expression.

This included reflection on the church sacraments. While Anabaptists insisted on believers’

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Discovering Biblical Equality, continued from page 1

PIERCE: We acknowledge and embrace this truth. But we do not attempt to define in a prescriptive way how masculinity and femininity are worked out in our human fallenness and in our various cultural contexts. The Bible does not provide adequate data for such an enterprise. Complementarity need not necessarily lead to male hierarchy, but it can exist, and flourish, without it.

HOOVER: Becca, your chapter "Equal in Being, Unequal in Role" tackles head-on a major premise of those who challenge the notion of biblical equality without hierarchy. Why do you think this stock response has so much appeal? Why do you think this issue is so critical?

GROOTHUIS: For most of church history women were denied equal status with men because it was held that women were simply inferior persons, by God's design. Then later in the twentieth

century the church came to believe that God did not create woman to be personally inferior to man; yet the submission texts were still understood to exclude women from equal participation in the church and in the home, especially with respect to any activities deemed spiritually authoritative. But this left dangling the question, Why should an equal person be excluded from certain key areas of human activity and ministry? To reconcile this conflict, the "equal in being/unequal in role" construct was devised. This is the linchpin of the entire hierarchical-complementarian enterprise. They must be able to uphold equality of being alongside inferiority in role, and this hermeneutical device is the widely accepted way of reconciling these two propositions. Yet in my chapter I show that it simply is not logically possible to have women be both equal and unequal in this way.

Because of its rationale as intrinsic to God's original creation design, and its nature as necessary, permanent and grounded in woman's unalterable ontology, woman's inferior "role" does not fit the definition of a role. Calling woman's subordination a mere "role" or "function" serves as a rhetorical decoy that makes woman's subordination to man's authority appear compatible with woman's full spiritual and ontological equality with man. Herein lies its appeal. It appears to resolve the conflict between equality and inequality. But, as I

argue in my chapter, if this so-called role is, in fact, biblically mandated and justified for all women for all time, then it logically entails women's fundamental inferiority in being and not merely in function. Yet we know from Scripture that man and woman are created equal in being. Thus woman's subordination is contradicted by woman's equality. We cannot, as the saying goes, have our cake and eat it too when it comes to acknowledging women as equals while we keep them in their "place." And it won't do to insist that even if it's not logical it must be true because the Bible says so. Not even God can make a logical contradiction true. And if it can't be true, then it can't be biblical.

HOOVER: Opponents of your point of view often suggest that egalitarianism inevitably leads to liberalism in the church. How do you respond to that charge?

PIERCE: The charge would be appropriate if we based our conclusions merely on cultural pressure in opposition to the teaching of Scripture. But the opposite is true. We affirm and submit to the teaching of God's Word, which we believe teaches a complementary gender equality—not patriarchy.

GROOTHUIS: This charge seems to be more a perception of guilt by association than anything else, an emotionally laden impression, not a well-reasoned conclusion. We believe it is the right thing for churches to permit women whom the Spirit has gifted and called to serve in leadership ministry alongside men without restriction based on gender because the Bible affirms the gifts and ministries and priesthood of all believers in Christ, regardless of gender or any other social or physical difference.

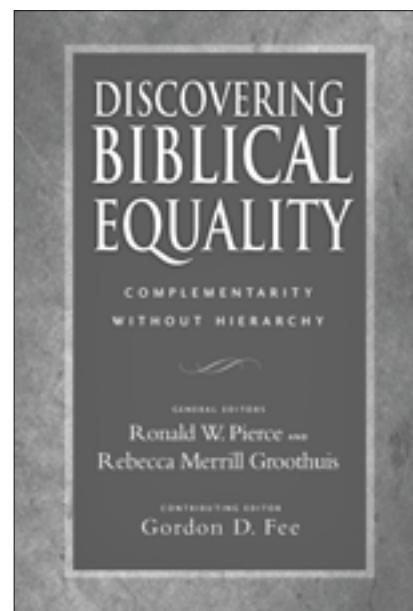
HOOVER: The other charge I often hear is that the sort of reasoning that is used to defend egalitarianism leads to acceptance of homosexuality. How do you respond to this charge?

GROOTHUIS: When one applies to the texts on homosexuality the hermeneutic that evangelicals use in deriving gender equality from the biblical texts, the clear conclusion is that, although the traditional ban on women in leadership should be abandoned, the scriptural ban on homosexuality should be retained. This is because the Bible itself treats these two issues in diametrically different

ways. DBE has an entire chapter explicating these watershed differences.

HOOVER: What surprises do you think readers will find in this book?

PIERCE: Here the term *discovering* in the title



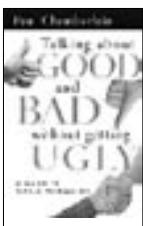
comes in, especially for those unaware of the work of evangelicals for biblical gender equality, or for those who have heard about this position through those who oppose our work. Contrary to the charges of many of its critics, the biblical equality position affirms the truth of Scripture, celebrates the "maleness and femaleness" of God's creation, is not the product of "contemporary feminist cultural trends," and does not deny the enduring principles of all the gender-related texts of the Bible. In short, many will be surprised to discover how biblical gender equality is.

HOOVER: Gordon Fee served as contributing editor to this volume. Would you like to say a little more about the role he played in the development of this project?

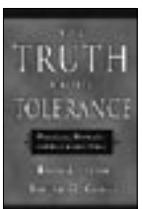
PIERCE: The work of the three editors was intentionally complementary—that is, we sought to practice what we preach. I initiated the project and brought Old Testament expertise to the task. Rebecca brought significant editorial skill and experience, along with a razor-sharp theological and philosophical mind. Gordon is our internationally recognized New Testament and hermeneutics scholar, as well as text critic. As contributing editor, he wrote four vitally important chapters, and read and critiqued all the others.

HOOVER: Ron, you seem to be vitally interested

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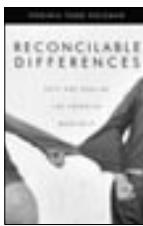


Paul Chamberlain's *Talking About Good and Bad Without Getting Ugly* describes both the challenges to moral discourse in contemporary culture and the means to overcome them. An excellent supplemental text for undergraduate ethics or apologetics courses.



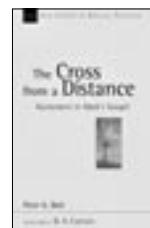
In *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity and the Culture Wars*, coauthors Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti counter the charge that conviction about tolerance and the commitment to truth are mutually exclusive.

They in fact make the claim that the opposite is the case. Tolerance as often understood easily collapses into intolerance, and a Christian—even evangelical—commitment to truth provides a secure foundation for a tolerant society which provides room for others to pursue a knowledge of the truth.



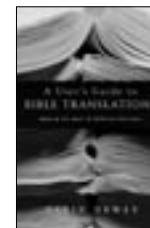
Asbury Theological Seminary professor of counseling Virginia Todd Holeman brings together in *Reconcilable Differences* her own clinical experience and research with biblical and theological insight to provide guidance for mar-

NEW NOTEWORTHY

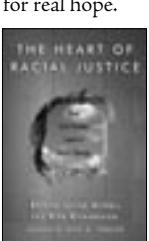


Distance (NSBT) examines the narrative, history and theology of Christ's atonement found in the Gospel of Mark. Bolt addresses exegetical questions, touches on the polemical issues surrounding our doctrinal formulations and takes up our practical concerns for evangelism.

That God moved toward humanity in the very moment of its greatest rebellion was and is cause for hope and wonder.



A User's Guide to Bible Translations offers a sweeping history of the translation of Scripture. David Dewey lays out not so much what version to use but what questions ought to be asked. A word-for-word translation may not serve the purposes of preaching, while a loose paraphrase may offer little scholarly benefit. In the end, this book provides a helpful anchor for scaling the big wall of English translations looming over us. ■



At its core, racial division is a spiritual problem. At the same time injustice must never be spiritualized. In *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change* Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson make the crucial connection between the role of healing prayer and spiritual warfare in bringing about justice. They call their readers to do the internal work that will then allow them to do God's work in the world. Find out why John M. Perkins calls this book "a blueprint for the Christian church."

Growing out of lectures at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Peter G. Bolt's *The Cross from a*

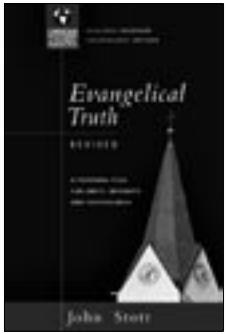
Now Let's Hear What the Rest of the World Has to Say ...



The Majority World continues to make its voice heard in the Western church. IVP celebrates this development with two additions to the landmark Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective (CDGP), with more volumes on the way.

Joe Kapolyo, former principal of the Theological College of Central Africa, brings us *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives Through African Eyes*. Kapolyo asks questions of what is central to human identity from a perspective largely shielded from the fierce individualism and competitiveness in Western culture, informed more closely instead by an African, tribal context.

John Stott, himself no stranger to the



Majority World, revisits his plea for unity in the newly revised *Evangelical Truth*. He fleshes out an evangelical understanding of truth centered in the trinitarian gospel, with a strong emphasis on the faithful living out of our evangelical convictions in fellowship with one another. Stott's reliable voice, guided by his years of listening to the church outside his native London, makes this highly personal book an important resource in the ongoing effort to bring a global perspective to our understanding of Christian doctrine.

Taken together with Samuel Escobar's *The New Global Mission* (CDGP), these books invite the Western church to engage the strong scholarship and vital faith of the church in the Majority World. ■

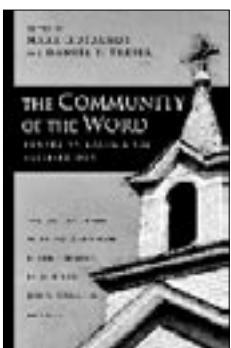
2005 Wheaton Theology Conference: "Women, Ministry and the Gospel"



The 14th Annual Wheaton Theology Conference will be held April 7-9, 2005, at Wheaton College. The theme will be "Women, Ministry and the Gospel," and speakers will explore the possibility of finding fresh perspectives in this often entrenched debate. Biblical scholars, church historians and systematic theologians who have represented a range of positions on this issue will be involved in considering new paradigms for understanding the nature of gender and Christian public ministry in light of the gospel.

The conference is sponsored by the Wheaton College Graduate School Department of Biblical & Theological Studies, Archaeology and World Religions, and by InterVarsity Press. For more information visit www.wheaton.edu/Theology/theology-conference.html or e-mail Theology-Conference@Wheaton.edu. ■

Attending to Evangelical Ecclesiology



a growing sense that the ambiguity among evangelicals about the nature of the church needs to be

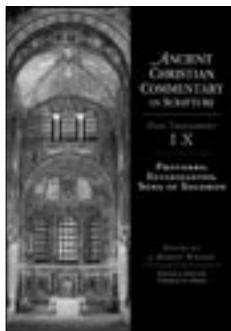
The *Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, is the fruit of the work and interaction of presenters at the 2004 Wheaton Theology Conference. There is

given attention because its neglect really constitutes a detriment to evangelicalism's maturity and ability to participate in wider Christian church discussions.

Fourteen essays by notable scholars including John Webster, William J. Abraham, Allen Verhey, D. G. Hart and Ellen T. Charry, take up the task of reviewing the situation from historical, biblical and theological perspectives. The result is a multidimensional treatment that illuminates an evangelical resistance to ecclesiological reductionism but also highlights the challenge of formulating a cohesive and coherent theology of the church.

An evangelical vision of the church must somehow include its missional, moral, doxological and culturally engaging dimensions all on the basis of its worship, which is in response to the creative calling together and transformation of the people of God through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit. The essays together constitute an overview of the richness and depth of evangelical thought on the nature of the church and promise to contribute to a more satisfactory ecclesiology that can be of benefit for the whole church in its variety of expressions. ■

New Commentaries for Your Enjoyment



several new offerings in ongoing series.

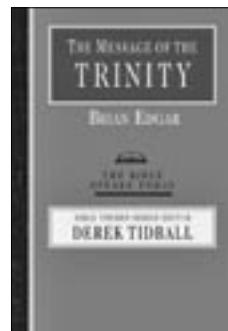
The Ancient Christian Commentary on

Asksed about whether a new commentary series was worth launching years ago, David Scholer commented, "Well, scholars like to write them, and people like to read them." So we are pleased to announce

Scripture marches forward with the volume on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, edited by J. Robert Wright from General Theological Seminary in New York, and the volume on Hebrews, edited by Philip D. W. Krey and Erik M. Heen, both from Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The former shows again how adept the church fathers were in seeing Christ in the Old Testament in rich and edifying ways. Krey and Heen, while still giving the big picture, have relied heavily on Chrysostom's *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews* as a prism for looking at the book of Hebrews and other early Christian com-

mentary on the letter.

The Bible Speaks Today has two excellent additions: *The Message of the Trinity* by Brian Edgar which offers a practical biblical theology of the Trinity, complete with study guide; and *The Message of Exodus*, a skilled exposition of the book from series editor J. Alec Motyer. ■



Questioning the Consensus



of Q. In an era that has produced critical editions of Q and in the interest of keeping us all honest, Mark Goodacre (from the University of Birmingham, and well-known for his award-

Eckhard Schnabel, in his monumental *Early Christian Mission*, mentions in passing that German scholars are apt to take arguments against the existence of Jesus more seriously than those against the existence

winning web directory The New Testament Gateway (www.ntgateway.com) and Nicholas Perrin (Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania) have assembled a transatlantic team of scholars foolhardy enough to challenge the prevailing scholarly consensus. The resulting collection of essays, *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique*, painstakingly examines issues from the logical presuppositions that birthed the Two-Source Hypothesis, to ways in which order in the Double Tradition raises serious questions concerning Luke's independence from Matthew, to methodological issues involved in reconstructing Q, and finally to an exploration of what Gospel scholarship without Q would look like.

Eric Eve of the University of Oxford engages in a particularly fascinating thought experiment: given current assumptions and means of reconstructing Q, what would Mark look like if we were to assume we had Q, and Mark was the missing document? Regardless of the conclusions readers ultimately reach, their thinking will be stretched by this important contribution. Tom Wright, bishop of Durham and author of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, notes in the foreword that Perrin and Goodacre "are to be congratulated on assembling a book which presents engaging and tenacious arguments . . . for questioning the still-dominant 'Q' hypothesis." ■

Anabaptist Theology, continued from page 2

baptism and correct celebration of the Lord's Supper at the risk of their lives, they had no category for God's presence in these but "spiritual." Their opponents, understandably, wondered why Anabaptists insisted on using water, wine and bread. I was stunned by Marpeck's insight that the issue was "not the element . . . but the activity . . . not water, bread and wine . . . but baptism and the Supper." Church sacraments were not things, but actions, or rituals. The essences of water, bread and wine did not change. Nevertheless, they belonged to the ritual's "essence." For Christ chooses to convey grace in a special way through the Supper, and its physical elements play an indispensable role. Without bread and wine, the Supper wouldn't be the Lord's Supper. Marpeck, I maintain, expressed well explicitly Anabaptism's implicit sacramentality—and provides ways to connect with "sacramental" Christian traditions, and offer them the Anabaptist awareness of the sacramentality of everyday life and work.

DEDDO: Your work has also gotten some interest outside of Anabaptist circles besides the evangelical branch. Can you tell us something about that development?

FINGER: Surprisingly, in 1983 I found myself representing Mennonites in the National Council of Churches and, even more surprisingly, I've continued until now! I considered myself on the evangelical side of the divide against liberalism. NCC's goals related to ultimate church union seemed vague and even undesirable. But I've always found myself and Mennonites wonderfully welcome. I've learned more from articulate spokespersons of other churches than would fill another six-hundred-page book! In that context I began to really learn about Catholicism and Orthodoxy. My desire for the unity of Christ's true church has continued to grow. Through many conversations on many issues, I kept discovering how Anabaptism's implicit theology could help in this task. This is a major theme of my present book. Many of these learnings are in it—along with my insistence on maintaining Anabaptist distinctives like peace, economic sharing and believers' baptism, which many churches consider divisive. Things I've learned from evangelicals—like vital faith in Jesus, transformation by the Spirit, biblical authority and global mission—are also essential to any ecumenism that I'd favor. ■

Discovering Biblical Equality, continued from page 3

in getting both sides talking. Tell us about the session that you have planned at ETS. Even though we're talking now, the session will be over before this interview appears in print.

PIERCE: Yes, this is a passion of mine. My twenty-eight years of work among a faculty of fifty evangelicals who generally represent a male-leadership position has taught me the need to foster a more civil and higher level of dialogue and debate, rather than the heated arguments and reactionary attacks that have often characterized the "gender discussion" in the past several decades. Our work in the Evangelicals and Gender Study Group at ETS has been focused on this goal, to which the steering committee members and panel participants consciously contribute. I believe that with God's help our best years lie ahead, during which we can model more fully the oneness that Christ desires for the church, without minimizing the significant differences that we have on this topic.

HOOVER: How might this book be used in a classroom setting?

GROOTHUIS: It would serve well as a main textbook for any class addressing the gender debate in evangelicism. It could also be used as a supplemental text for classes in Christian social ethics or theology.

PIERCE: I have dreamed of a volume like *DBE* for decades and had my first discussion of such a project with Andy Le Peau at IVP about fourteen years ago. I wanted a text to set beside John Piper and Wayne Grudem's 1991 comprehensive work, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, so that my students could

read a strong defense of both views from a wide array of recognized scholars and make up their own minds. I am thankful that such a volume now exists.

HOOVER: What are your hopes for this book?

PIERCE: My hopes are, first, that *DBE* will encourage both men and women to practice the truth of biblical equality in their churches and homes; second, that thinking Christians will more fairly and clearly consider the strengths and weaknesses of both positions in light of the authoritative teaching of Scripture; and third, that we might set a corrective course toward a more positive and charitable dialogue on this important topic.

GROOTHUIS: My hope is that *DBE* will receive a wide and fair reading in and beyond the evangelical world. I hope and pray that many will hear and heed its liberating message that men and women can and should minister to the glory of God by the power of the Spirit according to their gifts and abilities, and not be hindered by gender restrictions that are not mandated by Holy Writ. When believers in Christ come to understand that women stand before God with the same responsibilities and privileges as men, then the church will not be hampered by any perceived need to keep women subordinate but will instead be more fully empowered by the Spirit as all members of the body are able to pursue the ministries to which God has called them. The mission of biblical equality is not simply to empower women as individuals but to empower the church as the body of Christ on this earth. ■

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