

*Partners in Christ: A
Conservative Case for
Egalitarianism*

Available November 2015
\$20, 208 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-4081-6

“Like Viewing a Familiar Landscape from a New Vantage Point”

The Bible says that women should keep silent in church *and* that they should pray and prophesy. It calls wives the weaker partner *and* says that men and women are equal.

When it comes to understanding what Scripture says about men and women, those on both sides of the debate can and do marshal strong evidence from the Bible. Why are they able to do this? John Stackhouse boldly contends it is because Scripture in fact says both things.

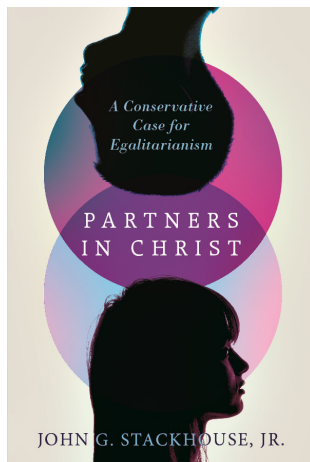
Does the Bible contradict itself then? Not so. Rather Stackhouse describes the single approach in Scripture that guides us with clear direction on these important matters of relationships in the church and the family.

Are you looking for an approach that takes the whole Bible into account and not just bits and pieces of it? While treating Scripture with utmost seriousness, Stackhouse moves us all beyond the impasse in this important debate.

Stackhouse uses *Partners in Christ* to address

- what a theological argument that goes beyond hermeneutics could look like;
- how to take both sides of the argument seriously;
- what role eschatology plays in the gender role debate;
- where narrative fits into the gender role discussion;
- how to make sense of past patriarchal structures; and
- how the gender role debate differs from the homosexuality debate.

“Unlike many writers on both sides of this debate, Stackhouse offers a hermeneutical approach that recognizes the diversity of Scripture and accounts for it,” writes Richard Bauckham, senior scholar at Ridley Hall, University of Cambridge. “For many readers familiar with the texts and the debate, the effect of this distinctive contribution will be like viewing a familiar landscape from a new vantage point.”



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Realized or Over-Realized Eschatology

Egalitarians often accuse complementarians of failing to recognize the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in the career of Jesus and in the bestowing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Complementarians, it is alleged, fail to take eschatology seriously – particularly the declaration that the “last days” have arrived, per Peter’s sermon in Acts 2. “You’re living in the past,” egalitarians say, “still living under the effects of the fall and thus perpetuating the male domination described in Genesis 3. You don’t realize that we are now in a new era, the era of the last days, when patriarchy, along with other traditional compromises of God’s good will, is to be done away with.”

Yet egalitarians themselves are open to an opposite charge from the complementarian side – namely, that they are practicing a “realized eschatology” (some would say an *over-realized* eschatology): an eschatology that acts as if the end times have indeed *fully* come, and that we are to experience all of the blessings of the kingdom here and now. If there is too little “already” in the complementarian position, there is not enough “not yet” in most egalitarian teaching.

What would our understanding of gender look like, however, if we took the “already, but not yet” principle seriously? What if we were to expect, instead of one extreme or the other, an appropriately paradoxical situation: a slow and partial realization of gospel values here and there, as God patiently and carefully works his mysterious ways along the multiple fronts of kingdom advance?

The New Testament writers and audiences seem to expect the Lord’s return at any time – and particularly within the lifetimes of some of the first readers. Indeed, Paul has to counsel the Thessalonians that the Lord has not returned already, but is expected soon (1 Thess 4:13–5:3). So it would make sense – given gospel priorities, holy pragmatism and eschatological expectations – for the apostles to teach a policy of cultural conservatism (“Get along as best you can with the political powers and social structures that be”) in the interest of accomplishing the one crucial task: spreading the gospel as far and as fast as possible. And they do.

This outlook is so foreign to that of most modern Christians – although many Pentecostals and charismatics around the world do share such a lively belief in the imminence of the second coming – and yet so important for understanding our subject that it is worth considering several key passages in this regard. Let’s look at three from Paul and one from Peter:

But we urge you, beloved, . . . to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thess 4:10-12)



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If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. (Rom 12:18–13:12)

Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God. . . . For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor 7:20–24, 31; cf. 1 Tim 6:1; Tit 2:9–10)

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pet 2:12–17)

Missionaries of every era and locale often have practiced exactly this policy. There was no



point, in their circumstances, to undertaking a quixotic crusade against some deeply entrenched social evil when the church was tiny and young. Any such irritation (one could hardly call it a threat) to the powers would have been crushed in its cradle. And if you have transformation of society in mind, as Christians do who see now that Christ did not return in the first century and might not return for another twenty, then it is better to play the long game: to grow the church and then permeate society with gospel values, with the hope of eventually ameliorating or even transforming what was wrong.

Yet even with this pragmatic accommodation to social realities for the sake of the gospel, we would also expect to see evidence of the kingdom “already” here: in the early church, and in every church. At least within Christian homes and churches—those institutions over which Christians would have the most immediate and extensive control—one would expect to see kingdom values at work: overcoming oppression, eliminating inequality, sharing resources, binding disparate people together in love and mutual respect, liberating gifts and the like. We would expect to hear teaching that envisioned that great day when all such barriers to human fellowship are removed and everyone can fully flourish together. We would expect, in short, to catch glimpses of the kingdom and to feel its unstoppable momentum toward universal shalom, even while we also appreciate the way the Holy Spirit skillfully and patiently guides the church to make the most of whatever opportunities it has in this or that situation. And in many homes and churches, past and present, I think we do find exactly that sort of evidence of God’s “kingdom come” — not as disobedient departures from God’s commandment of perpetual patriarchy, but as faithful enjoyment of the life of the world to come, insofar as it can be enjoyed under the present regime. We shall examine examples of such enjoyment presently, in church history and even in the New Testament itself. Before we do, however, we also need to consider yet another paradoxical principle: the Christian liberty to give up precisely some of the freedoms won for us in Christ—again, for the sake of a higher good.

— Taken from Chapter 8, “Eschatology”