
Women in Ministry: Beyond the Impasse

BY GRETCHEN E. ZIEGENHALS

While most Christians agree that women should be allowed to exercise their God-given gifts of ministry, a sticking point between egalitarians and complementarians is whether certain leadership roles are off limits to women. Both sides want to reach consensus, but are unsure of how to bridge the gap.

Do we still need to question the role of women in ministry? The answer is “yes” for many conservative evangelical Christians. For them, the issues surrounding women in congregational ministry still provoke heated biblical, theological, and ecclesiological debate. Despite the fact that we have women serving in even the highest offices of government, evangelicals continue to examine Scripture in search of answers to questions about women in ministry that are plaguing conservative congregations and seminaries. The issue came to a head in 2000, when the Southern Baptist Convention adopted the revised *2000 Baptist Faith & Message*. To Article VI on “The Church” the statement was added: “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.” Article XVIII on “The Family” (which had been added in 1998) included this interpretation of women’s role in the home: “A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.”¹

What exactly is it about women in ministry that provokes such debate? And what are the arguments for preventing women from serving in churches? While most evangelicals agree that women should be allowed to exercise their God-given gifts of ministry, the sticking point seems to be whether or not particular leadership roles are off limits to women. Some evangelicals have taken what they are calling an “egalitarian” position on the issues of women in church leadership, while others assume a “complementarian” one. Both sides want to reach some consensus on the issue, but are unsure of how to bridge the gap.

Complementarians believe that men and women have been created equally in God’s image, but have different, complementary, God-ordained roles in both Church and home. They also believe in male headship in the Church and the home and they believe that men should mirror God the father, whom they see as loving, wise, protective and all-knowing. For complementarians, there are *essential* differences between men and women that dictate their roles. *Egalitarians*, on the other hand, believe that not only have men and women been created equally in God’s image, but they have been *gifted* equally as well. No role or position in the church is limited to just one gender. Marriages are rooted ideally in negotiation, consensus, and mutual submission, not headship. They think that exclusive male leadership in the Church and home represses women and can at times lead to abuse.

Margaret Kim Peterson notes that both egalitarianism and complementarianism seem to be about the distribution of power. “The egalitarians think power should be shared fifty-fifty; the traditionalists think the distribution should be, in the memorable phrase of one of my husband’s first-year Bible students, ‘sixty-forty in favor of the guy’” (*Women, Ministry and the Gospel*, p. 163).

Three books help us sort through these arguments and understand the issues from evangelical viewpoints: editor James R. Beck’s revised edition of *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005, 359 pp., \$17.99); Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen’s collection, *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 304 pp., \$24.00); and Sarah Sumner’s *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2003, 332 pp., \$15.00). While each book takes a different approach, these three works represent thoughtful, evangelical Christians who wish to engage in rational dialogue and build consensus with one another.



Two Views on Women in Ministry offers the most cohesive, focused format with which to approach the issues. A part of Zondervan’s Counterpoints: Exploring Theology series, its four contributors are all evangelical

New Testament scholars who hold seminary faculty positions. These similarities eliminate other variables from the discussion and help us focus on the scriptural texts that support or refute each position. Two of the scholars – Craig S. Keener (Palmer Theological Seminary) and Linda L. Belleville (Bethel College) – consider themselves to be egalitarians, while two of them – Thomas R. Schreiner (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) and Craig L. Blomberg (Denver Seminary) – self-identify as complementarians. After each of the four major essays, in which one of the authors lays out his or her scriptural justifications, the other three respond briefly.

While the authors' approaches are scholarly and focus on the exegesis of specific passages in question such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 or 1 Timothy 2:11-15, they maintain a lively balance between energetic debate, a history of obvious friendship, and a good-natured respect for one another's positions. Beck notes in his introduction that as evangelicals still debate the issues of women in ministry, we need to forge a "Christ-honoring irenic spirit" for the conversation. In this, the book is quite successful.

Linda Belleville explains that the debate comes down to four questions: "Does the Bible teach a hierarchical structuring of male and female relationships? Do we find women in leadership positions in the Bible? Do women in the Bible assume the same leadership roles as men? Does the Bible limit women from filling certain leadership roles?" (p. 24) The authors all believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, and they all appear to be responsible scholars. Thus it is difficult to emerge with a strong sense of whose reading is the *correct* one. The book is helpful, however, for those who wish to understand more deeply the scriptural justifications for a position they already hold on the issue of women in church leadership or the position held by someone in the other camp.

Some arguments are not as well-supported as others, such as when Craig Blomberg attempts to explain that women can always do everything in a church context except whatever is the "highest authority." For instance, a woman could preach, if she was under the authority of the all-male board of elders, but if the role of pastor was the highest authority, a woman could not hold that role. He bases his arguments on facts such as women were not among the twelve disciples. Craig Keener convincingly refutes this point with a practical argument: "Sending out women on evangelistic travels, either as two women alone (regarded as unsafe) or a woman and a man (scandalous) was impractically provocative and counterproductive to the mission. For practical reasons, Jesus also chose no Gentiles (impossible) and possibly no Judeans (for geographic reasons)" (p. 186).



For a wider look at the issues, *Women, Ministry and the Gospel* offers a multidisciplinary approach that "strives to refresh the conversation" (p. 11).

The Introduction notes that while some Christians are weary of the issues, this book is for evangelicals who may be encountering questions about women in ministry for the first time, or for those who want to rethink an issue. The book offers a variety of approaches, such as Margaret Kim Peterson's lively chapter, "Identity and Ministry in Light of the Gospel: A View from the Kitchen" and James M. Hamilton Jr.'s "What Women Can Do

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in Ministry: Full Participation within Biblical Boundaries." Hamilton argues that "full participation in ministry" is constrained by specific, transcultural gender roles, based on his reading of the nature of gender in 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, among other texts. Peterson agrees that a discussion about the gendered division of labor is at

the heart of the discussion of women and public ministry, but argues that Scripture, especially the stories in Luke 9:59-60 and Luke 10:38-42, calls us away from "bifurcated notions" of women's or men's work, and towards "a unified vision of 'the Lord's work,' to be undertaken by women and men together across a variety of continua" (p. 152).

Some of the freshest material in the book seems to come from Part IV, which includes materials from the perspective of the social sciences and the humanities. In this section Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen declares "a plague on all your houses!" (p. 171). She argues that neither side has understood gender properly, because "there is much more variability *within* than *between* the sexes on almost all of the trait and behavior measures for which we have abundant data" (p. 174).

In this same section, editor Timothy Larsen offers a fascinating look at the history of evangelical women in public ministry. He notes that while evangelical churches historically were committed to women in ministry at a time when more theologically liberal churches were not, in the last sixty years that trend has been reversed. For evangelicals, Larsen explains, the reasons for this reversal included the cultural tendency in the 1950s to restrict women to the private sphere, the evangelical reaction to First Wave Feminism, and a shift in how biblical evidence is weighed.

The final section of the book offers three essays that attempt to move us "beyond the impasse" and "toward new paradigms." While the book does a good job at offering new perspectives on an old conflict, it is not as successful at offering new paradigms. Henri Blocher's position is difficult to decipher. Sumner, whose book we will discuss next, is somewhat more helpful

because she attempts to “forge a middle way” between complementarians and egalitarians. As a part of this middle way she reframes the debate: “It is not a debate between conservatives and liberals. It’s a debate between conservatives and *conservatives*. Those who are *not* conservatives typically have never even heard of the conservative in-house terms of *complementarian* and *egalitarian*” (p. 259). Timothy George has the last word of the book, proposing a new ECT or “Egalitarians and Complementarians Together.” This group would, among other things, offer “testimonies of mutual conversion” (p. 285) that would help us understand why certain issues are compelling to us at different times in our lives.



The third book, *Men and Women in the Church*, is the most personal of the three. In fact, Sumner notes that *she* is the audience that her book is targeted for. The effect is that of someone who is thinking out loud, albeit with integrity and care.

Her book accomplishes several goals: first, it is an amalgam of her thoughts on women in church leadership; second, it describes moments in her vocational and spiritual journey and moments in the lives of women she has mentored and taught; third, it includes exegesis of key passages; and fourth, it offers several intriguing chapters about gender roles in both our spiritual and congregational lives.

All of these offerings are in service to her primary goal to blur the lines of the debate and to show us how complementarians and egalitarians can agree. She is loathe to come down squarely on one side or another, which can be exhausting at times for the reader, as she builds elaborate cases around scriptural texts in an effort to show how we are more similar than we think. She does point out helpfully that both groups are revising church tradition – complementarians by saying that the *worth* of men and women are equal, and egalitarians by saying that their *rights* are equal.

Sumner offers several ground rules. First, she notes that every scripture means something – and *God* knows what it means. We cannot just throw out or ignore a passage that makes no sense to us or that makes us feel uncomfortable. Second, she encourages us as we study scripture passages not to look up a word such as “weaker vessel” in the dictionary, but rather to study it in its many contexts in the Bible. Third, she argues that what the Bible says trumps tradition every time. That is, we should not look to the history of Christianity to be our guide on women’s roles in the Church, but rather to Scripture. Fourth, she notes that it is God who gifts us and ultimately calls us to ministry in the Church, no matter what people think about the matter.

The most interesting material comes in chapters 6 through 8 when Sumner writes about the spiritual and vocational limits placed on women

and men in the Church by traditional gender roles. In Chapter 6 entitled “Women and Personhood,” she takes a raw look at how women have been perceived and treated in many churches. She argues that too many women have been “held back” from using their God-given gifts. Sumner encourages the women she encounters not to hold back:

A common formula for helping Christian men to feel more solid and secure is to coach Christian women to hold back. Thus many Christian women never minister to men, and thus many Christian men never are developed in the faith. Men are weakened when women hold back. Men are weakened to the point of needing all the women to hold back. (p. 94)

She acknowledges that some conservative evangelical churches have limited women’s involvement by convincing them of their inferiority:

I can confidently say that Christians in the United States generally agree that it is bad theology to say that poor people are inferior to rich ones or that blacks are inferior to whites. We also seem to agree that it is bad theology to think that children are inferior to adults. Unequivocally we believe it is even worse theology to say that God is inferior or that Christ became inferior to the Roman government on the day he was arrested and killed. And yet I cannot with confidence say that Christians generally agree it is bad theology to believe that women are inferior to men. (p. 77)

Sumner goes even further by admitting that she once held a similar view, holding men in higher esteem. Yet, she continues confessing, “Although I am a woman, I have tacitly thought of myself as a special type of woman, the kind that can keep up with men” (p. 78). While I think Sumner now believes in the equal worth of women and men, this theme of special exceptions is one that permeates complementarian thought. Although women may not have leadership roles, the theory goes, if there is an occasional woman who is talented, quiet, not angry, does not make trouble, and asks nicely, she can be an “honorary man.” “It’s usually no big deal if a man is surpassed by a woman who is considered to be exceptional,” she writes, “The men I talked to readily agreed that it would not be bad to lose a tennis match to Steffi Graff, no matter who was on the sidelines watching” (p. 94).

Yet she begins Chapter 7, “Men and Manhood,” with the words, “If Christian women have a tendency to pretend they are inferior, the opposite is true for Christian men” (p. 81). She explains that men in the Church are trained to establish their identity as higher than that of women. Criticizing biblical scholars such as John Piper for taking too narrow a view of masculinity — “‘At the heart of mature masculinity,’ he says, ‘is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women’” (p. 89) — she outlines a vision of marriage where men and women are responsible for

their own actions and feelings. Such a marriage is based on love as revealed in Christ, not on a worldly fantasy of Zorro meets Cinderella. Discussing men's fear of being associated with anything "feminine," she notes that it is not necessary "to define masculinity in terms of leading." Rather, there is biblical evidence of women leading men and that Jesus himself "received from women." "Sometimes it is wise for a man to lead and for a woman to affirm his leadership. Sometimes it is right for a man to protect a woman and a woman to receive. But at other times," she continues, "God wills the reverse" (p. 98).

Another chapter that is particularly worthy of mention is Chapter 8, "Masculinity and Femininity." Here Sumner uses feminist analysis (though she would never describe it as such) to examine how gender stereotypes in the Church prevent us from having a good relationship with God. She shares with us how she asks her students to list definitions of masculinity and femininity from the perspectives of the world, the Christian community, nature, and the Bible. According to the stereotypes they come up with, "men have more to lose and women have more to gain from the Christian community. I wonder if this accounts, at least in part," she writes, "for the reason why men are less likely than women to attend a local church" (p. 103).

She goes on to note that women in the Church usually attend Bible studies and are prayer warriors, while men attend accountability groups. "And what is the implication? Women should know the Scriptures, and men should live the Scriptures without knowing them. Isn't that self-defeating? Men are supposed to become Bible Answer Men, and yet women are the ones at Bible Study." The result of this imbalance is that "the body of Christ is weakened" (p. 103). One group of women told Sumner that they were afraid to unleash their strength in their congregation: "We're afraid because if we get involved in church leadership, then we're likely to go overboard and take full control of the men!" (p. 104).

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But Sumner believes that "many of the norms within the Christian community are more cultural than biblical" (p. 105), and we must think of women on the battle front of the faith, just like the men. "Women of God are included in the battle of the Lord," she writes. "They don't sit on the sidelines watching the men. They wear the spiritual armor because they need it.

They're out there too, just like the men, building the kingdom of God" (p. 109). Sumner's purpose is to keep reminding us that there is a "difference between what we have been taught to think and what the Bible says is true about men and women" (p. 112). Her arguments intend to move complementarians along, while warning egalitarians that the issue is not about personal power.



The question that remains after reading these three books is: Have they moved us forward in the attempt to build consensus between egalitarians and complementarians? All three books certainly succeed in fleshing out the issues, the various ways in which we can understand what Scripture says about women in church leadership, and the extent to which Christian tradition offers resources (but mostly has not been helpful). As conservative evangelical Christians, these writers see the Bible as the ultimate authority on the issue. As a result, they could probably spend the better part of eternity debating about whose interpretation of Scripture is closer to the truth. This approach might only move the debate forward inch by inch. It is good progress that most of the writers now believe they cannot look to tradition for truths about gender roles, but the yeast with which to leaven the bread is still missing.

I would like to suggest that Christian feminism may be the elephant in the room. While many of the authors make it clear that they are rigorously opposed to feminism and view it as the great enemy of conservative evangelicals, several of them use feminist analysis as a tool with which to do their work. Openly embracing the principles of Christian feminism would help the two sides move closer to the consensus they seek.

Most of the authors operate with a highly reductive view of what feminism is. Sumner uses the terms "Christian feminist," "biblical feminist," "evangelical feminist," "radical feminist" and "secular feminist" interchangeably, without clear definitions or distinctions. Timothy Larsen's essay and several others are exceptions to this trend. Larsen carefully acknowledges that there are several versions of feminism, and he notes that one form in particular has evoked a strong reaction from evangelicals (p. 232).

In addition, almost none of these authors acknowledge that one can be a feminist and a Christian. In the Introduction to Sumner's book, for instance, Phillip Johnson reassures the readers, "She says that she is a Christian first and last, and not a feminist, and that she wants to write in furtherance of truth and Christ's power, not women's power," because he fears, "Some readers may suspect that there must be some suppressed anger or feminist power-seeking lurking in the background" (p. 5). Sumner concurs in her acknowledgments that Johnson helped her initially in her writing the book by "challenging me to first convince him that I am not a feminist (he didn't

automatically believe me at first)...” (p. 7). Her point seems to be that one cannot be a Christian and a feminist.

Yet I found it fascinating that Sumner was so adept at using the tools of feminist analysis to champion the ways in which women are created equally in God’s image but not treated so in the Church. Sumner unwittingly uses feminist analysis to understand God’s saving activity on earth and she does an excellent job!

Here is why I think an open embracing of a thoughtful Christian feminism would be helpful to this conversation. First, conservative evangelicals seem to do an elaborate dance around saying that women are equal. The language of “rights” seems to be too prickly for them to use, too reminiscent of the First Wave feminism of the 1960s and ‘70s. Yet as one author points out, this movement did gain women important advances such as equal pay and domestic violence laws. I do not think anyone in this conversation wants to go back to a time when women did not have these rights. Sumner argues that because we are Christians, we do not need to say that we are also feminists. The gospel is pro-woman, just as it is pro-man. Yet, we are sinful beings and many Christians are not pro-woman. Thus, while chauvinism is not a part of God’s character, it is often a part of the fallen nature of God’s people. So a conservative Christian platform that saw women and men created equally in the image of God should welcome the laws and the theories of feminism that focus on helping create a more just society on earth for both women and men.

In *Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide*, Lynn Japinga reminds us that “Christian feminists, like feminists of other faiths or nonreligious feminists, represent a range of positions. Evangelical feminists tend to be more conservative in their

attempts to preserve traditional Christian doctrines.”²

But most feminist Christians would agree, she continues, that feminism is “a commitment to the humanity, dignity, and equality of all persons. They seek equal rights for women, but their ultimate goal is a social

order in which women and men of all races and classes can live together in justice and harmony” (p. 13). We must therefore resist whatever oppresses human beings and instead empower and encourage women, she writes. “A particularly Christian approach to feminism might add that the source for these beliefs about dignity and equality is the theological assertion that all people are created in God’s image and therefore are valuable, gifted, free,

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and responsible" (p. 13). It seems to me that it would be helpful for evangelical Christians to embrace this language as they continue to articulate the roles of women in the Church.

Second, if feminist Christians loved their personal rights more than the Bible, they would have thrown up their hands and left the Church long ago. Yet there are thousands of feminist Christian men and women working hard in the churches that have not always been kind to them. They work from within the Church to help keep it true to the spirit of egalitarianism that Christ embodies. Christian feminism is about more than personal power, and feminist Christians would agree with Sumner that our power is rooted in Christ.

Third, God might be using feminism to help reform the Church. Sumner writes, "Could it be that the global trends of feminism coincide with God's plan to reform the way the church treats women? After all, there is biblical precedent for God to use pagans to make his name known and act on behalf of the oppressed" (p. 55). This theme could be developed in evangelical literature, acknowledging that feminism (and certainly not all feminism is "pagan") is very biblical in its prophetic, liberating forms.

Finally, the primary gift that feminist theology can bring to this evangelical conversation would be a deliberate lifting up of women's experiences. We have already seen how the lack of exegetical consensus is frustrating for some evangelicals. One of the primary tasks of feminist theology, according to Rosemary Radford Ruether and other feminist theologians, is to recover the stories and experiences of women in order to illustrate their gifts and talents in the community. Japinga categorizes these experiences as bodily experience, socialized experience, and the experience of oppression or suffering. If the community were to lift up and listen to the experiences of women, it could glean new insights into the biblical stories and passages that guide evangelical conversations about gender.

Katherine Doob Sakenfeld notes that through the Bible "God shows women their true condition as people who are oppressed and yet who are given a vision of a different heaven and earth and a variety of models for how to live toward that vision."³ She argues that we can look to texts about women in the Bible to understand the lives of women today, and we can look at our lives today to fill in the gaps about the experiences of biblical women. I understand more about the bent-over woman in Luke 13:10-17 and the nature of what might have oppressed her, when I consider the experiences of my grandmother, a hardworking immigrant who was bent over from years of hard work, which included hunching over a sewing machine to earn a living for her family.

Acknowledging and listening carefully to the stories of conservative evangelical women as well as other Christian women might help move the conversation between egalitarians and complementarians beyond the

impasse. Such listening might be the lever that is needed to budge the stone of consensus. But it needs to be the kind of listening that trusts that women's experiences can bring insight into our understanding of Scripture. Only such a fuller understanding that includes our lived experiences can help us see the loving and respectful relationships between women and men in the Church that God intends.

NOTES

1 *The Baptist Faith and Message* was written in 1925, revised in 1963, amended in 1998, and revised again in 2000. A helpful comparison of these versions is available online at www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmcomparison.asp.

2 Lynn Japinga, *Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 12. Further page citations will be in the text.

3 Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1985), 55-64, here citing 62.



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