

Faith! 'Tis a Precious Grace
Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795)

Faith! 'tis a precious grace,
 Where'er it is bestowed;
 It boasts of a celestial birth,
 And is the gift of God.

Jesus it owns a King,
 An all-atoning Priest;
 It claims no merits of its own,
 But looks for all in Christ.

To him it leads the soul,
 When filled with deep distress;
 Flies to the fountain of his blood,
 And trusts his righteousness.

Since 'tis thy work alone,
 And that divinely free,
 Come, Holy Spirit, and make known
 The power of faith in me.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Ten: Complementarianism As a Secondary Doctrine

Kevin T. Bauder

Gavin Ortlund explains his theory of doctrinal triage in the book *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*. His system involves three levels of doctrinal importance. Primary doctrines are essential to the gospel and to Christian fellowship. Secondary doctrines, while not essential to the gospel, do affect some levels of Christian fellowship. Tertiary doctrines should not define Christian fellowship.

To illustrate second-rank doctrines, Ortlund deals with three specific areas of disagreement. The first is baptism. The second is miraculous gifts. The third is gender roles as understood in the debate between complementarians (who believe that God assigns specific leadership roles to men but not women) and egalitarians (who believe that true equality between the sexes requires opening all leadership roles to women).

Ortlund recognizes that both the complementarian and egalitarian labels apply to a range of positions and that not everyone under each label can be treated the same. Nevertheless, he notes that the differences between the two positions are so practical that the issue cannot be avoided and that no truly mediating position will be possible. A church either will or will not ordain women to the pastorate, for example. It will or will not disciple married couples to recognize male headship within the home (117). The necessity of these choices leads Ortlund to insist that the dispute between complementarianism and egalitarianism cannot be treated as a third-rank difference.

Furthermore, Ortlund sets this debate in a larger social context. The West in general, and America in particular, is backing away from any notion of natural and determinative masculinity and femininity. These and related categories, such as marriage, are hotly contested, and this secular debate adds urgency to the dispute between complementarians and egalitarians (117–118).

Then Ortlund notes that the debate over gender roles is often a debate over how one interprets and appropriates Scripture. This is where he might have said more, for egalitarians follow at least three hermeneutical roads in ar-



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iving at their conclusions. How they draw their conclusion is sometimes as important as the conclusion itself.

The first road recognizes full biblical authority but sees Paul's teachings about the role of women as a particular local application of generalized principles. A parallel could be drawn with the way many complementarians view Paul's teaching about head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11. Many or most see head coverings as a temporary and culturally-bound application rather than as a timeless requirement. Many who have traditionally defended women preachers have done so by following this road, including some fundamentalists (W. B. Riley and Oliver W. Van Osdel are examples).

The second road to egalitarianism utilizes some form of either trajectory (I. Howard Marshall) or redemptive-movement (William Webb) hermeneutic. These hermeneutical techniques pay lip service to biblical authority, but they insist that God's final word must be discovered by following a line that goes beyond Scripture itself. This final position may even nullify or contradict specific biblical statements.

The third road to egalitarianism seeks to discredit some biblical teachings in favor of others. For example, Paul King Jewett in *Man as Male and Female* argued that Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2 reflected his chauvinism as a rabbi while Galatians 3:28 defined the true relationship between the sexes. This approach to the text severely undermines or flatly denies biblical inerrancy and integrity.

These three roads to egalitarianism require very different responses. While Ortlund chooses not to recognize it as such (119), biblical inerrancy is a fundamental of the faith. To arrive at egalitarianism by the third road places one on the far side of the watershed that divides orthodoxy from heterodoxy. Biblical inerrancy is a first-level issue, and defenses of egalitarianism that attack the inerrancy and integrity of the Bible are genuinely heretical. They exclude Christian fellowship at every level.

Defenses of egalitarianism that take the second road are also seriously flawed. While the trajectory and redemptive-movement hermeneutics claim to take a high view of the Bible, they nevertheless treat the biblical text like a wax nose. Advocates of these approaches have not succeeded in erecting methodological barriers and limitations that can successfully correct abuses of their hermeneutical techniques. While the use of either trajectory or redemptive-movement hermeneutics may not place their advocates outside the faith, it should certainly limit the possible circles of fellowship inside the faith. Using Ortlund's classifications, I see this as an upper-second-level matter.

The first road to egalitarianism does not wreak nearly the damage to biblical authority that the other two roads do. Complementarians and egalitarians can meaningfully debate the question of applicability without calling into

question either the clarity or authority of the Bible. Some level of Christian fellowship does exist and some level of Christian commonality should be demonstrated between the two groups.

Nevertheless, as Ortlund adequately shows, the difference remains both important and unavoidable. For that reason, fellowship between complementarians and egalitarians is necessarily limited and even impossible at some levels. As with other important differences within the faith, believers who do not agree must either limit their message or limit their fellowship if they are to get along.

I once heard a prominent professor from Dallas Seminary explaining to a student that he was complementarian, but his church was egalitarian—and he was determined that the church would not know his position. That is an example of limiting one's message. He might better have found a church where he could live and teach his full convictions. That would be limiting one's fellowship.

The degree to which either one's message or one's fellowship must be limited depends on the seriousness of the disagreement. The gravity of the egalitarian error hinges partly on one's reasons for holding the egalitarian position. These reasons may constitute a fundamental error that places one outside the faith; they may constitute a severe error within the faith that bars most levels of fellowship; they may constitute a serious but not deadly error that allows some levels of fellowship while restricting others.

Perhaps it would be useful to weigh Ortlund's three test cases against each other. The milder forms of the egalitarian error are less serious than the Charismatic error in almost any form. They are probably more serious than an error over the subject or mode of baptism—as long as the gospel is not at stake. See my previous essays on those topics to be reminded of my reasons for weighing them as I do.

It is worth noting that some complementarians also hold errors that may be as serious as some egalitarian errors. When complementarianism is used to defend a brutalizing, dominating, and dehumanizing attitude toward women, it is egregiously wrong. No biblical teaching held in a biblical way will ever justify abusive behavior. Sometimes we need to learn to limit our fellowship to both sides.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
