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EGALITARIANS AND COMPLEMENTARIANS TOGETHER?

A Modest Proposal

Timothy George

WHY AM I WRITING THIS? PERHAPS YOU HAVE heard the story of the Texas rancher who threw a big party—everything's big in Texas—and filled his swimming pool with human-eating sharks as a form of entertainment for his guests. When they had all gathered, he announced that he would give to any guest who successfully swam the length of the pool the choice of either fifty million dollars or the deed to his whole ranch. Before he could finish speaking, he saw someone swimming furiously across the pool. When the disheveled swimmer arrived successfully on the other side, the rancher said: "I'm astounded; I didn't think anyone would try that, much less do it! But I am true to my word. Now tell me what you want: the fifty million dollars, or the deed to the ranch?" "What do you mean?" the swimmer exclaimed, "I want the guy who pushed me into the pool!"

While I shall not accuse anyone of pushing me into this pool, I confess that I am writing this somewhat reluctantly. I am not a card-carrying member of either party in what has been called an emerging civil war within evangelicalism. Further, I have no special expertise in this issue; I have read widely but not deeply in the enormous literature it has generated. Apart from a brief excursus, "Was Paul a Feminist?" in a commentary on Galatians I published

some ten years ago, and a few paragraphs in an essay published even earlier than that, I have written nothing on this subject, whereas many of our colleagues have spent years, even decades, exploring this theme at various levels.[1]

I have no new interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 to offer. Nor do I have any new lexical or grammatical insights into the meaning of *kephalē* or *hypotassō*. If I bring anything at all to this theme, it is by way of a reflection on the conversation itself: on how it sounds to a participant-observer within the evangelical family, one who recognizes that something crucial is involved in this discussion but who also hopes for a way beyond the polarization it has produced. The question mark at the end of my title and the adjective "modest" in the subtitle are both to be given their full force. The mood of this essay is interrogative or at least subjunctive, certainly not indicative, much less imperative! What I have to say is perhaps more a sermon than a lecture, its tone more exhortative than analytical, its *modus loquendi* more pastoral and theological than exegetical or polemical.

With this in mind, I want to do four things. First, I need to declare, as one does when going through customs, what it is I am bringing with me into this new territory, my baggage, as we say. In other words, I need to say something about my own tradition and its location within the academic and ecclesiological space in which this conversation is taking place. Second, I want to say something about the wider context that frames the egalitarian-complementarian divide within the evangelical family. This is a vast topic, of course, and I shall touch only on a few selective items to emphasize more clearly the underlying unities between egalitarians and complementarians against extreme positions unacceptable to both sides. Third, borrowing some ideas from my friend Roger Nicole, I want to review a few principles that might possibly help us learn better how to be better theologians of controversy, how to do polemics without being so polemical. And, finally, drawing on some of my experience in the Evangelicals and Catholics Together project, I want to suggest some possible, tentative steps forward for what, conceivably, in God's providence, might be a new ECT—Egalitarians and Complementarians Together: Not forgetting the question mark.

Before we get started, just a brief word about labels. I am well aware that labels can be libels. *Communist, redneck, egghead, liberal, fundamentalist, Calvinist,*

[1]See Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), pp. 286-93; and "Conflict and Identity in the SBC: The Quest for a New Consensus," in *Beyond the Impasse? Scripture, Interpretation, and Theology in Baptist Life*, ed. Robinson B. James and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), pp. 195-214.

Arminian—all of these terms carry negative connotations and can become labels with which fellow Christians attack and reproach one another. "He's a Calvinist!" might mean that he is a mean-spirited, pigheaded, hard-nosed bully who never has any fun and doesn't want anybody else to. Conversely, "She's an Arminian!" might mean she is a weak-kneed, lily-livered, mushy-minded pushover who has no convictions and won't stand up for what is right. The gender debate is filled with its own libelous labels. When you look at the literature over the last three decades, it is clear that there has been a significant shift in the preferred terms of self-designation. "Christian feminists" have become biblical egalitarians, though the former term is still used by some. Likewise, patriachialists, hierarchialists and traditionalists have become complementarians. There is a sense, of course, in which all complementarians are also egalitarians for, as far as I know, no one in the current debate denies that men and women are equally created in the image of God and share an equal access to salvation in Christ. Likewise, there is a sense in which all egalitarians are also complementarians for they seek a form of gender reconciliation that implies distinction as well as similarities between men and women, a position aptly summarized in the subtitle of a recent book: *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy.* In other words, we have become all things to all people so that we might confuse everybody! It is well beyond my ken to sort all of this out. It is my general rule of thumb to refer to anyone by whatever nomenclature or designation they usually employ to refer to themselves. This is a matter of courtesy, not ideology, and I mean nothing more or less by it in this essay.

The Baggage I Bring

If anything I have said thus far should lead anyone to think that I approach this issue from a neutral epistemological platform with no *Vorverständnis* or precommitment, let me say at once that I belong to a congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention which in the year 2000 revised our denomination-wide confession of faith to include a new article declaring that while both men and women are gifted for service in the life of the church, the office of senior pastor should be reserved for men. (Nothing is said about ordination in this document.) This new addition to the Baptist Faith and Message, as we call our confession of faith, has had the effect of aligning the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in North America, with a complementarian view of women in ministry. The acceptance of this view has since become

the norm for missionary appointment, faculty selection at our six Southern Baptist seminaries and employment within any of our denominational agencies. Baptists, however, are fiercely congregationalist in our church polity and this denomination-wide decision has no official bearing on local church decision-making. In theory, any Baptist congregation is free to call and ordain any person to any office of ministry regardless of gender, age, educational background or other criteria. In reality, however, this recent—and novel—denominational ruling at the SBC level has had little practical effect on local congregational practice. In effect, it merely confirmed and codified what was the already-existing practice of a vast majority of SBC churches anyway. In Alabama, where I live, there are more than 4,000 local Baptist churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, several African American Baptist denominations, as well as a number of Independent Baptist churches. To my knowledge, only two of these more than 4,000 Baptist congregations have women who currently serve as pastors. Although Alabama may be considered a very conservative state, this pattern would not vary significantly in other parts of the country among churches affiliated with these denominations, including so-called moderate Baptist churches. The congregation to which I belong has never elected, nor even considered, a female candidate for pastor or deacon, the two Scriptural offices we recognize in the congregation. At the same time, many women are deeply involved in the life of our church; at present, six very competent, compassionate and well-qualified women serve on our full-time professional ministry staff in various leadership roles.

Part of the ambiguity I feel about this issue, however, stems from the fact that I work at a theological school. Samford University's Beeson Divinity School is an evangelical, interdenominational theological school that has female faculty members and welcomes female students in all degree programs. Soon after Beeson was founded in 1988, I received a call from a somewhat suspicious pastor who said, "I understand you have women students over at Beeson." "Yes," I said, "we do." "Well, you don't let them take preaching, do you?" I thought for a moment, and then said, "No, we don't. We *make* them take preaching." It is not an option in our master of divinity track. Preaching, like the study of Hebrew and Greek, is a discipline we think all students need to study regardless of the ministry trajectory they may eventually pursue.

At the same time, Beeson does not serve as an advocacy base for either a restrictive or open view on women in ministry. Evangelical theological schools

tend to fall into one of three camps on this issue. Some are unequivocally egalitarian and would not likely hire a faculty member who did not share this commitment. Fuller, North Park, Ashland, Palmer Theological Seminary (formerly Eastern) and Church of God School of Theology are among the seminaries who hold this view. On the other hand, other theological institutions, either by confession or theological conviction, have a more restrictive understanding. Westminster, Dallas, Covenant and, more recently, the six SBC seminaries fall into this group. My school, Beeson, belongs to another group of theological schools who do not make this matter a test of fellowship, but as we serve constituencies with differing polities and differing views of the role of women in ministry, we welcome both faculty and students who hold different convictions on this matter. Some of our peer institutions in this regard would be Trinity, Gordon-Conwell, Denver, Regent College, Vancouver and, although it is not a seminary, Wheaton College as well.

CONTEXT

I want to turn now to a brief consideration of the wider context against which the complementarian-egalitarian debate has been framed within the evangelical church. In reading through much of the literature on this subject, it is easy to get lost in the maze of exegetical minutia, the thrust and counterthrust of theological arguments, and to suppose that this debate among evangelicals had developed in a vacuum unaffected by the wider social, political and ideological forces in the environing culture. But this would be a serious mistake. To show the fallacy of this ahistorical approach, I want to look in very generalized terms at two polar extremes that complementarians and egalitarians find objectionable today, almost without exception. The first of these polar views I am going to call "the ugly face of androcentric sexism." I say "androcentic" because sexism, like racism, is not uni-directional despite the claims of liberationist ideologues to the contrary. At the same time, it is important to realize, as one complementarian leader has written recently, "For more cultures through most of history the most serious deviation from biblical standards regarding men and women has not been feminism, but harsh and oppressive male chauvinism. It still exists today, not only in some families in the United States, but also in a number of cultures throughout the world."[2]

[2]*EFBT*, p. 524.

Church history, of course, is virtually littered with evidence to support this statement whether we think of Tertullian's notorious statement that every woman was an Eve, the devil's gateway, the unsealer of the forbidden tree, whose sin destroyed God's image, man, and because of whom even the Son of God had to die; or Thomas Aquinas's definition of woman as a "misshapen man," following Aristotle; or the grim picture of women presented in the late medieval *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches") as carnally insatiable creatures who formed pacts with the devil in hopes of sexual gratification. One of the most embarrassing examples of such misogyny in the era of the Reformation came from the pen of that irascible Protestant John Knox. From the safety of Calvin's Geneva, the most perfect school of Christ on earth since the apostles, he called it, he wrote his "First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women" declaring that women by nature are "weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish; and experience hath declared them to be unconstant, variable, cruel and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment"—appealing to Genesis 3:16, 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14. Knox's comments were directed against Mary Tudor, "the Jezebel of England," "Bloody Mary," whose reversion to Catholicism had seemed to put the English Reformation into reverse. However, by the time Knox's "First Blast" had made it through the press, Mary was dead and her half-sister, Elizabeth, not the Jezebel but the Deborah of the Reformation, had ascended to the throne. She took great umbrage at Knox's generic denunciation of female governance. When Knox tried to return to England from the Continent, Elizabeth refused him entry into the country, whereupon he took his hot gospel north of the border and began the agitation which led to the Scottish Reformation.

Such views, invariably supported by an appeal to Scripture, led to a pattern of male dominance that accrued to the detriment of women in the new American Republic. Even the enlightened Thomas Jefferson held that girls were unfit in brains and character for serious study and forbade them entrance to his University of Virginia.[3] In 1848, at the famous Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, agitation was undertaken to secure for women in this country the right to own property, to retain their own earnings, to share legal custody of their children, to pursue higher education and to vote in na-

[3]Robert L. Saucy and Judith TenElshof, eds., *Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), p. 37.

tional elections. Suffrage in the United States, of course, only came with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, allowing women to vote for the first time in 1920, a right denied to women in France until 1944, and in Switzerland until the 1960s.

Four years after the Seneca Falls meeting, Frances Dana Gage, a reformist dynamo from Ohio, peered into the future in her poem entitled "One Hundred Years Hence."

> One hundred year hence, what a change will be made,
> In politics, morals, religion, trade,
> In statesmen who wrangle or ride on the fence,
> These things will be altered a hundred years hence.
>
> All cheating and fraud will be laid on the shelf,
> Men will not get drunk, nor be bound up in self,
> But all live together, good neighbors and friends,
> As Christian folks ought to, a hundred years hence.
>
> Then woman, man's partner, man's equal shall stand,
> While beauty and harmony govern the land,
> To think for oneself will be no offense,
> The world will be thinking, a hundred years hence.
>
> Oppression and war will be heard of no more,
> Nor blood of a slave leave his print on our shore,
> Conventions will then be a useless expense,
> For we'll go free suffrage a hundred years hence.
>
> Instead of speechmaking to satisfy wrong,
> We'll all join the chorus to sing Freedom's song,
> And if the Millennium is not a pretense,
> We'll all be good brothers/neighbors a hundred years hence.[4]

Well, Emily Dickinson she is not. But it is interesting to note, more than one hundred fifty years later, how her concerns for not only the social role of women, but also racism, militarism and penal reform have remained live issues in our society, however fatuous her postmillennial utopianism has turned out to be.

[4]Frances Dana Gage, "One Hundred Years Hence" [1852], in Linda A. Moody, *Women Encounter God* (New York: Orbis, 1974), pp. 140-41.

As Timothy Smith and many other scholars have pointed out, evangelicals, both men and women, often motivated through spiritual awakenings and revival movements, led the way to bring about moral reform of society through abolition, temperance, suffrage and the like. Within the evangelical church however, despite and alongside of the history of evangelical women in ministry, chauvinistic and traditionalist views of women continued to prevail, sometimes in muted tones, sometimes in more virulent fashion.

An example of the latter is a book published in the city of Wheaton in 1941 by a Baptist evangelist from the South, John R. Rice. Rice had just moved to Wheaton with his wife and six daughters, who were ages four to nineteen in 1941. Rice was not a stranger to the North, having been a graduate student at the University of Chicago when he responded to the call to be an evangelist after leading a man to Christ at the Pacific Garden Mission in 1921. His famous book, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers,* grew out of Sunday afternoon seminars he put on in Chicago area churches following his evangelistic meetings. Basing his teaching on Paul's advice about head coverings for women (1 Cor 11:2-16), Rice claimed that his sermons had had a visible effect on female coiffure in the area. He could point to literally hundreds of women who "now have long hair as a result of hearing me teach and preach what God's Word says on that subject." Bobbed hair invariably led to bobbed character in women, Rice said. Wives, he argued, should strictly obey their husbands "in everything," as the Bible literally says. Women are not so much created in the image of God, Rice declared, but rather in the image of their husbands. Women should not even go to church if forbidden to do so by their husband. "But what if my husband instructs me to do something sinful like visiting the tavern, going to the picture show or even having my hair bobbed?" Don't be concerned with such "imaginary cases," Rice advised. If you demonstrate a meek, submissive spirit your husband will not think of making such outrageous demands, but as 1 Peter says, will be won by example of your witness. (Rice's theology could have been greatly helped at this point by a good dose of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity!)

Rice told of one woman in Oklahoma who had sent him a gift of six dollars for his radio ministry asking him to say nothing about it over the air as she had done this without her husband's knowledge. Rice sent the money back saying he could not accept such gifts for to do so would make him a party to her disobedience to her husband in this matter. "God is not pleased with rebellion,

even though it be, ostensibly, because of love for him. God wanted a meek and quiet spirit in the heart of that Christian woman, wanted her to be subject to her husband, more than he wanted six dollars for a Gospel radio program."[5]

Rice based his views on 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14 and Ephesians 5, texts that still undergird complementarian views of male headship today, but I know of no complementarians in the current discussion who would draw the same conclusions from these passages as Rice did. Although complementarian arguments today are usually directed against egalitarian readings of these biblical texts, I suspect that most complementarians would find Rice's reasoning and application as morally repulsive as would their interlocutors on the other side of the debate.

But this issue is framed not only by misogynist examples from the past, the ugly face of androcentric sexism, but also by its polar opposite, the ugly face of radical feminism. I am aware that feminism covers a wide variety of viewpoints and nuanced positions including liberation theologians, mystics, eco-feminists, goddess feminists, women-identified feminists, post-Christian feminists, as well as diverse ethnic feminists who virulently criticize other feminists as white, middle-class American or Western co-conspirators in the oppression of their sisters. What all of these views share in common, however, in addition to a severe critique of male domination, is the rejection of the authority and truthfulness of Holy Scripture.

The rise of contemporary feminist hermeneutics can be traced back to *The Woman's Bible,* a revisionist rendering of the Scriptures edited by Elizabeth Cady Staton and published in the 1890s. The purpose of this project was to present the Bible as a weapon in the struggle for women's liberation. In order to accomplish this goal it was necessary to "deconstruct" the text of Scripture, which was seen as a product of an ancient patriarchal culture and androcentric religion inimical to the higher aspirations of women. Thus, Elizabeth Staton boasted, *The Woman's Bible* would reveal to the modern woman that "the good Lord did not write the book; that the garden scene is a fable; that she is in no way responsible for the laws of the universe. . . . Take the snake, the fruit tree and the woman from the tableau, and we have no fall, no frowning Judge, no inferno, no everlasting punishment—hence no need of a Savior. Thus the bottom falls out of the whole Christian theology."[6]

[5]John R. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives and Women Preachers: Significant Questions for Honest Christian Women Settled by the Word of God* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1941).

Feminist hermeneutics has come a long way since Staton, and Carolyn Osiek has offered the following classification of hermeneutical alternatives employed by feminist theologians: (1) *rejectionists* (rejecting the Bible as authoritative or useful while retaining aspects of the religious tradition it represents), (2) *loyalists* (accepting, but not uncritically, the biblical traditions as the Word of God), (3) *revisionists* (attempting to separate the content from the patriarchal mold of Scripture—a new version of the old husk and kernel paradigm), (4) *sublimationists* (searching for the eternal feminine in biblical and extra biblical symbolism and imagery) and (5) *liberationists* (using a revised understanding of biblical eschatology as the interpretive principle with which to judge the revelatory character of biblical texts).[7]

The second of these alternatives, the loyalist perspective, might conceivably with some qualifications embrace the biblical egalitarian viewpoint. The other positions, however, move beyond what anyone in the current discussion would regard as an evangelical view of Scripture. In its most basic concerns, radical feminism moves beyond the pale of anything recognizably Christian, as its clearest, most consistent theologians such as Mary Dally and Daphne Hampson have long since realized. In 1971 Mary Dally delivered her famous Exodus Sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church declaring her intention and setting forth her rationale for leaving the Christian faith.

> We cannot really belong to institutional religion as it exists. It isn't good enough to be token preachers. It isn't good enough to have our energies drained and co-opted. Singing sexist hymns, praying to a male God breaks our spirit, makes us less than human. The crushing weight of this tradition, of this power structure tells us that *we do not even exist.*[8]

The fundamental question for radical feminists is not whether God should be called Father, but whether women can be redeemed by a male savior. Thus the move from Christ to Christa and the oft-quoted statement by Delores Williams, "We don't need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and all that weird stuff."

Rusty Reno has written an important essay in which he describes the

[6]A. S. Kraditor, ed., *Up from the Pedestal: Landmark Writings in the American Women's Struggle for Equality* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), p. 119.
[7]See Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 162.
[8]Quoted, Elaine Storkey, *Origins of Difference* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 118.

project of feminist theology as an essentially modern, post-Kantian undertaking, despite postmodernist and ultramodernist gyrations here and there. It was Kant, after all, who observed that in order to interpret the Bible according to the inner essence of religion, one may do with the text what one likes. Such disdain for the concrete integrity of what one encounters in the Bible, and the Christian tradition that lies behind it, supports the iconoclasm of radical feminism, that is to say, its violence against the trinitarian and christological particularity of orthodox, biblical faith.[9]

If Kant is the true father of feminism, despite his own patriarchialist views, then its godfather is Ludwig Feuerbach. It was Feuerbach, anticipating Freud, who extended Kant's constructivist depiction of theology to define religion itself as a projection of human consciousness. We construct an idealized version of our own longings, aspirations and desires (including our own unconscious desires according to Freud) and project these outward onto an imagined deity whom we might call Father, or Mother, or the Force, or Sophia, or any number of other possibilities for the name of such a deity as protean as its reality, grounded in nothing deeper, for there is nothing deeper, than the abyss of human imagining. What this produces, to quote the title of a book published by feminist scholar Patricia Lynn Reilly, is *A God Who Looks Like Me*.[10] Elaine Storkey, an evangelical who fully appreciates the profound and valid critique feminism has brought to our culture, identifies precisely the basic problem with this approach:

> Radical feminism wants the fruit of love, but denies the Source. For in the end the stance of independence is independence from God also and an assertion of human (feminine) autonomy. Many of their diagnoses are correct. Much of what they have to say about patriarchy needs to be listened to. But at the deepest level is this problem. Their stance is a fundamentally religious one, and their faith is in themselves.[11]

I have talked about radical feminism and androcentric sexism not in order to construct a straw woman and a straw man just to knock them down, but because the contemporary evangelical debate between egalitarians and complementarians is carried on against the backdrop of these stereotypical extremes. Many complementarians believe that the inevitable logic of the egalitarian view leads directly to radical feminism, and they oppose it, not only because of what it teaches about the role of women in the home and in the church, but also because of what they fear its ultimate trajectory might be. Likewise, many egalitarians see the complementarian position as merely a slightly updated version of the old chauvinism, an effort to suppress the full exercise of women's God-given gifts based not really on biblical truths but on a cultural captivity that borders on, if it does not finally end up in, idolatry. Both fears are motivated by legitimate concerns, and we will not move forward until such concerns on both sides are fully heard, appreciated and made a part of our dialogue with one another.

[9]Alvin F. Kimel Jr., ed., *This Is My Name Forever* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 188.
[10]Patricia Lynn Reilly, *A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality* (New York: Ballantine, 1995).
[11]Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 109.

CAN WE TALK?

Many people are surprised to learn that my good friend Roger Nicole is a biblical egalitarian. He is perhaps better known for other commitments—as an unreconstructed Calvinist who has defended the Westminster standards and the Canons of Dort against Arminian detractors of all sorts; as an unflinching inerrantist who helped to found the Evangelical Theological Society in 1949; and, more recently, as one who has sounded the alarm bell against that form of semi-process theism commonly known as openness of God theology. Those who know Roger well will know that he is a person possessed of a great good humor and a very irenic spirit despite the fact that he has become entangled in numerous theological fights throughout his long and distinguished career. This has led him to reflect, perhaps more than most other theologians, on how to deal with those who differ from us. Karl Barth once said that there can be no dogmatics without polemics, and I think he is right, for Christianity makes certain claims about not only "what is true for me," but also about how things really are. Its God-talk is not only the personal love language of a private prayer group or spiritual club, it is also directed outward to the public square, the marketplace of ideas, to the human community at large, the world for which Christ died. Roger has studied the modalities of polemical theology and he poses three questions for those engaged in the kind of discussion we are considering here.[12]

[12]The following section is based on Roger Nicole's essay, "Polemic Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ From Us," in *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus Publishers, Mentor, 2002), p. 10.

1. What do I owe to the person who differs from me? The point is this: we have obligations to people who differ from us. We are obliged to deal with them as we ourselves would like to be dealt with or treated, Roger says. We owe them *love*. We do not owe them agreement, but we should make every effort to understand what our interlocutor means by what he or she says, and this requires us to be good listeners as well as good talkers. We also need to understand the aims of those with whom we differ. What are they seeking to accomplish in this dispute? What are they responding to or reacting against? In almost any theological position we encounter, even in those that have been deemed manifestly heretical by the wisdom of the church, we should always ask, Is there any validity in the position of my opponent? In the second century, for example, Marcion had a legitimate concern: he wanted to uphold the radical newness of the message of Jesus against certain theologies of continuity that obscured this gospel insight. That was a legitimate concern over against the Ebionites and others. However, Marcion pursued this concern to a complete rejection of the entire Old Testament, and much of the New, which resulted in a horrible heresy the effects of which are with us still. All the same, we owe those who differ from us, including radical feminists and unreconstructed traditionalists, an effort to listen to and understand their deepest concerns.

2. What can I learn from those who differ from me? Here is what Roger says:

> The first thing that I should be prepared to learn is that I may be wrong and that the other person may be right. Obviously, this is not applied to certain basic truths of the faith like the deity of Christ for salvation by grace. The whole structure of the Christian faith is at stake here, and it would be instability rather than broad-mindedness to allow these to be eroded by doubts. Yet, apart from issues where God himself has spoken so that doubt and hesitancy are really not permissible, there are numerous areas where we are temperamentally inclined to be very assertive and in which we can quite possibly be in error. When we are unwilling to acknowledge our fallibility, we reveal that we are more interested in winning a discussion and safeguarding our reputation than in the discovery and triumph of truth.[13]

William Webb's book, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* contains a chapter

[13]Ibid., p. 15.

titled "What If I Am Wrong?"[14] However one evaluates Webb's "redemptive movement hermeneutic" set forth in this volume, his heuristic strategy is on target. To ask this kind of question is not to relapse into a kind of wishy-washy relativism or loss of conviction. It is simply to proceed in a spirit of humility believing, as Pastor John Robinson said to the departing Pilgrims, "The Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth out of his Holy Word."[15]

3. How can I cope with those who differ from me? At this point in his essay, Roger deals with various strategic arguments from Scripture, reason, history and tradition. He presents good advice on how to construct a theological argument, but he also notes that the word *cope* carries an interpersonal connotation. If we are believers in Christ, not to say evangelicals, we will recognize that our theological opponent—our "enemy" if you will—is also our brother and sister in the Lord. Just as in evangelism, where we can win an argument and lose a soul, so also in church polemics; we can squash an adversary and damage the cause for which we are striving. Our goal is not to pommel our interlocutor into the ground, like a boxer demolishing his opponent in the ring, but rather to win him or her over to a new and, we trust, better understanding. So, as Paul says, "the Lord's servant must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 2:24-26 TNIV).

In surveying the recent literature on both sides of this issue, I have found in both camps two motifs held together in uneasy equipoise. On the one hand, there is a tendency to be tenacious, unyielding and unrelenting in the critique of the other side. In a recent anthology of egalitarian essays, the editors state this clearly: "Though we speak strongly in favor of unity, points of agreement and dialogue, it must be noted that we see no middle ground on this question."[16] In an earlier essay from the same perspective, another writer, an outstanding New Testament scholar, urges that the teaching of a genuine mutuality and equality in Christ should be pursued actively, even aggressively, to the point of declaring that this commitment is constitutive of the gospel. Just as

[14]William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
[15]Robinson's famous "Farewell Address" was quoted by Edward Winslow in *Hypocrisie Unmasked* (London, 1646), pp. 97-98. See the discussion in Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), pp. 91-92.
[16]*DBE*, p. 17.

some Christians saw the former system of apartheid in South Africa as not only a moral failure but also a theological heresy, a perversion of the gospel, should not those who deny that all avenues of ministry and leadership are open to women as well as men be placed in the same category? This scholar comes right up to the edge of anathematizing his complementarian colleagues, but then (wisely, I think) backs away from such a pronouncement:

> I am fearful of placing myself in the position of judging others without humility or sensitivity; that I do not want to do. In other words, I will call no one a heretic, but I would call an expression of the Gospel that excludes women in any way or sense from equality with men in Christ in status, response, action and ministry a misguided form of the Gospel as presented in the New Testament.[17]

Statements like this indicate that a great deal is at stake for those deeply committed to the egalitarian view.

But these statements can be matched, with equal if not greater severity, by those on the other side. For some complementarians, what is at stake is nothing less than the authority of the Bible itself. If I'm not mistaken, and I may well be, this position represents a hardening of the earlier complementarian recognition of egalitarians as sharing with them a common commitment to the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture while differing exegetically and hermeneutically on key biblical texts. This has prompted one egalitarian scholar to protest: "I hope those who disagree will challenge my interpretation, not my commitment to the authority of Scripture."[18] Complementarians also fear that if the egalitarian position prevails, its principles will be broadened to other areas of concern, such as homosexuality, so that eventually "no moral command of Scripture will be safe from its destructive procedures."[19] For those who share this analysis, this is no tempest in a teacup but a struggle for the very soul and life of the church.

So perhaps a new ECT is doomed from the outset, and I have set out on a fool's errand. Perhaps. But there is another note in both literatures that is sounded with what I take to be true conviction and integrity, and this gives me some basis to think—and hope—that we are not quite yet at a total impasse. For both sides speak clearly of shared values, mutual recognition and

[17]Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck, eds., *Woman, Abuse and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 51.
[18]*DBE*, p. 158.
[19]*EFBT*, p. 377.

patterns of cooperation. Here, for example, is such a statement from tl egalitarian side:

> Evangelicals who promote biblical equality can affirm the core values of fellow Christians who disagree with us on gender equality. What we have in common as Christians far outweighs our disagreements. We must, therefore, rehearse our shared values frequently and clearly. We must regularly reiterate our support of family values and the responsibility of parents for their children. . . . by pointing to our commitment to the authority of Scripture, the sacredness of the family and the centrality of evangelism and missions, we connect to the core values of those who are otherwise apprehensive of biblical equality. By carefully establishing the enormous ground we have in common, we build sturdy bridges to those who are unsure of our message.[20]

Perhaps the clearest expression of a similar openness from a complement rian side is in the essay "Charity, Clarity, and Hope: The Controversy and tl Cause of Christ," first published in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhoc* in 1991. "We are sure," say the authors,

> that neither the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood nor the Council for Biblical Equality flatters itself by thinking that it speaks for evangelicalism, let alone for the church as a whole. We do not know whether history will attach any significance to our statements. . . . This issue has important implications for marriage, singleness, and ministry, and thus for all of life and mission. Yet we sense a kinship far closer with the founders of CBE than with those who seem to put their feminist commitments above Scripture. . . .
>
> In profound ways we share a common passion with egalitarians: a passion to be obedient to biblical truth about manhood and womanhood; a passion to see men and women affirm the awesome reality of equal personhood in the image of God; a passion to see marriages whole and lasting and freeing and happy for both husband and wife; the passion to resist the moral collapse of our culture in all manner of tolerated abuses and addictions and perversions; a passion to be a winsome, countercultural, outcropping of Kingdom beauty and truth; a passion to equip all men and women for ministry according to their gifts with none throwing life away in trivial pursuits; a passion to magnify Christ—crucified, risen, and reigning—to a perishing society; and a passion to mobilize the whole church—men and women—to complete the Great Commission, penetrate all the unreached peoples of the world, and hasten the day of God. . . . We long for

[20]*DBE*, pp. 487-88.

> a common mind for the cause of Christ. . . . our aim is to carry on the debate with clarity and charity.[21]

As this document has been reprinted without change several times, I assume that its authors still accept and are committed to what they wrote nearly one and a half decades ago.

A NEW ECT?

Now comes the modest proposal I promised in the subtitle. Perhaps the time is right for egalitarians and complementarians to come together, to work together, to stand together precisely for the reasons stated clearly by both groups in their advocacy literatures—to further the cause of Christ and to advance the gospel of life in a culture increasingly marked by violence, decay and death. Shortly after the release of the first Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) statement in 1994, I wrote an editorial in *Christianity Today* in which I described this new initiative as "an ecumenism of the trenches."[22] It was clear that Catholics and evangelicals had come together not as proponents of a kind of armchair ecumenism seeking to rehearse and unravel the deep divides of the Reformation, but rather as cobelligerents in a shared struggle against a common enemy. Catholics and evangelicals found one another as allies working together on behalf of the sanctity of human life, the sacredness of marriage and family life, as advocates for justice and peace in a conflicted world that desperately needs to hear a word of reconciliation, a word that sounds far more credible when spoken by Catholics and evangelicals together rather than in isolation from one another.

I am not here to defend the ECT project, and I am well aware that not all evangelicals think that what we have attempted to do is such a great thing. But perhaps there are some strategic lessons gleaned from that experience that can inform the issue before us. Both the Catholic and evangelical participants in ECT have been determined to pursue an ecumenism of conviction, not of accommodation. We do not seek a placid *via media*, nor a sweeping under the rug of trenchant, clear-cut differences. Both sides in our dialogue are passionately committed to an unfettered search for truth, and this strategy requires the

[21] *RBMW*, pp. 404, 406.

[22] Timothy George, "Catholics and Evangelicals in the Trenches," *Christianity Today*, May 16, 1994, p. 16.

honest confrontation of ideas and truth claims as well as a conciliatory spirit that is open to convergence and reconciliation. This same kind of commitment, I believe, must mark any genuine progress in the quest for mutual understanding by egalitarians and complementarians. These words by Simone Weil could well serve as a guidepost on this journey: "Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is Truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."[23]

With that in mind, I want to suggest a tentative agenda—nine general themes or areas of concern—that I believe could be helpfully pursued by persons of goodwill and high moral imagination from both the complementarian and egalitarian communities. I have given no thought to the practicalities of such a process—the Evangelical Theological Society which welcomes both egalitarians and complementarians in its membership could play a role, as could Christian colleges and seminaries, local congregations and denominations, and parachurch ministries of various kinds. Some of these suggestions have already been acted upon and are underway in various places, and where that is the case I encourage an intensification of such efforts.

1. Let's study the Bible together. This has been our primary strategy in Evangelicals and Catholics Together. We have come together with open Bibles and open hearts and have learned a great deal from such personal explorations of the Word of God. Evangelicals and complementarians have, of course, been studying the Bible on this issue overtime—no doubt there are many empty forests as a result of their published labors on this subject! But apart from the several multiple-views books on this theme, much of this work stands as discrete silos of scholarship that lack the dynamism and cross-fertilization of a live interactive approach.

Perhaps a good text with which to begin such a study would be 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Paul's comment about the time (*kairos*) being shortened, so that "those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (NIV). Admittedly, this is not one of the famous purple passages about women in ministry, but it is nonetheless one of the most pertinent pericopes

[23] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 69.

in the New Testament for getting our priorities in order. It challenges us to a life of costly obedience as those "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" as Paul refers to this present dispensation (1 Cor 10:11). These verses are embedded in a passage dealing with the messy matters of sexuality, celibacy, divorce, marriage and sexual purity. It would be interesting to see what a committed cadre of competent complementarian and egalitarian biblical scholars would say *together* about a passage like this. Perhaps it could even shed some new light on 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, not to say Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2.

In any event, if we're evangelicals, there is no way around the exegetical task. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians—from whom we have much to learn in this matter, I believe—have a very different rationale for their insistence that only males can be admitted to the priesthood. It is a rationale based on a decidedly sacramental understanding of ministerial orders in which the priest, especially at the Eucharistic offering, is required to be not only a representative, but also a representation, literally a re-presentation of Christ: *sacedos est alter Christus.* This concept corresponds to an ecclesiology that sees the church itself as the extension of the incarnation. This rationale does not work for evangelicals for whom apostolic continuity is not represented in an unbroken succession of duly ordained priests and Roman Catholics in fellowship with a bishop who is in fellowship with a bishop of Rome. For evangelicals, that church is apostolic which honors the succession of apostolic proclamation in the inscripturated witness of the Bible. This, I take it, is common ground for egalitarians and complementarians, and indeed for all good Protestants, and so we have to wrestle with what in the world Paul means by the *hapax legomenon* in 1 Timothy 2:12, ***authenteō,*** and how this relates to the overarching storyline of biblical revelation.

2. *Celebrate together the consensus of the Great Tradition.* Evangelicalism at its heart is a renewal movement within historic Christian orthodoxy. This is a commitment we share with many other Christians, to be sure, but it is also at the heart of our own appropriation of the Reformation legacy and the Spirit-inspired movements of the Awakening. Egalitarians and complementarians stand together on one solid foundation, the only foundation that can be laid, Paul says: Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). Let me quote again from the complementarian document I cited earlier:

> The things that unite egalitarians and complementarians are inexpressibly magnificent and infinitely valuable. We serve the same omnipotent God, and there is none like him. Do we not share the faith that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it—that he made everything and everyone? Do we not share the faith that in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, Jesus Christ, whom he appointed the heir of all things and through whom he made the world? Do we not believe that this great and glorious Son of God became flesh and dwelt among us, that he gave his life a ransom for many, that he rose from the dead never to die again? Do we not share the faith that anyone and everyone who turns from sin and calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved? Do we not believe that Christ is coming again to establish his Kingdom of righteousness and peace?[24]

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! These are not trivial theological ideas, but the very heart of the gospel message itself, that which Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 15:3 to be "of first importance," indeed, the message by which we are saved, if we hold fast to these things. This is not to say that the differences between egalitarians and complementarians are trivial or unimportant—far from it—but it is to plead that such differences be placed in the context of the underlying unities which form the basis of a common witness of love and service to the world.

3. *Testimonies of mutual conversion.* It is a fact of life that people change their mind from time to time. It would be interesting to take a poll of evangelical leaders and ask how many had changed their mind about the role of women in ministry. I would like to hear more testimonies of those who have undergone such a change of mind and heart on this issue. Such testimonies, of course, cannot settle the issue for us exegetically or theologically, but they can help us to understand why certain things are persuasive to us at different moments in our lives. They can prompt us to ask where we sense the Holy Spirit may be leading us at any given moment. I would like to hear a discussion, for example, between Craig Keener, an egalitarian scholar who used to be a complementarian, and Father Patrick Reardon, an Antiochian Orthodox priest who used to be an Episcopalian egalitarian. Why did they change their minds on this issue? This kind of conversation, I believe, could lead to greater mutual understanding on both sides.

4. *The naming of God.* I would like to encourage a symposium of com-

[24] *RBMW,* pp. 420-24.

plementarian and egalitarian scholars, liturgists and theologians on the issue of gender-inclusive language for God. Whatever one may think about gender-inclusive language for humans, the use of feminine appellatives for God seems to be of a very different order. While no complementarians, to my knowledge, would countenance gender-inclusive language for God, the best arguments against this practice have been put forth by egalitarians, including the late Elizabeth Achtemeier, Roland Frye, Robert Jenson, Geoffrey Wainwright, Elizabeth Morelli, Donald Bloesch, Tom Oden and, most recently and most thoroughly, John W. Cooper. Cooper also gives full weight to feminine imagery for God in the Bible, as well as the notion of "kenotic masculinity of God" implied in the title Abba, and he calls for Christians to find biblically faithful ways to talk about "the motherly touch of our heavenly Father," as he calls it, without revising the biblical and historic Christian orthodox Trinitarian language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[25] This is the kind of topic that could well benefit from the sort of careful exegetical study that both complementarian and egalitarian scholars have shown themselves capable of doing.

5. The sanctity of life. In a culture of death, can egalitarians and complementarians stand and work together on behalf of the sanctity of human life to oppose abortion on demand? On this issue, I take it, egalitarians stand together with complementarians over against mainstream feminism, with the exception of the tiny Feminists for Life group.

6. Defend marriage and family integrity. While demonstrating the Christian and neighborly approach to all persons, including homosexual persons, can egalitarians and complementarians agree that homosexual activity is not a God-ordained lifestyle that should be approved and recognized within the Christian community? Can evangelicals and complementarians agree to be welcoming of homosexual persons but not affirming of homosexual practices and different lifestyles as accepted norms of church and family life? And without entering into the political debate over the proposed amendment to the federal constitution, can we agree to support the understanding of marriage as the God-ordained union of one man and one woman?

7. Sexual abuse. Running throughout the literatures of both communities

[25]John W. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 265-94.

is a debate about whether one of these views, or the other, contributes to the sexual abuse of women. Charges and countercharges are made on both sides about this, but every person I have read in the current discussion is strongly opposed to such horrible abuse and believes Christians should never countenance sexual abuse in any form. Surely here is a topic where the stated agreement between complementarians and egalitarians far outweighs their backwater differences about what motivates and contributes to such practices. Why not form a joint complementarian-egalitarian task force to study this issue, propose a concrete action plan for pastors and congregations to use in dealing with sexual abuse cases? Why not develop a joint literature and curriculum for churches, colleges and seminaries to use in raising the consciousness of the evangelical community on this matter?

8. Concerts of prayer. In a lecture presented at Regent College several years ago, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen challenged her audience to remember that the issues raised in gender discussions could not be resolved by arguments, organization and church political strategies alone, that such matters required a serious, prayerful engagement.[26] What about a round of prayer meetings in which representatives of both communities meet together to pray for one another, to seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit in our study of the Scriptures, in our joint projects on behalf of the least, the last and the lost all around us, and in our efforts to be both faithful to our conscientious convictions and also agents of reconciliation within the evangelical family?

9. Evangelism and missions. Can egalitarians and complementarians agree that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation for all persons everywhere? We do! Can we find ways of working together to support the world Christian mission, giving special attention to our brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle in various parts of the world against persecution, harassment, poverty and isolation from other believers? If we could see the world through the eyes of the Savior's love and see ourselves perhaps through the eyes of such brothers and sisters who do so much with so little, perhaps we would see our own intra-evangelical debates, including this one, in a different light.

Well, that is the end of the sermon, or almost. I want to close with a prayer. It's a prayer from a nineteenth-century Christian woman, Christina Rossetti, a

[26]See Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "Principalities, Powers, and Gender Relations: Some Reflections for Patient Revolutionaries," *Crux* 31 (September 1995).

prayer that takes us to the heart of Jesus' own life and ministry and his embracing invitation to us all:

> Jesus, who didst touch the leper, deliver us from antipathies; who didst eat with them who washed not before meat, deliver us from fastidiousness; who didst condone inhospitality, deliver us from affront-taking; who wouldst not promise the right or the left, deliver us from favoritism; who, having called didst recall Peter, deliver us from soreness; who didst love active Martha and contemplative Mary, deliver us from respect of persons. Deliver us while it is called today. Thou who givest today, and promisest not tomorrow.[27]

[27] Christina Rossetti, in *Prayers of Women*, ed. Lisa Sergio (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 93.

CONTRIBUTORS

Henri D. Blocher is the Knoedler Professor of Theology at Wheaton College and professor of systematic theology at the Faculté Libre de Théologie Evangélique in Vaux-sur-Seine, outside Paris. He has authored six books, including *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* and *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*. In addition, he has recently assumed the presidency of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians.

Lynn H. Cohick is associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College. She taught for three years at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya, and is the author of *The Peri Pascha Attributed to Melito of Sardis: Setting, Purpose and Sources*, and coauthor of *The New Testament in the World of Antiquity.*

Timothy George is founding dean and professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School. He is a remarkable evangelical statesman, serving as executive editor *for Christianity Today* along with serving on the editorial advisory boards *of The Harvard Theological Review, Christian History* and *Books & Culture*. He has written more than twenty books, including *Theology of the Reformers.*

James M. Hamilton is assistant professor of biblical studies at Southwestern Seminary's Havard School for Theological Studies in Houston, and the author of *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old And New Testaments.* He has published articles in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology, Themelios, Trinity Journal, The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* and *Westminster Theological Journal.*

Mark Husbands was recently appointed the Leonard and Marjorie Maas Associate Professor of Reformed Theology at Hope College. He has completed the monograph *Barth's Ethics of Prayer,* and has edited six books, including *The Community of the Word, Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* and *Essays Catholic and Critical.*

Rebecca G. S. Idestrom is associate professor of Old Testament at Tyndale Seminary. She is the author of *From Biblical Theology to Biblical Criticism: Old Testament Scholarship at Uppsala University, 1866-1922.* She has published articles and reviews in *Journal of Pentecostal Theology, Didaskalia, Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, Journal for the Study of the Old Testmament, The Pentecostal Testimony, Themelios* and *Hebrew Studies.*