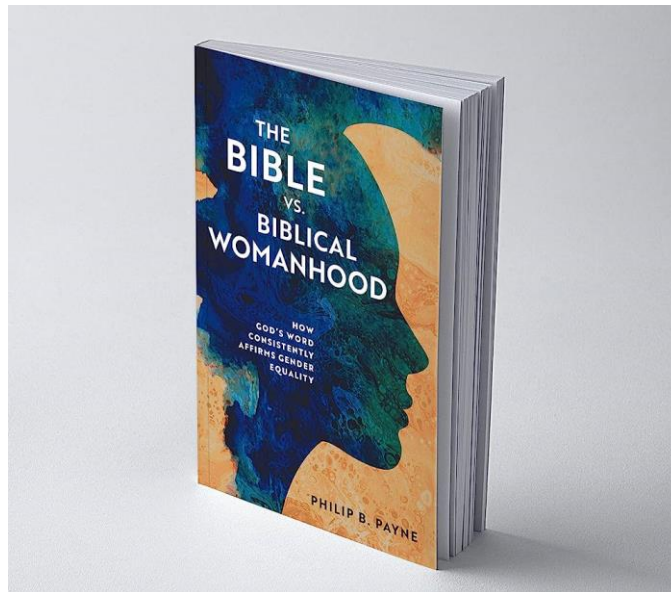


# Does Gender Equality Equate Us?:

## A Review of *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood* (Part 1)

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For every theological movement, there are scholars who continue to defend it, and the doctrine of egalitarianism is no exception. This year, Philip Payne (Ph.D. at Cambridge, professor at Trinity, Gordon-Conwell, and Fuller) published a condensed version of his exegetical defense for egalitarian doctrine which he entitled *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood*. Guns drawn, Payne takes aim at complementarianism as he wades through significant battleground texts in the debate over God’s intended design for men and women in the home, in the church, and in the world. But shot after shot, Payne misses the target and instead exposes the flimsy foundation on which egalitarian doctrine has always been built.

For those unfamiliar with the terminology, the word “egalitarianism” refers to a theological system that affirms female pastors/elders, rejects the idea of asymmetrical submission of wives to their husbands, and touts itself as a defense of equality between men and women. Payne’s subtitle, *How God’s Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality*, demonstrates that he conceives of equality only in egalitarian terms. As we will see, not all definitions of equality are created equal.

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“Complementarianism,” in contrast, is a theological system that teaches God’s distinct roles for men and women in the church and in the home. Consistent complementarians would not appoint a woman as a pastor or elder and would teach asymmetrical submission of a wife to her husband, all while affirming the intrinsic equality of men and women. Payne’s title takes direct aim at complementarianism, which has been articulated most prominently in the last few decades in a book edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem entitled [Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#). It will not surprise readers of The Cripplegate to hear that on this issue we agree with Piper and not with Payne.

Why, then, dedicate space to a review of a book with which we disagree fundamentally? Three reasons: 1) To make plain what the scholarly arguments behind egalitarian doctrine sound like. Payne is a fair, thoughtful representation of egalitarian reasoning. 2) To expose the failure of those arguments to rightly handle the biblical text. They fail to persuade in a handful of different ways. 3) To give complementarian Christians a few categories of egalitarian arguments so that they can be equipped to respond with warmth, charity, and biblical truth when challenged on this topic.

As an overview, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood* examines key biblical texts regarding womanhood in a more or less canonical order. Payne begins in the Garden, as he should, then moves his way quickly through the Old Testament to the New where he spends the bulk of his time dealing in detail with hotly debated texts like [1 Corinthians 14:34-35](#) (“the women should keep silent in the churches”), [Ephesians 5:21-33](#) (“Wives, submit to your own husbands”), and [1 Timothy 2:8-15](#) (“I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man”). To Payne’s credit, he doesn’t ignore texts that seem to challenge his egalitarian convictions, and he includes a section in each chapter responding to some common objections. Payne is no newcomer to the debate about gender in the Bible, and his years of academic attention to this topic are obvious throughout the book (see, for example, the appendix of Vaticanus Distigme-Obelos Symbols). Payne shows his work, presents his case, and deals with prominent texts on biblical womanhood.

However, what this book supplies in its scholarly awareness, it lacks in sound argumentation. Rather than respond to each argument text by text, I will break this up into four categories of error in egalitarian reasoning that characterize Payne’s work and egalitarianism as a whole. This post will deal with the first category, which is an equivocation of the meaning of “equality.”

## Equality Equivocation

Payne consistently misrepresents complementarian doctrine to prop up his interpretation. Directly and indirectly, he wars with straw men rather than speaking to

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real men and women and their complementarian views on Scripture. And in so doing, Payne asserts that equality must mean identity; that the only design preserving fairness is sameness.

Speaking of complementarians, Payne writes, “Now, some proponents of gender hierarchy *claim* that they believe men and women are equal: they are both made in the image of God, have equal worth in God’s sight, and so on. But when it comes to the everyday practice of leadership and use of power, they do not treat women as equal to men” (p. xxii-xxiii). This sentence betrays Payne’s willful ignorance about his opponent’s argument. He knows that complementarians believe that people can be made by God with equal value but different roles and responsibilities, but simply refuses to entertain that distinction as a valid argument. Rather than deal with the heart of the question (does unequal distribution of power necessarily entail unequal worth, dignity, or value?), he simply assumes his answer and says that an attempt to ask the question is “[concealing] an agenda: a gender hierarchy with men at the top (p. xxiv). He then compares complementarians with Orwell’s communist pigs who said, “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.”

Throughout the rest of the book, Payne continues to subtly equivocate on the meaning of “equality” by appealing to Scripture. While Payne claims that he “[does] not deny God’s creation of men and women with differences that complement one another,” he works hard to obscure those differences by mapping his homogenous view of equality onto the text. Here are a few examples:

- p. 9 – Payne lists all the events that happen to *both* Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and presents that as “the equality of man and woman.” That both Adam and Eve were tempted, ashamed, and cursed says nothing about God’s distinct gender designs, only that they are both sinners in need of a Savior. That Adam and Eve were cursed differently, in fact, suggests distinct roles for men and women.
- p. 18 – Payne lists positive representations of queens in Scripture to assert that God does not only “desire male leadership.” He lists: Queen Esther, the Queen of Sheba, and the Queen of Chaldea. Notice that none in that list are queens of God’s covenant people. The queens of Israel that Payne does mention (Athaliah and Jezebel) are both wicked queens, but Payne asserts “neither they nor any other women who led Israel are criticized in Scripture on the grounds that a woman should not rule.” [Isaiah 3:12](#) begs to differ. And, complementarian doctrine does not exclude female leadership, but it embraces God’s design for male leadership as elders of the church and heads in the home. Payne repeatedly argues against positions complementarians don’t even hold.

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- p. 22 – Payne describes the Proverbs 31 woman as follows: “She is an efficient executive with a well-ordered domestic staff. She deals in real estate, runs a clothing business, and cares for the poor as well as her own household. She has her own earnings. She appears to be the primary income earner in the family. She is also a wise and kind teacher.” As is common in this book, Payne uses modern language as an anachronistic sleight of hand to argue for sameness in gender roles. He paints the Proverbs 31 woman as a high-power Wall Street CEO when Scripture describes her as a godly homemaker.
- p. 29 – According to Payne, that Jesus had male and female disciples “implies that Jesus wants women as well as men to teach his message.” Which is certainly true! The Great Commission applies to all men and women. [Titus 2:3](#) explicitly instructs older women to “teach what is good and so train the young women.” However, Payne means by this not that all men and women should teach, but that all men and women should teach *in the same way*. Again, this just ignores the category distinctions of complementarianism and assumes the conclusion of his argument.
- p. 45 – One of Payne’s most regular errors is making massive logical leaps from examples of women teaching in Scripture to the conclusion that women should be ordained as elders in the church. For example, he notes that there were several prophetesses in the Old and New Testaments, and so there were. But the office of a prophet is distinct from the office of an elder/pastor, and the two cannot be conflated simply on the basis that both involve teaching, as Payne argues. Additionally, Payne lists Priscilla and Timothy’s mother and grandmother as examples of “female teachers,” implying that their teaching is a justification for authoritative female teaching over men in the church. But Priscilla taught in the context of an evangelistic conversation with her husband Aquila and Apollos ([Acts 18:26](#)), and Timothy’s mom and grandma taught him as a kid in the context of the home ([2 Timothy 1:5](#)). To equate faithful parenting with pulpit preaching is an Olympic long jump in reasoning.
- p. 105 – Payne writes, “Some allege that [Gal. 3:28](#) applies only to who can be saved and not also to life in the church.” This seems to be a willful mischaracterization of a complementarian understanding of “there is no male or female.” A complementarian understanding of [Galatians 3:28](#) would of course appreciate its impact in relationships in the church across various categories – ethnicity, gender, class, etc. However, living out our unity in Christ through love and oneness with the body does not mean erasing God’s design for men and women in the church. Rather than speaking directly to

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complementarian interpretations, Payne sets up a false dichotomy and forces his readers to choose between [two bad options](#).

To directly engage with Payne's argument for a moment: a refusal to distinguish between personal value and an assigned role makes a mess of things quickly. In Payne's own words, "equality means equal access to power" (p. xxii). So, should children (who are of equal value as adults) be appointed as pastors and elders just like adults? What if the children say that they're "gifted and called" (p. xxiii) to preach to the church, which seems to be the main qualification that Payne is concerned about? What if the church affirms children as their preachers? If they're really equal, shouldn't they have "equal access to power"?

Or, did God advocate a sinful, unequal hierarchy when he forbade Aaron's disabled offspring from participation in the service of food offerings ([Lev 21:16-24](#))? Why did God send an earthquake to swallow up the "equality" warrior Korah when he opposed Moses' leadership over Israel saying, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" ([Num 16:3](#))? What about God's institution of the high priest, or of Israel's kings, or of the apostles over the early church? If equality means equal access to power, then God has consistently designed covenant communities with significant inequalities between his people!

Instead of approaching this debate charitably and consistently, Payne rejects a fundamental premise of his opponents and moves to reason from his own conclusions. He equivocates on the meaning of "equality" from the beginning and so undermines his own case.

In the process, Payne exposes a mortal wound in egalitarian thinking, namely that for men and women to be of equal value in God's sight, they must be given access to the same roles and responsibilities. Despite Payne's protest, this egalitarian impulse shares more in common with the American Dream than the plain teaching of Scripture. It values self-determination over all – "I get to do whatever I want to do because I want to do it." But it fails to realize that true joy and value don't derive from our inward impulses.

Our value comes from being made in God's image and remade in Christ's, not from who gets to stand in the pulpit on Sunday morning. In God's economy, we are equal in his sight because we are equally sinners in need of a Savior and equally saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The tasks God assigns us in the church and in the home do not give us worth – the majestic love of God does. And in God's loving wisdom, he has designed us with distinct, complementary parts to play in the drama of his redeeming grace. Our fulfillment comes from the God we all hear preached.

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In the next posts, we will see how egalitarian reasoning also fails because of its spurious translations, cultural impositions, and narrative misapplications.



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