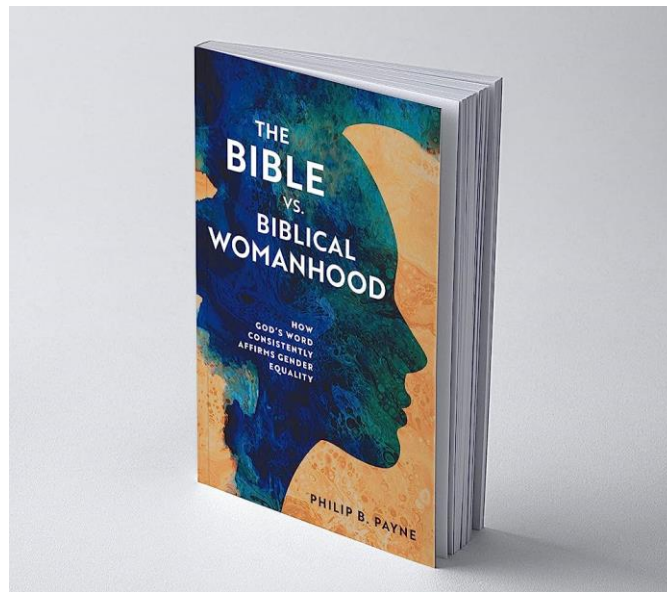


From Prophetess to Pastrix: A Review of The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood (Part 4)

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Earlier this year, the debate over women as pastors was reignited by Rick Warren's attempt to convert the Southern Baptist Convention to egalitarianism. [In his March interview with Russell Moore](#), prior to Saddleback's removal from the SBC, Warren made his case for why he believes women should be pastors, citing [Matthew 28:18-20](#) (The Great Commission), [Acts 2:1-21](#) (Pentecost), and [Matthew 28:1-10](#) (The Resurrection) as his defense. According to Warren, these passages are what moved him to repent of complementarian doctrine and embrace egalitarianism.

Of particular interest for this review is that all three of the passages Warren cited were taken from *biblical narratives*.

In this four-part review of Philip Payne's *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood*, we observed how egalitarianism [warps equality in the Bible](#), [twists the text of the Bible](#), and [overrules the authors of the Bible](#). My aim has been to show how Payne's distortions of Scripture fall into easily identifiable categories so that Christians can spot these kinds of errors

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wherever they see them. This last part of the review will deal with one more category of common egalitarian error: its abuse of biblical narratives.

Admittedly, Payne doesn't write as much about narrative texts as he does didactic (teaching) texts in his book. But arguments from narrative texts are prominent among egalitarians because of the appeal to well-known portions of Scripture, to the life and ministry of Jesus, and to current cultural ideas about narrative. There is an exploitable elasticity to the way that many think about applying Bible stories to the church today, and Payne knows it. If it can be shown that women *were* given pastoral roles (or something similar) in sacred history, the egalitarian reasons, then it can be argued that women *should* be given pastoral roles today.

That leads me to the main takeaway from this post, which I hope will be useful for you whenever you encounter any narrative in Scripture:

Just because something *did* happen in a biblical narrative doesn't mean that it *should* happen today.

This point may seem obvious at first. Biblical narratives record all kinds of behavior unworthy of imitation today: Ishmael's ill-advised regicide ([Jer 41:1-8](#)), Lot's offering of his daughters to the Sodomite mob ([Gen 19:8](#)), Samson's almost-marriage to a Philistine ([Judges 14:1-20](#)), and Solomon's massive harem of wives and concubines ([1 Kings 11:1-8](#)). Likewise, biblical narratives include details about events that we wouldn't expect to be repeated today; at least, I don't open my window in the morning expecting to get a meal delivered by a local murder of crows ([1 Kings 17:1-7](#)).

But my guess is that you have heard a sermon about "defeating the Goliaths in your life" or "not letting go until God blesses you" or "looking for your honey in the rock." Apparently, we do think some parts of Bible stories – what *did* happen – can teach us how to live the Christian life today – what *should* happen. In the Bible itself, Peter teaches us about the modern relevance of the Noahic narrative ([2 Pet 2:4-10](#)), Paul instructs us how to apply the wilderness wanderings to our own temptations ([1 Cor 10:1-13](#)), and John tells us that believing in the story of Jesus' flesh-and-blood life on earth is essential to Christian living ([1 John 5:6-12](#)). If all of Scripture is profitable for our maturity ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)), surely that includes the 40% of Scripture that we label "narrative"!

So, what principles should drive our right understanding and appropriate application of biblical narratives?

To illustrate just two of these interpretive principles, we will examine how Payne (as an example of egalitarian exegesis) wrongly interprets biblical narratives to turn

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prophetesses into female pastors. Payne regularly leaps from biblical stories involving a woman to a prescriptive application for the church today, misunderstanding and misapplying the texts against the original author's intention. By undermining these common-sense principles, he demonstrates the need to distinguish between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* elements in a narrative – that which *did* happen and that which *should* then happen.

3

Bible Narrative Principle #1: Characters Aren't Always Examples

When egalitarians attempt to defend their views on women in church leadership, the name "Deborah" frequently makes an appearance. According to Judges 4-5, Deborah was "a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth" who "was judging Israel" ([Judges 4:4](#)), who spoke on behalf of God to the leader of Israel's army (4:6-14), and who celebrated God's victory over the Canaanite king with a chapter-long song (5:1-31). Her name is often invoked by egalitarians because she acts as a judge for all Israel and because Barak, the male leader of Israel's army, receives commands from God through her and says to her "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (4:8).

In dealing with the story of Deborah, Payne claims that she is an example of God's affirmation of female leadership over his people. Payne asserts, "that there is no suggestion whatsoever in the text that there is anything amiss because this judge, Deborah, is a woman" (p. 14). Positively, he states, "Deborah powerfully demonstrates God's blessing on female leadership" (p. 14).

So how does Payne go amiss? In 1996, D. A. Carson demonstrated Payne's logical error in his book *Exegetical Fallacies* by showing that Payne improperly handled a syllogism in his 1981 article on 1 Timothy 2 (p. 94-95, *Exegetical Fallacies*). The same problem is at work here. Payne's logic with the Deborah narrative can be represented in the following way:

- Deborah is a female leader of God's people.
- God blesses Deborah's efforts as a leader.
- Therefore, "God blesses female leadership."

The first problem with this logic is labeling Deborah a "leader," which is intentionally vague and textually imprecise. She was a mouthpiece for God ("prophetess") and a resolver of legal debates ("judged Israel"). Secondly, Payne draws his assertion about God blessing Deborah's leadership from [Judges 5:31](#), "And the land had rest for forty years." To claim that a good consequence following one's action demonstrates blessing

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on that action doesn't logically follow and is the kind of leap prosperity preachers regularly make. God regularly blesses wicked rulers in Israel *not* as an affirmation of them, their gender, or their office but as an expression of his grace or even his eventual judgment (see, for example, [2 Kings 14:23-27](#) with Jeroboam II).

But the biggest exegetical problem with Payne's reasoning is his massive logical leap of a conclusion, that God blessing Deborah's leadership is God blessing *all* female leadership. Even if Deborah could be categorized as a leader, and even if God really did affirm her leadership through blessing, *the text simply doesn't present her as an example for leadership*. God does explicitly affirm women leading other women in the church ([Titus 2:3-5](#)), but Deborah isn't even intended as an example of that. Read through the rest of the book of Judges and you'll see that none of the judges are presented by the author as examples to emulate for Israel, much less for the church. That's just not the author's intent with the text.

Payne is playing here on our tendency to approach biblical texts with a moralizing principle that turns every character into an "ought." "Be like David." "Don't be like Saul." "Definitely don't be like Jezebel." And so on. And, in fact, there are texts where biblical characters *are* presented as positive examples of behavior ([Ezek 14:14](#)) and negative examples of behavior ([1 Cor 10:1-13](#), "as examples for us"). However, that does not mean that every author intends every character in every story to be a positive or negative example. Quite often, authors have different goals than mere imitation or prohibition in presenting the history of God's providence.

In the case of Deborah, we would be hard-pressed to demonstrate that the author of Judges intends for Deborah to be any kind of enduring example. That's not her function in this narrative, else we would expect to see some praise of Deborah in the song ([Judges 5:1-31](#)), which we don't. Payne seems to be aware of this problem but dodges it by misstating the objection as "[Deborah's leadership] was a one-time exception for exceptional times" (p. 16). The issue is not that the times were exceptional, though they undoubtedly were, *contra* Payne's analysis. The issue is that the author doesn't put forward any of the judges as positive examples of leadership.

The repeated refrain in Judges is "the people of Israel [again] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" ([Judges 2:11](#), [3:7](#), [3:12](#), [4:12](#), [6:1](#), [10:6](#), [13:1](#)), because "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25). The spiraling sin of Israel and God's incredible mercy is the author's chief concern. That Deborah was a female leading Israel is no doubt significant in the text, but for the exact *opposite* reason than what Payne asserts. In response to Barak's cowardice, Deborah says, "the road on which you go will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9), meaning Jael, who kills the enemy commander. If anything,

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Deborah's part in the story ends up producing shock at the reversal of roles between men and women, not an affirmation of female leadership.

That the Bible contains a narrative with a female prophet does not affirm female leadership in the church today. Not all characters in biblical stories are intended by the authors to be examples for us today, good or bad. In order to rightly read the text, we need to pay close attention to the methods employed by the authors to highlight their intended application rather than fabricating one ourselves.

5

Bible Narrative Principle #2: Correspondence Isn't Always Command

A second and related principle in narrative interpretation is this: Our ability to draw connections between biblical events and the church today does not impose an imperative on the text.

As an example, I could find several similarities between Jesus' command to the disciples to prepare the upper room for the Passover meal ([Mark 14:12-16](#)) and the necessity for someone at church to prepare the elements for the Lord's Supper on a Sunday morning. The similarities are that both involve work for Jesus' disciples, both involve a ritual meal, both involve a gathering for Jesus' people, and both involve obeying the commands of Jesus. However, if I were to say that Mark's intent in [Mark 14:12-16](#) is to teach us that somebody has to get communion ready, I'd misread that text. Just because I can see similarities between the Bible and a circumstance today doesn't a mandate make. Similarity alone is insufficient.

Payne falls afoul of this same logical error in his interpretation of the resurrection narrative. He writes, "The first person the resurrected Christ seeks out and commissions to announce the gospel of his resurrection and his coming ascension to God the Father is Mary Magdalene ([John 20:14-18](#)). Since 'apostle' means 'one sent with a mission,' it is appropriate to say that Christ appoints her an apostle to the apostles" (p. 30-31). So, along with Rick Warren, Payne argues that our Lord's choice to send Mary Magdalene to tell the male disciples about Jesus' resurrection and ascension is an affirmation that "Jesus encourages women to proclaim the gospel to men" as "servant-leaders" (p. 30-31).

Now, to be clear, Jesus' command to make disciples through the declaration of the gospel certainly applies to both men and women ([Matt 28:19-20](#)). Jesus *does* encourage both men and women to proclaim the gospel to both men and women. The Bible does not put any restrictions on men evangelizing women or vice versa.

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But there are two major problems with Payne's treatment of Mary Magdalene's role in resurrection proclamation. First, he ignores principle #1. Just because Jesus *did* tell a woman to proclaim the gospel to a group of men once doesn't mean women *should* do that today.

Second, Payne wrongly equates Mary's delivery of information to the disciples with preaching to the gathered church. He turns similarity into prescription, correspondence into command. Jesus' command to Mary was "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ([John 20:17](#)). This command shares some similarities with preaching in pastoral ministry today, as Payne notes. Both involve instruction from Jesus, both involve the communication of news about Jesus and his resurrection, and both are given to groups including men.

However, to state the obvious difference, Mary Magdalene wasn't a pastor. While there may be similarities between Jesus' command to Mary and Jesus' command to pastors, there are also meaningful dissimilarities. The most significant difference, for our purposes, is that speaking the truth about the resurrection in a conversation isn't preaching to a gathered assembly of the church. A closer analogy to Mary's assigned task would not be a Sunday morning sermon but a witnessing opportunity with a co-worker. There are different ways to "proclaim the gospel," and while the Bible commands both men and women to proclaim in personal evangelism, the Bible prohibits women from authoritatively proclaiming to men in the church ([1 Tim 2:10-12](#)). Jesus' command to Mary cannot be a prescription for pastors because, simply put, Mary isn't a pastor.

The same goes for Payne's treatment of Priscilla in her conversation with her husband, Aquila, and Apollos ([Acts 18:26](#)). Payne argues that when the text says that both Priscilla and Aquila "explained to him the way of God more accurately," this was an example of a woman teaching a man (p. 139-141). Payne writes, "Still others say that because she was teaching just one man, this is different from what [1 Tim 2:12](#) prohibits, but [1 Tim 2:12](#) also specifies 'to teach... a man' (singular)" (p. 141). That difference is exactly the point! Priscilla and her husband as a couple had an edifying conversation with a fellow believer. To jump from a husband and wife building up a brother in Christ to female pastors is a huge categorical leap. Similarities do not always imply prescriptions.

My aim in taking four articles to cover this single egalitarian work has not been to vilify Philip Payne or to exhaustively respond to every egalitarian argument that he or others have made. My hope, instead, has been to give believers four broad categories for identifying the faulty exegesis and theology involved in egalitarian reasoning. Equipped with these categories, then, you can quickly and ably respond to a question from a co-

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worker, friend, or family member who asks about your belief in God's good design for men and women.

If you think about it, these four categories of error cover the entirety of the exegetical process. They frame issues with the historical situation, with translation, with interpretation, and with application. In other words, error can enter from the world around the text, the text itself, the meaning of the text, or the use of the text. To be faithful, diligent students of Scripture, we need to guard ourselves from inserting our own ideas or preferences at any of these levels, and instead let the text of Scripture speak for itself.

If we do let the Bible speak on its own terms, whether in a narrative, a poem, or an epistle, we'll find that biblical manhood and womanhood are a profound blessing from God. Undoubtedly, many have experienced the abuse and neglect of God's given roles for men and women in the church and in the home. Some have claimed the Bible as their backing for chauvinism and domineering, while others have tried to stretch Scripture to support feminism and deconstruction. But when the Word of God has its say in the lives of God's people, both men and women know and experience the tremendous joy of the roles God has given them.

Our goal, as ever, is to hear God and obey God. Because of our own limitations and biases, hearing God clearly can take some work. But God has faithfully given us everything we need for life and godliness in his Word. As men and women, we can come together around that Word and build one another up according to his good design and for his eternal glory.



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