

"Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender" (Ch 20) by Roger Nicole & "Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate" (Ch 21) by Gordon D. Fee

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Introduction

Since its inception in the 1970s, North American egalitarianism has developed a distinct hermeneutic of its own with regard to its interpretation of gender-related passages in Scripture. It is not the purpose of the present article to address this subject comprehensively.¹ Rather, the scope of this brief essay is limited to providing a response to the hermeneutical chapters by Roger Nicole and Gordon Fee in the book *Discovering Biblical Equality*.²

Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender

In his 8½-page long chapter entitled "Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender" Roger Nicole sets out to "show how following valid hermeneutical principles will aid in the proper understanding of the passages relevant to the gender discussion" (355). At the very outset, Nicole affirms the divine authorship of Scripture and the primacy of authorial intent. In the remainder of his short piece, Nicole puts forth six foundational hermeneutical principles for evangelical interpretation.

These are

1. literal or figurative meaning;
2. prescriptive or descriptive texts;
3. individual, collective and universal references;
4. peripheral versus central doctrines;
5. fragmentary versus canonical interpretations; and
6. the situation of those being addressed or represented.

JBMW 10:1 (Spring 2005) p. 89

In principle, these distinctions are unobjectionable, and Nicole is to be commended for setting them forth as common ground for discussion. Nicole's application of these principles, however, is not quite as

unobjectionable. For example, Nicole writes that "Paul's descriptive analogy between Adam's priority in creation and Eve's priority in sin in [1 Timothy 2:13-14](#)-even though it is used to support the ad hoc prescription in [1 Timothy 2:12](#)-seems to fall far short of being theologically prescriptive or determinative" (357). In a related footnote, he asserts that the "primary point of the analogy is that the woman, who was created second, was first to yield to the deception of Satan" and admonishes, "One simply cannot make universal gender statements on the basis of ad hoc descriptions that are used to serve other points" (357, n. 5).

There are several problems with this line of argument. First, Nicole assumes at the very outset that [1 Tim 2:12](#) is an "ad hoc" prescription or description (following Gordon Fee?), which begs the question in presupposing non-normativity from the start. Yet the prescriptive or descriptive nature of this statement must be demonstrated, not assumed. Second, Nicole unduly conflates verses 13 and 14 by reducing their message to Eve, having been created second, yielding first to the temptation. More likely, however, Paul in these verses adduces two arguments, not one: women are not to teach or have authority over men because (1) Adam was created first, then Eve (v. 13); and (2) Eve sinned first, thus subverting the divine pattern, with disastrous consequences (v. 14). Hence, according to Paul, the Fall of humanity flowed from a violation of the implications of the order of creation, which is of permanent significance.

This, in turn, has ramifications for the proper ordering of relationships and ministries in the church. Because God first created the man, and then the woman, Paul argues, and because of the grievous consequences resulting from God's creation order, it is likewise men, not women, who ought to teach and have authority in the church, while women ought to learn in full submission (vv. 11-12). Nicole has unduly truncated Paul's argument and hence missed the important connection between Paul's command in v. 12 and its biblical foundation as cited in verses 13 and 14.

Nicole goes on to assert that "patriarchy is never *prescribed* in either Testament" (357). Thus [1 Tim 2:12](#) cannot be prescriptive. Once again, however, Nicole's presuppositions seem to be driving and predetermining exegesis. At the very start he classifies [1 Tim 2:12](#) as a "patriarchal text," and since "patriarchy is never *prescribed* in either Testament," [1 Tim 2:12](#) cannot be prescriptive (357). This, of course, is not exegesis, but an exercise in dogmatic deduction.

As a second case in point, Nicole cites Paul's "description" of male authority "in the Greco-Roman household," which, according to Nicole, "does not attain to a prescription for all times" (358). Nicole even asserts that "husbands are never instructed in the Bible to 'exercise authority over,' 'provide leadership for' or 'be responsible for' their wives" (358). This is an astonishing claim in light of the fact that Paul, in [Eph 5:22-24](#) plainly states, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church . . . Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." Earlier in the same epistle, Paul wrote that "God placed all things under his [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over

everything for the church" (Eph 1:22). In context, Christ's headship is defined as being "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion," extending even to the heavenly realm, including Satan and demons, and both to the present age and to the age to come (Eph 1:21).

In light of passages such as these, how can Nicole say that "husbands are never instructed in the Bible to 'exercise authority over,' 'provide leadership for' or 'be responsible for' their wives" (358)? He himself seems to sense the weakness of his position when he concedes that Scripture may do so "by implication," but maintains that "implication is not prescription." Is Christ's authority over the church and its need to submit to him as head then optional and "merely descriptive" as well? It seems hard to avoid the impression that egalitarians such as Nicole here go to some lengths in trying to evade the clear, abiding significance of a natural, straightforward reading of the text.

For these reasons the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive texts adduced by Nicole is unobjectionable as such, but Nicole's application of this principle is highly dubious at several points.

Another questionable application is found in the context of Nicole's discussion of "peripheral versus central doctrines." Nicole proposes that "Spirit gifting, which receives considerable attention in the New Testament," ought to be viewed as "more central than 'church order,'" asserting that "there is *no prescriptive passage* that dictates the structures or nature of church order" (359). Once again, this is an astonishing claim in light of the fact that a considerable portion of the Pastoral epistles, including passages such as 1 Tim 3:1-12, are given to apostolic directives concerning qualifications for church leaders, both elders/overseers and deacons. Here Nicole seems to be considerably more radical than other egalitarians who would be reluctant to set aside passages such as these as "non-prescriptive" and hence "peripheral."

Once again, while the overall guideline adduced by Nicole seems sound in principle, his application of this principle to the interpretation of gender-related passages in Scripture seems unduly guided by his egalitarian presuppositions which predetermine the outcome and make hermeneutics a tool in the exegete's hand that allows him to steer the exegesis of a given passage or set of passages in a desired direction rather than serving as a foundation that guides exegesis in keeping with the message of a given text, interpreted in context.³

Nicole concludes that "most of the differences between patriarchalists [his preferred term for complementarians] and egalitarians in the present gender debate are hermeneutically based" (363). He expresses his hope that by setting forth some basic principles of hermeneutics there will be common ground on which to move toward greater consensus or at least a more reasoned debate. As the brief interaction above demonstrates, however, the problem seems to be not so much on the level of hermeneutical *theory* but at the point of the *application* of these hermeneutical principles *in practice*.

Hence the solution, likewise, is to be found in the foundational presuppositions driving the practical application of hermeneutical principles by interpreters of biblical gender passages. The final arbiter must

remain the text of Scripture itself: Does a given interpretation attain plausibility and probability as a valid understanding of a passage in the light of context, word meanings, syntax, historical-cultural background, and so

JBMW 10:1 (Spring 2005) p. 91

on, or does it appear strained and merely possible but not probable? It is my observation and conviction that the egalitarian interpretation of the major gender texts in Scripture often falls in the latter, rather than the former, category.

Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate

We turn now to Gordon Fee's 18-page chapter on "Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate," some of which appeared previously in *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*.⁴ At the outset, Fee, who is Pentecostal, sets "the gospel of grace and gifting" over against "Paul's own rejection of law keeping" (i.e., legalism) and an approach that turns "questions of gender relationships into a form of law in which 'roles' and 'structures' are placed on the same level as the ethical obligation to love one's neighbor" (364-65).

In his section on "Why Hermeneutics?" Fee affirms the importance of the biblical author's intended meaning, notes the impact of the presuppositions of the interpreter, and stresses the significance of relevance. He proceeds to outline what are the distinctively evangelical presuppositions about the nature of Scripture and the source of authority as resting intrinsically in Scripture as external to the interpreter. He also discusses the inspiration of Scripture and notes both divine and human aspects of Scripture and the implications of Scripture being a divine as well as a human word.

Fee proceeds to sketch the "fundamentalist mindset" as one driven by a "longing for absoluteness in all matters" and detects an ancient precedent in the Pharisees' practice of legalism and of putting a "hedge around the law" (369). According to Fee, being unwilling to trust God "without absolute certainty" is "its own form of idolatry" (370). Although it is our human tendency to eliminate ambiguity, we must learn to trust God. God gave us his Word in the context of particular historical circumstances and by way of certain literary genres. This constitutes a divine accommodation to our human situation.

Also, we find in Scripture diversity within an essential unity. The traditional principle of the "analogy of Scripture" is helpful, but sometimes difficult to apply. Forced harmonization is to be resisted. Hence, Fee notes that Scripture reveals "a degree of ambiguity, accommodation and diversity," which causes many to opt for the extremes of fundamentalism or liberalism" (371). Fee instead urges a "radical middle" aimed at a "higher degree of common understanding," reaffirming authorial intentionality over against reader-response criticism and postmodernism" (371). As Fee himself observes, little that he has said so far is controversial or under dispute by evangelicals, including those engaging in the debate over gender roles in the church.

The rest of Fee's essay is devoted to two areas of concern: (1) the construction of "theology by way of implication" rather than on the basis of clear and explicit statements in Scripture (similar to Nicole's distinction between descriptive and prescriptive texts, see above); and (2) the practice of turning ad hoc biblical commands into "a form of Christian law." On the first matter, Fee contrasts universal human sinfulness (clear) with the nature of the resurrection body (disputed). Other less-than-clear matters cited by Fee are tongues as initial physical evidence of Spirit baptism; the mode of baptism; and frequency of Eucharist observance.

Fee puts male-female relationships in both church and home in this latter

JBMW 10:1 (Spring 2005) p. 92

category-according to Fee, "[T]here is no *explicit* teaching in the New Testament either about this relationship or about church order, structures of worship" (374). This, for Fee, includes the notion "that only men may hold certain church offices" and even the very notion of "offices" in the church itself. The reader at this point may ask, "What about [Eph 5:21-33](#)?" According to Fee, Paul here "assumes a Greco-Roman patriarchal culture . . . but he does not thereby bless the culture itself nor explicitly instruct men to exercise authority over their wives" (374). He contends that the household codes in Colossians and Ephesians are especially "elitist," being directed toward only certain wealthier households.

Fee concludes that in light of "the ambiguity of the New Testament evidence and the lack of explicit teaching on patriarchy as the norm in the new creation," deriving "a theology of patriarchy" from [Eph 5:21-33](#) is illegitimate (375). He has no doubt that this passage *reflects* the patriarchy of the Greco-Roman world, but he maintains that it does not therefore bless this worldview theologically. Rather, Paul is merely concerned to tell believers how to live out their Christian lives *in a patriarchal setting* such as their current one (375).⁵ In a footnote, Fee acknowledges that "some use [Ephesians 5:23](#) ('the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church') to theologize regarding patriarchy," but according to Fee, this is "full of dubious exegetical jumps" (376, referring to comments found elsewhere in *DBE*).

This is an interesting strategy. First, Fee says the husband's headship and the wife's submission are taught merely "by implication" rather than explicitly. On this count, of course, one wonders how Fee can still affirm that "[t]here is no question that these texts *reflect* the patriarchal worldview of the Greco-Roman world" (375)! If patriarchy is taught in [Eph 5:21-33](#) only by implication, how can Fee say the passage without a doubt reflects patriarchy? This seems to be a clear contradiction.

Second, Fee says that [Eph 5:21-33](#) is limited in application to certain wealthy households and to a patriarchal Greco-Roman setting and hence relative and culture-bound. He did not get this from the text itself which he claims is what is the proper object of interpretation, nor is there any evidence that such a limited application was authorially intended (which, to determine, Fee affirms to be the proper aim of interpretation).

Rather, Fee's interpretation of [Eph 5:21-33](#) is a good example of how a particular reconstruction of the historical background of a given passage is used to overwhelm and in fact mute the explicit teaching of Scripture. One wonders if the biblical teaching on male-female roles in the home really belongs in the category of mode of immersion, frequency of Eucharist observance, and tongues as initial sign of Spirit baptism, or if this teaching is in fact more central and clear than Fee allows.

I have engaged Fee at some length in my forthcoming commentary on the Pastoral Epistles in the New Expositor's Bible Commentary series and thus will refrain from doing so here as far as his interpretation of [1 Tim 2:12](#), his second example of "theology by implication," is concerned. Fee interprets *authentein* as "domineer," referring to Linda Belleville, a view that has been adequately critiqued above. As in his previous writings, Fee dismisses Paul's teaching in this passage by labeling it "ad hoc." Yet in light of Paul's use of Genesis 2-3 elsewhere in his writings (see, e.g., [1 Cor 11:8-9](#),

JBMW 10:1 (Spring 2005) p. 93

written several years prior to 1 Timothy), it is unclear how Paul's use of this portion of Scripture in [1 Tim 2:13-14](#) could possibly qualify as "ad hoc."⁶ More likely, the argument from the man's prior creation to the man's authority in the church formed part of Paul's customary rationale. Likewise, as in his commentary, Fee glosses over [1 Tim 2:13](#) and only comments on [1 Tim 2:14](#), which fails to do justice to Paul's rooting of his injunction in [1 Tim 2:12](#) in creation order prior to the Fall.

Fee believes he has established that "no New Testament text explicitly teaches patriarchy as the divine order that is to prevail across the two biblical covenants" (377). However, Fee does not consider passages such as [1 Cor 11:3](#): "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God," which seems to have direct application to the subject at hand. When Fee claims that "the analogy . . . that man is to rule woman because he was created prior to woman . . . occurs nowhere else in all of Scripture [apart from [1 Tim 2:12-13](#)]" (377), he fails to mention [1 Cor 11:8-9](#), a clear misstatement of fact.

To conclude, Fee sees [1 Tim 2:12](#) "as an ad hoc word intending to forbid some young widows from being carriers of the 'diseased' teaching in Ephesus," and maintains that the household codes in Ephesians and Colossians "are not intended at all to set boundaries" for anyone (380). Rather than legalism and narrow-mindedness, what counts are Spirit gifting and a love ethic. "Patriarchalists" fail to recognize the ambiguity and diversity of the scriptural witness with regard to gender roles in the home and the church and pharisaically oblige women to a patriarchal system that is merely culturally constrained but not part of the new creation in Christ.

What should be the response of those who are here charged with pharisaism and obscurantism? Are we in truth standing in the way of "the gospel of grace" and the free operation of the Spirit in the home and in the church? This would be a grave sin indeed. But could it be that Fee's case is in fact weaker than he allows? Could it be that the biblical teaching is clearer and more explicit on this subject than he allows?

Could it be that his exegesis is less driven by the respect for authorial intention and a supreme regard for the text itself than he believes? Let the reader decide.

Conclusion

It seems that one of the major purposes of *Discovering Biblical Equality*, if not the primary one, is to contest and try to recapture the term "complementarity." This is done by the consistent label of "patriarchalist" and "hierarchicalist" applied to complementarians, in an apparent effort to push complementarians further to the right. In effect, the editors and contributors to this book seem to deny that there is any difference between those advocating modern-day patriarchy and complementarians, or if they do, this is glossed over in order to pronounce complementarians "guilty by association" with those advocating a return to Old Testament patriarchy.

Apart from the fact that this involves a distortion of Old Testament patriarchy-see Dan Block's magisterial recent treatment of this issue⁷-this deliberately misrepresents the way in which complementarianism has consciously distinguished itself from patriarchy ever since its inception. What is more, focusing on "labeling" and "naming" and "renaming" may take a page out of the feminist playbook, but this cannot

JBMW 10:1 (Spring 2005) p. 94

conceal the fact that the primary thrust of *Discovering Biblical Equality* does not seem to lie in the exegetical arena but in the area of politics and propaganda.

By the same token, complementarians may want to take up the term "egalitarian," since they affirm women's and men's equality in creation and salvation, in both dignity and worth, to make the point that egalitarians are not the only ones to do so. Why not fop-fop and henceforth call egalitarians "complementarians" and complementarians "egalitarians"? The absurdity of this proposal, I think, illustrates that, in the end, the debate ought to be about more than mere relabeling the other side of the debate and scoring propaganda points.

Most complementarians I know do not focus on "hierarchy" in the sense of a top-down military structure and a "chain-of-command" model. They recognize, with Paul, that the husband's primary responsibility is to love his wife sacrificially and selflessly ([Eph 5:25](#)). To deny this, explicitly or implicitly by calling complementarians "hierarchicalists," hardly advances the debate, is not irenic and charitable as many egalitarian proponents like to project their public image, and involves a serious misrepresentation and distortion of the complementarian view.

One gets the impression that *Discovering Biblical Equality* is written primarily, not to engage in serious exegetical debate with the other side, but to advance the cause of the egalitarian movement and to gain adherents to one's view, even if this is accomplished by mischaracterizing the opposing viewpoint. Personally, I do not think this end justifies the means, nor is the price paid worth the possible gain. I

certainly hope the political and propagandist nature of this book will be sufficiently clear and transparent to the intended recipients of this volume so that they will not be misled as to the true nature of the biblical teaching on the subject.

In the end, this debate is about truth, not politics; about exegetical responsibility, not propaganda. As Gordon Fee himself affirms, "The scriptural view is that one must speak the *truth* in love" (369). We ought not to trivialize the issue by substituting rhetoric for substance. We ought not to marginalize the issue by obscuring the clarity of Scripture. Rather, we should keep our Christian liberty and God's creation order in proper balance; understand how God's household, the church, is rooted in God's order for the original household of husband and wife; cheerfully and jointly submit to the God of Scripture and trust that his creational wisdom is best; and appropriate his enablement to be restored to his original creation purposes in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.



Endnotes

¹ Though see the present author's contribution, "Gender Passages in the NT: Hermeneutical Fallacies Critiqued," *WTJ* 56 (1994): 259-83.

² A brief word regarding the title: though doubtless intended as an allusion to the work's major point of reference, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), the notion of "Discovering Biblical Equality" makes one wonder if the contributors to this volume "discovered" something in Scripture that is not really there (in the sense they claim it to be) in the first place—hence it was not "discovered" until recent years. See the essay by Robert W. Yarbrough in Andreas J. Köstenberger, Tomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) and his essay in the forthcoming second edition of this work.

³ I have addressed the hermeneutical fallacy inherent in an arbitrary distinction between "paradigm passages" and "passages with limited application" in "Gender Passages in the NT," 273-79. In this section I also deal with the problem of a "canon within a canon" and the perils of "content criticism" (*Tendenzkritik*) adopted by scholars such as I. H. Marshall or F. F. Bruce. This pertains also to Nicole's application of his principle "fragmentary versus canonical interpretations" to *1 Tim 2:11-12* ("Biblical Hermeneutics," 360).

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁵ Referring also to Nicole's principle of "peripheral vs. central doctrines," on which see above. Fee interprets the term "head" (*kephal*) entirely as conveying dependence for one's ongoing life in the world,

as wives were on their husbands "in this cultural setting." However, this understanding of *kephal* hardly does justice to texts such as [Eph 1:21-22](#), which were already cited and discussed above. What is more, lexical evidence for the meaning "source" for *kephal* is virtually entirely lacking (see Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* [Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004], 544-99).

⁶ See my "Gender Passages in the NT," 267-71, esp. the chart on p. 268.

⁷ Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 33-102, esp. 40-44, where Block contends that the term "patricentrism" better captures the essence of the father's role in ancient Israel than "patriarchy." See also Andreas J. Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 39-41.