

Egalitarians: A New Path to Liberalism? Or Integral to Evangelical DNA?

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“Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.”
“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.”
Cicero

The claim is often made that Christians who advance the shared leadership, authority, and ministry of men and women in the church and home do so only by circumventing the authority of scripture. Because of this claim, egalitarians are accused of theological liberalism. I was inspired to write this paper after an evangelical scholar confessed candidly to me that, though he was trained in a tradition that viewed egalitarian theology as pernicious, through a series of circumstances including a positive encounter with an egalitarian leader, he determined to study egalitarian theology more thoroughly. Cicero reminds us that a fair hearing of any position must include a full grasp of the historical context. This paper briefly considers historical material often overlooked by evangelicals in assessing the theological orthodoxy of egalitarians.

Defining terms

Egalitarianism: Egalitarians are Christians who affirm that scripture teaches the fundamental equality of men and women, both in being and service, so that gender is not a criterion by which to exclude women from public service or leadership in church, society, or home. As early as the late seventeenth century, Christians began publishing interpretations of scripture that supported women’s public preaching and teaching. By 1930, more than fifty scriptural treatises supporting women’s spiritual leadership had been circulating, from many branches of the evangelical church.¹ Egalitarians today echo the exegetical methods of these early egalitarians, concluding that women may serve in any position, including senior pastor; elder; deacon; board member; professor of any discipline; or president of a Christian college, seminary, denomination, or country. The criteria for service are holiness, giftedness, and calling—not gender.

Evangelicalism: Two resources offer insightful guidance for defining the theological identity of evangelicals: First is The Evangelical Theological Society Doctrinal Basis, written in 1949: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”² Second is Bebbington’s quadrilateral: a definition of evangelicalism formulated by David Bebbington and promoted by Mark Noll. In an effort to capture the depth and scope of evangelical history, Bebbington and Noll assessed the earliest usage of the term “evangelical.”³ They considered what evangelicals affirm theologically and also how evangelical theological ideals shaped daily life—in churches, denominations, and organizations. Their analysis of the evangelical movement gave way to Bebbington’s quadrilateral:⁴ four theological

ideals that capture the DNA or fundamental theological focus of evangelicals which, (to quote Noll) “drove its adherents in their lives as Christians.”⁵ These ideals include:

- *Conversionism:* Because of sin, every life needs redemption.
- *Activism:* The expression of the gospel through effort. Activism generally takes two symbiotic forms—evangelism and social action.
- *Biblicism:* A particular regard for the Bible, for all spiritual truth is to be found on its pages.
- *Crucicentrism:* An emphasis on Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

These four qualities comprise the focus of evangelical theology and enterprise, which fueled the modern missionary movement and sweeping social reform. Evangelical missionaries tended to hold as inseparable the good news of the gospel and efforts to make life better for the poor and the abused. Evangelicals challenged injustice because they were biblicists of the highest order, and teachings of Jesus such as “treat your neighbor as you would want to be treated,” guided their social reform. They believed scripture was supremely authoritative; a consistent reading of the Bible and living out its teachings was thought to bring moral, theological, and social wholeness to communities. It was to scripture that evangelicals turned when resolving the challenges of each age, such as suffrage, slavery, and whether women may preach and teach or hold positions of authority beside men.

Bebbington’s quadrilateral offers, I believe, the most complete definition of an evangelical, particularly in understanding why they gave women and also slaves positions of leadership, a freedom unknown to them in the culture in which they lived.

Liberalism: The term “liberal” is used to suggest that egalitarians place their feminist ideals—their demand for social equality with men in any sphere—ahead of a commitment to the authority of scripture. Rather than allowing scripture to shape culture, egalitarians are accused of giving secular culture greater authority than the Bible. The charge of “liberal” has typically implied that the teachings of scripture have been ignored in the wake of self-interest and cultural pressure. Consider two examples:

- Wayne Grudem, in his book *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism*, expresses deep concern “about the widespread undermining of the authority of Scripture in the arguments that are frequently used to support evangelical feminism.”⁶
- In 2008, the *Dallas Morning News* reported that after eighteen months of study, an all-male elder board gave a woman access to the pulpit for the first time in the forty-year history

of Irving Bible Church. The decision raised cries of concern among many Baptists. Chief among these was that of the Rev. Tom Nelson of Denton Bible Church. Nelson believed that his friends in Irving were on “dangerous” ground. “If the Bible is not true and authoritative on the roles of men and women, then maybe the Bible will not be finally true on premarital sex, the homosexual issue, adultery or any other moral issue,” he said. “I believe this issue is the carrier of a virus by which liberalism will enter the evangelical church.”⁷

Is there a necessary connection between egalitarianism and liberalism, as Grudem and Nelson have stated? To answer this question, consider the observation of Alvera Mickelsen, now in her nineties. She was raised in an evangelical setting, both church and home. Mickelsen attended Wheaton College and has been a member of a Baptist General Conference congregation through adulthood. She remembers hearing the female evangelist team Stockton and Gould preach in evangelical churches and institutions throughout the greater Chicago area, including on Moody Bible Radio. Alvera said with a chuckle, “You know, it wasn’t until 1950 that women preachers were considered liberal. Before that, no one thought twice about women preaching.”

Alvera’s hypothesis

If Alvera’s observation is correct, we would expect to see fewer women preaching and teaching in conservative Christian institutions after 1950, which indeed we do. Contrary to the claim that today’s egalitarians capitulate to secular feminist ideology, history offers another perspective. Examples abound of Christians whose egalitarian views are the result of a consistent reading of scripture, particularly with the rise of the modern missionary movement.

Even as early as the 1660s, a focus on the egalitarian teachings and practices of the NT church became popular among evangelicals, as seen in the writings and teachings of Margaret Fell Fox, an English Quaker and leading evangelical.⁸ What started with Fell Fox gained momentum in what is called the “Golden Era of Missions,” a movement in which new centers of Christianity flourished in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, leading to an unprecedented shift of Christian faith toward the Global South.⁹ This movement was led by evangelical women, who outnumbered men two to one. What is more, these women became founders and often the sole financial providers of missionary and humanitarian organizations, holding all positions of service and leadership. Significantly, the success of women and slaves serving in the most challenging circumstances globally gave the church ample reason to examine gender and ethnic bias biblically.¹⁰ World-renowned Bible scholars joined this conversation, including Dr. Adoniram Judson Gordon (1836–95), perhaps the most prominent evangelical pastor of his day. For Gordon, Pentecost was the “Magna Carta of the Christian church,” in which those who were considered inferior by birth inherited a new spiritual status through the power of the Holy Spirit. God’s gifting no longer rests on a “favored few, but upon the many, without regard to race, or age, or sex.”¹¹ As with Pentecost,

so today, all people regardless of class, ethnicity, or gender are one in Christ, with equal (ontological) value and therefore equal (teleological) spheres of service.

Gordon was joined by leading evangelicals such as Catherine Booth, cofounder of the Salvation Army. Like Gordon, Booth also engaged the whole of scripture, insisting that biblical texts be understood in their historic and cultural context. She wrote:

If commentators had dealt with the Bible on other subjects as they have dealt with it on this [gender], taking isolated passages, separated from their explanatory connections, and insisting on a literal interpretation of the words ... [oh] what errors and contradictions would have been forced upon the acceptance of the Church, and what terrible results would have accrued to the world.¹²

Perhaps the most systematic biblical assessment of gender was put forward by Katharine Bushnell (1856–1946), the youngest graduate of Chicago Women’s Medical College. After completing medical school, Bushnell worked briefly as a medical missionary in China, but returned home, eventually to lead the “Social Purity Department”¹³ of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)—an organization that typified the four theological priorities of Bebbington’s quadrilateral. Within the WCTU, Bushnell served as an evangelist and activist of the highest order,¹⁴ opposing the forced prostitution of girls and women in the United States and India. After two decades of rescuing girls from brothels, Bushnell believed that God was leading her to address the roots of sex slavery. This was the beginning of her theological reflection, which constitutes the pinnacle of her reforming work.

Bushnell observed that most religious traditions, including Christianity, interpret their sacred texts to create a gender-caste system based on the assumed innate depravity of females. It is not their character, giftedness, education, or devotion to God that renders females corrupt. It is their gender—a fixed and unchangeable condition. In such a system, virtue is believed to be the result of gender, and the character of females is deemed incorrigible, irredeemable, and therefore perpetually in need of male superiors. The Bible, the Koran, and the teachings of Hinduism have all too often been interpreted to make this case. For Bushnell, the devaluation of females was the root idea that subjugated females and drove the sex industry.

Bushnell and her colleagues perceived that religion provides the most exalted, convincing, and irreproachable devaluation of individuals, whereby their subjugation is justified. Because religious ideas have consequences, Bushnell believed any effort to dismantle the sex industry, though necessary, would inevitably fail without addressing the spiritual or philosophical presuppositions that fueled the sex industry. Of course, there is a great irony here: while religious leaders portray women as morally and intellectually feeble, God uses those who are considered weak to shame human pride. It was women’s acumen that exposed the flawed reasoning and shallow theology that devalued individuals because of their materiality. The example of such women suggests that effective

social reform is nearly always inseparable from a robust philosophical and theological deliberation. Again, biblicism and activism working in tandem to advance the gospel—few have accomplished this with greater elegance and vigor than Katharine Bushnell.

To expose the interpretive errors that led directly to the suffering and subjugation of women, Bushnell wrote:

A woman is of as much value as a man; and [people] will not believe this until they see it plainly taught in the Bible. Just so long as [Christians] imagine that a system of caste is taught in the Word of God, and that [men] belong to the upper caste while women are of the lower caste; and just so long as [we] believe that mere flesh—fate—determines the caste to which one belongs; and just so long as [we] believe that the “he will rule over you” of Genesis 3:16 is [prescriptive rather than descriptive of life in a fallen world] ... the destruction of young women into a prostitute class will continue.¹⁵

Bushnell was among the first to reason that male rule is *not* a biblical ideal. Rather, it is part of the chaos and domination resulting from sin, which Christians must dismantle and oppose. Male authority, privilege, and patriarchy are consequences of sin. They are therefore at odds with justice and the moral precepts of scripture, as Bushnell argued throughout her writings, which represent the first systematic biblical approach to gender justice.

In addition to providing an egalitarian hermeneutic, the activism of early evangelicals like Bushnell targeted institutionalized injustices by working toward the abolishment of slavery and by helping women gain the vote. Therefore, the egalitarian movement was a deeply biblical movement that began, not in the 1970s with secular feminists, but in the 1800s with evangelicals such as A. J. Gordon, Catherine Booth, Katharine Bushnell and others. It was on their shoulders that future generations of evangelicals stood in advancing the biblical foundations for women’s leadership. Consider the following four examples.

Frank E. Gaebelein (1899–1983)

A prominent evangelical theologian, educator, prolific writer, founder of Stony Brook Christian School, and one of the founders of *Christianity Today*, Frank Gaebelein was also an early member of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). Trained at Harvard, Gaebelein believed that faith should impact all of life, including the arts, literature, science, and social action.¹⁶ A strong supporter of civil rights and the equality of women, Gaebelein probably coined the phrase, “All truth is God’s truth.”

Gaebelein’s daughter, Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, now in her eighties, was a founding board member of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE). As a child, Gretchen learned that it was her Christian duty to discover and develop her God-given abilities. When considering her childhood, she recalls no encounter with Christian teaching that suggested ministry or work was limited by gender. It was not until after the 1950s that CBE founders like

Gretchen Gaebelein Hull and Alvera Mickelsen observed a drift in the evangelical ethos that made gender the basis of Christian vocation. And it was this very shift in emphasis from “Christian vocation,” centered on God’s gifting and calling, to “gender vocation” that led evangelicals like Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Alvera Mickelsen, Roger Nicole, Gilbert Bilezikian, Stan Gundry, Alan Johnson, and others to inaugurate CBE—an organization that promotes the biblical foundations for the shared service and leadership of women and men.

J. Barton Payne (1922–79)

Former president of the ETS and professor of OT at Princeton, Bob Jones, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Wheaton College, and Covenant Seminary (Creve Coeur/St. Louis), J. Barton Payne was a vocal advocate of women in ministry. His son, Dr. Philip Barton Payne, a noted NT scholar and author of *Man and Woman, One in Christ*,¹⁷ recalls his father’s egalitarian commitment in this way:

My father argued that women were not excluded from any form of Old Testament ministry with the possible exception of priest. He argued that in that instance, it was the standard association of priestesses with temple prostitutes combined with the Old Testament principle that God’s people should avoid the appearance of evil practices that would reflect poorly on God that explains why there is no mention of priestesses approved by God in the Old Testament. He saw no solid basis in the account of creation in Genesis for a second class status for women. Not long before he died climbing Mt. Fuji, he gave an annual lecture at Presbyterian Theological Seminary in [Dehradun, India] in which he argued that women should not be excluded from any form of ministry in the church. The editor of the journal in which these annual lectures were always published refused to publish it since there was no advocacy of a contrasting opinion, even though they had published George Knight III’s advocacy of the other side the previous year.¹⁸

The Prairie Bible School

Founded in 1922 in the small town of Three Hills, Alberta, Canada, Prairie Bible School (PBS, now renamed Prairie Bible Institute) has for “more than eight decades ... helped prepare thousands of Prairie Bible School alumni to become faithful servants of Jesus Christ, reaching out to people in more than 114 countries around the globe.”¹⁹

Prairie Bible Institute’s Doctrinal Statement aligns with Bebbington’s quadrilateral in making clear the school’s commitment to biblical authority: “We believe the Old and New Testament Scriptures as originally given by God are divinely inspired, inerrant, trustworthy, and constitute the only supreme authority in all matters of doctrine and conduct.”²⁰ PBS’s doctrine clearly differentiated it from liberal feminist theology. Nevertheless,

this supremely evangelical institute gave women strategic positions of leadership on their board of directors, as professors of theology and Bible, as principal of PBS's high school, and as preachers both during their summer conferences and on Sunday mornings in PBS's auditorium, the Tabernacle—the largest religious auditorium in Canada.

From the time PBS opened its doors to eight students in 1922, women's spiritual leadership was endorsed by Prairie's first principal, L. E. Maxwell (1895–1984). The school grew to become the most prestigious missionary training school for evangelicals in Canada. During Maxwell's fifty-eight-year presidency, his passion for evangelism and his respect for the authority of scripture drew thousands of evangelicals to Three Hills.

Maxwell was not only passionate about training students as missionaries, he was equally determined to include women in every aspect of the Great Commission. According to Dr. Robert Rakestraw, a 1967 graduate of PBS and retired professor of theology at Bethel Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota:

Maxwell was one of the most zealous advocates of missions. He was also an outspoken advocate of women preaching and teaching at all levels. If you were in favor of missions you had to be egalitarian. I remember Maxwell preaching on Psalm 68:11, the great company of women who published the glad tidings. For L. E. Maxwell, the cause of Christ was shared by both men and women alike.²¹

Maxwell claimed to have located over 300 biblical passages that support the leadership of women. Together with his long-time colleague Ruth Dearing, they published a book on this topic entitled, *Women in Ministry: An Historical and Biblical Look at the Role of Women in Christian Leadership*.²²

What is more, the 1960 PBS yearbook, *Prairian*, was dedicated to a female graduate who had distinguished herself as a missionary in China. In that yearbook Maxwell described the challenges Louisa Vaughan faced as a missionary to China. Citing her victory through prayer and faith, Maxwell wrote:

It was some forty years ago that I heard Miss Louisa Vaughan of China speak on John 14:13-14. She recited her heartbreaking experience with [discouragement].

Like a flash of light to her dark unbelieving heart came the words: "Whatsoever ye shall ask in My Name, that will I do. . . . If you shall ask anything in my name, I will do it."

She said, "My burden rolled away as I realized that I had nothing to do but to ask, and Christ would fulfill His promise, 'I will do it.'"

Through mighty faith and prayer Miss Vaughan saw revival work advanced in China during the following years. She was used of the Spirit to bring Ding Le Mei through for God. Never man spake like this woman. Ding Le Mei became "the Moody of China." Miss Vaughan conquered wherever she went on her knees—in His Name.

My own father-in-law, Don Halladay, attended PBS from 1958–61. After graduation, he and his wife, Wanda Halladay, worked for thirty-seven years as missionaries in Brazil. Both Rakestraw and Halladay were students of Ruth Dearing, who not only taught Bible at PBS, but also preached frequently in chapel.

Dearing held positions of leadership at PBS for fifty-nine years, as a member of the faculty of Bible, theology, and doctrine; as a board member; and as principal of Prairie's high school. High school teachers, male and female alike, reported to her. It was Maxwell who first hired Dearing, initially inviting her to teach at Prairie's high school. Because of her prominent administrative abilities, she was promoted to vice principal, then principal—a position she held for eighteen years. Holding a degree in religious education from Seattle Pacific College (today's Seattle Pacific University), Dearing was invited by Maxwell to teach introductory Bible to PBS's freshman college class. She eventually became a full-time faculty member at Prairie Bible College.

In 1928, Ruth Miller joined the PBS Bible faculty and was invited to preach from the pulpit of Prairie's Tabernacle on Sunday morning, like Dearing and other PBS faculty. Women were also frequent platform speakers, especially during summer conferences sponsored by PBS. Conferences included women such as Gladys Aylward and Helen Roseveare who addressed enormous audiences enraptured by their experiences as world leaders in Christian missions.

Prairie's female graduates were as pioneering as Dearing and Miller. They too courageously ventured alone to distant and dangerous places around the world, a fact touted in *Prairian* yearbooks. To inspire the service of graduating students, the 1958 *Prairian* gave a realistic view of dangers embraced by female missionaries. Aimed at shaming a few men to joining them, the following solicitation was entitled, "Opportunities for Young Women!"

There are still some areas where refrigerators and washing machines are scarce, where the food becomes monotonous, where rough trekking through mosquito-infested jungles and bridgeless rivers is common, where people do not want the Gospel and think they do God a service if they kill you.

It is still possible to endure loneliness and apparent frustration amid heat, filth and stench. Probably you will not marry, as the percent of men going to the mission fields is very small.

But, if you have given your life to Jesus and can trust Him to supply your needs (or give you grace to die joyfully), we will be glad to consider your application as one of the four hundred urgently needed on the W.E.C. [World Evangelization Crusade] fields.

This is an opportunity to prove the Omnipotent God! If there are still some old-fashioned young men who feel called to serve the Lord in hard places, with no earthly security, they too may apply.

PBS was unabashedly evangelical in its high view of scripture; its devotion to evangelism; and its commitment to preparing students as missionaries, evangelists, pastors, Bible expositors, and Christians ready to give their lives for the gospel. Gender bias was eclipsed by the Great Commission, and it was to this that PBS, under the leadership of Maxwell, devoted itself. Serving in more than 114 countries, Prairie graduates, both men and women, recognized that much of the world was unacquainted with Christ. What did it matter if a woman carried the good news to these souls for whom Christ died? Roused by Maxwell's "Great was the company of women who brought the glad tidings" (Ps 68:11), women and men set their sights on leading the world to Christ, and gender was no deterrent because the task was great, the harvest was ripe, and the workers were few.

Fredrik Franson (1852–1908)

Perhaps no other individual was more compatible with the evangelical ethos of PBS and its founder L. E. Maxwell than Fredrik Franson, founder of The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM). Born in Sweden in 1852, Franson immigrated to the United States and came to faith in Nebraska in 1872. After an encounter with D. L. Moody, Franson was unsurpassed in his zeal for evangelism and missions, driven by the belief that Christ's return was imminent. A passionate dispensationalist, Franson traveled extensively, training missionaries on four continents, while also publishing popular biblical treatises and establishing strategic partnerships with other like-minded evangelicals such as A. B. Simpson and Hudson Taylor. Ultimately, Franson is credited for founding not only TEAM, but also the Danish Mission Confederation, the Swiss Alliance Mission, the Barmea Alliance Mission, the Finnish Alliance Mission, the Swedish Evangelical Mission in Japan, and the Swedish Alliance Mission.

Franson, like Maxwell, was an ardent supporter of women missionaries. Determined to make known the biblical basis for women's evangelistic service beside men, Franson wrote "Prophecy Daughters" in 1896. Relying on a whole-Bible approach, "Prophecy Daughters" is striking for its cohesive, original, and concise survey of scripture. From Genesis through the epistles, Franson celebrated scripture's consistent support for women's spiritual leadership. Fundamental to "Prophecy Daughters" is the goal of confronting gender prejudice in order to free women for evangelism. He "labeled as heretics those who grounded a doctrine on one or two passages in the Bible, without reading the references in their context."²³ "Prophecy Daughters" opposed a selective reading of scripture, showing that the main biblical themes include, rather than exclude, women's leadership. Franson also offered an assessment of the gender teachings, not only of the early church fathers, but also of reformation leaders such as Martin Luther. Ultimately Franson perceived no ministry in which women may not lead. He was no gradual emancipationist, and his biblical scholarship had one focus—to give God's gifts to women expansive opportunities on any mission field. Hence, in the introduction to "Prophecy Daughters," he wrote:

What the Bible says about the woman's place in evangelistic work and prophesying is a very important question, especially in our day, when ... so many doors are open for missionary work. Many of China's 400 million inhabitants thirst for the Gospel.... In Japan reception of the Gospel is so great that it has been said that [those] who would see [unbelief] in Japan must hurry out there. Thousands of witnesses are needed.... In India there are 250 million and in Africa about as many who have the right to receive from us the glad tidings of Jesus Christ which we know.... The field is thus very large, and when we consider that nearly two thirds of all converted persons in the world are women ... the question of woman's work in evangelization is of highest importance.... If there is no prohibition in the Bible of public service by women, either in political franchise ... then we stand face to face with the fact that the devil has succeeded in excluding nearly two thirds of the total number of believers—damage to God's work so great that it can scarcely be described.²⁴

According to Franson, the whole of scripture endorses women's preaching and teaching, beginning with Genesis. He noted that the "help" (*ezer*) woman offers man in Gen 2:18 is primarily spiritual "influence." He then asked, if woman was persuasive in leading Adam to sin, how much more might her influence be used to "remove sin from the world,"²⁵ in leading men to the gospel?

Similarly, the prophets Deborah and Huldah influenced Israel's decision-makers—the kings, priests, and other prophets.²⁶ In this way, prophets like Deborah and Huldah led the entire nation of Israel. For Franson, the whole of scripture reveals women as part of a great company (predicted in Ps 68:11) who declare the glad tidings of God's victory over sin and death. For this reason, women were prominent at Pentecost as Joel prophesied (Joel 2:28). And a woman—Anna—was also the first to announce the birth of the Christ and was the only prophet active at the time of Christ's presentation at the temple (Luke 2:36).²⁷ The Samaritan woman was also part of that great company of women. After meeting Christ (John 4:28), that same day she "persuaded the whole town to seek the Savior."²⁸ Like the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene carried the glad tidings of the risen Lord to the disciples. News that "was preached to the farthest boundary of the earth, was first proclaimed by a woman, and not only to the eleven,"²⁹ but to those who were also with them, the other women (Mark 16:10, Luke 24:9).

If Jesus was not ashamed to include a woman in his work, why should we be afraid to do so? Neither was Paul unwilling to work beside women like Priscilla the teacher, Phoebe the deacon, and Junia, whom both Chrysostom and Theophilus understood to be a female apostle.

If scripture as a whole points to Christ, can we afford to overlook the women of scripture who declared the good news

of Jesus? Yet their voices have been stopped by those who rely upon two passages (1 Tim 2:11-15, 1 Cor 14:34) “without reading them in context.”³⁰ While Franson stops short of a thorough explanation of 1 Tim 2:11-15 or 1 Cor 14:34, he argues that scripture stands against any exclusion of women’s teaching and prophetic leadership, particularly in the teachings and service of Christ and Paul. If female teaching itself was forbidden, then Franson notes:

The instruction which Prisca gave to Apollos would also be against God’s command, and Paul’s order to women to be “good teachers” (Titus 2:3) would be abrogated, and then women’s work in Sunday schools, in public schools, and in the teaching they convey through books and articles in religious papers would all be forbidden.³¹

“The danger of founding a doctrine on a single text, without comparing it with hundreds of other texts that speak of the same theme, cannot be emphasized enough,”³² said Franson. “If a sister can more easily bring souls to the Savior . . . then she sins if she does not use those gifts that God has given her.”³³ And, the results of this are disastrous in light of eternity. A sense of urgency comes with the fact that there are so many “people in the water about to drown.”³⁴ Franson writes:

A few men are trying to save [the drowning], and that is considered well and good. But look, over there a few women have untied a boat also to be of help in the rescue, and immediately a few men cry out . . . ‘No, no, women must not help, rather let the people drown.’ What stupidity! And yet this picture is very fitting. Men have, during all these centuries, shown that they do not have the power alone to carry out the work for the salvation of the world: therefore, they ought to be thankful to get some help.³⁵

Like today’s egalitarians, Franson’s commitment to evangelism and scriptural authority was fundamental to his egalitarian advocacy. What is more, his biblical defense of women’s leadership employs the same methods of interpretation used by egalitarians today, even though today’s egalitarians are accused of succumbing to liberalism. Perhaps our neglect of historic individuals like Franson, Maxwell, Dearing, and others contributes to this problem. It was only in 2009 that “Prophesying Daughters” was made available on the Internet. It had formerly been sequestered in the archives of an Evangelical Covenant publication, *The Covenant Quarterly*.

Conclusion

Prior to the 1950s, biblicism and conversionism compelled early evangelicals to welcome women as Bible teachers, preachers, board members, and as innovators of mission organizations and Bible institutes. A high view of scripture and a commitment to evangelism also propelled the Golden Era of Missions, in which

women vastly outnumbered men. Women’s gospel leadership posed no challenge to biblical authority; they threatened only human bias that circumvented scripture’s support for women’s equal service and leadership in Christian mission.

An openness to the gift of women among evangelicals changed dramatically during the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, with its concern for higher critical methods and a disregard for the authority of scripture. Bible institutes sought to distance themselves from any intellectualism that smacked of higher critical methods. The Northwestern Bible Training School (today’s University of Northwestern–Saint Paul), for example, responded to the threat of modernism by eliminating courses on “archaeology, history, and the ancient languages.”³⁶ Instead, some evangelicals relied on a literal or “plain reading of the text” as their principal interpretive method. By abandoning rigorous intellectual engagement, not only theologically but in other fields as well, fundamentalists and no small number of evangelicals lost their capacity to impact culture through the academy, an observation made by Dr. Charles Malik in his opening address at the dedication of Wheaton’s Billy Graham Center in 1980.³⁷ According to Malik, it will take decades to recover the intellectual ground and social engagement surrendered by fundamentalists and evangelicals after 1950.³⁸

A plain reading of scripture, accompanied by a neglect of history, culture, and the ancient languages, also had devastating consequences on women’s leadership. Some biblical passages pertaining to women’s leadership pose interpretive challenges that require a thorough knowledge of ancient history, culture, and language. One such passage is 1 Tim 2:11–15, with its unusual Greek verb *authentēin* and its suggestion that women are saved through childbearing, to say nothing of its apparent conflict with Paul’s established practice of advancing the gospel beside female leaders such as Junia, Priscilla, Phoebe, Chloe, and Lydia. The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy led to a shallow reading of scripture, divorced from the academic rigor and social engagement that had characterized an earlier generation of evangelicals, thus diminishing the influence evangelicals might have intellectually, spiritually, and socially.

One needs only to browse the archives of an evangelical college or university founded prior to 1950 to read journals and correspondence from female graduates serving on global mission fields.³⁹ Their writings are filled with an explicit commitment to biblical authority and evangelism—ideals that exemplify an earlier evangelical faith. In reflecting on their legacy, one wonders if the early evangelicals might view our generation as liberal for placing the priorities of evangelism behind our obsession with so called “gender roles” that truncate the leadership of women, thereby diminishing the good news of Christ.

Egalitarians do not comprise a new path to liberalism. Rather, egalitarians are devoted to the authority of scripture, and to many of the same biblical interpretative methods of an earlier generation. Egalitarians do, however, differ from complementarians in their interpretation of passages like 1 Tim 2:11–15 or 1 Cor 14:34. Let us recognize that evangelicals (both egalitarian and

complementarian) arrive at opposing interpretive conclusions even while upholding the authority of scripture. An accusation of theological liberalism must be balanced against actual facts, beginning with the history of evangelicals as a whole.

I end with a troubling observation. Over the last fifteen years, I have encountered too many Christian college students who seem more concerned with “gender roles” than with discerning their God-given gifts and calling. A preoccupation with gender differences (what sociologists call “gender essentialism”) also appears in popular evangelical literature in which passive beauties await male rescue. This preoccupation exhibits an anemic expression of Christian faith, apparently unaware of its own feebleness, as Malik predicted. How vastly different were the lives of evangelicals like Catherine Booth, A. J. Gordon, Katharine Bushnell, Amanda Smith, Fredrik Franson, and L. E. Maxwell, with their determination to prove God omnipotent in dire circumstances. I would rather be among that great company of women Franson celebrates and which scripture compels us to emulate with impunity.⁴⁰

Notes

1. Charles O. Knowles, *Let Her Be: Right Relationships and the Southern Baptist Conundrum over Woman's Role* (Columbia: KnoWell, 2002), 85. See also the writings of Margaret Fell Fox at <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/search?author=fell%2C+margaret&amode=words&title=&tmode=words&c=x>.

2. <http://etsjets.org/?q=about>.

3. Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 19ff.

4. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s-1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 3. See also Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 16.

5. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 19.

6. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 11.

7. Sam Hodges, “Woman's Turn in Pulpit at Irving Bible Church Brings Buzz, Beefs,” *Dallas Morning News*, Aug 25, 2008.

8. Margaret Fell Fox's best-known egalitarian treatise is *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures* (London, 1666). See <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/fell/speaking/speaking.html>.

9. Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), ix.

10. Knowles, *Let Her Be*, 85ff.

11. A. J. Gordon, “The Ministry of Women,” *The Missionary Review of the World* 17 (1884): 911.

12. Catherine Booth, “Female Ministry; or, Women's Right to Preach the Gospel,” in *Terms of Empowerment: Salvation Army Women in Ministry* (London, 1859; reprint, New York: The Salvation Army Supplies Printing and Publishing Department, 1975), 19–20. See <http://www.cresourcei.org/cbooth.html>.

13. The Women's Christian Temperance Union's Social Purity Department aimed its efforts at freeing girls and women from forced prostitution throughout the world.

14. See a timeline of Bushnell's life here: http://godswordtowomen.org/gwtw_bushnell_timeline.pdf.

15. Katharine Bushnell, *Dr. Katharine C. Bushnell: A Brief Sketch of her Life and Work* (Hertford, England: Rose and Sons Salisbury Square, 1930), 14. See http://godswordtowomen.org/bushnell_brief_sketch.pdf.

16. To grasp the breadth of Gaebelein's erudition, see Talbot School of Theology's list of his publications: www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/frank_gaebelein.

17. Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

18. Comments emailed to the author by Dr. Philip Payne on Oct 16, 2008.

19. <http://prairie.edu/document.doc?id=58> (p. 6).

20. See <http://prairie.edu/document.doc?id=312>.

21. Mimi Haddad interviewed Robert Rakestraw in his home in Saint Paul, MN, in Aug 2008.

22. L. E. Maxwell and Ruth C. Dearing, *Women in Ministry: An Historical and Biblical Look at the Role of Women in Christian Leadership* (Christian Publications, 1995).

23. Fredrik Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (November, 1976): 25.

24. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 25.

25. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 25.

26. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 26.

27. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 28.

28. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 29.

29. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 30.

30. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 35.

31. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 35.

32. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 36.

33. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 39.

34. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 29.

35. Franson, “Prophesying Daughters,” 29.

36. William Vance Trollinger Jr., *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 94. Riley was also president and founder of the World Christian Fundamentals Association. As such, he favored a “plain reading of the Bible,” as the fundamentalist interpretive method, rather than harnessing history, archaeology, and the ancient languages to grasp the fullest meaning of scripture.

37. See <http://wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/BGCdedication.htm>.

38. See further, Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

39. For a more thorough study of the support evangelicals gave women's leadership, see Janette Hassey, *No Time for Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry around the Turn of the Century* (Minneapolis: CBE, 1986).

40. “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb 13:7 NIV).

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