

# *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian*

## A Summary Review

Michelle Lee-Barnewall has added considerable weight to a complex and controversial divide within evangelical circles arguing that the way forward is to first step back in the gender debates. Both sides in the discussion need to get a biblical grip on the relevance of kingdom values as they relate to gender talk. I can say at the outset that this point alone got my attention and it makes the book especially important. Without this maneuver, then the ability to listen to the opposing side is significantly hindered. After so much heat has been generated by so many for so long, Lee-Barnewall's *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* is very refreshing.



The first three chapters of Part 1, "Gender in Evangelical History," set the stage for "Reframing Gender" and the final five chapters of Part 2. Lee-Barnewall's thesis is clear and she is not taking sides. Instead, she shuffles the deck by reconfiguring the discussion in terms of kingdom values such as humility and love, unity and inclusion, sacrifice and service. She warns "when the dominant goal is to defend one's position, it is extremely difficult to consider the possibility that answers may not lie exclusively on one side, to see the beneficial arguments on the other side, and to explore new areas" (p 3). In other words, both sides of the divide have been significantly blindsided by their own questions, which have effectively controlled the answers received. I will briefly highlight Part 1, "Gender in Evangelical History," chapters 1-3 and conclude with reflections on Part 2, "Reframing Gender".

**Chapter 1**, "Evangelical Women and Social Reform," was an eye-opener. A socio-historical reconnaissance of the "mid-nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century" in America turns up not a few "seeming contradictions," or certainly a host of ironies, of which I was unaware. Although lines remained thick defining women and men, it was the moral roles women played that took their influence beyond the "geographical sphere" of the home. Lee-Barnewall notes that "women were domestic but not homebound. They were virtuous but not passive or fragile. They were under the authority of the men in the church and their husbands at home at the same time that they were to be moral and spiritual leaders and reformers" (p 33). As culture increasingly shifted from an agrarian society to an urban and industrial one, men busied themselves with pursuits of ambition, economics, and greed while those larger social tasks of public speaking, missions, and temperance work fell to women who were considered the moral architects of society. Fueled mainly by the suffragist movement, the world became women's household in this early era.

**Chapter 2** surveys a post-World War II era showing women's sphere of influence returned to the home as men were returning from the war in need of work and esteem. The security of the home became a safe harbor and the predominant value in America (think "American dream"). Before World War II a woman's household was largely extended to the world. After World War II this is reversed – a woman's world was limited to her household and it was her duty to train children and ensure her man had his place of refuge. For women to remain in the workforce after World War II was not only perceived as a direct threat to the man, but came to be viewed as a compromise of the safety and security of this most cherished institution, the American home. Moreover, it is not insignificant that "as the country turned inward during the post-World War II years and became more individualistic in its focus and values, evangelical women were primarily child centered, placed priority on their marriages over jobs, and concentrated on their own

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homes" (p 47).

Naturally, there are byproducts of this trend toward an inward and individualistic focus. Individualism and personal fulfillment became paramount pursuits in American culture and gave rise to a new wave of secularism. **Chapter 3** synthesizes much of the analyses from the first two chapters. From 1960s and onward, concerns for personal rights and equality eclipsed the good of society as a whole and became "a fertile environment for the feminists who would in turn provide a vital catalyst for the evangelical egalitarian movement" (p 49). The Civil Rights movement also served as a catalytic connection to fan the flames of a liberal feminism focused on equality of the sexes.

All of these forces set the "interpretive framework" for an evangelical feminist movement that served to challenge "cultural patterns and attitudes in an unjust subordination of women" (p 57). Instead of the home being a source of women's strength and fortitude that extended into the public arena, a post-World War II era home becomes a picture of weakness and submission, which are still heralded by complementarians as virtues but which egalitarians seek to jettison.

As noted already, "a framework that is essentially decided prior to analysis, not unsurprisingly, leads to answers that fit that framework" (p 65). Questions we ask about gender roles all too often reflect "cultural rather than biblical priorities" (p 66). The more important task for both sides of the gender divide, however, is to identify those transcendent values that focus on God's kingdom and which are more foundational. Part 2 presents the biblical reasons for utilizing "different categories with which to understand gender," such as unity, a theology of "reversal," and holiness of God's people. Unless and until kingdom principles govern the discussion, the divide will only widen.

Issues around gender roles in the home, the church, and the world have become secondary themes for most American evangelicals, largely due to the cultural, political, and social blitz around same-sex behavior and gender identity issues. Nevertheless, gender roles remain critically relevant for Christians all over the globe and *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian* is a vital and valuable read in this space. Vital, I say, because as the subtitle suggests, it offers up a "kingdom corrective" by expositing those transcendent principles that should govern any debate and that, regrettably, have all but been forgotten or ignored by those on the frontline of evangelical gender debates. As a biblically faithful and historically keen analysis of the problem, *Michelle Lee-Barnewall* has provided a way forward in the discussion.

I already I mentioned that Part 1, "Gender in Evangelical History," covers relevant historical background and sets the stage for Part 2, "Reframing Gender", where kingdom themes are revealed and applied. **Chapter 4** lays out two of these themes, namely, "(1) unity and corporate identity of God's people and (2) the way in which 'reversal' demonstrates the power and glory of God in the Christian community" (p 71). Since so much of the Christian faith has been held hostage to the ideals of individualism and personal fulfillment that have so saturated our culture, this first theme is particularly difficult for American evangelicals to grasp. Still, **Scripture shines a bright light on unity as an expression of identity through community** and Lee-Barnewall ably demonstrates this is the case (pp 72-76).

The second theme is "reversal" and portrays the power of God, which I believe has profound implications well beyond the gender debate. Examples abound. Whether God chooses the elder

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Esau to serve the younger Jacob (Gen 25:23), or an unlikely young David to serve as the Lord's anointed king rather than one of his older and seemingly more fit brothers (1 Sam 16:7), or Gideon's meager lot of three hundred to conquer the entire Mideonite army (Judg 7), God regularly "works in unexpected ways that upend traditional expectations" (p 76).

New Testament examples continue the "reversal" theme with a rich man entering Hades while a poor man experiences blessings after death (Lk 16:19-31), the small sum of a widow being larger than gifts from the wealthy (Mk 12:41-44), or mere shepherds announcing the birth of the Messiah (Lk 2:8-20), women being the first to announce a risen Savior (Matt 28:1-10), or the foolishness of the Gospel being the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:27-28). The *sine qua non* of this reversal theme is found in the Incarnation of God in Christ and his crucifixion (Philip 2:5-11) where interestingly "one of the main results of such a 'reversal' is to increase unity." Lee-Barnewall explains.

In Phil. 2:1-11 Paul tells the Philippians that they can achieve the "same mind" and the "same love" and be "united in spirit intent on one purpose" by following Christ's example of humility and so looking out for the interests of others. The community is bonded together as the members care for one another. (p 79)

Many more examples are listed, but the points made in this chapter are clear: the corporate unity God requires is expressed only when our identity is "found not in oneself, one's position, or personal power, but in dependence on God" and the symbol of servant, as the next chapters show, must be embraced because it is the "antithesis of power, status and domination." When God's people reflect these values, then a deep unity obtains and God is glorified (pp 80-81). The implications for gender are clear. All are called to serve and in so doing, all are united.

In many respects, **Chapter 5** is the highlight of the book. Lee-Barnewall nails it on every front as she challenges us to "rethink equality and rights in the body of Christ" (chapter subtitle). Here she especially targets egalitarian assumptions and, as an egalitarian, I appreciated her clarion call. She rightly gives significant attention to Gal 3:28, that trusty passage used repeatedly in the egalitarian camp, to show instead that Paul's primary focus is soteriological rather than merely socio-structural. It is not so much intended to flatten all distinctions between gender (and status and race), but instead serves to illustrate a broadening of access to the Gospel message. This fits with the kingdom value of **inclusion and love**, which is the transcendent perspective we are to observe.

The new attitudes and reactions implied by the passage seem to point not to equality, at least in terms of sameness or fairness, as much as to a profound love for and acceptance of one another that binds the community together as one (p 87).

Other passages that also illustrate these transcendent values are given consideration (1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11; Eph 4; et al.). Summing up Paul's thrust she opines "what characterizes the community is the way in which the people of God love one another in their differences, not an overlooking or erasure of distinctions" (p 88). Equality is secondary to the call to love others by prioritizing them above self and it is "precisely *because* these distinctions existed that the believers' unity and love would be so remarkable" (emphasis hers, pp 90-91).

Although hierarchies remain intact in the New Testament, there is a kind of "reversal" at play in

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the kingdom of God. "The point is not so much whether hierarchies are present as it is what they mean. In the kingdom, values of power and privilege are turned upside down" (p 91. Cf., Mt 20:16; Mk 10:44). Most germane to gender is the place of women as disciples of Christ, who, being "entrusted as "mediators of revelation to men" shows an "eschatological reversal of status" (quoting Richard Bauckham; p96 for reference). From Acts 2 we learn that Pentecost is the prime historical example where women are "included in the outpouring of the gift of prophecy and the reception of the empowering Spirit. However, whether this carries further implications for equality is not the point of the passage. Instead, 'inclusion' better captures the implications of Pentecost" (p 100). To miss this theme is, so to speak, to miss the forest for the trees.

**Chapter 6** targets the subjects of authority and leadership and (no surprise) the complementarian model. No surprise to the reader to find Lee-Barnewall's focus is not on "leadership", but on the "servant" side of the "servant-leader" model. She notes that complementarians find "leadership and often authority are generally seen as the predominant ideas, and servanthood is then the attitude or manner in which this leadership is carried out" (p 103).

She rightly notes that this complementarian focus does not "sufficiently capture New Testament leadership" (104). Instead of authority in leadership playing a dominant role, the New Testament emphasis on "sacrifice, unity, and love" play larger roles for leaders (p 106). Drawing from Paul's writings and Jesus' teachings, she illustrates authority is set in sharp contrast to serving – the latter a requisite for being a leader amongst God's people. In fact, she highlights the common theme of humility that runs through the role of both *slave* and *servant*. This ideal especially stood out in the highly stratified Roman society and contrasts sharply with the basic model on which society was based (pp 112-113). Again, Christ's example of the Incarnation is powerful to illustrate this reversal required of leaders with the impact, ironically, leading again to kingdom ideal of unity in the body of Christ. Lee-Barnewall writes:

As the apostles follow the model of Christ, their lowering, self-sacrifice, suffering and other-oriented concern and behavior set the example for others for the unity of the community. Their example is particularly powerful because, as leaders, they would be least expected to do so, just as the nature of Jesus's humility was shocking because of his ultimate status as God. (p 114)

At the end of the day, servanthood to the extent of being a slave to Christ and for others is what marks greatness. Authority is only secondary (if not tertiary) for the biblical leader. In fact, given that servanthood is requisite for leadership, one could argue that authority is derived from a humble service to others and not from one's status. This question remains highly relevant: *Do we have leaders who are servants or servants who are leaders?*

This summary review has gone on long enough, so I'll be brief on the final two chapters. However, let the reader know that these concluding chapters should not be missed nor are they less important to the arguments made.

In **Chapter 7** Lee-Barnewall sticks to her guns repeating that the kinds of questions asked of a text often yield pre-determined answers, such as "Does the husband have authority over the wife?" or "Who makes the final decision in a marriage?" (p 126). Surveying Genesis 1-3 and the topic of marriage she concludes that the inspired text does not concern itself with authority or equality but instead the focus is on unity together in obedience to God. While differences between

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the male and female are clear and their relationship involves asymmetry (Adam being the source of the woman; Adam discovers he needs Eve and not vice versa), explicit details of male authority over woman are entirely absent. Instead, the only explicit direction given to Adam is to "cleave" to Eve so that they can become "one flesh," which entails unity, holiness, and obedience. In this directive, Adam (man) is unique and in this, tragically, Adam failed.

The final chapter digs deeper into the topic of marriage and discusses Eph 5 and Paul's instructions to husbands and wives. Rather than offer up just another well-worn discussion around the meaning of "kephalé" (head) or directly take on issues surrounding the possibility that a patriarchal cultural context makes this passage time-bound and not timeless, Lee-Barnewall sets these ideas into the larger context of kingdom themes. She insists that "authority" and "equality" "cannot adequately do justice to the nuances of Paul's use of the head-body metaphor. Instead, it may actually be a misleading entry point from which to concentrate our exegesis of the text" (p 164). Unity is the goal and the kingdom principle from which exegesis is to be executed. Most importantly, she argues that Christ's example of love and humility are not merely qualifying factors of his ministry, but instead are **defining factors** of the Incarnation. Husbands' headship (whatever one concludes about that) must be set in this context, rather than simply shoring up the idea of "leadership" with the likes of being a "loving leader" or "sacrificial leader." In fact, in a society where leadership entailed hierarchy under the rubric of authority and submission, a husband's service and sacrifice of love for his wife turns the 1st century home on its structural head and shines a bright light on the Gospel's call for inclusion. Paul's instructions for the home are counter-cultural and this maneuver actually shows forth unity and a harmony not seen anywhere else in the world. Lee-Barnewall adds a finish to this last chapter that is only fitting:

The kingdom of God transforms headship in direct opposition to the way it would be expected in a society that supremely values power, honor, and status...Ironically, this reversal of expectations is precisely what leads to the fulfillment of the one flesh union of Genesis, for both the husband and the wife, and Christ and the church. (p 166)

The last section, "Final Thoughts", nicely captures the themes throughout the book and offers up ways to move forward with some cautionary warnings. Gender in the Bible, says Lee-Barnewall, "may relate more fundamentally to the holiness of God's people and the impact of grace on relationships in the family of God" (p 169). Well said!

I cannot recommend this highly enough and can only hope that both sides of the debate reframe the questions in light of kingdom principles. With this excellent contribution to the gender debates, I know that I will read the relevant biblical texts on gender with different eyes. And, God willing, let these themes govern my reading of God's inspired text. Taking a step back is indeed the way forward!

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A special thanks to [Baker Academic](#) for providing a review copy. [Download an excerpt](#) and see especially Scot McKnight's keen analysis [here](#).