



What's So Great About (Biblical) Feminism

A Survey of The Perspective
The Scriptures & Its Implications

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Introduction

The Door Between Two Choices

When it comes to *feminism*, two prominent Christian perspectives stand in opposition to one another. The first perspective is what is known as *complementarianism*. This outlook was coined by a group of conservative evangelical pastors and theologians who, in 1987, formed the *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (CBMW) in response to conservative churches attempting to reconcile the tenets of modern *feminism* with biblical truth. Consequently, according to this view, adopting a feminist outlook negatively impacts the gospel message to the world. The movement of *complementarianism* was articulated in two specific documents: *The Nashville Statement*, which consists of a collection of affirmations and denials, some of which discuss men and women's roles and responsibilities in the family, marriage, and a sexual ethic that aligns with Scripture. The second document, known as *The Danvers Statement*, is the document that explains the reasoning that justifies *The Nashville Statement*. The two main aspects that this perspective seeks to address are

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the responsibility of leadership of the husband in the home (which is to reflect the leadership of Christ), and the responsibility of the woman to operate as the homemaker and housewife as articulated below,

1. *The widespread uncertainty and confusion in our culture regarding the complementary differences between masculinity and femininity; (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).*
2. *the tragic effects of this confusion in unraveling the fabric of marriage woven by God out of the beautiful and diverse strands of manhood and womanhood; (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).*
3. *the increasing promotion given to feminist egalitarianism with accompanying distortions or neglect of the glad harmony portrayed in Scripture between the loving, humble leadership of redeemed husbands and the intelligent, willing support of that leadership by redeemed wives; (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).*
4. *the widespread ambivalence regarding the values of motherhood, vocational homemaking, and the many ministries historically performed by women; (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).*

The second aspect has to do with church leadership. Just as male leadership in the home reflects gospel truth and promotes clarity when it comes to biblical authority, male leadership in the local church underscores this same reality as espoused in the statement,

7. *the emergence of roles for men and women in church leadership that do not conform to Biblical teaching but backfire in the crippling of Biblically faithful witness; (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).*

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8. *the increasing prevalence and acceptance of hermeneutical oddities devised to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of Biblical texts;* (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).
9. *the consequent threat to Biblical authority as the clarity of Scripture is jeopardized and the accessibility of its meaning to ordinary people is withdrawn into the restricted realm of technical ingenuity;* (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).

Underneath the general umbrella of *complementarianism*, there are two branches. Some people, known as soft complementarians, are convinced that some women cannot hold certain church leadership positions (such as senior or executive pastor). Still, they may hold leadership positions and teach in combined gender groups. Moreover, those who adopt this view also state that women can hold leadership positions outside the local church (such as principals, deans, CEOs, and managers). The second branch of people who are known as hard complementarians believe that women should not hold any leadership positions in the local church and extend this to public and private life.

On the other side of the debate is what has been coined as egalitarianism. The organization known as *Christians for Biblical Equality* (CBE) was founded in 1987 in response to the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). Similar to the two documents drafted by CBMW, *Christians for Biblical Equality* wrote their own statement known as “Men, Women, and Biblical Equality.” This document speaks against the two documents of CBMW around the male leadership of the church, calling for mutual leadership as detailed in the statement,

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12. *The Bible teaches that, in the New Testament economy, women as well as men exercise the prophetic, priestly and royal functions...Therefore, the few isolated texts that appear to restrict the full redemptive freedom of women must not be interpreted simplistically and in contradiction to the rest of Scripture, but their interpretation must take into account their relation to the broader teaching of Scripture and their total context* (Christians for Biblical Equality, 1989)

Moreover, the *Christians for Biblical Equality* challenge the idea of the headship (or leadership) of the husband in the household and make the case that this instruction may promote domestic violence and child abuse,

11. *In the Christian home, husband and wife are to defer to each other. Neither spouse is to seek to dominate the other, but each is to act as a servant of the other, in humility considering the other as better than oneself. In case of decisional deadlock resolution rather than by one spouse imposing a decision upon the other* (Christians for Biblical Equality, 1989).
12. *In so doing, husband and wife will help the Christian home stand against improper use of power and authority by spouses and will protect the home from wife and child abuse that sometimes tragically follows a hierarchical interpretation* (Christians for Biblical Equality, 1989).

Egalitarianism, like *complementarianism*, supports and advocates for the equality of the sexes in substance and value. Both speak out against violence and manipulation in the family dynamic. Additionally, both believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is central to a believer's thinking and conduct, and that a Christian's life ought to reflect this reality. However, how this is understood varies by position. Those who subscribe to a *complementarian* outlook would argue that to ignore the differences between men and women and how those differences emphasize each of

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their roles and responsibilities is to minimize or even eclipse the message of the gospel.

On the other hand, *egalitarians* would argue that the teaching of “traditional” male leadership within the church and family unit dismisses or obscures the gospel message. However, each perspective boldly declares that it is aligned with the Bible while criticizing the other. How would a person who is in the middle of this intense discussion determine which perspective is true?

Some people may use their personal experiences to determine the validity of each view. For example, a person who has experienced physical abuse at the hands of a man who misused Scripture would find it normative for a person to have a hostile attitude toward *complementarianism*. In contrast, a person who lived in a home where both parents shared the labor and responsibility in providing for the household may be more sympathetic to an *egalitarianism*. While personal experiences are significant, they are not universal to human experience.

Additionally, one’s personal experience may cause a person to incorrectly perceive things about God and His activity (e.g., Psalm 73). Therefore, personal experience may not be reliable for selecting the right view, as a person’s personal preferences may influence their choice. Another challenge may be the personal influence of an authority figure or another important person. This challenge carries the same issues as the previous point. How would a person who trusts the authoritative figure’s perspective recognize if that source of authority is not influenced by their

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own personal experience? As a result, the authoritative figure may ignore, dismiss, or even construct an alternative explanation for the sake of maintaining their perspective, which is intimately associated with that authority's personal experience.

Another obstacle is the belief that an adjective, when associated with a noun, describes the noun *in toto*, and that there is no other explanation for that noun than the adjective that describes it, because it is assumed that the adjective describes the foundation of that noun. An example can be seen in the statement below,

*In 1987, CBMW was established primarily to help the church defend against the accommodation of **secular feminism**. At this time many evangelicals were beginning to experiment with an ideology that would later become known as evangelical feminism. This was a significant departure from what the church had practiced from its beginning regarding the role of men and women in the home and local church. The effects of this departure have not been benign. As evangelical feminism continues to spread, the evangelical community needs to be aware that this debate reaches ultimately to the heart of the gospel. (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1987).*

The *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* stated that it was established against “secular *feminism*.” The problem with the word *feminism* (noun) is that it is associated with the word *secular* (adjective), which indicates the influence this philosophy has on the noun *in the present day*. A person may mistakenly view the *secular* and *feminism* as interchangeable terms, leading to the false belief that the foundational principles defining them are fixed and unalterable. As a result, a person may assume that biblical Christianity and *feminism* are incompatible, and that the concept of *feminism* is irredeemable.

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So how does one determine which is more biblical if a person ought not to use personal experiences, authoritative sources, or is not assumptive about the nature of the word *feminism*? Between the two doors of the *complementarian* and *egalitarian* view lies a third door. This third door has been overlooked by those who have chosen the other two—an alternative perspective that has been neglected. Yet this door may lead to a *feminism* that is more consistent with the biblical perspective. When the door is opened, we discover that this neglected perspective does not begin with a defining *feminism* from the author's personal experience, what another theologian or other says, or even the negative assumption about the word *feminism*, but the meaning of the word from how it is constructed, that is its etymology. It is here where our discourse begins.

