



Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate

Michelle Lee-Barnewall, Lynn Cohick (Afterword), Craig Blomberg (Foreword)

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Regarding gender relations, the evangelical world is divided between complementarians and egalitarians.

While both perspectives have much to contribute, the discussion has reached a stalemate. Michelle Lee-Barnewall critiques both sides of the debate, challenging the standard premises and arguments and offering new insight into a perennially divisive issue in the church. She brings fresh biblical exegesis to bear on our cultural situation, presenting an alternative way to move the discussion forward based on a corporate perspective and on kingdom values. The book includes a foreword by Craig L. Blomberg and an afterword by Lynn H. Cohick.

Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate Details

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From Reader Review Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate for online ebook

Bob says

Summary: Argues on the basis of the biblical texts for a reframing of the discussion of the relationship of men and women from one of power versus equality to one that focuses on the elements in the biblical texts around reversal, inclusion, unity and service.

In the mouthful that is the title to this book lies a heated, sometimes hurtful, occasionally constructive intramural discussion in the evangelical community about how men and women relate to each other in the church and in marriage. Complementarians argue for gender distinctives that are complementary, for some form of male headship, female submission in marriage and that certain roles of leadership in the church are open only to men. Egalitarians argue that the best way to understand the biblical texts is that in creation and redemption, men and women are equal at the foot of the cross, that all roles of leadership are open to both in the church and that husband and wife mutually submit to each other as equals. Both "sides" contend that they are being faithful to the teaching of scripture.

I've watched this debate go on through my adult life, although rarely have scholars on one side or the other of this discussion reached out to see if there is some way the two positions can be reconciled. Over time, some have moved to a "soft" complementarian position, while egalitarians have been open to explore distinctives of gender while avoiding any form of hierarchy in marriage or church. What has troubled me is that the discussion has often been framed around authority or rights and hasn't explored questions of servanthood, inclusion, and the kind of mutual care that ought characterize communities shaped by the crucified and risen Christ.

Michelle Lee-Barnewall has been troubled by this as well and thinks that part of the reason for the impasse to which we've come is that the discussion has been framed around categories of roles, authority, and rights that may draw more from contemporary culture than the biblical narratives and that there may be a perspective inherent in the narratives that is missed because of the framing questions we ask.

The first part of the book reviews the evangelical history of women. She breaks this into three periods, the first of which is around the turn of the 20th century when women were significantly involved in many social and mission causes, the focus being on doing one's duty where needful. The second was a period of retreat, after the turbulence and separation of World War II, emphasizing the role of women in the home and in child-rearing. This transition, in the post-civil rights and feminist era to a focus on equal rights for women, with others holding to a more traditional role, that in contemporary discussion has been framed as complementarian.

The second part of the book turns to biblical theology and the biblical text to develop themes that might reframe the discussion. First she considers the idea of the kingdom of God and the emphases on unity and corporate identity, and on the great reversals of power, including the exaltation of the lowly and the humbling of the exalted. She then goes on under the theme of unity to explore the idea of inclusion and whether this is a better way to understand the place of women than either complementary roles or equal rights, that women are welcomed in Jesus circle and shared in and were included in the blessing of Pentecost. She also explores the radical teaching about leadership as servanthood, or even slavery, which radically

upturns for both men and women, the hierarchies of the New Testament period.

In the latter part of this section, she considers two passages, Genesis 2-3, and Ephesians 5:21-33. In Genesis 2-3 she notes particularly the one flesh instructions to Adam and how in his disobedience, this is broken as he blames Eve, even though it is to Adam that God first addresses himself. She does note how the relationship originates in Adam, through whom Eve is given life and named, and yet the focus, she contends is not his authority or precedence but his leaving, cleaving, becoming one flesh with her. In Ephesians, while the man is indeed "head" (and the meaning of this can be debated) there is no command to exercise authority but rather to love and give oneself, with the husband and wife relationship demonstrating the union between Christ and church.

Lee-Barnewell does not take a "side" in this discussion, even in conclusion. She advocates instead for a different kind of discussion. She suggests that the rhetoric used to characterize the "other" as "feminist" or "patriarchal" is not helpful. Rather than answer the question of what women can or cannot do, she believes these other biblical themes are crucially important as foundations for any constructive discussion, and for reaching a place informed more by scripture than culture for all concerned.

My fear with a book like this is that it will either be disregarded or attacked by advocates on either side of this discussion, and especially by complementarians. I do think the upshot of her "reframing" would be to support the position of egalitarians, albeit with a different spirit. Yet I think this is an important book, as are similar books around questions of origins and the Genesis text, in reframing the discussion by changing the kinds of questions we ask of the biblical text, indeed in trying to listen to the text and let it deliver us from our own cultural captivities. That might even have the effect of bringing us together in the inclusive, unifying ways Lee-Barnewell envisions.

Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from the publisher. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own.

Rob Steinbach says

Lee-Barnewall's book is a great contribution to the "evangelical gender debate." While it isn't a starting point in the conversation (it assumes a general knowledge of both sides) it is a refreshing read for someone tired of the divide and its myopic focus on either authority (complementarian) on the one side (a defense for who is in charge at home and in the church) and equality (egalitarian) on the other side (a defense for equal rights). While issues of authority and equality do play into understanding the scriptures view of gender and roles, Lee-Barnewall pushes the church to have a greater imagination and consider larger themes in the Bible (kingdom, unity, etc.).

She does a particularly good job in exposing the weakness of the complementarian argument that Genesis 2-3 establishes male headship. Using a literary approach to the text, the focus is primarily on Adam's disobedience as Paul demonstrates in Romans 5. While some may say that Adam avoided his responsibility of headship and Eve usurped it, Paul doesn't note that in Romans 5. Rather, the focus is on Adam's disobedience. If one can gain support from Genesis 2-3 for male headship it isn't directly in the text (highlighted by the author) and more of a theological deduction than clear conclusion.

When working through Ephesians 5, she doesn't nullify a husband's authority/leadership in marriage in light of the mutual submission of v21, contrary to some egalitarians. Instead she highlights some 1st century insights into the head/body metaphor. In that time, the head (emperor) was the most important member of the body (empire) and would expect others to sacrifice for it. Paul reverses this metaphor and has the head sacrificing for the body. In a culture where the wife would expect to sacrifice herself in service to her husband, in Paul's paradigm, this gets reversed. Again, Lee-Barnewall doesn't do away with the "head" distinction, but gives the reader a different angle/approach to understanding the radically different sacrificial role of a husband in light of the kingdom.

There's more to note about this book, but I'd encourage complementarians, egalitarians, and "somewhere in the middle" folks to read this contribution to this important topic!

Matt says

I really appreciate the questions Lee-Barnewall is asking and the scriptural interpretive work she is doing. I assumed a book like this would still lean significantly "pro-egalitarian", but was encouraged by just how much the book takes the entire current debate and shows it to be an insufficient conversation to solve these issues.

I particularly enjoyed her decision of the Ephesians 5 passage and how the concept of headship meets the biblical theme of divine reversal.

Amanda Patchin says

An excellent re-framing of the evangelical gender debate. Concerned with the call of the Christian to holiness, love, unity, and community Lee-Barnewall clears away the historical detritus of the debate in order to examine the themes and emphases of the significant passages in the Complementarian/Egalitarian debate. What emerges is an opportunity to understand the importance of men and women's shared humanity (a favorite theme of mine), our calling to serve one another with total humility, and the tendency of the Gospel to invert both our rights and our individuality to the benefit of the community.

Long on premises and short on conclusions, I'd consider this book the important first step in a new conversation on how to build service and marriage in the Church.

Laura Wood says

This book provided a different and valuable perspective on the debate on gender roles in the Church. I appreciated the author's consistent reminder to consider the body of Christ as a whole and to see ourselves more in the light of community instead of as individuals with rights and roles. This alone was worth the read. This is crucial to our understanding of gender roles but also helped me see how we have syncretized the gospel to fit our American, be-an-individual, God-wants-me-to-fulfill-my-full-potential kind of thinking. Thank you, Michelle Lee-Barnewall for a thorough, well-researched book on an important topic!

John says

Michelle Lee-Barnewall argues that the current conversation on gender in the evangelical world is not only at an impasse, but that both sides are approaching the conversation from the wrong perspective. While both sides obsess over the outcomes, they do harm to the biblical text and background in hammering at these outcomes. Lee-Barnewall pushes us to re-frame the gender conversation on the basis of the biblical themes of reversal, unity, holiness, and service.

Because of this re-framing of the question, Lee-Barnewall's book will surely frustrate many readers who want to push ahead to her response to the practical issues that flow out of this conversation. But Lee-Barnewall shows restraint in trying to keep us on course and giving us fresh eyes to see familiar texts. She is undoubtedly successful on all counts and has provided a great service.

Lee-Barnewall begins in an unconventional place, giving us a broad-brush history of history in the United States regarding women, their rights, and the church. Lee-Barnewall argues that Egalitarians have centered their struggle around rights, while Complementarians have dug in on authority, "In keeping with secular feminism, [Egalitarians] spoke primarily in terms of women's rights. In keeping with secular power [Complementarians] spoke primarily in terms of men's authority." The history Lee-Barnewall shares is complex, with a number of surprises. The history is certainly not a simple upward progression, various historic realities (industrialization, WWI and WWII, etc) significantly impact the relationship and understanding of gender in the church.

For the impatient reader who wants to jump to the biblical conversation, you might want to start with Part Two, but for those who read Part One they are likely to be rewarded (as I was) with unexpected insights.

Part Two is titled, "Reframing Gender" and here Lee-Barnewall tears into the key biblical texts to help construct a biblical perspective on gender. Lee-Barnewall argues that there are, in fact, roles laid out for the genders in Scripture, "The Bible teaches that men and women fulfill different roles in relation to each other" and that these roles, including the unique leadership role of men, are based 'not on temporary cultural norms but on permanent facts of creation.'"

The Roman context in which Jesus ministered would have been highly stratified with an embedded understanding that one's birth placed one in a societal strata that was both one's right and one's place. In this context, Jesus invites all to participate in a new covenantal community, a family where distinctions and hierarchy aren't erased, but radically redefined. Lee-Barnewall says, "In this new community, distinctions are not eliminated as much as they have become irrelevant for determining who can be "in Christ" because now believers are children of God through faith rather than the law (Gal. 3:26)."

The leaders (elders, etc) this new community, are the servants of the community, imitating Christ himself. It is not just that the leaders serve, but that they are leaders because they are first servants. Lee-Barnewall says, "In other words Christ indicates that servanthood is a prerequisite for being a leader. Thus, rather than considering how servanthood modifies a type of leadership, it may be better to ask how servanthood forms a necessary basis for leadership, even authority, and how a kingdom perspective of reversal explains this paradoxical notion."

Lee-Barnewall moves to the Genesis account and with a careful reading that shows the way in which the text

emphasizes the unity and similarity of Adam and Eve (see Adam's first song of rejoicing over Eve), but also notes the unique role Adam and Eve play in the text, with God giving Adam the command to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and then coming to him and holding him to account for the breaking of that commandment.

From here, Lee-Barnewall teases out an interpretation of the critical passage in Ephesians 6, with particular emphasis on authority. Lee-Barnewall argues that while keeping the authority structure intact, Paul then subverts the call for those within that structure. She asserts, "The normal expectation for the metaphor is that the head is the leader and provider of the body. Consequently, it is the head's responsibility to ensure its own safety, and the body's responsibility to sacrifice itself for the sake of the head. As a result, we would expect Paul to instruct the wife, the body, to be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the husband, the head. Such instructions would be the most logical since, according to common reasoning, the body could not survive without the head. But that is not what we find; rather, Paul states the reverse. The husband as the head is called to give himself up for the wife as his body, just as Christ gave himself up for the church, which is his body." This notion would have been offensive in a Roman context, but it is beautiful in Christ's new kingdom.

Early in the book exhorts, "The key may be asking not so much whether Scripture promotes equality or authority as how—in a kingdom understanding—gender relates to love and unity between husbands and wives, among the many members of the body, and ultimately between Christ and his bride...We may gain more not from merely asking what rights a person has or who has power but by seeing why unity matters and how it is accomplished by power manifested through weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), such as was exhibited through the cross." May this be the case for Christ's church in America and around the world.

One expects Lee-Barnewall to unpack what this means in terms of the function of the local church today, but she avoids doing so, and I think that decision was wise of her. I eagerly anticipate her reflections on this topic, but I'm grateful that she allows her reader to wrestle with the important theological framework without entangling it with concrete calls for action which may allow readers to dismiss the framework itself. Action surely is needed by us all, but I believe her framework is compelling and needs to be wrestled with on its own merits first.

I'm grateful for this significant contribution Lee-Barnewall has made. She has impacted my own perspective and I am hopeful that her contribution will push the conversation of the church at large forward. I heartily commend the book to you.

Johnny says

Great Perspective and Approach

Taking the road less traveled yet much needed, the author gives us a good look again at root issues that Scripture emphasizes, which are different than many of the categories people from "both" camps of the gender role / relationship debate approach with. It's great to take a step back and get your perspective shifted yet stay faithful to keep Scriptures main point the main point!

Shaun Lee says

This book is a labour of love, with thorough research having gone into the pages. While other books on the topic of Women in Ministry is narrow in scope, this author attempts to provide a blanket exploration on the topic, from both a "secular" and theological angle. It perhaps would be apt to classify this book as a hybrid of a meta-analysis and devotional commentary. Chapters 1 (Evangelical Women and Social Reform) and 2 (Returning Home after WWII) provided a far more rigorous revisit to my Junior College days when we set in lectures and had to write essays on the emancipation of and rights of Women.

I could imagine Lee-Barnewall presenting the content in the book in the form of a 52 weekly lectures. The reason is probably because most of the time (especially when she refers to Scripture or theological themes) she is establishing a case with affirmative substantives, (if I could borrow a debating term) positive matter. While she does cite other bible scholars at times, this occurs less infrequently than I had expected (given the endorsements by fine theologians like Darrell Bock and Craig Keener). Having read many extremely scholarly commentaries in my research, I felt that Part 2 of the book reminded me of a devotional commentary by Wiersbe or an inspirational sermon. Or perhaps to be less harsh, (in Lynn Cohick's words in the Afterword) "review" may be more apt description.

This is probably my fortieth book I have read for the purposes of writing an exegetical paper on 1 Tim 2. The title would have hinted at the author's attempt to strike a balance between the extremes of complementarianism and egalitarianism. I wish that she would have bitten the bullet and taken a stance (like Craig Blomberg did in his excellent Appendix of a similar title in <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1...>), rather than refrain from making a conclusion of where she stands in the debate. I would have probably given an extra star if she had attempted to do so.

I received this ebook from Baker Academic through Netgalley.com in exchange for this review.

Megan says

SO good to have a strong female voice on this issue. She asks some very critical questions and does a good job pointing out flaws in both perspectives. I love her emphasis on unity as well as well as the importance of nuance.

Kimberly Harris says

This was a brave book to write considering that she is telling both sides of the debate that they are missing key things in their arguments. It would be easy for both sides to read this book and not like it because it doesn't support their cemented ideas.

However, for the open minded, I think that this book is more than worth the read. She gives you much to chew on. I feel like I will need to read it again to really let the message sink in more thoroughly. But there were a couple of chapters in the book that were "light bulb" moments for me, where she presented in a clearly articulated argument some of the vague thoughts I had had.

While the Christian world is entrenched in one of two camps (Egalitarian or Complementarian) Michelle

Lee-Barnewall argues that the very questions we are arguing about aren't the important questions we should be asking and we need a completely different viewpoint to approach this topic Biblically. Her subtitle is, "A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate"

Part one is showing how world events tended to push our theology into these two camps, rather than the Bible. While a lot of the history was familiar to me, Lee-Barnewall's take on it was particularly insightful.

Part two is titled, "Reframing Gender". Some of the ideas presented here are worth the entire book and more. For example, is servant leadership, leadership with servanthood attributes, or servants of God with some leadership responsibility? (Chapter 6) This deserves the chapter she devoted to it.

And chapter eight on Ephesians 5 was brilliant in showing the ancient viewpoint of what "head" meant, and how Paul is even more radical than we thought in reversing this power structure by telling the head to sacrifice self.

I've read a lot on this topic, and it starts to feel very repetitive after a while with everyone repeating each other, but Lee-Barnewall gave me so much more to ponder and consider that was a new way to look at things.

In the end, many readers will be disappointed that instead of sharing concrete examples of how this should play out in the church and home, she asks the readers to think deeply about these ideas, to mull on them, and to ask new questions instead of the old ones. She knows you do have to get to the practical questions (i.e. should women be elders) but she feels we need to get our feet on a firm foundation first. A foundation she is trying to correct by gently giving another viewpoint of the important passages we use to prove our side of the debate (on both sides).

Whether you agree with her slant or not, I hope this book gets more traction because I think it is a very important and valuable one.

As a side note, this is written in a very academic manner, with lots of footnotes. Don't expect a story driven, "inspirational" book when you pick this up. It meant it was a slower read for me because it was so dense with information and ideas. I found it worthwhile to read all of the footnotes as well.

David Bronson says

A fascinating read. I think Lee-Barnwell presses a useful point, though with some (not insignificant) flaws in her approach. The first section on the history of America's understanding of gender is probably the most useful part of the book, in my opinion.

But I think the book needed to be about 50% longer: she never deals with 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and I think her section on 'kingdom values' needed more support. On the latter, I think she certain could have made her point, but since she never did the deep dive necessary to answer the objections that I immediately came up with, I was left to do the defending myself. Too bad - I would have liked to see more.

Regardless, I think this book begins a useful conversation in terms of helping us correct some of the excesses of the debate.

????????? ???? says

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Amy Morgan says

Loved how Lee-Barnewall talked about gender through the lens of the kingdom theme of “reversal.” She doesn’t give direction on what gender roles are appropriate. Instead, she asserts that maybe we are asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking, “Who has authority?” and “What are women allowed to do in church?”, that perhaps we should be asking questions like, “How does the idea of ‘reversal’ in God’s kingdom impact how we view headship?”

A refreshing perspective that allows you to come outside of our narrow cultural viewpoint. She also spends a lot of time on the development of our current cultural viewpoint, emphasizing that the questions we ask emerge out of our culture, rather than from Scripture itself.

Hope Wiseman says

Excellent critiques on both positions. A worthwhile read and important contribution to the egalitarian/complementarian evangelical debate.

Arlie says

An excellent read. Lee-Barnewell starts the book with several chapters that indicate how much of gender debate in the church is a response to cultural shifts and norms (as opposed to inspired by the Bible) - chapters on Victorian era, post WW2, and more contemporary.

The book then goes on to explore greater kingdom themes that should and must inform both our discussion and our study - namely unity and reversal. I loved having my thinking reframed. It was humbling and refreshing to look more closely and with less of an agenda at Biblical teaching in this area. Really worthwhile.
