

# A Way-Station to Egalitarianism: A Review Essay of Aimee Byrd's *Recovering from Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*

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Evangelicals have been debating manhood and womanhood for decades, and the conflict shows no signs of subsiding. No little bit of ink is spilled every year by both sides, and many works have trouble getting through all the noise. Such is not the case with Aimee Byrd's new book *Recovering from Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: How the Church Needs to Rediscover Her Purpose* (Zondervan, 2020). The provocative title riffs off the name of the seminal complementarian work *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991). Byrd takes direct aim at what she believes to be the deficiencies of complementarianism as expounded by its chief proponents, especially the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW).

## SUMMARY

Byrd's Introduction presents the defining metaphor of the book—yellow wallpaper—which comes from a feminist novel authored by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (15). In the novel, Gilman describes a woman who loses her sanity in a room covered in yellow wallpaper. The main character begins to feel that there is a woman trapped behind the yellow wallpaper trying to tear her way out. The yellow wallpaper serves as a metaphor for patriarchal oppression from which women must free themselves. Byrd uses this metaphor to describe how women in evangelical churches are trapped behind patriarchal oppression in the form of “current teaching on so-called ‘biblical manhood and womanhood’” (19). For example, she cites John Piper's definition of masculinity and femininity and contends that it focuses too much on authority and submission. She claims that Piper's complementarianism means that all women must submit to all men (22). Instead of authoritative male headship, Byrd wishes to emphasize “reciprocity” between male and female voices in scripture and between men and women in the church (25). She also wishes to “peel and reveal” the yellow wallpaper that keeps this reciprocity from being realized.

After the introduction, Byrd's book unfolds in three parts. Part 1, “Recovering the Way We Read Scripture,” argues for new ways of reading Scripture to “reveal the reciprocity of both men's and women's voices that are coactive in teaching one another through God's Word” (26). She decries approaches to scripture which focus on female “weakness and victimhood” but which emphasize male “leadership and agency” (39). Relying heavily on Richard Bauckham's work,<sup>1</sup> Byrd argues that Scripture is filled with “gynocentric” interruptions of the “male-focused” material in the Bible (43). She argues that the book of Ruth, for example, is a gynocentric interruption that “demolishes the lens of biblical manhood and womanhood that has been imposed on our Bible reading” (49). Ruth after all is a woman who teaches Boaz, thereby establishing a model for all women (57). Indeed, women like Ruth, Rahab, and Huldah act as “tradents” who grant authoritative status to the canon of scripture (64, 67). Byrd even speculates that “Mary must have been a valuable resource for Luke when writing his gospel” (90). Byrd argues that in our churches today, these kinds of “gynocentric interruptions shouldn't just be permitted; they should be promoted” (70).

Part 2, “Recovering Our Mission,” makes the case that parachurch ministries teaching biblical manhood and womanhood have gotten the church off its mission. This middle portion of the book focuses heavy criticism of CBMW and various personalities associated with it.<sup>2</sup> She argues that CBMW’s complementarianism is premised on an unorthodox view of the Trinity. That trinitarian error then becomes the basis for errors about manhood and womanhood (100-101). Highlighting a handful of sentences in an appendix, Byrd argues that the foundational complementarian book—*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*<sup>3</sup>—also rests on an unorthodox view of the Trinity (103). All of this fuels her impression that “organizations such as CBMW have reduced that distinction [between men and women] to an unbiblical principle—one of ontological authority and submission” (102-103). She condemns Wayne Grudem and other CBMW writers as teaching “unorthodox doctrine” (103). Her impression is that the complementarianism teaches that “the sole distinction between the sexes from the creation account [consists] in male/authority and female/submission” (116). The example of Phoebe—whom Paul appointed as a leader in the church at Rome—shows us that this paradigm is mistaken (148). Women must also be trained and prepared to teach and should not be inhibited by unbiblical notions of male headship. Evangelical parachurch organizations often foster these false teachings and seek to displace the church as the primary matrix for discipleship (157). Byrd complains that these “Complementarian parachurch organizations promote a male culture that prohibits reciprocity” (163). Byrd even rejects *The Nashville Statement*<sup>4</sup> in part because she views it as a “rebranding” of CBMW’s “ontological authority/subordination teaching” (172-73).

Part 3, “Recovering the Responsibility of Every Believer,” explains how both men and women should be carrying out their ministries in the church. Byrd argues that the word *helper* in Genesis 2 does not make women into “subordinate assistants” to men in the church but “necessary allies” in the ministry of the word (189). Thus, she complains that “many churches limit, in ways they do not limit for laymen, the capacity for laywomen to learn deeply and to teach” (188). She suggests that laywomen should be serving in the same capacity as laymen when it comes to the teaching ministry of the church (188). Rightly understood, Paul’s command for women to keep quiet in the churches (1 Cor 14:34-35) does not prohibit women from this kind of teaching ministry over men (193-200). Byrd argues, “We need to

be careful not to make a corrective response to a specific situation a blanket theological position about gender” (195).

## EVALUATION

Byrd’s views at first blush appear to be a classic narrow complementarian perspective—a male-only eldership with husband as “head” of the home.<sup>5</sup> In other words, her view sounds a little bit like Kathy Keller’s view—that a woman can do whatever an unordained man can do in ministry.<sup>6</sup> But when you press into the details of Byrd’s argument, it looks like she may be going further than that.

For example, when defining “headship,” Byrd relies on a feminist scholar named Sarah Coakley to deny that “headship” involves any authority on a husband’s part. Headship is a “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” structure (107). Byrd uses the word “headship” (like other narrow complementarians) but she fills it with Sarah Coakley’s meaning. The result: Rhetorically, Byrd sounds like a narrow complementarian. Substantively, she embraces a feminist definition of “headship.” If Byrd embraces Coakley’s definition of “headship,” then Byrd isn’t even a narrow complementarian. All complementarians believe that headship denotes authority, but Byrd does not embrace this truth.

Byrd’s use of sources in general is troubling. For example, Byrd recommends the website [IntersexAndFaith.org](http://IntersexAndFaith.org) to readers as a resource for understanding intersex (123). That site was founded by Megan DeFranza, who is an LGBT-affirming feminist. DeFranza’s book on intersex is also an LGBT-affirming book.<sup>7</sup> Byrd also quotes Virginia Woolf to refute complementarianism (170). As many readers know, Woolf was a lesbian novelist from the United Kingdom and a patron saint of feminists and lesbians everywhere. And Byrd is quoting Woolf to refute the teaching of the Danvers Statement. Why is Byrd appealing to feminist and pro-LGBT writers to interrogate complementarianism? Byrd is quick to denounce certain complementarians as outside the bounds of orthodoxy, but she offers no similar warnings about her feminist and pro-LGBT sources. Why is that?

It is not encouraging that Byrd stridently opposes *The Nashville Statement* (170) while commending “intimate but non-erotic” relationships as “a great hope for those who suffer with same-sex attraction” (172). This is a position

endorsed by the Revoice conference and writers at the Spiritual Friendship website<sup>8</sup> and which was roundly rejected by the PCA's study committee on human sexuality: "We do not support the formation of exclusive, contractual marriage-like friendships, nor do we support same-sex romantic behavior."<sup>9</sup> Instead of warning against these "marriage-like" same-sex friendships, Byrd commends them.

In addition to this, Byrd advances her view by relying on those who work from egalitarian or feminist frameworks: Charlotte Perkins Gilman (13), Richard Bauckham (43), Christa McKirland (45), Carolyn Custis James (53), Tikva Frymer-Kensky (79), Sarah Coakley (107), Phillip Payne (116), Kevin Giles (119-20), Lynn Cohick (146), Michael Bird (147), Ben Witherington (195), and Cynthia Westfall (198). To be clear, she's not arguing against these authors or engaging them critically. She's agreeing with these authors on a variety of matters. Indeed, the controlling metaphor of the book—the yellow wallpaper—comes from a feminist novel and represents patriarchal oppression, which Byrd claims is rife in complementarian churches. It's not wrong to quote egalitarians, but when she does she often embraces their arguments. Taken as a whole, her book shows no interest in really learning from complementarians even though she acts like she's occupying the middle of the road. Byrd is very clear that she does not wish to be known as a complementarian at all. She writes, "I cannot call myself a complementarian" (121).

Byrd makes a number of claims that can only be compatible with an egalitarian view. She says that in the Bible women served as "leaders of house churches" (190). She claims that Acts 16 depicts Lydia as a church planter alongside Paul. Lydia's responsibilities included "caring for the church" and even "to lead the church" until elders were put into place (192). Relying heavily on egalitarian scholars Lynn Cohick, Philip Payne, and Michael Bird, Byrd claims that Phoebe (Rom. 16:2) held "two leadership positions" (146). First, Phoebe was a *deacon* whom Paul had invested with his own authority to *teach* Paul's letter to the church in Rome (147). Second, Paul describes Phoebe as a leader who held a "position of authority" *vis-à-vis* the church of Rome (148). Byrd apparently views these women to be functioning as laywomen (151), but these women nevertheless teach and exercise authority in a way that is indistinguishable from elders. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that Byrd identifies Junia (Rom 16:7) as a female apostle alongside the

apostle Paul and James the leader of the church in Jerusalem (224). Byrd contends that Junia's apostleship should be understood in the traditional way—an office held by one who was an eyewitness to Jesus and who had received a direct commission from him (224). All of these claims have been thoroughly debunked by complementarian scholars, and I'm not going to rehash that here. I'm simply pointing out that Byrd is citing egalitarian scholarship and is embracing their conclusions.

Byrd chafes against limitations on women teaching men. She accepts a male-only eldership but otherwise embraces women teaching men and exercising authority over them. She writes:

“Laywomen . . . Like their brothers in the faith, they too are encouraged to seek the greater gifts and to mature in their knowledge of the faith so they can teach others. There's no qualifier in these verses, saying that men are not to learn from women or that women are only to teach their own sex and children. *Any divinely ordained differences that men and women have do not prohibit women from teaching. It would be disobedient to Scripture to withhold women from teaching*” (174, emphasis mine).

Byrd accuses broad complementarians of being “disobedient” to scripture in prohibiting women from teaching men. Yet she herself does not explain key biblical texts that say women shouldn't teach men (e.g., 1 Tim 2:12). You can't write a book arguing that women *can* teach men and then not deal with the key biblical text that says women *shouldn't* teach men. Kathy Keller takes a narrow complementarian view, but she at least does her readers the favor of explaining her interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11. Byrd doesn't do that work. I am surprised that the publisher let that pass.

Byrd claims to be concerned mainly about lay ministry, but she believes that lay women ought to teach and admonish the elders of the church and that there is something wrong with churches where this isn't happening (228-29). Byrd shows no concern for submission to male headship because for her submission does not mean deference to authority but ranking someone else as more important than oneself (230). Byrd contends that women should not be made to feel “suspect” when they correct church members (including elders), nor should they be “viewed as trying to usurp authority from men” (230). Byrd's view may not allow women to hold the office of elder, but it certainly encourages women to behave like they do.

Byrd invests a great deal of energy in relitigating the 2016 Trinity debate and in debunking a view often referred to as “the eternal subordination of the Son” (ESS). She is apparently under the impression that if ESS is false, then so is complementarianism. To that end, Byrd makes a variety of misleading declarations about CBMW. For example, Byrd claims to have “found a CBMW document from 2001 on their position on the Trinity, connecting ESS directly to the complementarian position” (100). She claims that it is an “official statement” by CBMW endorsing ESS (121). That is false. The document in question is an old article published in *The Journal for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*. But this article does not represent CBMW’s position on the matter.

The Council has never approved any official statement endorsing ESS. Byrd’s case against CBMW relies on there having been some official endorsement of ESS at CBMW, but that has never happened.<sup>10</sup> Many of the council members have *never* held to any version of ESS (however it is defined) and would resist any implication that they have. But Byrd misrepresents this. The only official statement that I am aware of is one that the CBMW board adopted in the wake of the Trinity debate in 2017, in which the board voted to affirm the Nicene Creed as defining its position on the Trinity.<sup>11</sup>

In any case, Byrd’s argument falls flat because complementarianism neither stands nor falls on speculative parallels with the Trinity. Complementarians (and egalitarians for the record) have drawn such analogies over the years, but that has never been an essential ingredient of complementarianism. Readers should take a look at the *The Danvers Statement* and note that it doesn’t mention the Trinity at all.<sup>12</sup> That is not to say that the Trinity is unimportant. There are lots of important doctrines not mentioned in Danvers. It is simply saying that analogies to the Trinity are not the emphasis of what the Bible teaches about gender and sexuality. If everyone who holds an ESS position were to cease holding that position today, the biblical case for complementarianism wouldn’t be diminished at all. For Byrd to think that she has somehow weakened the complementarian case by opposing ESS is mistaken.<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps the most important aspect of Byrd’s book is how it fits into the broader conversation among evangelicals about complementarianism. What is Byrd doing in the bigger picture? She’s providing one possible doorway for a generation of complementarians to exit complementarianism. These are

people who, on the one hand, read their Bibles and recognize that it makes *some* distinction between the roles given to men and women—so they can't go *all* the way to egalitarianism. But, on the other hand, they don't like what they see in certain versions of complementarianism. A slightly more cynical take is that they're more shaped by our culture's androgyny and sharp disdain of any distinctions between men and women than they realize, even as they ironically accuse complementarianism again and again of doing this.

But never mind the more charitable or cynical take. Either way, there's a generation looking for a doorway, and Byrd provides it. Which means, she doesn't really need to make good arguments. She doesn't need to do careful exegesis. She can invoke whatever sources she wants. Why? Because she's got a pre-made audience. This audience is ready to jump and is just looking for a reasonably intelligent pretext for doing so.

It's often this way in popular Christian books. They tap into something people are already feeling. This was true of Rob Bell's material. It was true of Donald Miller's *Blue Like Jazz*. To be sure, both writers are extremely gifted. But many gifted writers never get noticed. Which ones do? The ones that articulate what people are already feeling, so that they can identify with it.

I don't know how popular Byrd's book will prove to be, but she's sharp, and she's tapping into something. Yet here's the catch. The bad arguments, even when brilliantly presented and popular in their moment, don't last. Where are Rob Bell and Donald Miller today? And their arguments? The world has moved on, and the only thing left behind are a vast number of sheep who were led astray a decade ago. Who knows how those sheep are faring in the faith today?

I predict arguments like Byrd's will prove over time to be a briefly held way-station on the movement from narrow complementarianism to egalitarianism. Readers who do not wish to take that journey should be cautious about Byrd's book.

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1. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
  2. Full disclosure, I currently serve as the President of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW).
  3. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991).

4. *The Nashville Statement* can be read here: <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>.
5. In this essay, I refer to two different “camps” within the complementarianism—narrow and broad. Narrow complementarians believe that our application of complementarian principles should be limited to the church and the home. Pastors should be men, and husbands should lead their homes. Broad complementarians have argued that the Bible teaches us a much broader application of complementarian principles—broader application in the church and the home and broader application in society at large. Kevin DeYoung has written to me privately confirming that he is the one to have coined this terminology at a private speakers’ meeting for Together for the Gospel a few years ago. As best as he and I can tell, the first print reference to the terminology appears in Jonathan Leeman, “A Word of Empathy, Warning, and Counsel for ‘Narrow’ Complementarians,” *9Marks Journal*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-word-of-empathy-warning-and-counsel-for-narrow-complementarians/>.
6. Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 21.
7. Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).
8. E.g., Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015).
9. Bryan Chapell et al., “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eight General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America” (Presbyterian Church in America, 2020), 12.
10. The view sometimes labelled as ESS does not really appear in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, except perhaps in an appendix that Wayne Grudem wrote on the Greek term *kephalē*. I say “perhaps” because what Byrd describes as ESS is not what appears in that appendix. Byrd describes ESS this way: “This doctrine teaches that the Son, the second person of the Trinity, is subordinate to the Father, not only in the economy of salvation but in his essence” (101). But this is not at all what appears in Grudem’s appendix. Grudem writes that “the doctrine of the ‘eternal generation of the Son’ has been taken to imply a relationship between the Father and the Son that *eternally* existed and that will always exist—a relationship that includes a subordination in role, but not in essence or being... The orthodox doctrine has always been that there is *equality in essence and subordination in role* and that these two are consistent with each other.” See Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of *kephalē* (‘Head’): A Response to Recent Studies,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 457. To describe Grudem’s position as an outright denial of the Son’s equality with the Father would be a mischaracterization. Even in disagreement, charity requires describing an opponent’s position in terms that they would recognize. I think Byrd has failed at this in describing her opponents’ views on ESS.
 

No matter how one interprets Grudem’s appendix, this still doesn’t constitute an official endorsement of ESS on the part of CBMW. As the preface to *RBMW* states: “We must say here that the positions advocated in the chapters are those of the individual authors. Yet the authors share a common commitment to the overall viewpoint represented in the book, and in every case the editors felt that the chapters were consistent with the position endorsed by the Danvers Statement.” See John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), xv. The doctrinal unity of *RBMW* is the Danvers Statement, not any individual interpretation or position advocated in *RBMW*.
11. That statement can be read here: <https://cbmw.org/about/statement-of-faith/>.
12. *The Danvers Statement* can be viewed on the CBMW website: <http://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>.
13. For more along these lines, see Denny Burk, “Mere Complementarianism,” *Eikon* 1, no. 2 (2019): 28–42; Denny Burk, “My Take-Away’s from the Trinity Debate,” *Denny Burk: A Commentary on Theology, Politics, and Culture* (blog), August 10, 2016, <https://www.dennyburk.com/my-take-aways-from-the-trinity-debate/>.