

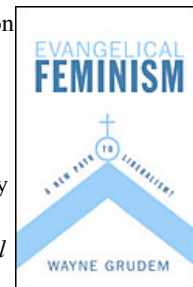
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A New Path to Theological Liberalism? Wayne Grudem on Evangelical Feminism

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Are American evangelicals charting a new path into theological liberalism? That is the serious question posed by Wayne A. Grudem in *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* This new book is one of the most urgently needed resources for evangelical Christianity, and it represents one of the most insightful and courageous theological works of our times.



Wayne Grudem is no stranger to controversy. Currently Research Professor of Bible and Theology at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona, Grudem is the author of several important volumes on a range of theological issues. Most importantly, he is the author of his own *Systematic Theology* and *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*. He also co-edited the landmark volume, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, with John Piper.

In *Evangelical Feminism*, published by Crossway Books, Grudem argues that evangelical feminism now represents one of the greatest dangers to the continued orthodoxy of the evangelical movement. “I am concerned that evangelical feminism (also known as “egalitarianism”) has become a new path by which evangelicals are being drawn into theological liberalism,” he explains.

In this new book, Grudem considers twenty-five different patterns of argument put forth by evangelical feminists, and demonstrates that every single one of them either contradicts or compromises the authority of Scripture.

In considering the arguments put forth by evangelical feminists, Grudem is careful to avoid *ad hominem* attacks on egalitarian scholars and spokespersons. Instead, he considers each of their arguments with considerable scholarly care and attention, drawing the logical conclusions from the methodological assumptions the egalitarian scholars embrace.

At the same time, Grudem is careful to specify and name the scholars whose proposals he considers, and the book is carefully footnoted and documented so that readers can follow the arguments for themselves. Grudem’s use of the term “theological liberalism” is certain to be controversial. After all, the very genesis of the evangelical movement in North America was grounded in an effort to avoid the errors of theological modernism and liberalism that had already, by the midpoint of the last century, overtaken the mainline Protestant denominations. Grudem defines theological liberalism as “a system of thinking that denies the complete truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God and denies the unique and absolute authority of the Bible in our lives.” In defining evangelicalism over against theological liberalism in this way, Grudem returns to the Scripture Principle that stood as foundational to the evangelical movement.

Grudem is equally careful in defining evangelical feminism as “a movement that claims there are no unique leadership roles for men in marriage or in the church.”

A work like *Evangelical Feminism* has been desperately needed, and Grudem's new book arrives just in time. A new generation of younger evangelicals is facing the challenge of evangelical feminism just as the current and the larger culture are moving even more swiftly against biblical authority. Grudem understands that the temptation toward evangelical feminism is the same as that which has attracted so many theologians, pastors, and denominations in recent decades. As a matter of fact, he correctly observes that "evangelical feminists today have adopted many of the arguments earlier used by theological liberals to advocate the ordination of women and to reject male headship in marriage." Interestingly, Grudem provides an historical overview which traces the emergence of evangelical feminism and egalitarian theory to 1974, when Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty published their work, *All We're Meant to Be* and Paul Jewett of Fuller Theological Seminary published *Man as Male and Female*. As Grudem observes, "While egalitarian positions have been evoked since the 1950s by theologically *liberal* Protestant writers, no *evangelical* books took such a position until 1974."

The mainline Protestant denominations began to ordain women in the mid-1950s, and it took some evangelicals less than twenty years to move in the same direction. Grudem's concern is to demonstrate that the hermeneutical moves necessary to justify the ordination of women to the pastorate subvert biblical authority. Furthermore, these same interpretive maneuvers open the door for a complete reshaping of Christianity.

In a brief historical analysis, Grudem demonstrates that denominations move through "a predictable sequence" of theological liberalism. First, biblical inerrancy is abandoned. Then, in turn, the denomination endorses the ordination of women, rejects biblical teaching on male leadership in marriage, sidelines pastors who are opposed to the ordination of women, approves homosexual conduct as morally valid in at least some cases, ordains homosexuals, and elects homosexuals to "high leadership positions in the denomination."

As Grudem observes, the Episcopal Church USA has, to this point, been alone in taking this sequential progression to its ultimate conclusion with the election of an openly gay bishop. Nevertheless, virtually all of the mainline Protestant denominations are embroiled in deep conflict over these very same questions. Indeed, these denominations have already moved so far along this line of progression that stopping at any point short of the ordination of homosexuals to ministry appears purely arbitrary.

The heart of *Evangelical Feminism* is a consideration of the patterns of argument put forth by advocates of egalitarianism. Some evangelical feminists simply deny the authority of the Genesis account of creation, at least as this account deals with the creation of man and woman. Some, like Rebecca Groothuis argue that the Genesis account tells us "nothing about God's view of gender" because the gender issues are simply rooted in the "patriarchal" nature of the Hebrew language. Of course, this means that biblical inerrancy is now compromised by the assertion that we cannot actually trust the language accurately to convey what God intended. Similarly, other figures argue that Genesis 1-3 can be relativized on the issue of gender relations by arguing that parts of the Genesis account are nothing more than literary devices.

Egalitarian theorists must deal with the Apostle Paul, and Grudem traces the move of Jewett and others in claiming that Paul must be understood as limited in his understanding of gender relations due to his own rabbinical training and the fact that he had not carefully resolved these issues by the time he wrote his epistles. Grudem documents how some figures make this argument by suggesting, for example, that Paul incorrectly understood Genesis 2-3, or that he willingly presented what he knew to be a false argument in order to reach his audience. As Grudem explains, if the Bible is the Word of God, then Paul's interpretations of the Old Testament are also God's interpretations "of his own Word."

Again and again, Grudem allows the advocates of egalitarianism to reveal their own efforts to get around the clear teachings of Scripture on the different roles assigned to men and women. Gordon Fee, for example, argues that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 are "certainly not binding for Christians" because these verses, he argues, were not actually written by Paul, but were additions of a later scribe. As Grudem demonstrates, not one single ancient manuscript has ever omitted these verses.

One of the most important sections in *Evangelical Feminism* is Grudem's consideration of the so-called "trajectory hermeneutics" now gaining favor in many evangelical circles. Grudem traces this hermeneutic to Krister Stendahl, a former dean at Harvard Divinity School. As far back as 1958, Stendahl was arguing that the church must not be trapped in a first century understanding of gender issues, but must press forward to a new reality, even as the New Testament pressed beyond the Old. Thus, evangelical figures such as R.T. France have argued for the ordination of women on the

basis of a “historical trajectory” traced from the Old Testament through the New Testament and pointing beyond to the present age.

This approach is made clear by David Thompson in a 1996 article: “Sensing the direction of the canonical dialogue and prayerfully struggling with it, God’s people conclude that they will most faithfully honor his Word by accepting the target already anticipated in Scripture and toward which the Scriptural trajectory was heading rather than the last entry in the biblical conversation.”

As Grudem observes, “This means that the teachings of the New Testament are no longer our final authority. Our authority now becomes *our own ideas of the direction the New Testament was heading* but never quite reached.”

At this point, a crucial question arises. If this hermeneutical method is legitimate, how can we stop at the ordination of women? This is the very argument made by proponents of normalizing homosexuality and ordaining homosexuals to the ministry. If the New Testament is to be superseded by a later reality based in a more modern understanding, how can the church justify relativizing some texts without relativizing others?

Grudem also offers a careful critique of William Webb’s “redemptive-movement” approach, which, as he observes, casts the entire ethical structure of the New Testament into doubt. Grudem goes to some length to demonstrate that Webb’s approach undermines the church’s ability even to understand the New Testament text. Webb’s cumbersome and elaborate criteriology for deciding these issues puts the question outside the reach of all but a tiny priesthood of scholars. Even more importantly, it points to something outside the New Testament as our authority. As Grudem notes, this is “a huge step down the path toward liberalism.” In other chapters, Grudem considers the fact that many evangelical feminists claim the right to prioritize certain biblical texts, while relativizing others. Others attempt to dismiss certain passages as “disputed” in order to eliminate their functional authority in today’s church. Grudem effectively undermines these arguments, showing once again that the acceptance of these arguments requires the subversion or outright rejection of biblical authority. These maneuvers are absolutely incompatible with an affirmation of biblical inerrancy.

In a series of capable considerations, Grudem looks to a host of alternative arguments made on behalf of the ordination of women, ranging from those who claim an authority of experience or “calling” above Scripture to others who claim that women can teach and preach in the church so long as they do so under a male pastor’s authority.

Finally, Grudem returns to the issue of homosexuality, arguing that the hermeneutic employed to advocate egalitarianism leads, if pressed consistently, to the normalization of homosexuality as well. “The approval of homosexuality,” he notes, “is the final step along the path to liberalism.”

The great value of Wayne Grudem’s new book is its combination of cogent argument and fair presentation. Grudem is careful to acknowledge that many, if not most, evangelical feminists have not moved completely along the trajectory toward the full embrace of theological liberalism. Nevertheless, his surgical approach to their theological arguments and hermeneutical proposals reveals the clear and present danger to evangelical orthodoxy posed by egalitarian theory and practice. *Evangelical Feminism* is truly a tract for the times—a manifesto that should serve to awaken complacent evangelicals to the true nature of the egalitarian challenge. Furthermore, the book serves as an arsenal of arguments to use in revealing the crucial weaknesses of the egalitarian proposal.

Nothing less than the future of the Christian church in North America is at stake in this controversy. Evangelicals no longer have the luxury of believing that this controversy is nothing more than a dispute among scholars. *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* has arrived just in time. Get this book quickly—and read it with care.

