

AlbertMohler.com

Hard to Believe? Biblical Authority and Evangelical Feminism

With this approach to the Bible, you can simply discard any text you dislike. Just dismiss it as a marginal comment, or deny that Paul even authored the text. This is where the denial of biblical inerrancy inevitably leads — the text of the Bible is deconstructed right before our eyes.

Wednesday, July 14, 2010

Anne Eggebroten visited Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and what she found there shocked her. As a matter of fact, she was so shocked that she wrote about that experience in the July 2010 edition of *Sojourners* magazine. Readers of her article are likely to experience a shock of their own — they will be shocked that Eggebroten could actually have been surprised by what she found there.

In “The Persistence of Patriarchy,” Eggebroten writes about “the wide reach” of complementarian views of manhood and womanhood among conservative Christians. Her article is subtitled: “Hard to believe, but some churches are still teaching about male headship.” Hard to believe?

Can anyone really be surprised that this is so? In some sense, it might be surprising to the generally liberal readership of *Sojourners*, but it can hardly be surprising to anyone with the slightest attachment to evangelical Christianity. Nevertheless, Anne Eggebroten’s article represents what I call a “*National Geographic* moment” — an example of someone discovering the obvious and thinking it exotic and strange. It is like a reporter returning from travel to far country to explain the strange tribe of people she found there — evangelical Christians believing what the Christian church has for 2,000 years believed the Bible to teach and require. So . . . what is so exotic?

She begins her article at Grace Community Church in California, where, in her words, “God is male, all the pastors, deacons, and elders are male, and women are taught to live in submission to men.” That is a snappy introduction, to be sure, but it requires some unpacking. When Eggebroten says that, at this well-known evangelical church “God is male,” she is echoing the arguments of the late radical feminist Mary Daly, who famously asserted that “if God is male, then male is God.” At Grace Community Church, as in the Bible, references to God are masculine, but God is not claimed to be male. Interestingly, she also missed the fact that Grace considers the role of the deacon in terms of service, rather than authority, so women in fact do serve as deacons with responsibility for particular ministries.

Nevertheless, Eggebroten is certainly onto something here, especially when Grace Community Church is contrasted with the Episcopal congregation visited by her husband on that same Sunday. In that church, a woman is preaching the sermon. We can’t miss the point when Eggebroten writes:

These two different worlds exist side by side: congregations where men and women are equal partners in service of Jesus Christ, and others where gender hierarchy is taught as God’s will and the only truly biblical option. On Sunday morning we all drive past one flavor of gender teaching to worship in another.



Well, on this Sunday Anne Eggebroten did *not* drive past Grace Community Church. Instead, she heard a sermon by Dr. John MacArthur, who for more than 40 years has served as pastor of the church. Beyond that, MacArthur has become one of the most respected and influential preachers of our times, with perhaps the most widely disseminated ministry of exposition in the history of the Christian church.

Eggebroten enjoyed the sermon, remarking that MacArthur's message was "excellent." She added, "I guess that's how megachurches get started." Well, one can hope.

The central part of her report from the trenches at Grace Community Church comes from an experience at a visitors' reception after the sermon. Eggebroten asks a woman there (a physical therapist with a degree from the school where Eggebroten teaches), "Is women's submission to their husbands stressed in this church?" The answer, of course, was *yes*.

It appears that Eggebroten could hardly have been surprised, for she wrote:

At least things aren't as extreme as they sound on the church Web site. There, I had listened to Anna Sanders lecture women on how to live in submission to their husbands. "We need to beat down our desire to be right and have our own way," she had said, citing John Piper, Nancy Leigh DeMoss, and Martha Peace—all authors published in the last decade. "It's his way, his rights, his expectations, and his plans. ... Be a helper."

So, there was little ground for surprise when Eggebroten asked the question at the visitors' reception. But there was more to come. She writes, "I'm stunned to find that the 300-student Master's Seminary on the church campus enrolls only men."

Well, let's see. The Master's Seminary, according to its own mission statement, "exists to advance the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping men to be pastors and/or trainers of pastors." The logic is simple and straightforward. The church believes that the Bible restricts the office of pastor to men. The Master's Seminary trains only pastors and trainers of pastors, thus it limits admissions to men. What could possibly be stunning about that?

As Eggebroten acknowledges, seminaries that train for roles beyond the pastorate may enroll women for those programs without compromising this conviction. But Master's does not offer those programs, so what is possibly shocking?

In the course of her article, Eggebroten continues her reports of conversations with members of the complementarian tribe before getting to the more deeply theological portion of her essay. In this passage, she gets to the core issue:

Here's the question: Is God permanently committed to the kinds of social hierarchy that existed in the first and second millennium B.C.E. and continued until recently, when education and voting were opened to women? Or does the vision of Paul in Galatians 3:28—"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"—take precedence?

At this point, the agenda becomes clear. Eggebroten argues that the church has simply perpetuated the patriarchal traditions of the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures that formed the social context for the early Christian church. Against these, she contrasts the Apostle Paul's beautiful declaration in Galatians 3:28 — "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

But this is the kind of sloppy and agenda-driven exegesis that reveals the desperation of those who would reject the New Testament's limitation of the office of pastor to men. In Galatians 3:28 Paul is clearly speaking of salvation — not of service in the church. Paul is declaring to believers the great good news that "in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith" [verse 26]. He concludes by affirming, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" [verse 29].

To read Galatians 3:28 the way Eggebroten reads the verse, you would have to believe that the Apostle Paul was in direct contradiction with himself, when he restricts the teaching office to men in letters such as 1 Timothy and Titus.

Or . . . you can try to deny that Paul actually wrote those latter letters. Eggebroten accuses conservative evangelicals of ignoring "evidence that the 'pastoral epistles' (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) were written in honor of Paul long after he died

and reflect a second-century debate over women's roles in the church—whether to conform to social customs for the sake of winning converts, or to advocate radical social equality (and even celibacy) in the last days before the Second Coming.”

What this reveals, of course, is the argument of many evangelical feminists that we can discard the teachings of the Pastoral Epistles. We can keep the Apostle Paul we like (taking Galatians 3:28 out of context, for example) and disregard the Paul we do not like.

Nor are the Pastoral Epistles the only biblical texts subverted by this line of argument. With reference to 1 Corinthians 14:35 (“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission”), Eggebroten suggests, among other options, that “verses 34-35 began as someone's marginal comment, later copied right into the text.”

With this approach to the Bible, you can simply discard any text you dislike. Just dismiss it as a marginal comment, or deny that Paul even authored the text. This is where the denial of biblical inerrancy inevitably leads — the text of the Bible is deconstructed right before our eyes.

“So what is the will of God for women today: silence or preaching, subjection or mutual submission?” Eggebroten asks. She adds, “Many Christians in all denominations, including evangelicals aren't even asking this question any more —yet the neo-patriarchal movement remains widespread.”

The answer to that question, as Eggebroten's essay helps to clarify, depends on your view of Scripture. In order to reach her conclusions, you must accept her evasions of the biblical text. If you are willing to do that on this question, you will be willing to do so on other issues as well. The central issue is, and will ever remain, the authority of Scripture.

Anne Eggebroten has written a fascinating report that, like so many others of its kind, reveals more about the reporter than the reported. Eggebroten teaches religion at California State University, Northridge, and she is a founding member of the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus. In her other writings she has, for example, profiled “the reality of abortion as a morally responsible choice being made by countless Christian women of all denominations.”

In what sense can any of this be bent to fit within evangelical identity? This essay reveals again how these arguments — and the magazine that publishes them — are so very distant from the beliefs of most evangelicals. If there is anything genuinely shocking about this article, it is the fact that the writer would attempt to lay claim on evangelicalism.

In yet another twisted use of Scripture, Eggebroten concludes by citing Galatians 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” As Paul asserts, in Christ we are free from the slavery of attempting to prove our righteousness by the Law. Paul is not liberating the Church from the Bible.

In the end, that is the real issue. There are Christians who would demand to be liberated from the Bible? Now *that* is what really should be shocking.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Anne Eggebroten, “[The Persistence of Patriarchy](#),” *Sojourners*, July 2010.

