

**Hermeneutical Inconsistency in Egalitarian Theology: A Critical Analysis of Pauline
Interpretations on Gender Roles and Moral Instructions**

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Proper interpretation of Scripture requires understanding that the authors wrote with specific intent. Distorting or misunderstanding the intent affects the meaning itself. This principle is essential in biblical interpretation, as the authority of Scripture relies on uncovering the intended meaning of the texts. Sometimes, interpreters attempt to convey different messages from Scripture, whether intentionally or not, rather than focusing on the literal meaning of the text. Some scholars argue that the text is not always as straightforward as it appears and use extrabiblical sources to aid in its interpretation. While some cultural or extrabiblical sources can be helpful with interpretation, one should aim to find the meaning within the text rather than overly relying on external sources. This issue is significant in the biblical discussion around the Pauline epistles.

The ongoing debate over women's roles in ministry highlights differing interpretations within biblical studies. Complementarians interpret Paul's teachings on gender and moral conduct as enduring and authoritative. Egalitarians often contextualize, reinterpret, or deny Paul's instructions on gender roles in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, while upholding the universal relevance of his moral commands. This issue raises substantial concerns regarding hermeneutical inconsistency due to an observed pattern among egalitarian theologians who affirm moral commands but reject gender roles.

Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the hermeneutical methods of egalitarian theologians when they face interpretive tensions. The following examination suggests that egalitarian readings of Pauline teachings may exhibit an inconsistency, selectively contextualizing gender-related texts while upholding a universal ethic for moral instructions. The argument below develops in three parts, including a comparison of interpretive strategies used for gender and moral texts, an evaluation of the theological implications of selective

contextualization, and an assessment of the egalitarian scholars who transitioned from contextualization to reinterpretation. The interpretation of Pauline texts and their impact on broader scriptural interpretation, particularly concerning cultural arguments in texts on sexual ethics, necessitates careful study. These topics invite further exploration of the boundaries and validity of interpretive practices within egalitarian hermeneutics. Accordingly, this paper argues that egalitarian interpretations of Pauline teachings on gender roles exhibit hermeneutical inconsistency by applying cultural contextualization to gender texts while treating moral instructions within the same epistles as universally binding.

Literature Review

Before examining the interpretive inconsistencies found in egalitarian readings of Pauline texts, it is necessary to engage with the existing scholarly literature that defends and critiques these approaches. This is necessary due to a growing number of egalitarian scholars who seek to reframe or reinterpret Pauline texts that have historically been viewed as restricting women's roles. These approaches often rely on text-critical, lexical, or sociocultural arguments that challenge the plain sense reading of the passages. While presented with scholarly rigor, such interpretations frequently reveal a hermeneutic marked by selectivity, prioritizing ideological commitments over authorial intent and canonical coherence. Below is a review and survey of representative works from egalitarian and complementarian perspectives, highlighting the hermeneutical principles and interpretive strategies that shape their conclusions.

Review of Books

William G. Witt's *Icons of Christ* offers a robust systematic theological defense of women's ordination, but lacks direct exegesis of Pauline texts. Witt explicitly states that Scripture alone is insufficient to resolve the debate and calls for theological reasoning to bridge

the gap between what Scripture meant and what it means today.¹ Witt critiques traditional interpretations, arguing that they originated from biased patriarchal church history, and advocates for a reimagined ecclesiology that includes women in all roles. While he raises some valid points, he lacks a hermeneutical framework that distinguishes between cultural practices and biblical commands, exposing the hermeneutical inconsistency that drives many egalitarians, including Lucy Peppiatt in her work, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women*.

Peppiatt's work builds upon Witt's theological research, offering rhetorical and exegetical critiques of Pauline passages. Peppiatt contends that texts such as 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 suggest Paul quotes or corrects his opponents rather than giving his instructions.² To support her arguments, she heavily relies on speculative reconstructions of Greco-Roman religious and cultural backgrounds, including links to the Artemis cult. While her approach is innovative, it raises concerns about placing too much emphasis on historical guesswork at the expense of textual clarity and canonical coherence.

Nijay Gupta's *Tell Her Story* presents a case-based examination of women in the Old Testament and early church, featuring figures such as Deborah, Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla.³ Gupta contends that these examples set a biblical precedent for women serving in teaching and leadership roles. Although his arguments are often insightful, Gupta occasionally minimizes exegetical challenges to his position. For example, regarding Junia, he gives little attention to Greek syntactical counterarguments, instead favoring supportive patristic interpretations. Similar

¹ William G. Witt, *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women's Ordination* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 3,7.

² Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 58-76.

³ Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2023), 3.

to Peppiatt and Witt, Gupta emphasizes theological and historical considerations over rigorous hermeneutical consistency.

Collectively, these egalitarian works employ an interpretive strategy that re-examines traditional gender roles through theological perspectives and sociocultural contexts. However, this approach highlights a challenge in applying a uniform hermeneutic to gender-related passages, raising questions about their interpretive treatment in comparison to other Pauline instructions.

Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger's book *God's Design for Man and Woman* and Gregg Allison's *Complementarity* offer complementarian perspectives on gender roles.⁴ The Köstenbergers develop their argument from Genesis through Revelation, providing a biblical-theological overview of gender roles with practical applications for contemporary churches.⁵ They include historical and cultural contexts where relevant, with a focus on the biblical text. Allison's work examines complementarity from historical, modern, biblical, and theological viewpoints, discussing both unity and distinction between sexes as part of God's created order and applying this framework to scriptural commands. Both works employ a grammatical-historical method to address egalitarian arguments and present their interpretation of scriptural coherence, contrasting with differing approaches in egalitarian literature.

Review of Articles

Richard Fellows and Joseph Wilson both challenge the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, a passage prohibiting women from speaking in church. Fellows argues that these

⁴ Gregg Allison, *Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence* (Brentwood, TN: B&H, 2025), xv-xviii.

⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret E. Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 17-19.

verses were not originally part of Paul's letter but were added later by a scribe, likely influenced by proto-patriarchal tendencies in the early church. He builds his case primarily on so-called internal inconsistencies and the unusual reversal of the names Prisca and Aquilla in 1 Corinthians 16:19, which he sees as indicative of scribal influence and redaction aimed at reducing female prominence.⁶ In a similar vein, Wilson claims that the Western text-type manuscript tradition portrays Paul as a chauvinist through interpolations such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. He asserts that these interpolations were not part of the earliest text traditions but rather function to align Paul with Greco-Roman patriarchy.⁷ Both articles propose that later textual corruptions, rather than Pauline theology, account for the restrictive tone of specific passages, offering a text-critical foundation for egalitarian reinterpretation.

However, these conclusions often rely on speculative reconstructions of manuscript transmission and impose ideological motives onto scribes without sufficient textual warrant. Such efforts, though scholarly, risk undermining the stability of the biblical text and opening the door to subjective deletions based on modern ethical preferences.

Jamin Hübner and Philip Payne represent a second line of egalitarian scholarship that focuses on the lexical and grammatical features of Pauline texts. In "Revisiting the Clarity of Scripture in 1 Timothy 2:12," Hübner argues that the passage's meaning is not clear and the traditional readings are linguistically and syntactically dubious.⁸ He questions the traditional

⁶ Richard G. Fellows, "The Interpolation of 1 Cor. 14.34–35 and the Reversal of the Name Order of Prisca and Aquilla at 1 Cor. 16.19," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47, no. 2 (2024): 179–217.

⁷ Joseph A. P. Wilson, "Recasting Paul as a Chauvinist within the Western Text-Type Manuscript Tradition: Implications for the Authorship Debate on 1 Corinthians 14.34–35," *Religions* 13, no. 5 (2022): 432–449.

⁸ Jamin Hübner, "Revisiting the Clarity of Scripture in 1 Timothy 2:12," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 1 (2016): 97–117.

interpretation of the prohibition against women teaching or exercising authority over men, claiming that evangelical assumptions about scriptural clarity in this verse are misplaced. In another article, Hübner targets the key term *authentēō* (αὐθεντεῖν), often translated as “to have authority.” He concludes that the word likely carried a negative connotation, such as “to dominate” or “to usurp authority,” thereby suggesting Paul addresses a specific kind of abusive behavior rather than general ecclesial structure.⁹ Payne complements Hübner’s approach by focusing on the coordinating conjunction *οὐδὲ* in 1 Timothy 2:12. He argues that *οὐδὲ* links the prohibition against teaching and *authentēō* as a unified idea. He believes that Paul’s concern is with a particular kind of teaching that is domineering, not with all teaching by women.¹⁰ Payne’s argument depends heavily on linguistic constructions that are debated even among scholars who accept egalitarian conclusions.

Taken together, the reviewed scholarship reveals a deep hermeneutical divide in contemporary biblical interpretation. Egalitarian scholars frequently reinterpret gender-specific Pauline texts through cultural reconstructions, semantic revision, or textual skepticism—often subordinating exegetical clarity and theological consistency to modern ethical ideals. In contrast, complementarian approaches emphasize a more uniform application of biblical principles across both gender and moral teachings. This tension reveals a recurring pattern: egalitarian interpretations often employ selective hermeneutics in their application of gender roles while maintaining the universality of Paul’s moral commands. Such inconsistency calls for further examination. The following section explores this interpretive imbalance by comparing how

⁹ Jamin Hübner, “Translating Αὐθεντέω (*authentēō*) in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 2 (2015): 16–24.

¹⁰ Philip B. Payne, “1 Tim 2.12 and the Use of οὐδὲ to Combine Two Elements to Express a Single Idea,” *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 2 (2008): 235–253.

egalitarian theologians treat gender-related and moral instructions within the same Pauline epistles, highlighting the theological and methodological implications of this selective approach.

Comparative Exegesis of Gender Roles and Moral Instructions in Pauline Texts

The first step in analyzing egalitarian hermeneutics is to examine how they interpret specific Pauline teachings. This section reviews the exegetical work of several egalitarian scholars. The goal is to demonstrate that egalitarian scholars employ diverse interpretive methods in analyzing particular texts. These scholars aim to interpret the Scriptures correctly and apply them accurately for the church, but adjust their methods when dealing with specific texts. This can become troublesome to many because, as Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard wrote, “proper hermeneutics” leads to faithful application and understanding.¹¹

Furthermore, they stress the importance of proper hermeneutics in accurately interpreting Scripture and avoiding cultural or personal biases.¹² The examination below focuses on whether egalitarian scholars consistently apply their hermeneutics and accurately interpret what Scripture conveys. The following analysis aims to demonstrate that egalitarian scholars do not consistently apply their hermeneutics and often misinterpret what Scripture teaches.

Egalitarian Exegetical Views on Paul’s Commands of Gender Roles

A central issue with egalitarian interpretation is the inconsistent division between gender-specific and moral instructions in Paul’s writings. Craig Keener acknowledges that Scripture usually “address[es] people in particular historical settings,” then states that some of those

¹¹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 63.

¹² Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction*, 63.

principles, gender roles, are not universally binding, like those on sexual morality.¹³ In another writing, Keener makes an interesting statement when he asks how one can “distinguish between passages that are situation-specific, and those that should be universally applied?”¹⁴ Keener answers this by saying that knowing the first-century culture allows one to know what is universally applied and what is not.¹⁵ From Keener’s interpretive method, one begins to see how egalitarians interpret Scripture: they allow outside sources to tell them what is applicable and what is not. Using culturally relevant sources may help one understand aspects of Scripture, but using them to interpret what is applicable today is potentially dangerous. It is dangerous because one may then impose a meaning on the text that the text does not support.

The understanding of a text is found through its meaning, even if the purpose is unclear. Purpose reveals itself through meaning, which dictates how to apply the text. If meaning derives from purpose, the text may not hold relevance for contemporary church contexts. Geisler frames it like this, “if the application (how) of a passage is limited to the purpose (why), which really determines the meaning (what), then there is no way to preach (and apply) much of the Bible to most believers in the world today.”¹⁶ Geisler further argues, “the *what* (meaning) is absolute, but the *how* (application) is relative to the culture.” Geisler argues that using the purpose of Scripture to determine its application is flawed because if the application changes, then the meaning and truth of Scripture also change, making it non-absolute and subject to interpretation.¹⁷

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), xv.

¹⁴ Craig Keener, “Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:8-15,” *Priscilla Papers* 12, no. 3 (1998): 11.

¹⁵ Keener, *Interpreting*, 11.

¹⁶ Norman L. Geisler, “The Relation of Purpose and Meaning in Interpreting Scripture,” *Grace Theological Journal* 5, no. 2 (1984): 240.

¹⁷ Geisler, “The Relation of Purpose and Meaning,” 240.

Egalitarians seem to disagree with this understanding. Lucy Peppiatt, for example, argues that in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Paul addresses only the women influenced by the Artemis cult, commanding them to learn quietly, but not all women. She assumes cultural context because texts of that time used the same or similar words.¹⁸ Towner appears to agree with this in his discussion surrounding 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Towner states that piecing together the situation in Ephesus in the first century is like “art restoration.”¹⁹ However, Towner argues that no sources give reason to believe these verses address a “unique problem.”²⁰ He argues this even though he holds a view very close to Peppiatt’s that Paul permitted women to teach as long as they did not teach heresy.²¹

Peppiatt not only allows cultural context to override the plain structure and grammar of the text but also dismisses any scholarly concerns that, upon reading the text of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, any Artemis cultic aspects are without merit.²² Thomas Schreiner argues that the text of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 does not mention aspects of this cult. He further argues that anyone who reads this into the text has read background information from an “alleged historical situation” into the text, committing a “mirror reading.”²³ Peppiatt brushes off this argument, arguing it is strange, with all the cultural understanding, that anyone would deny the text is about the women coming

¹⁸ Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's*, 146-48.

¹⁹ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 194.

²⁰ Towner, *Letters to Timothy*, 195.

²¹ Towner, *Letters to Timothy*, 199-200.

²² Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's*, 146.

²³ Thomas R. Schreiner, “A Response to Linda Belleville,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Rev. ed. Ed. Stanley N. Gundry and James R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 108.

out of the Artemis cult.²⁴ Towner also allows cultural thoughts and arguments to sway his understanding, arguing that Paul prohibited a group of “wealthy women from teaching.”²⁵ He then develops an argument based on other Pauline writings that women taught throughout the churches in the first century and that Galatians 3:28 makes it clear all are equal in the church, but women of wealth, inspired by heresy, or those behaving like Roman women were not to try and assume authority over men in the church until they had learned correctly.²⁶

Some egalitarian interpreters reject 1 Timothy as Paul’s writing because it did not receive attribution to Paul until around 180 BC.²⁷ Wilson further argues that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 echoes 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and not the other way around, and this is strange because the Pastor, so-called by Wilson, should have known that Paul was refuting the Corinthians in that passage.²⁸ Wilson not only teaches that the passage in 1 Timothy is not of Paul but that it reverses Paul’s original position in the letters to the Corinthians.²⁹ Wilson says that because he reads 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as a letter from Corinth, and verse 36 is a rebuke from Paul.³⁰ He bases this argument upon the Greek structure of the “*etas*, disjunctive particles of separation bracketing the first clause.”³¹ Wilson states that this means Paul was shocked by the statement in verses 34-35, which instructs women to remain silent and learn from their husbands at home.

²⁴ Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s*, 146

²⁵ Towner, *Letters to Timothy*, 200.

²⁶ Towner, *Letters to Timothy*, 218-23.

²⁷ Wilson, *Recasting Paul*, 437.

²⁸ Wilson, *Recasting Paul*, 437.

²⁹ Wilson, *Recasting Paul*, 437.

³⁰ Wilson, *Recasting Paul*, 432.

³¹ Wilson, *Recasting Paul*, 435.

Craig Keener does not take this extreme approach in his interpretation of the text, but he does raise some interesting points. He argues that this is for the women, but in the way of the exercise of Christian liberty in homes, rather than causing another to stumble.³² He further argues that the women probably asked unlearned questions because only boys received law teaching during their upbringing.³³ Ultimately, Keener argues that Paul did this as a way to settle controversy because cultural social conventions dictated it, and if this were a permanent restriction, then Paul would have had contradictions in his writings.³⁴

Conversely, Gordon Fee argues that these texts were interpolations, not part of the original writing, but placed in the text. He bases this argument on textual evidence that these verses appear in two different locations in several manuscripts, after verse 33 in some and after verse 40 in others.³⁵ Fee suggests that the scribes who copied and did not decide on the text added this.³⁶ Payne supports this, noting that some manuscripts, such as Codex Fuldensis, lack these verses entirely.³⁷ Fee concurs with Payne that these verses are later additions, as they disrupt Paul's argument and mirror 1 Timothy 2:11-12, suggesting a scribe added them to align

³² Craig S. Keener, *1 Corinthians*, Cambridge New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 118.

³³ Keener, *1 Corinthians*, 119.

³⁴ Keener, *1 Corinthians*, 118, 121.

³⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 782.

³⁶ Fee, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, 780.

³⁷ Philip B. Payne, "Fuldensis, Sigla for Variants in Vaticanus, and 1 Cor. 14.34-5." *New Testament Studies* 41, no. 2 (1995): 240.

Paul's teachings.³⁸ Fee concludes that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is almost certainly not authentically Pauline.³⁹

These egalitarian scholars present detailed arguments that examine the texts to suggest that the plain reading may not be as straightforward as it appears. This raises the question: Do they apply the same approach to the Scripture passages on sexual morality within Paul's epistles?

Egalitarian Exegetical Views of Paul's Moral Commands

While egalitarian scholars often contextualize or reinterpret Paul's instructions on gender roles, they frequently affirm his moral teachings, particularly those related to sexual ethics and personal conduct, as universally applicable. Within this method, one finds a hermeneutical inconsistency, as the same method of cultural contextualization is not applied equally across Paul's epistles.

For example, in 1 Timothy 1:8-11, Paul outlines moral instructions that include prohibitions against sexual immorality, lying, and murder, all standards that egalitarians uphold as timeless truths. Philip Towner links this argument to the Decalogue, suggesting it is a timeless, universal teaching and that Paul associates it with any violation of sound doctrine.⁴⁰ However, when it comes to 1 Timothy 2:8-15, the literal hermeneutic shown for 1 Timothy 1:8-11 becomes problematic. For example, Towner argues that the gender role texts that say, "A woman must learn in quietness, in all submission," are culturally specific, but then argues that these commands are timeless (1 Tim. 2:11, *Legacy Standard Bible*).⁴¹

³⁸ Payne, *Fuldensis*, 241, Fee, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, 782.

³⁹ Fee, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, 792.

⁴⁰ Towner, *Letters to Timothy*, 129.

⁴¹ Towner, *Letters to Timothy*, 200, 218-23.

Craig Keener treats Paul's moral teachings as normative. In his discussion on 1 Corinthians 6:9-21, Keener argues that everyone should follow Paul's moral commands because of their connection to the law and the Christian's connection to Christ's body, which they do not want to defile through inappropriate behavior.⁴² Keener then spends some time discussing the cultural practices of sexual immorality in Corinth. He noted that prostitution was legal, a good source of tax income, and widely practiced by Greeks.⁴³ Here, one sees the inconsistencies of his hermeneutic on display.

Commenting on commands to women in Paul's writings, Keener allows cultural aspects to shift his thinking, saying that not all of Paul's words in his letters carry universal authority.⁴⁴ Since this was also an issue in Ephesus, Paul advised Timothy not to permit women to teach. However, Keener suggests that this was only an analogy referring to the uneducated women of that time and that this principle still applies today.⁴⁵ What made him change in this instance? While Keener delves deeply into his discussions and provides numerous scriptural reasons, he ultimately shifts his hermeneutic. Paul could have utilized the Old Testament in an analogy form for his moral commands, just as Keener says he does in his gender commands. One can only tell this by their decision and not by the text.

Keener's affirmation of moral instruction contrasts with his and other egalitarian treatments of gender roles. They explain away gender roles by using cultural context or extravagant explanations of how Paul interpreted the Old Testament. All while maintaining that

⁴² Keener, *1 Corinthians*, 54-55, 58-61.

⁴³ Keener, *1 Corinthians*, 59.

⁴⁴ Keener, *Interpreting*, 11-12, and Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, xv.

⁴⁵ Craig Keener, "How Does Paul Interpret Eve in 1 Timothy 2," *Priscilla Papers* 11, no. 3 (1997): 11-12, and Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 116-21.

the moral commands are unchanging truths, even though many Scriptures in the Old Testament point to men having leadership roles (i.e., the development of Kings in Israel, all priests being men). However, they shift their hermeneutics and argue that each command differs, even if it is not immediately apparent in the text.

Glen Scrogie correctly admits that the issue between egalitarians and complementarians is not necessarily about infallibility but hermeneutics.⁴⁶ Scrogie further argues that the hermeneutics of egalitarians is revisionistic in that they employ “revisionist strategies.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, they seek the “true meaning and intent” and “restrict the application of a biblical imperative to its unique historical setting.”⁴⁸ Sadly, sometimes, this method can lead to one interpreting the moral commands similarly, which, as Stackhouse wrote, has allowed many to use these methods to promote homosexuality.⁴⁹ One reason this may happen is due to the accepted belief among many egalitarians that one can never be certain of having the correct interpretation of a passage.⁵⁰

William Witt has argued extensively that it is not the interpretation that leads one into aberrant theology but the person’s theology.⁵¹ While Witt’s point is valid, the selective hermeneutic mentioned above could lead to this thinking. If one says Scripture means one thing in one part of an epistle, it opens the possibility of interpreting any disliked Scripture similarly.

⁴⁶ Glen G. Scrogie, “Tracing the Trajectory of the Spirit: Egalitarian Hermeneutics and Biblical Inerrancy,” *Priscilla Papers* 17, no. 2 (2003): 13.

⁴⁷ Scrogie, *Tracing the Trajectory*, 13.

⁴⁸ Scrogie, *Tracing the Trajectory*, 13.

⁴⁹ John G. Stackhouse. *Partners in Christ: A Conservative Case for Egalitarianism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 13.

⁵⁰ Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*, 32.

⁵¹ Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 12-15.

Theological Implications of Selective Contextualization

Egalitarian interpreters often selectively contextualize gender-specific instructions, frequently dismissing them as merely culturally bound. While often holding the moral commands as universally binding. This interpretive imbalance suggests more than mere exegetical disagreement; it exposes deeper theological assumptions that shape how Scripture is read and applied. Selective hermeneutics refers to the method of applying cultural or theological filters to particular biblical texts, often those related to gender, while treating others, particularly moral commands, as universally binding. The following section explores how this selective approach reflects underlying theological biases and, more significantly, how it risks undermining the authority and coherence of biblical teaching as a whole.

The Theological Bias of Selective Contextualization

Nijay Gupta states at the beginning of his book *Tell Her Story* that he is not setting out to write a revisionist history or “upend everything said or written before about the history of the early church.”⁵² Interestingly, even though he wrote this, the book then devotes considerable time to arguing for things that seem contrary to Scripture. Gupta spends the entirety of the book arguing that women in leadership roles should be the norm, rather than the exception. He argues that Deborah in the book of Judges is definitive proof that women were and are capable of leading.

Some of Gupta’s argument stems from the fact that the Bible devotes considerable attention to Deborah and never mentions anything negative about her.⁵³ Gupta further argues that

⁵² Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 3.

⁵³ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 12.

Deborah led Israel alone without her husband, and she alone counseled Barak and was regarded as a mother to Israel.⁵⁴ His interpretation of this singular female judge in Israel highlights a broader hermeneutical trend among egalitarian scholars. One reason this is important is that in the book of Judges, the people did what they wanted, which implies that they were not following what God desired (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Also, in the narrative surrounding Deborah and Barak, Deborah tells Barak that since he was unwilling to go into battle if she did not go with him, the glory of the battle would go to a woman (Judges 4:9). Gupta does not talk about these situations except to gloss over the fact that Deborah said the glory would go to a woman by saying Barak wanted her to go as his spokesperson.⁵⁵

Gupta interprets this narrative in support of women in leadership roles. However, his reading arguably overlooks critical textual elements, such as Barak's reluctance and the broader context of Israel's spiritual disorder. Gupta takes his view as the correct view, arguing that this interpretation is not wrong because the praise song uses the singular instead of the plural, which, in Gupta's opinion, indicates that Deborah was the one receiving praise.⁵⁶ Again, one sees a theological bias creeping into his hermeneutic with this concept. Perhaps this is part of the glory, not going to Barak, but rather to a woman. Maybe this is how God demonstrated through Israel's history what happens when people fail to heed God's call in their lives.

Whether or not the interpretation that Barak's actions serve as a source of embarrassment is accurate, the more significant issue lies elsewhere. The most crucial point is that Gupta takes isolated elements from a narrative rooted in a biblical context, which explicitly emphasizes

⁵⁴ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 13.

⁵⁵ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 14.

⁵⁶ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 15.

Israel's repeated failure to submit fully to God. Gupta not only argues this for Deborah but for many women throughout the Scriptures. For instance, he argues Phoebe was a leader because she delivered the letter to the Romans, and notes that Junia is referred to as an apostle and a notable figure in the church, though possibly not in the same sense as Paul; however, this interpretation remains a topic of debate.⁵⁷ From these arguments and others surrounding Priscilla, he makes definitive statements that, since these women were leaders—a debatable claim—then all women throughout history should have the same possibilities.⁵⁸ This approach raises important questions about the validity of the hermeneutics of egalitarian scholars.

Gupta's work exemplifies a broader trend among egalitarian scholars who employ selective hermeneutics or contextualization to construct their case against a complementarian view. Does this mean they have a hidden theological bias? Not necessarily, but it does mean they have a bias toward a specific view. In this section, theological bias does not imply a hidden desire to impose a particular interpretation; instead, it means that many scholars tend to lean into a method of interpretation that causes them to overlook what the text says in favor of what they want it to say.

Two examples of those who do this are Alan G. Padgett and William G. Witt. These two have a bias that tends to suggest Scripture is insufficient for determining the truth of a text. Padgett argues that “a plain or conventional reading of the Bible” is not enough because interpreters should look for “a spiritual sense that goes beyond the plain text of Scripture.”⁵⁹ He further argues that this is not a matter of steps, but of layers of meaning, as he believes that only

⁵⁷ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 113-27, 141-42.

⁵⁸ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 130, 132, 137.

⁵⁹ Alan G. Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 28.

portions of the Bible retain authority for today if they convey a particular Christ-centered meaning.⁶⁰ A view like this aligns well with selective hermeneutics and theological bias because it enables one to move beyond Scripture to derive meaning and has a distinctive approach to determining whether the text retains authority for today, allowing one to discard aspects that do not support it.

Witt, on the other hand, does not even suggest using hermeneutics or exegetical work to determine if the Bible calls for only men in leadership in the church. He argues that interpretation must go beyond Scripture itself into broader theological reasoning to determine biblical meaning.⁶¹ Padgett agreed with this when he wrote that “careful biblical exegesis...is not enough.”⁶² Padgett further argues that one must consult the historical documents of the church to gain a better understanding of what is right and wrong, seemingly placing more authority on the church documents than on Scripture.⁶³ Here, Witt and Padgett share a deep agreement because they both believe that a theological study will better clarify what is right and wrong within the egalitarian-complementarian debate. These two authors move beyond selective hermeneutics into selective contextualization by dismissing Scripture as the authority and placing theological arguments above it.

When Padgett works through Scripture, specifically 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, he does so in a highly selective manner, arguing for aspects that are not present. He builds his argument from the “bottom up” because he thinks a new way of reading will demonstrate that Paul was refuting

⁶⁰ Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 28-29.

⁶¹ Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 7-8.

⁶² Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 14.

⁶³ Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 14.

the aberrant theology of the Corinthians.⁶⁴ In this method, Padgett constructs an argument that aligns with his view but is inconsistent with the text. He wants everyone to believe that Paul argued against headship, claiming he did not even argue in a descending order in this text.⁶⁵ While the order from top down or bottom up begins with Christ or God, making his argument seem strange (1 Cor. 11:3), the headcoverings in this section of Scripture do present an interpretive challenge, as they are quite different from those in any other part of Scripture. Even though they present a problem, that does not detract from the text stating that there is an order in the church. Padgett argues in the stream of Peppiatt that this is Paul refuting the Corinthians, when there is no good evidence that this is a possible interpretation.⁶⁶

Interestingly, Peppiatt raises good questions about what interpreters know regarding this section.⁶⁷ Peppiatt even admits that the reconstructions she develops of the situation are speculative, with “a lot of guesswork in them.”⁶⁸ Speculation appears to be a standard method of many of the egalitarian scholars studied thus far. They often set the Bible aside to explore other forms of work in order to understand it.⁶⁹ They employ selective hermeneutics when studying Scripture, leading to what almost appears to be imaginative speculations about historical situations. These scholars seem not to allow the Scripture to interpret itself, even though Padgett

⁶⁴ Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 123.

⁶⁵ Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 122.

⁶⁶ Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's*, 68.

⁶⁷ Lucy Peppiatt, *Unveiling Paul's Women: Making Sense of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 16.

⁶⁸ Peppiatt, *Unveiling Paul's Women*, 17.

⁶⁹ Peppiatt, *Unveiling Paul's Women*, 17.

argues that the only way to find the meaning of the text is by allowing the whole Bible to contribute to the conversation.⁷⁰

Given the plausible possibility of a theological bias in egalitarian scholars' studies on gender roles, a quick review of several scholars' ideas surrounding some Pauline texts seems appropriate at this point. Keener, in his commentary on Galatians, argues that Paul's statement from Galatians 3:28, that everyone is one in Christ, means a joining to one body and a dismantling of the social structure of the time.⁷¹ Then Keener turns and argues that this social element in the text promotes equality for all, dismissing the idea that Paul wrote about the possibility of all receiving salvation, regardless of what Judaizers thought.⁷²

Keener does not deny the text's salvific focus but suggests that Paul simultaneously advanced an egalitarian social principle. An interesting concept, especially since the entire book of Galatians appears to carry weight against the Judaizers who argue that people must adhere to Jewish customs for salvation (c.f. Gal. 1:6-10; 2:11-21; 3:1-24). Additionally, the passage from Galatians 3:26 states that all are "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus," emphasizing that salvation is a crucial component of the passage. Köstenberger argues that this is about unity in diversity, rather than equality, because there is unity of all through faith in Christ, but not all are the same.⁷³ This argument is why Köstenberger previously argued that this passage has nothing to do with the church's leadership roles or equality at all, but rather with the fact that, regardless

⁷⁰ Padgett, *As Christ Submits*, 30.

⁷¹ Craig S. Keener, *Galatians*, New Cambridge New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 170.

⁷² Keener, *Galatians*, 171-73.

⁷³ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design*, 165.

of one's status, they can receive salvation and church membership.⁷⁴ Richard Hove similarly maintains that Galatians 3:28 affirms spiritual equality in Christ without eliminating functional distinctions in the home or the church.⁷⁵

Keener, a solid scholar in most instances of his works, seems to fall into the same reasoning as Vorster, who argues that Galatians 3:28 is a “revolutionary statement describing the total destruction of any form of social superiority...and the constitutional value of equality.”⁷⁶ Another instance of selective hermeneutics that falls into a theological bias. Even Scot McKnight does not argue that the text is about equality so much as an ending to viewing women as inferior, because in Christ, they are one with everyone else.⁷⁷

McKnight, in his analysis of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, notes that Paul's instructions for women to learn in silence and not teach men are context-specific, relating to circumstances in the Ephesian church, such as concerns about false teachings and possible influence from the Artemis cult. Paul's encouragement for women to learn “in silence” is about focused learning rather than prohibiting speech, suggesting that women should receive education prior to taking on teaching responsibilities.

⁷⁴ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God's Design*, 159.

⁷⁵ Richard Hove, *Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 147-48. Hove challenges the egalitarian use of Galatians 3:28 as a proof-text for abolishing gender roles, arguing that Paul's concern lies in affirming spiritual equality in justification, not in redefining functional distinctions between men and women. His exegetical work demonstrates that Galatians 3:28 addresses access to salvation across ethnic, social, and gender lines, rather than eliminating the creation-based structures of male and female roles. This interpretation highlights the importance of consistent hermeneutical application across gender and moral texts.

⁷⁶ Jakobus M. Vorster, “The Theological-Ethical Implications of Galatians 3:28 for a Christian Perspective on Equality as a Foundational Value in the Human Rights Discourse.” *In Die Skriflig: Tydskrif Van Die Gereformeerde Teologiese Vereniging* 53, no. 1 (2019): 1.

⁷⁷ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 202.

McKnight further argues that Paul addressed specific women, possibly young widows prone to gossip, comparing this to the instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Within this discussion, McKnight argues that Paul identified wealthy women as the primary problem in the church, urging them to be modest and refrain from extravagance.⁷⁸ He utilized the fictitious story from Xenophon of Ephesus, called *Ephesiaca*, which employs similar language to Paul's teachings on wealth and women, to demonstrate that the teaching is directed at women from the Artemis cult.⁷⁹ Again, one sees selective hermeneutics at work here, as he consults outside sources to determine what the text says, but in his discussion of Paul's moral commands, he does not do the same.⁸⁰ His selective hermeneutics on these passages leaves room for people to move in and take the same turn on the moral commands.

Keener allows for the same interpretive method in his work on 1 Corinthians, where he argues that the text's meaning is what it says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, but allows for contextualization to interpret chapters 11:2-16 and 14:34-35.⁸¹ In instances of the commands regarding women, Keener allows cultural possibilities to determine the meaning in the text rather than allowing Paul to speak. With this type of selective interpretation in hermeneutics, these egalitarian scholars open the door to other interpreters to reinterpret or dismiss divinely inspired instruction.

⁷⁸ Scot McKnight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 44-62.

⁷⁹ McKnight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 50-51.

⁸⁰ McKnight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 29, argues that the commands against homosexuality are based on the law and therefore are permanent.

⁸¹ Keener, *1 Corinthians*, 54-55, 92-94, 117-18.

Such an approach does not necessarily compel interpreters to adopt false beliefs, but it creates the possibility for others to develop a distorted understanding of Scripture. Witt correctly argues that this theological development does not inherently lead to heresy or heretical theology, but it is the theology itself.⁸² While this argument is valid, a hermeneutic that allows for selective interpretation can undermine the authority of the Bible. As these examples demonstrate, selective contextualization is not merely a methodological oversight; it marks a hermeneutical shift that reorients the authority of Scripture within contemporary frameworks, a shift that warrants closer attention.

Undermining of Biblical Authority from Selective Contextualization

The pattern of selective hermeneutics and contextualization among egalitarian scholars does more than shape interpretation; it redefines the authority structure of Scripture. By treating Paul's gender-specific instructions as culturally irrelevant while affirming his moral commands, one allows for the view that biblical authority is conditional, granted only when texts align with contemporary convictions. The result subtly transfers interpretation from the biblical text to modern ideological reasoning.

A clear example of how this occurs within the egalitarian framework is when John G. Stackhouse argues that experience, tradition, scholarship, and art should lead one to a better understanding of Scripture.⁸³ He believes this because he does not believe that Scripture passages have a singular meaning but multiple applications. He argues that it is foolish for someone to think they can read the Bible and understand what it says and means because of its ancientness

⁸² Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 14-15.

⁸³ Stackhouse. *Partners in Christ*, 19.

and the use of old, dead languages.⁸⁴ Another aspect of Stackhouse's hermeneutic is that he believes human reasoning can be a "check on their [complementarians'] interpretation of God's authoritative Word."⁸⁵ William G. Witt echoes and extends this line of reasoning stated by Stackhouse. Witt argues that interpreters must discern the difference between "what did it mean?" and "what does it mean?"⁸⁶ He argues that people cannot appeal to Scripture alone because it is insufficient; it requires a theological argument to support it.⁸⁷

While the utilization of scholarship, tradition, theological arguments, and even experience can aid in one's interpretation of God's Word, the individual using these as a guide must remember that they are all fallible and may lead them astray. If the Bible says something but it appears to contradict those helps, and they follow the helps over the Bible, they may very well end up in a bad theological spot. Even Stackhouse admits that many of the same arguments used to support egalitarian theology have become arguments in favor of allowing homosexuals into the pulpit.⁸⁸ Witt attempts to disagree with this statement, arguing that the argument is flawed because egalitarian interpretations do not lead to theological heresy, but rather, it is the individual's theology that is at issue.⁸⁹ One issue with this is that if one can selectively decide which commands of Scripture are authoritative for today, then what stops them from choosing to change many aspects of Scripture?

⁸⁴ Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*, 18.

⁸⁵ Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*, 22.

⁸⁶ Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 7.

⁸⁷ Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 7.

⁸⁸ Stackhouse, *Partners in Christ*, 13.

⁸⁹ Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 14-15.

One key example of this comes from the work by Christopher and Richard Hays. Richard Hays, a one-time stalwart in the evangelical theological community, who defended the biblical moral commands as effective to this day, has changed to hold that interpreters can “set aside biblical laws and teachings they deem unjust, irrelevant or inconsistent.”⁹⁰ Before this, they argue that since God sometimes changes his mind, it is fine for people to change what they read because the biblical narratives throughout the Bible point to a trajectory that allows for “mercy” in human sexuality.⁹¹

These two egalitarian scholars suggest that the Spirit leads the church beyond Paul’s understanding, displacing the text’s plain meaning with what they see as deeper moral insights. With them, Scripture becomes a witness to moral progress, rather than the source of settled truth. Perhaps these men had adopted a theology that led to these views, as Witt argued, or they simply followed the trajectory that Stackhouse suggests can occur. One thing is sure: they employed a selective hermeneutic and contextualization, which ultimately enabled a new authority over the Bible: the self.

One sees this same argument arise in Matthew Vines’ works. He discusses how ancient pagan writings discussed how same sex attraction was an expected thing in the culture.⁹² This point fits into this discussion in that Vines takes these extrabiblical writings from pagan sources and uses them to explain away the biblical teaching that people with urges toward the same sex must remain celibate as a faithful Christian.⁹³ He further argues, along with other egalitarian

⁹⁰ Christopher M. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Storyline* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), 213.

⁹¹ Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy*, 205-06.

⁹² Mathew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case for Same-Sex Relationships* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2014), 31.

⁹³ Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 31-42.

scholars, that Paul “undermined the belief that patriarchy has a place in the kingdom of God” with his arguments in Romans 16:1-2, Philippians 4:2-3, and Galatians 3:28.⁹⁴ Vines uses this argumentation, along with his discussion of same-sex attraction described in pagan works to defend his belief that patriarchy and concepts surrounding the churches view of same-sex relationships are wrong because they base them on a flawed system.⁹⁵ One final aspect of Vines’s argument that follows what the egalitarian hermeneutic may lead to is his views of Romans 1.

Vines argues that Paul wrote only about exploitative relationships, and therefore construes loving same-sex relationships as outside of Paul’s critique.⁹⁶ Vines allows for personal desires and passions to guide his interpretation and uses outside sources to define what Scripture says. He does not rest in the plain words on the page and trust that God’s word guides correctly. In his hermeneutical work, he mirrors the reinterpretations of other egalitarian scholars, subordinating them to a moral conviction about what the Scriptures say. One observes a similar hermeneutical process in which interpretive assumptions guide readings, rather than textual honesty.

Vern Poythress addresses these concerns and interpretations when he notes that the apostles wrote to be understood, as they wrote to people with a patriarchal background.⁹⁷ Poythress’s argument asserts that modern interpreters often project their own biases onto the text. He argues that too frequently, they find confirmation rather than challenge, meaning Scripture

⁹⁴ Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 92

⁹⁵ Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 94.

⁹⁶ Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 95-116.

⁹⁷ Vern S. Poythress, “Two Hermeneutical Tensions in Evangelical Feminism,” *Verbum Christi* 6, no. 2 (2019): 154.

stops being the yardstick by which one measures truth and becomes an object of revision.⁹⁸ One sees in Poythress that too often, egalitarian, selective hermeneutics and contextualization tend to undermine the authority of Scripture, even if unknowingly, in favor of the reader's authority. They incorporate modern ideas and ideals into the text and draw on outside sources to support their arguments.

As these examples demonstrate, selective hermeneutics and contextualization are not merely a methodological oversight or an exegetical preference; they mark the beginning of a more profound hermeneutical shift. What begins as an attempt to understand Paul's teachings within their historical context often progresses into a more substantial reframing of his theological intent. When interpreters assess texts through the lens of contemporary cultural values or ethical assumptions, they may inadvertently supplant the authority of the original text with their interpretive perspective. This pattern, clearly observable in the works of Stackhouse, Vines, and the Hayses, signals a movement beyond contextual explanation into doctrinal reinterpretation. The following section will examine how this shift manifests through the deliberate reframing of Paul's context, an increase in subjectivity in interpretation, and the redefinition of biblical authority in light of contemporary reasoning.

From Contextualization to Reinterpretation: A Hermeneutical Shift

The previous sections demonstrated that egalitarian scholars often apply one set of hermeneutical principles to Paul's moral commands and a different set to his instructions on gender roles. Moral texts are typically upheld as universally binding, while gender-specific texts frequently get dismissed as culturally bound or contextually irrelevant. This selective application

⁹⁸ Poythress, *Two Hermeneutical Tensions*, 154-56, 158.

of hermeneutical methods not only creates inconsistency but also signals the beginning of a more profound interpretive shift—one that moves from contextualization into reinterpretation.

The definition of reinterpretation in this section differs from the conventional theological understanding of interpreting something in a new or different light. While some material discussed here may fit that category to some extent, this reinterpretation ultimately shifts from objective analysis to subjective interpretation.

For instance, some egalitarian scholars argue that cultural circumstances in the early church led to a perspective where Paul engaged in an extended diatribe, rebuking corrupt views about women. They suggest that the commands attributed to him are not genuinely his or that he was only addressing uneducated or cultic women.⁹⁹ This approach moves beyond exegetical probability into subjective speculation.

The subjectivity inherent in these approaches not only reframes Paul's intentions and context but also allows for the rejection of other commands and raises the possibility of dismissing the authority of Scripture. As a result, such interpretations risk creating instability in biblical understanding, as the Scriptures become manipulable by the interpreter, particularly if the text challenges their theological commitments.

Hermeneutical Instability and the Decentering of Authorial Intent

One discovers an example of this subjectivity in the work of Dorothy Lee. In her book *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament*, she describes a method that at first seems correct but then delves into subjectivity. She states that the meaning of the text “resides primarily in the

⁹⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 780-92, Fellows, *The Interpolation*, 179-217, Payne, *Fuldensis*, 240, and Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's*, 146.

text as an objective reality.”¹⁰⁰ She goes awry when she says the text “always has something more” to reveal to new readers.¹⁰¹ While it is true that readers will always find new and different applications in the text with each new generation, Lee appears to go beyond application to new interpretations. She suggests that the text contains more meanings than the author intended.

Lee makes this concept clear when she utilizes Paul Ricoeur’s notion of a “surplus meaning.”¹⁰² Within this concept, she argues that through “symbols and symbolic structures of the text grounded in theological truth...lend themselves to variegated understandings.”¹⁰³ From this, she argues that the text can have more than one meaning while remaining objective.¹⁰⁴ She believes this allows the text to retain its authority and enables the reader to derive its meaning from their” cultural setting.”¹⁰⁵ Lee believes that this method enables women to engage Scripture from their perspective, drawing out a Spirit-led” surplus of meaning” that speaks to present contexts without denying the text’s objectivity. She believes that these fresh readings offer transformative insights that renew the Christian community’s understanding of the gospel for today.

Lee may say the text of Scripture cannot mean whatever the reader wants, but she claims the reader’s context and experience contribute to the meaning. Her description is a shift away from authorial intent without saying so. Her argument allows for reimagining or “illuminating

¹⁰⁰ Dorothy A. Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 8.

¹⁰¹ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 9.

¹⁰² Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 9.

¹⁰³ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 9.

the text in ways unforeseen,” which carries the risk of interpretations shaped more by contemporary perspectives than the author’s intended meaning.¹⁰⁶ Lee’s treatment of women in ministry exemplifies the culmination of trajectory hermeneutics—her hermeneutic moves from contextualization to an outright reinterpretation of Pauline teaching.

On one hand, she contends that historic “male-oriented scholarship” distorted Paul’s writings, creating interpretations that “represent a betrayal of the Pauline vision,” especially by denying women’s leadership in the church.¹⁰⁷ Lee frames traditional readings as culturally conditioned remnants of patriarchy, asserting that to “hold back the full working out of the gospel” is to resist the liberating trajectory of the gospel itself.¹⁰⁸ Then, on the other hand, Lee advances a cultural argument rooted in contemporary experience.

She argues that since women today excel in every sphere of leadership—political, professional, educational, scientific, and military—the church should mirror culture’s affirmation of women’s capacities by opening roles, including pastoral leadership, to them.¹⁰⁹ Her argument moves beyond exegesis into reinterpretation by subordinating the text’s original meaning to perceived gospel trajectories and culture. In her framework, modern social realities become hermeneutical authorities, and denying women pastoral roles is comparable to resisting cultural progress and the providential fulfillment of the gospel.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 135.

¹⁰⁸ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 187.

¹¹⁰ Lee, *The Ministry of Women*, 135.

Lee's rhetoric reflects the inherent subjectivity and instability in egalitarian hermeneutics, where the interpreter's horizon and cultural context ultimately govern the application of Scripture. While this interpretive method may not be the method that all egalitarians use in their interpretations, it is an aspect of their hermeneutics that allows them to be selective over consistent. This interpretive method is a trajectory hermeneutic that allows for theological developments beyond the author's original meaning under the guise of uncovering latent possibilities in the text.

Ronald Pierce's chapter in *Discovering Biblical Equality* provides an example of this hermeneutic. Within his chapter, "Biblical Equality and Same-Sex Marriage," Pierce's reasoning illustrates how trajectory hermeneutics can extend interpretive openness to debates such as same-sex marriage.¹¹¹ This openness highlights the broader implications of departing from authorial intent. By attaching egalitarian reasoning to debates over same-sex marriage, Pierce underscores the broader impact of shifting from authorial intent to contemporary horizons of meaning. When reinterpretation detaches from the original message, theological reasoning can stray far from the author's intent, making the interpreter rather than Scripture the source of truth.

Within this shift, Scripture is no longer the ultimate authority for the church because interpreters have taken authority over the text through their context and experience. This shift has then rendered the teaching that all Scripture is "God breathed" and able to train, equip, and prepare every person for "righteousness...[and] every good work" void because the interpreter can make Scripture say anything they desire (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In this shift, the training and

¹¹¹ Ronald W. Pierce, "Biblical Equality and Same-Sex Marriage," *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, 3rd ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westphal, and Christa L. McKirkland (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 491, 508.

equipping function of God's Word is undermined because the text no longer binds the reader, but the reader then binds Scripture to what they desire.

From Reframing to Reinterpretation: The Hermeneutical Slide in Egalitarian Readings

While many egalitarian scholars profess a high view of Scripture and a commitment to its authority, their interpretive practices often reveal a hermeneutical slide, from reframing the biblical text to reinterpreting its meaning. What begins as an effort to clarify the cultural or linguistic background of a passage can ultimately result in readings that depart significantly from the text's plain sense and authorial intent. Within this section, an examination of how such interpretive moves unfold in the work of several egalitarian scholars, beginning with Glen Scorgie's framing of the redemptive movement hermeneutic and culminating in reinterpretations that question textual authenticity or replace creation-based arguments with sociocultural reconstructions.

Glen Scorgie argues that egalitarians have the same doctrine of Scripture as complementarians, but have different approaches to the authoritative word of God that each sees as infallible.¹¹² He further argues that their view on biblical inerrancy must be demonstrated," if they are to gain ground in the conservative evangelical community.¹¹³ Scorgie then builds an argument that interpretive methods from egalitarians seek to clarify what Scripture means through examining the Greek to understand what words truly mean. In this argument, he examines several New Testament passages and one Old Testament passage from Genesis 2:18, 20, where Eve is the helper suitable for Adam. In each passage, he ultimately lands on an

¹¹² Scorgie, *Tracing*, 13.

¹¹³ Scorgie, *Tracing*, 13.

egalitarian perspective, as evidenced by his statement, “once properly understood...it is thoroughly egalitarian.”¹¹⁴

Much of Scorgie’s work stays in Scripture, but he follows a trajectory hermeneutic, saying that an interpreter needs to examine the text in a teleological manner over a static one.¹¹⁵ However, this examination, as described above, makes the reader the determiner of the meaning, even if the egalitarian scholars argue differently. Scorgie does not call this hermeneutic trajectory, but a “redemptive movement hermeneutic.”¹¹⁶ William Webb initiated the redemptive movement hermeneutic, which evaluates whether biblical commands reflect a fixed moral norm or a culturally accommodated ethic moving toward a greater ideal.¹¹⁷ Köstenberger argues that Webb moves beyond the canon of Scripture to “extrapolate the trajectory and then follow it beyond Scripture,” rather than looking in Scripture where the “definitive word on the subject” is found.¹¹⁸ Köstenberger further argues that this hermeneutic removes Scripture as the final authority because only Scripture is inspired, not the trajectories an interpreter places on the text.¹¹⁹ If egalitarians hold Scripture in the same view as complementarians, as Scorgie stated, their hermeneutic seems to suggest otherwise.

¹¹⁴ Scorgie, *Tracing*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Scorgie, *Tracing*, 16.

¹¹⁶ Scorgie, *Tracing*, 19.

¹¹⁷ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 13-18. Webb proposes that certain biblical teachings, such as slavery and gender roles, exhibit a “redemptive trajectory,” they move beyond the cultural norms of their time toward more progressive ethical applications. These dynamic teachings, Webb argues, should further advance in modern practice. In contrast, prohibitions against homosexual behavior are classified as “static” commands, grounded in universal moral principles that remain binding across all cultures. His hermeneutic seeks to discern when Scripture’s ethics are temporary accommodations and when they represent moral absolutes.

¹¹⁸ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design*, 351.

¹¹⁹ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design*, 352.

Lucy Peppiatt directly offers interpretations that only emerge when interpreters move from the text's plain statements to a trajectory-based reading. She claims Paul quoted patriarchal views in 1 Corinthians, but did so as a corrective, not a command.¹²⁰ She presents this alternative reading where Paul corrects dominant status-seeking men enforcing cultural head covering practices on women. She draws from sociocultural reconstructions suggesting the Corinthian church was shaped by Roman values of honor, shame, and hierarchy, with certain men imposing oppressive customs under the guise of religious propriety. Peppiatt makes the argument that Paul is using rhetoric in a diatribe where he has an interlocutor, in this case those who call for patriarchy, that he subtly dismantles without a direct polemic. She thus states the head covering argument is not Paul's endorsement of gender subordination, but a rhetorical rehearsal of the Corinthian position that he corrects, asserting mutuality in Christ and rejecting practices rooted in status and cultural conformity.¹²¹

However, there are several problems with this exegetical understanding. First, the exegetical flow of the text suggests a different interpretation than Peppiatt argues. In verse 2, Paul commends the church for holding firmly to the traditions he taught them. Then he goes into a discussion of some apparent issues the church had, and he wanted to correct. In this regard, Peppiatt is correct; the church was not following the order of the Lord taught by Paul. He tells them in verse 3 that there was a specific structure to the church where Christ is head of man, but God ultimately is head of all because he is head of Christ (c.f. v. 12). Paul then moves from this and structures his arguments on creation order, not Greco-Roman custom (vv. 8-9).

¹²⁰ Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's*, 55–76.

¹²¹ Lucy Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul's Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 78-84.

Although this interpretation remains subject to debate, it presents a more plausible understanding of the text than the view advanced by Peppiatt. Notably, egalitarian scholar Philip Payne contends that Paul constructs his argument based on the order of creation. Payne argues Paul grounds his instructions in creation theology, affirming the distinctiveness of male and female as integral to reflecting God's design. Men receive the exhortation not to wear effeminate hairstyles because they are the image and glory of God, and such displays symbolically reject God's moral order by blurring sexual distinctions. Conversely, women must exercise authority over their heads by keeping their hair controlled in worship, not as a sign of male authority, but as a moral obligation tied to propriety before God and his angels. Payne emphasizes that Paul's concern is not enforcing hierarchical subordination but preserving gender differentiation as a theological good, rooted in creation, and expressed through appropriate conduct in worship.¹²² Benjamin Merkle agrees that Paul wrote this to show that creation affirms "gender and role distinctions," which he ties indirectly to head coverings to illustrate that the Corinthians must uphold this distinction.¹²³

Merkle builds his argument on the belief that the Corinthians attempted to eliminate gender distinctions driven by an over-realized eschatology, the belief that God's kingdom had already arrived and rendered traditional roles, bodies, and marriage obsolete. From this, they rejected gender differentiation in worship, misapply Paul's teachings on freedom, and misunderstand spiritual maturity as transcending physical distinctions like male and female. Therefore, the head covering issue was not about attire alone but reflected the deeper theological

¹²² Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 208–218.

¹²³ Benjamin L. Merkle, "Paul's Arguments from Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 and 1 Timothy 2:13–14: An Apparent Inconsistency Answered," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 3 (2006): 528.

error that confused present spiritual realities with a future eschatological fulfillment. Which means that Paul's correction emphasizes that spiritual equality exists in Christ; the created distinctions between men and women remain meaningful and must be honored in the present age.¹²⁴ Gregg Allison reinforces Merkle and Payne's discussion when he argues that Paul's instructions uphold the equal dignity and the meaningful differentiation of men and women, which are the design for interdependence within creation and the church. His argument illustrates that this discussion is far from being a cultural artifact. Still, it is a call to maintain gender distinctions, reflecting a theological imperative rooted in Genesis, countering any attempts to erase or blur those distinctions.¹²⁵

These arguments remain grounded in the biblical text and uphold the connection to creation, without relying on trajectory-based or culturally reconstructed hermeneutics. Merkle offers a coherent explanation of Paul's instruction on head coverings, showing how it aligns with creation order while also accounting for why the practice is no longer binding today. Payne, though writing from an egalitarian perspective, demonstrates that an egalitarian reading does not inherently require extrabiblical justification. While trajectory hermeneutics pose significant challenges within biblical interpretation, the more alarming development is the claim by some scholars that certain Pauline passages are inauthentic, a move that calls the reliability of the biblical text itself into question.

Richard Fellows, Philip Payne, and Gordon Fee all argue that Paul's command for women to keep silent and be in full submission in the church in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is not

¹²⁴ Merkle, *Paul's Arguments*, 528-32.

¹²⁵ Allison, *Complementarity*, 393-394.

even from Paul.¹²⁶ Fee acknowledges that the text appears in every manuscript but then argues that even though they do, there is significant doubt as to its authenticity.¹²⁷ Payne argues that the “majority reading” of texts does not put these verses after “v. 40, we must conclude” that the manuscript evidence supports it as a variant, giving probability that it is not original.¹²⁸ Then Fellows states that even though every manuscript includes this text, “we cannot conclude from this alone that Paul wrote it since an interpolation could spread from manuscript to manuscript” until all were infected.¹²⁹

While this is possible, it is highly improbable. One reason why is that the text throughout the chapter makes way for this section to be part of the original. In verses 28, 30, and 34, Paul puts forth a threefold call for silence. This call reinforces his concern for order rather than a blanket prohibition on female participation. Köstenberger adds to this argument when he argues that this section is about an “argument to address proper decorum.”¹³⁰ While he notes that this pertains to judging prophecy, he clarifies that it is not a complete ban on women’s involvement in the church, as 1 Corinthians 11 already states that they prophesy and pray.¹³¹

While this egalitarian hermeneutical shift does not include going beyond the text to find an interpretation, it rejects the authenticity of the text. It raises a concern about the infallibility of Scripture. If every New Testament manuscript included this section, yet these scholars, amongst

¹²⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 780-82, Fellows, *The Interpolation*, 179–217, and Payne, *Fuldensis*, 240.

¹²⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 782.

¹²⁸ Payne, *Fuldensis*, 241.

¹²⁹ Fellows, *The Interpolation*, 182.

¹³⁰ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design*, 180.

¹³¹ Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design*, 180.

others, say it is an error by scribes, then this could potentially lead many to believe that Scripture contains further errors. These hermeneutical moves bring doubt upon Scripture and allow for too broad an interpretation of what else may not belong in the Bible. If this text were like that of 1 John 5:7 and only found in a few very new manuscripts, then the reliability of Scripture could hold.¹³² As it is, though, this interpretive decision, despite the evidence, can lead many to doubt the authority of Scripture.

One final aspect of egalitarian reinterpretation is in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Lucy Peppiatt argues that the discussion is about women from the Artemis cult only.¹³³ She is astounded that anyone would reject this view, given the extensive cultural understandings surrounding this concept. Whereas Schreiner, among others, states there is no evidence in the text for this view.¹³⁴

Payne gives possibly the best argument for reading 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as Paul prohibiting a specific kind of teaching, one where the women take a self-assumed authority over men, rather than forbidding all teaching by women.¹³⁵ Payne develops this argument by arguing that the conjunction οὐδὲ joins "to teach" and "to assume authority" as a single, unified prohibition, not

¹³² Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 51.

¹³³ Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's*, 146

¹³⁴ Schreiner, *Response*, 108, also S. M. Baugh, "A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century," in *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, Third Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 25-64. Baugh argues that Paul's instructions were not a response to the Artemis cult but addressed disruptions within the church, from the wealthy women of Ephesus concerning true piety in the church. He grounded his arguments in creation order rather than in local pagan influence.

¹³⁵ Payne, *1 Tim. 2.12*, 243-49.

two separate commands. He achieves this by referencing Paul's other writings, where Paul employs this conjunction to combine two expressions into a single idea.¹³⁶

While Payne contends that the conjunction οὐδὲ grammatically joins “to teach” and “to assume authority” into a single situationally specific prohibition, Merkle refutes this limitation by demonstrating that Paul's command is not grounded in the syntax, but in creation order. Merkle argues that Paul's appeal to Adam's primacy and Eve's deception is not a cultural illustration but a theological rationale that transcends local circumstances.¹³⁷ Thus, even if Payne's grammatical analysis holds, the scope and permanence of the prohibition have their foundation in Paul's creation-based reasoning, not merely the syntactical structure of οὐδὲ. Furthermore, Merkle points out that Paul provides no textual evidence that women were teaching false doctrine in Ephesus, undercutting Payne's contextual assumption that this prohibition targets a localized abuse.¹³⁸ Also, the tense of “I do not permit” in this text is in the present active, signaling an ongoing normative instruction, not a culturally limited observation. Merkle illustrates that the reinterpretive method that some egalitarians utilize is too narrow and misses the broader implications of the text. Jamin Hübner, another egalitarian scholar, makes this same argument about Payne. Hübner argues that Paul is focused on correcting a disruptive, domineering behavior inconsistent with Christian humility.¹³⁹ He further contends that *authentēō* is about self-asserting grasp for leadership, rather than a neutral exercise of leadership.¹⁴⁰ While he critiques Payne's work as being too narrow, Hübner also makes mistakes.

¹³⁶ Payne, *1 Tim. 2.12*, 235-41.

¹³⁷ Merkle, *Paul's Arguments*, 542, 548.

¹³⁸ Merkle, *Paul's Arguments*, 545.

¹³⁹ Hübner, *Translating Αὐθεντέω*, 20-22.

¹⁴⁰ Hübner, *Translating Αὐθεντέω*, 18-20.

Hübner's critical mistake is that he does not stay within the argument of the creation order as presented in the text. Instead, he steps outside of Paul's stated rationale. He appeals to the negative connotation of *authenteō* in lexical data to argue that 1 Timothy 2:12 is merely a contextual correction of improper behavior, rather than a universal principle grounded in creation. On page 19, Hübner emphasizes that the immediate context of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 involves corrective instructions regarding improper behavior, particularly regarding attitude and self-assertion. This is where he pivots from Paul's creational grounding (vv. 13-14) and reinterprets *authenteō* as a situational issue of domineering teaching, based on lexical and contextual cues, rather than adhering to Paul's explicit appeal to the order of creation.¹⁴¹

Hübner further critiques complementarian uses of 1 Timothy 2:12, stating they inconsistently apply the clarity of Scripture to the text despite its evident exegetical difficulties.¹⁴² He defines an obscure text in five criteria: 1) disputed meaning, 2) non-literal reading, 3) obscure vocabulary, 4) interpretive diversity, and 5) application difficulty.¹⁴³ He believes that 1 Timothy 2:9-15 fulfills all five of these criteria, noting especially the rare term *authenteō*, and the wide variety of interpretations even among complementarians.¹⁴⁴ He believes that complementarians elevate this passage as a definitive text against women teaching or preaching because they ignore the complexities and utilize a selective hermeneutic themselves.

Again, Hübner diverts from Paul's creational rationale and mirrors his lexical-contextual argument about *authenteō*. He emphasizes the text's perceived obscurity, highlighting his

¹⁴¹ Hübner, *Translating Αὐθεντέω*, 19.

¹⁴² Hübner, *Revisiting*, 97-98.

¹⁴³ Hübner, *Revisiting*, 102-03.

¹⁴⁴ Hübner, *Revisiting*, 105-09.

perception, and places greater emphasis on external lexical connotations over the internal structure.¹⁴⁵ His insistence that the passage is too complex to bear theological weight reflects the same methodological shift seen in his treatment of *authentēō*, sidelining Paul's explicit grounding in creation for interpretive frameworks that obscure the apostolic intent. Hübner is, in fact, guilty of the selective hermeneutics he accuses complementarians of by doing this subtle shift.

Conclusion

The above discussion has demonstrated that egalitarian interpretations of Pauline teachings on gender roles often exhibit a hermeneutical inconsistency that undermines exegetical coherence and theological stability. While affirming Paul's moral commands as universally binding, many egalitarian scholars simultaneously relegate his instructions on gender roles to culturally specific contexts. This selective contextualization is not merely an exegetical oversight but reflects a broader methodological pattern where ideological preferences and cultural reconstructions influence interpretive outcomes. Egalitarian scholars such as Lucy Peppiatt, Nijay Gupta, and Craig Keener frequently utilize sociocultural backgrounds, speculative historical reconstructions, and rhetorical strategies to minimize or dismiss the plain sense of gender-specific passages, while upholding moral teachings such as sexual ethics as transcultural and authoritative. This disparity exposes a hermeneutical tension that raises serious concerns regarding the interpretive consistency and theological consequences of such approaches.

The progression from contextualization to reinterpretation becomes evident in the trajectory hermeneutics employed by scholars like Dorothy Lee and William Webb. Lee's appeal to Paul Ricoeur's notion of "surplus of meaning" and Webb's "redemptive movement

¹⁴⁵ Hübner, *Revisiting*, 105.

hermeneutic” both illustrate a shift away from authorial intent towards reader-centered interpretations that prioritize contemporary cultural insights over the original meaning of the text. While these methods claim to uphold biblical authority, they functionally decenter the text’s meaning from its divine-human authorship and relocate authority into the evolving perspectives of the interpreter. The danger of this hermeneutical trajectory is that it creates a fluid and unstable framework wherein the application and even the meaning of Scripture becomes contingent upon cultural shifts and theological trends, rather than being grounded in the canonical text itself.

Moreover, the inconsistency in egalitarian hermeneutics becomes even clearer when examining how egalitarian interpreters approach the texts themselves, particularly passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Scholars such as Gordon Fee, Philip Payne, and Richard Fellows argue for the interpolation or contextual irrelevance of these texts, despite overwhelming manuscript evidence supporting their authenticity. By rejecting these passages as non-Pauline or culturally obsolete, egalitarian interpreters not only undermine the specific teachings on gender roles but inadvertently open the door to questioning the integrity and reliability of the biblical text as a whole. This approach risks eroding confidence in the sufficiency and infallibility of Scripture, as textual authenticity becomes negotiable when passages conflict with contemporary ethical sensibilities.

Ultimately, the selective hermeneutics employed in egalitarian readings reveal a deeper theological shift that challenges the authority of Scripture. By privileging cultural analysis, ideological concerns, and speculative reconstructions over the grammatical-historical method, egalitarian interpreters risk subordinating the Word of God to the shifting tides of human reasoning. Those who treat Scripture’s commands as binding only when they align with modern

cultural values do not safeguard its authority. Instead, theological fidelity requires a hermeneutic that consistently honors authorial intent, recognizes the coherence of Scripture's message, and resists the temptation to reinterpret divine revelation through the lens of contemporary ideology. Only by maintaining a consistent interpretive approach can the church preserve the transformative power and doctrinal stability of God's Word for all generations.

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