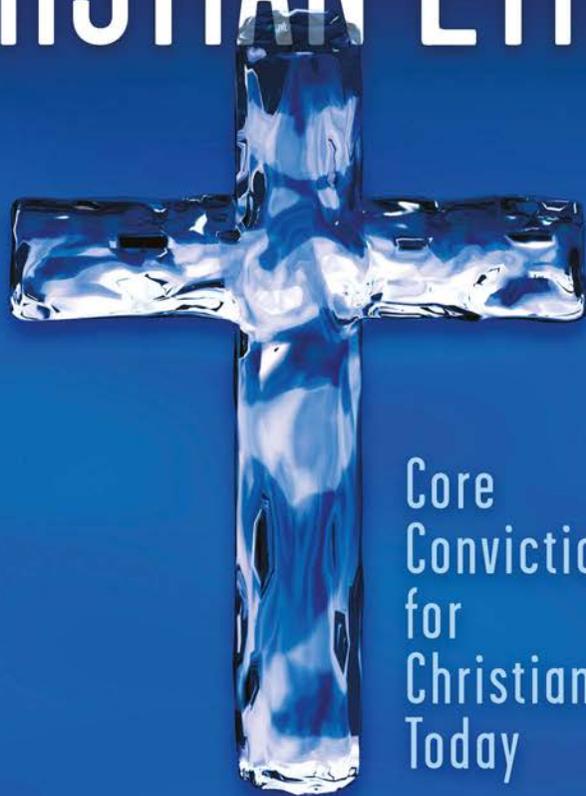


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CHRISTIAN ETHICS



Core
Convictions
for
Christians
Today



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FOREWORD BY RUBÉN ROSARIO RODRÍGUEZ

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Ending Patriarchy

Once and For All

14.1 Introduction: On Misbegotten Tradition

We continue our journey of ethics through the lifecycle with the issue of gender. Despite much that has changed in recent decades, my grandchildren, like the generations before them, have thus far encountered a world in which they have discovered two basic types of humans—males and females.

Because of the kind of Christian family in which they live, these kids have not been taught that males were created by God for leadership over females. Nor have they been taught that men are supposed to work outside the home while women are to work only at home. Nor have they been given any idea that violence against women and girls is acceptable. Nor could they conceive of a world in which boys rather than girls would be given the opportunity to go to school. Nor, finally, could they imagine a world in which males would be intrinsically valued more than females.

This is a chapter that argues that surviving Christian theologies that teach even “soft” versions of patriarchy are vestiges of misbegotten tradition that need to be abandoned as out of keeping with the moral core of Christianity. It is time to end patriarchy, once and for all.

14.2 Soft Patriarchs vs. Egalitarian Feminists

There is, unfortunately, still a “women’s issue” in large portions of world Christianity. Everything about this issue is contested, including what to call it and how to frame it.

If I were to begin by framing it as follows, you likely would know where I would end up: “The problem is women rebelling against God’s plan for their gracious submission to men, because feminism has confused women about their God-given roles.”

If I were to begin by framing it this other way, you might also know where I would end up: “The problem is men’s unwillingness to give up their historic domination and disempowering of women in the name of God.”

The advocates of the first narrative today generally prefer the term *complementarian* to describe their view. They believe that God established a “complementary” ordering of male-female relations, at least in certain realms of life, in which men are to lead and women are to subordinate themselves to male leadership. Their adversaries call them advocates of *patriarchy*—systemic male power over females—even if perhaps *soft patriarchy*, compared to earlier and alternative versions that are, or were, more extreme and even cruel. There is a difference between Western soft patriarchs and the Taliban, to be sure. (I first saw the term “soft patriarchy” in sociologist Brad Wilcox’s 2004 book, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*. I think the term fits many, though not all, such evangelical patriarchs.)

The advocates of the second narrative generally prefer the term *egalitarian* or *feminist* to describe their view. They believe that God established an ordering of male-female relations in which leadership opportunities are linked to giftedness and need rather than gender. They deny any divine plan for male leadership. Their adversaries take the term feminist and use it as a pejorative, understanding feminism as a rejection of God’s ordering of creation, or at least of the family and the church.

For the rest of this discussion, I will describe the conflict within the churches as being between *soft patriarchs* and *egalitarian feminists*, the two major parties in a longstanding and often bitter debate. I won’t use the term “complementarian” because I believe it to be a euphemism for soft patriarchy, and euphemisms obscure truth rather than illuminate it.

In 2021, church historian Beth Allison Barr released a blockbuster book on this issue, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. Barr’s historical research confirms what historian Margaret Lamberts Bendroth claimed in 1993 in *Fundamentalism and Gender* and what I will strongly affirm here: Female subordination, under the name “biblical womanhood,” “gracious submission,” or “complementarity,”

is a deeply flawed Christian tradition with a history that has evolved with and in cultures rather than any kind of fixed divine revelation.

Another recent blockbuster book, *Jesus and John Wayne*, by historian Kristen Kobes Du Mez (2020), makes the broader case that hardcore patriarchy and authoritarianism explain much of what has gone wrong with recent white U.S. evangelicalism. These two recent books signal that the discussion of gender in evangelical Protestantism is transitioning from a debate about what Christian women are “allowed to do” to a searching critique of toxic masculinist Christianity and its connections with the ills of American culture.

14.3 Looking Back: My Primal Engagement with This Conflict

I began my teaching career in 1993 in a setting in which the battle between soft patriarchy and egalitarian feminism played out in real time. When I began my studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) in 1984, the school had become hospitable to, if not dominated by, an egalitarian feminist vision. This was quite a change from the default patriarchy of an earlier SBTS, and of the majority of the churches of our sponsoring denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). I was hired in spring 1993, in interviews in which I made plain my egalitarian feminist convictions.

Overturing egalitarian feminism and restoring a patriarchal vision, even if “soft,” was among the first items of business on the agenda of the new president, R. Albert Mohler Jr., who began his term in summer 1993—three months after my interview with his predecessor.

The issue came to a head in 1995, when a highly qualified, self-identified biblical-inerrantist evangelical was denied appointment by the seminary president solely over his egalitarian posture on women. At a stormy faculty meeting, the president announced that henceforth no professor would ever again be hired or advanced if he or she believed that women should be allowed to be senior pastors of churches. While some faculty members tried to finesse the issue using clever verbiage, I was among many who were forced out or who left over the matter.

Ponder that: Within the span of a decade, a seminary was moved from a predominantly egalitarian vision to an enforced patriarchal vision. Presumably, God had not changed God’s mind. But one group of Southern

Baptists had been forced out by another group, and when power changed hands, so did the acceptable position on this issue.

Let me now see if I can offer a reasonably fair-minded articulation of both major views.

14.4 The Soft Patriarchy Position

Soft patriarchs believe they can spot a clear male leadership theme throughout scripture.

God makes Adam first, and Eve as his “helper” (Gen 2:18). God chooses men as his covenant partners (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, etc.). The twelve tribes of Israel are all headed by men. The kings of Israel are all men. All named biblical authors are men.

Jesus is a man. His twelve apostles are men. The qualifications of both deacons and bishops in 1 Timothy 3 include “husband of one wife,” and only a man can be a husband. Paul commands women to be “silent” in church and “subordinate” in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, and in the (disputably) Pauline text of 1 Timothy 2:12–15, the writer permits no woman to teach or have authority over a man, adding to his rationale the claims that Adam was made first, Eve sinned first, and faithful, modest women are saved through childbearing.

Paul offers an extensive theological rationale for male leadership (or *headship*) in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. In this text, Paul asserts a hierarchy in creation that runs God—Christ—man—woman, or perhaps God—Christ—husband—wife. Because the same Greek words are used for man/husband and woman/wife, the extent of this female subordination is debated.

Paul goes on to say that man is the image and glory/reflection of God, whereas woman is the glory/reflection of man. Referring to the Genesis 2 account, Paul next says that woman was made from and for man, not man from and for woman. Though Paul later qualifies this by saying that woman and man are not independent of each other, and that man in fact also comes through woman (via birth), the woman must keep her head covered in worship as a symbol of “authority on her head, because of the angels.”

Male leadership and female submission in marriage are explicitly taught in Ephesians 5:22–33 (cf. Col 3:18–19). Here again the husband is the head of the wife. Now the comparison is to Christ as head of the church, with the analogy extending to wifely submission. Husbands are to love and sacrifice

for their wives as Christ loved and sacrificed for the church, with great tenderness, care, and self-sacrifice.

A major articulation of the soft patriarchy position is the “Danvers Statement,” published in 1988 as the charter document of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. This influential group is still active today.

This declaration asserts that Adam and Eve were both made in God’s image, “equal before God as persons but distinct in their manhood and womanhood.” God built into creation “distinctions in masculine and feminine roles.” The primary distinction noted is headship. Adam was created as the head in his marriage with Eve. Human sin did not create male headship in marriage but instead distortions in that headship, in the direction either of “domination or passivity” on his part, “usurpation or servility” on her part.

While the Bible affirms both the “equally high value and dignity” of both men and women and of their respective roles, the “principle of male headship” in family and religious community is consistently affirmed. This means that “some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men,” and “a call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries.” This means that just because some women report a call to pastoral ministry, this does not negate what this declaration asserts to be clear biblical teaching against this. In church, as in family life, men are to lead, in a loving, Christ-like way, while women are to accept the God-given limitations on their roles and “use their gifts in appropriate ministries.”

All composite declarations reflect power and group dynamics, involving consensus-building strategies and efforts to smooth over complex issues that might destroy the effort. But in these declarations, a seam often emerges that shows where consensus could not be reached and thus got papered over.

In the Danvers Statement, I see two of these. One is the way in which the supposedly God-given contrasting male and female roles are restricted to marriage and church life, with no reference to any other arena—such as government, business, volunteer organizations, and so on.

This leaves some important unanswered questions: Did God ordain male leadership over women in all arenas, or only in home and church? Is every woman everywhere supposed to submit graciously to every man everywhere? Did God ordain that women can work outside the home? If so, are they allowed to supervise men in such roles? Does God permit a woman to hold elective office? If so, is she allowed to supervise a man in such a role—like,

for example, the way a female president would have authority over *all* men in the country?

From a review of the signatory list and awareness of other statements by some of those signatories, it is obvious that the Danvers group did not go into these questions because they would not have agreed. Perhaps also they concluded at a strategic level that it was far too late to try to persuade most women to abandon their work outside the home.

The other seam in the statement is this one: “some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men.” Question: Which ones? The document never clarifies exactly which roles for women would constitute “set[ting] aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries.” The reason why the Danvers group could not specify further, I think, is not only that they could not agree, but also that facing the issue would have required facing the dramatic diversity of offices and leadership structures that exist in different churches.

Are we talking about churches with a team of pastors who share authority? If so, can a woman be one of them? Are we talking about a group of elders or presbyters? If so, can a woman be an elder? Can she be the leader of an elder group? Are we talking about connectional churches that have local or regional officials such as bishops? Can a woman be a bishop? Are we talking about charismatic churches in which leadership is tied to supernatural gifts? Can a woman who has such gifts assume leadership in any way? Are we talking about ordination? Can a woman be ordained to Christian ministry? If so, to what roles, and with what limits?

At Southern Seminary circa 1995, there was much discussion of whether the official limit was going to be ordination, pastoral office, or the role of senior pastor. There were arguments over whether the issue was teaching, or authority over men, or church “office.” In the end, the SBC hierarchy decided to resolve it this way in their official doctrinal statement, the Baptist Faith and Message: “[The church’s] scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” (BFM, 2000).

If you go back and compare the actual biblical texts cited above with the Southern Baptist declaration, or with the Danvers Statement, you notice something else: *these statements are softer and more inclusive than some of the cited biblical texts themselves.* They do not include the claim that there is a hierarchy that runs God/Christ/man/woman, that women must be silent in

the churches, that women must submit to male authority because Adam was made first and Eve sinned first, that women are saved by childbearing, that women must wear head coverings as a sign of authority on their heads, that while men are the image and glory of God, women are the glory of men, and that women can never exercise authority in church life. Danvers authors cite some of these passages in parentheses (like this: 1 Tim 2:8–15) when trying to make the points they want to make, but then they do not deal with unwanted statements in these texts.

What makes this patriarchy is that, in the end, “power is held by men and withheld from women” (*KE Glossary*, p. 468). What makes this *soft* patriarchy is that, in the end, the harshest teachings of the scriptures (not to mention two millennia of Christian tradition) are omitted—which we can assume is either due to the lack of consensus of the drafters or the fact that not even many deeply conservative Christian women would be willing to accept such statements. This does raise questions as to the supposedly clear, authoritative biblical basis for the teachings offered versus those omitted.

Still, in the end, patriarchy survives, in softened form. Millions upon millions of Christians are taught some version of soft patriarchy every week, both in what is said from the pulpit and, alas, in the exclusively male humans who say it. As church historian Beth Allison Barr says, this is the ethos within which many millions of girls and women (not to mention boys and men) experience church, school, and family life.

14.5 The Egalitarian Feminist Position

The Danvers Statement was a response to the rise of egalitarian feminist thought in Christianity, which began on the mainline Protestant side in the 1960s and by the 1980s was spreading into more conservative evangelical churches and denominations. The most articulate statement of the new evangelical feminism was in a statement called “Men, Women, and Biblical Equality,” released in 1989 by a group, which also still exists, called Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE). The two groups, like the positions they represent, have been locked in opposition since the 1980s.

The CBE statement opens starkly: “The Bible teaches the full equality of men and women in Creation and in Redemption.” The document asserts that men and women were created in God’s image, for equal partnership, with joint dominion and childrearing responsibilities. The woman’s role as God designed it is as partner, not subordinate (Gen 2:18 is reinterpreted

based on the Hebrew word *ezer*). Woman coming from man means unity and equality, not second-class status. Adam and Eve both sinned and share responsibility. Adam's "rulership" over Eve is an aspect of the fall, not a prescription for a "headship" which this group does not recognize as a legitimate theological category.

Redemption in Jesus Christ is for all who believe, on equal terms. The basis of service in the church is Spirit-giftedness, not gender. There is no New Testament teaching that spiritual gifts are distributed along gendered lines. In the church, ministry is offered by those gifted and empowered, period. Rather than offices, the CBE statement speaks of "prophetic, priestly, and royal functions" in ministry, and that both women and men exercise all these functions in the New Testament. All "serving and teaching ministries at all levels of involvement" must be open to women according to their spiritual gifts. Public recognition of spiritual gifts and service must be given on equal terms to both women and men.

In family life, the norm is mutual submission and responsibility, not male headship. No gender distinctions are recognized by CBE in any aspect of family life: child nurture and discipline, decision making, and leadership. Male headship is treated as a dangerous path that can lead to "wife and child abuse." Power in family life, and every kind of responsibility, must be shared.

As for all those other passages cited for the patriarchal position, these are dismissed as follows: "The few isolated texts that appear to restrict the full redemptive freedom of women must not be interpreted simplistically and in contradiction to the rest of Scripture, but their interpretation must take into account their relationship to the broader teaching of Scripture and their total context." CBE also says: "We believe that Scripture is to be interpreted holistically and thematically. We also recognize the necessity of making a distinction between inspiration and interpretation." The latter, it is clearly implied, is what the Danvers types are doing when they say they are just being "biblical." CBE conclude their document by claiming that *their* view is the one that is "true to Scripture."

From a distance of more than 30 years, the limits of this document are also visible. There is no real discussion of the substance of the texts that cut against their position. There is too much patriarchy in scripture for the texts that reflect it to be simply dismissed as "isolated." To accept this while taking an egalitarian feminist position would require acknowledging that the cultures which produced the Bible were deeply patriarchal, and it is

inevitable that this patriarchy would bleed into the biblical texts. But this, in turn, would be to challenge the assumption that the biblical texts should simply be treated as divinely inspired rather than also humanly authored and culturally situated.

The CBE statement has the great virtue of *naming the issue of power*. Though the document only uses the word twice, the Danvers Statement only uses the word once and never with reference to their own position.

This is striking. I was trained with the warning that power is central in relation to every ethical issue, including family ethics, and that it is probably most central when most obscured. The fundamental distinction between the two positions we have been considering comes down to power: Soft patriarchy preserves male power, albeit described as Christ-like service; egalitarian feminism rejects exclusive male power and calls for power-sharing between women and men.

14.6 Christian Social Ethics Offers a Bigger Picture

Christians often treat every debate as a biblical faceoff. I bring my scriptures with my (right!) interpretation, you bring your scriptures with your (wrong!) interpretation, and we have it out. Christians often fail to treat either the context in which the scriptures were written, or our own context, social location, interests, biases, and so on.

I interpret the “women’s issue” not only as a biblical interpretation issue but in the context of the exercise of power in human history; here, the power of men over women. A basic conviction of mine is that the implications of “power over” are *best understood from below*. Related to that is the awareness that moral-perceptual blind spots and rationalizations are especially prevalent in those who are on the top of power structures.

Patriarchy is about male power over women in social institutions, sometimes exercised through mere brute force, usually enshrined in some justifying ideology. In patriarchal societies men rule in all major spheres, including sex, marriage, family, economics, and religion. It can look as awful as the Taliban shooting young Malala Yousafzai for trying to get an education in Pakistan, or as comparatively mild as women being told they are not allowed to preach. Patriarchy is patriarchy.

Patriarchal societies have been the rule rather than the exception in human history. Rarely has this patriarchy been soft. It has involved every form of injustice—violence, domination, economic injustice, and exclusion from

full participation in community. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's shocking 2010 book, *Half the Sky*, offers descriptions of some of the specific miseries inflicted on women in patriarchal societies. These include sex trafficking and coerced prostitution, honor killings, child marriages, forced abortions, discrimination in education and employment, preventable maternal mortality, sexual violence, and much more. The global picture is devastating.

Feminism, in my view, is simply a resistance movement to patriarchy. It is similar to other social movements resisting other forms of structural oppression. Feminism attacks both patriarchal ideology and its various expressions. Feminism seeks to overturn patriarchy and create equality and shared power between women and men.

Frederick Douglass (1817–1895), in a famous 1857 speech, which is often called “If There is No Struggle There is No Progress,” said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” Martin Luther King Jr., writing in his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” concurred: “Freedom is never given voluntarily by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

Feminism demands that men give up patriarchy. Patriarchy, in turn, does what power usually does—it resists, as far as it is able, with every means it can imagine. When necessary, it takes a step or two back, conceding a bit of ground and readying for counterattack. If it loses the next battle, it retrenches, regroupes, and tries again. This makes sense of something we so often see—many forms of injustice never seem to just die. They retreat a bit, maybe, and then come roaring back when given an opening.

This is how I perceive the “women’s issue” in Christianity. I believe that the Bible reflects the very deep patriarchy of the cultures within which various biblical texts were written over many hundreds of years.

However, the Bible also offers countervailing resources that are even more compelling, given that the Bible emerged in patriarchal cultures. These include the powerful role of numerous women in the Bible, the role of Mary, Jesus’ inclusive ministry, the radicalism of the early church, the named women leaders of these churches, the egalitarian impact of the Spirit, and a number of powerful texts pushing toward overcoming all our human hierarchies, such as Galatians 3:28 (“for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”).

I seek to position Christian social ethics as an ally to egalitarian feminism. I believe that girls and women are sacred in God’s sight, equal with men,

typically different from men in some ways, though this varies dramatically and is always best left to women's self-definition. I believe that women reflect human diversity in their God-given gifts, personalities, skills, interests, and visions of flourishing. I believe that a just church and a just society do not accept any built-in, gender-based power-over structures.

I view the soft patriarchy position as a part of the problem of patriarchy but also an evidence of how much patriarchy has weakened in many cultures. The soft patriarchs have given up much ground, but they are still trying to hold onto patriarchy's one core commitment—male power over women as a structural feature of church and family life. In this sense, Danvers-type soft patriarchy is part of the same massive tapestry of global patriarchy that feminism has been trying to unravel for centuries. I find myself decisively on the feminist side, rather than standing with those repackaging patriarchy for modern use.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the level of patriarchy in scripture? Where do you see countervailing tendencies?
2. When we see patriarchal strands in scripture, should we see these as expressions of God's will, or as cultural artifacts?
3. How would you describe the state of the contest between patriarchy and feminism in your cultural context? In your church context?
4. Who do you think makes the stronger "biblical" case: the soft patriarchs or the egalitarian feminists? Does this resolve the issue for you?