

A Review of the Historical Arguments in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*

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Not many books related to biblical studies sell thousands of copies in the first few weeks. Beth Allison Barr's book has. As of this review, it is in its fourth printing, and there seems to be little slow of the momentum. What has motivated such interest? The title of the book reveals the culturally relevant argument: *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*.²

Beth Allison Barr (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) is a history professor at Baylor University and specializes in the study of church history, particularly women's history and the medieval church. Barr's work seeks to provide a unique perspective on the egalitarian/complementarian (E/C) debate. Indeed, Scot McKnight endorsed the book, noting that "Barr's careful historical examples drawn especially from medieval history hold together a brilliant, thunderous narrative that untells the complementarian narrative."

Barr has a history in complementarian circles. It was because of the E/C debate that her husband lost his job as youth pastor of a Southern Baptist church (2). She changed her views over many years (as the book details), and it appears her husband later embraced egalitarianism as well. Together, they pressed the issue within the church. Rather than changing the doctrinal position of the church, the pastors chose to terminate Jeb Barr from his position. This decision deeply affected Allison Barr, who references it throughout the book.³

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² (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2021). Barr does not define terms in the book, apparently assuming that readers will understand what she means by terms such as egalitarianism, complementarianism, evangelical, and biblical womanhood. The following definitions will be used in this review, and they will be assumed to be the meaning Barr has in mind.

Egalitarianism is the view that men and women are not only ontologically equal but entirely equal in social standing. Accordingly, there is mutual submission in marriage, and there are no roles in the church that are reserved only for men.

Complementarianism is the view that though men and women are ontologically equal, God established distinct roles in the church and home for men and women.

Evangelicalism is best described by David W. Bebbington (*Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, [London and New York: Routledge, 1989], 2–17), who suggests a four-fold definition. Evangelicals are people who are characterized by activism (active evangelism), conversionism (the necessity of the new birth), biblicism (the Bible is the foundation for life and practice), and crucicentrism (the sacrifice of Christ is theologically central).

Biblical womanhood is the most difficult term to define. In Barr's book it appears to be the idea that women should be homemakers, subordinate to their husbands, and primarily learners in the church. It is often accompanied with an emphasis on women learning domestic skills (cooking, baking, sewing, etc.).

³ From the limited material Barr presents in the book, it appears Barr and her husband should have resigned and left in peace. I know the doctrinal code of my seminary, and if I found that I could no longer ascribe to that theological system, I would find it my duty to resign.

Though Barr mentions other experiences that inspired the writing of this book (e.g., sexual trauma [200–05] and over-the-top teaching on gender roles [76, 105]) it is clear that the experience of rejection from her church was a primary catalyst.⁴ The infusion of personal experience throughout indicates that the C/E issue is not merely academic. Barr has felt great hurt by what she perceived as the church’s rejection of her gifts and the limitations the church placed on her and other women. Further, she is convinced that complementarianism leads to abuse.⁵ For these reasons, she describes herself as an “activist” for the cause of egalitarianism (1).

Barr recognizes the role that experience played in tipping her over the edge against complementarianism, yet she maintains that “what brought me to this edge was not experience; it was historical evidence. It was historical evidence that showed me how biblical womanhood was constructed—brick by brick, century by century” (9–10).

It is this historical argument I want to consider in this review. Of course, many evangelicals will want to know her position on various biblical texts. Because her focus is on the historical argument, Barr spends minimal time on the exegesis of texts, mostly mentioning that they are misunderstood when applied in a complementarian way, though not adequately demonstrating that fact.⁶ This review article focuses on the historical perspective, since that is her focus.

⁴ “I have told you how my husband was fired after questioning the role of women in our church. I have let you glimpse the pain and trauma that that experience caused my family. I have told you how it pushed me to stop being silent, to speak the historical truth about complementarianism” (201).

⁵ In her words, “Hierarchy gives birth to patriarchy, and patriarchy gives birth to the abuse of both sex and power” (207).

⁶ The second chapter of her book is designed to address the exegetical side of things. She begins with a recognition that her students hate Paul because it is primarily his words—the “texts of terror” (e.g., 1 Cor 11 and 1 Tm 2)—that are used to limit the role of women in the church. She then suggests that Paul has been read wrong, with evangelicals reading *into* Paul cultural assumptions of male superiority. She asks, “What if, instead of a ‘plain and natural’ reading, our interpretation of Paul—and subsequent exclusion of women from leadership roles—results from succumbing to the attitudes and patterns of thinking around us?” (41).

She makes the argument that Paul’s original readers would have been drawn, not to the statements of wifely submission, but to the fact that women were addressed (49). Accordingly, these codes are actually “resistance narratives” to the way Rome thought of women (and slaves). Ephesians 5:21 should be read in connection to both husbands and wives, who are to submit to one another. Further, Paul used all types of feminine imagery, which suggests that he disagreed with the Roman view that the female body was weak (51). In all, Paul’s view of women was different than that displayed in some Roman sources and suggests that Paul believed differently than the patriarchal Romans. Indeed, by the household codes, “Paul was showing us how the Christian gospel sets even the Roman household free” (55).

To put Barr’s argument in its strongest form, she seems to be arguing that just as slavery was not outrightly condemned by Paul but was undermined, so too is patriarchy. This form of argument is powerful, for it is clear that though Paul commanded the submission of slaves, he was not in favor of the slavery system. Yet this is precisely where the divergence from gender issues rests. Whereas Paul made some clearly negative comments concerning slavery (1 Tm 1:9–10; Philm 16), he did not do so for submission in marriage. In fact, Paul grounds the submission of the wife in the creative act of God in 1 Timothy 2, a passage Barr—quite surprisingly—does not directly address.

In relation to Paul’s teaching on women being silent, Barr presents “how a better understanding of Roman history can change how we interpret this passage” (57). This history includes the story of how Rome and its military dealings led to the deaths of many men and subsequent riches to many surviving women. After the war ended, Rome attempted to rein in the wealth of these women through a new set of codes, the Oppian Law. Many writers of the day (including Livy) gave speeches, some of them recorded in writing, that were critical of independent women. In light of this history, Barr suggests that Paul in the “silence passage” is doing the same thing he does elsewhere in 1 Corinthians (e.g., chs. 11 and 14), “refuting bad practices by quoting those bad practices and then correcting them” (60). The problem with this

Barr's historical argument has three separate branches. First, she presents a *continuity argument*. This argument suggests that there have been women in leadership positions and women who have preached throughout church history. Such history has been whitewashed to remove the marks of their influence but, observed carefully, such marks are still present. On the basis of such historical precedence, evangelicals and their limitations on women are out of step with church history.

Second, Barr makes a *cultural argument*. This argument suggests that throughout history people inside the church have embraced the subordination of women because of cultural forces outside the church. Accordingly, complementarianism has joined forces with a dominant and pervasive cultural movement that subordinates women and upholds the primacy of men. Patriarchy is not derived from Scripture; it is imposed on Scripture.

Barr's third and final historical argument is a *collusion argument*. Here she argues that historical evidence shows that men have modified Bible translations, reintroduced heresy, and created doctrines (inerrancy) in order to keep women subordinate.

Before addressing Barr's arguments, a preliminary question should be asked. What place should historical evidence have in an evangelical consideration of the E/C debate? Imagine that there were massive evidence that women were in leadership positions and were preaching throughout church history. Would that indicate the need for evangelicals to embrace egalitarianism? The clear answer is no, because for evangelicals the teaching of Scripture is central.⁷ However, if such evidence were found, it may motivate evangelicals to reconfirm their exegesis.

interpretation is twofold. First, in the other cases where Paul is quoting the Corinthians, there are obvious clues or at least indications. D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 55. Here, there are none other than the tension some commentators experience reading it. Second, if Paul were responding to the Corinthians' fallacious reasoning, one would have expected an extended discussion, and Paul's short comments are not sufficient. Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 720.

Paul's list of ten women in Romans 16 (62–69) was particularly influential for Barr. She argues that in light of these many women in partnership with Paul, he could not have held to views now associated with complementarianism. This is especially the case since he mentions Phoebe, a deacon, and Junia, an apostle. In response, Phoebe could have been a deaconess, or even simply a servant, as that is what the word (*διάκονος*) means. The debate over Junia is well known. Three responses are in order. First, the name is likely masculine (Esther Yue L. Ng, "Was Junia(s) in Rom 16:7 a Female Apostle? And So What?," *JETS* 63/3 [2020], 517–33). Second, the term *apostle* means "sent one" and need not refer to an official title. Third, the designation *well known among the apostles* could refer to one's position among the apostles, but more likely refers to being known by the apostles.

Barr addressed Genesis 3:16 as well, centering her argument on the poorly translated Latin Vulgate rendering: "To the woman also he said: I will multiply thy sorrows, and thy conceptions: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee" (Douay-Rheims). On this reading, It appears that male headship is a result of the fall, whereas almost every English version, following the Hebrew, rightly notes that the woman's "desire will be for the man" and the man will, due to sin, sometimes abuse his authority. The NET translates the passage well: "You will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you."

Barr is to be commended for not simply skipping over an exegetical analysis. She wanted to write a book that centered on history, and she could have simply claimed that the exegetical side was outside of her area of expertise. A book written about evangelicals that does not address the text would be an odd book indeed. Despite my commendation, however, Barr's exegetical presentation fails to persuade.

⁷ Historically, evangelicals have had Scripture at the center of their identity. Bebbington noted that evangelicals have historically centered their beliefs on the Scripture, believing that "all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages" (12).

Further, imagine that clear evidence were given that evangelical Christians think in categories similar to those championed in patriarchal cultures. Should such evidence cause evangelicals to embrace egalitarianism? The clear answer is no, for alignment with the broader culture neither confirms nor denies the legitimacy of Christian belief. Nevertheless, there have been times where culture has wrongly influenced the way that Scripture is viewed (e.g., Christian support for chattel slavery). Everyone approaches Scripture with a lens, and that lens can distort. Accordingly, when cultural pressures are evident, it is even more important to reconfirm one's exegesis.

The key question is this: Does Barr present the sort of historical evidence that compels evangelicals to look once more at their exegesis? It is my contention that she has not. To substantiate my claim, I will address each of her three historical arguments, starting with the continuity argument, moving to the cultural argument, and concluding with the collusion argument.

The Continuity Argument: Women throughout Church History

Barr, following Elaine Lawless, claims that “women have been preaching in the Christian tradition from the earliest historical moments” (89). The reason evangelicals do not accept women preaching and leading is that they have forgotten the past: “By forgetting our past, especially women who don't fit into the narrative that some evangelicals tell, we have made it easier to accept the ‘truth’ of biblical womanhood. We don't remember anything different” (181).

The following list aims to be exhaustive, highlighting each woman Barr mentions throughout the book. The purpose of listing them is to examine whether Barr has presented enough evidence for us to affirm her conclusion that women have been preaching and leading throughout church history. After examining each of her examples, some conclusions will be drawn.

- Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century woman, was known for “her extravagant worship style, which included disrupting services with crying and sobbing, together with her tendency to debate theology with clergy and even preach to local people” (73). Barr suggests that her example shows that the “conventional wisdom” that a woman could not preach was wrong (73).⁸
- Barr claims, with the following attending proof, that “medieval churches, sermons, and devotional literature overflowed with valiant women from the early years of Christianity. Women who defied male authority, claiming their right to preach and teach, converting hundreds, even thousands, to Christianity” (76). Barr claims that such women “remembered by medieval Christianity undermined modern biblical womanhood” (84).
 - Saint Paula (347–404) “abandoned her children for the higher purpose of following God's call on her life” (79). She worked with Jerome to translate the Vulgate, and Jerome wrote a biography of her, noting that she “held her eyes to heaven . . . ignoring her children and putting her trust in God. . . . In that rejoicing, her courage coveted

⁸ As Barr notes, Kempe herself distinguishes between “speaking for God” and “preaching” (73). She maintained that she did the former and not the latter. Accordingly, it is hard to see how Kempe's example challenges the view that the medieval church did not allow women preachers or leaders.

- the love of her children as the greatest of its kind, yet she left them all for the love of God” (quoted by Barr, 79).
- Margaret of Antioch (fourth century) desired to remain a virgin and was tortured because she refused the advances of a Roman governor. After being tortured, she was swallowed by a dragon, which she was able to destroy with the sign of the cross. Though she was beheaded, thousands were saved as a result of her example (79–80).
 - Mary, the sister of Martha, was the “apostle to the apostles” and a “missionary of Christ, affirmed by Peter.” Barr notes that “she preached openly, performed miracles that paralleled those of the other apostles, and converted a new land to the Christian faith” (82).
 - Martha, the sister of Mary, encountered a dragon eating a man. She sprinkled holy water on it and gave the sign of the cross, allowing her to bind the beast. She performed other miracles, and preached (83).
 - Clotilda, a Burgundian princess, convinced her husband to believe the gospel (88).
 - Genovefa, who did miracles and was a patron of the first bishop of Paris, refused to submit to church authorities. Instead, as one historian wrote, she took the “place of a man” as bishop. (87)
 - Brigit of Kildare was ordained as a bishop by the error of a bishop who mistakenly read the episcopal orders at her consecration (88).⁹
 - Hildegard of Bingen preached throughout Germany in four separate tours from 1158 to 1170.
 - “Carolyn Muessig argues that Catherine of Siena was a preacher, achieving ‘the conversion of the listeners and the spiritual refreshment of both the audience and the preacher herself’” (97).
 - Katherine Zell, wife of the reformer Matthew Zell, stated that she should be judged “not according to the standards of a woman, but according to the standards of one whom God has filled with the Holy Spirit” (115).
 - Argula von Grumbach, an early defender of Lutheranism, noted that her writings were not “woman’s chit-chat, but the word of God” (115). When confronted on her teaching, she responded, “I am not unfamiliar with Paul’s words that women should be silent in church, but when I see that no man will or can speak, I am driven by the word of God when he said, ‘He who confesses me on earth, him will I confess, and he who denies me, him will I deny’”(115–16).
 - Anne Askew, who was aligned with the English reformation and became a martyr for the reformation, when confronted by Paul’s command that women remain silent, responded that she was not preaching, for that occurred in a formal setting behind a pulpit. When asked further about her speaking, she recorded her response to the bishop: “I answered him, that I knew Paul’s meaning so well as he, which is, 1 Cor. xiv. that a woman ought

⁹ Barr recognizes that the stories written of this woman and the previous one are hagiographic in nature.

- not to speak in the congregation by the way of teaching. And then I asked him, how many women he had seen go into the pulpit and preach? He said he had never seen any. Then I said, he ought to find no fault in poor women, unless they had offended against the law” (116).
- Mrs. Lewis Ball, who went by her husband’s name to indicate his agreement to her ministry, was invited to preach evangelistic services at a Southern Baptist Church in Elm Mott, Texas, from 1934 to 1938. Barr states unequivocally, “In 1934, no one at this Southern Baptist church had a problem with Mrs. Lewis Ball preaching” (175).
 - Sarah Crosby, a contemporary of John Wesley, was accepted by him as one who had an “extraordinary call” (177).
 - Mary J. Small became an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal church in 1898 (180).
 - Texas Baptist Ella Eugene Whitfield, a missionary for the Woman’s Convention Auxiliary National Baptist Convention in 1911, “preached” almost five hundred sermons and visited over one thousand homes and churches (180).¹⁰
 - Brekus’ book on female preaching in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America¹¹ provides an appendix with a list of 123 women who “preached and exhorted” in American churches (169–70).

Barr suggests that the multiplicity of examples cited throughout her book amounts to evidence that women were preaching and in church leadership throughout the history of the church. While various critiques could be made of the list above (e.g., the historical accuracy of her claims,¹² the hagiographic nature of some of her examples, the unique historic circumstances of the women in her list¹³), two primary ones will be addressed here.

¹⁰ The source material concerning Ella notes that she was a matron of a school and was engaged in missionary work. It is not clear what this work entailed, nor to whom she proclaimed her messages. Samuel William Bacote, ed., *Who’s Among the Colored Baptists of the United States* (Kansas City, MO: Franklin Hudson, 1919), 1:101–103.

¹¹ Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹² Kevin DeYoung’s recent review highlights many of the historical inaccuracies presented in Barr’s list. “The Making of Biblical Womanhood: A Review,” *Theologos* 46/2 (April 2021): 402–412. The present review will simply take her claims at face value, showing that even if everything presented here is entirely factual, her case would not be made.

¹³ One of the major evidences used by Barr is the book by Brekus (see note 11 above). Yet Brekus admits that the larger, established churches did not allow women preachers. Instead, “a small number of new, dissenting sects” did so, and these new congregations were characterized as “anti-authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and often visionary.” Catherine A. Brekus, “Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Women and the Church*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2009), 22. Even within these groups, Brekus notes, one major reason for female leaders was the lack of male leaders. When the denominations became more established, the role for women diminished. Further, while these women defended their actions by referencing Scripture’s women, they “found it difficult to imagine that God wanted them to be the full equals of men,” “they denied that they wanted to subvert male authority in either the home or the church,” and “most did not believe that the Bible sanctioned women’s political, legal, or economic equality to men” (25).

First, if there were evidence that women have been preaching and leading throughout church history, it is surprising that she gives so few examples. Overall, the vast timeframe she covers reveals little evidence of her claims.¹⁴ Barr protects her argument from this kind of claim by noting that women have been intentionally excluded from church history: “Women’s stories throughout history have been covered up, neglected, or retold to recast women as less significant than they really were” (84). It is assumed that this is the reason the number of women is so low and their influence so small. Barr sees a conspiracy here, for it was “male clergy who undermined the evidence” (87). Even the evidence that remains is being mistreated, says Barr: “Despite the significant role women play in church history, and despite clear historical evidence of women exercising leadership . . . popular, modern church history texts present a masculine narrative of church history that minimizes female leadership” (98).

As with any theory that proposes history has been intentionally rewritten, it is impossible to respond persuasively. Any evidence to the contrary is construed as evidence in favor. Of course, there is likely evidence that women’s roles were intentionally minimized in some specific case (though Barr never mentions any), but for this broader claim to be true, there had to be a commitment of male clergy across various ages and locales to commit such a significant act. Is it not more likely that the role that women played in preaching and leading in the church has always been a minor note in church history?

A second problem with Barr’s evidence is that she makes no distinction between women testifying and women preaching. Her examples evidence that such a distinction has historically been recognized, for Anne Askew distinguished between words uttered publicly and those given authoritatively from the pulpit. Anne did the former, but she knew of no one who did the latter. Such a lack of a distinction seriously muddies the water, for it is not clear whether the women Barr references saw themselves as preaching or merely testifying to the truth of Christianity. Complementarians debate this distinction and how best to draw the line. Without making such a distinction at all, Barr loses much of the force of her argument.

In sum, Barr’s evidence falls short of presenting a case for the claim that “women have been preaching in the Christian tradition from the earliest historical moments.” To establish a historical trend would require significantly more evidence and would require a firm distinction between preaching and testifying.

Cultural Argument: The Church Embraced Cultural Patriarchy

Barr’s second historical argument for an egalitarian view of women in ministry concerns the trends of society. She believes that patriarchalism derives from society and is imported into Scripture. In fact, “a gender hierarchy in which women rank under men can be found in almost every era and among every people group” (20). Though the way patriarchalism evidences itself constantly morphs,

¹⁴ This is a problem elsewhere in the book, where very small sample sizes are used to draw exceptionally wide conclusions. For example, she notes that she examined 120 late medieval English sermon manuscripts concerning how they used Pauline texts. On the basis of this small sample size, she makes the following claim: “Women as exemplars of faith became much more important to the medieval religious agenda than women as exemplars of submission and domesticity” (119).

it is always present. In a modification of the words of Jemar Tisby, “Patriarchalism never goes away. It just adapts” (186). The church takes such adaptations and applies them to arguments for the subordination of women.

Barr makes some helpful arguments here, showing that the church can often take the thoughts of society and justify its own actions on that basis. For example, Barr highlights the “cult of domesticity,” a system of beliefs deriving from the industrial revolution, which suggested that women were more pious (and therefore ought to teach children piety), more pure (and therefore needed to be protected), more subservient (because they lacked mental and emotional skills, resulting in the need to be led), and more domestic (and therefore should not work outside the home and should focus on domestic skills) than men (164–65).

The greatest strength of Barr’s historical analysis is evident here. She rightly notes that not all “cult of domesticity” beliefs are based on Scripture. Many were developed on the basis of external forces such as the separation of work from the home and scientific claims about female distinctiveness (164). As complementarians, we must affirm that our conclusions are grounded in Scripture, not the tide of culture. Barr’s work may be a call for some to clarify in their own thinking what is truly biblical from what is merely cultural.

Nevertheless, Barr assumes that if there are ideas similar to the “cult of domesticity” in the church, then women’s subordination must be based on those cultural views. A more realistic view is to see that such “cult of domesticity” ideas have infiltrated some forms of complementarian views of women, but not all. Indeed, biblical complementarianism needs none of the attributes of the “cult of domesticity” to establish the distinction between the roles of men and women in the church.

In reality, the weight of Barr’s arguments depends on the idea that Scripture does not teach complementarity. If, in fact, the Scriptures teach complementarianism, then one may likely find cultural reasons used as *secondary justification* for the position of Scripture, but they do not *ground* the position of Scripture. This is where Barr gets off course. She continues to focus on the secondary justifications, whereas evangelicals ground their position in the text.

It is within this broader historical argument that a tension exists throughout the book: Barr claims that complementarians hold to their position because of the patriarchal pressure of outside culture. Yet Western culture over the last number of decades has moved towards egalitarian ideals. If her thesis were correct that evangelicals follow culture, we would have expected most evangelicals to have shifted towards egalitarianism.¹⁵

The ultimate reason evangelicals have largely not embraced egalitarianism¹⁶ is that the biblical position is not based on culture at all. Once more, Barr underestimates the centrality of the exegetical

¹⁵ One of her chief complaints against the ESV is that it was written “to fight against liberal feminism and secular culture challenging the Word of God” (132). It is not clear how this coexists with the following statement: “The evangelical church fears that recognizing women’s leadership will mean bowing to cultural peer pressure. But what if the church is bowing to cultural peer pressure by denying women’s leadership? What if, instead of a ‘plain and natural’ reading, our interpretation of Paul—and subsequent exclusion of women from leadership roles—results from succumbing to the attitudes and patterns of thinking around us?” (41).

¹⁶ Certainly, an embrace of egalitarian principles has taken place in some quarters of evangelicalism. Significantly, these would be the regions of evangelicalism where the inerrancy and authority of Scripture are more open to question.

arguments. She claims that it is “impossible to maintain consistent arguments for women’s subordination because, rather than stemming from God’s commands, these arguments stem from the changing circumstances of history. New reasons have to be found to justify keeping women out of leadership” (186). However, the church’s justification for male leadership in the church has been consistent from its inception—Scripture forbids female leadership in the church. Evangelical churches are actually moving against the cultural moment, and they do so for the same reason they once went with the culture; namely, they stand aside the stream of culture, grounded on the rock of revelation.

Collusion Argument: Keeping Women Subordinate through Versions and Theology

The final argument Barr makes against the evangelical complementarian viewpoint concerns male efforts to keep women subordinate. Beyond what she views as the intentional whitewashing of women’s roles in church history, Barr highlights two additional ways complementarians have kept women in subordination. In her words, “Two significant (but related) shifts happened within evangelical theology that helped seal biblical womanhood as gospel truth: the championing of inerrancy and the revival of Arianism” (187). To these she adds one more: men have modified Bible translations to keep women in subjection.

Those who understand the history of evangelicalism will be surprised by Barr’s first argument. She claims, “Inerrancy wasn’t important by itself in the late twentieth century; it became important because it provided a way to push women out of the pulpit” (191). On Barr’s reading, inerrancy was created to be a tool used to subjugate women, yet the doctrine was not created in the twentieth century at all. True, the ancient doctrine of the full trustworthiness of the text was clarified and formalized as a doctrine of inerrancy in the twentieth century. Evangelicals found it necessary in response to the liberalism that was quickly gaining prominence within Protestant churches.¹⁷

Barr shows little evidence of understanding why evangelicals hold to inerrancy. Theological conservatives hold to inerrancy because of the nature of God, the one who communicated Scripture. Since he is truth, his word is truth. Barr also confuses inerrancy with a literal, historical, and grammatical interpretation of Scripture. She says that “[inerrancy] teachings buttressed male authority by diminishing female authority—transforming a literal reading of Paul’s verses about women into immutable truth” (189). She goes on, “The concept of inerrancy made it increasingly difficult to argue against a ‘plain and literal’ interpretation of ‘women be silent’ and ‘women shall not teach.’ The line between believing the Bible and believing a ‘plain and literal’ interpretation of the Bible blurred” (190).

In the environment where the Bible had to be taken literally, “inerrancy introduced the ultimate justification for patriarchy—abandoning a plain and literal interpretation of Pauline texts about women would hurl Christians off the cliff of biblical orthodoxy” (190). Ultimately, Barr’s

¹⁷ D. A. Carson edited a volume of essays entitled *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). One of its central themes is the trustworthiness and inerrancy of the text. The first section on the history of the doctrine (both before it was called inerrancy and afterward; 43–320) does not appear to discuss women, egalitarianism, or complementarianism. More specifically, Bradley N. Seeman’s article, “The ‘Old Princetonians’ on Biblical Authority,” shows that the reason for the clarified statement and defense of inerrancy was the growing skepticism of German liberalism (195–237).

problem appears not to be inerrancy itself but the interpretive method that inerrancy almost inevitably invites. Read charitably, Barr is not arguing that Paul was wrong and that evangelicals need to ignore his teaching on women. Instead, she is arguing that Paul should not be simplistically read without a contextual lens. A “plain and literal” reading is an uninformed reading.

The problem here is the same we have encountered before, namely, what do the Scriptures teach? Does the cultural setting of Paul’s epistles indicate that Barr is right? Certainly, her exegetical section has not established that. Overall, the claim that inerrancy was established in order to keep women in subjection is a shockingly baseless claim, especially by a credentialed historian.

Barr’s second example of the intentional subordination of women by evangelicals concerns the doctrine of the Trinity. Barr claims that evangelicals have resurrected Arianism by claiming that Jesus is eternally subordinate to the Father. Indeed, “evangelicals resurrected Arianism for the same reason that evangelicals turned to inerrancy: if Jesus is eternally subordinate to God the Father, women’s subordination becomes much easier to justify” (195–96).

It is not my intention to defend the claim that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father. Some evangelicals have done so (e.g., Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware), and I would not call them heretics. It would certainly be historically inaccurate to call them Arians. And though Barr claims that such a belief is clearly outside the bounds of orthodoxy, no clear council decision ever spoke directly to *this* issue.

In the end, the controversy need not concern the discussion of complementarianism. If the subordination of the Son is merely economic and not ontological, the same complementarian argument can be made.¹⁸ There is no need to appeal to the eternal relations of the Godhead. Indeed, complementarians do not need such an argument, which at best serves as an analogy.

A final way Barr believes evangelicals have sought to continue the subordination of women concerns Bible versions. Her attention is centered on the ESV, which she notes was “a direct response to the gender-inclusive language debate. It was born to secure readings of Scripture that preserved male headship. It was born to fight against liberal feminism and secular culture challenging the Word of God” (132). One chief example is the translation of Romans 16: “Most people who attend complementarian churches don’t realize that the ESV translation of Junia as ‘well known to the apostles’ instead of ‘prominent among the apostles’ was a deliberate move to keep women out of leadership (Romans 16:7)” (69).

Even before the ESV, however, the subordinating influence of translations was present. For example, the KJV chose to describe Phoebe as a “servant” rather than a deaconess and to translate the instructions to “deaconesses” as instructions to the wives of deacons (148).¹⁹ In sum, “because

¹⁸ The argument would go this way: Though the Son is ontologically equal to the Father, it was determined that he would serve in a subordinate role for a limited time. In the same way, though women are ontologically equal with men (being made in the image of God), when a woman marries she enters into a subordinate role for a limited time (until eternity or the death of her husband).

¹⁹ Further, Barr argues that the KJV and the English versions that follow it are often guilty of “flattening” the roles of women by translating different words (i.e., those referring to concubines or slaves) as “wife.” This was done to make the English version match “English sensibilities” (149). Indeed, the insertion of “marriage,” a word that has no direct equivalent in Hebrew or Greek, throughout English Bibles was designed to present marriage as the “ideal state decreed by

women were written out of the early English Bible, modern evangelicals have more easily written women out of church leadership” (150).

Barr is right to say that “all biblical translations are shaped by human hands” (129–30). The best translations seek to minimize this influence by staying as close to the original language as they can while still bringing over the original meaning. This is not always possible, and each translation committee has to decide how best to handle difficult cases. What should be avoided, however, is the intentional modification of the text according to one’s preconceived bias. Ironically, Barr advocates the very thing of which she accuses the ESV.

Of course, some of the passages are simply difficult translational issues. Should Phoebe be a “servant” or a “deaconess”? The word for deacon (*διάκονος*) is the word for servant. Similarly, debate has surrounded 1 Timothy 3, and it is not clear whether Paul is speaking of deaconesses or the deacons’ wives.²⁰ Finally, whether Junia is “well known to the apostles” or “prominent among the apostles” is a legitimate translation issue, depending on the meaning of Paul’s phrase. Some versions maintain the ambiguity by translating “outstanding among the apostles” (NASB, NIV). When the ambiguity cannot remain (as in the former two examples), the translation inevitably reflects the understanding of the translators. Of course, this is a double-edged sword. Whether Phoebe is a “servant” or a “deaconess” reflects the translator’s view of the entire biblical text.

Barr’s strongest arguments in this section concern the flattening of the roles of women and the flattening of relationships to the husband-wife relationship (146).²¹ In some of these cases the translators were not carefully bringing to the surface the meaning of the text, but rather they contextualized it for their own age. There is irony here, however, for this is the very problem the TNIV faced. It sought to “modernize” the text for a perceived age where “man” and “mankind” could no longer serve as general words covering both sexes.²² Of course, it was not clear then that such an age had come, and the way that the TNIV went about it ended up obscuring other important details of the text (e.g., number and person).²³

God” (148), Barr argues. She further adds that “early modern biblical scholars found that marriage was puzzlingly absent from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible), especially for an institution thought to be championed by God” (149). She gives no justification for this claim. But it should be noted that the absence of a specific word does not indicate the absence of an idea.

²⁰ See Yarbrough’s balanced approach, which provides powerful arguments for both sides. Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 209–12.

²¹ Barr notes “that the primary word for woman in the Old Testament was complex, applying to both an adult woman and a woman ‘belonging’ to a man—as a wife, a concubine, a wife within a polygamous relationship, and even a slave. Although certainly aware of these complexities, translators of the English Bible simplified matters by reducing the Hebrew word to two English words: woman (used 259 times in the KJV) and wife (used 312 times in the KJV). Hence Rebekah became Isaac’s ‘wife,’ and Laban’s daughters, Rachel and Leah, became Jacob’s ‘wives.’ Even the raped woman in Deuteronomy 21 became a ‘wife’” (149).

²² Barr, following Hilda Smith, calls this “false universal language” whereby “early modern English pretended to include women through male generic words (like the universal ‘man’) but excluded women by gendering examples, metaphors, and experiences in masculine ways” (146).

²³ Barr’s criticism of Poythress shows that she does not fully understand his critique of the TNIV. The example she cites has Poythress criticizing the change in number (TNIV “human beings” compared to “mankind”). Poythress writes, “The change to a plural obscures the unity of the human race.” Vern S. Poythress, “Small Changes in Meaning Can

Ironically, in light of her criticism of the ESV, Barr suggests that modern versions should modify the text in favor of egalitarian principles. Consider her assessment of 1 Timothy 3:1–13. She rightly notes that the text includes only one general pronoun, “whoever” (τις, v. 1), while modern English versions include the male pronoun throughout. She admits that there is a male referent in the midst of the text (“one-woman-man,” v. 2), yet she maintains that supplying male pronouns is an example of a “relentless and dominant narrative of male bias” in translation (147–48).²⁴ The problem with her assessment is that it is nearly impossible to translate the text into English without gendered pronouns.

In Greek, the original pronoun was indefinite because it was stressing the general nature of the statement: “This is a faithful saying, ‘whoever desires the office of overseer desires a good work.’” After this pronoun, it was not necessary to supply another pronoun in Greek, which can often operate with only verbs (because verbs include the subject). Since English does not do this, a pronoun has to be supplied. And since the instructions indicate that the person must be a “one-woman-man,” then it is fairly clear that the rest of the instructions should be taken in reference to men. Indeed, even the TNIV used masculine pronouns here. To make the passage genderless would not only make for horrendous English, but it would also obscure the text.

Barr is right to highlight the effect that versions can have on the way Christians view matters of theology. Nevertheless, she falls short of demonstrating that there has been an intentional move among translators to keep women in subjection.

Conclusion

Barr’s work is designed to be a historically based egalitarian attack on complementarianism. Nevertheless, her three arguments are unpersuasive. First, the historical examples of women preaching and in leadership are far too few to provide evidence for her bombastic claim that women have been preaching and leading since Christ’s resurrection. Second, the claim that evangelicals are merely following cultural patriarchy fails to work in a modern Western society, and it fails to adequately take the exegetical case into account. Third, Barr’s assertion that men have intentionally excluded women by the modification of theology (whether inerrancy or Trinitarianism) or by the translation of Scripture are ungrounded claims that show a lack of understanding of the history of theology, the decisions of church councils, and the complexities of Bible translation.

Stepping aside from the formal arguments made in the book, it appears that there is a deeper reason Barr rejects complementarianism. Throughout the book, Barr continues to return to emotionally charged stories of how she believes complementarianism has hurt either her family or other women. One gets the impression that the ultimate reason Barr is against complementarianism is that she believes it is not good. And if it is not good, then it cannot be right.

Matter: The Unacceptability of the TNIV,” *JBMW* 10/2 (2005): 28. Barr critiques him as though he has a problem with the lack of “man” in the name. In reality, Poythress is concerned with the change in number. A translation like “humankind” (139–41) would have resolved his complaint.

²⁴ Here Barr is quoting Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019), 139.

This argument, though unstated, is likely the most compelling reason the book has gained traction. Accordingly, complementarians need to take *this* argument seriously. How then should complementarians respond? Simply put, by living the truth faithfully. Some of Barr's examples expose the darker side of "complementarianism";²⁵ we must expose the brighter side. Whenever one of God's truths is critiqued, the greatest response is to live out that truth, allowing the truth to justify itself.

In this case, Barr believes that complementarianism produces a hierarchy that leads to abuse and stifles women's fruitfulness. On the scriptural view, however, men and women are productive to the extent that they embrace God's structure of creation. The best way forward, then, is for complementarians to embrace God's commands faithfully, demonstrating that the hierarchy God has established is both good *and* right.

²⁵ Complementarianism is placed here in quotation marks because the abuses of a system should not be considered a part of the system. In other words, abuse of women is not a part of the biblically structured system God has endorsed. Indeed, abuses of that system are a part of the fall (Gn 3:16).