

Egalitarian? Super – but don't let Ken Bailey convince you...

by Mike Mileski

A review of "Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View" by Kenneth E. Bailey. Originally published in ANVIL, an Anglican Evangelical Journal for Theology and Mission. The version I'm reviewing can be found online [here](#).

Kenneth E. Bailey has written two books that are crazy helpful for understanding the cultural atmosphere in which the New Testament was written. They are [Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels](#) (2008) and [Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians](#) (2011). I happen to own both, and have been helped by them in my teaching. I have huge respect for Bailey's perspective, and the way he helps us to understand the context of the New Testament. That said, when I came across this article by him arguing for an Egalitarian interpretation of some of Paul's tough texts - and realized that there are a lot of Egalitarian laypeople look at this and say "See?! See?!" - I felt compelled to give my own perspective.

Having focused most of his time on 1Corinthians and 1Timothy, he concludes:

Special problems in Corinth and Ephesus were dealt with firmly for the sake of the upbuilding of the body of Christ in those places. I submit that these admonitions can be understood to be in harmony with the clear affirmations of the presence of women as disciples, teachers, prophets, deacons, (one) apostle, along with the possibility of women elders. In this manner all the NT texts considered can be seen as supportive of the great vision in Gal 3:28 where 'in Christ...there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

With all due respect to Bailey, I would want readers of "Women in the New Testament" to be critical, and not easily convinced by the interpretation Bailey presents here, or the arguments he uses to get there.

Some less-important issues that are still worth noting:

a) The female apostle in Romans 16:7

The name Junia (Gk: Jounian) looks like it's probably talking about a woman. This has been hotly debated, and it's not a huge issue for me either way, since as Bailey defines apostle, it's someone who was "an eyewitness to Jesus who had received a commission from Him". Though I think an apostle is more than that, Bailey doesn't, so it's not worth a lot of discussion here. The point though, is that Romans 16:7 neither requires nor necessarily even suggests that this person - Junia/s - is part of the group among whom he/she is outstanding.

The same "en + dative article + plural noun" construction is all over the place in the NT, and we wouldn't say that it's grouping a person together with the group being referred to. A few examples:

- Junia is outstanding among the apostles (ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις) and they were in Christ before I was. (Rom. 16:7 NIV, NASB)
- God wanted to make known among the Gentiles (ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27 HCSB, NASB, NIV, NET, ESV)
- Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles (ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν), so that in a case where they speak against you as those who do what is evil, they will, by observing your good works, glorify God on the day of visitation. (1Pet. 2:12 HCSB, NASB, NET, ESV Note: NIV and TNIV use 'pagans')

In a case like Col. 1:27, no one would argue (I hope) that Paul meant that God was making the mystery known to a group among whom it was already known. He was making it known "among the Gentiles" because it wasn't yet. And in 1Pet. 2:12, no one would (I hope) suggest that Peter meant that being among the Gentiles makes one a Gentile. In the same way, based on the very same construction, I don't see Rom. 16:7 as teaching or even suggesting that Junia was an Apostle. Many English translations agree; for an interesting exercise, let [biblegateway](#) show you how they express it in the text of Romans 16:7.

b) Women elders in 1Timothy

Bailey argues that the structure of 1Timothy 4:6-5:22 is a chiasm. It's interesting, and there may even be something to that. But by virtue of its chiastic structure, Bailey argues that in 5:1-2, Paul may be (he argues for it at length, though he doesn't suggest it's a necessary interpretation) talking about male and female elders, rather than old men and women. If that were Paul's intention, the second halves of both of these verses make no sense, because they're talking about young men and young women. In any event, even supposing that this section of 1Timothy is chiastic in structure, that doesn't change the meaning of the words Paul uses in it. It's the meanings of the words he uses that preclude (in my view) the possibility that he's talking about male or female elders. This won't be the last time that Bailey imposes a meaning on the words that is different from their plain sense meaning, by virtue of where they're situated in the structure and form of the text.

c) Interpretive options

As Bailey sees it, the reader of the NT is faced with texts that are either "positive" or "negative" with regard to the role of women in ministry. He has treated the ones he sees as "positive" first, and where he turns to the "negative", he offers us five choices for how to proceed and make sense of both poles. These five choices are:

1. Dismiss the biblical witness as contradictory and thus irrelevant.
2. Take the texts that say 'yes' to women as normative and ignore the others.
3. Focus on 1Cor. 14 and 1Tim. 2 and overlook the women disciples, teachers, deacons/ministers, prophets, and woman apostle.
4. Conclude that the NT is at loggerheads with itself and that the Church can only choose one biblical view against the other.

5. Look once more at the negative texts to see if their historical settings allow for more unity in the outlook of the NT than we have suspected.

He ignores a sixth alternative, which screamed out to me, being the converse of fifth, and at least as plausible, though undesirable for the committed Egalitarian:

6. Look once more at the 'positive' texts to see if plain-sense exegesis, in light of cultural context, allow for a different understanding of male and female equality in the NT than we have suspected.

Why is this missing from Bailey's list? Because for Bailey, as for almost all Egalitarians, an assumption is made that any attempt to limit men and women in terms of which roles they are eligible for is a violation of their created equality. I don't share that assumption. Yet because Bailey clearly believes that it's not equality unless we can all do or not do anything we want for Jesus, it's utterly out of the question that those NT texts that impose limits on what roles or offices are open to women and men are positive. In other words, Bailey's definition of equality keeps him from reading these controversial NT texts as positive, or good, or helpful, or edifying. They're in a different category altogether: "negative".

2. The Women in Corinth

I was raised a nominal Roman Catholic. When I went with my class to mass as a kid, I got smacked upside the head more than a couple of times by teachers who told me that I was in God's house, and as such, I should behave myself. Admittedly, I was chatty. Teachers told me I had ants in my pants. Moreover, I found church boring, and the only thing that kept me sane for those forty-five minutes was talking to the kids beside me about the latest episode of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, or who would win in the next Wrestlemania. I definitely wasn't chatting because I was trying to get a better understanding of what the priest was saying. If I were, I'm certain that the teachers would have understood, and explained it to me quietly and carefully. And if they didn't explain there during the mass, they'd have said "I'll tell you later when we get back to school". But again, in all honesty, that's not why I was talking in church. It was because I was bored and found chatting to be more entertaining.

Bailey argues that something like this was happening in Corinth, and that's why Paul had to tell them to keep quiet. The women of Corinth were chatting because they couldn't understand what was going on. He explains that in Corinth, "...in that church the women could perhaps not easily follow what was being said and so would begin to ask questions or lose interest and start 'chatting'." Sadly, if Bailey is right, it didn't take very long for church to become boring! Apparently, by the end of the first century, within a generation of Jesus' resurrection, half of the church populations in Corinth (i.e., the women) had already 'tuned out'!

Now that alone isn't a valid argument, but I doubt that Bailey is right about this, based on what Paul

actually says in 1Cor. 14. In this passage as well, Bailey points out a chiasmic structure in which chapters 11-14 are a separate essay that climaxes in ch.13 with Paul's discussion of love. As such, Paul's message in the controversial section of ch.14 can be paraphrased as: "Don't ask questions during the worship and don't chat. Ask your husbands at home and be silent in the church." For support, Bailey appeals to Chrysostom's similar instructions from the fourth century, and argues "If this was the scene in... Antioch in the fourth century, what can we imagine for Corinth in the days of Paul? Corinth was, no doubt, even more disorderly." That is unlikely, but regardless, Bailey's interpretation fails to take seriously the meaning of the words that Paul used.

Paul's instruction in this passage wasn't "As in all churches of the saints, the women should stop talking about the last episode of *The Bachelor* and pay closer attention, because it's not good for women (or men for that matter) to chat in church" or something to that effect. He doesn't qualify what is acceptable for the women to talk about. Instead, he says:

As in all the churches of the saints, 34 the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be submissive, as the law also says. 35 And if they want to learn something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church meeting. 36 Did the word of God originate from you, or did it come to you only? (1Cor. 14:33-36 HCSB)

Bailey's effort to reconstruct the scene at Corinth should take more seriously the possibility that the women weren't just blathering and chatting about godless nonsense. If that were his concern, why talk about submission? Why appeal to the need for submission as a grounds for admonishing these women to stop chatting in church? And moreover, why put a restriction on all women? Why put this on "the women" in "the churches" rather than just those women who were causing the problems? No, if Paul's goal really were what Bailey is suggesting, Paul had words to express it. Instead, it seems to me that Bailey is imposing a different meaning on Paul's words than what makes plain sense, and he does so because the structure and form he sees in the letter compels him.

I might illustrate it with this old classic:

Jingle bells, Batman smells
Robin laid an egg;
The Batmobile lost its wheel
And the Joker took ballet - hey!

The above is a familiar Christmas melody (i.e., Jingle Bells), and it shares the same structure as other Christmas carols (i.e., rhyming couplets). Big deal. Is there anyone who'd honestly contend that this song's author (genius that he or she was) meant for it to be taken seriously as a Christmas carol? Of course not. All it takes is an honest reading of the words on the page, and the meaning of those words make it clear. Granted, that doesn't leave us with an interpretation that is comfortable (the Joker took ballet? Yikes). In the same way, in this text, Paul presents an ontological argument about woman as the reason why they should stop the particular behavior that was disruptive (and to be honest, it's not clear to me what that was) and instead, they should be quiet in church. Again, it's not a comfortable interpretation, but for me, that's not a relevant category for doing exegesis.

3. The Women in Ephesus

This may surprise you, but I have a lot of trouble with Bailey's interpretation of 1Timothy 2: 11-15. It begins with his reconstruction of the situation facing the Ephesian church. Bailey's view seems to me far more fatalistic than is warranted:

What possibility would any male religious leadership have had for a sense of dignity and self-respect? What kind of female attitudes would have prevailed in such a city? How easy would it have been for the values of the society to have penetrated the Church? Castration being the ultimate violence against the male, would not anti-male sexism in various forms be inevitable? ...It is easy to assume that a group of women had asserted enough power to gain adherents to their heretical views.

One problem I have with Bailey's reconstruction is that it's not clear from the text that the false teachers were female. Along with Bailey, many Egalitarians have argued that it was the female false teachers in Ephesus whom Paul was forbidding to teach and exercise authority later in 1Tim. 2:12. Even though Ephesus was a hotbed of Artemis worship, the text of 1Timothy gives no sense that the false teachers were female. That's really important. On the contrary, in 1:3, the term "certain people" used by Paul of the false teachers is, in Greek, a masculine plural. It could rightly be translated "certain men" as in the NIV, NASB. Later, in 1:20, Hymenaeus and Alexander - the two who shipwrecked their faith so that they could no longer "strongly engage in battle" (v.18). So, it looks like the problem of false teaching that had crept into the church was not owing to a group of women, but to men. If I were an Egalitarian, I'd have a real problem with this. It'd be like saying *"from here on, because of the epidemic of porn among Christians, I do not permit a woman to use the Internet."*

Bailey's translation of v.12 is "I permit none of these theologically ignorant women (in Ephesus) to teach, because they have brought their syncretistic religious beliefs with them into the Church." Based on what we've just seen, I'm forced to ask, What sense does this make, since the problem in Ephesus wasn't owing to theologically ignorant women, but theologically ignorant men?! If Paul's goal were to root out only those who were theologically ignorant, he certainly had the language to do so. He doesn't say "I do not permit uneducated women to teach or exercise authority over a man." Instead, his instructions are grounded in something more fundamental:

A woman should learn in silence with full submission. 12 I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; instead, she is to be silent. 13 For Adam was created first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed. 15 But she will be saved through childbearing, if she continues in faith, love, and holiness, with good judgment. (1Ti 2:11-15 HCSB)

Paul doesn't qualify what kind of woman he wouldn't allow to teach or exercise authority - only that it was women. In other words, this limitation wasn't owing to her level of education, her grasp of orthodox Christian doctrine, etc., but her gender. For Paul, there's something about womanhood and manhood that demands that in the local church (that's the focus of Paul's teaching here) the

teaching and exercise of authority (normally but not exclusively bound up in the role of pastor / elder) are reserved for biblically qualified men. Here again, for many people, male and female, this is an uncomfortable conclusion. And again, that's not the first question that ought to drive our exegesis.

Bailey's effort to explain why Paul's injunction here is against all women here is hardly convincing.

He says,

Paul cannot expect the young Timothy to administer theological exams in the midst of a crisis! The Gordian knot must be cut or its rope will strangle all of them. Paul cuts it with "I permit no woman to teach!" All of them are asked to study the faith! Is this not an appropriate ruling, given the tensions of such circumstances?

If this is an honest question, my honest answer is "Seriously?!" If I were a thoughtful Egalitarian, reading Bailey's argument here would not help. I'd feel like Paul was punishing all Ephesian women for the mistakes of a few; or, I'd think that Paul's way to minimize the risk of false teaching was to say "no" to all women teachers. That doesn't make the situation better; it makes it worse. He could have said "I permit no Artemis follower to teach or to have authority." He could have said "I permit no woman who hasn't been through Catechism class first to teach or to have authority." But he doesn't. That's important. If I were a woman living in first-century Corinth, with a gift of teaching or leadership, and in danger of abandoning Christian faith because of the appeal of the Artemis cult, and you were to tell me that in order to protect the church from the influence of a handful of women, no woman would be allowed to teach or rule from here on, I would not thank you. I wouldn't say "Yes, that's a Christ-like response to this situation." I would say, "Seriously?! Why not silence the source(s) of the false teaching, rather than putting restrictions on all Ephesian women?!" That would be an appropriate response to Paul if that were what he was saying in this text, but I don't believe it is.

In this text, Paul's restriction of teaching and exercising authority is not connected to anything the woman doesn't know or can't do. What's the reason he gives? It's twofold. First: "Adam was created first". I take that to mean that it's meaningful that God made the man first, and that woman was created as his helper. That's not an irrelevant detail in Genesis, at least not for Paul. Thus the reason why the teaching / governing office is reserved for men has something to do with manhood, and what a man was made for.

The second statement may be an additional reason for Paul's restriction, but it may just be another related idea that he felt was pertinent to the situation facing the church in Ephesus: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed". This is a toughie. I think there's a lot going on here, but basically, I take that to mean that in the Fall, Adam's failure wasn't that he was deceived. He failed, but his failure wasn't in being deceived by the tempter. The tempter very cleverly and craftily went to the woman - the helper. Adam was the one charged with subduing the creatures of earth, and in the Garden, when one of those creatures needed subduing, Adam was nowhere to be found. That doesn't mean (at least for me) that she's more gullible than the man - it means that he should have been there, and he wasn't. So when Paul uses it here in 1Tim 2:14, I see that as an argument for the need for male headship in the local church, especially in Ephesus, since Adam's failure to lead in the Garden resulted in the entrance of sin and death into the human race.

So this may be a warning from Paul that the failure of men to lead this church through this test may result in a similar fall.

4. A final criticism re: equality

I mentioned earlier that Bailey's definition of equality keeps him from seeing the NT statements about the role of women in church leadership as 'positive'. He shares his vision for that kind of equality when he says:

The great standard set in Gal. 3:28 affirms that 'in Christ...there is no longer male and female'. Progress toward that goal of full equality cannot be made if either gender is asserting dehumanizing power over the other... if Paul's vision in Galatians is to be followed neither gender has the right to absolute control over the other. This text can be seen as relevant to a part of this collection of problems.

At this point in the paper, Bailey appeals to Gal. 3:28 as the reason why 1Tim. 2:10-15 can't mean what it seems to mean. I take exception to this approach, especially in light of the two very different purposes behind these two passages. At this point in Galatians 3, Paul has set out to explain that neither one's race, class, nor gender are factors for determining whether one has a share in the inheritance that is Christ; rather, "...you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." (v. 26). How can that be true? "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ like a garment." (v.27). So when he goes on to explain in v.28 that "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" he's not suggesting that we should be blind to gender in all matters; he's saying that gender is quite irrelevant for deciding who may or may not be saved (i.e., be Abraham's seed; an heir according to God's promise). It's quite a stretch to argue, on the basis of Gal. 3:28, that an implication of the equality we have in Christ necessarily precludes gender-based distinctions in terms of roles - which Paul is arguing for in 1Tim. 2. Yet that is what Bailey wants Gal 3:28 to mean, and he uses it to show that the argument that Paul presents in 1Tim 2:12 (i.e., the argument from primogeniture) is groundless.

Instead, Bailey says that "...in Christ this order is no longer relevant." This leaves us with an apparently self-contradictory Paul. How does Bailey resolve this?

Bailey explains that in 1Timothy by saying that here, "...Paul is angry and is surely not attempting to write a calm dispassionate essay that can be critically compared to what he wrote decades earlier in another time and to another situation." This is concerning for me. Apparently for Bailey, part of the process of exegesis involves not only text and context, but also an evaluation of the author's emotional state at the time of writing - otherwise we can't know how seriously we should take the text. In other words, we should cut Paul some slack in 1Timothy because he was upset? We should forgive Paul's contradiction because he's not in his right mind? Remember - Paul was pretty ticked in Galatians, too. It was there, for example, and not in 1Timothy, where he expressed his desire that the Judaizers "get themselves castrated" (Gal. 5:12).

There is, of course, another possible solution: it's that for Paul, there is no contradiction whatsoever

between our full equality in Christ, and the practical implications (lived out in the church) of God's design for manhood and womanhood.

Summary:

I would humbly suggest that Bailey has, like many of my friends who end up Egalitarian, made an idol of our culture's definition of equality. It seems that the desire to preserve his understanding of equality drives Bailey's interpretation. While he is not alone in this, it seems to me that the reason why Bailey ends up with these unconvincing interpretations of the gender texts (i.e., 1Cor. 14 and 1Tim. here) is that he, like many Egalitarians, cannot reconcile the equality of men and women with gender-based distinctions. I'm not better than they are, but I can. I have no problem saying that God has designed manhood and womanhood to be equal in all ways with respect to value, potential, etc., and that at the same time, God has designed us in such a way that that value and potential is best seen as we serve and glorify God in ways that complement and support each other.

At other points, I felt like Bailey allowed the structure or form of a text force it to mean things that one wouldn't take from it, based on a plain-sense reading of the words on the page. In other words, it seems that by virtue of its chiasmic structure, it should be clear to Paul's readers that when he says "older women" in 1Tim 5, we should really understand him to mean *female elders*; and that when he says women should be silent in 1Cor 14, we should really understand him to mean that women should relax.

Finally, it's important to see that Bailey's interpretations of Paul's instructions concerning the women of Ephesus in 1Tim. 2 do not resolve the tension, but make it worse. I have my doubts that I'll convince anyone by this review to choose the Complementarian view over the Egalitarian one. (I've been careful not to try to persuade anyone of Complementarianism; that's not my goal here). And I'm fine with that. And if you're going to be an Egalitarian, that's fine too. We'll still be BFFs. We'll still hang out. But please don't be an Egalitarian because you believe the answers and interpretations that Bailey presents here are better than what you'll find in Complementarianism. They're really not.

<http://mikemileski.blogspot.com/2012/03/egalitarian-super-but-dont-this.html>