
**A Review of Ronald W. Pierce. *Partners in Marriage and Ministry*.
Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 2011.**

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In *Partners in Marriage and Ministry*, Ronald W. Pierce summarizes his convictions and concerns regarding the roles of men and women in the family and church. Calling for relationships marked by mutual partnership, Pierce hopes to persuade the lay audience at which the book is aimed to rethink the traditional complementarian biblical interpretations that call for male leadership in marriage and ministry. Pierce, longtime Professor of Bible and Theology at Biola University, former board member of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), and the co-editor of *Discovering Biblical Equality* (InterVarsity, 2004), has dedicated a significant portion of his academic and ministerial life to the egalitarian cause, and this book represents a brief summary of his thinking on the relevant biblical texts.

Summary

The book is brief and concise and does not advance any new arguments or biblical interpretations. Everything in the book can be found in greater exegetical and explanatory detail in numerous egalitarian works by Pierce and others. Such is the intent of *Partners in Marriage and Ministry*. Pierce's goal is to summarize his theology of the roles of men and women in the church and family. Written for the lay person, and directed toward those who are curious about what the Bible teaches on male and female roles, it reads like a primer on egalitarian theology and biblical interpretation. *Partners in Marriage and Ministry* is comprised of an introduction and three major sections, "Partners from Creation to the Cross," "Partners in Marriage," and "Partners in Ministry." Each section ends with principles for application, and each chapter ends with discussion questions.

In the introduction, Pierce begins with some biography, chronicling his early commitment to male leadership in the home (which he describes as "baggage") before he "began to study the Bible in earnest regarding the topic," where he discovered that he could find "no evidence in Scripture that God intended for only one to lead and the other to follow" (11). His thesis is that "the unity and diversity shared by men and women should be characterized by mutual submission in the body of Christ—in both the church and the home" (11). The rest of the book seeks to advance that thesis.

As I mentioned earlier, the book, by design, does not advance any new theories, interpretations, or models. Rather, it summarizes Pierce's egalitarian interpretations. Since there is nothing new in the book, my summary will be brief.

In the three chapters that comprise the first major section, "Partners from Creation to the Cross," Pierce looks at Genesis 1–3, examples of women who held unique leadership or ministry roles in the Bible, and Galatians 3. In Chapter 1, consistent with egalitarian interpretation, Pierce finds no evidence of differentiation in roles between men and women prior to the fall. Patriarchy arises as the inevitable product of the introduction of sin in the world. Chapter 2 provides a summary of egalitarian appeals to women in Scripture. Pierce covers the examples of Deborah, the women who followed Jesus, and Junia and Adronicus. Each is offered as evidence that women were affirmed in the Bible as holding leadership and ministerial roles that are consistent with Pierce's egalitarian mutual partnership model. Pierce then turns to the egalitarian "Magna Carta," Gal 3:28, in chapter 3: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor

free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” For Pierce, full inclusion in the church and at the “table of fellowship” (42) entails full opportunity with no distinction in roles.

In the second major section, “Partners in Marriage,” Pierce addresses 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5, and 1 Peter 3. In chapter 4, Pierce argues that Paul’s treatment of 1 Corinthians 7 teaches that marriage is to be characterized by “an equal sense of mutuality between men and women” (56). Pierce emphasizes that Paul’s only mention of authority in the context of marriage is when he speaks to issues related to sexual intimacy, namely, that neither spouse has authority over his or her body, but each is to yield that authority to the other. In chapter 5, Pierce believes that Paul’s teaching on the relationship between husband and wife must be understood in the context of Eph 5:28 where Paul calls for unilateral mutual submission. Pierce explains that “headship” in Ephesians 5 is best understood as “source of benefit for” (66). Therefore, Paul’s call on women to submit and his call on men to act as heads actually subverts the cultural understandings that were more authority-laden. In chapter 6, Pierce explains that, though the language of 1 Pet 3:1–7 is gender specific, it is not gender exclusive (73). The language of beauty and attractiveness directed toward wives and the language of treating women as weaker vessels directed toward husbands is to be equally applied by the opposite genders as well. Again, Pierce warns that the mandate for wives to submit to their husbands is to be understood in the context of Paul’s mandate for mutual submission in Ephesians 5.

Finally, in the third and final section, “Partners in Ministry,” Pierce looks at 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2. In chapter 7, Pierce concludes that the “headship” language of 1 Corinthians 11 is best understood as referring to “head” as “source” or “point of origin” (86), and that “praying and prophesying” refers to “leading public worship” and “preaching the gospel” respectively (91). It is true that Eve was made for and from Adam (1 Cor 11:8–9), but all subsequent men come from women so any priority of men over women is negated by that fact. With that in mind, Paul’s teaching in 1

Cor 11:2–16 is best understood to mean that men and women should dress with “appropriate gender markers” (90). Though Pierce is not sure what praying and prophesying with a sign of authority means, he is sure that the important aspect is that women were serving, with apostolic blessing, as preachers and worship leaders in the New Testament church. In chapter 8, Pierce goes into great detail on the religious-pluralistic context of Ephesus during the first century. He concludes that Paul’s prescriptions of men praying and women adorning themselves with love and good deeds, and his proscription of women teaching arise from specific historical issues (namely, the Ephesian men were more interested in arguing than in praying, while the Ephesian women were immodest and taught in a domineering way). The gender specificity is culturally relative. Therefore, Pierce writes that Paul’s prescriptions and proscription are just as apropos for both genders in all cultures—pray, be modest, and do not teach in a domineering manner. He concludes by answering the question of whether women ought to share equally in church leadership with an emphatic “Yes!” (102–03).

Strengths

Obviously, Pierce had far more to say than what I covered in the preceding summary, but what I wrote captures the heart (I believe) of his arguments. The strength of the book is in its simple and brief presentation of the egalitarian position. It is not overly academic. One could read *Partners in Marriage and Ministry* in a single sitting and understand the egalitarian position and egalitarian interpretations of most contested biblical passages in the complementarian/egalitarian debate.

Further, it is apparent that Ronald Pierce loves Jesus Christ and has a genuine affection for the church. He writes in a gentle and graceful (though not always generous) manner. He recognizes the authority of Scripture and realizes that he must account for all the words of Scripture if he is to live faithfully before God. That does not mean that I believe that all of his interpretations and subsequent applications are faithful or beneficial, but I respect the fact that he tried to account for the

whole counsel of God, even the egalitarian “problem passages,” without resorting to ignoring biblical texts or accusing God’s word of being in error.

Weaknesses

As I have mentioned, *Partners in Marriage and Ministry* does not advance any new arguments and so the interpretations, applications, logic and conclusions of the book have been critiqued and answered in many books and articles previously published. I would direct the reader to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 1991) and Tom Schreiner’s chapter in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (rev. ed.; Zondervan, 2005) as representative examples of decisive rebuttals of the claims put forward in Pierce’s book. Therefore, I do not feel the need to present an argument-by-argument critique of the book. Rather, I will limit my critique to those aspects of Pierce’s work that are more particular to his book.

First, the strength of the book, its conciseness, is also its greatest weakness. Pierce summarizes his position with minimal explanation and virtually no interaction with alternate treatments of the biblical texts. Each chapter is presented as the most reasonable way to read the biblical text, even though his interpretations are often not straightforward nor the simplest readings of the text (e.g., his teaching that there is no hint of male headship in Genesis 2; his assertion that Gal 3:28 teaches equality of role between male and female in the church, not just equality of redemptive standing; his argument that the authority over a spouse’s body regarding sexual intimacy establishes a paradigm of mutual submission for male-female interaction; etc.). Now I am sure that Pierce believes his interpretations are reasonable and correct. But the reality is that many of his teachings, including virtually all of his explanations of the egalitarian problem passages (e.g., 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Peter 3, etc.), are contested and do not enjoy the affirmation of church history. They are recent constructions that have only been proposed in the last fifty years. Recent origin does not make a biblical interpretation wrong, but the burden to argue and prove the innovative interpretation ought to lie with the exe-

getical pioneer. Pierce, by intentional design (not duplicity), chose not to bear that burden. Given that his target audience is the church layman, the result is that his readers could believe that the Biola professor has given the definitive word on the subject, when that is certainly not the case.

Second, throughout the book it is assumed that equality of essence mandates sameness of roles. That is, it would be impossible for God both to create male and female as equal image bearers and to designate specific roles based on gender. Authority differentiation and equality of essence are absolutely incompatible. But this is simply untrue. During his first advent the Son willingly submitted to the Father and will one day subject all things (including himself) to the Father (1 Cor 15:28). Yet he did so, does so, and will continue to do so as one who is absolutely equal to God in nature and essence. So, contrary to egalitarian assertions, subordination of roles is compatible with equality of essence. It is also an implicit and explicit assertion of the book that role differentiation inevitably leads to power struggles and strife. Pierce notes that the power struggle between men and women first appeared after the fall (23). No complementarian would disagree with this. Of course there were not coercive power struggles when sin was totally absent. Where Pierce errs is in his conclusion that since power struggles first occurred after the fall, then differentiation likewise first occurred after the fall. But this conclusion does not necessarily follow, the biblical text does not affirm the conclusion, and there is plenty of evidence for God-designed role differentiation prior to the fall (e.g., order of creation, Eve being made from and for Adam, Adam naming Eve, Adam being confronted for the sin of the first couple, etc.).

Finally, throughout his book, Pierce speaks of and celebrates the God-designed diversity between men and women (e.g., 17–20, 45–47). He denies that part of that diversity includes the God-ordained differentiation of roles and the created constitution and gifts to best fulfill those roles. Pierce offers little in the way of explanation of where the diversity actually lies, though he is quick to suggest that physical abuse of women and mari-

tal conflict is the result of male headship or patriarchy (e.g., 72, 80–81). One is left to wonder what it is that defines a man as a man and a woman as a woman (aside from man's unique ability to bring discord, I suppose). This is a critical issue given Pierce's thesis of mutual partnership. What is it that men bring as men and women bring as women to this mutual partnership? In one strange discussion of 1 Pet 3:7, where wives are described as the "weaker vessel," Pierce dismisses the passage with a silly anecdote demonstrating how women are, at least in one instance, stronger than men (74–75). What, then, did Peter mean? The passage has to mean something, yet Pierce offers only denials of female weakness on the basis of cultural relativity and particularity (i.e., men usually enjoyed positions of greater authority and power). Is there such a thing as masculinity and femininity? If so, what are they? Is there anything that a man is uniquely gifted and constructed to be and to do? Pierce offers no guidance on this. I do not think his thesis can bear the weight of the answer.

The book's title, *Partners in Marriage and Ministry*, promises much, for it is a biblical and crucial truth that God designed men and women for meaningful and complementary partnership in both the home and church. A vital and necessary aspect of that design includes male headship. This design is good and ought to be celebrated, for it is within that context that men can thrive as men of God and women can thrive as women of God to the glory of Christ and the multiplication and edification of Christ's church. But Pierce's book is based upon a denial of such design. For that reason, and the others that I have outlined, I can only recommend the book to a well-informed audience as a quick primer on egalitarian theology and biblical interpretations. But for those who are seriously wondering what the Bible has to say about male and female roles in marriage and ministry, they would be better served to look elsewhere.