



Review of Palma, P. J. (2025). *Beyond the Evangelical Gender Roles Gridlock: Reimagining Paul's Views on Women, Marriage, and Ministry*. With a Foreword by D. Gomez. Lexington Books. (ISBN 9781666940077), xviii + 266 pp., hb \$120.

Few contemporary topics are as inflammatory as gender roles within the church. The decades-long culture wars, featuring two mediating positions pitted against one another, have led to widespread damage, particularly to the reputation of the church. It is self-evident that (as the title suggests) a gridlock has emerged that warrants the assistance of an external party to clear the way so that a destination can be reached. Palma's work is an attempt at clearing such a blockade. Though some may scoff at the notion of (yet) another reevaluation of Paul's writings, given the gridlock, this work warrants attention, even from the strongest critic. Given the scope and speed of social change, there is an inevitable necessity to reevaluate historical interpretations and ideals.

Despite many such attempts originating from one side or the other of the debate, the uniqueness of the work is the mediating stance of the author (e.g., a moderate egalitarian attending a complementarian church). The tone is non-combative, and his kind and thoughtful engagement with his local ministry contacts supports his ethos. Recent cultural studies about the changing landscape of women in the church and in the culture at large are sufficient grounds for a fresh reappraisal of the historically difficult texts. The author's primary purpose is to demonstrate "how complementary contrasts in marriage and ministry echo God's design in creation, implying reciprocity defined not chiefly by roles or functions but by relationality" (14).

Chapter 1 attempts to set the historical stage for the issues facing the church today. Palma notes that, particularly, the second-wave feminists' debates surrounding second-wave feminism gave rise to the two groups—evangelical egalitarians and complementarians—and the subsequent debates that ensued. He gives a charitable overview of both views, highlighting how much the two groups share in comparison to the other groups on the fringes of the spectrum. He also highlights the increased challenges associated with Christian patriarchy, given the results of the past few decades.

The second chapter introduces a novel contribution of this book by the term "parity." Parity, as depicted in Genesis, the author argues, trumps all conversations

about the differing roles constituting so-called biblical manhood and womanhood. He says, “Any ensuing explanation about gender is enclosed within the broader realization of the permanence of men and women’s shared identity as the apex of creation and representatives of divine rule over the earth. Only with this foundational parity in view can one comprehend the purpose of creating humanity in kind as ‘male’ and ‘female.’” (46).

Chapter 3 offers a detailed evaluation of the controversial 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 text, with particular attention paid to head coverings in both ancient and modern contexts. Chapter 4 continues the theme of external adornment in its reevaluation of 1 Timothy 2:9–10, with a focus on contemporary modesty codes among religious groups. Chapter 5 addresses the household codes in Ephesians 5, including the ever-contentious *kephalē* debate. Chapters 6–7 shift the focus from the household to the home in their reevaluation of the “silencing” texts” (1 Cor. 14:34–35 and 1 Tim. 2:11–15, respectively). The author argues that women speaking (at the very least in the forms of prayer and prophecy) was the norm and the silencing instructions are exceptions, though some may disagree with the author’s position on authorship and the interpolation debate. He also examines the possibility and scope of women in leadership roles within the earliest churches and how the contemporary church should view and respond to women’s ordination.

Chapter 8 offers perhaps the best contribution of the book. In this, even the term “complementarity” is given a healthy reevaluation, detached from its perennial problems with power struggles. Palma argues against both “roles” and “functions,” rather favoring “relationality” stemming from the parity inherent in the *imago Dei*. Through the novel idea of harmonious differentiation, the author continues his quest to bridge the chasm between the two perspectives while avoiding deconstructive consequences. Finally, given the developments of the past few decades, there is a revised spectrum of gender role perspectives in Appendix B, which is quite helpful.

Overall, the tone and style are accessible to nearly all readers. There is an impressive well of sources, both ancient and contemporary, supporting the author’s propositions. The overall purpose seems to illuminate the truth that “despite notable differences, there is an opportunity, whether one is egalitarian or complementarian, to cross the aisle and pursue positive, cooperative interpretations of challenging passages” (35). The author’s desire for greater unity in the church is interspersed throughout, evidenced by the near absence of polemical or otherwise inflammatory partisan language. His solution to the gridlock calls for everyone, regardless of where he or she may fall on the spectrum of gender role perspectives, to lay down his or her weapons and engage in the warfare of love and humble service to one another through servant leadership—something that should unite all Christians. Palma’s hope seems to be that everyone can take steps towards one another in the middle to encourage and empower healthy ministry relationships so that the church can be effective, both locally and globally. In sum, this is a well-researched and worthy contribution to the broader evangelical gender debate, which deserves an objective listen.

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Crisp, B. (2026). *Strengthening the Church and Its Leaders: Paul's Blueprint in 1 Corinthians*. Wipf & Stock. (ISBN 9798385272136), xii + 132 pp., pb \$23.00.

This highly readable 16-chapter book has formative value for church leaders and pastors in the early phases of their ministry. Each chapter contains an expository summary, three to four key takeaways, and three reflective questions: this structure could fit in a 16-week Sunday school class on the Apostle Paul's practical nuggets on church leadership. The author's encouragement to church leaders is to depend on "God's metrics" as instructed in the 1 Corinthians Epistle for leading God's church and for dealing with church issues rather than relying on either the "bottom-line metrics of nickels and noses in ministry" (p. 121) or the "speculative, humanistic approaches" (p. xi).

Crisp's presupposition is twofold: 1) Scripture is reliable instruction for today, and the challenges and the sins facing the church of Corinth "mirror contemporary difficulties" and "cultural sinfulness in the contemporary church," and thus, 2) the insights from 1 Corinthians are like antidotes to contemporary church problems (p. 7).

According to Crisp, "Church leadership is tethered to Scripture's divine counsel" (p. xii). Popularity and large following are not the goals of church ministry (p. 19). Rather, the lasting fruits of the simple gospel simply communicated are (p. 21). Thus, leaders who "attempt to sanitize" or "change" the message of the Cross to make the gospel more palatable to contemporary ears will see the gospel "stripped of its innate power that provides salvation" (pp. 16–17). Spiritual growth depends on following the mind of Christ and the holy spirit's guidance instead of "structural forms" of "assimilation and discipleship tracks" (pp. 28–29).

Receiving and giving corrections that neither condemn nor shame are crucial in the practice of leadership (p. 38). The Pauline argument for liberty is not to be used for "pleasure and self-gratification": to act otherwise is to distort Christ's sacrifice and to set up "an idol" and a "fetter" (pp. 52–53). Godly leaders ask, "what are we willing to inconvenience ourselves for the salvation and growth of those God [has] entrusted to us?" (p. 64).

To church leaders who seek "relevance, appearance and cultural acceptance" as well as "eloquence," they can expect "the lessening of God's power in the churches"

(pp. 42–43). They have after turned their focus away from what is right: “the focus has shifted from God’s presence to stage production . . . from pastoral shepherding to congregational spectating . . . from missional living to occasional attending . . . from the gospel’s power to self-help . . . from supernatural solutions to natural accommodations . . . from faithful exposition of the Scriptures to communicative creativity” (p. 42). And following the “cultural mindsets of tolerance,” they will invariably “view accountability as judgmental, authoritarian and unloving,” thereby moving further away from godly sorrow and true repentance which are necessary for our individual and collective covenant with God (pp. 48–49).

Are we “running the race” set by God? Crisp warned that leaders disqualify themselves when they “are zigzagging around by focusing on metrics, social media, and human technologies,” and preaching with group opinion as a gauge of their performance (p.71). The focus has to be Jesus!

The overall message found in *Strengthening the Church and Its Leaders* is hermeneutically sound. And as needed, Crisp cites biblical commentaries and scholarly periodicals to support his claim. However, several assertions are unconvincing. Crisp claims that “God invalidates attempts to figure things out with our intellect Guard your heart against human wisdom, training, metrics, and formation that instruct you to adopt ‘proven’ methodologies that ‘work’” (p. 18). Now, if the author’s interpretation is right and fair, one would wonder why God gave humans intellectual faculties. Also, why is using “proven” approaches necessarily a movement away from authenticity with God and with oneself? Surely reinventing the wheel cannot always be the right move. Crisp also writes that “Human wisdom, which rules more on techniques, skills, marketing and consulting, is wood, hay, and straw,” and it is unlike the “humble service through the preaching of and reliance upon the cross’s message;” the latter produces gold, silver and precious stones” (p. 34). While the principles of leaning on God and the corollary of depending on the Cross lie at the heart of discipleship, ministry, and service, I wonder if Crisp has set up the juxtaposition of “human wisdom” and “humble service” all too neatly. In life, people tend to find God and discern God’s ways in overlapping states of our messiness, and so, who can insist that seeking wise counsel from mentors, trainers and consultants is evidence that one is not relying on God? I am also curious how Crisp would put into action his identified 15 actions of love (cf. 1 Cor. 13) to resolve toxicity, rivalry and conflicts for truth/orthodoxy and unity in churches and denominations? How would his claim that humble leaders depending on God’s grace will accomplish more and “function at a higher level” than the “prideful self-reliant” leaders hold up in reality (p. 11)?

With that said, the book could be the start of a conversation among leaders for improving their local church or denomination.

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