

Baylor prof examines where ‘biblical womanhood’ comes from

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WACO (RNS)—Beth Allison Barr never intended to write a book like *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*.

As associate professor of history and associate dean of the Graduate School at Baylor University, Barr said she was a “very happy academic.”

But then came 2016. That was the year her husband was fired from his job in ministry after he and Barr challenged the church’s teachings on women in ministry. It also was the year former President Donald Trump—who has bragged in the past about his mistreatment of women—was elected with the overwhelming support of evangelical Christians.

“Those two things together made me realize something had to be done, people had to know where complementarian teachings came from—and they didn’t come from the Bible,” she said.

The Making of Biblical Womanhood lands as popular Bible teacher Beth Moore’s departure from the Southern Baptist Convention has shaken evangelicalism. With the move, Moore has apologized for her part in elevating complementarianism—the belief traditional gender roles are divinely ordained—to, as she put it, “the importance of a first-tier doctrine.”

Before Barr’s book released April 20, it had already been featured on NPR’s Morning Edition. The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood had already published a post refuting Barr’s argument that

complementarianism is something added to the Bible, not found in its text.

“I think the evidence has become hard to ignore, and when that is combined with women’s personal experiences, it is causing more of them to question than perhaps would have done 10 years ago,” Barr said.

The author and historian talked to Religion News Service about where the idea of biblical womanhood comes from, what she believes the Bible actually has to say about the role of women and what it will take for things to change.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Can we start by defining “biblical womanhood,” “Christian patriarchy” and “complementarianism?”

Complementarianism is a made-up word, and it is made up to make patriarchy sound better—to make Christian patriarchy sound better.

What complementarianism argues is women and men have divinely ordained, distinct gender roles that are not interchangeable. Women are divinely ordained to follow male headship and to be primarily focused on domestic tasks: family and home. Men are divinely ordained to lead and not just in the church and in the family, but it also spills over into the outside—the cultural world, the economic world. Biblical womanhood is this divinely ordained role for women by complementarianism, which is Christian patriarchy dressed up.

Where does this idea come from?

It’s no surprise we find patriarchy in the Bible, because that’s the world the people of the Bible lived in from Old Testament to New. What is surprising is how much resistance to patriarchy we find in the Bible. The Old Testament raises women up—women like Rahab. She’s a prostitute, and

she gets (named) in the line of Jesus. In the historical, patriarchal world, there is no reason to even mention her name. We see this continuous thread where women are lifted up, and women are given authority like Deborah. And then, of course, in the New Testament we see women holding surprising positions of authority.

We have interpreted the Bible through the lens of patriarchy instead of through the lens of Jesus. What we have done is we have really read the Bible through five or six verses in the New Testament—mostly Pauline texts—that say women be silent, women submit to their husbands, etc.

First of all, it's problematic to interpret the entire Bible through the lens of just a handful of Scripture. It's also a problem because it takes those Scriptures out of their historical context. If we look at it from the historical context, what we find is, first of all, they don't mean for women to be silent and to submit in the way we interpret it today. And the second thing is they cannot mean women are to submit to men for all time, because we see women leading in the New Testament church.

The world offers patriarchy, and Jesus offers us something better. The church, instead of embracing that something better, has just continued in this old tradition of patriarchy that hurts people.

What changed your mind about this?

Growing up, it was background noise in my world.

It was gradual, and it really wasn't until I became a professor myself and I began to really see the impact of what happens when we teach complementarianism—when we teach boys there's something about them that makes them able to teach and lead, and there's something about women that makes them unable to do that. This is teaching men that women are less than them, and this became very obvious to me. At the same time, it became very hard for me to ignore the historical evidence

that shows me we were not interpreting the Bible correctly.

Yet, we stayed in a complementarian church. We mostly just kept our mouth shut and tried to not overtly teach it, without overtly challenging it.

What is the vision or role of women you do see reflected in the biblical text?

If you really were able to look at the Bible objectively, what you find is there is an amazing number of women actually mentioned by name in a world that doesn't mention women by name, that mostly mentions them in context of their husbands and fathers.

As a historian, that is remarkable to find that. We miss that because of our lens of complementarianism that we carry to the text. We miss that in Romans 16. We've got 10 women who are listed there. Seven of those women are listed by ministry. We know women are teachers, deacons, apostles and house church leaders.

One of the taglines for your book is, "It's time for Christian patriarchy to end." What do you think it would take for that to happen? What comes next?

What if we stopped putting up with it? What if women in churches, instead of being silent like I was, actually stop allowing the leaders to get away with it? I think that can help to change things.

Not only does biblical manhood and womanhood hinder women to use their gifts, but it's also damaging in what it teaches. It teaches men that women are less. The roots of all these sexual abuse scandals, misogyny, abuse, etc., is from teaching women are less. And so it's not only harmful to the gospel, it's harmful to people.

We simply have to let women and men know they can still be biblically

faithful and not agree with patriarchy. What has happened is complementarianism has introduced an element of fear that if you do not believe it, it means you do not believe the Bible, it means you are walking away from the gospel, and that is not true. History shows us there are biblically faithful people who do not accept complementarian teachings. I'm one of them.