

Reflections on Christian Community: An Interview with Gilbert Bilezikian

GLEN G. SCORGIE

Glen Scorgie: Dr. Bilezikian, I think we are all curious to know how you today, as a theologian, might be in any way different from the Dr. B we might have known back in the mid-1980s when your book *Beyond Sex Roles* first came out. You're the authoritative insider here. What, if anything, has changed?

Gilbert Bilezikian: You know that I wrote *Beyond Sex Roles* not as a young man, but in my mature years, after I had pondered the issue quite thoroughly. So, in terms of my egalitarian position, I haven't changed much. Some of the thinking and argumentation has been refined, but, essentially, I hold to the same beliefs that inspired me at the time when I wrote the first book.

GS: I know this could look like a loaded question, but do you think you are becoming more or less conservative as the years go by?

GB: Because of my high view of Scripture as God's word, I've always held to a conservative theological position. And, because I adhere to a conservative view of Scripture, I take biblical imperatives very seriously. Christ summarized those for us as follows: love God with everything you have, because he loves you with everything he has. Then, he gave us the complementary principle: love your neighbor with everything you have, because God loves your neighbor with everything he has.

If we take these commandments to the letter, we become obligated to adhere to values that are usually not labeled as conservative, such as commitment to peace and social justice issues. Precisely because I am theologically conservative and because I take biblical truth as binding, I find myself with the progressive wing of the evangelical spectrum in terms of the application of biblical truth to current life situations. A conservative theology compels me to assume an activist position on social issues.

GS: After all these years of studying the Bible, do you look at it any differently than you used to?



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GB: I was trained in seminary under two outstanding scholars for whom I will always be grateful. One was Roger Nicole and the other George Eldon Ladd. Roger Nicole is still teaching, although George Ladd died some time ago. They both profoundly influenced my approach to Scripture. Because of their influence, I hold to a high view of the Bible as God's word. I have nowhere else to go as source of divine revelation and am profoundly skeptical about the finality of human pronouncements and the lasting worth of human speculation. So, my answer to your question is no. I really haven't changed my view of Scripture over the years.

GS: If your high view of Scripture has been sustained since your seminary days, what about your hermeneutical approach to it? Do you interpret it through any different lens now?

GB: This raises the question: How does the Bible speak today? First of all, I think the canonical Scriptures come to us with a consistent message. My approach to the Scripture is to endeavor to define what each author's intent was when he or she wrote. Authorial intent can be determined by the content of the passage under consideration, its context within the book, and from the larger socio-historical situation surrounding the text. Once you define the authorial intent of a text, you are in a position to draw principles from the document that you can then apply to present life situations. So that's really my basic hermeneutical approach, and it's been honed through my professional years as an educator. As my friend Dr. Alan Johnson puts it, "It is my high view of the authority of Scripture that compels me to hold a high view of women."

GS: So far, I haven't detected much in the way of development.

GB: I'm hopelessly static [laughter].

GS: Perhaps we will find it otherwise as we move along. Let's focus now on your work as an egalitarian theologian, and this recently released third edition to your book *Beyond Sex Roles*. I'd like to begin by simply asking: Were you always an egalitarian?

GB: I guess I've been an egalitarian at heart from the time I became a believer, and perhaps even before, without really knowing it. Allow me to explain. I was born and raised in Paris. As a child, I saw Hitler's Nazi troops invade France. Then, I lived under that oppression for four years during World War II. It was during that time that I developed a deep abhorrence toward the notion of entitlement to leadership on the basis of birthright. Hitler and the Germans at the time were telling us that they were the super race, and therefore entitled to rule the world. That just didn't sound right to me.

Their claim to superiority was based on their assumed racial choseness. Since that time, I have felt very uneasy with any claims to entitlements that are allegedly derived from divine right or from birthright. This applies to racial differences, but also to class differences, and, of course, to the gender difference. So, for a very long time, I have felt deep revulsion toward claims of superiority alleged to derive from the accident of birth. But, there were other turning points or defining moments as well.

GS: Please, go ahead and explain.

GB: I have described some of them in my introduction to *Beyond Sex Roles*. One occurred as I became involved with the establishment of Willow Creek Community Church. When the time came to appoint elders, there was a general sentiment that, according to Scripture, it would be wrong to appoint women as elders. However, there were some women leaders who had been very able contributors to the planting of Willow Creek from its inception. So, instead of rushing into a decision, we chose to engage in a very careful study of what the Bible had to say on the subject of female church ministries. The results of that study are contained in *Beyond Sex Roles*.

There was another defining moment that occurred when I was in Lebanon on an educational mission for a few years. As the civil war began, it became very unsafe for our family to stay there. In fact, our young daughter Christiane was shot in the back during that period. So, I decided to bring the family to the United States and I returned to Beirut alone for a year to finish my term. During that year, my wife Maria took care of our four small children by herself. She did an admirable job, and, when I returned home, I didn't feel any right to take back those areas of leadership where she excelled and in which I had less expertise. I realized that biblically defined leadership was not a unilateral proposition, but that it required the sharing of leadership on the basis of each one's spiritual gifts.

GS: So, whatever residual patriarchy characterized you and your family dynamics fell by the wayside after your wife's stellar performance as a single parent. Have I got it right?

GB: Thank you. You've expressed it much better than I could [smile].

GS: Perhaps some readers will conclude that your views are simply based on your personal experience and larger cultural forces.

GB: My views are certainly not based on the fact that, concurrently with the period we are discussing, there was the rise of the feminist movement. I think there is a great deal of difference between what we egalitarians proclaim and what secular feminism tries to achieve. The latter is about a quest for equal rights and equal power. That may have validity in the world out there, but it's not a biblically warranted pursuit. What the Bible requires of believers is to practice the exact opposite of that agenda—not the pursuit of power, but, rath-

er, a relinquishment of power. The Bible teaches all believers to practice mutual submission and reciprocal servanthood. This proposal is exactly the opposite of the ideals of secular feminism. So, while I respect what some feminists are doing, I don't claim direct contributions from their legacy.

GS: *Beyond Sex Roles* came out in 1985, then again in 1991, and just this last year you had a third edition published by Baker. What did you feel you needed to say in this latest edition that you did not say in the earlier versions?

GB: First, the style and the presentation have been updated to keep up with the expectations of a new readership. But, more importantly, some major revisions were effected in key areas of the argumentation. This strengthening of the biblical case for gender equality represents a formidable challenge for the proponents of patriarchy. For instance, one of the main contributions that this revision offers is a new look at the biblical definition of "headship." Since the previous edition appeared, I came to the realization that, in every New Testament reference to Christ as "head" of the church, his headship function is consistently described not in terms of exercise of authority or leadership over the church, but as a ministry of giving life, salvation, sustenance, and growth. As head to the church, Christ is servant-provider rather than boss or leader over the church.

GS: Do you feel in this third edition that you have made that point more clearly than in the earlier ones?

GB: Absolutely. This refining of the biblical definition of headship is of crucial importance for gender issues, since the headship of Christ to the church is paralleled in Scripture to the relationship of husband to wife. The erroneous interpretation of biblical headship as authority is a dangerous aberration that has destructive implications for the definition of Christian community and, by extension, for the structuring of male/female relations.

GS: Is there anything else that is new in this third edition?

GB: I also tackle in it what seems to be the last bastion of the hierarchical argument against the ministry of women in the church: the passage in 1 Timothy 2 that prohibits women to teach and enjoins them to keep silent. This has been the ultimate clobber text of the hierarchists. No more! They cannot brandish that argument because it has become a two-edged sword that can just as easily be used against them. May I quickly summarize why?

GS: By all means.

GB: For one thing, we have always heard it said that Paul's position in 1 Timothy 2 is based on the argument from creation. When you look at it very carefully, it's not. It is based on the argument from the temptation in the Garden of Eden. That makes a whole deal of difference on whether you interpret the prohibition as a universal rule or as a temporary measure directed at an exceptional church situation.

But, more importantly, you keep on reading from chapter 2 to chapter 3, and you discover that Paul mandates similarly rigorous restrictions for men who aspire to leadership—to eldership, teaching, and managing the affairs of the local church. He lays down qualifying requirements that pertain to family status: would-be leaders should be married and have children who are submissive and respectful in every way. For the first time in the New Testament, being married, having a family, and managing it well become part of obligatory requirements for appointment to church leadership. Taking this prescription to the letter, who does that exclude from positions of leadership? It certainly excludes single men, but also childless married men, married men who have only one child, married men whose children are not submissive, and married men whose submissive children are not always respectful. Should the restrictions for access to male leadership according to 1 Timothy 3 be applied to men with the same enthusiasm and vigor as the hierarchists apply those for women in chapter 2, who would remain qualified for leadership ministries in our churches?

GS: How is this interpretation different from the one you held twenty years ago?

GB: Back then I was on the trail of this interpretation, but, like everyone else, failed to read the passage in its broader context which includes the restrictions for access to ministry for males. I tried to deal with 1 Timothy 2 just by itself. I finally viewed this chapter in context and discovered that, in this epistle, the Apostle Paul restricted almost everybody from ministry, not just the women. There were urgent reasons for him to do so. In another one of my books, *Community 101*, I explain at length the circumstances that required Paul's brutal intervention. The near-terminal crisis that faced the church in Ephesus called for harsh remedial measures. The church was thrown into a crisis-management mode for its own survival. This aspect of the epistle had never occurred to me previously. Similarly, it seems to have never occurred to the multitude of hierarchical scholars and preachers who delight in expounding on the restrictions that concern women without ever dealing with those that pertain to men in the very next verses of the same epistle.

GS: That's helpful, and I think the reference to *Community 101* will be worth noting as well. Beyond these exegetical arguments, do you think your views on gender itself have changed in any significant way?

GB: If anything, my views on gender equality have been confirmed with the help of other scholars. But, those scholars are not necessarily those who teach equality. They're the other ones—the promoters of hierarchy. I have held numerous debates with them in public and in private conversations. I discover that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to defend honestly their position. Their consternation has reassured me about the biblical validity of my advocacy.

GS: I suppose that you are going to discreetly abstain from naming any specifically.

GB: They don't need more advertisement. It is known that they run well-funded and highly organized councils to promote gender hierarchy and to exclude women from church leadership ministries.

GS: You have already mentioned your shift in the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2, but I noticed that in the later edition you understand some of Paul's more controversial remarks in 1 Corinthians as actual quotations from his opponents, which Paul himself then proceeds to refute. Are we reading you correctly there?

GB: Absolutely, the more I read passages like 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14 in the context of the full epistle, the more I am convinced that Paul challenges his opponents several times in this epistle by citing their own teaching in a rejecting kind of way, to refute those very teachings. I find it inconceivable that the Apostle Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would contradict himself in the same document—that he would state something and the exact opposite in the same breath.

For instance, in chapter 11, there is this little development about the primacy of men, and women reflecting the glory of men, and women having to cover their heads because of men and angels. But, then, in a major shift of logic, Paul reverses his discourse to claim that, “in the Lord,” men and women are totally interdependent in terms of origination, that God alone has creational primacy, and that a woman's hair is her real covering. It is obvious that, after quoting the teachings of his Judaizing opponents, Paul counters them with his own teaching introduced with the very strong adversative word, “nevertheless.”

The same goes for the passage in chapter 14 where Paul demands absolute silence from women during congregational worship. This text creates a massive contradiction with the teaching in chapter 11 of the same epistle where Paul has women praying and prophesying, leading in worship, and speaking forth the word of God. The critical tension between those two statements is resolved when the restrictive statement is recognized as a quote derisively cited by Paul, a Judaizers' slogan which he reprovingly throws back in their faces. Unfortunately, punctuation marks and quotation marks did not exist in antiquity. We have to recognize citations from the content and the context of those statements.

GS: Many critics of the egalitarian movement charge that we egalitarians are on the slippery slope to sanctioning ordination of gay ministers and blessing gay unions. I assume you disagree with that. I wanted to ask you a more nuanced question. Have your attitudes toward gays changed at all throughout the years?

GB: My attitude is that love of neighbor comes first while biblical standards are upheld. In terms of homosexuality, there is a lot said in the Old Testament and not much in the New Testament. I teach that our model for man/woman relations is found in the creation design.

The culmination of the creation story in Genesis 2 is that great declaration about a man and a woman bonding together to

become one flesh—one entity. On this basis, I assume that sexual oneness was intended to occur between a man and a woman. I don't find any basis in the egalitarian position for the obliteration of the distinctiveness of sexual differences.

In fact, I think the ones on the slippery slope in this regard are those who interpose the distance of hierarchy between men and women. The alternative to relations of mutual reverence and deference between the sexes runs the risk of confining them into castes. There is danger in defining men and women as two separate kinds of humanity, isolated from each other by a relation of master to subject. Historically, such segregation of the sexes has given a lot more opportunities for homosexuality, such as in ancient Greece, than the commitment to oneness that occurs among a man and a woman who respect each other as equals.

GS: Well, that's an interesting counterargument. It seems evident that you have expanded your advocacy of gender equality to encompass other justice issues. Is this a fair assessment? If so, how did it come about?

GB: Fair assessment indeed. I started focusing on the violation of the biblical prescriptions for community, first relative to the issue of gender. Once you start dealing with one violation of community, it is impossible not to be concerned with other expressions of abuses of power. Therefore, in this recent edition, I also express concern about issues relative to race, class, and economics.

GS: Reading through *Beyond Sex Roles*, I notice how you view sin as something that creates differentials of power and then encourages self-centered abuse of these arrangements by the more powerful. I'm sure that you are aware that postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault has said similar things about the dynamics of modern life. So are you, as two Frenchmen, on the same page?

GB: That's giving me a lot more philosophical credit than I deserve. It is interesting that you should bring that up, because Foucault is a contemporary of mine. He was born in France, a year earlier than I. He also experienced the Nazi occupation during World War II. He has expressed a great deal of sensitivity to issues of power. He believes that knowledge, and even words, give an advantage—give a power over others that generates hierarchy rather than mutual submission. In this regard, I would believe that you are right, I am on the same page as he is. However, the basis for my thinking is not

philosophical speculation, but the teachings of Christ and of the Apostle Paul, according to whom we are called to deny ourselves for the sake of others and to live in relations of mutual submission. So, I am sensitive to the abuse of power that

can derive from a misunderstanding of our identities as men and women. Obviously, Foucault was unknowingly indebted to the teachings of Christ about his position on servanthood.

There is danger in defining men and women as two separate kinds of humanity, isolated from each other by a relation of master to subject.

GS: Maybe you could clarify where you and Michel Foucault are significantly different.

GB: Michel Foucault is a secular thinker. It is generally agreed that sometimes it is difficult to understand what he writes, and I am not sure that he always understood it himself. We cannot ask him to explain himself any more! He died in the 1980s at a relatively young age. As a Christian, I have a different frame of reference.

GS: As you continue to grow, as a Christian and as a human being, is there any particular Christian doctrine or cluster of ideas that is becoming ever more central and formative for your thinking?

GB: Definitely. I'm very sensitive to what the Bible teaches about community structure. I'm absolutely dismayed at the current obsession of the evangelical church with issues of leadership. It seems to me that in this regard we are attentive to what the secular world is doing, saying, and practicing, rather than to what the Bible teaches. One of the major reasons for the dysfunction that prevails in Christian congregations or in Christian family relations can be attributed to the importation into Christian thinking of models of hierarchically structured community that are not biblical and therefore do not belong there. Models of church leadership currently promoted seem to be calculated to kill community.

GS: Alien models, so to speak.

GB: Alien models that Christ vehemently rejected when he expostulated, "It shall not be so among you!"—hierarchical structures thoughtlessly adopted from the corporate world.

GS: Let me ask about your strategies. You wanted to make a difference through the years. You wanted to be an effective change agent. Have your strategies shifted at all?

GB: For a long time, I felt like a voice in the wilderness. There really was no incentive to be a change agent. I just wanted to say: Let's rethink our Christian definition of community relations. As a result, I really never have had a methodical strategy except to speak the word of God and be faithful to it. My gut-level strategy is the one commanded by the Apostle Paul, where he enjoins believers not to be conformed to this world, which is permeated with the curse of hierarchy, but to be transformed with a new conceptual approach so that we may discern what the will of God is for us. That kind of transformation leads to the renewal of our minds. But, it re-

quires sacrifice. Paul calls believers to present themselves as a living sacrifice. It is very difficult to give up advantage and preeminence in a hierarchical system in order to practice the opposite, which is mutual submission. It is just as difficult for those who have been beaten down into a mentality of subservience to learn to exercise responsibility within relations of shared leadership. In both cases, there is a need for renewal of the mind and of self-sacrifice.

GS: Would you say you still operate with the same style and tone as you always did?

GB: Whether I practice it or not, I believe that we should be respectful even in disagreement with people who are honestly convinced of the necessity of hierarchical structuring of community. But, I must also say that I have no patience with those hierarchists who defend their positions out of vested interest, or out of gender supremacy aspirations, or of egotistical prejudices. I'm for peaceful discussion, but I admit to becoming agitated when I sense that I am in the presence of reactionary misogyny.

GS: You don't feel less incensed than you used to?

GB: I feel anger at injustice disguised under alleged Christian truth even more intensely than I used to. But age has taught me to control its expression.

GS: Some of us feel a great deal of impatience, anger, grief, and lots of other emotions over the slow embrace of the full equality of women and men in the evangelical community. As you peer into the future, are you more optimistic or pessimistic about how these churches of ours will respond down the road?

GB: The church has lost its way several times during the two millennia of its existence. For a long time, the church had no clue as to where God's revelation was to be found. Clerics ran from pillar to post looking for a word from God while the biblical manuscripts were left to rot in musty monasteries. Also, for a thousand years, the church had lost its most precious entrustment, the message of salvation. The Bible is still being rediscovered today as God's word by large segments of the church and, only a few centuries ago, the good news of salvation by grace was proclaimed again after a millennium of confusion and darkness. I believe that the church has also lost the definition of its own identity as God's community of oneness, including oneness between men and women.

GS: Where does that leave you in terms of optimism or pessimism?

GB: Just as God made it possible for recovery to happen with the doctrine of salvation and with the doctrine of Scripture, I believe that the future will prove that the church is able to recover the biblical definition of community, and, within community, the proper definition of relations between men and women and the place of women in ministry. We are plant-

ing the seeds today that will eventually result in the recovery of the uncorrupted vision of Scripture on gender relations. There will probably be some holdouts. Like today, some churches still believe that the King James Version is the only valid version of the Bible, inspired by God. There are those in society who believe that the moonwalk never happened, and there is a Flat Earth Society. So, there will always be proponents of lost causes. But, there are signs that the church is beginning to move away from the stultifying and dehumanizing patterns of gender hierarchy.

GS: You certainly place the advocates of hierarchy in dubious company there. You have been a champion in, and a survivor of, the gender wars. Have you any advice on how a person can rightly contend for the truth, neither acquiescing to injustice nor stooping to harsh militancy?

GB: My advice is to feel secure in your commitment and to articulate it without bitterness. It is easy for egalitarians to become bitter because of the deep historical entrenchment of the opposite view. But, we must realize that the hierarchists are on the defensive, not us. They are responding to the challenges of egalitarians with immense expenditures of energy and of resources. They may be aware of the vulnerability of their teaching. Since we have nothing to lose on our side, we should act as magnanimous opponents rather than as bitter enemies.

GS: Finally, is there anything you have ever said or written that you really do regret and wish could somehow be deleted from the public record?"

GB: I am sure I have made my mistakes, probably even in this interview. But, my regret goes the other way. I regret opportunities where I should have spoken prophetically instead of remaining silent.

GS: Well, Dr. Bilezikian, is there anything that you may want to say as a summation here before we say goodbye for now?

GB: I want to express gratitude for this opportunity to converse on a subject that is of great importance, not only to me, but also for a correct definition of the church, and therefore for the progress of the Kingdom in the world. Thank you for this occasion. In addition, I want to encourage scholars who are working in this area not to lose heart. For a long time, it seemed like there were just a few of us who were articulating the egalitarian position. Within the last fifteen to twenty years, I've seen a whole bunch of younger, able scholars join the ranks. At the beginning of their productive years, they are already doing good work. A veteran academic like me, coming to the end of his life, can only encourage those young scholars. I used to pray for them to emerge, and they have appeared. I want to encourage them to commit themselves to this task unstintingly, knowing that the future of the church is at stake and that their work is not in vain in the Lord.

GS: Thank you very, very much, for all of us.