

Louder Than Words
InterVarsity's Actions Clarify Its Stance on Gender
Jeff Robinson

Is InterVarsity Christian Fellowship committed to egalitarianism?

The organization's officials say InterVarsity does not operate out of a particular stance on gender issues but Ryan Leatherman might beg to differ.

Leatherman began working for InterVarsity at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, upon his graduation from the school in 2002. During the spring semester of 2003, Leatherman's staff partner announced he would leave the position at semester's end.

Little did Leatherman know that his colleague's departure would also lead to his exodus from IVCF.

InterVarsity sent a female to replace Leatherman's departed staff partner, which caused "quite a stir among the members of the Drake chapter," Leatherman said. The new hire spawned an ongoing discussion of gender roles within ministry.

"This (the hiring) raised a number of questions and caused quite a stir among the members of the Drake chapter," Leatherman said. "The community had many discussions about the roles of men and women, as many questioned whether the new staff [member] should be at Drake and how she should function if she were."

It did not take Leatherman long to discover how the new hire would function.

His new staff partner wanted to teach for the chapter's meetings which included both male and female participants. When Leatherman apprised his supervisor of his complementarian convictions, he soon learned how his view was received by InterVarsity. A meeting between Leatherman, his new colleague and their supervisor unveiled a more dogmatic stance from IVCF on gender roles.

"I was told two things," Leatherman said. "First, my female staff partner needed to teach, and second, the chapter at Drake was going to move in a direction that more accurately reflected InterVarsity's stance on gender roles.

"In response, I posed two questions to my supervisor. The first was, 'Would I need, in practice, to endorse, explicitly or implicitly, an egalitarian view of gender roles?' The answer was 'yes.' The second question was, 'Would I have the freedom to teach and affirm my view?' The answer was 'no.'"

The teaching of Scripture-particularly by the apostle Paul's writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy-convicted Leatherman of the veracity of the complementarian view.

Leatherman met with his IVCF supervisor in February. The supervisor gave him three options: plead "agnosticism" on the issue and continue to study it toward changing his view, resign, or be fired. Leatherman elected to follow his conscience and resigned three days after the meeting.

Though Leatherman says he desired to stay within the organization and continue to work with those with whom he differed on the issue, it was clear that he had to go.

"I felt I had no options," Leatherman said. "I could not change my view, as it is rooted in convictions I have from the Scriptures, and I could not hold my views and remain in InterVarsity."

IVCF's website sets forth both the organization's doctrinal statement, its purpose statement and its core commitments. Under the heading of "Leadership Developments" within InterVarsity's Core Commitments, the organization briefly articulates its commitment to develop both genders within ministry: "We develop women and men to serve as leaders at every level of InterVarsity and ultimately for the kingdom of God, honoring God's gifts and calling in them."

Leatherman says this clause was not part of InterVarsity's materials when he was first hired. When Leatherman first encountered the statement in November of 2002 at a regional conference, he did not interpret it as indicating an egalitarian stance.

"My thought as I accepted my position was that I would be allowed to function out of my convictions while disagreeing and having an ongoing dialogue with those with whom I disagree," he said.

Bill McConnell, associate director of advancement for IVCF says the organization allows both male and female students to lead in all areas of campus ministry because IVCF is an interdenominational home mission agency to college campuses across the world, which differs qualitatively from a church.

While students who work with IVCF campus groups hold both egalitarian and complementarian views, McConnell says staff workers are free to express their own views on gender and other issues on which Christians differ.

Workers are expected to present alternative views to their own with Scripture as the final arbiter, he said. InterVarsity's statements of faith and purpose serve as its uniting principles, McConnell said.

"Our staff help both men and women to discover and exercise their spiritual gifts, which are not limited by gender," McConnell said. "Thus all of our students may lead Bible studies and prayer groups, evangelize, teach, administer, etc., according to their gifts.

"Even denominations that limit the roles of women in churches encourage women to serve as foreign missionaries and we see our work of home missions in the same light."

Randy Stinson, executive director for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), points out that the fact IVCF is not a church does not exempt it from biblical teaching on gender roles.

"Just because an organization is not a church does not mean that it is not required to be guided by biblical parameters when it does the things that churches do," Stinson said. "In 1 Tim. 2 :12 Paul is not just concerned with a particular location (the house church or some other building) but with a particular act.

"A parachurch organization that has individuals performing functions governed by the Scriptures (like teaching) has no authority to disregard Paul's exhortation here or anywhere else."

Complementarians also encourage women to serve as missionaries, Stinson said, but all missionaries must operate under the authority of Scripture. That most denominations affirm female missionaries is true but does not deal with the heart of the gender issue, he said. The fundamental issue is obedience to the teaching of Scripture, he said.

"All complementarians whom I know would encourage women in the area of missions," Stinson said. "We would simply state that their role as a missionary should not ask them to violate biblical commands.

"Their call to ministry should not be at odds with the words of the God who called them. Even if IVCF considers itself to be a 'home mission' agency, this does not exempt them from requiring Scripture to govern the activities of their missionaries."

While McConnell touts the organization's commitment to gracious disagreement, Leatherman's story and other indicators point to a more aggressive leaning toward egalitarianism.

On the InterVarsity website, Alec Hill touts the organization's commitment to "gender blindness" by referencing, not Scripture, but a secular book which praises IVCF for giving men and women the same ministry assignments.

Writes Hill, "In a more recent book *The Church on the World's Turf*, written by a non-Christian author, noted his surprise that leadership in IV is gender blind. Contrary to what he expected, women serve on equal footing throughout the ministry."

Hill also praises a work which applauds InterVarsity's first president, Stacey Woods, for holding a view of gender roles that was "decades ahead of most other Christian leadership."

InterVarsity leader Jeanette Yep's endorsement of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) on the CBE website also seems telling of IVCF's commitment to egalitarianism. CBE exists to promote the egalitarian view of ministry within evangelicalism. The organization bases its view on an egalitarian interpretation of Gal. 3:28.

Yep is vice president of InterVarsity and is director of Multiethnic Ministries for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA. The CBE website lists Yep as a supporter and includes a statement of endorsement from Yep.

Former InterVarsity president Stephen Hayner issued perhaps the clearest statement on the gender debate in a position paper in October of 1993, entitled "Women in the Ministries of InterVarsity." Hayner presents a survey of IVCF history, asks practical questions regarding gender roles in ministry, and considers biblical and theological issues.

Hayner addresses a number of biblical texts that are typically used to support a particular view of gender roles in the church. His analysis of the texts always includes a decidedly egalitarian spin.

In dealing with 1 Tim. 2:8-15, for example, Hayner calls the apostle Paul's limitation of teaching and exercising authority to men a spot of "practical advice" bound by the immediate practical situation.

Writes Hayner, "The essential question here is whether Paul is establishing a principle which he saw as normative for the church in all times, or whether he was addressing particular issues which Timothy was facing in his work in Ephesus. The latter is more probable given the kind of similar practical advice found throughout the book (see, for example, Paul's teaching about widows in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 which certainly must fall into the category of 'good advice but not to be uniformly applied throughout all time')."

Stinson says Hayner's hermeneutic typifies the egalitarian approach to the interpretation of Scripture.

"Hayner's arguments about the temporary nature of Paul's commands in 1 Tim. 2 reflect the poor hermeneutical approach on which the entire egalitarian position is based," Stinson said. "Paul is clearly basing his argument in the Genesis account where God proclaims the goodness of the order between men and women."

Hayner further argues that IVCF is not a church, but a para-church organization exempt from following some of the stipulations for church officers found in Scripture.

Hayner concludes that the New Testament places no restriction on the ministry of women in the local church, writing, "...any practice which inhibits the use of gifts based on gender...is biblically flawed."

Hayner states that IVCF staff members may believe that women's ministries are biblically limited in the local church but they may not act on that belief in any way that encourages students to withdraw from an event or a church in which a woman is teaching the Scriptures.

While one may teach an egalitarian view, Hayner's statement seems to indicate that a staff member may not articulate a complementarian understanding. Stinson says this is precisely the practical result of IVCF's attempt at "neutrality;" the organization winds up practicing a rather aggressive egalitarianism, he said.

"IVCF, in spite of their efforts to create a neutral climate with regard to what they consider to be secondary issues, has produced a situation hostile to complementarians," Stinson said.

"This is because not all secondary issues are of the same order. The gender issue may not impact matters of salvation, but it impacts nearly every other aspect of the Christian life - how the home is structured, how the church is structured, who is authorized to teach and have authority over men, and even how we understand God and his Word.

"It appears that it is impossible for an IVCF employee to be a complementarian and not have at least the possibility of being in a situation where his convictions may be compromised. The IVCF commitment to having women leading and teaching Bible studies to groups that include men is clearly egalitarian. They should just go ahead and say so."

Leatherman is not the first to feel the unsettling effects of IVCF's "gender blindness." According to the June 22, 1992 edition of *Christianity Today*, Dave Green was dismissed from his job as regional director for Western Pennsylvania for teaching the complementarian position.

In the wake of his resignation, Leatherman has moved on without bitterness. He is working as a freelance musician and music educator. Leatherman says he has not discussed the issue further with IVCF but continues to fellowship with friends who remain InterVarsity staff members and also with students at Drake University.

"A year or two ago, I might have said InterVarsity wasn't very aggressive in its stance on gender roles," Leatherman said.

"Given the things that have gone on in the last few months, however, they seem to be much more aggressive than I previously thought ... Dissention on the issue of gender roles is not welcomed within InterVarsity ... It seems that they are becoming much more aggressive in promoting and advocating their stance."