

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Book Critique: Two Views On Women In Ministry

Submitted to Dr. Garry Graves, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

201520 Spring 2015 THEO 530-B05 LUO

Systematic Theology II

by

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February 22, 2015

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Introduction

James Beck, the general editor of *Two Views On Women In Ministry*, has put together a critical resource on the topic of gender and leadership in ministry for the American church. Beck is a professor at Denver Seminary, as well as a respected author. In putting together this resource he sought out four top theologians and scholars well versed on the subject of women in ministry, two of which were to be egalitarians, and two who were to be complementarians, to put together both arguments for their view and respond to the articles contributed by the other writers. The contributors; Linda Belleville, Craig Blomberg, Craig Keener, and Thomas Schreiner, are all professors noted for their scholarly writings. In addition, all four have made serious contributions to the topic of women in ministry in the years building up to the creation of this book. Ultimately, the five of them have created an invaluable tool for clarifying the issues surround the conversation on women in ministry and leave the reader in a position to approach the topic far better equipped than they were before reading the book.

Brief Summary

One of the questions that has caused much debate and even division in recent years is the issue of women in ministry and what their role can and/or should look like. The two basic approaches are Egalitarianism, which would give women equal opportunity to lead and serve in any capacity that men do in the church, and Complementarianism, which contends that the roles for men and women complement each other, with men called to the head, or lead authoritative position. This has become more of a debate in recent decades as the separation in gender roles, long a part of culture throughout the world, has been shattered. In America, for example, churches that hold to a complementarian view are one of the last places that do not allow equal

access to women. In a culture where women run companies, hold political offices, and even run for president, this has become a more challenging position to defend.

Linda Belleville and Craig Keener both present arguments for the egalitarian position. Belleville makes a case that the Bible overwhelmingly, from Old Testament to New Testament asserts women in all levels of leadership, not only as something that happened but as something God intended. Her contention is that the male dominance that has occurred over the generations is not something intended by God, but is instead a natural result of the fall and man's sinfulness. She contends that there are three specific passages in the New Testament that seem at first glance to demand male headship, but in fact do not and instead reveal deeper issues specific to those churches Paul wrote to that needed to be dealt with. For example, it was not a mandate for all women to be silent – it was a command for a select group of troublemakers to be silenced.

Keener, while sharing Belleville's egalitarian standpoint, comes at it from a different standpoint. Rather than systematically working through the whole of scripture as Belleville did, he instead focuses much more of his attention on Paul, Jesus, and the unique demands of their ministries, their ministry contexts, and the impact that had on their perceived view of women in ministry. His contention is that while the Bible permits women in ministry in most circumstances, it does prohibit it in exceptional cases.¹

Craig Blomberg and Thomas Schreiner present the case for the complementarian view. Much like Belleville, Blomberg works his way through the scriptures focusing on many of the same passages but with a different approach. Where Belleville saw the creation story as egalitarian until the fall, Blomberg makes the case that it was in fact God's intended order. He

¹ James R. Beck, ed., *Two Views On Women in Ministry*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), location 3974.

created man first, called the woman a helper, demonstrated Adam's headship through Adam's naming of Eve, and so on. Instead of male headship being a result of the fall, Blomberg sees the abuses of that God created role being a result of sinfulness, but that in its ideal it brings glory to God. While he sees women in ministry throughout the Bible, he asks the question of whether or not the New Testament model changes the pattern of male priesthood found throughout the Old Testament. While women functioned in all other roles of leadership at one time or another, they did not have the role of priest, much like Blomberg asserts the New Testament calls women to ministry but not that the head, or pastoral role.

Schreiner focuses most of his efforts on Genesis 1-3, with the conclusion that those passages than shape the interpretation of Paul's letters in the New Testament. He makes the case for a complementarian primarily through six observations from Genesis; God created Adam first, the commands regarding eating from the tree were given to Adam, Eve was created for Adam, Adam named Eve, the serpent in his rebellion to God went against the divine order by tempting Eve and not the head (Adam), and finally, even though Eve sinned first, Adam is the one through whom sin entered the world and bears the responsibility for the first sin. While all of the authors reference the creation story, Schreiner goes into far more detail with it, with some of his observations not appearing in the other presentations.

Critical Interaction With The Author's Work

Each of the authors are up front with their theological and biblical perspectives. James Beck, as the editor, acknowledges in the beginning his egalitarian stance and his hope that it does not bias the work in any way. He does as well as could be hoped in that regard; by putting the order of presentations with an egalitarian one leading the charge, it could be argued that he gave his point of view the first impression advantage, causing the complementarians to appear to be

defending rather than making a case. At the same time, had he reversed the order and ended with egalitarianism, it could be argued that he gave his view the last word. In either case, had he not prefaced the work with his own view, it most likely would be next to impossible for the reader to discern it, so in that regard he did well.

Each of the writers have the same goal, to make the case for their view point. However, they each have weaknesses; Belleville glosses over the lack of female priests in the Old Testament, and is a little too assuming with the absence of women pastors being named in the New Testament not necessarily meaning they were not allowed, but could have been included in the ranks of other unnamed New Testament leaders. Blomberg does not adequately refute the idea that the key New Testament passages used for male headship are describing specific contexts and are not actually church wide values. Keener spends too little time on the Old Testament, while Schreiner spends too little on the New Testament.

At the same time, where each of the authors do focus their efforts they excel. Each are clearly well versed in their theology and no where they are best able to make the case for their view. In that perspective, they very much succeed in their goal of making a compelling argument. The true challenge is, however, that both viewpoints are supported throughout scripture as they demonstrate so effectively! As noted by Beck, “We believe one can build a credible case within the bounds of orthodoxy and a commitment to inerrancy for either one of the two major views we address in this volume, although all of us view our own positions on the matter as stronger and more compelling.”²

² Ibid., location 179.

Thomas Schreiner actually reviewed a previous edition of the book and critiqued it extensively, arriving at the conclusion that his viewpoint, complementarianism is the only viable option.³ It is interesting to note that his two primary criticisms of the book are dealt with in the later edition; he disagreed with the decision to not include responses from the authors to each other, which were then added to the second edition, and he felt an essay by Ann Bowman was the weakest of the four – hers was removed from the later edition and replaced with one by Schreiner. Unfortunately, this did change the balance in gender of the authors; originally there were two men and two women, the updated edition only has one female voice in a volume dedicated to women in ministry.

Gretchen Ziegenhals notes in her review of the book that it “offers the most cohesive, focused format with which to approach the issues”⁴ of women in ministry. She appreciated the respectful way with the authors were able to approach the topic, affirm each other’s strengths, but also disagree while preserving the unity of the faith. Her only frustration were in the few instances where she felt they glossed over the inconsistencies in their own arguments, which she cited one of Blomberg’s points as an example. This criticism was the same one I felt over the few areas where each of the authors were the weakest in the arguments. I would have liked to have seen them tackle all aspects head on, even the areas where they have a harder time defending their viewpoint.

Two other books that also tackle this subject in a similar level of quality and respect are Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen’s collection, *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring*

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Review of Two Views on Women in Ministry,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 6/2 (Fall 2001): 24-30.

⁴ Gretchen E. Ziegenhals, “Women in Ministry: Beyond the Impasse,” *The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University*, (2009): 78.

*New Paradigms*⁵ and Sarah Sumner's *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership*⁶. In addition there are countless works by popular authors which are less academic in presentation but also bring the topic of women in ministry to the forefront of conversation.

This book is useful for the ministry leader. It tackles one of a handful of key issues the church must address in our current culture in a way that builds unity rather than tearing it down. Because of the depth of the work, and the scholarly nature of it, it is not for the casual reader or recent convert. However, for a leadership team wrestling through the issue of women in ministry and what their stance should be regarding their church or ministry scenario, this is a tremendous resource in its systematic presentation of the key issues, rebuttals, and overall adherence to scripture as well as its underlying current of unity. The topic of gender roles, and the church's stance on it in a culture that allows women every level of leadership in every aspect of society other than the church, is one that regardless of the stance a church may come to, must be able to be effectively communicated. This book gives leaders the tools to be able to do that.

Conclusion

Having grown up in churches and environments that held to a complementarian view of the Bible, but struggling with my own leanings towards egalitarianism, this book was a tremendous resource for me. Each of the authors powerfully makes the case for their view, and do an effective job of responding to their counterparts' articles and highlighting the weaknesses

⁵ Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen, eds., *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007).

⁶ Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus On Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, USA.: IVP Books, 2003).

of their opponents. This book does not provide easy answers, however, it does give the reader the tools to make a far more informed decision on how they will interpret the scriptures.

Ultimately, I thought Belleville did the best job at proving her case. Her systematic approach to the Bible, as well as her detailed analysis of the original languages really helped to support her case.

The only real weakness in the book, which contained five different voices (four authors, one editor), was that only one of those voices was female. It seems strange that the genders could not be more equally represented, especially given that the editor in charge of recruiting the authors is an egalitarian.

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