

# SUGGESTED READING

## WOMEN CAUGHT IN THE CONFLICT

By Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Baker Books, 1994

Reviewed by Frances F. Hiebert, International Student Coordinator at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

This book deals in depth with the rocky relationship between evangelicalism and feminism. The author believes it is no less than part of the “culture war” that replicates on a smaller scale what is going on in secular society.

Groothuis clearly defines and describes Evangelical Feminism in contrast to other forms of feminism and in distinction from “traditionalism.” Two other areas treated in the book make significant contributions from my point of view. One is the historical evidence that the church has accepted its view of the role of women from the culture, rather than constructing a truly biblical view. The second is the role that Satan plays in restricting women’s use of their Spirit-given gifts in ministry to the church and to the world.

The very first statement in Groothuis’ book throws out a ringing challenge to the idea that the church always has taken its understanding of the role of women in church and society from the Bible. Not so, she declares. Rather, for nearly two millennia, the Christian church usually has sanctioned the role for women current in mainstream secular culture by decreeing the cultural role to be the “biblical” role for women. Thus if the role of women changed in society, it would change in the church as well.

There are two major exceptions. One was in the early New Testament church, where the role of women was drawn from Jesus’ teaching and example. The second is now, when the church is resisting giving women the equality and opportunities given to them in the secular world. In the centuries between these two periods Groothuis finds significant evidence to show that her original thesis is accurate.

It may come as a surprise to some, but the “traditionalist” role for women is not very old at all: It arose after the Industrial Revolution, as a result of the splitting apart of work for men and women, and flourished during the 19th century Victorian era. The simple historical fact is that full-time motherhood as the *only* acceptable role for women was a cultural invention of the nineteenth century. This view was laid aside briefly during the first part of this century, but revived after World War II. The great wars had so shaken American confidence that many persons reached back for what seemed familiar roles and “hurried home to the suburbs for safety and security” (16). America’s unparalleled economic prosperity allowed these “new Victorians” of the nineteen-fifties and sixties to turn women into full-time homemakers and give men the whole range of employment

opportunities. Freudian “social religion” reinforced the strictly separate roles for women and men. It was this social and economic climate of the post-World War II period that was taken by Evangelicals and christened as the “traditionalist” position. Groothuis writes,

When, after World War II, evangelicals began to outline the sexual hierarchy in stricter terms—and with greater insistence, they were simply continuing in the ‘traditional’ church practice of agreeing with whatever secular society decreed concerning the role of women.

Unfortunately, culture and pragmatism rather than theology often determine whether women are given equality with men in the church. Ironically, the church’s determination to be “separate from the world” often means separation from contemporary culture but unquestioned acceptance of an earlier era’s cultural values.

Groothuis courageously identifies Satan as the one who actually influences Christians to accept pagan ideologies that come from the outside world in ways so subtle that Christians may be totally unaware of these origins. In recent times, Satan has used secular culture very successfully in two different ways to reinstate the silent subjection of women. The first was the antifeminist uprising in American secular culture that occurred largely as a product of another evil, namely, back-to-back wars.

Then when it appeared that women were again about to revolt against the new Victorianism, Satan’s second strategy was to encourage a new feminism. Unlike the earlier women’s movement that occurred at the turn of the last century and had a firm Christian basis, this new feminism veered off into a radical and reactionary departure from virtually every moral and family value that had been held by Western society. With Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen and others, Groothuis concludes that in this area, as in every dimension that affects and afflicts the church, spiritual forces are at work behind the scenes. “The conflict is, at root, spiritual—not merely cultural, psychological, or theological” (173).

In the Introduction, Groothuis states her intention to go beyond the rhetoric of competing points of view in order to see the “big picture.” From my point of view, she has succeeded admirably. I would choose this book as one of the most important on women’s issues in my library.

(The book has chapter endnotes, suggested reading, and an index. I would have appreciated a separate bibliography as well.)