

BOOK REVIEWS

SHATTERING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

By Miriam Neff and Debra Klingsporn
Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996

Reviewed by Frances F. Hiebert, missiologist
and frequent contributor to Priscilla Papers

Shattering Our Assumptions began as a research project carried out by Miriam Neff, who surveyed 1,200 Christian women in diverse churches across the country. The questionnaire was designed to find out what Christian women think about the role of women in the home, church, and society. The book also draws on research conducted by Christianity Today, Inc., surveying readers of Today's Christian Woman.

Neff and another author, Debra Klingsporn, collaborated in writing the book itself. Both women are committed Christians, active in their churches and communities. Both are professional women, writers, wives, and mothers.

The purpose of the book is to give perspective on the rapidly changing and diverse roles for Christian women. It addresses both cultural stereotypes and traditional Christian assumptions. The authors, however, come to their subject from different vantage points.

Miriam Neff is a counselor in a large urban high school, host of a national radio broadcast, and speaker at women's conferences and retreats. Debra Klingsporn is an independent writer and marketing communications consultant with a prior experience of fifteen years in the publishing industry. Debra is married to a senior staff minister and struggles with the "blurred boundaries" of being a work-at-home mom with two daughters and the usual demands of living in suburbia.

An interesting feature of the book is that when Scripture is quoted and it is appropriate to the text, male nouns and pronouns are changed to feminine gender. Neff explained that 25 years ago, on her own, she began doing research on gender words in Scripture—before she knew anything about feminism or what the church considered appropriate roles for women. Her purpose was simply to find how God wanted her to live as a Christian disciple and so she researched each word related to gender in the passage she was studying to see if the instruction, lesson, or promise applied to her as a woman. If it did, she would read the text using female nouns and pronouns.

The authors have continued the practice of using feminine pronouns and gender-accurate language when quoting from Scripture in the book so that women will feel the personal meeting with God that God intends for all who seek him. As with other personal convictions advanced in the book, the authors do not advance highly technical theological arguments to substantiate this practice.

Assuming that all of Scripture applies to all the people of God makes it logical for them to do this.

The book is divided into four sections: 1) Women in the workplace, 2) Women away from work, 3) Women living a covenant, and 4) References and resources. Each author, identified by name, addresses each of the first three sections separately. The fourth section contains two appendices. The first is the Neff survey and conclusions; the second is a helpful list of books with short descriptions on a variety of topics pertaining to the reality of women's lives today.

In the section on Work, some interesting facts come to light that surely will challenge some people's assumptions on the contemporary profile of working women. They are realities, in spite of theological and ideological debates about the issues. These realities include the following:

- Two-thirds of women work outside the home.
- More Christian women work outside the home than in the general population.
- Fulfilling their calling, not earning money, was their primary motivation.
- Work brings both stress and deep satisfaction.
- Single women are more satisfied than many assume them to be.

The section on Women Away from Work confirms that many women do most of the work for the family in addition to their work outside the home. In order to remedy this situation so that work is shared between the partners, this section also deals with Christian marriage. Here the authors tend to become a bit more prescriptive than descriptive. Miriam Neff offers four points on Christian marriage. In point number one, "What do Christian marriages look like?," she warns that there is no one pattern to which they should all conform. She writes:

God creates each person with that woman's or man's unique fingerprint. To unite two unique people and conform them to a cookie-cutter marriage mold doesn't make sense. The current Christian mania for reducing faith to formulas, a life-time of living to a seminar-shaped recipe, simply defies God being Creator of each individual. We forget that institutions such as marriage were made for the benefit of people, not the other way around.... Let God creatively be God (p. 120).

When it comes to the church and women, the authors note that two-thirds of the women surveyed do not feel fairly represented. They cannot count on the church for personal, vocational and emotional support. The church is still patriarchal and dominated by men's views in its writings and institutions. Much false theology with regard to women still prevails. When it comes to policymaking and leadership, the glass ceiling still is much lower in the church than in the workplace.

So what? The book ends with some assumption-shattering conclusions: The church may suffer if women

are not allowed in the pulpit, but the work of God will go on. Women are going out in record numbers as “marketplace missionaries.” Believing that the Great Commission still is most important to God, they introduce hurting, broken people to Jesus Christ. They pray in front of computers and preach in the mailroom. Here gender has no limitations; here women first are Christians with a calling and a mission.

A common sense approach based on the plain reading of the whole of Scripture makes the book appealing to people who may be confused, annoyed, and fed-up with the theological debates coming out of seminaries and much Christian literature. Written in everyday language, generously larded with anecdotes from the authors’ experience, and with little interest in scholars and their splitting of hairs, this book is a real treat for Christian women who are just trying to follow their calling and make their way in the real world.

GOD’S DAUGHTERS: EVANGELICAL WOMEN AND THE POWER OF SUBMISSION

By R. Marie Griffith

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997

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God’s Daughters is an ethnographic analysis of Women’s Aglow Fellowship, a 30-year-old women’s organization that originally developed out of the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International. Women’s Aglow is the largest interdenominational women’s mission organization in the world. Dr. Griffith’s book, based on her 1995 Harvard Ph.D. thesis, is built on her observer-participant findings. The analysis is warm and respectful and is built of a genuine liking the author developed for these praying women. The author describes her own personal Episcopalian affiliations as substantially different from the spiritual sensibilities of her new-found WAF friends. Griffith undertook her work to describe the depth and complexity of the lives of these women in contrast to the rather flat, unidimensional stereotypes used by outsiders. In this purpose the author has succeeded.

Griffith describes Women’s Aglow as an eclectic and adaptable group, a mix of “moral austerity, cheerful pragmatism, and apocalyptic urgency” (p. 65). The organization gives its members opportunities to develop leadership in ways they couldn’t do in their own churches. At the heart of the organization is its central message: through prayer women can find healing, empowerment, and freedom. Prayer and the accompanying narrative accounts (written and spoken testimonies) bring about radical renegotiations of power and a reshaping of personal identity for these women.

As the book’s subtitle indicates, Griffith was especially interested in how these women lived with doctrines of submission. Early in the history of the movement, submission

was presented by the organization in a standard format that has seen innovative and historical development in recent years. “Contemporary evangelical women continuously redraw and renegotiate the boundaries of power and authority” (p. 16), and Women’s Aglow Fellowship is no exception to this rule. Slowly public meetings and written materials began to give more prominence to mutual submission as an important concept. For example, WAF began with a group of five male pastors serving as the organization’s advisory board. Many women viewed these men as the proper “covering” they needed so that the women’s organization could be biblically structured. This “covering” ethos has gradually shifted to one of gender symmetry. The meaning of the functions served by this board of advisors is different to different members. Many now see them as helpful outsiders who are available to help the group if needed but who are otherwise quite uninvolved. In 1993 the international group quietly changed its constitution to allow females to serve on this board of advisors for the first time. Local advisory boards, however, continue to be all-male. (Can we imagine a group such as Promise Keepers having an all-female board of advisors?)

One of the contexts out of which WAF arises is the recovery movement which is in turn a part of the larger therapeutic culture. A major theme of the prayer work that the organization urges upon its members has to do with the myriad of emotional trials which besets the modern woman. The movement helps its participants own up to anger by helping them envision alternatives to it as well as to shame. Women who struggle with weight loss, physical attractiveness, need for affection, or desire for intimacy are encouraged to pray that God will help them with their struggles. They learn that their new spiritual family can replace a disappointing earthly family, that unfeigned submission will be a means toward deliverance from most if not all of their problems, that Jesus can be their companion even if their husbands will not be, and that they can develop true intimacy with God through prayer. Although the content of these themes is clearly psychological, the organization rarely identifies them as such and presents them instead as spiritual teachings.

Griffith describes one rather upsetting feature of Women’s Aglow. The organization seems to enforce some unwritten rules for its leaders, apparent from the fact that they all share the following characteristics: a “buoyant style of deportment, speech and gesture intended to communicate the inner radiance of a close relationship with Jesus. In this way aspects of physical appearance, including weight, hairstyle, makeup, clothing, and so forth, work as indicators not simply of social status but of moral righteousness as well and so further uphold distinctive hierarchies within the organization at large” (p. 158).

Currently the organization is reporting some decline in membership. But these mostly white middle-aged women keep praying and have started working at racial reconciliation. During these days when definitions of Christian womanhood continue to shift, WAF serves a vital need in the evangelical world, and Griffith’s book helps us understand it more completely.