

BOOK REVIEWS

WOMEN AND MEN: GENDER IN THE CHURCH

Carol Penner, Editor. Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1998. 151 pp.

Reviewed by Dr. James R. Beck, Professor of Counseling, Denver Seminary

This book emerges out of a rich Mennonite heritage that rather consistently deals with major social issues as they relate to biblical faith. Carol Penner's panel of authors, representing various segments of the North American Mennonite scene, have produced a very usable book suited both for adult Bible study home groups and for adult Sunday School classes. The authors are all egalitarian in their approach to Scripture and practice.

The book's thirteen chapters deal with the many facets of concern that arise when we seek to examine the issue of gender and the church: the theology of gender, gender in the Bible, sex differences, homemaking vs. careers, masculinity and femininity, violence and gender, aging, singleness, racial ramifications of gender, and parenting concerns. Each chapter is written in a readable style, with concluding discussion questions and sources for further reading.

Today, many women and men whose consciences have been sensitized to matters of gender can have difficulty reading many sections of the New Testament, just as certain passages may have been difficult for educated slaves to read in the 19th century ("Slaves, accept the authority of your master with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh" [1 Pet 2:18]). Such readers will discover helpful interpretative tidbits in almost every chapter. For example, one chapter notes that in both creation accounts (Gen 1 and 2), "Male and female are clearly one – and two" (p. 37). Dr. Wilma Bailey of Messiah College points out that "anthropologists have learned through research that there are no universal roles for women or men beyond those of biological necessity" (p. 14). She also argues that an insistence on defining the nature of God in such a way as to suggest that God is male is likely a violation of the second commandment which prohibits the construction of an image of God. When God offered to Moses a self-definition, the answer was expressed in the genderless first person: "I am who I am" (p. 19).

Some authors choose to use both masculine and feminine language to describe God which may present something of a stumbling block to mainstream egalitarian readers. Nonetheless, the book is a valuable resource that is sure to help thoughtful Christians in their struggle to relate biblical faith to matters raised by current gender debates.

PRISCILLA'S LETTER: FINDING THE AUTHOR OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

By Ruth Hoppin, San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1997. 173 pp.

Reviewed by Estella B. Horning, Affiliate Professor of Biblical Studies, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary

Ruth Hoppin has spent decades researching Adolf Harnack's hypothesis that Priscilla wrote the biblical Epistle to the Hebrews. A first book, Priscilla, Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, was published in the late 1960s. Since that time additional relevant material has been published, some of it related to the Dead Sea Scrolls. This book is an update which takes such material into account.

Hoppin begins by calling attention to the mysterious anonymity of the author of Hebrews, who is obviously a highly competent biblical scholar, a widely respected leader of the early church, colleague of Timothy and probably of Paul. How could such a person be unknown and unnamed, yet have written a work so widely known and revered?

Hoppin then examines clues in the text of Hebrews itself: in the title, the use of pronouns, and in the postscript (Heb 13:22-25) with its references to Timothy and other leaders, mention of "they of Italy," and the strange apology of 13:22. Next Hoppin constructs a psychological profile of the author and explores the questions: Is the author feminine? Does the author identify with women? Hoppin reviews the centuries-old speculation regarding authorship of Hebrews, concluding that of the available candidates, only Priscilla meets all the qualifications. Acknowledging the historical ties of this Epistle to Rome and noting its textual connections with Timothy, Hoppin concludes that Priscilla wrote from Rome to the church in Ephesus where she was an acknowledged and respected pastoral leader.

This book indicates extensive and up-to-date acquaintance with the literature and commentaries, and presents a convincing argument for Priscilla's authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Hoppin's thesis is based on the hypothesis of Harnack, which was further elaborated by other scholars. She has also tied together information from the narratives of Acts, archaeological discoveries, inscriptions in the catacombs of Rome, historical mention of probable contacts with Peter and Philo, and Priscilla's relationship to Paul as identified in the New Testament.

I recommend this book to any scholar who is concerned with the message, author and setting of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Hoppin's work might also be of interest to feminist biblical scholars who try to analyze, identify and understand the role of women in leadership of the early church.