Book Review

Gender Roles and the People of God: Rethinking What We Were Taught about Men and Women in the Church

By Alice P. Mathews (Zondervan, 2017)

Reviewed by Dorothy Littell Greco

Theologian and author Alice Mathews recently said in a Christianity Today interview with Hannah Anderson, “Satan knows that if he can keep women out of service, in the church and in the world, he will have won an enormous victory.” Mathews’s most recent book, Gender Roles and the People of God, takes back some of the territory gained by the enemy.

According to Mathews, “In many churches and denominations around the world, the subject of how men and women relate in the church has become a third-rail issue.” In other words, engage at your own risk. Perhaps because of this reality, far too many churches and Christian academic institutions seem content to allow a few loud voices to control the conversation. Rather than resigning herself to limited options, Mathews has spent a good portion of her life combing through scripture to determine if exclusionary practices can be supported.

In In ch. 1, Dangers of a Misleading Reading, she outlines how readers can critically evaluate biblical texts to discern how cultural mores and personal biases (their own as well as those of the loud voices) may interfere with interpretation. Mathews advocates that readers include the context and “listen to the full testimony of Scripture” rather than plucking certain texts out of context to support a particular interpretation. With that clear metric, she begins a historical overview of patriarchy by asking:

Is the Bible “patriarchal”? If we mean by that question, does the Bible accurately describe the patriarchal societies, beliefs, and actions recorded in the Scripture, the answer is yes. . . . But if we mean, does the Bible endorse the patriarchal culture in which its history and teachings are displayed, the answer is no. This is the difference between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive in the Bible.

Mathews’s perspective is that the creation account reveals complete equality between Adam and Eve without God-ordained hierarchy. She writes, “Eve was not created to serve Adam but to serve with him.” The remaining arguments in Gender Roles and the People of God hinge on this understanding, coupled with her belief that scripture does not support the eternal subordination of Jesus to God the Father.

In the subsequent chapters of Part One, Mathews points to women in positions of leadership throughout the OT (e.g., the midwives Shiprah and Puah in Exod 1, Deborah in Judg 4-5, and Abigail in 1 Sam 25). She then offers examples of how Jesus overturned gender hierarchies—what Mathews refers to as “the Divine Counterpunch.”

In Part Two, Mathews analyzes the theology behind gender-based hierarchies by digging into four familiar texts often used to justify exclusionary practices: 1 Tim 2:8-15, 1 Cor 11:3, 1 Cor 14:34-35, and Eph 5:21-33. For example, countless of us have sat squirming in pews while pastors have used 1 Tim 2:12 (“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man. . . .” [NIV]) as justification that women should never teach or have authority over men. Without sufficient understanding of the cultural context, ancient languages, and the arc of scripture, it might indeed seem that Paul was issuing a universal prohibition. Mathews does not agree.

She invites us to place the verse within the historical and sociological context of the time period. Rather than conclude that the apostle was forbidding all women from teaching or from having authority over men for all time, she argues that Paul was urging Timothy to decisively counteract heretical teaching and un-Christlike behavior (e.g., misandry, the hatred of men) that prevailed in Ephesus at that time.

Based on Mathew’s scholarship, “the prohibition in 2:12 is against grasping for unauthorized authority to teach a man in a high-handed or despotic manner.” Furthermore, as she explains in her chapter of How I Changed My Mind about Women in Leadership (ed. Alan Johnson, Zondervan, 2010), it appears that “while the norm in healthy churches was the full partnership of men and women in ministry, some churches in crisis (in Ephesus and Crete) needed remedial leadership that excluded most men as well as all women. . . . The one reality did not cancel out the other.”

In the final section of Gender Roles and the People of God, Mathews excavates history to reveal how specific men (Aristotle, Tertullian, and Augustine) and certain church movements used scripture to create gender hierarchies and subsequently fused their perspective with scripture. Tertullian espoused his belief that “the Christian woman was responsible not only for her own chastity, but for male chastity as well. She wasn’t chaste if in any way she excited a man’s imagination sexually.” Such misguided and harmful logic has been used to blame women for men’s bad behavior for more than two thousand years.

At the conclusion of Gender Roles and the People of God, Mathews’s scholarship helps readers understand how God has created men and women as two complementary genders that, in Carolyn Custis James’s words, form “a Blessed Alliance,” fulfilling God’s mandate together, as a team. I feel deeply indebted to the author for her life-long pursuit of this truth. I certainly hope that Mathews, age 86, will continue to write and thereby inform and encourage women—and men—around the globe.

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