

The Fall of Patriarchy

By Del Birkey | Reviewed by David M. Scholer

Del Birkey, an independent scholar and author of *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1988), has written a passionate, wide-ranging, and interesting book on the harmful power of patriarchy and its critique by Jesus and the apostles, representing the biblical truth of gender equality. Birkey published an article on patriarchy in the Spring 2000 issue of *Priscilla Papers*, which he says was the beginning of his work on this topic.

Birkey carries out his task in eight chapters. The first three analyze the origins and nature of patriarchy as a “fallen worldview.” Chapter 4 focuses on Jesus (and other elements of the New Testament); chapter 5 gives attention to Paul. The sixth chapter discusses the church fathers’ solidification of an ecclesiastical patriarchy, which overpowered the biblical teachings of gender equality. Chapter 7 discusses what Birkey calls the “fourth temptation”: the desire for men to use “forbidden authority . . . in leadership among God’s people and in our marriages” (p. 225). The last chapter is a strong denunciation of what Birkey names Christian patriarchy and its harmful effects on the church and its mission.

The book concludes with three appendices (six views on patriarchy and the Bible, summaries of five evangelical authors who have various differences on the issues, and a summary of the current state of house church studies—a major interest of Birkey, which appears frequently in the book), extensive notes, and an index.

It is impossible in one brief review to comment on all aspects of Birkey’s book, especially since his study is so wide-ranging, and perhaps not even always clear in its organization of data. This review will focus primarily on the chapters devoted to Jesus and Paul.

Chapter 4, “Christ against the Patriarchy,” focuses briefly on Jesus’ critique of the (patriarchal) power and authority of religious leaders, and then pursues extensively how, as Birkey describes it, “The House Structure of the New Testament Churches Provided the Effective Milieu for Gender Equalization in Christ” (p. 73). The attention to the teachings of Jesus which bear on the issues of patriarchy is too scant. Passages in the Gospels in which Jesus defends the sexual integrity of women (e.g., Luke 7:36–50; John 8:1–11; Matthew 21:31, 5:27–30) do not receive attention. Various other actions of Jesus described in the Gospels which would bear on this topic (e.g., women as disciples and women as proclaimers) are not engaged.

The importance of house churches in gender equalization in ministry is a very important insight; this is Birkey’s strength. His insights are paralleled in various new studies, especially those of Carolyn Osiek (e.g., *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* [with D. L. Balch; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997]; *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in*

Earliest Christianity [with M. Y. MacDonald; Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2006]; Birkey gives his critique of the earlier book on pages 155–57; the later book appeared too late for Birkey to note). Birkey takes his readers on a tour of this theme through all the New Testament texts (pp. 77–124), which is interesting and helpful.

Chapter 5, “Paul against the Patriarchy,” focuses almost exclusively on Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 5:21–33, which are two crucial texts for his discussion. Other crucial Pauline texts are discussed briefly in the previous chapter on Christ (pp. 81–90, 101–05). The data here are good and sound, but Birkey takes little specific advantage of the significant scholarly work done by evangelical egalitarian scholars on these texts. In both the treatments of Jesus and Paul, it may be that Birkey tends to obscure the issues of historical distance. Jesus and Paul are not twenty-first-century egalitarians; they are first-century persons in a decidedly patriarchal culture, which did shape both of them, even though they also acted and taught in significant ways that challenged their cultural assumptions and framework.

In chapter 6, “The Post-Apostolic Fathers & Ecclesiastical Patriarchy,” Birkey gives considerable attention (pp. 167–223) to the development of male-dominated ecclesiastical structures of authority and to the Fathers’ attitudes toward women and sexuality. This is important data, presented by Birkey in an interesting fashion. It does seem too bad that Birkey in this chapter did not make use of Elizabeth A. Clark’s excellent anthology of patristic texts on women (*Women in the Early Church* [Message of the Fathers of the Church 13; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983]).

Chapter 8, “Gender Patriarchy & the Good News,” is a fine, forceful, pastoral conclusion to Birkey’s convincing study. It is filled with appropriate warnings and encouraging advice.

In short, Birkey’s book is a meaningful contribution to the evangelical egalitarian literature on issues of major concern. The book is, in indirect ways, an *apologia* for the house church movement. That, along with the fact that the discussions are sometimes “thin” with reference to biblical data and scholarly discussions of it, may lessen the impact that this book might have. Yet, Birkey’s message is forceful and provides instruction for all of us on this important aspect of our theological and pastoral concerns.

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