

Half the Church

By Carolyn Custis James | Reviewed by Cynthia Davis Lathrop

Carolyn Custis James is an established author; she has three previously published books, *When Life and Beliefs Collide*, *Lost Women of the Bible*, and *The Gospel of Ruth*. She holds an MA in biblical studies and is the founder and president of Synergy Women's Network. In this, her fourth book, *Half the Church*, James writes with passion and intensity to encourage women to fulfill God's call on their lives. She says that women make up at least half the church; in fact, she says that women make up 80 percent of the church in China and about 90 percent in Japan (27). James encourages women to be an active force in the world by stepping out and using the gifts and abilities that God has given them. She also maintains that, if women are held back from fulfilling God's call, the church suffers. Appealing to Paul's metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–27), she contends that, if women are not allowed to function in ministry, then half the body of Christ will not be operational, and Jesus wants a vigorous and healthy body (187). To become the church fully, women and men must work together, cooperating in kingdom living and kingdom purposes, as God desires.

James has added a new dimension in her writing—the global dimension. After having been challenged by Kristof and WuDunn's book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (2009), she now challenges women and men to action in justice issues: sex trafficking, female genocide, and more. Throughout the book, we are introduced to various young women in difficult and horrific circumstances. Is the gospel message universally applicable for women of all cultures (35)? Can it bring salvation, hope, and deliverance to women who suffer under oppression and injustice? James seeks to answer these questions through Scripture, biblical examples, and through the wisdom shared by justice workers, humanitarians, and in the exemplary lives of missions workers past and present.

In chapters 2 through 5, James unpacks scriptural passages and concepts that prove God values both women and men. For example, in Genesis 1:26–28, the Lord identifies both the woman and the man as God's image bearers. God also gives the same responsibilities to both and commands them to be fruitful and multiply and to rule and subdue the whole earth (Gen 1:26, 28). The author suggests a bigger picture here: the strategic mission of being God's intermediaries (53). James also speaks of the "Ezer-Warrior" (113), given to the man by God so that man would have someone who corresponds to him and is equal to him, one who will engage with him in the conflict (111–13). In Genesis 1:26 and 28, the man and the woman share responsibility for the garden and work together; James cites this as a model of cooperation between men and women in the church today. This she calls the "Blessed Alliance."

As examples of this Blessed Alliance, she uses the Old Testament characters of Esther and Mordecai and the New Testament characters of Mary and Joseph. Both sets of characters become caught up in a bigger picture, and they must each step outside of traditional roles and expectations for the sake of God's kingdom (143–48).

James is exceptional at drawing out practical examples of men and women who step outside of cultural conditioning and patterns of behavior (89). I found myself gratefully meditating on her treatment of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz (83–93) and wanting more. The companion to this spiritual insight is her enthusiasm and support for women to become the leaders God gifted them to be (77). Other pluses in this book include her emphases on Jesus' words in Matthew 22:37 and 39 that we are to love God with all that we are and our neighbor as ourselves, and on Paul's words in Philippians 2 that we are not to operate out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but out of humility. These are the heart reasons we are image bearers, *ezer* warriors, and a Blessed Alliance, cooperating together as women and men in kingdom building.

There was only a small amount of information on justice and abuse issues in the book; I would like to have seen more. James does not like to engage in debate and controversy regarding women's ministry. She encourages women to be all that they can be for the Lord and to use all of their gifts, but, at the same time, she will not take a stand on the subject of women's ordination. I believe that, if she were to do this, she could be a stronger advocate for her sisters around the world. Even so, I think that this book will generate discussion and will challenge us all in our thinking and in our living. Certainly, classes on justice issues may find this appropriate, as well as classes on women in ministry.

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