Living on the Boundaries

Evangelical Women, Feminism and the Theological Academy | By Nicola Hoggard Cregan and Christine D. Pohl | Reviewed by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen

In 2006, some senior women faculty at Calvin College were inspired by the film Calendar Girls, a lightly fictionalized account of an improbable fundraising device by a group of middle-aged Britons in a rural Women’s Institute. The Englishwomen decided to pose in discreetly suggestive ways (featuring food, flowers, and fancy hats) for a calendar, which ended up selling so widely and so well that it raised almost $1 million for the cancer ward of a local hospital. The women at Calvin decided to celebrate, in a similar way, the now-critical mass of female professors at their institution while at the same time raising funds for a downtown women’s ministry. The result, a sixteen-month calendar titled “So Far From Cheesecake,” features full-professorial women, most of whom earned their terminal degrees from the 1980s to mid-1990s. They are posed in academic regalia surrounded by the tools of their disciplines, which include the social and natural sciences, languages and philosophy, art and music, communication, dance, and business. One woman in religious studies was also featured, her photo flanked by the telling phrase that Jesus used to describe Mary of Bethany as she studied at his feet with the male disciples: “Choosing the better part.”

Nicola Cregan and Christine Pohl—a theologian and theological ethicist respectively, and both professors at evangelical institutions—belong to roughly the same cohort of academic women: they pursued seminary then doctoral training in the 1980s, encouraged by the success of the third wave of feminism and its (albeit fainter) reverberations in the evangelical subculture. Living on the Boundaries is their attempt to track what happened to almost one hundred scholars like themselves: women with advanced theological training who have self-identified as evangelicals and feminists, though not always simultaneously. Lacking a comprehensive database for such a group, they did the next best thing and used a “snowball” method (getting people to refer other people) to assemble their sample. The result is a richly textured analysis of responses combined with thoughtful theological and cultural reflection. “Is it possible to be both evangelical and feminist?” they ask, referring to a joint identity that too many in both camps still consider an oxymoron: “For some women, it is not possible to be either, if to be one is to be defined out of line by the other.” Yet, they report, “we discovered that the most fruitful insights into these tensions came from those who still struggle on the border of evangelicalism or who live with difficulty but hope in its mainstream” (29).

Not surprisingly, most of their respondents reported finding “life on the boundaries” to be tension-laden in ways that were alternately invigorating and depressing. Within evangelical
institutions, assumptions about gender are usually implicit rather than explicitly laid out in creeds and faith statements, but such assumptions have significant effects on women scholars, both institutionally and personally. Does the lone woman scholar at a faculty dinner gravitate to a conversation with her male colleagues or with their non-academic wives? How do women academics negotiate the tension between their appreciation of evangelicalism’s critique of mainstream culture and their disagreement with its simultaneous failure to recognize institutionalized male privilege within its own ranks? How do they negotiate the unpredictable two-step between evangelical experientialism (which seems to privilege women’s piety no less than men’s) and its continued adherence to a hermeneutic of propositional rationalism that is used to keep women down?

As if such challenges weren’t enough, Creegan’s and Pohl’s respondents often found themselves equally marginalized in the mainstream academy for self-identifying as evangelicals, suspected of suffering from false consciousness if they reported any positive residue from their male-dominated church past. Ironically, although “feminism is now much more open to the plurality of women’s experiences, especially in the Two-Thirds world . . . these insights are rarely turned to the evangelical woman’s experience” (75). At the same time, there were positive stories of good mentors and teachers on both sides of the evangelical/feminist divide. Especially telling (at least for me, as an academic in an evangelical setting) was the authors’ conclusion that high expectations combined with steady support seemed to help these women the most as they developed their academic/theological careers.

There were equally positive accounts of friends, family, professional networks, and parachurch organizations continuing to affirm respondents’ identities as both evangelical and feminist. Particularly astute is their chapter on “Evangelical and Feminist Maps,” where “the feminist critiques of patriarchy, of sin defined as pride, of a superficial theodicy and of future eschatology are modified by an evangelical awareness of God’s presence with us on the journey” (151). More challenging to raise in evangelical circles are the issues of God language and theories of the atonement, Christology, and Scripture—but here help has come from an unexpected quarter. As evangelical male theologians have begun to approach these topics from other points of departure, they are beginning to converge with the concerns of their women colleagues.

Creegan and Pohl conclude their volume with a list of practical suggestions for moving forward, a veritable gold mine both for evangelical women with an academic calling and those who would mentor them. If I have one reservation about this rich and thoughtful book, it would be that I would have liked to have heard more about those women in their sample (the majority, the authors tell us in passing) who have ended up as part of the evangelical minority in various mainline denominations. Back in the 1980s, I recall asking one such woman how she felt about seeking ordination in a mainline church, given that her own church would not ordain her. Her reply was that she and several other women in her position had made a covenant with each other that they would be ordained in whatever denomination would have them, and that once there
they would consistently preach the gospel and hold each other accountable for doing so. I suspect that part of the good news of “living on the boundaries” is that many such women have been agents of orthodox renewal where they have ended up—which, given their ambiguous status in their churches of origin, would certainly show that God has a sense of humor. And I suspect that, with the passage of time, the same will be true of evangelical women who have ended up in the mainstream theological academy. Perhaps in the next decade or so we can persuade Creegan and Pohl to do another survey to find out.

Notes

1. Available from the Calvin bookstore at calvin.edu/campus-store.

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