

# Why We're Equal

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## *Introducing Feminist Theology | By Val Webb | Reviewed by Joseph B. Modica*

Val Webb, adjunct faculty member at the University of Minnesota and author of four books, including *In Defense of Doubt*, has written an engaging, readable, and mostly historical approach to feminist theology. Her thesis is straightforward and often restated: “The goal of this book is to look at the diversity of the feminist movement and show how limited and inaccurate negative stereotyping is” (p. 3; also see pp. 9, 12, 47). Webb purports that there is not a feminist theology, but rather feminist theologies, so a casual observer cannot make sweeping assumptions of what it means to be a Christian feminist. Her nine chapters walk the reader through Christian history to observe how gender roles between women and men were decided. There are a number of historical and exegetical nuggets, such as her discussion of Onan (Gen. 38:4–10, Deut. 25:1–10), who is often used as an argument against contemporary contraception. “The offense for which Onan was killed was neither masturbation (onanism) nor birth control—sex without the risk of pregnancy. The offense was refusing to fulfill his legal and family obligations to his brother's wife, hardly an issue in our society!” (p. 37). Webb also weaves into this journey snippets of her own spiritual pilgrimage as well as a critique of her Roman Catholic faith tradition (e.g., her discussion of Onan above).

Webb has written an accessible book that places feminist theology in historical context and describes some of the content for each of the movements. As the Roman statesman Cicero once said, “To be ignorant of history is to remain a child.” Webb has a knack for showing the reader that many of the issues that women grappled with—even in earliest centuries—are not new, but rather historical redux.

As with any inquiry, one will not always agree with the author's assertions or evaluations. There are two reservations. First, Webb waffles on the authority of Scripture when she relegates the Creation story (Gen. 1–2) to myth (nonhistorical) so as to avoid the “fall of humanity”—what Webb calls “Reclaiming Eve”—and the infamous “let women be silent” passage (1 Tim. 2:12) as a second-century, non-Pauline writing (thus nonauthoritative since it is not from Paul's pen). One wonders if Webb overly sympathizes with E. S. Fiorenza (*In Memory of Her*) who blatantly excises patriarchal texts of Scripture and deems them nonauthoritative. It is one thing to state that certain texts are rooted in patriarchy and need to be reinterpreted in light of cultural and historical findings. It is quite another thing to say that those specific texts are nonauthoritative, even noninspired—although Webb does not state this exactly—than other texts.

The question that remains for Webb (and others) is: Can feminist theologians hold to authority of Scripture, or are they compelled to select only certain texts as authoritative (vis-à-vis “inspired”) and place the others in the “patriarchal paper shredder”? The problem with this is:

Who determines which texts are authoritative? Feminist theologians? Womanists? Dispensationalists? Pentecostals? The writer of this review? Webb seems resistant to completely commit to the historical doctrine of biblical authority.

The second reservation involves the “Re-Imagining God” conferences (the first was in 1993). Webb, although mentioning that the movement “is not without its problems” (p. 121), seems nevertheless to be sympathetic and indifferent to the theological criticisms that have surfaced about this yearly conference. It is beyond the scope of this review to evaluate the presuppositions and content of this conference, and although Webb only devotes three pages to the topic, they are indeed positive ones.

Surprisingly, Webb does not interact with evangelical feminist scholars—those who maintain the authority of Scripture and also affirm the gender equality (e.g., Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Gilbert Bilezikian, Patricia Gundry, Craig Keener, Ruth Tucker, David Scholer, Gretchen Hull, etc.). Furthermore, interaction with Phyllis Trible's groundbreaking work in biblical feminist scholarship, *Texts of Terror*—which maintains the authority of Scripture while “rereading” texts through literary criticism—is nonexistent (although Webb does refer once to a Trible journal article). There are also beneficial study questions for each chapter and an appendix highlighting women's movements around the world.

Webb is to be commended for her erudition, passionate writing style (her repeated use of exclamation points shows her enthusiasm!), and personal engagement with the subject. Her banner “To be a Christian is to be a feminist” resounds with this reviewer and CBE members. Nevertheless, the above reservations should be noted.

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