Women, Ministry, and the Gospel

*Exploring New Paradigms | Edited by Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen | Reviewed by Timothy Paul Erdel*

This fine collection of essays draws upon papers presented at a Wheaton College Theology Conference in April 2005. While they all merit reading and pondering, four struck me as particularly noteworthy: those by I. Howard Marshall, Fredrick J. Long, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, and Timothy Larsen. At the same time, with one or two exceptions, the articles break less new ground than the phrase *New Paradigms* in the subtitle suggests. One purpose of the conference was apparently to work toward some sort of rational, biblical rapprochement or *via media* between the two evangelical camps (hierarchists and egalitarians), as several invited contributors (e.g., Henri Blocher, Sarah Sumner) were already known for trying to promote a middle way between the more strident claims of partisans on either extreme. What follows, given the space limitations of a review, is a very brief account of each essay with an occasional judgment or two thrown in.

The opening piece by Rebecca G. S. Idestrom examines the case of Deborah. In Judges, where even heroes are flawed, Deborah’s story takes substantial space, yet she is presented without blemish. Deborah combines multiple roles, among them prophet, judge, lyricist, and “mother in Israel,” doing so in a manner that evokes the towering figure of Moses while also foreshadowing the ministry of Samuel. She apparently served as a judge apart from the imminent threat from Sisera and his army (compared to male judges appointed to deal with specific crises), one of several hints that her role was normative, not just a divinely permitted exception due to the failure of male leadership.

James M. Hamilton makes what case he can for limiting what women may do in Christian ministry based on their gender alone—he would say based upon divinely revealed boundaries. He and I would read the same scriptural passages with the same high view of biblical authority, yet differ fairly dramatically in our interpretations of those same texts. A simple example would be our disagreement over the meaning and implications of *authentein* in 1 Timothy 2:12. The hermeneutic that one brings to the task, including how one weighs different portions by the same author, can make enormous differences, but it would probably take a full-length article to respond to his position point by point.

I. Howard Marshall focuses on the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2: the core, linchpin passage for many traditionalists, with whom he generally takes issue. Marshall notes that he published his own commentary (ICC) on this portion before many other scholars who have since made similar analyses, but he himself is still humbly open to further exegetical insights, as evidenced by his repeated references to more recent scholarship by Linda Belleville. While his observations about
1 Timothy 2 are both astute and profound, I particularly appreciated his multiple dry asides about the casuistry and hair-splitting that traditionalists are forced into when trying to determine exactly what women may in fact do within the church, slyly implying that the result is frequently *ad absurdum*. For example, are we to ban women from writing books or hymns lest they inadvertently teach men? In a similar vein, Marshall can wryly observe that an interpretation put forward by Thomas R. Schreiner—that the serpent *should* have tempted the *male* Adam *first*—amounts to a “counsel of despair” (70).¹

Lynn H. Cohick argues both from her experience as a missionary in Kenya, where she began to see how culturally laden some of her hermeneutical assumptions were, and from her own exegetical work, that 1 Corinthians 12–14 does not have the restrictive force for women in the church that many traditionalists assume. She interacts with multiple interpretations, but particularly with Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Yale University Press, 1995), suggesting that he has not gone far enough in recognizing the redemptive critique of culture that the Apostle Paul makes, nor does Martin link the permission given women to prophesy in chapter 11 properly with the instructions in 12–14.

Fredrick J. Long packs tremendous content into his essay, especially by means of charts. He convincingly shows that there are no gender restrictions whatsoever in the New Testament gift lists, and, from the beginning, God gave his gifts to be used for leadership among his people (see Num. 11:24–30; cf. Joel 2:28). Long also makes a good case for why Luke might have been reticent to transcribe actual female speeches in a Roman context, even though he describes women “prophesying, running house churches, teaching” (122), and otherwise ministering and suffering persecution alongside men.

Mark Husbands draws especially on insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his theological reflections on why women should be full partners in ministry. He also makes good use of N. T. Wright’s distinction between Old Covenant Judaism and New Covenant Christianity. Circumcision privileged not only Jews, but *males*, while baptism invites both Gentiles and *women* into the fullness of the gospel, including witness and ministry.

Margaret Kim Peterson writes as a professional theologian who thoroughly enjoys housework, making numerous pertinent observations from that “politically incorrect” vantage. She rightly questions how boundaries are drawn concerning Christian public ministry, shrewdly observing how blurred “public sphere” and “private sphere,” “religious” and “secular,” “men’s work” and “women’s work” actually are, especially given historical and cultural changes in the meaning and definition of various functions as they relate to gender.² She also offers a refreshing analysis of Mary and Martha—how striking and paradoxical Jesus’ rebuke would have sounded, since hospitality is a major biblical virtue!

The most provocative chapter, by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, is, somewhat ironically, a “meta-review” summary of recent empirical studies in the social sciences. Nevertheless, its implications
are rather far-reaching and could actually threaten assumptions about genders and the
differences between them that are sometimes held in common by both hierarchists and
egalitarians, each side appealing to gender distinctions while arguing toward somewhat different
ends. Many hierarchists would cite apparent differences as evidence that each gender is, from
creation itself, essentially different in its roles, with the female gender therefore divinely unsuited
to certain forms of public, ordained ministry. Some egalitarians would stress that whatever
differences may exist require full participation by both genders in church leadership and
elsewhere in order to realize fully all the implications of the *imago Dei* and of gifting for ministry
in the church.

Van Leeuwen makes multiple points, which I will unfairly reduce to three. First, human traits
and behaviors vary far more *within* the genders that they do *between* them. In fact, extremes for
both genders fall within the same broad bell curve. Second, though the two genders do have
slightly different means with respect to many traits and behaviors, the differences are, when
properly controlled for extraneous variables, *not statistically significant*. Third, Mars/Venus
gender language is, therefore, “romantic rubbish.” There are so many issues here, and so many
possible arguments and counterarguments from all sorts of domains, that I simply must put
them aside for another day.³

Cheryl J. Sanders combines fascinating vignettes of three prominent, if too often forgotten,
“sanctified” female clergy (Amanda Berry Smith, Rosa A. Horn, and Ida B. Robinson) with an
autobiographical note and a lament for the decline of female clergy in her home denomination,
the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana. I resonated with her account, as the tiny predecessors to
my own small denomination (the Missionary Church) during their early years licensed some *five
ton* hundred women for public ministry (*not* counting overseas missionaries), but we now barely and
all too reluctantly credential a mere handful.

Timothy Larsen develops this same theme on a larger scale and shows how profoundly
evangelicals suffer from historical amnesia. Almost the entire impetus for women in public,
ordained ministry came from *evangelicals*, including ardent *Calvinists* and *fundamentalists*, but
one would never know it today. I have rehearsed many of the same stories and themes for years
to my students, who often (though not always, thank God) look at me with uncomprehending,
blank stares. They cannot imagine a world where the theological conservatives were the radical
feminists, even though some of their own great-grandmothers were prophetic firebrands in the
pulpit and the public square.

Henri Blocher suggests that women can be ordinary preachers (“prophets”) and sometimes may
be called to what for them might normally be extraordinary vocations (“teachers” and
“leaders/rulers”). The proposal winsomely tries to make sense of apparently disparate biblical
trajectories, but may suffer, if to a lesser degree, from casuistic dilemmas similar to those to
which Marshall and Peterson alluded in their articles.
Sarah Sumner tries very hard to reframe hierarchist and egalitarian debates in a way that would have them work together with respect to shared concerns and convictions. She takes special pains to underscore unacknowledged common assumptions. A more egalitarian spin might also emphasize the degree to which many of the more nuanced hierarchists have simply abandoned dogmatic statements against women made by “church fathers” from the medieval or Reformation eras.

Timothy George concludes the collection by asking three questions about how we might learn from our “opposition” and listing eight areas where the two camps should, as evangelicals, share common convictions. His proposals are all good, I suppose, and to be applauded, but not very original or exciting to a convinced egalitarian.

Notes

1. The editors waited a full year or so for a corresponding article on 1 Timothy 2 from a hierarchal perspective, but, despite repeated promises, never received it, and finally, reluctantly sent their manuscript off for publication without it (10).
2. Insights supported at length by the work of Carrie A. Miles, The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2006), which appeared while Women, Ministry and the Gospel was in press.
3. The claims are so intriguing—with my own intuitions, experiences, and readings suggesting fairly strong arguments both for and against them—that my original review consisted largely of ruminations about this one contribution. Single-sex communities and relationships (schools, dormitories, athletic teams, etc.) offer laboratories for analysis and reflection, as do anecdotal experiences from rearing children or more formal studies of specific traits like aggression. Do men and women really fight differently, as Langdon Gilkey suggests in Shantung Compound?

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