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# BOOK REVIEW OF PARTNERS IN CHRIST

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PRESENTED TO: Dr. GLEN SHELLRUDE - NT READING 503



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## Partners in Christ

This book is primarily addressing believers who are in the church and have given their lives to the Lord Jesus. The book starts with what appears to be contradictory terms in the Bible about women in ministry but in all reality, they are not. We have to discover what Jesus is really saying about the issue of women in ministry. After all, for those of us who really love Jesus, we want to share the correct teaching on this subject matter and learn to exercise tolerance and respect for each other.

When we consider a discussion on women in ministry, we must look at biblical texts in their proper social, political, and psychological orientation at the time of Christ. Furthermore, we must look at two thousand years of church history. This is just the starting point, but we prayerfully must ask ourselves as sincere believers what the biblical texts and tradition are really saying to us.

We have presently coined terms particularly in our traditional Western culture like: feminism and patriarchalism in attempt to label our differences. Of course, each term has its own stigma and implication. The author referring to feminists which he represents "...are those who resist what they judge to be *arbitrary, ungrounded* distinctions between men and women and the discrimination that attends such distinctions..."<sup>1</sup> The modern term of patriarchalist is complementarian. This term reflects "...their contention that both women and men are fully human and reflect the image of God, but are sometimes called by God to different, and "complementary", roles on the basis of their sex."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Stackhouse, John G., Jr., Partners In Christ, pg. 14

2 Ibid., pg. 14-15

Therefore, to understand whether women has an expansive role in the church, we need to objectively consider our hermeneutics of biblical text as we apply them to contemporary situations. Further, even in our interpretation of the biblical text, we must look beyond the way we exegete a text based on historical or social setting because we do not all ponder theological reasoning of a particular text the same way. Moreover, "...[o]ne's theological method in large part determines one's theological outcome."<sup>3</sup>

We can begin with certain assumptions which would lead to different theological outcomes. Some Christians may believe that Christians can be feminists while others will say that you can only be either. It appears to me that this controversy is by no means resolved.

Therefore, it is not enough to take a biblical text outside of an historical, social, and psychological setting and apply it to a contemporary setting to mean the same in this society. Not only are we taking the text outside the various settings, but we are applying our own interpretive value. This of course can lead to erroneous conclusions.

Moreover, to test the reliability of our hermeneutics, we have to seek the Lord, exercising discernment on a case by case basis, and examine the outcome of each case. If the outcome is negative when exercising our interpretive value of the Word of God in a given situation, it could be that we incorrectly interpret the Word of God. Further, there are times we have to look at tradition and experience to ascertain the interpretation of a biblical text, knowing there is no private interpretation of scripture. As "...human beings with limited intellectual capacities and worse, we are still subject to the influence of sin, we must beware of our interpretations of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 17

anything, including Scripture, as at least possibly mistaken and maybe even self-serving...”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when it comes to gender in the ministry, we are confronted with the question whether we can see why God would do such a thing. We must not lean upon our own understanding but get discernment and the wisdom of God where positive results will be manifested. We are forced “...to do our own homework, and see what Christ is saying to the church in our place and time.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, our broad base Christian belief teaches us that our interpretation of scripture should match our tradition and teaching, offering a protection from extremists in one direction or another.

When the author looks back as a youngster, having grown up in the church where vibrant spirit filled women were not used to lead in the service but sometimes boring men detached of spiritual exuberance led week after week, month, and year after year, he “wondered” why women were not being used to lead in his church service. Over the years, this pondering put him on a path to conduct an inventory among women family members, classmates and even his wife as to why women were not used in leadership capacity.

The above-mentioned developments were in the late 1970’s where “broad social transformation of gender” began to take place. Women began to assume the role of all occupations of life in this society; the glass ceiling was being shattered. This author came to a conclusion after much readings on attempts to explain gender bias in the church, while considering I Tim. 2:11-15. Moreover, the author states in his conclusion that “...we should look at all of the texts as open-mindedly as possible [looking at] competing interpretations... We should look, in basic epistemological terms, for the preponderance of warrants, or grounds to

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4 *ibid.*, pg. 20

5 *ibid.*, pg. 24

believe p instead of q... if we conclude that a preponderance is discernible, then we should acknowledge it... and proceed to act on that basis.”<sup>6</sup> If we cannot discern, we should reserve judgment.

When we look at the plan and purposes of God, the question becomes what good reason would God have in not selecting women for leadership positions in the church since He has good reasons for all His other commands. We do not see one, but have examples of women in leadership positions in the secular world. Therefore, “...Theology is the task of coordinating the deliverances of all of these gifts of God, and then formulating our best estimation of what God is saying to us, today, in the context, for his purposes in this moment.”<sup>7</sup>

When developing one’s theology, we must consider all texts of scripture and determine secondary and controlling texts. For example, ““...As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (I Cor. 14:33; cf. I Tim 2:11-12).”<sup>8</sup>

We find, however, earlier in this epistle the text that a woman should not pray or prophesy without her head being covered. We may say the prayer means individual as pertaining to the individual person but prophesy is a corporate term which has to do with the church. Generally, one doesn’t prophesy to one self. Therefore,

...[i]n this regard, we do well to consider the importance of the so-called hermeneutical circle: the moving back and forth between what one assumes are control texts and what one assumes are secondary texts seeing how well the data

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 31

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 34

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 38

are explained by this relationship, with the possibility ever open that one not only might have to adjust one's interpretation of this or that text, but might have to move texts from one category to another as one works toward the best arrangement of them all...<sup>9</sup>

Hence, this gets us closer to the truth. If one would adopt the above-mentioned idea as a model, then the first principle from this model can be "...that men and women are equal in dignity before God... The creation mandate to procreate so as to co-create the world with God is given to man and woman as the partnership they are – the humans – without any sense that one is somehow lesser or inferior."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, an equal number of chromosomes come from men and women in procreation. Each one contributes 23, providing evidence that in procreation neither sex is greater or lesser than the other. In Roman 16:1-12, Paul complimented women's roles in the various churches in the same breath as he complimented the men in the churches. It would then appear that women were of equal value in assisting Paul. Therefore, "[t]here are lots of scripture clues...to indicate that the egalitarians are right: God originally intended women and men to be co-equal partners in stewarding the earth, without one being subordinate to the other, and God has never rescinded that mandate."<sup>11</sup>

But what about Paul's assertion that women are not to lead. We need to reconcile this in a way that doesn't appear contradictory to other scriptures in the Bible which support leadership roles of women. I believe we can agree that one of the things which matters most to God is the furtherance of the Gospel. Moreover, "...In the New Testament, and in subsequent church history, we see that God is willing to do almost anything to get the gospel out to as many people

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9 *ibid.*, pg. 38-39

10 *ibid.*, pg. 47

11 *ibid.*, pg. 48

as possible, as effectively as possible...”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we see over the centuries the principle of accommodation where God works within human limitations to accomplish His will, rather than doing a complete work at once and overturning the use of human agents.

Moreover, “[i]n just this way, I suggest, Jesus puts critical and creative pressure against the gender distinction of his culture- the way he also does against the Jew/Gentile distinction... but without going so far as to actually overturn it...”<sup>13</sup> The society in first century Judaism was entrenched with male domination. The strong expectations of a new kingdom, the eschaton, dominated the minds of the disciples and believers alike. Thus, the thought or idea to ruffle feathers by accepting women leadership roles in the church ministry was unthinkable. Moreover, we find scriptures permitting slavery, obedience to the government, etc. For the sake of the eschaton, the thought was to leave the status quo so as to not be distracted in proclaiming the kingdom of God. Therefore, the oppression of women which existed was not challenged. This I hope will shed light toward reconciling Paul’s assertion that women are not to lead and leadership roles of women in the scriptures.

Yet we know “...[F]reedom from gender discrimination is an important implication of the gospel... this particular liberty, among many others, must at least sometimes be foregone in the greater liberty given us to do whatever is necessary to further the most fundamental message of the gospel: deliverance from sin and death, and reconciliation to God and the enjoyment of eternal life through knowing Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>14</sup> I believe the egalitarians would say each

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12 *ibid.*, pg. 51

13 *ibid.*, pg. 53

14 *ibid.*, pg. 63

of us is gifted by the Holy Spirit; this is essential in Paul's teaching. There is no indication in Paul's teaching that the various gifts may be delineated along the lines of sex.

As believers, it is essential that we exercise our spiritual gifts as the church is in order. On the other hand, the complementarians would say don't see egalitarianism in certain scriptural texts where Paul says men teach their wives at home and the wives ought to be silent in the church. Further, men are the head of their homes, exercising spiritual authority over their wives. However, this silence in the church seems to point to corporate worship. In this culture, women did not have the same formal education as men for the most part, and it appeared that the questions asked by women would be disruptive. Therefore, "Paul tells women, as a general principle that applies to them as a general class, to ask their husbands at home..."<sup>15</sup>

The question is, how do we reconcile scriptural texts pointing to complementary points of view versus an egalitarian point of view. Hence, scripture "...as a whole, however, the pattern of hierarchy seems evident. It seems to me to be a more hopeful theological strategy to look for a different way of understanding this pattern as a whole than to try to chip away at it one verse at a time."<sup>16</sup>

The author now suggests "...that Paul – and God are not forbidding women from leadership forever and in every circumstance, but are instead temporarily accommodating themselves to the global reality of patriarchy, then we might catch a glimpse of exceptions in the record..."<sup>17</sup> While we may look for these types of exceptions in scriptures, we nonetheless, find a double standard. Women were unclean for twice as long when they gave birth to girls as

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15 *ibid.*, pg. 68

16 *ibid.*, pg. 66

17 *ibid.*, pg. 69

opposed to boys. We find these examples in Leviticus. Moreover, we have Paul's interpretation of men being made in the image of God while women were made in the image of man. This interpretation doesn't seem to line up with Gen. 1:26-27.

The double pattern at times in scripture texts does not line up with the oftentimes of Christ and even Paul praising women throughout their ministries. On such an important event as the resurrection, it was a woman who Jesus first revealed Himself to. Therefore, "... the task before us is to make sense of all that Paul says, not just a few bits we happen to think are clear in the midst of otherwise murky passages, including the apparently egalitarian verses – some of which appear *in the same place*."<sup>18</sup> We see this same double pattern in the Torah where some sort of patriarchal conduct is affirmed but at the same time affirm equality of women under varied circumstances supporting egalitarianism.

Now, one has to ask the question, why do we prefer the egalitarian interpretation? "... Because the egalitarian interpretation makes better sense of the presence of both kind of texts alongside each other in Scripture... egalitarians see God working through patriarchal structures in Scripture and in church history while also providing the foundation for the removal of those structures when and where the cause of the gospel would be advanced thereby."<sup>19</sup>

If women through God's gifts and intelligence can advance the gospel in ways that their male counterparts cannot, why would God destine women to a non-leadership position for all times and forever more. "... Why would God call entirely equal sexes to deeply different roles, ever and always, world without end? Why indeed would one role be that of leadership and the

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 83

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 86-87

other of submission, if women and men are not only equal in status and dignity before God but equal in every other way as well?”<sup>20</sup> If one were to argue the fact that women are generally smaller and physically weaker than men as a reason to marginalize a whole category of people, the women’s moral and emotional intelligence may very well be superior to their male counterpart. Furthermore, if one were to carry this thinking to an absurdity, exceptional women that are taller and stronger than some of their male counterparts should exercise leadership over those males.

The author makes clear that our theology will not necessarily be packaged timelessly, seamlessly, fitting nicely in a theological framework to last forevermore. The author here argues that God condescends to human understanding in expressing His superior nature and love toward us. “...God is transcendent, almighty, self-existent...Now, how would God best communicate this point...By using the image of “lord” of ruler, monarch, judge, master – all of which were positions generally held by males.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, even in God expressing His maleness is due to a male dominated culture. Therefore, the author would argue that “[w]e need to recognize that the biblical accounts need reinterpretation from points of view other than that of the traditional privileged male...”<sup>22</sup>

I don’t believe there are any serious doubts that women can lead and have been leading successfully over many decades. They have done well in seminary classes; successfully occupy leadership positions in churches; have preached and taught timely messages. “...So there seems

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20 *Ibid.*, pg. 89

21 *Ibid.*, pg. 99

22 *Ibid.*, pg. 101

no reason left to forbid a woman from occupying this role, other than sheer prejudice of the “I’m just not comfortable with a woman as a senior pastor” variety.”<sup>23</sup>

It can be argued that Paul’s declaration in I Tim. 2:11-14 is proof to small number of deviant cult movements led by women but then the question can be asked about the leadership of the vast majority of cult movements in this country alone. Instead of denigrating women leadership, we must celebrate, for we find major leaders in Christianity such as John Westley, Charles Finney and Dwight Moody encouraging female evangelists.

It has also been argued that Christian feminism is derived or in response to secular feminism. Thus, its origin is one of worldliness and as such should be discredited. In response to this: “Christian feminists is a hundred years older than the books of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem on this side of the Atlantic, and of Simone de Beauvoir on the other.”<sup>24</sup> Even if this were true, “...it wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing. For who cares where a good idea originates?”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, “...the mainstreaming of women’s full dignity in home and church should be a priority with all Christians in such cultures. There is no longer any reason to hold back, and every reason to move forward.”<sup>26</sup> The critical debate to women liberation is what constitute “human right” versus “social privilege”, duty to self and others as a whole. In the women suffrage movement in the U.S., there was no discernable reason to deny women the right to vote other than to protect the privilege white men from maintaining their status quo as the ruling sex. Even slavery was never normalized explicitly. These types of denigration based on race or sex

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23 *Ibid.*, pg. 103

24 *Ibid.*, pg. 108

25 *Ibid.*, pg. 109

26 *Ibid.*, pg. 108

serve no purpose in the furtherance of the gospel but as a hinderance. If the goal is the spread of the gospel, all unnecessary barriers must be broken down.

Patriarchy seems to be a result of the fall, and God "...doesn't fix everything at once, but presses as hard as he can-that is, as hard as the situation itself will bear, and with primary values preferred over secondary or tertiary ones- to maximize shalom in every situation, . . . and God calls his people to do the same."<sup>27</sup> We need to always open our hearts and minds to receive the guidance of the Spirit in every situation, and "... rigorously comparing the strengths and weaknesses of two or more competing paradigms, honestly attempting to see whether one is superior to the other... We will make no progress on this...[issue] if we do not open our hearts, as well as our minds, to the Spirit of God..."<sup>28</sup>

As we open our hearts and minds to the Spirit of God, we need to ask where are the women, "...when it comes to looking at broader questions of biblical interpretation, and to the composition of fresh theological schemes..."<sup>29</sup> The imagery of women in the Bible needs greater emphasis in the church as a whole, demonstrating their ability to lead in what may be generally male dominated roles. We must recognize that women's voices in the field of theological scholarship needs to be heard and present needs to be felt in order to get a balanced perspective of biblical text.

Moving forward, we need to break down barriers as perceived men's role versus women's role. "...[B]ut instead to note the wide range of human interests and concerns and ways

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27 *ibid.*, pg. 121

28 *ibid.*, pg.133

29 *ibid.*, pg. 144

of being Christian and then opening up the church to accommodate them and help them thrive.”<sup>30</sup> Having this theological focus, the activities of the sexes is less about gender and more about learning various human perspectives. Today, we see the growing number of women even outnumbering their male counterpart in universities but only a small number of women become CEO’s of major firms; this ought not to be. Though the number of women in politics is more favorable, it “...still lags well behind the proportion of women in the electorate (For example, the U.S. Congress is made up of only 20 percent women.)”<sup>31</sup>

One may argue that women are more nurturers and the competitive culture in the workplace in climbing the corporate ladder is less conducive for women. The answer to this is simple, “...men have defined the actual roles of leaders and the criteria by which all of us are to judge their success. Processes and principles of appointment and promotion have been constructed by men... How could we expect otherwise?”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in my estimation women have to press on like minorities have over the centuries. They “...have... to make the best of their situation, to provide good examples to those women and men under their influence...and to hope for something better, if only for their daughters and sons.”<sup>33</sup> Men have to reflect inwardly, picking up the baton to do meaningful steps to include women in leadership in every aspect of life, especially in those roles where traditionally men led the way. I must ask the women in my life, please assist me to develop egalitarian behavior; this is my desire.

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30 *Ibid.*, pg. 155-156

31 *Ibid.*, pg. 160

32 *Ibid.*, pg. 170

33 *Ibid.*, pg. 175

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