

Book Review

God's Women—Then and Now

Gill, Deborah M. and Barbara Cavaness

(Springfield, MO: Grace & Truth, 2004) pp. 1-238. Paperback.

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This fresh new book by two experienced women ministers is one of the best handbooks on the subject of women in ministry that I have seen and it is certainly to be recommended to all ministers whether men or women. We men are too often either unaware of or insensitive to the potential of women in ministry and women are too often held hostage to anxiety because of (frequently unintended) male prejudice and not a little uncertainty about what the Bible really says about women ministers. The authors have superb academic credentials, both holding Ph.D.s from Fuller Theological Seminary, but they are also well experienced. Cavaness has been a missionary and a professor for more than 30 years; in her twenty-plus years of ministry, Gill has been a professor, pastor, and denominational executive. Their book should lay to rest much of the confusion about whether women are called as ministers.

Seeking above all to be biblical, they have divided the book into five logical units that sequentially engage the significant exegetical, theological, historical, and practical questions: "Unit One: "A Biblical Approach" points out the importance of going to the Scriptures and interpreting correctly; Unit Two: Old Testament Foundation" shows the dignity of women in creation and emphasizes their important role in Old Testament ministry; "Unit Three: New Testament Foundation" deals with Jesus' regard for women and their important role in

the early church, all against the backdrop of societies of that time; "Unit Four: Specific Issues in Local Churches" responds to misinterpretations of the prohibitions against women in Corinth and Ephesus; Unit Five: Practical Applications for Today" gives down-to-earth counsel for current issues in home and church.

The truth is that most people have not really read the Scriptures closely to see what an important role women have played in the work of God over the centuries. Gill and Cavaness trace their significance from Eve in Genesis two all the way through to Jesus' resurrection announcement first to women and to Paul's female colleagues such as the deacon, Phoebe, and Junias, who is included with the apostles (Romans 16:1, 7). This is the evidential strand of historical precedent. Women served in leadership positions all through the Bible.

The theological issues are carefully evaluated, as for example, Paul's assertion "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28; see 98-100). To me, the key argument is found in Joel's prophecy, affirmed by Peter's Pentecost announcement, that when the Spirit is outpoured both men and women will prophesy (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:14-18). They certainly did all through New Testament times. No differentiation is made between men and women in the reception of the Spirit! Moreover, the gifts of the Spirit,

which are the tools of ministry, are granted equally to both men and women. Never are women excluded from spiritual gifts.

The meaning of the Greek word for “head,” *kephal_*, is a disputed issue in currently scholarship. The concept of male headship in 1 Corinthians 11:3, 7-9 is often used to deny women a significant leadership role (87-92). The authors argue that the correct meaning of *kephal_* in 1 Corinthians 11 is most likely “source” or “origin” and, therefore, is no prohibition against women in ministry. “This passage presents many difficulties to understanding. But it does not refer to a husband’s authority over his wife or any man’s authority over a single woman” (91). A similar issue is found in Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” which the authors promptly and rightly link to Ephesians 5:21, “Submit to one another...” and use to draw out the teaching of mutual submission (100-103).

There are two perplexing passages often quoted to forbid the ordination of women, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 “women should remain silent in the churches,” and 1 Timothy 2:12 “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” It should be clear to all that these two verses must be interpreted against the huge background of scriptural precedent where women are obviously active in key roles through the Bible. For example, female prophets were certainly permitted by Paul to speak in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 11:5) and Priscilla apparently had the larger role in the instruction of Apollos (Acts 18:26). While we continue to have questions about Paul’s precise meaning in these two passages, Gill and Cavaness offer a careful evaluation of historic interpretations and give plausible explanations to show that they need not be sweeping prohibitions, as is often believed and asserted.

The closing chapters offer sage counsel to men and women who want to translate

biblical teaching into contemporary reality. The authors are strident, fanatical women determined to overthrow the social order. Rather, as women ministers who have helped to blaze a trail, they are eager to help other godly women find their place in ministry. Helpful discussion will and should continue on the precise nuances of a number of issues touched on in this book. But it is a fine contribution to the growing body of literature that aims to empower women. *God’s Women* will make an excellent resource for a sermon series, a Sunday school class, a college or seminary classroom, or a special study session on women in ministry.