

Book Review: *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership.*

Lee, Dorothy A. 2021. *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership*. Grand Rapids: Baker. 1–191 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6308-6. Approx. 350 ZAR (29 USD). Paperback.

1. Introduction

Research professor Dorothy Lee presents a scholarly study of Christian traditions surrounding the ministry of women in the NT. Her expertise as a biblical scholar is evident as she interacts with Christian traditions surrounding the ministry of women through reflections on biblical passages and profiles of women in the NT who encountered the Lord and engaged in his mission at various levels. Her analysis leads her to affirm convincingly that “baptism is the primary symbol that draws women and men into a relationship with Christ that transcends all human barriers” (Moloney, p. ix). Her thesis is that all Christians have the capacity to communicate Christ to others and to share his life in multiple forms of ministry. This book makes a valuable contribution to the theological debate of women in contemporary ministry.

2. Summary of the Book

The purpose of Lee’s book is to highlight new research that has emerged from different theological traditions across the church. Research which focuses on the role of women in leadership in the early centuries of the church’s life, and demonstrates the significant place women held within and beyond the ministry of Jesus (p. 2). She posits a theological discussion of women in ministry and whether they are capable of being icons of Christ—that is, representatives of Christ who can embody his living presence (p. 173). She carefully examines these arguments through tradition and Scripture.

Convincingly, Lee revisits the current arguments against women’s full participation in ministry and leadership within the church. Her study explores two points for arguments against women’s leadership: On one hand, some claims are based on Scripture—that the Bible itself does not endorse women’s leadership, except in relation to other women and children. The second argument arises from tradition—that church teaching has never endorsed women’s ministry at the level of ordination. Therefore, the purpose of Lee’s study is to revisit the arguments against women’s participation in ministry and church leadership (p. 10).

She does so from a clearly biblical and theological point of view. For example, she notes a key theological argument that claims the Twelve apostles are the inheritors of Christ’s ministry and that no woman is included among them and therefore cannot function in formal ministry. Lee argues that the key challenge for today’s church is the recognition of women’s equality and mutuality with men in the proclamation of the gospel. She contends that there is a need to create structures protecting the weak and vulnerable (p. 12). Women’s full dignity and authority as children of God and disciples of Christ, whatever their race or culture, need to be included in new ways to fulfill the NT call to a transformed world, where “there is no

longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28; NRSV) (p. 12). From this NT perspective she argues that women should have full access to the church’s ministry, whether in lay or ordained ministries, and that this access needs to depend *not* on gender but rather on a sense of vocation and on the church’s discernment of calling. She affirms that all Christian women, like all Christian men, should be considered in this important theological discussion (pp. 10–11).

3. Theological and Christological Evidence

Lee exegetes many of the key texts that most theologians argue regarding the place of women in ministry. She concludes that in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, readers are left with a profound impression of the strength and resilience of the women disciples. Although women are not mentioned as frequently as men, and their role is less visible than the Twelve, their ministry role goes far beyond their cultural context. This portrait of women in the NT reflects the ministry of Jesus and his extraordinary openness to women as disciples (p. 35).

Luke’s Gospel displays women who are connected to Jesus at profound levels, including at times of crisis in their own lives. They are suppliants who respond in faith and self-giving to Jesus’s healing power. They are acknowledged as disciples from the beginning of their journey to Jerusalem. Women are followers of Jesus and are committed to his message, demonstrated by their exemplary service. Jesus’s attitude toward women and power challenged the structures of his world. Notable passages include Mark 5:21–43 and Matthew 9:18–26 (pp. 18–19). She further posits that the Johannine Gospel gives us the fullest panoply of women disciples who were able to understand and bear witness to the Gospel of divine glory revealed in Jesus’s ministry, death, and resurrection. She gives particular

emphasis to Mary Magdalene as the apostle of the resurrection and the primary witness to God’s triumph over death in Jesus (p. 190).

In reviewing the Acts of the Apostles, Lee notes that women were used as prophets, disciples, and ministers. Several examples include the following: Acts 1:14 notes Galilean women followers; Acts 2:17–18 notes female prophets; Acts 16:13 notes Jewish women in Philippi; and Acts 21:8–9 notes four prophets. While Lee notes that men are more prominent in the Acts of the Apostles than are women, she argues that this reflects the culture of that day, which makes the presence and role of women more remarkable (p. 73). Lee further maintains there is no real opposition to women’s authority as leaders and teachers, particularly if these texts were interpreted within their own contexts. She further concludes that the General Epistles support the inclusive vision found in the Gospels and Pauline writings.

Lee addresses the claim that those who advocate for women in ministry are giving in to a liberal agenda arising from Western secularism that is implicitly alien to the Bible and the traditions of the church. She addresses this key issue in the historical context of the NT (p. 154). For example, in the Gospel of John, Lee examines the significant role of women in the meaning of discipleship in Christian ministry and leadership. Lee concludes by demonstrating that women have biblical grounds for the authoritative forms their ministry will take, proclaiming the crucified, risen Christ in word and deed (p. 95).

She discusses at length Paul’s writing in I Timothy that creates heated debate among many theologians. Paul’s basic premise is that women are to be “silent” in church and are not to teach men. Importantly, the author notes that reactionary scholarship asserts that this key text is a teaching for all time, excluding women from leadership and teaching authority. Moreover, Lee notes Luke Timothy Johnson who takes a different view and

struggles with its meaning for the contemporary world. His hermeneutical solution is to recognize the contextual nature of Paul's teaching and to question whether it is normative. Johnson, Lee states, speaks of the need to "engage" the words of Paul in a dialectical process of criticism within the public discourse of the church (p. 122).

An alternative view argues that the appropriate way to translate the Greek word group is "quietness" rather than "silence," given that I Timothy 2:2 also speaks of living a quiet and peaceful life as citizens. The context suggests possible conflict within the community around misleading teaching, therefore giving rise to the appeal for peaceable living. According to Lee, women are not called to keep silent in church but rather to be quiet, avoiding disputes and false teaching; they are also permitted to learn in a culture that often frowned on education for women (pp. 123–124).

4. Strengths

Wisely, Lee does not attempt to place women on pedestals as if their gifts and graces surpass those of men. Rather, she acknowledges that idealizing women is as dangerous as demeaning or dismissing them. Lee further posits that, certainly, women are as capable of sin as men and can misuse authority and leadership as well as men (p. 188). Woman and men are genuinely equal precisely in their common need of grace and their access to gifts given them by the Spirit for building the church.

Lee contends that throughout history, Scripture has been interpreted in the light of the various contexts in which Christians have found themselves. As Paul's writings have been used by those critical of women in ministry, Lee notes that women in the patriarchal setting of the NT world were much less educated and had little public profile in comparison to men; therefore, women were often held in lower esteem and not permitted to enter theological discussions. Nevertheless, Paul acknowledged the significant

role that women played in churches, and he supported their ministry.

Importantly, Lee does a thorough exegesis of key scriptures that have raised serious questions around leadership of women (p. 111). She gives particular attention to one of the most contested scriptures in I Timothy 2:2. She ponders, why is the advice for quiet submission to true teaching given only to women? One possibility is that it is the women rather than the men who have listened to false teaching and may even be perpetuating it; perhaps the teaching originates from women's lack of education in that century (p. 124). Lee further concludes that gentleness and modesty of demeanor were considered in the ancient world important virtues appropriate to women. Importantly, she draws together this universal truth for Christian women today: "Modesty, in particular, along with self-control in speech and decorum in dress, is a virtue advocated for all women (I Timothy 2:9–10)."

In her study of women in the NT, Lee has sought to catch a glimpse of women's ministry within a variety of literary forms, different voices, and diverse theologies. She contends that the NT's main concern is not female discipleship and leadership, but rather the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (p. 189). This key issue resound throughout her book.

5. Weaknesses

While Lee upholds her purpose for writing the book—to demonstrate evidence from Scripture, historical context, and theological tradition of women in leadership—she also includes extra-biblical literature outside the canon of Scripture. For example, she refers to sources such as the New Testament Apocrypha, Acts of Thekla, Gospel according to Mary, and the Gospel of Bartholomew. It can be argued that these extra-biblical sources weaken the exegesis of key Scriptures within their historical context. Although these texts demonstrate something of how the early communities

beyond the first century understood the NT witness and the trajectories they saw arising from it, these noncanonical writings pose a particular challenge on the issue of women's ministry because of the texts' ambivalent status within the church. Some of these texts stand outside the orthodox Christian faith.

Toward the end of her work Lee often digresses to the discussion of there being too much patriarchal authority in the contemporary home and church. In her efforts to discuss the male headship in the home and church, she often demeans the place of male headship. This, arguably, weakens the premise of her work. For example, she contends that the Father-Son language makes John's Gospel patriarchal. Nevertheless, she affirms that the Gospel is an ancient text arising from a culture very different from our own.

6. Conclusion

Lee's position as an accomplished research professor contributes to an objective discussion of church tradition to show that Christian women were valued as disciples in the early church and given leadership roles. Importantly, the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds were patriarchal and had a clear bias toward maleness. Nevertheless, the cultural realities of life in the ancient world were considerably diverse. A few elite women were able to resist patriarchal restraints and negotiate the complexities of the cultural norms to make important contributions to public life and their church community.

Lee's work demonstrates that there is no single, unanimous voice on women's ministry throughout the history and experience of the church. However, the suppression of women in ministry was not total in the NT world. In some contexts, women's ministry flourished and was valued, despite opposition (p. 169). Lee's work will help readers gain a better

understanding of the important role that women played in the NT and how that role can offer contemporary Christian women a place of effective ministry. Her work is scholarly, relevant, and makes a valuable contribution to this pertinent contemporary issue.

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