

After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation,
by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, et al.
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Johan D. Tangelder

In my book reviews I have always tried to be scrupulously fair to the intent of the author(s). And when in disagreement, I have clearly stated the reason. I always consider a review as a form of dialog. But *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation*, written from a feminist perspective, doesn't lend itself to dialog. I fear that any disagreement will be brushed aside as coming from a stridently male perspective. For this reason, I find this review a daunting and difficult task.

After Eden is the product of a team of five scholars from the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship who came together for one year (1989-1990) to study the topic of "Gender Roles: Stability and Change within the Context of a Christian Worldview." Team leader and Calvin College psychology professor Dr. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, wrote the proposal for the study and edited the results of the one year study for publication. The other members of the team were Annelies Knoppers, a feminist activist in the Christian Reformed Church, and an independent scholar who, until 1991, was associate professor of sociology at Michigan State University; Margaret L. Koch, assistant professor of history at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota; Douglas Schuurman, theologian and ethicist at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, and Helen M. Sterk, assistant professor of communication and rhetorical studies at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

This team (all feminist scholars) believes that many-but not all-of the deepest aspirations of feminism are contained in the Christian gospel, and particularly in the Reformed expression and understanding of that Gospel. From their perspective they deal with various feminist approaches to gender relations, theology, the place of women in the CRC, gender relations in dress and sports, family and societal justice, case studies on women from India and Egypt, and gender structure in both domestic and waged work. Their hope is that their effort will result in aiding women who are articulating and publishing their own definitions and descriptions of life, of children, women and men, and of the relations among them.

After Eden demonstrates that the controversy over the ordination of women is more than a tempest in a teapot. The authors advocate more than women's rights and Inclusive language. They call for a fundamental rethinking of our traditions, theology, interpretation of Scripture and social structures. In developing their position, they draw from both experience and Scripture.

Experience

Schuurman claims that Calvinism and feminism agree that human experience plays a normative role in creating, shaping and sustaining a Christian view of God, humanity and the world. He states that the "normative role of experience" in Calvinist thought

has often been denied or muted by "Orthodox and Neo-Orthodox" Reformed theology. He notes that the believer's experience of God's grace and the testimony of the Holy Spirit play a vital role in Reformed thought and life. He makes much of Abraham Kuyper's emphasis on experience. The development of a person's faith proceeds from the experience of God's assurance of pardon. And this experience of assurance of salvation (and the related conviction that all of life belongs to God) is the unifying impulse of Christian vision and action. But I fail to see how Schuurman can use Kuyper to support the feminist concept of experience. For Kuyper, the inerrant, inscripturated Word of God, and not experience, was the sole authority of life and action. Accepting the legitimacy of experience becomes problematic when it is taken as a norm to dictate what we are to accept from the teachings of Scripture.

Schuurman notes how different feminists view the role of experience. He observes that most feminist theologians tend to emphasize women's experience of God's grace in the struggle for liberation from patriarchy and for the affirmation of women as women. The central concern in most feminist theology is not the need for individual pardon but the need for the victims of sexism to be free from oppression and the need of those who perpetuate sexism to repent.

Scripture

How does Scripture function in "Christian feminism"? What are the implications if we take both Scripture and experience as our norm for creating, testing and sustaining worldviews? Says Schuurman, "To accuse feminist Christians, for example, of being 'unbiblical', as though the central issue were one of accepting or rejecting the authority of the Bible, fails to reckon with the profound ways in which experience shapes Calvinist uses of the Bible." He also implies that our declaration that the Bible is the formal authority is more theory than fact. He claims that the Confessions govern much of our use of the Bible. And he says that unjust practices can easily be covered by the slogan-sola scriptura. But if we take Schuurman's view as normative can we ever appeal to Scripture? And why should the experience of women be more normative than of men, or of a teenager, or of Asians or Africans? Whose experiences should play a crucial role?

How are we to read the Bible? According to the team, "a truly traditionalist reading of gender relations would in fact allow Reformed Christian males to inflict a great deal of what we now call abuse upon women." Helen Sterk claims that authors since the time of Christ have used the creation story to portray women as less than men-intellectually, physically, and morally. Says Sterk, "The creation story favored by traditionalists sanctions the male restriction of female potential. It effectively denies women their full status as image bearers of God and members of the body of Christ. Furthermore, the traditional story as presently used closes off possibilities for change: *it takes the sacred story as settled, as contained, as already told rather than still unfolding.*" (Emphasis mine-J.D.T.) She also claims that no CRC synodical committee has been able to find incontrovertible grounds either for keeping women out of or placing them in positions of leadership in the church. She supports the view taken by those who

believe that Christians should look at headship from the perspective of the future kingdom, instead of looking back to the order of creation. But the "overall sweep" approach has its dangers. If this is the way to view Scripture, what prevents anyone from interpreting the Bible in any manner appropriate to their immediate circumstances? I believe that this is a legitimate concern which should be subject to intense discussion. Dr. John Bolt warns against the "overall sweep" approach "because an eschatological hermeneutic is being used today to legitimize homosexuality and because many feminist theologians insist that a dual notion of God as Father and Mother is essential to women achieving full equality in the church."

Dr. Cornet Venema observes that the "overall sweep" is the overall direction toward which we think the Lord is leading the church in the end. This means that the final appeal in the headship debate is no longer to the text of Scripture. Scripture is thus interpreted according to what it should say rather than to what it does say.

Language

Our use of language should meet the changing standards of our time, we are told. Says Schuurman, "Calvinism can legitimately support the mainline and evangelical proposals to make God-language more inclusive, whether by using imagery that is overtly feminine or by diversifying imagery for God."

Helen Sterk notes that feminist criticism of traditional masculine God-language grew out of women's struggle with oppression and abuse, often legitimated by religious language of control, dominance and headship. But what of the sexual abuse some males have suffered? What kind of language should be appropriate for them? Should our language not be defined by Scripture? Christians must regulate their life by the example of Christ, and fashion themselves like Him in all their thought, words and deeds (Eph. 4: 22-24). When we let experience dictate how we should speak, we have substituted Biblical authority for the supremacy of the individual.

Nonsexist language has become an ideological test. Peter Berger aptly comments, "That is what inclusive language means ... the artificial imposition of an ideological jargon whose purpose is to compel ideological allegiance in a symbolic fashion. It is not what people pretend it to be namely, a rectification of past discrimination or exclusion. But it is precisely ideological-political jargon."

Doctrine of God

God-language may never be abused. Of course God does not sanction social oppression of any kind; the living God does not desire the exploitation of nature. God is "Father." The feminists view this concept as relational. Says Schuurman, "...the significance of God as 'Father' is not primarily God's transcendence and certainly not God's maleness, but rather God's relationship with Jesus Christ." God's power is recast "as enabling rather than as overpowering strength as one way to reduce the idolatrous love of masculine language. Another is to give prominence to the feminine

imagery already in the Bible, which will allow us to understand God more fully." But according to Scripture the role of God the Father is crucial to the Gospel. The Gospel is basically a Father movement. The Gospel does not start with the cross of Christ or the gifts of the Spirit, but with the Father who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son (John 3: 16). The Father is the source of everything in both creation and redemption. He is not only the source of everything, but also the goal of everything. Though the Fatherhood of God is crucial there is no pagan attempt to assert masculinity at the expense of femininity. Schuurman rightly points out, the Bible doesn't avoid feminine images of God. Yet God is never called "She."

Doctrine of Christ

According to Helen Sterk, Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Humanity rather than Son of Man. But this title for Christ may not be sacrificed on the altar of inclusive language. In Mark 2: 10 Jesus invests this title with deep Christological meaning. Christ, the Son of God incarnate, is the second Adam. As Abraham Kuyper comments, "He was not merely a person, but He was the Son of man, the central person. He represented the human race in its fulfillment, humanity in its richest and highest power and authority. Adam's power over the creation collapsed the moment the curse fell upon creation and made it go berserk. The Son of Man, however, possessed the power of the human spirit to the highest degree so that He could even control nature, disoriented as it was by the curse."

Doctrine of Man

Of course, the male/female relationship is a main feature of the book. The authors charge that due to the predominant "male experience," traditional theology had led to patriarchy and hierarchical thinking. They call our society male-dominated. Males are the oppressors and the females the oppressed. Men are told that they should not feel guilty about being men, which is of course nice to know. But Annelies Knoppers points out "that it can be healthy and productive for members of an oppressive group to feel guilty and repentant about their position against subordinated groups. This guilt may then become an incentive to change."

The relationship between male and female is put into the context of a power struggle between the women, being less valued than men, and the privileged males. Knoppers speaks of "the continuing imbalance of institutional power between men and women." Abuse, in whatever form it may come, is an abomination, an insult to God. Lust for power is a sin. Christians are saved to serve. Men and women are created in God's image. They reflect His image in the moral, intellectual and spiritual likeness to Him (Col. 3: 10; Eph. 4: 24; 1 Cor. 11: 7). Yet God did not designate identical roles. Says Mary A. Kassian, "The leadership Adam provided was without chauvinism. The help Eve provided was akin to the help God Himself provides. Adam gave loving guidance to the relationship without domineering his wife. Eve willingly and gladly submitted to Adam's leadership as his equal counterpart."

Doctrine of Sin

As a consequence of the feminist social understanding of human nature, the doctrine of sin receives a different emphasis than we are accustomed to in Reformed thinking. Feminist theologians perceive sin as not merely a private, personal matter. The focus is on differences between the typically "male" and "female" sins. Van Leeuwen argues that "the fundamental sin for women is 'enmeshment' within social relations; their basic challenge is thus learning to exercise faithful, accountable dominion." Conversely, for men the basic sin is "domination" within social relations, and their challenge is to develop their "relatedness to others." Schuurman notes, "When feminists have acknowledged women's guilt, that guilt has usually been attached to their failure to resist oppression and develop their own gifts." Schuurman rightly observes, "But in claiming that women are more prone than men to sins of omission, feminists are making a novel claim. Calvinists believe that all people are guilty of both kinds of sin.... Classical Calvinism is at odds with the feminist analysis of sin's different effect on women and men."

Doctrine of Redemption

Redemption is couched more in terms of this world than the world to come. The focus is on the wholistic and social dimensions of salvation. Salvation is seen as embracing both justification and sanctification. Orthodox Calvinists agree. Salvation embraces all of life-the now and the not yet. We support Margaret Koch's call for "all to work to restore social, economic, and political justice between women and men, aiming to benefit people of both sexes, while being aware of their differences." Calvinism is "world-formative." Koch says that "Christian feminism, then, challenges both women and men to work toward God's vision of shalom in the human community." However, their vision of shalom is different from classic Calvinism. This is abundantly clear from the way they envision male/female relations. Van Leeuwen writes, "that despite its secular ring, the contemporary feminist call to restore justice to family life and caring nurturance to the public sphere is in many ways reflective of the biblical vision of shalom."

Though salvation is of the Lord alone, the reader is left with the impression that though sin is subtle and pervasive, it can be overcome through our own efforts. Conversion is from a dehumanizing way of life to a liberating and serving way of life. Though the authors have much to say about making this world a better place, I am glad with the way they conclude their book: "As Christian feminists, we accept this ambiguity that comes from living 'between the times.' Nevertheless, we look forward in hope to the shalom of the new heaven and earth, in which all things-and all relationships-will be made new."

Justice

Van Leeuwen defines a feminist as "a person of either sex who thinks men and women are equally saved, equally Spirit-filled, and equally sent. To be a Christian feminist is to be concerned about justice."

Koch and Van Leeuwen claim that "a fully-orbed feminism must take economic as well as other kinds of justice into account." They appeal to the Biblical vision of shalom, proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets, poets, and crafters of proverbs and affirmed in the New Testament as well.

The authors pay a great deal of attention to economic injustice done to women. Van Leeuwen says, "But one does not have to be a thoroughgoing Marxist to appreciate the fact that real economic injustice has been done to women through the traditional practices of gendered job segregation."

Though we must seek justice for all the oppressed, we begin to walk on a slippery slope when the gender issue is discussed as a matter of justice.

The gay movement, for example, argues that justice demands that the gays and lesbians should have the same legal rights for their relationships as those enjoyed by heterosexuals. The question of justice doesn't remove the role difference between men and women which has been established in creation.

Doctrine of the Church

As far as the church is concerned, the most obvious feminist concern is the full participation of women in all areas of church life and ministry. The CRC's position comes under heavy criticism. The authors claim "that the rates of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse tend to be highest among conservative, antifeminist, and homophobic Christians." This highly debatable and emotionally-charged accusation does not help in bridging the gap between feminists and conservatives.

When the 1990 Synod debated the future of women in the church, women were excluded from the deliberations. Sterk comments: "But that so few of the 184 delegates noted the irony of such an exclusion indicates the depth of men's conviction that their voices are authorized to dictate the terms of gender relations. Other examples of the formal exclusion of women are male-only church councils, men's clubs and men's sports." The form for Public Profession of Faith is also questioned. Asks Sterk: "In what sense, then, are they (women) being welcomed into all of the church's privileges and into full participation in the church's life? How is the average teenaged woman who is professing her faith along with her peers in front of the church to understand and act upon this highly ambiguous message?"

After Eden provides an excellent discussion of the history of feminism while it examines the many complexities of gender relations. It also raises valid criticism. In our information-saturated, decadent and hedonistic culture, we tend to become

desensitized to suffering, abuse and violence. We must continue to propagate the Biblical ideal of righteousness, peace and justice, while not forgetting that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned.

Christian feminism is more than a call for justice. As I have shown, it addresses every major area of Christian doctrine and practice. Yet the differences between the feministic view of Scripture and its approach to it, and historic Reformed Christianity, are profound. If there is to be any continued dialog between the two groups then Scripture, and NOT anyone's context and experience needs to be the basis for dialog. Sola Scriptura!

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