

What's Right with Feminism?

Since the 1960s the controversial feminist movement has made its presence felt in our Western society. It has made an impact on labor relations, the family structure and education. The Church too has not been left unscathed. The ordination of women is a popular media issue. Most Protestant mainline denominations have accepted a changed role for women, permitting them to function as ministers or elders. There are, however, an increasing number of women within the evangelical churches who are embracing the contemporary feminist position. Elaine Storkey is one of them.

In *What's Right with Feminism* Storkey traces the history of feminism and attempts to put it into perspective. She is rather pessimistic about the role of the Church. For most modern feminists the Church is part of the problem. They see the Church as an institution structured by men and for men. The Church itself signifies oppression. The consensus seems to be that the Gospel is not Good News for women as it is proclaimed and practiced in our churches. For most feminists the Church is beyond redemption. Though Storkey is an evangelical, she comes down hard on fellow evangelicals who oppose contemporary feminism. She claims that those authors who have something detrimental to say about the women's movement have never read any of the feminist writers they criticize and have little understanding of what they are saying. This is a strong and unfair statement. Evangelical authors read more than just literature written by other evangelicals!

The book is divided into four parts. "Part One: The Feminist Case" looks at the description feminists give of women's alleged exploitation at work, in the home, in the professions, educationally, before the law and in the church. Background materials and contributing factors are provided. "Part Two: The Feminist Diagnosis" identifies three main secular perspectives: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism, with its attack on patriarchy and a commitment to a woman-centered ideology. "Part Three: Some Christian Responses" focuses on two poles of Christian reaction. The first one rejects the women's movement outright. It views any change in traditional roles with suspicion and alarm. The opposite pole consists of women who are redefining their faith and have replaced the God of Scripture with an image of God formed by radical feminist theology. "Part Four: A Third Way" offers a rationale for "biblical" feminism. Storkey argues that there is no difference in the role of men and women. There is complete equality in husband and wife relationships. "The traditional stale breadwinner/domestic wife is not sealed with an indelible scriptural stamp. It is one of the options open. But so are many others. Jointly shared working and domestic roles are equally Christian. So is the situation where the man cares for the family, and the wife earns the income.

What role does the woman have in marriage? Is the submission of a wife to the husband in marriage a beautiful pattern to be modelled or an archaic tradition rooted in ancient Jewish culture? What is the role of the woman in the church? Scripture must be considered, but hermeneutical suppositions appear to determine the conclusions reached.

Storkey believes that we need a new framework for understanding some of the passages relating to the role of women. Changes must be made. And we are all making some adjustments and reinterpretations to biblical teaching in applying them in a contemporary culture.

Should our interpretations be approached from a culturally changing context of Scripture? Is Storkey not using a contextualized theology herself? Is she herself not reflecting the priorities of Western contemporary feminism as much if not more than the biblical outlook? Storkey does not discuss in-depth relevant Scripture passages. Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus," is an exception. This text appears to be a key to the interpretation of Scripture. On the basis of this text she argues not simply for equality between the sexes, but for substantial identity of role. All other texts in Scripture are reinterpreted so that they do not contradict the feminist view: A case in point is Storkey's view of the first chapters of Genesis. Interpreting them from a feminist perspective she says that they do not support a hierarchical view of men and women. Whatever applies to the man applies to the woman. With this in mind she claims that man in the Genesis account stands for "humanity" and not a person with a specific gender attribute. Storkey's book is one of the best works on evangelical feminism I have read so far. It is well researched and documented. The North American reader may find the many references to the British situation annoying at times. The British statistics and illustrations are not always applicable to our setting.

What is right with feminism? I am convinced that the evangelical feminists have no case. Evangelical feminism is a twentieth century novelty. Until recent history no branch of the church would have ever suggested Scripture supported feminism. It is simply incompatible with the plain reading of the Word of God. And the case of feminism will not be advanced through the use of inaccurate culturally conditioned exegesis, however sincerely argued and persuasively and sensitively presented. Elaine Storkey, has been a visiting professor at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, and at Calvin College. At present she is Lecturer in Sociology and Philosophy at Oak Hill College, London, England. Why did she teach at Calvin College? No wonder that evangelical feminism is making inroads in the Christian Reformed Church. Her teachings are not in line with the official position of our denomination. What happened to our Reformed distinctives and discernment as far as visiting professors is concerned?

What's Right with Feminism? by Elaine Storkey;
William H. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Rapids, Michigan,
1985; paperback, 186pages.

Johan D. Tangelder
April, 1987