

To Rod:

Regarding: Book Report onj Michelle Lee-Barnewall's "Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian"

Rod, I have read this book and then re-read parts of it. While it is very well written and researched, by a very competent author, it is very hard to pin down, precisely, what its contributions to the ongoing Egalitarian/Complementarian Debate might be.

That is not to say that the Book does not have value. I think that it does. I think that, in some areas, it has a whole lot of value. My conclusion that the book might be a disappointment to those who are trying to deal with the gender debate is not based on the overall value of the Book, but rather on what I perceive will be disappointments on the part of those on each side of the Egalitarian/Complementarian debate, who are looking to the Book and the author for some "firm resolution" of the debate. They are not going to get that resolution from this Book.

Furthermore, this Book is not an "easy read." It is not a book that I would want to recommend to someone as being one which will direct him or her to some way to deal with the ongoing Egalitarian-Complementarian Debate. This Book can present a rather tough read, but it is a worthwhile read in my opinion.

So, what is the value of this Book? What are Ms. Lee-Barnewall's contributions to the ongoing debate? In my view the Book's value and her contributions actually go beyond this ongoing debate about Egalitarianism vs. Complentarianism. Those values and contributions rest in:

-Ms. Lee-Barnewall's re-positioning or redirecting the trajectory of the debate, and that re-positioning or redirecting of trajectory has huge value, not just in the pending subject matter of the debate but in dealing with debates about other matters of Christian Doctrine, if not even matters of secular debate,

-Ms. Lee-Barnewall's reminder about the very unproductive ways in which Christians (and citizens and politicians as a whole) approach debates on complex issues, by taking an "either or", or "my way is the right way" approach, as opposed to recognizing the complexity of the issue and then trying to learn from those on each side of the issue in the hopes that some consensus or compromise can be reached,

-Ms. Lee-Barnewall's reminding us or admonishing us about how we current day Christians tend to approach Scripture and a Theological issue from the point of view of current day societal or secular viewpoints or biases,

-Ms. Lee-Barnewall's very well thought out, and very well researched and documented conclusion that the issue at hand (complementarianism vs. egalitarianism) and other issues of Christian Doctrine, must be approached, not simply from a "rights of the individual", "fairness to the individual", "equality vs. inequality" or, in this particular instance, from a "what women can do or what women cannot do" approach, but rather must be approached from what she refers to

as a “Kingdom” view, with the goals to be those of the “corporate good” of the church as a whole, “unity”, “love” and “the reversal” in the Kingdom of God, as taught by Jesus, his disciples, and Paul in the Pauline letters (e.g. the meek will inherit the earth, the last shall be first, he (or she) who will lead must be a servant or slave, etc.) (I.e. Jesus and the Kingdom of God as taught and preached by Him (and as described in his parables) turned the social order upside down, and Paul expanded on this “reversal” in his letters.)

-Ms. Barnewall’s overall teaching that when we approach the Pauline passages which seem to deal with the debate at hand, we should approach same with questions which are not so much directed to a resolution of the practical questions (i.e. “What can Women do in the Church” or “What can Women not do in the Church”) but rather with questions which are “Kingdom” oriented or God oriented, and which look to the Godly concerns of “corporate good or corporate unity” of the body of the church, and with consideration of the “reversal” principle mentioned above where the “leader” or “head” is primarily a “servant” or “slave” of Jesus and of those to whom he or she ministers, meaning that, while the leader or head might have “authority” or be in a position of “hierarchy” the emphasis is not on “authority” or “headship” or “hierarchy” or “honor” or “privilege” (such as would be the case in the secular world) but rather is on “servanthood” or even “slavery” to Jesus and those to whom he or she is to minister. In other words, a Christian Leader or Pastor is first and foremost a servant of Jesus and of his or her flock, and perhaps even a slave to Jesus and his or her flock. Yes he or she has authority, but that authority arises first and foremost from his or her said servanthood or slavery.

This Book is not one to be read in one sitting and is not one to be read only once. It requires a slow, pondering reading and probably at least two or more readings in order for its value to be obtained. I am not certain that I would recommend it to anyone who is struggling with the “Gender issue”. I do think however, that it has value but I do think that it has value, some of which is described above. This “value” lies, primarily, in its urging that we need to reorient or redirect the basic manner in which we approach any debate on any Christian doctrine or scriptural issue. Our current day tendency is to approach scriptural or doctrinal issues by seeking firm, propositional answers to those issues. We tend to want “practical” answers to direct questions, such as “What Can a Woman Do In Church?” and, while we don’t want to admit such to be the case, we approach these questions and answers with something of a bias, sometimes a strong bias, that arises from the demands or feelings or emotions of current day culture. I believe that the author urges that we, of course, look first and foremost to scripture, but that we do so without an emphasis on “individual rights” or “individual equality” or even “the good of the individual” but rather with more of an emphasis on the “corporate good” or “unity” of the church, keeping in mind the “reversal” principle which underlies the kingdom of God, as described above. Under that principle, “power” or “authority” or “public honor” or “hierarchy” are not only not emphasized but are de-emphasized in favor of “submission”, “servanthood” or even “Slavery” to Jesus and those being served or led.

Outlining this book presents a difficult task, but I will attempt a very rough outlines follows:

I) Part One: Gender in Evangelical History:

In Part I of the book, the author reminds us that when we approach Scripture and try to interpret Scripture with respect to the Gender issue, or any issue for that matter, we are inclined to approach it with a view towards answering questions which are dictated by the then current secular or general culture. Therefore, the approaches or answers to the Gender issue, for example, have varied with the, from time to time, prevailing cultural norms as follows:

A) Pre WWI, Depression, and WWII Times:

While the Victorian times and industrial revolution certainly tended to put “women in the home”, while the men went out and earned a living, and gave men authority over many economic and political matters women were perceived as being “more moral and virtuous than men” and their perceived superior morality and virtue called upon them to assume leadership roles in many matters of public interest, including “temperance” and “voting rights” and areas of missionary work. To quote the author: “One of the more remarkable features of post-Civil War America, through the turn of the century was the vigorous activity of American evangelical women in social reform and missions”, areas in which they were seen to be superiors of morality and virtue. “Fueled by millennialism....(it was believed that women’s work)....could help usher in the kingdom of God on earth...” giving women leadership roles in many benevolence societies and reform movements. Some evangelical leaders, including Charles Moody, believed and held that some should preach. Women, in view of their superior morality and virtue were called upon to extend their spheres of influence. So in post Civil War, pre WWII times, and while some emphasis was placed on the role of women in the home, women were given leadership positions in matters of public interest because of their perceived superior morality and virtue. While, perhaps, not the case in actual church leadership positions, women had leadership positions in evangelical societies and organizations. Some became prominent revivalist preachers. The effects of two World Wars and the Depression had a dramatic effect on the roles of women.

B) Post WWII: Then came WWI, the Depression and WWII, and in the post WWII era a whole lot of anxiety and uncertainty and even fear pervaded the American populace. There was a fear that other wars would occur. While the economy was recovering and doing well, the depression left a whole lot of economic anxiety in the public. The overriding concerns became those of “peace and tranquility and some security” in the American home and family. Women, who had been in the labor force, were replaced in their jobs by returning GIs. The general perception was that men would go out into the somewhat unpleasant job and economic and political arenas, while the women would engage in homemaking activities. There “perceived” duties were to rear children and to provide a safe and harmonious and peaceful home for the men and children. Evangelical leaders preached and taught that the “woman’s place was in the home and in the ‘noble activities’ of being a wife and nurturing mother.” So the role of women in leadership positions diminished, both in the public, and economic spheres and in the evangelical organizations. Certainly, any roles for women in the church diminished.

C) The 1970s and Later: The “Secular Feminist Movement” arose in general society and this movement impacted the evangelicals and their congregations and organizations and the church generally. Whereas, previously, the general view had been one of “the corporate

good”, the concentration shifted to the individual and “individual rights”. “Individual Rights” began to dominate the public debate and church debate. Perhaps one could say that whereas, before the concentration was on service to the church and the corporate good of the church, now the concentration was more on the “obligation of the church to serve its individual members”, and on the “perceived rights” of those members, and on “equality among individuals.” Truly, western society (and the western church) underwent (and is still experiencing) a concentration on the individual, and on “individual rights”, “equality” and “fairness.” Certainly, the “secular feminist agenda” led to a corresponding “evangelical feminist agenda”, and gave rise to an increased “egalitarianism” vs. “complementarianism” debate, which continues today.

So, according to Ms. Lee-Barnewall, we can see how the surrounding secular culture has impacted the “spiritual”, if you will, debate over the Gender issue. This debate has been characterized by questions of “what can women do in the church or home” or “what can women not do in the church or home” or “what is the role of male leadership in the church or the home.” She would abandon or re-direct these questions and approach the relevant scriptural passages by totally re-framing the gender issue so as to direct the interpretation of the scriptural passages which are used in the gender debate more in line with what she sees as being “God’s point of view” or a “kingdom point of view” as opposed to a point of view which is more grounded in “individual rights” or in answering the practical “what can----do or not do” questions. In her view, the kingdom themes which should prevail in the scriptural interpretation project are:

- the corporate good of the Church as opposed to themes of “individual” rights or “individual” good

- unity in the church

- “submission” and “servanthood” and even “slavery” to Jesus and the Flock, as being the initial and primary requirements for leaders as opposed to placing primary emphasis on authority or hierarchy,

- observation of the clear principle of “reversal” that is to be achieved in the kingdom of God and in His Eschatological community, where the last will be first, the meek will inherit, and the powerful will submit, where submission, servanthood, even slavery to Jesus and His flock are the initial point of emphasis for any leadership position, as opposed to an emphasis on power, acclaim, or authority.

Ms. Lee-Barnewall then pursues this different approach in Part II of the Book.

II) Part II: Reframing the Gender Issue/Some of the Relevant Scriptural Passages and the Kingdom Approach:

While I have not given true justice to Part II of the Book, I think that it can be seen, from the above parts of this outline, that Ms. Lee-Barnewall argues for a total re-framing or re-orienting of the manner in which we approach the Gender issue. She argues that such issue, like any issue of Christian Doctrine or Biblical interpretation must be approached with our attempt (perhaps feeble) to see it from “God’s point of view” or a “Kingdom point of view” and not our “human point of view” or “human desire for finding propositional certainty” from our biblical interpretation efforts.

A) Kingdom Themes: Kingdom Themes, as taught and exemplified by Jesus, emphasize servanthood. “The symbol of the servant ‘expresses the antithesis of power, status and domination,,,,,(which would have been)...both striking and perplexing in the ancient Mediterranean world.” “Believers are to reflect God’s holiness and be a witness to the nations.” We are to glorify God by inhabiting the world as His image bearers and living in obedience with His mandates. “A part of this obedience as the people of God...(we are called)...to corporate unity in our relations with one another.” We are to live our lives in complete dependence on God, who has illustrated “through the cross and the lives of his people how his ways confront and oppose the self-centered and self-glorifying ways of humanity.” So when we approach the issues of “roles” in the church we are to emphasize, not power or authority or individual rights or good, but are to emphasize the kingdom themes of servanthood, love and unity.

B) Adam and Eve: When you listen to some theologians or evangelical leaders who preach or teach on the Gender Issue, you will note that they often emphasize the creation story of Adam and Eve, emphasizing that Genesis purportedly teaches that “Adam came first” and that “Eve was to be Adam’s Helper”, and even that it was Eve who purportedly led Adam into temptation and to his eating of the forbidden fruit. Barnewall-Lee sort of turns these arguments on their head. She looks at the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, and point out that this story, like an Biblical narrative, must be read in view of its literary genre, that being one of “narrative”. The biblical writers used narrative not to provide a list of “doctrinal statements or truth” but more as a way to force deep thinking on the part of the hearer or reader. Story can provide deeper meaning to truths than can simple propositional statements of those truths. However, story must be read carefully. Story must be read and considered in context, and in its completeness. So if we want to get the “true meaning” or the “true teaching” of the story of Adam and Eve we have to read the story in its entirety and very carefully consider it in its entirety. Lee-Barnewall urges that if we truly read and absorb the creation story of Adam and Eve, and of God’s relationship with them, it is reasonable to conclude that God assigned to Adam the duty to achieve and protect “unity of the flesh” or “unity of the union” of Adam and Eve. God actually spoke, primarily, to Adam, and only spoke to Eve after the incident of the fall and the banishment of Adam and Even from Eden. According to her, Adam had the duty to honor and protect Eve and preserve the unity of their union, duty in which he failed, even to the point of trying to justify his failure to God, by blaming that failure on Eve. In Ms. Barnewall’s view this duty of “unity” in both marriage and the Jewish nation and the church is a prevailing one in scripture. One of the primary obligations of any “head” or “leader” is to assure this unity, and any authority or rights or privileges of leadership are subordinated, from the outset, by this obligation to achieve and protect unity.

C) The Radical Nature of the Christian Community: Lee-Barnewall urges that the Christian Community is an “inclusive one”, and that the concept of this community as being one that is “inclusive” was, during the days of the early church, and remains a radical concept. The Christian community is one where historic enmities become buried in the bonds among the people of the community. For example, in the early days of the church the enmity between Jews and Gentiles was reconciled. In her view, Paul’s teaching in Gal. 3:28, which is often used as evidence of an egalitarian theology, speaks not so much to “equality” as it does to “universal integration into a new single community of Jesus, a community of One of Jesus’s followers,

whether they be “Jew and Greek, Slave and Free, Male and Female.” They are not “*isos*”, “equal” but are “*heis*” “one.” “In other words, the ‘universal integration into a new single community of Jesus followers is the point, not equalization of all of its members.’” The concepts of “peace”, “tranquility” and “unity” among members of the church are the tantamount concepts, not those of “equality” or “individual rights” or “power” or “authority”.

D) Reversals: Lee-Barnewall argues that there must be a rethinking of Equality and Rights in the Body of Christ, as Rights and Equality are subordinated to the Kingdom principles of “Oneness of the Body”, “Unity”, Servanthood, Slavery and the “reversal” that will be achieved in the Kingdom of God and in His Eschatological community. In other words, the debate is not over the “rights of the individual” or over “who has what rights” “or who has authority over whom” but rather is over the corporate good of, and unity of God’s church and of the home/family. Mutual submission is required. In Jesus’s world, and the Kingdom of God, there is a complete reversal of the rights and privileges of the leaders and the powerful as compared to those of the “weak” and “underprivileged.”

So, Ms. Lee-Barnewall does not propose a solution to, or an answer to the Gender debate, but rather proposes a re-framing of the manner in which that debate is approached. In this respect, I think that she echoes what I think might be the thinking of Sarah Sumner (I think Sarah made some similar statements in a book you had me read earlier). I think Lee-Barnewall makes a valuable contribution to the manner in which we should approach the Gender debate, or any debate for that matter, and of the manners in which we read and interpret and learn from Scripture. We have to do our best, our feeble best, to approach scripture without a bias or prejudice dictated by the thinking of the current culture and with a goal, however feeble it might be, of trying to see things from God’s point of view, or a Kingdom point of view, and not our more human point of view wherein we demand our “rights” or “equality.” Doing so is obviously very, very hard and requires a lot of humble, prayerful work.

So, while I find this book to be one that is not easy to read and to be one which will not resolve the Gender debate, I find it to be a valuable resource and to be one which reminds us of matters which should direct our biblical interpretation efforts generally.

Sorry that I cannot give you more definitive information about this book. I actually enjoyed it, but it is sure not bedtime reading. If I were to suggest that you or anyone read this book, I would suggest that the “essence” of it can be derived its excellent Introduction (which is actually quite thorough) the author’s “Final Thoughts” which appear near the conclusion of the Book, and the “Afterword” essay or commentary of Lynn H. Cohick, a New Testament Professor of Wheaton College. That “Afterword” appears at the conclusion of the Book.

In the instance of this book, unless I was using it as a resource to be cited in some essay, paper or other writing, I would probably just read the introduction paragraphs and the conclusion of each chapter. These are very well written and I find that they accurately describe the contents of each chapter, which are heavily annotated and cite many authorities.

I guess that if I had to conduct a class on the controversial “gender” issue, I would use

this book as a starting point, stating something like: "Ok, this is a controversial issue, and it can generate a lot of heat, but let's try to agree on how we are going to approach our discussion of this issue. We might not agree on this issue, but we should at least agree on the manner in which we are going to approach it and talk about it. So, I want you to read as much of this Book as you can read and that you certainly read its Introduction, its "Final Thoughts" and the "Afterword" which appears at the end of the Book. Then, if you have time, please read the introductory paragraphs and the conclusions for each chapter. Then let's talk about how we are goign to approach the gender issue. What will our initial orientation be?