

1-1-1996

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Claude Cox

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Recommended Citation

Cox, Claude (2012) "Reading Resource: Recent Books and Articles Relating to Gender and Christian Service," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss2/15>

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Reading Resource:

Recent Books and Articles Relating to Gender and Christian Service

by Claude Cox

In a recent version of "The Three Little Pigs," the second pig is a girl! In the Sesame Street account of Rapunzel—which your children and grandchildren know—Rapunzel, following her rescue by the prince, decides not to marry him but goes off to realize her own future. In **Big Dan's Moving Van** by Leslie McGuire (Random House, 1993), the person sitting beside Dan at the diner is a female truck driver wearing a shirt that says "Bertha's Trucking Co. Inc." that does not surprise our children. Nor are we surprised that the mechanic servicing Dan's big rig is a woman. This is increasingly our world; it is certainly the world of our children.

In the last fifteen years numerous books have been written concerning the place of women in ancient Greco-Roman society and the early church, and by comparison roles of women in modern society. The challenge raised for the church by the information now available to us is to faithfully appropriate the message of the ancient biblical texts in the world of the twenty-first century. One clear principle emerging from this scholarship is that we must not generalize about very complex issues, past or present.

It is with such caution that Elizabeth A. Clark begins her article on "Women" in the **Encyclopedia of Early Christianity**, edited by Everett Ferguson (Garland 1990) 940–943: "Considerable caution must be exercised in interpreting the roles and status of women in early Christian history. The sources are scanty, and their authors are males who often wrote prescriptively." Clark offers a description of the "relatively public activity" of women in the early church, which she maintains is an "interpretation now generally accepted." She goes on to demonstrate how these public roles became restricted, a process she attributes to the increasing formaliza-

tion of the church and its hierarchy.

In 1981 David Balch published **Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter** (Scholars). (Balch is an ACU graduate, and the book is dedicated to his wife and to Everett Ferguson.) This book explores the "rules for the household" that one finds in 1 Peter and demonstrates that such rules were taken over from contemporary society and "Christianized" by the addition of phrases like "in the Lord." That is, such codes which call for wifely submission, obedient children, and loyal slaves did not just "fall down from heaven" but, rather, grew out of the church's interaction with societal expectations of the time and place. For example, the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife that the culture of the time demanded was not a Christian innovation (99). In light of such expectations and demands, failure to adhere to established codes was regarded as a threat to society, and a "liberated" woman was a sign of a family out of control. Equally enlightening is David C. Verner's **The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles** (Scholars, 1983), which treats such things as the social structure of the traditional Greek and Roman households and, once again, the "rules for the household." Another work on the Pastorals which should be mentioned is Bonnie Bowman Thurston's **The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church** (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

There is an important article entitled "Family' in Church and Society of New Testament Times," by Peter Lampe in **Affirmation** 5 (1992) 1–20. (This journal is published biannually at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.) Lampe points out that the dwelling rooms of private homes were the *only* real estate structure at the church's disposal in the first

two centuries. Such meetings in private households accommodated only relatively small groups of around twenty or thirty people (8). Several house churches could meet in one city with little contact, though common leadership. This is a significant observation for the roles women may have played in such gatherings, since some women functioned as heads of households (e.g. Chloe, 1 Cor 1:11) in which churches met.

One of the contributions to clarifying the roles of women in synagogue circles is Bernadette J. Brooten's **Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue** (Scholars, 1982). Brooten offers an analysis of inscriptional evidence, including evidence that women served as elders in the synagogue. Her work is not to be overlooked, since the background of worship in the church is centered in the synagogue.

Craig S. Keener's **Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul** (Hendrickson, 1992) is a scholarly, well-written and accessible treatment (the book is also inexpensive) that comprises two sections: "The Roles of Women in the Church" and "Women's Roles in the Family." The first section consists of a discussion of three texts: 1 Corinthians 11:1–16; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:9–15. Keener sees 1 Cor. 14:34–35 as addressed to uneducated women who were interrupting the exposition of scripture with questions. This text "calls us to order in worship, not to the silence of women" (88). But what about the passage in 1 Timothy? Keener's introductory comments about this text are worthy of citation: "It would be surprising if an issue that would exclude at least half the body of Christ from a ministry of teaching would be addressed in only one text, unless that text really addressed only a specific historical situation rather than setting forth a universal prohibition" (101). Keener thinks the prohibition is directed at incompetent teachers, "not because they are women, but because they are unlearned" (120). At least he is asking some of the right questions—note the heading above the 1 Timothy passage: "Specific Situation or General Rule?"

The scholarship and insights of a book like Keener's become clear when compared to a book like F. LaGard Smith's **What Most Women Want, What Few Women Find** (Harvest, 1992). This writing has influenced the usage of the phrase "male spiritual leadership," a catch expression now being heard in some of our churches (based on Smith's treatment of Genesis 3—a misleading reading of the text in my opinion). According to Smith, the dominance "placed upon" males as a result of the sin in the Garden was confined to the spiritual. By using the word "spiritual," Smith believes he is able to preserve the religious community as a place for male dominance

when elsewhere the male-female relationship may be equitable. In other words, a woman can be the CEO of a corporation but cannot offer a prayer at her church.

Some other writings from our religious heritage need mentioning. **Gender and Ministry: The Role of the Woman in the Work and Worship of the Church** (Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs, Inc., 1990) records a discussion that took place at Freed-Hardeman University in 1990. It is a useful reading because it presents different points of view within the same book, even if the two sides never really meet. Don McWhorter and Ralph Gilmore see the "restrictive texts" as not "cultural" but divinely appointed, connected to women's subordination at creation. Lynn Mitchell and Robert Randolph see the same texts as directed at particular historical situations. McWhorter argues that the first-century woman was a "very liberated woman" (29, 81–82, 93)! The approach of McWhorter and Gilmore is largely ahistorical; therefore, they are not interested in the way the New Testament passages have been interpreted in the past (85). Mitchell and Randolph are more in touch with mainstream scholarship and think the context of the New Testament is vital for understanding its message.

For some pertinent comments about an ahistorical reading of the Bible in our church tradition, see C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, **Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ** (ACU, 1988; chapter 1: "Roots: Why Bother?" 1–10). In a related vein, one notes also Allen's **Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church** (ACU, 1993). An ahistorical reading of the Bible is also blind to one's own particular past. Note the chapters in this book about the women preachers and leaders in our restoration movement: chapter 4, "Your Daughters Shall Prophesy;" chapter 17, "The New Woman;" chapter 18, "Phoebe's Place." Allen is right; how soon we forget.

The 1990 Christian Scholar's Conference at Pepperdine included the presentation of several papers relating to women, including Micki Pulley's "The History of Women in the Restoration Movement." Stuart Love presented "Roles of Women in the Gospel of Matthew: a Macrosociological View." Other papers included Anna Griffith, "Female Leadership in the Churches of Christ Today"; Donald Kinder, "Female Leadership in the First Century Church?" and Kathy Pulley, "Women, Leadership, and the Local Church." These papers are available for a nominal fee from Christian Scholar's Conference Papers, Religion Division, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA 90263. Love has an approach

similar to his Pepperdine paper in "Gender Status and Roles in the Church: Some Social Considerations," *Restoration Quarterly* 36 (1994) 251–266. His work incorporates useful research about the public/private expectations for the sexes in agrarian societies, which is of course the world of the Bible.

In 1993 College Press of Joplin, Missouri, published *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, Volume 1*, edited by Carroll Osburn.¹ This is an ambitious, comprehensive survey of women in society and church in the Greco-Roman world. Both the editor and the publisher are to be commended for making such a sizeable collection available—552 pages, with the indexes. The twenty essays include three by women: "Women in the Church in Recent Discussion" (Kathy Pulley); "'Neither Male and Female' (Gal. 3:28)" (Jan Hailey); "The 'Widows' in 1 Tim. 5:13–16" (Marcia Moore). Other contributors bear familiar and not-so-familiar names: Wendell Willis, Sterling, Chesnutt, Walters, Mark Black, Osburn, Neller, Pollard, Geer, Blackburn, Helton, Thompson, Aquino and McLemore, Chouinard, Allen Black, Childers and Niccum, and Ferguson. Gender-specific language seems to be avoided throughout, though there is a lapse on page 39. The contributors are, for the most part, academics attached to universities of the a cappella Churches of Christ except for Blackburn, Chouinard (Independents), Pulley (SW Missouri State U.), and Sterling (Notre Dame). The exegetical papers tend to be heavily footnoted and formula driven. An exception to this is James Thompson's "The Submission of Wives in 1 Peter." His work is a model of exegesis; it demonstrates that exegesis is an art as well as a skill.

As the title of the volume indicates, the overriding interest of the whole collection is historical, precise and dispassionate. This type of approach is at once the great strength and the great weakness of our heritage's exegesis. This is very much a book for the head, not so much for the heart. Nonetheless, it does have implications for our hearts. Almost every essay ends with a conclusion that implicitly calls for change. On the other hand, there is little here that one might say falls under the area of pastoral care, that is, little for women who feel spiritually disenfranchised in our congregations and little for men who cannot (or who *feel* they cannot) change. If change can come simply by reasoned argument about the past, then this book will take us a long way. In my opinion, however, we need something now for our hearts, where people really live; for our fears as well as for our dreams.

The great strength of Osburn's collection is to clarify the issue of why things are the way they are in the New Testament. At the end of the collection,

Everett Ferguson, in his paper "Women in the Post-Apostolic Church," concludes, "Except in some heretical and schismatic groups, the churches in the early patristic period evidence prohibitions on women speaking in the assembly and serving in leadership positions of bishop/presbyter or presiding at liturgical functions. On the other hand, in ministering functions women were actively involved and exercised leadership responsibilities in a variety of ways" (513). What we gain on the way to those remarks is a thorough explication of how this situation came to be. Two of the most illuminating essays are those by Gregory E. Sterling, "Women in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds (323 BCE-138 CE)," and Randall D. Chesnutt's "Jewish Women in the Graeco-Roman Era." One notes especially the restriction of women to the realm of the private: women generally did not address public assemblies (72). These two essays demonstrate that the various relevant texts—perhaps there is no text *not* relevant, since all texts belong to the same social context—are rooted in time and place. They are not ahistorical, even if our reading of them has been. In that connection we might recall Thompson's words about the underlying intention of Scripture (392). To the Sterling and Chesnutt bibliographies may now be added Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Harvard, May 1995), whose publisher's summary includes, "By examining the roles that men assigned to women, the ideals they constructed for them, and the anxieties they expressed about them, Blundell sheds light on the cultural dynamics of a male-dominated society."

A writing which treats women in both testaments is edited by George J. Brooke: *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (Edwin Mellen, 1992). It is composed of a collection of fourteen papers given in a seminar at the University of Manchester between October 1990 and December 1991; these papers are scholarly but readable by the informed non-specialist. Included are, for example, "Women and the Inheritance of Land in Early Israel" (S. Joy Osgood); "John 4:27—Women (and Men) in the Gospel and Community of John," (Martinus C. de Boer); and Brooke's own paper "Susanna and Paradise Regained." These are stimulating reading.

The way people lived in ancient Israel and the roles they may have fulfilled is illuminated in a thoroughly engrossing book by William Lancaster entitled *The Rwala Bedouin Today* (Cambridge, 1981). (Recall that our pre-Israelite ancestors were semi-nomadic.) In the chapter entitled, "The Position and Importance of Women," Lancaster points out that, structurally, women are equal partners of men: "men can get nowhere without a woman and

women cannot be anyone without a man.” Further, “women are confined to the private sector and are therefore not seen, both literally and figuratively.” This is due, he says, to their importance to society as a whole; they are too valuable to be allowed to become embroiled in public feuds and politics (58).

Returning to contributions from our heritage, Ben Wiebe, an elder at the Stoney Creek church in Hamilton, Ontario, has written a useful article relating to texts in Galatians and 1 Timothy: “Two Texts on Women (1 Tim 2:11–15; Gal 3:26–29): A Test of Interpretation,” **Horizons in Biblical Theology** 16 (1994), 54–85. Wiebe looks at how the starting point—the “liberating” text in Galatians or the “restrictive” text in 1 Timothy—has determined the treatment of the subject of women’s roles in the church. With regard to the text in 1 Timothy 2:11–15, he shows a connection with 2 Timothy 3:6–9, that is, the relationship of the women addressed to the false teachers to whom they had opened their homes (1 Tim 5:13, 15). It is in the light of their role in advancing the false teaching that the strong corrective is put forward (57). Wiebe’s picture of the historical situation behind 1 Timothy 2 is sharper than Keener’s; the exegesis of both is in keeping with contemporary work on the passage. For example, Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, **How to Read the Bible for All its Worth** (2nd ed., Zondervan, 1993 [1981]) comment, “they [i.e. certain women] appear to have been a major part of the cause of the false teachers’ making headway there. Since women are found teaching (Acts 18:26) and prophesying (Acts 21:8; 1 Cor. 11:5) elsewhere in the New Testament, it is altogether likely that 1 Timothy 2:11–12 speaks to a local problem” (75) Wiebe’s article is a careful piece of work and deserves reading in our circles.

Most recently I’ve read Wendy Cotter’s article, “Women’s Authority Roles in Paul’s Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?” **Novum Testamentum** 36 (1994) 350–371. It presents an approach that has much potential. Cotter takes six women leaders from Paul’s letters—Apphia, Chloe, Prisca, Euodia and Syntyche, Phoebe—and considers them over against the prevalent culture of their respective cities, in the light of the culture of the time generally, and in the context of the *ekklesia* (community). Unfortunately the “body of evidence” we have for these women is very small, but Cotter’s approach is unique. She notes that “Roman and Greek culture

agreed in the exclusion of women from the public and/or political arena” (366). Since the word *ekklesia* carries with it a civic dimension, women in leadership roles were participating in a countercultural activity (370).

What one misses in the studies by academics and professors, with the clear exception of Allen’s **Distant Voices**, is a sense of pastoral care. All of them are rational, head-oriented studies. Such valuable research eventually will have its effects. But people live out of their hearts, out of their senses of security, out of their fears, and out of their loves. Smith taps into people’s fears when he cautions against any role for women in the public worship of the church—because it will open the “floodgate” (279). Of course similar dire warnings have been issued almost any time change has come. Those who seek responsible change must educate the people of good will in our churches and persuade them that this will lead to “a better world,” a more adequate response to the gospel, and to a better future for our children.

Finally, one should mention contemporary translations of the Bible which draw on up-to-date scholarship. Consider the **New Revised Standard Version**. This translation uses inclusive language where possible, reducing the male-dominated language of the biblical text considerably. Beyond that general advantage, we read, for example, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon [footnote: minister] of the church at Cenchreae” (Rom. 16:1); “Women [footnote: Or, *Their wives*, or *Women deacons*] likewise must be serious” (1 Tim. 3:11). There are many refreshing translations in the **NRSV** and I am surprised even in going back to its predecessor, the **RSV**, how “male dominated” the translations of the Bible have been.

Claude Cox is minister of the Barrie Church of Christ in Ontario, Canada, chaplain at Grove Park Home for Senior Citizens—a ministry initiated by the Barrie church, and Adjunct Associate Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at McMaster Divinity College.

¹Editors’ note: Since the writing of this article, a second book of essays on women in the early church is now in print. The title is **Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, Volume II**, edited by Carroll Osburn (College Press: Joplin, Missouri. 625 pages including appendices and indexes).