

Paul Elbert. *Pastoral Letter to Theo: An Introduction to Interpretation and Women's Ministries* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2008). Pp. xxiv + 97. Paper. \$15. ISBN 13: 978-1-55635-546-2.

Is it possible that basic hermeneutical principles are violated in an effort to be politically correct in modern society? Some women have felt betrayed or underutilized in the church due to the interpretation of some NT texts that seem to some to teach that their role is relatively minute in comparison to the role of men. Is it in response to women's liberation that scholars now contend these verses are mere "cultural statements" and thus no longer apply to today's society? Can one stay true to a historical-grammatical method of hermeneutics and still prove the validity of women in ministry through the very Scriptures that some claim to be stating otherwise? Elbert, building on the work of Adele Berlin as well as Greco-Roman rhetorical contexts, employs what he has called a "narrative-rhetorical hermeneutical method that is charismatically sensitive" and not indebted to the historic presuppositional filter of an "apostolic age," carefully argues that women do have an equal role of ministry and spiritual gifts in the church. This is the essence of the exegesis set out in *Pastoral Letter to Theo: An Introduction to Interpretation and Women's Ministries*.

Elbert opens the book stating the importance of good hermeneutical background and methodology. His intention here is to seek the original meaning and authorial intent on key passages in order to promote a more sustained understanding. He further contends that an interpretive method must respectfully account for the cohesive manner of Scripture in its entirety. His purpose, therefore, is to prove that "the Spirit retarding claims, artificially devised epochs, and temporal chasm between original and later New Testament readers as a whole, which have been imposed by Protestant scholarship and formally incorporated within some Evangelical faith traditions since the mid-nineteenth century, are inappropriate and need to be considered for retirement" (xvii).

Elbert goes on to state that one of the major hindrances for an acceptable understanding of key passages is due to poor hermeneutics, particularly in "Bible Belt" zones, including a region of that description in the United States. He contends that some Evangelical groups, in particular, tend to make "bold and textually untested and unconsidered claims based on proof-texting" (4). Some very fine Christian people have continued for a long time to repeat unreflective claims without giving due consideration to a critical contextual interpretation of the

texts they repeatedly tout. The historical result has been to uphold an “apostolic-age” style of interpretation stemming from the male-dominated culture of the Protestant Reformation. In so doing, many of these well-intentioned ministers have focused on what is “doctrinally acceptable and thus keep the tradition of proof-texting alive” (5).

In support of his thesis, Elbert begins with the Fourth Gospel. Here he notes that John 1:33 and John 7:39 are connected to one another and probably not referencing John 20:22. In other words, 1:33 and 7:39 refer to a Christian experience that the author expects to be understood as beyond narrative time. The editorial clarification at 7:39 is then a “precise and intrusive comment by the author to explain what the words of Jesus actually mean” (11). Elbert argues that this editorial insert is often ignored or marginalized in the context of its narrative. He goes on to suggest that the author regards 7:39 as a significant prediction confirming a contemporary ministry of Jesus Christ and Spirit-reception or baptism in the Holy Spirit by the heavenly Jesus that active readers will be familiar with or interested in.

Elbert then moves from this potential misinterpretation in John regarding the heavenly Jesus’ ministry of baptism in the Holy Spirit to interpersonal spiritual gifts, as taught in 1 Corinthians. He begins this segment with 1 Cor 13:10 and contends that this verse has been venerated as a major proof-texting source for many years by the modern dispensational/cessationistic mindset. After a brief discussion, Elbert closes by pointing out that since we do not see face-to-face, Paul’s “that which is perfect” cannot refer either to the canon of Scripture or to the later completion of a supposed imaginary epoch *before* the parousia (24). Both of these novel interpretive inventions are false. Elbert cites every critical commentary in the history of modern scholarship (thirty-one of these), who also interpret “that which is perfect” as the return of Christ. As to the imposition of an intervening chasm between Paul’s original readers and later readers, I might draw attention to the apparent chasmal ridiculousness of God, through Paul, taking pains to explain details of interpersonal spiritual ministries that He was about to eliminate.

This argument then moves effortlessly to the role of women in the church and the sexist treatment they have received due to unexamined dictums and grossly distorted texts. Supporting this argument, Elbert again raises the classic case of the “apostolic-age” interpretive method employed by John Calvin at Acts 2:38–39, something that he has written about previously, where Calvin reverses his own contextual interpretation of the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38). Here Calvin erases

his own reading by imposing a cessationistic dictum. Elbert suggests that Calvin's performance here was politically motivated (29).

Elbert goes on to mention that selecting a verse out of context for study is disconnected from the Greco-Roman culture and method of study. For those rhetorically trained in Roman education, every passage would have been studied consistently within the context of the entire work. In such a literary atmosphere among oral readers of Paul's letters in the churches, 1 Cor 14:34–35 would never have been disconnected from the preceding 14:1 and, more importantly, from 11:5. If women are encouraged to pray and prophesy with their heads covered, then it does not follow that they would be excused from speaking in the church altogether. Elbert suggests, then, that *these* women mentioned in 1 Cor 14:34–35 should remain silent because they were interrupting the service with their questions and debates, perhaps questioning why men no longer had to be circumcised while they were still required to wear head-coverings. This passage does not conclusively suggest that all women should remain silent at all times and evidence in support of this conclusion is offered. As shown by the gender inclusive "all" in 1 Cor 14:31, all may contribute to the ministry of prophecy, which may include elements of teaching so that people can understand. However, those who cause confusions with questions must wait and address them at home with their own husbands (35). Therefore, by connecting Paul's train of thought through 1 Cor in 11:5, 14:1, 31, 34–35, one can see the coherent thought that negates the extra-biblical cessation of women's ministries in some Evangelical Protestant culture today.

After his discussion of 1 Corinthians, Elbert confronts the text of 1 Tim 2:11–12 in its contemporary Greco-Roman religious context. Once again, he insists that these two verses cannot be extracted from their original literary context or from their NT context with respect to the ministry of the heavenly Jesus. He goes on to explain the cultural background of Ephesus and role of women in this city, pointing out that the context of 1 Timothy is concerned with the home, not public ministry. Timothy's warning of a woman exercising authority over a man is referring to the woman's own husband. Since her husband is the head of the home, she is not to exercise authority over him in particular. This argument is preceded and balanced by Elbert's comments that wives can be right and calls attention to God telling Abraham to listen to his wife in Gen 21:9–13. He also points out the distinct instruction of mutual submission in Ephesians 5.

As Elbert continues with specific reference to restricting women from teaching as argued by some from 1 Timothy, he again reiterates

the specific socio-religious background of this letter's initial reception. These women, newly converted in Ephesus to Christianity, needed to learn from their husbands. They warranted correction for their religious and social status associated with political influence from the Temple of Diana. Elbert firmly establishes this point on the use of the Greek verb *epitrepō*, which refers to a prohibition for a specified time and cannot mean a permanent ban. The textual implication explicitly correlates to the underlying cultural situation (48).

Finally, Elbert closes out the last two chapters of his book by addressing a few key passages in Acts and Romans. Elbert suggests that in the composition of Acts, Luke followed the rhetorical device of examples and precedents which would also help clarify the letters of Paul and stimulate a fresh reading of them. He first calls attention to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on both men and women so that both may prophesy in fulfillment of Joel's prophesy. Therefore, both sexes are equally equipped for ministry. He then points out Luke's recognition of Philip's daughters in their prophetic ministries in Acts 21:8–9 as well as the teaching ministry of Priscilla to Apollos in Acts 18:24–26. In Romans, Elbert brings attention to Phoebe and Paul's admiration of her ministry as a deaconess in the church that is evidently stated in Rom 16:1–2. Elbert then revisits the ministry of Priscilla (mentioned as Prisca by Paul in Romans) along with her husband Aquila. He highlights Paul's title of "agents of God" in their work as missionaries to this region (69) and then draws attention to the honorable mention of Junia in her ministry as being "outstanding among the apostles" in Romans 16:7. Elbert believes that Paul regards Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia, along with Tryphaina, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:12), as not only laborers in the Lord, but as "compatriots" in ministry. He feels that the text suggests these latter three women were also missionaries or local church leaders with whom Paul was personally acquainted. (I think that Elbert feels that Paul would have regarded Philip's daughters in the same light.)

The discussion of whether the person honorably mentioned at Rom 16:7 has a feminine name, "Junia" or a masculine one, "Junias," is carefully addressed in the last chapter, "Romans in Light of Modern Translation Methods" (71–82). It seems to me that Elbert, building here on the work of Linda Belleville and Eldon Epp, reaches a judicious conclusion that this apostle was indeed a woman.

Since the book, though rigorous and compact, has a slight pastoral flavor, Elbert keeps the footnotes to a minimum. However, he provides a thorough "Select Bibliography" (85–97) that affords a very valuable

background to the scholarship underpinning this study and its conclusions.

The contribution of this small book is perhaps monumental with respect to its size, putting some of the pieces together that biblically support the role of women in ministry. Elbert eloquently shows the textual cohesion of the many uses and references to women in ministry. He deliberately addresses the problem passages that have been proof-texted by those with historical agendas that may not have been as concerned with biblical accuracy as with other matters. Elbert is consistent in addressing these texts in showing their cultural and religious background and specific ministry contexts that have contributed to authors' original intent. He rightly shows the continuity of Scripture and specific references of women in ministry in both testaments. In addition, he shows the diverse roles of these women including administration, politics, teaching, preaching, prophecy, missions, and general leadership of the church. Through this book, Elbert is justified in his conclusion that it is incongruent with Scripture to deliberately proof-text the few verses that seemingly limit the role of women in the church when there is an abundance of examples of the opposite application.

It is this writer's opinion that the overall argument of the book might be stronger by staying closely connected to the role of women in the church. Elbert varies slightly from this in chapter one when discussing John's Gospel, although he undoubtedly felt that the issue of an interpretive method had to come first. Secondly, more than once Elbert attributes possible feelings to characters in venturing assumptions as to what Paul and others would have done or felt in the book of Acts (61, 66). For example, he believes that Paul would not have required Phillip's daughters to remain silent when he visited their home. He evidently thinks that such behavior here on Paul's part is inconsistent with Luke's thinking about Paul and about women and, by implication, would contradict what interpreters like John MacArthur say about Paul and women in 1 Corinthians (27). However, since one cannot ask Paul his intention, this suggestion about what the Lukan Paul would probably not have ever done with regard to these prophetesses in Philip's home must remain in the realm of attractive speculation (attractive to Elbert at any rate). Yet, his strong Scriptural support in other areas readily makes up for this small discrepancy.

This book is a powerful resource for seasoned pastors and young women, who might question the role women in the body of Christ due to the often ludicrous and blatant disregard for Scripture that has

resulted from the lack of a proper grammatical-historical or narrative-rhetorical method of interpretation. It is agreed with Elbert's bold remark that dogmatic individuals on this score may need to consider giving an account before God for the damage done to the church as a result of their unexamined and uninvestigated assumptions (63). In this book dedicated to the memory of four women Pentecostal pioneer ministers (Cora Fritsch, Alice Luce, Elize Scharten, and Elva Vanderbout) Elbert adequately supports his thesis and solidly proves that the notion of forbidding women from taking their rightful part in Gospel ministry is without biblical foundation.

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