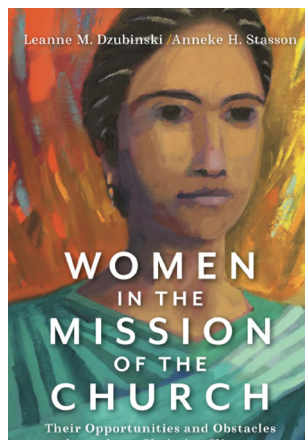


Women in the Mission of the Church: Their Opportunities and Obstacles throughout Christian History

By Leanne M. Dzubinski and Anneke H. Stasson. Baker Publishing, 2021. 240 pages. Kindle.

Reviewed by William Jackson



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It should go without saying that women are essential for God's mission to the world and have been fulfilling this vital role since the time of Jesus (ix). Despite this reality, women have unfortunately faced gender-based obstacles from the beginning (185).

Throughout this book, various stories are shared about women who have made a profound impact upon God's kingdom from the early church through today, while also presenting the sober reality of their unnecessary challenges. Upon reading historical accounts of their work, church planters ought to examine their ministry and the nature of their inclusion and development of women in ministry. To exclude them, or not develop them, is to disobey Scripture (Eph. 4:11–12).

These two female authors have spent numerous years studying the intersection of gender and church history and are passionate about this subject. Their thoughtful research and easy-to-read writing style make this book enjoyable.

Summary of Content

Dzubinski and Stasson begin with the idea that women have encountered significant gender-based challenges since Jesus' life and ministry. Sadly, I have known several women who have felt judged based on their gender. These struggles have unfortunately existed since the Curse (Gen. 3:16).

Part 1: Women's Leadership in the Early Church

The authors begin by sharing stories of women who learned directly from Jesus and his apostles. Rather than a woman's worth coming from her ability to bear children, Jesus taught that women had intrinsic value (15). He saw their gender but did not speak differently to them (16). The Apostle Paul worked with numerous women (see Romans 16) and called them deacons (Rom. 16:1), fellow laborers (Rom. 16:12; Phil. 4:3), and apostles (e.g., Junia, Rom. 16:7). Phoebe funded part of Paul's ministry and was called upon to deliver the book of Romans, probably providing some public interpretation for it (16). Priscilla was a teacher of the word and was often mentioned before her husband Aquila, a demonstration of her importance (19).

Widows faithful to Christ after their husband's death could receive a financial stipend and would often be involved in ministry—some were even ordained (26). Several women were martyred over the years after proving to be extremely bold in their gospel witness, such as Thecla, Blandina, and Perpetua (28).

Anyone reading this section on the role of women in God's kingdom in the first-century should conclude that the apostles valued women in

ministry immensely. As I ponder that statement, I have to ask myself, “Do I show the same value and respect to my female colleagues that Jesus and the Apostle Paul did?” Women were founders of ministries, hosted house churches, delivered theologically dense messages (like the book of Romans), and were foundational in Paul’s ministry.

The way we speak of women and their roles matters. The Roman world often viewed courageous people as “manly” and not feminine (33). Certain translations tend to minimize the role that women played in God’s kingdom (47–49). If the very Bibles we read downplay the capabilities of women in ministry, then how is it possible for the church to imagine what amazing things God can do in and through them? A healthy ecclesiology seeks to continue the biblical tradition of looking at both genders as peers in ministry, not subservient creatures like some church leaders have done in the past.

Part 2: Women’s Leadership in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Throughout the book, readers are encouraged to remember that God uses people in the public and private square. Part two particularly highlights the stories of women in the Middle Ages who usually did not have spiritual leadership positions yet were tremendously influential. Such women were mothers, sisters, empresses, and queens, and fulfilled their witness of Christ. They were crucial to bringing their family members into the Christian faith (60).

Monasteries, including convents formed by nuns, greatly impacted medieval Christianity. These convents were beacons of light where education was encouraged (previously most women were illiterate in the Middle Ages) (85). It was common for nuns and monks to accompany missionaries when they preached in new areas, providing “living sermons” to unbelievers through their godly lifestyles (89). Their examples spurred more women to follow in their footsteps. When the Black Death killed around one-third of Europe’s population, it was Catherine of Sienna and

her disciples that cared for many abandoned sick patients (98). Their dedication to God is to be highly revered.

Part 3: Women's Leadership Since the Reformation

The vast number of women preachers in America and England is fascinating, and the thousands who have turned to Christ because of their ministry is a great source of joy. When the First Great Awakening occurred, women played a significant role in the preaching (128). There were certainly opposers to this view and women were commonly limited to the home, while men were freer to move in public (130). Several denominations allowed women to be involved in leadership, especially within the Methodist movement (130).

A common refrain I have heard in America regarding women leading house fellowships and movements abroad, is that "God does special and different things in the mission field." As we ponder the amazing things God does, like using women in the Great Awakening, why would he not continue to use them in similar ways? Regardless of location and time, he can and will use both genders to glorify his name and lead people to himself. If the Bible directs us this way, and history also reminds us it has happened in this manner, why would church planters expect anything different? I am convicted to include women in ministry.

The book concludes with a summary about how confusing and unjust the challenges can be for women in ministry. While the Bible portrays women as having capabilities for leading in ministry, certain cultural views and biblical understandings have minimized women's leadership potential (204). Nonetheless, women in every century since Christ's life have ministered to people in word and deed. They have pioneered fields in education, spoken and led movements against cultural sins, established monastic life, and cared for the poor and sick. However, as movements and institutions formalized, women often bore the brunt of a limiting effect in leadership (207). We should rejoice at the amazing feats of

women throughout the millennia, yet soberly realize that they have faced unnecessary challenges.

Evaluation

As a man who grew up in a conservative complementarian church culture, I have not had experience (outside of my organization) with seeing women lead in mixed-gender ministry settings. Several years ago, I felt God leading me to pray and study this subject, which has been rewarding and has caused me to want to lift up women's voices in the church. This book is a helpful step in assisting people towards that noble end.

The purpose of this book is not to answer the question, "What role(s) can women play in the church?" This must be kept in mind when reading it. The authors purposefully refrain from exegeting typical passages related to the debate on women's roles in the church. Instead, they tell stories of how God has used women, leaving the reader to examine this important issue elsewhere. I do not think that hinders the usefulness of this book.

Readers from a firm complementarian background might have two challenges with this book.

- *Avoiding "the elephant in the room"?* Whether helpfully or otherwise, this book avoids claiming a theological position on complementarianism or egalitarianism. However, as I read this book, I am led to believe the authors are not the former. There is a strong expectation that women can lead in the same manner and ways men do. This belief will rub some people the wrong way. Complementarians could feel misguided by some aspects of this book. They could legitimately believe they are both honoring God's Word and women by not letting them lead mixed-gender churches.
- *Theology of God's call.* The authors do not specifically address how one discerns God's call in life. In several instances, the authors discuss how some women have felt God's calling upon their life to preach, yet their church, denomination or social circles forbade

this (133). For those who believe women should not preach in mixed-gender circles, they could foreseeably find this complex concept difficult. This is certainly a unique challenge women face that men do not.

Relevance for the Practitioner

The stories in this book provide real-life examples for all believers. They can be used to share with various people in discipleship settings, to encourage men and women to look at the wonderful example of their sisters. Uplifting the voices of women in God's kingdom work is empowering to men and women in the church.

In my church-planting experience, I have been blessed to work alongside women and men on teams where women's voices are equal to men's. However, when it comes to the local church setting, I have seen that preaching, leading in the Eucharist, and holding the position of elder are usually assigned to men. This can confuse women about their role and worth in God's kingdom, if they feel a calling to a certain ministry, yet are prohibited from practicing it (as several women in this book experienced). I personally struggle to understand who is "right" in that scenario and am fine with this topic being a "gray" one.

In my patriarchal Muslim-majority host country, it is not appropriate for women to lead mixed-gender groups. Men go to mosques; women pray at home. In fact, the more submissive and reserved a woman is, the higher her honor. When a family becomes followers of Christ, their longevity in a church (usually a house church) is often limited because of cultural views that women do all the housework. When a woman is responsible to prepare and cook food, clean up dishes, handwash clothes, and care for the children, then who has time to attend church? Certainly not women!

One change our church-planting team incorporated was to ask local women, "What is the best time of day/week to meet for fellowship?" The answer we received was Friday afternoon. So, we changed our

worship time to accommodate them. Our house church could continue to improve, but we seek to involve women as we teach God's Word in a facilitative Bible study. Women are encouraged to bless others in the service and outside of it.

Recommendation

Dubinski and Stasson do a wonderful job making this topic accessible to the lay person. The stories they share read like an enjoyable history book. Women and men can all learn from the examples of the women within this book and be inspired to live fully for Christ and his gospel. It is no small feat to cover such a broad period of time (2,000 years), and it includes non-Western voices throughout.

Those interested in the subject of gender within Christianity will find this book insightful. Straying away from polarizing terms (like complementarian and egalitarian) might be one of the best strengths of this book. They let the Bible and history tell their own stories, and the engaged reader will come to their own interpretation. I recommend this book to Christians thirsting for a practical understanding of how God can use both genders to spread his kingdom. Such people will accept some levels of ambiguity while also seeking to be biblically rooted. As a result, this book has the potential to cause more women to be fully trained for the ministries God has called them to.

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