



NO LITTLE WOMEN

Equipping All Women in the Household of God

AIMEE BYRD

Aimee Byrd equips readers in the lost art of discernment. You don't need to agree with Aimee on all of the fine points in order to learn from her. Aimee provides practical tips for reading, learning, listening, and discerning.

—**Rosaria Butterfield**, author, *Openness Unhindered and The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*

Aimee Byrd calls for men and women in the church to take the discipleship of women seriously. Some pastors have a bad habit of failing to engage women in the church or scrutinize what they study, and male church leaders often fail to be open to contributions from women in the church. This book offers several practical ways for pastors to overcome the separating out of women's ministries, which has resulted in a sort of pink and flowery ghetto of theology.

—**John McKinley**, Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, Biola University, La Mirada, California

Aimee Byrd fearlessly takes on a range of problems that are not often addressed in the same work: women's ministries and women themselves who lack proper theological training; pastors who neglect the training and the gifts of the women who could be deployed in the kingdom to great effect; and the hyper-complementarianism that is itself bad theology. May all those who need to hear her message give it heed.

—**Kathy Keller**, author, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*

Aimee Byrd writes with wit and wisdom, biblical clarity and theological maturity. What she writes about here is a matter of urgent pastoral concern to every minister and elder. There

are movements and ideas around that are offering solace and encouragement to those who would hold back our sisters in Christ from being all that they could be for him. Women are our most committed resource for doing the work of the kingdom, and they deserve our best thinking and support. It is our solemn duty to guard all the flock of God, to nurture and use their spiritual gifts, and Aimee helps us to identify and address the issues head on.

—**Liam Goligher**, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

Unfortunately, many of the answers offered to women today about their place in the church are the result of asking the wrong questions. Fortunately, Aimee Byrd is asking the right questions—tough questions, to be sure, but questions that are much needed and long overdue. *No Little Women* steers the discussion about women and the church back to its rightful place by uniting a high view of Scripture and a high view of women.

—**Karen Swallow Prior**, professor of English, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia

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I dedicate this book to the core women
in my first Bible study:

Brooke, Caty, Dana, Andrea, Evie, Corie, Jackie, Lora,
Erin, Monique, Courtney, Paula, Lori, Beth, Jill, and our
beloved Kathie, who is now with Jesus.

It was a great honor to study God's Word with you.
And it has changed my life.

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INTRODUCTION

We read books for different reasons. But whether we pick a fictional, historical, biographical, doctrinal, or self-help book, we are after a positive experience. There is something noble about reading—even if it isn't quality reading—in an age that is captivated by visual media. Picking up a book comes with an intended purpose, one that requires more discipline than reading a blog article, perusing our social media news feeds, or even committing to watch a movie. Reading takes more work. And we want to be rewarded for it in some sense. What expectations do you have for this book? What do you hope to learn? That's a question we will return to later.

When we are talking about Christian books, we really expect results—positive results, even eternal results. And yet, as noble as the art of reading is, it is not neutral ground, not even in Christian publishing. This is a book that aims to help the whole church by examining church initiatives for a group that makes up over half of our congregations—the women.

It's good news, really. I'm not writing as someone offended or burned. I am an advocate for the local church. I am writing as one small person who represents this group of more than

half the church. I am a woman. I am happy to be a woman who is a member of a faithful, confessional church. I'm not exactly young anymore; I've grown as a woman in this environment. And yet I'm not one of the women we look up to who are the most experienced in life and have so much wisdom to offer. I'm somewhere in between, having just celebrated my fortieth birthday, creeping up closer to my twentieth wedding anniversary, and having three children who are still in the home, albeit two of whom are going through the confusing teenage years.

This seems to be a good time for reflection in life. I can look back at my own naïveté, bad circumstances, mistakes, sin, and occasional glimpses of providential obedience and good timing in the Christian life, and I am also at a good place to look ahead, hoping to wisely apply what I've learned, God willing, to my own family and to any who may care to learn from a semi-crazy, yet informed and venturing, sister in Christ. It's also an interesting time in history for women and the church. While we believe we are in a more enlightened age than our ancestors, we are still trying to decipher and work our way through basic issues such as gender distinctiveness, sexuality, women's roles in the church and home, family dynamics, discipleship, and the relationship between church and culture. I want to encourage readers that there is good news about all of these related and important issues in life. But as you already know, because you were obviously concerned enough to read at least this introduction, there is some critique that needs to be evaluated, even in the places where we would like to take refuge, such as Christian publications, parachurch organizations, Christian radio, blogs, and even the ministries we try to build in our own churches.

Some of this is uncomfortable to talk about, but we aren't called to be comfortable. So I'm not writing in some kind of alarmist tone. I am writing because I know that God has

ordained that we often grow in a slow process. My own life is certainly representative of this fact. Some people seem to be blessed with a faster track to maturity. I have often learned the hard way. But I value that learning and don't want to make it any harder than it has to be, especially for those who are younger than me. I want them to learn much quicker! Even so, younger people have a voice that we need to listen to as well. Whatever our age and experience, we are valuable to the church of Christ, and he wants each one of us to be competent in our knowledge of him and in our understanding of the gospel. I still have a long road ahead, Lord willing.

Jesus Christ loves his church. That is the great news I want to share with you in this book. We believe that, right? In fact, Christ loves his church so much that he wants all of his church, including the women, to “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). And, of course, we believe that too. But how does Jesus do this for all of us? That is where we begin to have some differences.

Our theological views about creation, gender, and the household context affect the way we think about women's status, roles, and contributions to the church, home, and society. There has been a lot written on these topics, ranging from good to horrible. Many books written for women in the church, whether good or bad, are never read by the elders, pastors, or laymen. Women's ministries have become a sort of separate entity in the church, and this is one of our biggest problems.

As someone who speaks at women's retreats in different churches, I have been blessed to meet many wonderful women who have great intentions to live faithful Christian lives. Talking with many competent women in the faith is always an encouragement, especially when I am able to witness their conversation and life examples. Yet I have also talked with many women in the church who lack important skills in

discernment for discipleship. I've also talked and corresponded with numerous pastors who would like to serve the women in their congregations better and to encourage them in using their gifts. But often there isn't clear communication between women's ministries and church officers. All these conversations have led me to ask some questions that I aim to answer in this book. It is written both for women and for church officers, as well as for laymen who care about these matters:

- How does God describe woman?
- Should the church have women's ministries?
- Are women's ministries the best way to serve the women in the church and for the women to serve in the church?
- Is every member of the church a minister?
- How does the church minister to every member?
- Are the women in the church being properly equipped in the Word?
- What happens when women teach bad theology?
- What are the responsibilities of the head of a household?
- Can men learn from women?
- Have we lost the skills to read for understanding?
- Is there a difference between preaching to (and pastoring) men and preaching to (and pastoring) women?
- What is our responsibility in sitting under the Word?

This book is for the competent women who are seeking a better way, as well as for those of you who would like to become more competent, as God has called you to be. This book is also for pastors and elders who would like every member of their church to be well equipped in the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. I hope that all men in general will be interested in this significant matter of women and the church. I write with my eyes on the new heavens and

the new earth, where we will worship God together in resurrected bodies, forever praising our King. Our blessed Father has set his love on all his people, sent his Son into a fractured and broken world infested with sin, and bestowed on all those who believe in him new life in his Spirit. We are united in Christ. To God be the glory!

The best pastors and elders I know are learners. While they have so much to teach us, God can use even a housewife theologian like me to get a conversation going on this important topic. You will see that the chapters in the first three parts of the book have subsections directly addressing church officers in relation to the material of that chapter. This doesn't mean that pastors shouldn't read the sections directly addressing women or that women shouldn't read the sections addressed to church officers. I take this direct approach because we need to be listening to one another. Pastors, you need to hear what I am saying to the women, and women need to hear what I am saying to pastors. The whole book is meant for both men and women, laypeople and church officers, to read.

The fourth part of the book is very practical for all readers, ending in a chapter addressing pastors on the topic of preaching to and pastoring women, with a subsection for women about sitting under the preached Word. My hope is that this book will help both pastors and elders to shepherd the women in their congregations, and to encourage women to thrive under the ministry of Word and sacrament, so that it flows out to the whole church, to their homes, and to their communities.

PART ONE

Pinpointing a Real Problem



1

THE DANGER IN WOMEN'S MINISTRIES

Every now and then I get a disturbing email from a pastor or concerned woman about the women's ministry in their church. The usual scenario involves a group of well-intentioned women studying a popular book that is marketed for women's ministry groups, and it is full of bad doctrine. But the author is extremely likable, she has done many good deeds in the name of the Lord, and, frankly, the women in the group are now invested. They are offended that someone is questioning what they think has been an edifying study. So you can see how this email usually comes after significant damage has already been done.

Or has it? Why quibble over words when these women are bonding by studying a book that many other good churches are using? Because the truth of God's Word is important, and the women in God's church are important. What we study together in a side room of our church or in our living rooms shapes our own growth in holiness as well as the growth of those around us. Women are very influential both in God's

household and in their own. And there are many books marketed to Christian women that appear to be godly, while a closer look reveals that they are not in accord with Scripture. But the problem goes deeper than bad “Christian” books marketed to women.

There seems to be a pattern that has gone on from the beginning of time. We read in Genesis 3:1, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.” And what is the very next line after we have been given this information? “He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say . . . ?’”

In his malevolent shrewdness, Satan went for the woman. He went after Adam’s gift from God, his bride. That was indeed a clever way to get to Adam. So it isn’t surprising today that Satan goes after Christ’s bride, his church, with the same distortion of God’s word.

Are there any sections of Scripture that make you uncomfortable to read and especially to discuss with others? There’s one particular passage that gets to me, and it should be troubling to any pastor or elder in God’s church, to any husband who wants to love and care for his family, and to every woman who professes the name of Christ. That passage is 2 Timothy 3:6–7:

For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

This is a jarring warning. It comes in the context of Paul warning Timothy about false teachers infecting the church. They have an appearance of godliness, he says, but discernment shows that they are rebelling against the true power of

godliness in the Spirit (vv. 1–5). The assertion that they target weak women may seem insulting at first glance. Of course, Paul is not making a blanket statement about all women. Let's look into the word usage, cultural context, and exposition of this passage in more depth.

False teachers are a serious threat to God's church. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). This is exactly what Paul is describing in detail to Timothy when he warns him about the difficult times we are in during this age of "the last days":

For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. (2 Tim. 3:2–5)

And these are people in the church! They are deceptive. And they need to be avoided. Notice how these false teachers—we could even call them messengers of Satan—"creep" into households all stealth-like and target specific women. The language should make us think of a certain serpent.

We read Genesis from our point of view and cannot believe that Eve was so easily deceived. However, we are all susceptible if we are not adequately conditioned in the Word and if we do not look to God to supply us with all that is good. Think about this text for a minute. Paul is exhorting Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus. This is a church known for its passion for the truth! If Timothy needs to watch out for deception and false teaching in his congregation, then so do

pastors today. No matter how good the preaching is that we sit under, we are all vulnerable to false teaching.

One way that churches invest in their women and provide a setting for them to serve others is through a women's ministry program. You would think that every church would want to have a strong women's ministry. After all, women usually make up more than half of the church. And we want our women to be active members of the church body. But with all the opportunities for churches to have a thriving women's ministry, this verse in 2 Timothy is extremely pertinent. In many cases, women's ministry becomes a back door for bad doctrine to seep into the church. Why are there still so many gullible women? Have we made any progress in equipping our women to distinguish truth from error in what they are reading? Do the women in your church actually have the skills to lead a Bible study? Why is it that so many women sit under good preaching and have all the best intentions, yet fall prey to the latest book marketed to them that is full of poor theology? And why do so many women in the church fail to see that theology has any practical impact on their everyday lives?

There are several ways to look at this, but let's start by looking at the idea of "women's ministry" in the first place. Through the church's good intentions to minister to every member, we have swung the pendulum too far over into "every-member ministry." In doing this, we have lost our focus on the actual ministry itself. This book isn't a call for churches to ditch their women's ministry programs. Rather, I am asking both the officers and the women in the church to evaluate their women's ministries according to Scripture and also to encourage biblical women's initiatives in the church. I would love for this book to help build up the entire church, both brothers and sisters in God's household.

How do I respond to those emails that make me so sad? I sure wish that women (and men) in leadership would have enough discernment to recognize bad theology. Many don't. And we can all be sharpened. This is an opportunity for an elder to step in and teach these skills. Instead of just saying, "This book is dangerous because of A, B, and C, so therefore you must stop reading it," step in and read it with them. Find out what is so appealing about the book, and get to know the women studying it. Come prepared for discussion, with good questions and Scripture, so that these women will walk away with some tools for discernment. Teach them how to look for what this author is saying about God, about man, and about God's Word. People need to learn how to read a book.

Why We Are So Insulted

Perhaps when you read the words "weak women," your shoulders go back, your eyebrows furrow, and your lips purse. Paul's audacity here provokes a reaction. Such strong language does make some women defensive. This is indeed a jarring warning to read about a particular type of woman. Who would want to be one of those women? I don't want that for anyone in my church. I wouldn't want to hear that about any of God's people.

This expression, "weak women" (or "gullible women"), insults us. It is meant to jar a particular type of woman. The phrase, literally translated "little women" or "small women," was a term of contempt. Paul isn't soft-pedaling the issue here. And he isn't being chauvinistic. His writing in Scripture shows a high view of women and much appreciation for their service to God. I wish we could all be the kind of woman who is praised in his writing.

And Paul is not saying that men are never gullible. He is

saying that a particular type of immature woman was being targeted by false teachers looking to manipulate and infect households. Why do you think they were targets? Let's look at two reasons for going after women in general, and then two that make these particular "little women" even more of a target.

The Value of Women

The very first false teacher, Satan, deliberately went after the woman in the garden of Eden. Why didn't he approach Adam? Was it because Eve was more susceptible to error? Scripture doesn't tell us the reasoning behind his strategy, but we are told that he was "more crafty than any other beast of the field" (Gen. 3:1). Adam was the federal representative for mankind. His obedience would have earned blessing for us all, and his disobedience brought depravity and death to his whole posterity. So, make no mistake, Satan was going after Adam. He was going after Adam by going after his bride. He went for a target of value to bring about Adam's fall.

Before God created Eve, he declared that it was "not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). There has been plenty of discussion about this word *helper* in regard to a woman's role, and even to her value. But we don't really attach the same meaning today to this word, so maybe we lose some of its significance. The word *helper* can often bring up connotations of inferiority in our culture. Think of mommy's little helper in the kitchen. Isn't it cute that she wants to help mommy? Let's give her a bowl with some ingredients to stir and have her fetch a few things from the fridge. But don't let her near the stove or the sharp knives! She's just the helper; she might hurt herself!

Of course, this is not what "helper" means in Genesis 2:18. In fact, the same word is used to describe God as a "helper"

to Israel throughout the Old Testament.¹ And when we look at these verses, we see that this word communicates great strength. Psalm 89:17 is particularly interesting: “For you are the glory of their strength; by your favor our horn is exalted.” Here we have our word *ezer*, usually translated “helper,” translated instead as “strength.” These verses are also saturated in military language as they describe God as Israel’s *ezer*. The root for this word is used 128 times in Scripture, meaning “rescue” and “save.” It refers to God’s rescue in thirty cases, which we see mostly in the Psalms.²

Women derive value first and foremost from being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). But, as fellow image-bearers, we have a particular value in our relationship to men as well. John McKinley prefers to interpret *ezer* as “necessary ally,” asserting that God has given us this analogy between himself as *ezer* and woman as *ezer* to focus on their functional correspondence.³ This is certainly different from the way we use the word *helper* today:

The issue in *ezer* is neither equality nor subordination, but distinction and relatedness. She is to be for the man as an ally to benefit him in the work they were given to do. Just as *ezer* tells of God’s relatedness to Israel as the necessary support for survival and military perils, the woman is the ally to the man, without which he cannot succeed or survive. Unlike helper, that could seem optional, and allow the man to think he’s otherwise adequate for his task without the women, the distinction of ally marks the man’s dependence

1. See Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Pss. 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:17; 115:9–11; 121:1–2; 124:8; 146:5; Hos. 13:9.

2. See John McKinley, “Necessary Allies: God as *Ezer*, Woman as *Ezer*,” lecture, Hilton Atlanta, November 17, 2015, mp3 download, 38:35, <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=20759>.

3. *Ibid.*

upon her contribution. This dependence is plain when we consider Israel's need for God's contribution as her ally. . . .

What sort of ally is the woman to the man? She is a necessary ally, the sort without which he cannot fulfill humanity's mission. Certainly the woman as a necessary ally fits for the mission of family building. The pairing of the two terms *ezer* and *kenegdo* brings a meaning that is larger than gender complementarity and union for building a family. Necessary ally brings into view the joint mission for which the male and female are created to rule God's earthly kingdom.⁴

Ezer is the word first used to describe a woman's function. This helps us to understand why the crafty Serpent spoke to Eve. Immediately following a description of the Serpent as "more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made," we learn that "he said to the woman . . ." (Gen. 3:1). To get to Adam, Satan went after a target of value to him. It is no surprise, then, that he is still relentless in trying to deceive Christ's bride, the church, through false teachers, ill-placed priorities, felt needs, fear tactics, and coping mechanisms, to divert them from resting in Christ and in God's wisdom, provision, and sovereignty.

The Influence Women Have in a Household

Women are influential, both in their personal households and in the household of God. Research shows that men open up and have deeper conversation when a woman is involved.⁵

4. Ibid.

5. "Ladd Wheeler, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, found that women and men are both less lonely when they spend time with women. The data showed that whenever a woman was involved in an interaction, both individuals disclosed more about themselves, and the interaction became distinctly more intimate" (Dee Brestin, *The Friendships of Women* [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988], 16).

God has given us a gift of being relational. But this can also be used in a sinful way. Our propensity for intimate conversation helps us to be persuasive. This is especially true with our husbands. Before the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* popularized it, Spurgeon gave this witty advice to a bride in a wedding ceremony he was officiating: “According to the teaching of the apostle, ‘The husband is the head of the wife.’ Don’t you try to be the head; but you be the neck, then you can turn the head whichever way you like.”⁶ It’s funny because it’s kind of true. We don’t have to be the head to have power. But let’s not have weak necks!

The saying “Happy wife, happy life” is popular for a reason. And so we see Paul exhorting Titus to invest in the women of the household of God so that they may be instructed with a healthy doctrine that bears fruit in their personal households. Why does Paul say that he wants the older women to teach the younger women about personal holiness and relational care in the home (Titus 2:3–5)? Well, he tells us why: “that the word of God may not be reviled” (v. 5). We see that this teaching that the older women are responsible to hand down must be handled with great maturity, because they are dealing with the truth of God’s Word and applying it to people’s lives, where it will bear fruit. And people are watching! Sisters, neighbors, wives, and mothers tend to be the cultivators in household relationships. We are gifted with a tenderness to loosen hardened egos, as well as a firm strength to destroy the weeds that may infect our families. Women have a way of multitasking these relational gifts in beautiful harmony when they are in accord with healthy doctrine. But our influence can be devastating to a family when we are self-serving and manipulative.

6. C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 2, *The Full Harvest* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 442.

A woman's influence is not limited to her own home. Let's get back to the word *household* in our text in 2 Timothy. In their commentary, Bryan Chapell and Kent Hughes note, "The original Greek says 'the homes.' They were probably the spacious homes of the wealthy, where house churches often met."⁷ So it may be that these ungodly men are even more direct in using their stealthy tactics of manipulation by creeping into the house of God. These false teachers have a strategy. If they can deceive people with influence in God's household, they can cause the division and departure from God's Word that they are after. They are not just trying to deceive these women; they have the bigger goal of wreaking havoc in the whole household of God.

Opportunity

This term of contempt, "little women," reveals more about the women who were being manipulated. Robert W. Wall and Richard B. Steele explain in their commentary that this phrase, which they translate as "immature women," is "based on a common caricature of middle-class women in antiquity."⁸ They explain that, unlike the working-class women, these were women with time on their hands. They had time to sit and listen to these impostors and then to spread this new teaching. Extra time is a blessing if it is stewarded well, but immature women do not use it for God's glory. Idleness provides a golden opportunity for someone who wants to introduce new doctrine into a church. These little women were convenient targets and tools to use in the spread of false teaching.

When we see this phrase, we are offended. It makes us

7. R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1–2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 245.

8. Robert W. Wall with Richard B. Steele, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 262.

pause and consider whether we could be one of those women. But those who are “lovers of self . . . arrogant, abusive, . . . unholy, heartless,” and seeking to take advantage of God’s people, see an opportunity. In his epistle to the Ephesian Christians, Paul exhorts them, as they walk in the newness of their life in Christ, to put away falsehood (4:25). And so he warns them to “give no opportunity to the devil” (v. 27). There is a popular saying about how this happens: “Idle hands are the Devil’s workshop.” Idle people are inactive and lack purpose. But false teachers are highly active and purposeful. They are more than happy to give idle influencers-to-be something to talk about.

Susceptibility

Paul doesn’t just use this term of contempt without qualifying it. If you combine idleness with being “burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:6–7), you have some low-hanging fruit for the picking. Weak women are satisfied with half-truths because they are already invested in their sin. They are attracted to a counterfeit—to something that appears godly but doesn’t embrace all of God’s truth. When they don’t trust God’s Word to transform them, they deny its power. This is why Wall chose the word *immature* to describe “this working principle: these are female believers whose spiritual immaturity, not yet brought to maturity by the word of truth, are more easily seduced by false appearance.”⁹

Why are we so insulted when we read this passage today? Because we should be! We don’t want to be little women, immature in the faith, and an easy target for false teaching. Pastors, you wouldn’t want such low-hanging fruit in your

9. Ibid.

church, would you? This text should shake us women up to evaluate our theological maturity and how that translates into our personal time, and it should shake the church up to evaluate how we are investing in women. Many of us, working class or not, have extra time on our hands. Are we using that time wisely? Or are we holding on to a particular sin that is weighing us down? The preacher to the Hebrews tells us to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (12:1–2). If we are looking to Christ, to what he has done and what he is doing even now, sitting at the right hand of the Father and interceding on our behalf, then we are going to want to use our spare time to develop the spiritual stamina that we need to finish strong. That can translate into time in the Word, time in good fellowship, time serving our neighbors, and even some wholesome refreshment time to rejuvenate. Idleness is not to be confused with needed rest. But we can’t forget that we are in a marathon of perseverance in the Christian life of faith and obedience.

Sin weighs us down and discourages us from our call to keep running. It also distracts us from the One we are to look to while running. That’s when divergent teaching becomes appealing. Don’t be susceptible! Make no mistake; weak women are still being targeted. Much of the material that is marketed to woman in the so-called Christian market is banking on our immaturity.

A Plea to the Officers of the Church

Now, how does Paul go about addressing this issue of little women and false teachers? Does he write, “Euodia, Syntyche, make sure that you study Romans before you read *Jesus Calling*?” No. He writes his warning to Timothy. Strange, isn’t

it? Paul is clearly addressing this as a problem in the church.¹⁰ Pastors and elders, evaluate how your women's ministry is set up. What are the goals directing how it is organized? Are there some unintended opportunities for women who are burdened with sins to find respite in your women's groups? Do you know the resources that your women are using for teaching? Have you read them yourselves or looked into the authors? What is the goal for your women's ministry—or, if you do not have a formal women's ministry, for the women's Bible study or fellowship groups? Please, do not let your women be susceptible targets. This is a pastoral issue. Paul is writing to Timothy, who shoulders the burden for the integrity of his congregation.

Far too many motivated women are dealing with shallow women's studies—or, worse, just plain false teaching—in their church. One of their biggest laments is that the elders are unaware of the harm that these studies are inflicting on the women in their congregation. And the message from silence is that the women don't really matter. False teachers know how much women matter. Christian publishers know how much women matter as a target market. While the church, above all, knows that women are not tools for deception or a commodity for the market, it can sometimes be the very place where they feel undervalued in their most important role of all—as disciples of Christ. Initiative from the leadership in the church is needed to turn this situation around. Nothing will frustrate women more than to read this book and be left hanging in the breeze because their elders didn't bother to read it themselves.

No, not all women are gullible. But Wall and Steele are right: this is a haunting passage. We may think our desire to learn is a good thing in itself, but this passage shows us the danger of not coming to the knowledge of the truth. There are

10. Thanks to my pastor, Francis VanDelden, for these introductory sentences.

enemies making their way through the doors of our churches. These enemies may have some alluring things to say; they may even use some of our language. But where are they trying to lead God's people? They won't be satisfied with taking us just a little off track. Wall and Steele warn us that this situation is grave. These enemies are "further described as those who not only 'oppose the truth' and 'ruin the mind' but are without the intellectual equipment . . . needed to come to a knowledge of the truth and repent. Unlike that of Hymenaeus and Philetus, their situation is truly hopeless."¹¹ So it surely isn't harmless for women to learn from these unrepentant teachers who will ruin their minds.

The Good News

I'm not trying to beat everyone up with this warning (well, maybe a little). The only reason for me to write this book is that there's some great news to share. Paul writes his second epistle to Timothy in order to help instruct him to faithfully protect, preserve, and pass down what the apostles have delivered to the next generation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul entrusts his missionary work at the church in Ephesus to Timothy, to "guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (1:14). While these false teachers are distorting God's Word, Paul encourages Timothy,

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (3:14–15)

11. Wall with Steele, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 263.

The “whom” used here is plural in its original Greek form. We see in the beginning of the letter that Timothy was brought up in the faith of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (see 1:5).¹² So Paul is joining his own teaching to the teaching of these two important women in Timothy’s life, with reference to how this pastor has been equipped to stand for God’s truth.

You see, Paul does value the teaching of women. The good news is that Christ loves his church so much that he wants his entire household, including the women, to be able to teach and to help bring others to maturity. While they do not function in the office of a pastor or elder, women, like everyone else, are teachers. We should be good ones! And we see from Timothy’s life that a mother and a grandmother can have great influence in the church. What if their theology had been weak? What if their guidance had been untrustworthy? Along with the laymen in the church, women help the pastoral ministry of the church as the preached Word of God works in us to “see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God” (Heb. 12:15). We look after one another in God’s household.

The best news is that this good news flows from the work of Christ. We have all come up short in our learning and our teaching. I know I have embraced false ideas about who God is and what he has done when I have been weighted down with my own sin. I have squandered my privilege and responsibility before the Lord to bear his image and to glorify and rejoice in him. How are any of us worthy to call ourselves the bride of Christ? We are not, but for the love of Jesus, who fulfilled all righteousness on behalf of his beloved and took all our sin upon himself two thousand years ago. By faith we trust in his work to transform us into his own likeness as we strive to live a life of faith and obedience.

12. Note the significance in giving their names.

It is a privilege for us to learn about the great Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. It is a privilege to be called to worship in the household of God. But it is also an eternal matter. In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Our theology, what we know to be true about God, is an eternal matter! Everyone in the church needs to be a good theologian. There will be no little women in the new heavens and the new earth. So what does that mean for the church now?

One of my favorite definitions, when I think about this, is, “Theology is the knowledge of how to live in the presence of God.”¹³ This is imperative for everyone to think about. We see how important this is in the very first chapters of Scripture. Gregory Beale contemplates this in one of his biblical theology lectures.

How do we increase that presence [of God] in our lives, in our churches? How did Adam do it? I believe that after you believe in Christ that it’s growing in the Word of God, ultimately, and obeying it. Remember what happened to Adam: he was sitting right there when Eve was misquoting Scripture. I already mentioned this early in the semester. She misquotes it in three different ways, and then she falls, and Adam falls with her. And I take it then that living in the light of God’s Word is the way we live in the light of his presence. And if we don’t live in the light of his Word, we’re in darkness; we will fall; we will not have his presence. It’s as simple as that, but maybe it’s not real simple. It’s not just

13. This is a rough translation that Timothy George offers from William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, in his foreword to Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 7.

reading the Word of God, but we have really got to have a mind-set to come to the Word of God and be willing to be transformed by it—not reading in our own thoughts, but praying that God's thoughts will form our thoughts, not that our thoughts will mold God's thoughts.¹⁴

Again, this is part of the good news. God has given us his Word, which is living and active by the power of his Spirit. He has given us everything that we need to live in his presence. Christians are new creations, justified by Christ, united to him by his Spirit, being transformed into his likeness and therefore prepared for glory. And so we see Paul encouraging Timothy to continue in the faith that he was taught by his teachers—Lois, Eunice, and Paul—with confidence that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16). Now, as a pastor, Timothy has the special responsibility and privilege, in the ministry of Word and sacrament, to shepherd the people in the household of God to live in his presence, in light of his Word.

Nothing Less

The danger is to fall for a counterfeit. False teachers counterfeit the Word of God. They aim to deceive by imitating and distorting the truth. False teachers do this because it makes their message so attractive. But they want their thoughts to mold God's thoughts. Beale presses us to realize that it isn't

14. Gregory Beale, “A New Testament Biblical Theology: A Redemptive Historical Perspective of the Temple 1” lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA, mp3 download, 84:03, <http://faculty.wts.edu/lectures/biblical-theology-a-redemptive-historical-perspective-of-the-temple-i/>.

enough just to know God’s Word, but that we must “pray that we’re more willing than the demons” to follow it.¹⁵ They believe and shudder (see James 2:19), yet they do not obey the Word and will not be transformed by it. Jonathan Edwards warns, “The devil is orthodox in his faith. He believes the true scheme of doctrine. He is no Deist, Socinian, Arian, Pelagian, or antinomian. The articles of his faith are all sound, and in them he is thoroughly established.”¹⁶ Knowledge of God’s Word is not enough. We need to pray for God’s thoughts to form our thoughts, and this takes conditioning in the Word of God and a willingness to live in the light of his presence.

Spirituality is a buzzword in our culture that has been horrifically overused. More and more people from different faiths and philosophies want to say they are spiritual. But what does that mean? We act according to what we believe to be true. Our spirituality is a living out of our doctrine. The Reformed church emphasizes in its doctrine of *sola Scriptura* that our spiritual lives flow out from submission to God’s Word.¹⁷ The Scriptures are our sole authority in matters of what we believe and of how we worship and live. And this cannot be an individual spirituality, because we see from Scripture that the church is the bride of Christ—those who tremble at God’s Word (Isa. 66:2).

How does this work out between men and women in the church, wives and husbands, and church officers and laypeople? Beale is right; it isn’t simple. The church needs to guard

15. Ibid.

16. Jonathan Edwards, *The True Believer: The Marks and Benefits of True Faith* (repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2001), 29.

17. Natalie Brand, *Complementarian Spirituality: Reformed Women and Union with Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 27. Brand defines Reformed spiritualities as “simply manifestations of the same historical spiritual ancestry with its homogeneous traditional core values taken from the Reformation’s recentralization of Scripture” (pp. 27–28, emphasis in original).

its biblical truths and not settle for anything less. How can we sort through the heretical doctrines, theological errors, imprecisions, and in-house debates?¹⁸ As we aim to live faithfully in the presence of God, embodying the mediation of Christ to the rest of the world, we can inadvertently allow false messages to slip into our own churches. While faithful churches subscribe to the scriptural basis for the ordination of certain qualified men to the ministry of Word and sacrament, it's easy to settle for something that sounds good—women's ministries—and to fail to evaluate whether its purpose and function are shaped by God's mission to his people.

Let's take a look at how easily this can happen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Does your church have any type of mission statement for its women's initiatives? How does this mission statement, or lack thereof, affect women's influence both in the church and in their personal households? How can your church work to produce competent women, mature in the faith, who are able to teach what is good and are not susceptible to false teaching?
2. What do you think about John McKinley's translation of the word *ezer* as "necessary ally"? Does that affect the way that you think about women's ministries? How does this translation extend beyond the relationship between husband and wife? How is it broader than the typical categories of authority and submission that are associated with the translation "helper"?
3. Is there any idleness in your typical routine that could make you more susceptible to sin? Is there a particular

18. I will address those issues specifically in chapter 9.

sin that has been weighing you down and preventing you from persevering in your spiritual walk and in growing to maturity?

4. *Church officers*, here are the questions addressed to you specifically in this chapter: What are the goals directing how the women's initiatives in your church are organized? Are there some unintended opportunities for women who are burdened with sins to find respite in your women's groups? Do you know what resources your women are using for teaching? Have you read them yourself or looked into the authors? What is the vision for your women's ministry—or, if you do not have a formal women's ministry, for the women's Bible study or fellowship groups?
5. How do you understand the relationship between God's Word and your spiritual life? How would you say that the world outside the church defines spirituality? How is this a counterfeit for truly living in the presence of God?

WHY ARE SO MANY WELL-INTENTIONED WOMEN FALLING FOR poor . . . or even *false* . . . theology? Part of the reason is that, in church ministry, women are often left to fend for themselves.

Writing to concerned women and church officers, Aimee Byrd pinpoints the problem, especially the commodification of women's ministry. She answers the hot-button issues—How can women grow in discernment? How should pastors preach to women? What are men's and women's roles within the church?—and points us in the direction of a multifaceted solution.

After all, cultivating resolved, competent women will equip them to fulfill their calling as Christ's disciples and men's essential allies. If we want to strengthen the church, we must strengthen the women in it!



“Aimee Byrd is asking the right questions. . . . [She] steers the discussion about women and the church back to its rightful place by uniting a high view of Scripture and a high view of women.”

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