

The Role of Women in the Church: New Material Leads to a New View

Good News for Women by Rebecca Groothuis, and *I Suffer Not a Woman* by Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger (both from Baker Books)

Reviewed by Dennis McCallum

Good News for Women

I had an unusual experience with Groothuis' book because I have been reconsidering my understanding of 1 Tim. 2, and a friend suggested Groothuis had some good points on that chapter. Therefore, I read the chapter on "I Do Not Permit a Woman" first, even though it is near the end of the book. I was very intrigued with Groothuis' work on this passage, mainly because she suggested an interpretation for the passage that I had never before considered.

To people like me, who are sympathetic to evangelical feminism, but don't feel the freedom to dismiss or discount any passage of Scripture, 1 Tim. 2 stands as a key roadblock to women serving as elders. This stands in opposition to the position known as egalitarianism. According to egalitarians, women and men are the same with regard to their roles, not just equal before God. They believe women should be allowed to hold any position in the church, and even within marriage, should have a role no different than that of men.

These are two different questions, of course, and should be considered separately, even though they may be related. The majority of Xenos leaders have historically agreed that women may hold any office in the church, including elder, but that the New Testament prefers male elders. The biggest reason for the last caveat is 1 Timothy 2, which seems to ground a preference for male eldership in theology rather than in cultural strategy (because Paul cited Gen. 2 and 3 as apparently the reason for his restriction).

Groothuis offered an interesting explanation for Paul's language in 1 Tim. 2:13,14 "For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression." She suggested that Paul points out that Adam was created first because God gave him instruction about not eating from the tree before Eve was created. Therefore, Eve must have received her information about the tree from Adam, second hand, and was therefore more vulnerable to deception. In other words, her vulnerability was the result of inferior education. In the same way, the uneducated women in Ephesus were more vulnerable to deception because they were poorly educated as a result of the prevailing prohibition on educating women in the scriptures. To make this interpretation work, it is necessary to understand the connecting word "for" (*gar*) to mean "just like" rather than its usual meaning, "because."

I'm not sure whether this interpretation is permissible, because I need to do more study on whether *gar* can be understood this way. But on the face of it, this was the first time I had seen a plausible interpretation that doesn't ignore the citations from Genesis or twist them in a way that

becomes completely tortured. I found myself open in a new way to understanding this text as completely situation-based.

Groothuis also marshaled the other well-known problems with the traditional understanding of this passage, such as the wrongful implication that all women are more easily deceived than are men, and the lack of supporting scriptures prohibiting women in leadership at the highest levels. The odd word for “exercise authority” (*authenteo*) rather than the usual word (*exusia*) is another question mark for traditional interpreters (see below). In sum, I felt Groothuis’ interpretive work on 1 Timothy 2 was interesting and provocative, although I later found that Kroeger and Kroeger’s work was far more convincing and more complete.

Later, when I started from the beginning of Groothuis’ book, I also liked her coverage of gender equality, Jesus’ radical inclusion of women in his training and social circle, and the way women served as leaders, preachers, and even apostles. She clearly demonstrated the unfairness to women in history, including church history.

At this point, I had a very positive view of the book. But then I read two chapters that made my view decline drastically.

The worst chapter in the book is titled, “Issues in Inequality.” In this chapter, Groothuis produces an argument based mainly on non-biblical reasoning for why correspondence theorists (i.e. those who believe that women and men are different in more than sexuality, and that masculinity and femininity are deeper designations that lead to different roles in marriage and the church) are wrong. I agreed that many of the traditional teachers she cites are in the wrong, depending, as they do, on extra-biblical assumptions about the nature of femininity that are highly speculative.

But Groothuis was even more wrong! Her basic thesis is nothing less than what Jesus characterized as the “spirit of the gentiles” in Mark 10:42-5:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Groothuis’ analysis of leadership is that “when a role difference entails a status difference, the person with the higher status will be considered to be of more value in connection with the particular situation over which he has authority.”¹ She goes on to give an awful analogy of a general and a sergeant in the army. She points out that “They will not relate to each other as equals. The inequality in their military relationship will be a logical and appropriate outworking of their unequal military rank.” Accordingly, “generals and heads of state do not serve on the front

¹ Rebecca Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, Inc.) p. 71.

lines of battle during war time; they have greater political and military value than the foot soldier.”² But is this a good picture of marriage? Not really, she feels, because in traditional marriage (where the husband is the leader) there is no discharge from service, and the rankings are for life, making marriage even worse than the army.

I thought this passage and numerous similar arguments surrounding it were typical of the worst that we might fear in feminist interpretation. She completely misses Jesus’ teaching on the nature of spiritual leadership. A Christian leader would be the *first* to go onto the battle line! Jesus acknowledges that the gentiles see leadership as the opportunity to get their way with others. But he denied himself for the sake of others. Saying that leadership has “higher status” (a phrase she uses frequently to refer to leadership) is exactly what the gentiles see in leadership. But Jesus sees leaders and “the slave of all.”

Groothuis argues incessantly that submission means inferiority, and not just inferiority in role, but in personal worth. She summarizes her view of the traditional marriage: “Her [the wife’s] inferiority in function follows justly and logically from her inferiority in being.” Likewise in the church:

Women’s “functional subordination” in areas of spiritual authority implies more than women’s essential inferiority in those intellectual and temperamental abilities requisite to good leadership; it implies that women are also inferior spiritually.³

According to her logic, anyone who submits to another would only do so for one reason: that they are *inferior* to the leader. This worldly and unspiritual understanding of the nature of leadership and followership permeates her entire discussion. Using extremist rhetoric, she states, “A woman cannot be served by a man’s spiritual rule unless *her* ability to discern the will and understand the Word of God is inferior to the ability God has given men in this regard.”⁴ Thus, a husband’s leadership is his “rule” and a woman’s following signifies her “inferiority.” Truly, by this logic, none of us have any basis to follow anyone, unless we first agree we are inferior to that person.

That submission is proof of inferiority leads to a theological train-wreck when considering that Christ was in submission to the father. As Trinitarians, we have here clear proof that authority-submission relationships do not imply superiority/inferiority. This is never satisfactorily addressed.⁵

How different her understanding is from Jesus’ teaching, and indeed the whole Bible! Was it because his older brothers were inferior that God chose David? The election of leaders by God

² *Good News*, p. 72

³ *Good News*, p. 77

⁴ *Good News*, p. 78

⁵ She argues that Jesus’ submission was only temporary, for the sake of accomplishing a particular task. But this seems like an unimportant distinction to me. We are always called on to submit to others for the sake of a task, whether it be building a family, or building the church.

according to grace seems to have no place in Groothuis' theology of leadership. Yet the Bible is clear in the New Testament and the Old that God chooses spiritual leaders, and that they are often undeserving. Who would dare to accept the role of leader in the church based on the proposition that "I am superior to these people."?

The servant view of leadership comes up in her commentary, but only to be disparaged:

A servant, by definition, does for someone what that person needs or desires to have done for her. Unless a woman is spiritually in need of a man's governance in every area of her life, it's imposition upon her is of no service to her...the husband's spiritual leadership of his wife is a service to her only if she is in fact spiritually inferior to him.⁶

Again, Jesus' call to be the servant of all is incomprehensible if we accept her position. She sees leadership as "governance" and "rule," and sees servanthood as demeaning. "In order for male authority in marriage to be considered 'servant leadership,' women must also be presumed to be more childish than men."⁷ Yes, Peter thought it was demeaning when Jesus washed his feet, but that reaction was based on ego and pride. Allowing ourselves to be served is an affront to our pride, not to our equality.

In a related argument, she thinks that only one thing qualifies someone to lead: that such a person is more qualified, and thus has *earned* the right to lead.⁸ "True servant leadership requires that the leader be qualified and deserving"⁹ And, "The spiritual authority of the male over the female would rightly exist as a spiritual principle only if, in theological truth, the male qua male were better equipped to discern God's will and provide spiritual direction..."¹⁰ She complains that because the husband did not "prove himself worthy to rule," his authority is capricious, absolute, and unaccountable. The wife "is completely at his mercy, and he is completely in control" no matter how wicked and stupid his direction may be.¹¹ She seems to envision a very modern, secular world, where families are not a part of the Christian community where a wife who is being oppressed could appeal to the church and her ungodly husband would be disciplined. She ignores the fact that discipline in love is enjoined on women as well as men. She ignores the fact that human authority is never un-contingent or absolute (Acts 4:19,20).

Because she believes that leaders must earn their role by proving they are more qualified, all basis for leadership disappears. I ask, "better qualified in whose opinion?" In any difference of

⁶ *Good News*, p. 78

⁷ *Good News*, p. 78

⁸ "The ideal of servant leadership among adults is apropos only for situations in which...the leader has earned his authority and is accountable to the people for his leadership" *Good News*, p. 79

⁹ *Good News*, p. 79

¹⁰ *Good News*, p. 83

¹¹ *Good News*, p. 82

opinion, are we to have a contest to determine which one has “proven his or her worthiness” to lead? She naively suggests couples should simply agree on things—a suggestion that works well much of the time. But we all know there are those situations where agreement is not possible. What to do in these cases? A servant leader may well determine that this is the time to sacrifice self and give his spouse her way. Or, he may decide to take a stand in an issue too important to overlook. But in Groothuis’ world, only power-relations prevail. A huge question mark is left standing in the place formerly occupied by servant leadership. I really often felt her understanding of leadership is no different than that of secular feminists and postmodernists, who see leadership as oppression and unequal power relations. The bitter fruit of this view has been the postmodern inability to put together successful marriages. Without humility, servanthood, and self-effacement, the only marriage likely to last is the one where one spouse has managed to dominate the other so completely that they reach an uneasy peace.

One case where she allows for authority is when accomplishing a specific task. This is why Jesus was temporarily submissive to the Father.¹² Groothuis feels this is all right because it is not permanent, and is for the good of a particular task. Of course, I immediately wondered why creating a marriage and a family wouldn’t qualify as a particular task justifying leadership roles. After all, the Bible doesn’t call on all women to submit to any man, but for wives to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22). Likewise, isn’t the church here to accomplish a particular task? If putting together a successful marriage and a victorious church are particular tasks justifying temporary submission to leaders, the purpose for her entire argument against subordination suddenly evaporates.

Whether referring to the family or the church, I found her account of the world to be relatively devoid of human trust, of humility, and of self-sacrifice. There was no sense of the leader as being the first to pay the price, the first to deny self, the first to die for those he or she loves. The overall sense is that of striving for autonomy and dread of authority. Indeed, she has much to say of the danger of selfish male desire to control, but no warning against the dangers of selfish desire for autonomy, whether in women or men. In another section, she vigorously denies any power-thirst or desire for higher position. But her military illustration suggests she thinks leaders should be saluted like a general!

I’m not denying that patriarchal interpreters have used the concept of leadership to justify oppression and demeaning treatment of women or of church members. Groothuis documents this tendency in history very well. Likewise, I found myself repulsed by many of the contemporary male-only interpreters she cites. But to try to prevent oppression by advocating anarchy is the morally bankrupt path of postmodern secular feminism, not a biblical feminism. Autonomy and the rejection of leadership will never lead to unity and community. Only humility, and an understanding of servant leadership that sees leadership as an opportunity to give rather than the right to “get my way” will ever produce real harmony and freedom in human relations.

Most of us who hold to a more moderate view of gender roles know perfectly well that bossing others around has no place in Christian leadership. The Christ-like leader is persuasive, caring, and willing to allow others to defy his or her directives in most cases. Nothing is more

¹² *Good News*, p. 55 She calls this “functional subordination.”

dangerous in the church or the family than a person who is seeking egotistical power or autonomy. These come from the same fallen fount: our unwillingness to submit to God or anyone else.

I Suffer Not a Woman

After reading Groothuis, I read Kroeger and Kroeger.¹³ Their book is superior to any book or article I have read on 1 Tim. 2. Their scholarship is well documented from source material, and their argument was amazingly convincing.

Kroeger and Kroeger argue that the key to understanding this section of 1 Timothy, and indeed, all the pastorals, is the nature of Gnostic teaching at that time. They not only point out the deep-seated obsession with mother-goddess worship found in Asia minor and especially Ephesus (where Timothy was at the time) but also document that Gnostic teachers had adopted many of the same notions and loosely synthesized them with the Old Testament and Christian teaching.

Most important in this regard are two specific doctrines. First, the mother-goddess cults that held all life (including men) had come from the original earth mother. This is well known. But they also show that Gnostics had adopted this belief, and attributed the earth-mother role to Eve. In numerous texts (included in the book) Gnostic teachers maintained that Eve was the original human, and that she gave life to Adam. Readers will immediately realize that if this teaching was current in Ephesus, and if it was being advocated by women in the church, it would perfectly explain why Paul would follow his imperative limiting women's teaching by saying, "For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve."

Secondly, Kroeger and Kroeger show that the Gnostics also taught that when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, she was not in error, but actually brought Adam liberation from the oppressive god of the Old Testament. Most of us are aware that the Gnostics usually viewed the God of the Old Testament as a lesser god who foolishly created the material world—a big mistake to dualists who deplored all that is material as sub-spiritual. Adam was suckered by this lesser deity when he claimed to be the only God. But new to me was the notion that Eve set him straight when she listened to the wisdom of the serpent and broke from YHWH. This teaching, which they amply document from source material, may have been current in Ephesus at the time Paul wrote his letter. Again, readers who accept this will immediately see that Paul's following comment, "And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression," makes perfect sense.

The documentation doesn't absolutely show that Gnostics teaching this particular doctrine were present in Ephesus contemporary to the writing of 1 Timothy. However, it does show that such teaching was present in that area not long after the writing. We know that Paul, like other New Testament authors, was already struggling against an early form of Gnosticism because of his comment in 1 Timothy 6:20,21

¹³ Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not A Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge" [gnosis] - which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.

Aside from this apparent direct allusion to the movement, interpreters deduce that the heretical teachers in view here, in the pastoral epistles, and elsewhere (such as 1 John) were Gnostics because the nature of the arguments in these books imply that their opponents must be teaching something very similar to what Gnostics are known to have taught.

Kroeger and Kroeger enter into exactly this sort of argument to show that the opponents often referenced in the pastorals were Gnostics, or at least proto-Gnostics, who taught in germ form what was later developed into full-blown Gnosticism. In reaching this conclusion, they are in step with most interpreters. But I thought the discussion was very helpful, especially in light of the Gnostic material on Eve, and the feminine origin of the human race.

Kroeger and Kroeger conclude, along with many evangelicals, that women in Ephesus were intimately involved in spreading the new false doctrine that Paul so dreaded. This case, which is too elaborate to develop here, has always been convincing to me. Their translation work on a number of passages made significantly more sense than what we have in the NASB or NIV versions. For instance, the reference to "wives tales" (NIV), "fables fit only for old women" (NASB), or literally, "old women's tales" in 1 Tim. 4:7 has always seemed strangely sexist and out of character for Paul. But Kroeger and Kroeger show that this was actually a term in contemporary use, referring to old women who were the storytellers in the earth-mother cults. In these cults, such elderly women were the main propagators of their fertility doctrines and mythology. Now these same false teachings were showing up in the church, again propagated in part by women.

In a final coup, Kroeger and Kroeger lay out a study of the word used in 1 Tim. 2:12 for "exercise authority" (NASB) "have authority" (NIV) or "usurp" (KJV). The word, *authentien*, is rare, and only used this one time in the New Testament. Its origins go back to a word for murder, and in a related form means "original" from which we get the word "authentic." A cognate of this word is related to our word for "author," meaning to originate. They argue that the word can mean, "to claim ownership or authorship."

Based on this research, they argue that the verse could easily be translated, "I do not allow a woman to teach or proclaim herself author [or originator] of man..." This translation, which fits so logically with the following verse (about Adam being created first) has some problems (see below) but seems generally plausible in my opinion. Paul's call that they should be "quiet" (not "silent") and "in submission," is in line with all who take the posture of learners according to the New Testament.

Even the very strange verse 15 "But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety," is explained by their interpretation. Many Gnostics held that sex was all right, but not if it resulted in childbirth. Children are material beings, and therefore bad. Some even argued that women might lose their salvation if they had kids. But Paul may be reassuring them that nothing is wrong with having children. The sense would be that women will be saved regardless of whether or not they have children.

As I considered Kroeger and Kroeger's final argument and the research on which it is based, I found myself substantially won over to their view. This whole passage probably has nothing to do with the role of women in the church, but is a refutation of a specific position being advanced by false teachers in Ephesus!

I had earlier worked out a [synthesis of the passage](#) that I felt made sense, but I must admit, their approach makes much more sense.

Another thing I liked about this book was that they didn't use their argument as an occasion to attack the notion of gender roles in marriage, which is a completely unrelated issue. Although I don't know Kroeger and Kroeger's position on the subject (and there were hints that we would not agree here) this book is free from the dread of authority or wrong definitions of leadership found in Groothuis' work. They, too, have a nice section on the widespread leadership exercised by women in the early church. There can be no doubt that women led widely and often in the early church as I have argued elsewhere.

A highly critical review of the book has been published Westminster professor, S. M. Baugh, in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Vol. 56 (1994): 153-171), entitled, "The Apostle Among the Amazons: A Review Article." The article is also available online at www.cbmw.org/resources/reviews/suffernot.php. He bills it as a book review of Kroeger and Kroeger. I was not personally convinced by this piece because I felt the author was engaged in straw-man portrayals of Kroeger and Kroeger's arguments, and some of his opposing findings seemed to be selective.

For instance, he cites a quote to characterize their position, saying "that the Ephesian women were radical feminists and trying to dominate men." I didn't remember this emphasis in Kroeger and Kroeger, and then checked the citation, and found it's from a different book and author. Then he answers this position, saying "Up to this point, no one has established historically that there was, in fact, a feminist culture in first century Ephesus." But I never got the impression that Kroeger and Kroeger were arguing that Ephesus was a feminist culture. They only claimed that it extolled fertility and motherhood, like many other patriarchal cultures. Therefore, all his lengthy following argument appears to be aimed, not at Kroeger and Kroeger, but at the straw man he has created.

In a similar vein, he argues against what he says is Kroeger and Kroeger's attempt to substantiate "matriarchy" at ancient Ephesus." But again, I completely missed this claim in Kroeger and Kroeger. They said the maternal was extolled in fertility/earth-mother cults, not that Ephesus was actually a matriarchy! Obviously, the city government was a typical patriarchal, all-male government. By thus falsely characterizing an opponent's argument, the author loses credibility. He even cites a passage in Kroeger and Kroeger that says Ephesus was not a matriarchy, so what's the point? He goes on for paragraphs showing that Ephesus was run by men, all to no purpose.

Secondly, this author seems to omit information in order to create a false impression. For instance, he goes to considerable effort to show that the cult of Artemis was not a fertility-related cult because Artemis was a virgin and goddess of the hunt. But I have read in a number of sources

that Artemis was also considered goddess of motherhood. Even Baugh admits in his related book that she was the “helper in childbirth.”¹⁴ He claims there is “deafening silence regarding her connection to fertility, but then cites an epigraph from the period saying she is “the midwife of birth and the grower of mortals,” and “the giver of fruit.”¹⁵ In a word, Baugh seems to stand alone in his judgment here.

His best criticism was probably on the grammar of 1 Tim. 2:12. Although technical and too complicated to get into here, he effectively calls into question how they are handling the parallel clauses involving “to teach” and “to *authentein*,” joined by *oude* (nor). Although this part of their argument is not crucial to their thesis, I would like to see how Kroeger and Kroeger would respond to these complaints, but I have not seen any rejoinder from them.¹⁶

Even as Baugh warns his readers that Mrs. Kroeger is leader of an “evangelical feminist organization,” we should also consider that many fundamentalist men and “true reformed” thinkers have a strong bias against female leadership in general, as my observations above suggest. Another author in *Women in the Church* argues without embarrassment that women are more easily deceived than are men, and are weaker than men, which explains why they should not be in leadership.¹⁷ I have noticed that my other article arguing for female leadership has drawn the harshest email protests of any article I have on our website.

If Kroeger and Kroeger are right about 1 Tim. 2, (and I think they are) this means no passage in the New Testament speaks to the issue of female eldership in a prescriptive way. We do have evidence that elders were mostly, or maybe always, men in the early church, but this is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. Just as we relegate greeting one another with a holy kiss, or wearing head-coverings to cultural features no longer relevant to the modern world, male eldership may be viewed as a strategic move at that time, rather than a theological issue, once the Genesis citations in 1 Tim. 2 are understood this way.

¹⁴ Andreas J Kostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Scott Baldwin, Ed., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1995) p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 30.

¹⁶ In the same work, Scott Baldwin argues in a lengthy word study that *authenteo* cannot mean to claim ownership or authorship. But he begins by ruling out any study of the related noun *authentēs*, or other cognates, which I think is very unusual. Most lexicons consider entire word groups when trying to narrow the range of meaning for a word. Kroeger and Kroeger got some of their most important meanings from cognates. Scott Baldwin, “A Difficult Word: *Authenteo* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in Andreas J Kostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Scott Baldwin, Ed., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1995) pp. 65-80. These same authors complain that Kroegers lack historical rigor because they get their information on Gnosticism from second century sources which may have nothing to do with the situation in the first century. But I find this criticism vacuous, because most of our information on Gnosticism comes from the second century. If we limit our Gnostic sources to the first century, we would know very little about the movement. Yet, scholars are now willing to admit (unlike 50 even years ago) that Gnosticism began much earlier than previously thought, and was present in some forms during the apostolic period and even earlier in Judaism. When known Gnostic teaching from the second century matches exactly with a heresy implied in the apostolic writings, this is usually considered a pretty good case for saying the heretics are proto-Gnostic (as in 1 John). If we applied the same test to all references (i.e. that we must have extra biblical sources from the first century) we would have nothing left of Gnosticism in the New Testament. To the contrary, the New Testament itself, is first century evidence of this thought form.

¹⁷ See my earlier rejection of this position in “[Against the Traditional, Fundamentalist View of Women in the Church.](#)” Central issues in this rejection include 1) Lack of corroborating evidence from Scripture 2) Lack of evidence from science or history 3) Paul’s willingness to let women teach other women and children (who would be most vulnerable to deception according to this view) and 4) It requires we take Paul to be guilty of faulty exegesis of Genesis, which never teaches what he would be claiming under this view.

I would heartily urge all Christians interested in the exegesis of 1 Tim. 2 to read this book (*I Suffer not a Woman*) before reaching any further conclusions.