

Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions. By Linda L. Belleville. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, 217 pp., \$13.99.*

Reading this latest addition to Baker's "Three Crucial Questions" series reminds one of the inaugural volume in that series, Murray Harris's *Three Crucial Questions about Jesus*. In that book, Murray Harris asks three truly crucial-and largely non-overlapping-questions: "Did Jesus exist?"; "Did Jesus rise from the dead?"; and "Is Jesus God?" and answers them by adducing appropriate primary evidence in the meticulous fashion characteristic of this author, yet in such a way that a lay audience is able to benefit from his treatment.

How does Belleville's volume on women leaders and the church hold up by comparison? Not very well. First, of the three "crucial questions" she asks at the outset — "In which ministries can women be involved?"; "What roles can women play in society?" and "Can women hold positions of authority?" — the first and third questions overlap (and it is unclear why the second question is sandwiched between the first and third). Clearly, the issue of whether women can hold positions of authority will affect one's view of the question in which ministries women can be involved. As it is, however, Belleville seeks to defer dealing with the third question, so that the reader of chap. 1 is left with a solitary footnote (n. 34, p. 187), in which Belleville acknowledges that "[t]he only roles lacking female names are *overseer* and *elder*, but then specific men are not singled out in these capacities either" (!). (This cavalier dismissal, by the way, won't do. Does not already the requirement of overseers to be "faithful husbands" [1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6] suggest that Paul assumed the holders of this office to be male?) In any case, the issue deferred until the final chapter, then, already constitutes an integral part of the first question, and to separate the two questions and to deal with them in the order in which Belleville does is at best artificial and at worst slants the results in a misleading direction.

Second, though advertised by Baker as "even-handed," Belleville's volume has all the trappings of egalitarian bias, a fact that is all the more problematic as this orientation is not acknowledged anywhere in the volume. Rather than presenting both sides of the issue fairly, this book reads more like an attempt to substantiate egalitarian gender roles from Scripture. One glaring case in point is Belleville's choice to ignore entirely the most thorough treatment on 1 Tim 2:9–15 currently available (*Women in the Church*; ed. Köstenberger et al.; Baker, 1995), not only in her discussion of that passage, but even in the selected bibliography at the end of her volume. I know egalitarians may disagree with a work in which I participated but it is quite puzzling that they should ignore it entirely. How can such a procedure lay a legitimate claim to responsible scholarship? Unfortunately, even the series editor (himself an egalitarian) overlooked this omission. To advertise this kind of treatment as "even-handed" (as the publisher does) takes considerable nerve. Belleville's practice of putting her discussion of 1 Timothy 2 *last* in dealing with the issue (p. 16) is also standard egalitarian procedure. (Belleville does attempt a one-page rebuttal of my article on 1 Tim 2:12 in the recent *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [2001], pp. 135–36, with the bizarre and highly eccentric rationale that infinitives are not verbs and that 1 Tim 2:12 has to do with ideas, not grammar, classifying the "neither/nor" construction as a "poetic device." She also entirely misconstrues the syntax of 1 Tim 2:12, maintaining that the two infinitives modify "a woman" — in fact, they are complementary to "I permit" [cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, pp. 598–99, who lists 1 Tim 2:12 under "complementary," one of six subcategories of the adverbial use of infinitives] — and that the question answered by these infinitives is "What?" when in fact it is "To *do* what?" [namely, to teach or exercise authority], which, of course, confirms that the two infinitives convey the *verbal* notion of actions to be performed [or not performed]. I doubt many will follow Belleville's reasoning here that runs afoul the most elementary notions of Greek grammar and syntax.)

Third, Belleville's book is considerably less accessible to a lay audience than Harris's *Three*

Questions volume, as a comparison of the number of endnotes illustrates (Harris, about 75; Belleville, almost 200).

By way of more detailed interaction, I personally agree with Belleville on the presence of women deacons in 1 Tim 3:11; Junia as a woman missionary in Rom 16:7; and Phoebe as a deaconess in Rom 16:1 (see my essay on "Women in the Pauline Mission" in the recently released O'Brien *Festschrift, The Gospel to the Nations*; ed. Bolt and Thompson). On the other hand, I take exception to the author's practice, on the very first page of her introduction (p. 15), of aligning those who point to Jesus' choosing only men for his Twelve and to Paul's prohibition of women from authoritative teaching offices with the 2nd century Jewish rabbi who thanked God that he was not a woman.

Complementarians are regularly stereotyped. Thus 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–15 "are typically where the discussion begins and ends" (p. 20). Sleight of hand repeatedly replaces responsible scholarship, which is deplorable in a volume addressed primarily to a lay audience where not many will have the skill to check out Belleville's claims. For example, when evidence is given for women elders, no dates are given (pp. 25–26); regarding women as heads of synagogues, the only date supplied is the 2nd cent. AD (pp. 24–25). On women priestesses, Belleville offers innuendo rather than hard evidence ("raises intriguing possibilities," p. 27).

On a theological level, the author claims, in a debatable assertion, that ministry in the early church was exclusively charismatically driven, a mere function of spiritual gifts (pp. 39–41); and since there are no gender limitations on gifts, no distinction should be made between male and female roles in the church (p. 41). This, of course, ignores the teaching of the Pastoral epistles (e.g. the reference to *episkope*, "the office of overseer," in 1 Tim 3:1). According to Belleville, there is in the NT no distinction between unofficial and official, public and private, authoritative and non-authoritative instruction. But what about the requirement that overseers be able to teach in 1 Tim 3:2 and the reference to elders ruling the church, including those whose work is teaching and preaching (5:17)? Clearly, teaching was an important part of the office of overseer.

For Belleville, the more women in leadership, the better. On p. 46, she says that "[t]he neighboring nations fared even better" because they could claim Jezebel, wife of Israel's king Ahab, as their own! The NT, however, portrays Jezebel as a prototypical false teacher (Rev 2:20; though Belleville does acknowledge that she was "infamous for her political maneuvering," p. 46). "Women leaders" (pp. 49–50) perpetrates the ambiguous use of language common to much egalitarian fare. On p. 55, Junia is mentioned at first as if she were an *apostolos* all by herself (e.g. "she is commended by Paul for her outstanding apostolic labors"); only later it is acknowledged that Junia and Andronicus were probably a "husband-wife team" (p. 56).

When dealing with prophecy (pp. 56–57), Belleville says the only difference between men and women exercising this gift is the attire (headcoverings of women; twice quoting 1 Cor 11:4–5); but there is no hint that the attire reflected an authority structure (1 Cor 11:3). Rather, the author concludes that "[w]omen functioned in a highly visible leadership capacity" (ignoring 14:34–35)! Later (pp. 64–65), Belleville quickly jumps from women's praying in church to women being worship *leaders*, the only evidence cited being 1 Cor 11:4–5.

On p. 59, Belleville writes that "Priscilla took Apollos aside" and instructed him. While she also mentions Aquila elsewhere on the same page, the just-quoted statement is still inaccurate, partial, and misleading as it stands, for it gives the impression that Priscilla instructed Apollos independently and by herself. On p. 68, Belleville writes that "when Luke refers to their occupation as tent-makers, the order is 'Aquila and Priscilla' (Acts 18:2; cr. 1 Cor. 16:19), but when Luke and Paul speak from a ministry point of view, the order is always 'Priscilla and Aquila'"; but this is misleading, since in 1 Cor 16: 19 there is no mention of their being tentmakers at all. Equally dubious is Belleville's denial of any distinction between private and public instruction and her claim that Priscilla "perhaps" functioned as overseer (p. 68).

These kinds of judgments (and the examples could be multiplied) are hardly the result of an

"even-handed" assessment of the available evidence. More likely, they reflect an egalitarian bias.

Would I recommend this book, then, to those who are largely unaware of, but interested in, the present issue? While Belleville's handling of the subject is not incompetent at places and while she is clearly knowledgeable on the subject and generally well aware of the scholarly debate, the answer must be "no," because the present volume does not qualify as an even-handed assessment of the issues involved in dealing with the question of "women leaders in the church." Taken as such, *Women Leaders in the Church* may do more harm than good.

A final word to the publisher: In my opinion, entries such as these weigh down the entire *Three Crucial Questions* series. If this is the new direction for this series, perhaps the time has come to call an end to it rather than to diminish earlier contributions by associating them with works such as the present one.

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