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Matthew S. Vos

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Carolyn Custis James' *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women*: A Review Essay



by Matthew Vos

Does the gospel offer but a small, guarded message for women? In *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women*, Carolyn Custis James takes up this question, lamenting the unease and ambivalence many of God's daughters feel about their place in the church, especially when their gifts push against traditional gender boundaries. Does God define women's callings more narrowly than those taken up by men? Do "women's roles" mostly mean "women's limitations?" And when women are found leading, does their leadership signal that something's not right—that the men are

falling down on the job? As father to two adopted minority daughters (9 and 13), I ponder the same questions and share her concerns. Not infrequently, I've wondered what the church holds for my daughters as they grow into young women. How will the church and Christian community regard them if they address or contest the theologies they have been raised to articulate? Will the church actively and passionately help them to thrive, or will it only grudgingly accept their presence should they move beyond the pale of women's support groups and domestic pursuits? Will they be like Ruth (about whom James has a great deal to say), or will they join a "Ruth Circle" at church? And, most importantly, will *their* stories be merely "sidebars to the more significant stories of men"?¹ I'm not overly encouraged. Last term, in my Christian college class of 34 students—30 of whom were female—no one could identify a theologian who was a woman. Although historically, women—far more than men—are the constant in church (for a compelling account of this phenomenon see *Women's History Is American Religious History* by Ann Braude²), even in denominations that ordain women they rarely occupy central, authoritative positions, and when they do, their efforts tend to be diminished, resisted, and underpaid.³ James observes, "Christian women live a rather schizophrenic existence as [we] are constantly moving between two worlds, cultivating strengths, abili-

Dr. Matthew S. Vos is Professor of Sociology at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia.

ties, and experience we may need to set aside when we enter the church or head home.”⁴ Too often, in church, as in our sports, men do the important work while women cheer supportively from the sidelines—normative practices that have negative implications for the functioning, fidelity, and integration of both halves of the church. And, according to James, what is at stake is nothing less than the global battle for the kingdom of God and the church’s witness and commitment to the full-orbed gospel message.

In that battle and commitment, I, as a male professor in a denominational college, am relentlessly drawn into leadership by my church and Christian community. Though of modest talent (ask anyone), I have to fight off opportunities, sometimes opportunities for which I am ill qualified and for which my wife and female colleagues are much better suited. Additionally, I have the dubious privilege of witnessing a continual procession of people much like me (white, educated, male, middle-class) assume most available leadership posts. When people like me are leading, the world just seems right—life as God intended. But is it? Is our “normal” stifling half the church—the half where my daughters, graduate-degreed wife, and gifted female colleagues stand as spectators? In my church, the Christian school that my children attend and where my wife works, and at the Christian college where I teach, women in formal senior leadership positions run the spectrum between rare and entirely absent. In the Evangelical community in which we are centered, my wife and daughters almost never see visible symbols reminding them that women’s leadership is important and valued, let alone vital. However, on the male side of the gender divide, my son and I continually observe men (like us), and the symbols they produce, guiding and shaping the institutions that frame our collective lives. I’ve come to see this imbalance as equally problematic for my son and my daughters. Listen within some Christian communities, and you’ll hear about the men and the ladies—hardly equivalent terms: Men as actors; women as acted upon. Men as active; women as passive. But if James is right, passive is not at all how God created his female image-bearers to engage with the world. In fact, this

book is a call to “wake the sleeping giantess,” and James is passing out pointy sticks.

Half the Church derives, in part, from James’ reaction to Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s (2009) *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* as well as the stories of missionary Amy Carmichael.⁵ As James read accounts of “sex trafficking, female genocide, genital mutilation, and honor killings...,” she noticed how voices coming from inside the church were not the loudest or most urgent in their opposition to the global crisis confronting women.⁶ According to James, our Christian voices and relative inaction in this matter are heavily conditioned by our prosperity—a prosperity that “shapes both the questions we ask and the answers we embrace.”⁷ The church, rather than helping its daughters engage the global crisis confronting women, has instead helped sacralize domesticity, idealizing womanhood as domestic, passive, and privatized (stay-at-home). James, while careful to honor domestic callings, contends that a bourgeois domestic vision neglects the full spectrum of women in the church, most of whom fall outside of the married-with-children-and-a-bread-winning-husband demographic. If God’s plan is for women to be stay-at-home moms, the plan is failing. But more importantly, a call venerating the domestic can block out the desperate voices of suffering women in a world where “Honor killings, sex trafficking, child marriages, female infanticide, and stranded and impoverished widows are not yesterday’s news. They are happening at this very moment to catastrophic numbers of women—wildly beyond epidemic levels.”⁸ And James believes that domestic comforts, the anesthetic lure of self-actualization, and the norms of a patriarchal church and culture must be subordinated to the call to stand with the suffering and engage in the conflict.

James notices that most women (some 60 percent), including singles, the widowed, the childless, empty nesters, for most of their lives fall outside the traditional template for approved Christian living. Working from the Eden narrative, she explores God’s purpose in creating women and then reveals and critiques the various ways this design has been distorted. Much of the book

revolves around two themes: The first concerns the call God issues women to subdue the earth and to rule over it. This call beckons woman to conflict and necessitates that she engage with elements of the world that resist her just rule. The second concerns the often overlooked significance of the “label” God gives Eve—a label that highlights the fullness with which she bears God’s image, and underscores the assertive posture she is

The woman’s calling, it turns out, has been subjected to quite a bit of theological softening over the centuries, to the end that so-called biblical womanhood has become servile to the dictates and norms of patriarchal culture.

to take as she stands beside (or more literally “in front of”) the man with whom she rules and produces culture.

The aforementioned themes—conflict and the first woman’s God-assigned label—are closely connected. The woman’s calling, it turns out, has been subjected to quite a bit of theological softening over the centuries, to the end that so-called biblical womanhood has become servile to the dictates and norms of patriarchal culture. James discloses that translations of the Genesis text which say that God took “a rib” from Adam are misleading—after all, a rib is something most of us can imagine living without. She writes that “a closer rendering indicates that *“God took a good portion of Adam’s side.”*” Accordingly, all of humanity comes out of Adam’s wounded side, just as a new and redeemed humanity comes from Jesus’ wounded side. James describes the creation of Eve as a “sacred, holy moment.”¹⁰ From this holy moment the preeminent scriptural theme of oneness is born and takes shape: “Male and female begin as one, for God forms the woman from the man’s side. From one, male and female become two distinct individuals”—the woman is not just an

extension of the man but a distinct agent in her own right.¹¹ But, explains James, “the trajectory of their relationship will return them to oneness. From one to two and back to one again.”¹² And this oneness finds its center in God himself.

God calls the woman *ezer-kenegdo*. *Ezer* is translated in most English Bibles as “helper,” and *kenegdo* as either “suitable” or “meet” (as in help-meet). But, as James explains, “This in turn has led to interpretations of the woman as the man’s assistant, wife, mother of his children, and manager of their home, which as we’ve noted excludes some 60 percent of females in this country alone.”¹³ With such an ideologically charged hermeneutic, it’s easy to conclude that God intends women to cling to secondary, supporting roles that follow after men. But, James explains, the adjective *kenegdo* goes far beyond mere suitability: “*Kenegdo* indicates the *ezer* is the man’s match—literally, “as in front of him.”¹⁴ The conclusion? Eve—the *ezer-kenegdo*—is Adam’s equal—“She will be his strongest ally in pursuing God’s purposes and his first roadblock when he veers off course.”¹⁵ The word *ezer* is used, in the Old Testament, twice for the woman, three times in reference to nations to which Israel appealed for aid, and no less than “sixteen times for God as Israel’s helper...”¹⁶ And this association with God himself, James explains, upgrades the term to something considerably more formidable than “domestic help.” If the woman is a help-meet for the man, she’s a help-meet as God is a help-meet. The *ezer* is a warrior—not a scullery cook. And so, James concludes, “God created his daughters to be *ezer-warriors* with [our] brothers. He deploys the *ezer* to break the man’s aloneness by soldiering with him wholeheartedly and at full strength for God’s gracious kingdom. The man needs everything she brings to their global mission.”¹⁷ To sustain the military analogies, calling the woman a help-meet is a bit like calling Joan of Arc a girl scout or brownie.

Half the Church develops a variety of Biblical texts that showcase a woman as protagonist. From Ruth to Esther, to the Proverbs 31 woman, to Mary the mother of Jesus, to the *Bride* of Christ, James brings to attention the often dangerous trek into conflict to which God calls his daugh-

ters. Particularly interesting, she shows how God sometimes calls men to subordinate positions as he works out his purposes through his *ezer*s. In the face of grave conflict, Ruth is leader to Boaz, Esther to Mordecai, and Mary to Joseph. James, for example, asks the reader to consider what might have happened had Joseph decided to assert patriarchal privilege—by far and away the norm in his collectivist shame-based culture—rather than lend support to Mary’s leadership, forsaking his own needs, position, and reputation. Such unions, where men and women join forces, subordinating any personal claim to power or position, for the far more significant call of the gospel, James calls the *Blessed Alliance*. Members of the Blessed Alliance are kingdom minded, putting the interests of others ahead of their own, and the result is a mutual flourishing. In the Blessed Alliance, there “...isn’t a win for the women and a loss for the men.”¹⁸ In James’ words, “God’s tactics are counterintuitive to our male-centered world, but therein lies the surprise for the Enemy, for the world, and for us. For when men and women are allied together, richer discussions result in better decisions, the elimination of blind spots, and a greater kingdom force in the world.”¹⁹ Perhaps we all might turn our attention to leading, rather than focusing on “being” leaders—they’re not the same thing.

I would have found it helpful had James drawn greater attention to the ways that prominent theologians informing Evangelical and Reformed traditions have promoted and sustained the subordinated view of women she contests. Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, John Knox, and even John Calvin capitulate to what religious historian Rosemary Ruether (1975) has termed “hierarchical dualism”—the association of men with the “higher” processes (the mind, rationality, control, spirituality), and women with the lower (the body, sexuality, emotion, worldliness)—resulting in the master status of women as “other.”²⁰ For example, sociologists Keith Roberts and David Yamane (2012) note that Tertullian “continually reminded women that each one of them was an Eve, a ‘devil’s gateway’”; credit Luther with “on one occasion follow[ing] his comments on the story of humanity’s Fall with the directed obser-

vation, ‘We have you women to thank for that!’” and state that John Knox’s *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* “stands to this day as one of the most misogynistic statements in Christendom.”²¹ Lamentably, some of our most important theologians have, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps not, helped sacralize a masculinity that pushes women to the periphery of the church. Moving forward will require that we, the church, with greater conviction and a dose of humility, acknowledge and address the gendered structure of some of our foundational theologies. Without this acknowledgement, it is unlikely that we will draw the designated “other” into the center of fellowship.

My other criticisms of the book include what I perceive as James’ very slight tendency toward gender essentialism. While she skillfully pleads for women to occupy important space at various social tables, some readers may take away the idea that there is an essential “femininity” that is helpful when brought into business, marriage, and so on—women are different from men; difference is needed; difference is good. This “cultural” feminism too easily devolves into misinformed or downright ignorant discussions about “women’s roles.” To combat this possibility, the inclusion of more overt sociological content (James has a degree in sociology) addressing the social construction of gender, social roles, sexuality, and power (areas where sociology can make substantial contributions to theological understandings) would make for a more robust analysis in places. My small criticisms aside, this is an outstanding book, one which had an electrifying effect on my wife and on a number of the female undergraduates in my gender course, filling them with “a terrible resolve.” We are indeed at a crossroads, one which should prompt men like me to wake up and, with fresh determination, welcome the peripheral half of the church back to center while tempering our androcentric and ill-defined rhetoric about so-called “women’s” roles. Or, we could just soothe the sleeping giantess and settle for something less than the full-orbed gospel.

But, I must go. My *ezer* has returned from her labors. She will be hungry. I’d better start dinner.

Endnotes

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2. Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
3. Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
4. James, *Half the Church*, 158.
5. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).
6. James, *Half the Church*, 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 36.
8. *Ibid.*, 39.
9. *Ibid.*, 105.
10. *Ibid.*, 106.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 111.
14. *Ibid.*, 112.
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19. *Ibid.*, 149.
20. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
21. Keith A. Roberts and David Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 5th edition (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2012), 270-271.