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Hope for Harmony: A Review of Women in the Mission of the Church

Abstract

"Creation alone shouts the blessings of heterogeneity over the paucity of uniformity. The coalescing of our differences is part of God's greater story."

Posting about the book *Women in the Mission of the Church* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/hope-for-harmony-a-review-of-women-in-the-mission-of-the-church/>

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Comments

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Hope for Harmony: A Review of *Women in the Mission of the Church*

Kate Vander Veen
August 3, 2021

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

Author: Leanne M. Dzubinski, Anneke H. Stasson

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As a registered nurse, people are quick to assume my vocational calling is just that—nursing. Even though it is an arena in which it takes place, I perceive my God-gifted calling differently. Once referred to as a renaissance woman, it was with great intrigue that I approached Leanne Dzubinski and Anneke Stasson’s book, *Women in the Mission of the Church: Their Opportunities and Obstacles throughout Christian History*. Dzubinski and Stasson provided an amazing chronicle of women in ministry. In the beginning pages, they introduced the reader to their framework: the content is about women, their ministerial achievements, and the obstacles faced in the fulfillment of their activities. It is an account presented widely—rather than deeply—in historical facts to include many varieties of women’s stories. They admitted to writing from their own cultural perspective (English-speaking Westerners), and in doing so, drew out disturbing cultural practices that persisted over centuries.

The book is organized chronologically, as the female characters enter in a timeline occasionally overlapping one generation of women having influenced the next. There is considerably more discussion of women during the period of the early church, the Middle Ages, and their accomplishments or influence in the development of Christianity than in the later years. I found this disappointing, as it makes ‘learning from history’ more figurative, since I myself have greater personal freedom and more opportunities than a woman in any other time in history. I found myself wanting more data, and more information or clarification of the social or cultural contexts described, but then again, the authors remained true to their focus on the women and not the sociopolitical or cultural idiosyncrasies of the time. However, the authors were appreciatively clear about how history has hidden the significant achievements of women by word-smithing masculine terms that were culturally inappropriate to use when a female was the one enacting a particular role. They provided two tables that showed variations of word choice for *deacon* and *church leader* which Bible translators had chosen for their particular

translation. For example, *deacon* had been replaced with *helper*; *church leadership* had been switched out with *helper, patron, or manager*.

I am not a historian yet enjoy reading historical novels filled with underdog characters who overcome their antagonists. This book certainly fit that bill. Throughout the book, Dzubinski and Stasson described women who actively participated in their personal faith calling. The first chapter draws out the integral roles women had throughout Jesus' ministry. It was a lovely reminder of our Lord's value of women as coworkers in building his kingdom aside from childbearing and housework. The authors provided examples of women who were resource patrons, women who opened their homes for worship, evangelists, teachers, or apostles¹. Throughout the chapters that covered the earliest church years and the Middle Ages, the authors described an impressive array of women and their involvement in shaping theological practices. They described mothers, sisters, empresses, and queens who witnessed to their sons, brothers, and spouses, facilitating the conversion of important historical figures or kingdoms to Christianity. While the authors described women collectively grouped as Medieval Nuns,

I found myself wanting to know more, to get deeper into particular women's lives and the events surrounding their decisions and actions.

Dzubinski and Stasson wrote "Hildegard of Bingen is one of the most gifted humans to have ever lived"². They described her as a scientist, theologian, writer, preacher, philosopher, and more. As an experienced healer, Hildegard articulated concepts of human biology that were counter-cultural to the Aristotelian biases of that time, yet were accurate.

In each chapter, Dzubinski and Stasson described the cultural restraints imposed on the service women provided. It is unfortunate that women during these earliest eras had to seek freedom from male-induced cultural expectations (i.e., marriage) in order to fulfill what they were called and gifted to accomplish. The authors described multiple instances of women choosing celibacy or choosing to remain virgins, and others remaining widowed in order to move more freely in society. Accounts of nuns, widows, or "beguines" (women who chose service work without the vow commitment of nuns) described ways in which they cared for the sick and needy. The work of these women grew into what would become known as the women's religious movement. Dzubinski and Stasson described remarkable personal sacrifices the women made in order to 'care for the least of these' in that time. This gave me pause to consider my own faith walk and the degree to which humility and selflessness are part.

The third part of the book jumps through post-reformation years with far fewer descriptions of specific women and specific events. It does not lose its power, however. Cultural opposition to women's work in Christian mission became the greater theme of these chapters than the stories of women themselves. Admittedly, I experienced a growing discontent with what the authors were writing. The conflict stemmed from being thoroughly impressed—dare I say

envious—of the women’s endeavors, contrasted against the repeated obstacles the women faced. Dzubinski and Stasson described the roles women fulfilled during the First Great Awakening by saying they “testified and exhorted”³ across the U.S. colonies. Yet, as separate denominations sought social approval, distinguishing clergy from laity, denominational decisions resulted in women losing their public voice. Leaping forward again, the authors described similar obstacles during the Second Great Awakening. Women’s roles were once again socially defined, restrained, and subordinated to male-directed responsibilities. Several exemplary women who were called and clearly gifted to preach (demonstrated by the overwhelming faith conversions of the listeners) were admonished for ‘putting themselves on display.’ Although the premise of the book is to share the women’s stories, Dzubinski and Stasson did take a short journey to explore the precarious road of double standards. Anyone reading the book with an open mind cannot overlook the fact that obstacles abounded for women, many of which carried gender-imposed implications. In the preface, the authors stated a hope that what they wrote may “perhaps arouse some righteous indignation”⁴. I now understand that statement.

The lead sentence of Chapter 7 stated, “women have always taken the lead in caring for people on the margins of society”⁵. I wrote in the margin: “Why is that?” In this chapter, women are titled *social justice activists*, and multiple examples are offered where women stepped up to address prostitution, alcoholism, child abuse, lynchings, and other sexism-based inequities in society and in the home. The most remarkable chapter of this section of the book (post-reformation) is where Dzubinski and Stasson described female missionaries and their organizational achievements. In China, India, and across the African continent, women established missionary schools, healthcare centers, conducted Bible studies, and evangelized using a more culturally accepted gender-based format—that of women for women (and children). Two specific examples stood out that proved women were more than capable when given rein to do so: 1) two Methodist missionary women voiced their opposition to a thousand-year-old cultural practice of foot-binding which eventually became outlawed; and 2) Hilda Stumpf spoke out against female genital mutilation when many others critiqued her for imposing Western beliefs on the Kenyan people. Their perseverance in obedience to Christ is exemplary. Sadly, the pattern established early in the book, based on the lived experiences of so many women before them, is the same for the women’s missionary organizations. Denominational leadership mandated women surrender control of their organizations and organizational funds. The previously successful women found themselves sidelined and marginalized. Again, I wrote in the margin: “Did the same level of success continue thereafter?”

Dzubinski and Stasson’s concluding thoughts brought back hope that women’s work for the kingdom of Christ is no less significant because it comes about by women. They summarized⁶ the means used to limit leadership roles of women in the Christian church.

The book clearly edifies that women have demonstrated that they are just as capable apostles, deacons, preachers, teachers, and evangelists as their male counterparts. In the end, the authors asked, “What should we do now?”² They encouraged women who have felt silenced or dismissed to take courage.

They do not go so far as to comment on the denominational rightness or wrongness of the ‘obstacles’ imposed throughout history. Whereas, for me, I became increasingly frustrated...*confounded*...that women who have demonstrated educated intelligence, fastidious capability, and depth of theological thought continued to be displaced for what appeared to be sex-based reasons alone. Ephesians 5 speaks to submission between wives and husbands, not women to men. Likewise, the character of the submission is *as to the Lord, as Christ to the church*. It is not haughty, malicious, vain, or self-serving. I agree with Dzubinski and Stasson when they stated that diversity was created by God. Although distorted by sin, it nonetheless shapes our perspectives and experiences⁸. Creation alone shouts the blessings of heterogeneity over the paucity of uniformity. The coalescing of our differences is part of God’s greater story. Gifts are bestowed by God, for his purposes. As we live into Romans 15, may we learn from history, joining together to live in harmony. May we persevere in accepting one another’s God-entrusted gifts, to bring about solidarity, letting all the people extol God’s glory.

1. See Romans Chapter 16
2. p. 90
3. p. 128
4. p. xii
5. p. 147
6. using words like bureaucratization, institutionalized, clausturation, and social respectability
7. p. 212

8. Romans 1:18-25