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BOOK REVIEW

Lederleitner, Mary T. *Women in God's Mission: Accepting the Invitation to Serve and Lead*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018. 238 pp. \$18.00

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Women leading in the context of ministry, missions, or the church can be a topic surrounded by controversy. Mary Lederleitner approaches the topic by having interviews with ninety-five women from thirty different countries to “bring the voices of respected women from approximately thirty nations to the dialogue about leadership in general, and to the dialogue about service and leadership in God’s mission specifically” (2).

The strength of the book is its unique approach to the study of women in leadership. Lederleitner produces the data of her research in an interview style, giving insights from women in leadership roles from several positions such as pastor, vice president, executive director, board member, first lady, wife, and parent. She includes women serving in various entities: churches,

mission-sending organizations, para-church ministries, medical missions, advocacy groups, research and publishing groups, IT, secular businesses, nonprofits, and the home. The book gives some women a voice who would not otherwise have one. These women give their distinctive perspectives on women in leadership, gleaned from their experience of both struggles and victories. If one is looking to expand one's understanding of women all over the world in these various positions, hearing their stories of success and struggle, this aspect of the book will be enlightening.

With that being said, some weaknesses spring up as a consequence of this type of study. For example, though these women have a platform in which to speak, they speak from experience alone. Lederleitner keeps Scripture out of the equation in order not "to argue for one theological position over another" (10), and in so doing, these women also follow suit and do not express how God's Word affected their decision to pursue the leadership roles they took. In many instances in which these women shared their stories of how God gave them their calling, they all expressed similarly vague explanations. A woman from Germany expressed that she "felt very strongly called by God" (38), but did not explicitly mention Scripture in her testimony. Instead, she referenced the church confirming this calling. Another female leader in Europe had this to say: "We shouldn't worry about people who are critical of us. If [God] opens a door, I will walk through it. I know some people will not like it" (59). Nowhere in this woman's testimony does she reflect on Scripture.

Scripture is important to the discussion, as expressed in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV): "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Instead of the firm foundation of Scripture, the woman from Europe uses her experience as her guide as to what leadership positions she should take or not take. The only confirmation, according to the woman, is the availability of the position. Unfortunately, the book is riddled with this type of testimony.

Lederleitner does sprinkle Bible passages when the topic is not directly related to the theological debate of women in ministry. The points in which Scripture does enter into these women's testimonies are surprising. A woman (place unknown) gives this account of her struggle with the

Lord as to whether she should be a pastor:

God does not fit any boxes. I was sitting on my bed crying to the Lord saying, “It does not make sense. I am a woman. I am going to be a divorced woman. And you are calling me to be a pastor? What are you doing? That will never work!” . . . I had just said, “This is insane!” and the Lord said to me, “I have anointed you to preach the good news to the poor, to break the chains of the oppressed.” (27)

The woman does quote Scripture; however, 1) it is taken out of context, as it is a prophecy from Isaiah about Jesus Christ, and 2) it is not a primary text related to women’s leadership roles.

Later on in the book, a quite lengthy story is told of a young woman who recounts the time she struggled with her stepfather over her desire to study at a Bible college and train to become a pastor (124-127). Concerning her struggle, she said, “I was nineteen years old. I was very zealous for the Lord, and I just took the Lord at face value” (125). She said that she asked her stepfather to reconsider and that they should each pray about it separately. The outcome for the young woman was the perception that God still approved of her becoming a pastor. For her stepfather (whom she describes as abusive, a detail that seems to be necessary to her story), he said, “Well, I haven’t really heard anything, but I haven’t changed my position. You know, Paul seems very clear to me” (126). The young woman argued from her experience, while the stepfather grounded his position on Scripture. The end of this story is that she went on to become a pastor anyway. The following items are problematic: 1) When God’s Word is brought up, it is seen as secondary, 2) the stepfather is intentionally painted as the bad guy, 3) the young, inexperienced woman turned to her feelings stating, “I felt like I was supposed to go” (126), and 4) this young daughter had a challenging attitude towards her stepfather and put pressure on him, causing him to doubt Scripture. I do not doubt her testimony that some men in the world are unchristlike in their behavior towards other women; however, many stories that take her point of view are shrouded in testimonies about men who are not walking with the Lord properly. This treatment gives the reader the false indication that if a Christian man

behaves sinfully, it excuses a woman to disobey God's Word regarding women in leadership.

Many testimonies contained in this book are similar to the one above, highlighting the positive side of women in leadership while displaying the low points of fighting for that leadership position, framing men in a negative light in their stories. To be fair, Lederleitner does include positive stories of men in her book as well, yet again, it leans toward the egalitarian position. If a man rejects women in leadership, the stories about them are negative. If a man encourages women in leadership, it is seen as positive and courageous.

The author leans toward the egalitarian position, though she does not explicitly argue for a theological position. Some of the women in the book display challenge and confrontation rather than humbleness and submission. For example, a woman from Australia is quoted: "I don't mind when I get into that space to really challenge" (75). In contrast, some women prefer a passive approach, opting to leave the church or denomination that disagrees with them (132-133).

The researcher only interviewed women who have *chosen* to be in leadership positions, therefore discounting entirely women who have opted not to take leadership positions. Though the researcher desired to be unbiased, Lederleitner left out the voices of women who have leadership ability but would disapprove of women leading men within the context of a church, parachurch ministry, or mission group. This book thus leaves out an entire community of women who have chosen differently.

This reviewer is not in any way saying that women cannot be in leadership positions at all; women can lead other women spiritually. Lederleitner features women who are involved in leadership in the secular realm as well, and this reviewer would not argue against the freedom women have to obtain the secular leadership career they desire. Any leadership position that falls under the spiritual umbrella (church, parachurch ministry, missions) should be assessed from Scripture. Lederleitner includes both the secular and spiritual in her research, which can confuse the overall message.

Unfortunately, the book's title can be misleading to evangelicals, who define missions as obedience to the Great Commission. Non-evangelical

Christians may see “God’s mission” (*missio Dei*) as almost any worthwhile activity. The author’s definition of God’s mission is “influencing others toward God’s purposes in the world” (12), and her definition is further defined as she states, “If we are truly going to serve in his [God’s] mission, either through ministry or by doing our professions under his guidance and direction, we are engaging in a spiritual work” (66).

Lederleitner’s avoids taking an explicit theological position in her last statements:

The polarized two-category theological system is profoundly inconsistent, and I do not believe it is serving the global church well in God’s mission. As Allison said, “We need new language.” And Natalia said, “What I would really like to see is less talk about are you a complementarian or egalitarian, and having people be more in the middle without committing to one or the other. But just saying, ‘Let’s just do the Great Commission. And what are we doing as women and men to fulfill that?’” (204)

While it can be agreed that the gospel must be proclaimed, one should not be content to ignore God’s Word just because coming to a sound theological conclusion is difficult for most.

To conclude, Mary Lederleitner’s book sympathizes with women who often go unheard and who experience struggle in their understanding of God’s calling on their lives. Her desire to give women this voice and open up the dialogue between men and women on this topic is admirable. However admirable that desire may be, spiritual leadership roles for women are not topics about which people should merely speculate. Lederleitner, though she attempts to avoid all theological debate concerning women in leadership within God’s mission, reveals a preference for egalitarianism. Any book concerning women in leadership roles in churches, parachurch ministries, or missions, which are spiritual leadership roles, must enter into the theological debate. Taking a theological position on this matter cannot be avoided.