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Evangelical Scholars Discuss Women and the Bible

Thirty-six evangelical scholars, sixteen women and twenty men representing eighteen different church bodies, met recently to challenge traditionalist views of women and the Bible.

The three-day colloquium, held October 9-11 at St. Francis Retreat House at Mayslake in Oak Brook, Illinois, grew out of concerns shared by Catherine Kroeger, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota; Stan Gundry, executive editor for academic books at Zondervan Publishers; and David Scholer, academic dean and professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary.

For too long, the conveners argued, only traditionalist views of women in ministry have got much support from evangelical scholars. In hopes of furthering dialogue on the biblical and hermeneutical issues at stake, the three gathered a group of evangelicals who support women's full participation in ministry. Although several scholars representing traditionalist views were invited to present responses, all of them declined to attend.

The conference began with an impassioned plea from author and lecturer Patricia Gundry to recognize the pain that many women have suffered at the hands of the church. She summed up the issue in this way: "There is but one question in this conflicted issue, and only one. That central and watershed questions: Are women fully human?"

Gretchen Gaibelein Hull, who read Gundry's paper in her absence, added that "Role restrictions on women deny not only their full humanity but their full redemption in Christ."

Subsequent sessions tackled a variety of thorny issues. Key among them was the issue of whether an egalitarian view of women's roles is consistent with biblical authority.

Clark Pinnock, professor of theology at McMaster Divinity College, challenged the prevailing view among colloquium participants, arguing, "The adjective *biblical* clashes with the noun *feminism* in the term biblical feminism. If it is the Bible you want, feminism is in trouble. If it is feminism you desire, the Bible stands in the way." At best, he concluded, evangelicals ought to argue for a "Christianized patriarchy, one softened and modified by insights from Jesus' attitude toward women."

In contrast, Roger Nicole, professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a strong advocate of biblical in-

rancy, argued that "when a suitable understanding of Scripture prevails as well as an appropriate outlook on the role of women in the home, in society, and in the church," feminist aspirations need not be viewed as repudiating biblical authority.

In a paper on the meaning of the word *kephale* ("head") in the New Testament, Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen amassed evidence that the Greek translators of the Old Testament seldom, if ever, recognized a metaphoric meaning of the word that would suggest superior rank or authority. They thus cast doubt on the assumption that 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 intend to teach that husbands have authority over their wives.

David Scholer and Walter Liefeld, in separate papers on 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians, shared the view that one of Paul's prime concerns in the passages dealing with women is that the gospel not be maligning by violations of contemporary standards of decency. In no case did they find universal principles that would preclude women from any form of ministry today.

Conference participants were challenged to be Christian change agents by Joan Flikkema, executive secretary of the Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church. She suggested thirty-four different strategies, ranging in risk from low to high, for changing institutional attitudes and policies toward the use of women's gifts in the church.

At the end of the colloquium, J. I. Packer, professor of historical and systematic theology at Regent College, expressed his conviction that we need a view of the church which stresses "life before order, gifts before office." "Gifts," he argued, "are for use; order is for canonizing their use. Gifts are given to all; gifts are not intended to be thwarted."

Throughout the conference, participants wrestled with a variety of tensions, characterized by Jeannette Scholer as those between "experience and truth, persons and status, egalitarianism and hierarchicalism, the prescriptive and the descriptive, proof-texting and hermeneutical consistency, creation and redemption, the church's function as a critic of society and its effort to be winsome within society."

The conference papers will be published by InterVarsity Press.

BOOK REVIEWS

Miracles and the Critical Mind

by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984. 325 pp.) Reviewed by Bernard Ramm, Professor of Christian Theology, American Baptist Seminary of the West.

Colin Brown's book is essentially a historical review of the apologetic interpretation of miracles from the patristic times to the present. Because it is such a substantial historical review it is a source book that will be around for a long time. It is not a dry summary of historical opinion, because Brown always adds his own interpretation to the opinions expressed. Furthermore, the book is extensively documented (in both English and foreign literature) revealing the great amount of research gone into the writing of the book.

It is a book aimed at the theological community, especially at the professorial level, although advanced seminarians may read it with comprehension. Brown does move with ability in philosophical, theological and biblical-critical territory as one must to do justice to the subject of miracles. He rightly adds the word *critical* to his title because a person cannot discuss miracles as if they were purely theological or philosophical problems. One must touch base with current New Testament studies,

and Brown does that.

There are four problems which persist in the discussion of miracles and which constantly surface in Brown's discussion: (1) Does a person accept or reject miracles on a prior accepted philosophical or theological position so that the discussion of miracles is really an after-the-fact matter? i.e., are miracles rejected because of their inherent unbeliefability, or accepted because of their evident historicity, or is the matter already settled by one's world view? (2) How do we vigorously defend biblical miracles and yet turn around and play the skeptic with miracles in other religious traditions? (3) How do we define a miracle? If we define a miracle as an event contrary to natural law, do we not make faith in a miracle sheer credulity? If we define miracle as a higher or hidden function of the laws of God, do we not undermine the uniqueness of the miracle or the shock of it? (4) How do we apologetically define the function of miracles without getting into a circular argument? Do we believe in the inspiration of Holy Scripture because of miracles? Or do we believe in miracles because they are in the inspired Holy Scripture?

When Brown comes to express his own opinions I find them marked by great common sense. Having reviewed the history of miracles in theology he knows the options and the pitfalls. In the final analysis, Brown accepts the biblical miracles

because they fit into the total Christian schema entered by faith in Jesus Christ and illumination of the Holy Spirit. Brown does not accept the evidentialists view of miracles because all historical "facts" (miracles included) are accepted or rejected by historians as they fit into the schema the historian works within. No historical event is a hard, factual datum, let alone miracles. Brown also has no sympathy with those who wish to explain miracles away by psychiatric explanations or other means to reduce them to natural events or to mythical stories originating in the early Christian communities.

Alan Richardson was Brown's first mentor in graduate work, and Brown treats Richardson's opinions on miracles with great respect. When Brown discusses evangelicals and miracles he is hard put to come up with scholars of academic weight.

My critical remarks are of a very secondary order. Somewhere in these deeply researched pages one will find every objection to the biblical miracles and every apologetic defense of the miracles. I would liked to have seen a reference to James Orr's book on David Hume (*David Hume: The World Epochs Makers*) for they are fellow Scots and Orr must both praise and damn his fellow Scot. A reference to J. A. Passmore would have also been appropriate; his evaluation was that Hume was the greatest of the