
Book Reviews

Split Image

Anne Atkins

Hodder & Stoughton, 1998, 286pp pbk, £7.99

Anne Atkins is best known as the speaker who took a Biblical stand on homosexuality in a Radio 4 "Thought for the Day" in October 1996. This provoked a furore, and following that she was taken on as the Agony Aunt for the *Daily Telegraph*. She is respected for holding to a Biblical line on questions of morality, and so many people may read this book for an evangelical view of gender distinctions. It is sub-titled *Discovering God's True Intention for Male and Female*.

She is critical of some aspects of feminism but argues that the excesses are partly due to a culpable lack of involvement by Christians who have not been the salt that might have leavened the movement. In the first chapter there is a strong plea to accept the Bible's teaching without reading our own prejudices or cultural assumptions into the text. The next chapter on "Difference" argues that the only undeniable difference between men and women is that men beget children and women bear them, and that this has no relevance to how they should be treated (p. 14). Beyond that there is only some vague difference between the "masculine" and "feminine" principle, which again has no real relevance to how we treat each other. Any other treatment of the differences between the sexes is dismissed as of no importance. It is as if any stress on the differences might invalidate the following (excellent) chapter on "Equality". But in the next chapter on "Interdependence" the author speaks freely and naturally of masculine and feminine qualities. In the section on "Work" the only distinction is

that women have babies. Division of labour should be according to gift, preference and circumstance, not an old fashioned concept of "man as breadwinner, woman as homemaker". The chapter on "Authority" deals with 1 Corinthians 11 in some detail, picking up Morna Hooker's interpretation of v. 10: that the "authority" on the woman's head is *her* authority, and Atkins pushes that to conclude that v. 10 is speaking of the woman's authority over her head, ie over the man (p. 94). So, nothing in the chapter speaks of the subordination of women; rather we see women having authority over men in some situations of worship. Atkins is grateful that the Anglican Church now ordains women, though she abhors the way that those who oppose women's ordination have been treated.

In the chapter on "Marriage" the teaching of Ephesians 5 is taken to mean that yes, the wife should submit to her husband, but that the love the husband is commanded to show the wife effectively means that he is to submit to her as well. "It is often thought that a wife's submission implies a husband's leadership. This is not so: Christians submit to one another, but this does not make every Christian into a leader." (p. 158). The teaching of 1 Corinthians 7 is drawn alongside to show that "When it comes to authority, the marriage relationship is absolutely symmetrical" (p. 165).

The section on "Singleness" is very helpful: Biblical, balanced and warm. It would be good to see this chapter reprinted as a booklet, as it is hard to find positive material on this subject. *Split Image* was first published in 1987, and following the controversy over homosexuality mentioned above, the publishers decided to reissue it

with a new chapter on “Homosexuality”. This chapter too is excellent: clear, compassionate, maintaining throughout the insistence that homosexual acts are wrong, and giving an honest appraisal of the appalling risk of being part of the “gay scene”. Again, this chapter would make an excellent booklet.

The concluding chapter is on “Feminism”. “A feminist is someone who believes that women are equal to men and that they should be treated as such” (p. 248). So all Christians should be feminists. “As far as I know, no one in the Church has attacked feminism from a position of knowledge. Those who are well acquainted with the movement are largely sympathetic. Those who are critical of it seem to be criticising a grossly inaccurate caricature” (p. 249). Atkins argues passionately for what she calls “Christian feminism”. Bible believing Christians are to care about ill treatment of women: whether it be the atrocity of female circumcision in the Sudan, or the tragedy of wife battering here at home.

There are plenty of good things about this book: many of the comments are wise, perceptive, witty and true. The author challenges many cherished prejudices, and gives numerous anecdotes, some entertaining, some painful, which illustrate the way that both men and women can be “boxed in” by societal or church expectation. There is a great deal of unhelphful prejudice around in traditional evangelical circles. There is also the massive under use of female gifts and abilities in the church: a pitiful lack of opportunity for “full time” Christian work for women in conservative reformed churches. Bible training is often suggested for bright and capable young men but rarely for similarly gifted young women. They have to go abroad to serve full time!

But the positive aspects simply make

this book all the more disappointing in its failure to teach Biblical male headship. The author’s use of terms such as “inter-dependence” and “complementarity” raises hopes that here will be a work treading a Biblical middle path between the two extremes of a repressive, culturally hide-bound, and narrowly traditional view of gender on the one hand, and evangelical feminism on the other. But as is so common, the author falls prey to the logical fallacy of the *excluded middle*. Atkins believes that women should minister in the church. Therefore they must be able to do everything that men can do. She believes that wives should not be passive and servile. Therefore husbands are not to be leaders in the relationship. But it is quite possible to believe passionately in Biblical ministries of women, while also believing that the Bible teaches that the authoritative teaching-governing function of elder is to be exercised only by men. It is quite possible to reject a repressive view of headship where the husband is seen as the “boss” and the wife has to endure even gross abuse in the name of submission, but to hold to a belief in the husband’s loving servant, Christlike leadership

Over the past ten years a considerable amount of work has been done by writers such as Mary Kassian, Wayne Grudem and John Piper, to develop a positive and Biblical view of gender. Such literature from the “complementarian” perspective is totally ignored by Atkins. She complains that all Christian criticism of feminism is ignorant. That is simply untrue of a serious work such as *The Feminist Gospel* (M Kassian). She caricatures the anti-feminist perspective as pushing the “fluffy housewife” or “made-up sex kitten” image and complains that Christian critics of feminism have never read the feminist writers first hand. But her sweeping condemnations of Christian anti-feminists

show the same ignorance. Moreover, having read many of the feminist writers, I simply do not recognise the saccharine portrayal of feminism in this book. There is no reference to Millett, Firestone, Mitchell, Daly, Dworkin, Rich, Faludi et. al. nor to the secular critiques of feminism (such as those published by the Institute of Economic Affairs), which demonstrate that in many ways the feminist movement has had devastating effects on women.

On the differences between the sexes there is no reference to books such as *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (S Goldberg), *In a Different Voice* (C Gilligan) or *BrainSex*. (A Moir & D Jessel). These works demonstrate that the differences between the sexes are far more profound than Atkins' rather simplistic rendering. They do not imply that the differences justify discrimination: if a woman or man is individually gifted in any area there should be equality of opportunity. But the differences explain why in many areas there will never be equality of outcome, and to cry "sexism" or "discrimination" is wrongheaded.

In conclusion, does this book live up to the subtitle and help us to discover God's true intention for male and female? Regrettably, no. There are many good things in this book but sadly these may persuade readers to take on board the whole package – another attractive yet fundamentally flawed presentation of evangelical feminism.

Sharon James

Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

This organisation was founded the US in 1987, and produces resources which provide a Biblical and positive perspective on gender issues. A UK branch has now been set up. If any readers would like

further details, and/or a free sample copy of the latest issue of the CBMW Journal (which includes "An open letter to egalitarians: Six questions that have never been satisfactorily answered" by Wayne Grudem), please write to:

CBMW, 9 Epsom Road, Leamington Spa, CV32 7AR.

The Radical Evangelical

Nigel Wright

SPCK, 1996, 144 pp, £12.99

After such recently well-known epithets as "conservative", "charismatic" and even "post" evangelical, there is now a "new kid on the block" – "radical". It is written by a former lecturer in Christian Doctrine at Spurgeon's College, and appears in SPCK's *Gospel & Culture* series. The book evidences wide reading, deep reflection, and some thought provoking conclusions, all in comparatively short compass. It is well written, indexed and footnoted (I was able to discover only one typographical error – "1993" instead of "1983" – page 134, footnote 12).

Wright defines his "radical evangelical" position succinctly: "It is not inherently suspicious of 'higher criticism'. This is a 'radical' position in that it is not wedded to the 'conservative' assumptions of much recent evangelicalism" (p. 11, his quotation marks). He thus attempts to sail somewhere between the Scylla of the old liberalism and the Charybdis of conservative evangelicalism.

His avowed chart and compass is what he terms a Trinitarian "Revolutionary Orthodoxy". This enables him, graciously but firmly, to reject the extremes of the pluralist John Hick, the feminist Daphne Hampson, and the "atheist priest", Anthony Freeman. Conversely, he is able to acknowledge his debt to Barth for his understanding of Barth's (reformulated)

doctrine of election, with its tendency towards a “hopeful universalism” (p. 42). He is committed to Scripture’s general reliability but not its inerrancy. Moreover, he is uncomfortable with the doctrine of “penal substitution”, as traditionally presented, and urges more relational atonement models. Thus, the cross itself is “not necessary to enable God to forgive”. Rather, it is “the revelation of that cost in God” eternally that actualises itself at a precise moment in time (p. 67f).

Given his Barthian view of election, it is no surprise to encounter a “wider hope” for those outside the visible Christian Church, perhaps by some form of “post mortem” evangelism for some. For others, although he is not specifically cited, Karl Rahner’s well-known “anonymous Christian” paradigm is tacitly urged. For such, the gospel becomes the interpretation of “a reality into which they have already entered” (p. 100). Unsurprisingly, hell is not “eternal, conscious punishment”, though still a possibility, thus avoiding full-blown universalism.

His desire for a recovery of “radical politics” will ring many “Nonconformist bells”. Moreover, his final chapter’s call, *Towards a Generous Religion*, has some pertinent and challenging things to say to the “absolutism, restrictivism and judgementalism” of various forms of evangelicalism.

By this time, I suspect, the theological radar of many readers of this journal will be working overtime. There is more work to do. For more disturbing still is his treatment of the person of Christ. Although it is becoming a Christological commonplace among some theologians to believe that our Lord assumed a fallen human nature (for a recent excellent refutation see D Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Apollos, 1998)), most evangelicals have balked at the implications. Wright attempts, however,

“to boldly go”: “to assert his humanity surely involves the capacity ... to get things wrong” (p. 82); “There should therefore be no difficulty in acknowledging that Jesus was capable of innocent mistakes” – (p. 83). Unsurprisingly, these comments appear in the chapter, *The Legacy of Liberalism*.

This is a compassionate, challenging yet ultimately alarming book. I am unconvinced that the “radical” has taken me back to the “roots” of my faith. Rather, I feel I have been detoured to a neo-evangelicalism to who knows where.

Steve Brady

Transforming the World

David W Smith

Paternoster, 1998, 146 pp, £12.99

David Smith, the former Principal of Northumbria Bible College, argues that modern evangelicalism has lost its original vision of being what he terms “a world transformative religion”. The book takes the form of a potted history of evangelicalism from the time of the Great Awakening, highlighting the drift from its original concerns for social and political reform into the realms of purely personal faith and morals.

The thesis is by now a familiar one, having been rehearsed in numerous different ways in various publications in recent years. The value of this work lies in its exclusively British perspective – it is sub-titled “The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism” – and in its accessibility. It is clearly-written and targeted at a non-academic readership. Its brevity is by and large a virtue (there are only 125 pages of text) although this requires a fairly idiosyncratic selection of material.

All the compulsory heroes of contemporary, conservative evangel-