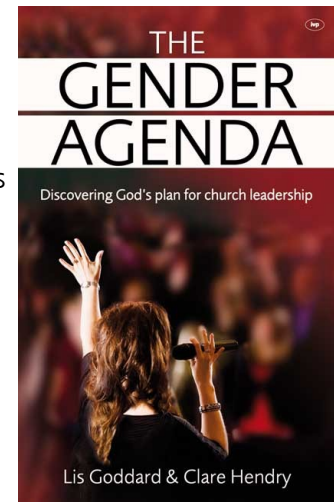


the gender agenda: discovering God's plan for church leadership

Lis Goddard and Clare Hendry (IVP, 2010)

I really enjoyed this book. If you need a simple and user-friendly guide to the endless debate about women in leadership, this is one to give a great overview, and then to pass on to someone who is new to it all.

What makes the book so readable is that it is written in the form of a series of emails between the two authors. Lis Goddard is vicar of St James the Less, Pimlico, and Clare Hendry is Minister for Pastoral Care at St James, Muswell Hill, and a visiting lecturer at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Both women are members of the committee of Awesome, a support group for evangelical women clergy in the Church of England, but Lis takes what has become known as the 'egalitarian' view and Clare the 'complementarian'. One of the things I thought really helpful about Clare's contribution is that she makes clear the variety of viewpoints represented by this constituency; she preaches to mixed congregations, for example, while not all 'complementarian' women would – or would be permitted to do so.



For those newer to the debate, the book is well set out, starting from the beginning of the Bible (Genesis) and working through to the Pastorals and some final exchanges about how it all works out in practice. Coming from a conservative background myself, and having written on the subject, I did not find much that was completely new, but I found much to simulate and to encourage me.

Occasionally I disagreed with some of the interpretations put forward (partly because for some passages there may be several different 'egalitarian' interpretations on offer). But both women engage well with the scholarship around each passage, without going into every fine detail, and with a light touch. Each woman is firm in her commitment to the authority of Scripture, but reads that scripture differently.

What I also found valuable was Clare's real engagement with the texts. Too often I have been exasperated by complementarians actually quoting John Gray as if he was scripture, citing women's gullibility on the basis of women's magazines, or writing about women's 'ambition' as if that is what prompts evangelical women priests to want to be treated fairly. But Clare and Lis listen to what each has to say about a particular passage, and respond courteously to each other's arguments

This is perhaps the aspect of the book which stuck me most: a deepening friendship and a desire to dialogue, between two people who share much theologically in common, but disagree on this one issue. It is a model of how to engage in this kind of debate, with deep respect on both sides but real disagreement about how to interpret scripture on the issues of women in leadership in the Church (and on leadership in marriage). By the end of the book, neither has convinced the other woman to change her view, but they have each learnt a lot – and so has the reader.

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