

Backtalk! Women Leaders Changing the Church

Susan Willhauck (The Pilgrim Press, 2005)

A stunning cover, with a bright colours and a variety of women's faces, make this an attractive book to pick up. And given the dearth of books which combine the subjects of leadership, women and the church, it makes compelling reading for women leaders and anyone who wants to promote women in leadership in churches.

The book aims both to celebrate women's leadership and to encourage women and men to speak out and act for change. It advocates 'backtalk' (as in 'talking back' to someone, questioning authority) as a methodology for doing theology and ministry, so that the voices of women are heard, and draws on the experience of women leaders in many denominations across America, and some in the UK and elsewhere.

The book uses a wide variety of interpretative traditions, and a diversity of theologies, feminist, womanist, liberation and Asian. This makes the book wide-ranging in scope, but possibly too broad for some.

From a discussion of 'backtalk', the author moves on to look at areas for growth and change, and stories and strategies for effective change. An oft-quoted proverb, 'A crowing hen will come to no good end', often used to silence women, is replaced by another: 'When women crow, we lay better eggs'. There is sometimes value in silence, but also in speaking out in order to change things.

On a practical level, some of the strategies for change explored in the book are those found elsewhere: mentoring, being clear about gifts and call, getting together with other women, working with those who are in leadership. Others are more unusual; for example, 'wear red underwear' (there is a story here!) is a metaphor for 'not losing our identity in rules and conformity'.

The bottom line? Too often, Willhauck argues, the church has implicitly said to women, 'don't give me any backtalk'. Women have been told what to do in order to get ahead. But now, things are changing, and women leaders are creating positive change in the church. By employing some of the strategies which the book identifies, the future may see a new generation of leaders who are 'called, claimed, and connected', filled with the Spirit and living towards a new future.

Rosie Ward
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