

Ministry by the Book: New Testament patterns for pastoral leadership, Derek Tidball (Apollos, 2008)

I was drawn to this book by the title and subtitle, and by its author, some of whose previous books I had read. Many studies of ministry claim to be 'biblical' but I was intrigued by a book which sets out to study New Testament models systematically. Following his time as principal of the London School of Theology Derek Tidball is now visiting scholar at Spurgeon's College, London, and bring a variety of experience, pastoral and academic, to the subject.

In 250 pages Tidball surveys what the New Testament has to say about ministry, by which he means 'full-time' or 'professional' ministry within local churches. While some scholars question the use of 'leadership' as a New Testament concept, for Tidball, the terms 'ministry' and 'leadership', or 'pastoral leadership', are interchangeable.

Reading the book with an eye for what the author had to say about women leaders, I had to wait 95 pages before seeing anything of significance (in the chapter on Acts), but then found the second half of the book much more interesting than the first. I found it surprising that Tidball did not make any connections with women leaders in his chapters on the Gospels (I suppose I expected something about Mary Magdalen or Mary of Bethany, or the women who followed and supported Jesus), but the book is more systematic and at times plodding than imaginative and exciting in its approach and style.

I was encouraged to hear Tidball's conclusion that women as well as men were leaders of house churches, and that 'Acts shows no inhibition about reporting the contribution of women to the leadership of the early church.' When writing on Paul he challenges some feminist critiques which have portrayed Paul as authoritarian and manipulative, and he explores true 'servant' leadership, also briefly touching on the use of power.

Under the heading of Paul as teacher, Tidball refers to the controversy around women as teachers, and the two so-called 'difficult passages'. His conclusion is that Paul's bar to women teaching (if that is what the passages are) does not represent a fixed transcultural position. While women as leaders is not a major concern in the book, I was surprised that as someone who clearly supports women's ministry, Tidball does not give the subject a little more attention. When exploring 1 Timothy 3:11, he characteristically weighs up arguments on both sides but concludes that the 'women' were almost certainly women who were deacons, and not deacons' wives.

Tidball also notes that leadership is always plural, which is so often said, but seldom fully acknowledged in the practice of leadership today, and his Baptist convictions emerge in his discussion of the pastoral epistles and the emergence of the three-fold orders, which he sees as one pattern among many (as well as one not fully developed in the New Testament), and not bearing the weight of preference that has been put on it in ecumenical circles.

What I found refreshing about the book is that Tidball explores a number of different models of ministry, each of which emerges from a different church or cultural context. Thus, while there is unity (the different models are not mutually exclusive nor in conflict with one another), there is no blueprint, but scope for diversity – if then, then also in the Church today.

A comprehensive, scholarly survey of New Testament models of ministry; not an easy read (in my opinion), but an argument which needs to be heard: to follow a 'New Testament' pattern is to see ministry as 'multi-coloured' and varied, rather than 'monochrome'.