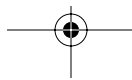
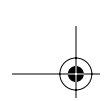


Foreword

When Sarah Sumner was seeking a descriptive title for this book, she told me that one adviser had suggested she title it either the “problem” or the “dilemma” of women in Christian leadership. Many conservative Christians probably frame the subject in one of those terms, but I responded, “You are not writing about a problem, much less a dilemma. You are addressing an opportunity.” Sarah’s aim is to help us set aside some self-defeating ways of thinking—to allow Christians to move forward in total honesty with ourselves about how we *are* or *are not* welcoming the gifted teachers whom God is making available to us for the more effective proclaiming and teaching of the gospel.

My background in secular universities and mainstream churches has made me wary of feminism but, like Sarah’s father, enthusiastically admiring of “women who can get things done.” As the founder and leader of the movement I describe in *The Wedge of Truth* (IVP, 2000), I eagerly welcome the participation of any women or men who can help us to bring out the truth, by public speaking, writing or whatever they are gifted to do. When I think of women who are truly making a contribution to the truth, however, I include women who are making that difference in the context of their families as well as those who are called to take a more publicly visible role. When pressed in interviews to name my heroes, I have spontaneously responded that they are “home-schooling mothers!” To me, the heroic mothers who nurture the next



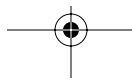


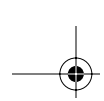
generation of faithful Christians are among the leaders of the church, regardless of whether they ever speak in front of a congregation.

One thing I know, however, is that my heroes are nurturing daughters as well as sons, who will step forward bearing gifts of teaching or preaching that we will surely want to call upon as we face the obstacles God is calling us to overcome in the twenty-first century. Like the first century, ours is a time that requires heroes, and we must joyfully welcome the potential heroes whom God provides for us, even if they are not exactly what we might have expected. To be sure, we must faithfully follow the Scriptures, but doing this requires that we distinguish, as Sarah so persuasively does, between an influential cultural tradition, which has often been misogynist, and the actual message of the Bible.

Biblical interpretation is not my profession, but I do have a determination to encourage the gifted young scholars and teachers whom it is my privilege to mentor to produce the very best work of which they are capable, and to step forward in confidence that they have something important to say to a mixed-up world that badly needs to hear it. As that implies, I am equally determined to persuade the world to pay attention.

If as Sarah's friend and mentor I have made any contribution to this book, it is by urging her to put more of herself into her writing, to let the reader see her ideas and arguments in the context of her family background and personal struggle to be accepted in a male world that did not make it easy for her. If some of her teachers warned her not to "show the full color of [her] plume," lest it threaten the men, I told her the opposite. She says that she is a Christian first and last, and not a feminist, and that she wants to write in furtherance of truth and Christ's power, not women's power. Personally, I know that to be true, but I know also that some readers may suspect that there must be some suppressed anger or feminist power-seeking lurking in the background. The best way to correct that kind of mistake is to understand how she related as a child to her father and her mother, and as a young adult to the biblically faithful seminary professors who developed her intellectual and scholarly capacities, but who in some cases were struggling "man-





fully” (a certain wry irony in the use of this term is fully intended) with the novel concept of a female theologian.

I am certain that the overwhelming majority of faithful Christians agree with me that we would rather hear good teaching from a gifted woman than inferior teaching from a less gifted man, and I am confident that Paul himself would approve of our preference, however much difficulty we may have sorting out all the intricacies of specific statements the great apostle made.

I am equally certain that Sarah fully recognizes that providing opportunities for *anyone* in the church, women included, is not an end in itself but always in furtherance of taking the whole gospel truth to men, women and families. We should never accept some hybrid such as feminist theology on the mistaken assumption that we are thereby pleasing women. We will never truly satisfy women that way, and even if we did, it would not be worth the cost. Our objective must always be to please Christ, and not to please men (yes, that generic term includes both sexes).

Not everyone will agree with all of Dr. Sumner’s answers, but I think it more important that impartial readers will agree that she raises the right questions. I remember a distinguished scholar who, informed that I was supporting Sarah’s project, assumed that it must be primarily about which church offices should be open to women. That is precisely the wrong question to start with, akin to the wrangling for position that characterized the disciples at their worst. Sarah starts with a much better question. How should men and women regard and treat each other if they are both truly faithful to the gospel of Christ and value truth more than personal power?

If you do not find that question important and fascinating, you ought to. So please move on and start reading Sarah’s book, where you will find that question very thoroughly and faithfully answered.

Phillip E. Johnson

