

# PARTNERS IN CHRIST



BY JOHN G. STACKHOUSE, JR.

**STUDY & DISCUSSION GUIDE**

by Hannah L. Steeves

### **CHAPTER 1 – WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?**

- How do you understand the terms “feminist,” “patriarchalist,” “complementarian” and “egalitarian”? What comes to mind as you think about each word? What sort of assumptions do these words carry in our culture (or within the Christian sub-culture)?
- Are you comfortable placing yourself under one of these labels? Can one hold an intermediate position? Why or why not?
- Why is it important to define terms in a discussion on gender? Must our terms be similar to be able to have a meaningful discussion?

### **CHAPTER 2 – HOW NOT TO DECIDE ABOUT GENDER**

- Professor Stackhouse argues that there is a tendency to rely solely on Biblicism when it comes to the discussion on gender: “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it” (page 18). How could it be harmful to narrow ourselves to this view? In what ways do our interpretations of the Bible sometimes require additional resources or voices? In what respects do we need to derive Christian ethics from more than just particular texts of Scripture?
- In what ways has culture helped in the pursuit of equality for men and women? In what ways has culture hindered the pursuit?
- Why is it important to test spiritual intuition (saying that an idea is specifically “from God”)? How can we determine better what is actually the “genuinely true Word of God” (page 24)?
- How can we compensate for our own predispositions, limitations, and desires in order to hear the voice of God as clearly as possible?

### **CHAPTER 3 – HOW I CHANGED MY MIND**

- How has your view on gender been influenced by your background (where you grew up, what time period you were brought up in, family background, church background, etc.)?
- Why is it important that we have people in our lives who can challenge our views or help us to wrestle through issues?
- How do we communicate respectfully, knowing that we all have different places and families of origins, different church backgrounds, and more?

### **CHAPTER 4 – TWO MORE THEOLOGICAL CLUES**

- What does Professor Stackhouse mean when he uses the term “control text” in reference to the Bible?
- Are there certain Bible verses that traditionally tend to “govern” others when it comes to the discussion on gender, whether for egalitarians or complementarians?
- What is the “hermeneutical circle/spiral” (page 38) in your own words? What are the elements involved?
- Professor Stackhouse writes, “The responsible thinker, according to this model, gathers all the relevant bits together – from tradition, scholarship, experience, art, and especially the Bible – and

then tries to discern what general pattern best explains them all” (page 39). Which of these sources do you find are often overlooked? How can our biases hinder what we conclude?

### **CHAPTER 5 – THE MODEL**

- Professor Stackhouse writes, “The Bible’s teaching is often complex, subtle, and even ambiguous – for the trained interpreter as well as for the ordinary reader” (page 44). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How does it affect the way that Christians should approach complex topics in their theologizing and in their behavior?
- This chapter talks about several instances in which women are given *some* leadership positions and *some* authority in certain circumstances. Discuss “the missionary exception,” “the parachurch parenthesis,” and “the ‘under authority’ arrangement” (pages 44-45). Are these “intermediate” positions satisfactory? Why or why not?

### **CHAPTER 6 - EQUALITY**

- Professor Stackhouse writes, “The first principle of this model is that men and women are equal before God” (page 47). Where does he ground this principle? Do you agree with his interpretation?
- This chapter lists several Biblical examples which seem to support both the egalitarian and complementarian positions. Did you find anything surprising within these Biblical examples? Were any of the ideas presented in this chapter new to you?
- Why is it important to acknowledge both sides of the argument instead of calling one or another position “flat out wrong” (page 50)?

### **CHAPTER 7 – GOSPEL PRIORITIES AND HOLY PRAGMATISM**

- The second principle to Professor Stackhouse’s paradigm is that “some things matter more than others” (page 51). In Professor Stackhouse’s view, what is the most important Biblical consideration?
- How does the principle of accommodation help to make sense of the seemingly contradictory Biblical passages concerning gender?
- What about this principle do you agree with? What parts seem hard to accept?
- In some cases, Professor Stackhouse says, patriarchy must be tolerated for the sake of the gospel. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

### **CHAPTER 8 – ESCHATOLOGY**

- Eschatology is the study of the last things. What does this doctrine have to do with the discussion on gender?
- What would our view of gender be if we used the “already, but not yet” principle?
- In what ways do you see the Kingdom of God already being established when it comes to gender equality?

- In what ways do you believe the Kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized when it comes to gender equality?
- The “policy of cultural conservatism” (page 56) was in place because the disciples believed that Jesus would return within their lifetime, so they worked under the political powers and social structures of that time. Do you believe we are always called to live under the political powers and social structures we have, or are we called to transform them?

### **CHAPTER 9 – LIBERTY**

- What ideas, Bible verses, or images come to mind when you hear the term “Christian liberty” (page 61)?
- Biblical examples are given in this chapter to show how we are to use the liberty we have in Christ (pages 62-63). What makes the idea of Christian liberty distinct from other definitions of liberty?
- Can gospel priorities limit Christian liberty? Should they?
- Think of a time when you felt the need to restrain your Christian liberty for the sake of the gospel. Was it easy to do? How did you feel? What ultimately helped you to make the decision?
- How do we engage in the gender discussion without losing sight of the top priority, which is the effective spread of the gospel? How would discussion about gender cause us to lose sight of this priority? How would it help to bring the sharing of the gospel into greater focus?

### **CHAPTER 10 – GIFT, CALLING, ORDER, AND EDIFICATION**

- How would you define “gift,” “calling,” “order,” and “edification”? How are these principles at work in 1 Corinthians 11-14? How are they at work in the church and home?
- How is it that the writings of Paul sound so egalitarian one minute, yet completely patriarchal the next? What explanations does Professor Stackhouse give (pages 67-69)?
- What is your experience of leadership in the church? Are there ways for women to help to improve church leadership?
- How do you think egalitarianism helps or hurts the furtherance of the gospel in your context? How do you think complementarianism helps or hurts the furtherance of the gospel in your context?
- Considering roles in the home, Professor Stackhouse lists scripture passages (Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Peter 3:1-2) in this chapter that deal with the notion of wives being subject to husbands. How does he interpret these passages (pages 75-78)? Do you agree or disagree with this interpretation?

### **CHAPTER 11 – THE PATTERN OF DOUBLENES**

- What does Professor Stackhouse mean by a “pattern of doubleness” found in the Biblical texts on gender (page 81)?
- What are a few examples he gives of this “pattern of doubleness”?
- Why does Professor Stackhouse believe this to be an important pattern when it comes to the topic of gender (pages 85-86)?

- If both egalitarian and patriarchal elements are found in these scriptural passages, should we pay more attention to one or the other of them in our context? Why or why not?
- If both elements are there, what are the dangers of reading from a *solely* patriarchal view? What are the dangers of reading from a *solely* egalitarian view?

### **CHAPTER 12 – WHAT THEN?**

- This chapter raises the question, “Why would God call entirely equal sexes to deeply different roles.... Why indeed would one role be that of leadership and the other of submission, if women and men are not only equal in status and dignity before God but equal in every other way as well?” (page 89). How would this question be answered from a complementarian viewpoint?
- Professor Stackhouse suggests that the complementarian position taken to answer to this question has become incoherent (page 90). Why does he suggest this? Are there any weaknesses in this argument?
- Is there a solid rationale for why women should remain in submissive roles even as egalitarianism becomes more widely accepted?
- This chapter also raises the question, “What is God calling Christians to do in regard to gender when society itself shifts to egalitarianism?” (page 91). Do Christians “lag behind” society on this issue (page 91)? Is that a problem if we do?

### **CHAPTER 13 – COUNTERARGUMENTS FROM THEOLOGY**

- How does Professor Stackhouse define the “task of Christian theology” (page 94)? Do you agree with his definition?
- Why is it important to develop a coherent theology of gender? How can we be sure our theology is coherent?
- Which arguments from theology sound familiar to you? Have these issues ever been raised in your context?
- Which points do you find most interesting in Professor Stackhouse’s response to these arguments?

### **CHAPTER 14 – COUNTERARGUMENTS FROM CHURCH HISTORY**

- Are you familiar with any of these arguments in your own context?
- Which arguments from church history are the most persuasive for you? Why?
- Which arguments are the least persuasive? Why?
- What is your reaction to how Professor Stackhouse responds to these arguments?

### **CHAPTER 15 – COUNTERARGUMENTS FROM CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE**

- Which of the counterarguments from contemporary experience and practice do you find to be the most convincing? Which do you find to be the least convincing?
- How does Professor Stackhouse respond to these arguments? Are they strong responses?

- The last counterargument deals directly with how the church reacts to culture and suggests how the church should react to culture. What is still the main priority for the church regardless of the presence or absence of patriarchy (pages 124-125)?

#### **CHAPTER 16 – WHAT THEN?**

- The first guiding principle mentioned in this chapter is “activism.” What is “activism,” in your own words? How, according to Professor Stackhouse, does activism play a role in the discussion on gender?
- The second principle is “realism.” What is “realism”? Why is it important in this discussion?
- The third element is “vocation.” What does “vocation” mean? What are some ways you feel you have been called by God? What should our vocational approach be towards the issue of gender equality?
- The fourth principle is “hope.” Why is hope such an important element in this discussion? What hope do we have as Christians in general? What hope do we have as we discuss gender equality as Christians?
- How do these principles apply in specific challenges and situations (pages 128-131)?
- Professor Stackhouse challenges readers at the end of this chapter to ask, “What should I do to compensate for my own predispositions, limitations, and desires in order to hear the voice of God as clearly, and searchingly, and transformationally as possible?” Share ideas that might help answer this question.

#### **CHAPTER 17 – INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE**

- Do you believe there is a need for revision of language within the Biblical text? Why or why not? What are some of the challenges that come with revision according to this chapter?
- It is obvious to readers of Scripture that the dominant biblical portrait of God is drawn with masculine imagery. How has this masculine imagery served, and how does it still serve, to perpetuate unjust relations between men and women?
- Should we maintain the “pattern of doubleness” (that is, maintain egalitarian and patriarchal images) in the Bible even as we speak of God? If so, how?
- What are the dangers of changing, or being selective in, our images of God in order to be more explicitly feminist? (See pages 140-141.)

#### **CHAPTER 18 – WOMEN AND THEOLOGY**

- What do you think a feminist approach to the Bible looks like?
- Why do we lack a feminist approach to the Bible? Why do more women not engage in this kind of scholarship? Why do men not take up distinctive feminist concerns in their Biblical scholarship?
- Several scholars are mentioned in this chapter. Do you agree with Professor Stackhouse’s assessment of feminist scholarship such as that of Phyllis Trible?

- What insights do you believe feminist scholarship have added or could add to Biblical scholarship and theology?
- How can the inclusion of feminist voices in Biblical and theological scholarship be encouraged? What happens if they are not (pages 148-149)?

### **CHAPTER 19 – DISCARDING THE “NEW MACHISMO”**

- What is the “New Machismo,” in your own words? According to Professor Stackhouse, where does it come from?
- Professor Stackhouse says that many churches have become “a women’s club with a male executive” (page 153). What does he mean by this? What are some examples he gives?
- Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? What are some dangers of the “New Machismo?” What are some dangers of catering to women only in the context of church?
- What are some dangers of perpetuating gender stereotypes in the church?
- Is it possible to strike a balance in the church to avoid falling into these patterns? What suggestions does Stackhouse give as alternatives to perpetuating stereotypes (pages 156-157)?

### **CHAPTER 20 – WHY, THEN, DO WOMEN NOT LEAD?**

- Do women lead? What evidence does Stackhouse give that suggests they don’t (pages 159-161)?
- What are the reasons Stackhouse gives for why women do not lead in secular occupations?
- Which of these reasons do you think are the main contributing factors? Are there any reasons listed which you believe are not actually contributing factors?
- What are the reasons Stackhouse gives for why women don’t lead in the church?
- Which of these reasons do you think are the main contributing factors? Are there any reasons listed which you believe are not actually contributing factors?
- What should be done in your world to encourage women to lead?

### **CHAPTER 21 – HOW TO CHANGE A MIND**

- At the beginning of this chapter Stackhouse mentions the Aristotelian argument that there are three modes of speech to be persuasive: *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. What is the role of each mode of speech (page 173)?
- Stackhouse suggests that *pathos* (appeal to affections) is a “crucial gift” (page 173). Why is this?
- What does Stackhouse encourage women to do to help motivate others to create equality between sexes (page 174-175)? What are the challenges accompanying this approach?
- Is this proposal of women communicating with men the whole solution (page 175)? What role do men have in helping to create equality between the sexes (page 176)?
- Do you agree with Stackhouse’s argument about “how to change a mind”? Is there anything you would add to this argument?