

Review: *Housewife Theologian*, by Aimee Byrd

By Mike Myers

My interaction with the writings of Aimee Byrd began several years ago while sitting around my father's dining room table in West Virginia. He had a copy of the pre-publication manuscript of Mrs. Byrd's *No Little Women*, and if I am not mistaken, we were discussing what eventually became chapter 6, *Men Learning from Women?* For that reason, *No Little Women* was the first of Mrs. Byrd's books that I eventually purchased and began to read. After a few chapters, I decided that I needed to go back to the beginning, so I embarked upon something of a comprehensive study of her books. What follows is my summary of Aimee Byrd's writings taken chronologically. I will do my best to present her arguments fairly and concisely and then add my commendations and critiques as needed. Following my series of reviews, I intend to offer a final, overarching assessment of her work as a whole.

Mrs. Byrd published her first book *Housewife Theologian* (HT) in 2013. Overall, I found this book to be both helpful and useful. From the very beginning Byrd set an encouraging and wholesome tone. Her aim in this first volume is a noble one: encouraging women to be careful, vibrant, learned, astute theologians. I agreed with her wholeheartedly that in our culture, the term *housewife* has sadly become an object of scorn referring to “a married woman without a career” (HT, 11). The vocation of *housewife* and all it includes desperately needs to be lifted up from the mental gutters of our degraded society's opinions and restored to the place of high honor that it deserves.

In her first chapter, Byrd discusses the absolute necessity of loving the truth of the Word of God, “As we can see from the story of Eve (and should know from our own experience) there are severe consequences for mishandling the Word of God. Even within the church we are constantly flooded with false teaching. Are we jealous to protect the truth of God's Word?” (HT, 24-25). She also insightfully comments on the effects of the curse

While I am focusing only on part of the curse here, I want to particularly address the aggravation introduced into the marriage relationship. Theologically, we learned that the governmental roles in marriage are to represent Christ and the church. Because of the effects of the fall, our roles can be easily subverted. Instead of joyfully serving in the vocation God has given us, our relationships become a power struggle of sorts. We want what we don't have. Women become envious of their husbands' leadership and men distort their responsibilities to a dictatorship or resign themselves to passivity (HT, 26-27).

Her observation on 1 Timothy 2:15 is also worth mentioning:

In the preceding verses, Paul is discussing submissiveness of women in reference to male eldership and pastoral authority in the church. He appeals to Eve's being deceived by Satan. Remember, before the fall Adam was to be the leader, and here we have Eve taking up this supposed theological discussion all on her own. Did she adequately represent her husband in her radical decision to disobey God? Paul's argument is not chauvinistic, rather it is lovingly showing forth the relationships God has ordained (HT, 33).

This first chapter was full of solid theological truths, encouraging speech, and very deeply honoring language both for the Scriptures and for her husband.

In the next chapter, Byrd addresses the sadly distorted and perverted topic of beauty, rightly assigning part of the blame to the objectivizing, wretched, corrupt institution known as Hollywood. Her observations about a woman's struggle with these ever present themes were honest and personal. Without discounting the physical element in beauty, she rightly grounded it in the virtues of grace, looking all the while to our Savior as the pre-eminent display of all that is beautiful and good. I found this one of the best chapters in the entire book. Although I have not read it, I believe Owen Strachan and Douglas Sweeney's book *Jonathan Edwards on Beauty* would serve as a good follow-up study for any interested in this important topic.

As I read chapter three, I found myself constantly agreeing and encouraging her as she wrote. Here Byrd takes aim at the unnecessary and sadly prevalent folly of compartmentalizing our lives. How sad that we often fall into the pre-Reformation false dichotomy of harsh divisions between the "ordinary" and the "spiritual." Her warning about taking this kind of approach is dead on:

When we are not wearing our 'faith hat,' we think in terms of all the *isms* of our time—naturalism, capitalism, humanism, feminism, existentialism, conservatism, liberalism, and so on—unaware that we are thinking like Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, and other philosophic minds and believing that we are thinking 'independently.' Tragically, rather than functioning as independent thinkers we are really just parroting the spin-doctors who don't see life through the lens of God's special revelation in Scripture (HT, 59).

The only minor addition I would have liked to see in this chapter is when she discusses her own responsibility to avoid the sins of "those gullible women that Paul marks out" (HT, 67). While not at all taking away from a housewife's personal responsibility to grow spiritually, I was disappointed there is no mention here of the role the husband has in both encouraging and ensuring everything possible takes place to achieve this laudable goal (though she does touch on this theme on pages 30-31).

Chapter four helpfully addresses the struggle many women have with seeing the worth and value of their callings as women in general, and for those housewives in particular. She writes,

When asked what we do we may respond with something such as, 'I'm a homemaker, but I also do such and such,' as if our main calling as women is not good enough and does not speak to our value as a person. Especially in our feminist culture, it is not savvy to define ourselves through our marital relationship with a man. We may keep ourselves busy with numerous endeavors and projects that appear to contribute more to society than managing a home or keeping children (HT 73-74).

Precisely at this point I would like to add some encouragement to build upon what Mrs. Byrd rightly identifies. To my sisters in the Lord who are seeking to be faithful in that private sphere of the home: do not let anyone or anything feed you the lie that your work is anything less than immeasurably valuable, insofar as you do it in the Lord. Byrd encourages her readers to find the

basis of their identity in Christ, and from that union to live in biblical submission (HT, 79-80) in a world screaming for them to do otherwise.

Through a warm and commendable presentation of both principle and anecdote, chapters five and six encourage women to careful discernment and godly hospitality. As a father of four boys who share a bathroom, I deeply empathized with her disdain for and struggle against things like “toothpaste-infested bathroom sinks” (HT, 123). In the next chapter, *My Two Pence Worth*, she makes the argument that the value of her work and influence is not measured by that which is visible, but rather in the quality of service she renders. I could not agree more. She writes, “Our vocation is not glorious. But we all have a circle of people in our lives whom we are influencing and teaching, whether the information we offer them is good or bad. We are in a position of power, and we need to look at it in this way.” Here is what I would change: this vocation *is* glorious, though very rarely *glamorous*. Many of us have heard that infamous line authored by William Ross Wallace, “*The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.*” How true. Housewives, mothers, your work may not be glamorous, but let no one dare to say it is not glorious.

Chapters eight and nine respectively address common struggles against sin and Mrs. Byrd’s account of bearing up through a difficult life-transition. Once again, I commend and appreciated her honesty and treatment of these issues, especially her exhortation toward the sufficiency of Christ (HT, 179). The next two chapters reflect on the place of the church and worship, and how they interact with everyday life. These two chapters were very clearly influenced by Dr. David VanDrunen’s “Two Kingdoms” outlook. While a critique of Dr. VanDrunen’s work falls outside the scope of my project, I have read Dr. VanDrunen’s *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* and his more popular level *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* and largely disagreed with his approach. She cites Dr. VanDrunen frequently and largely adopts his thesis in applying it to her life. Here is one example of a deficiency of the application of these principles to life: “God doesn’t equip Christians for cultural work any better than their unbelieving neighbors” (HT, 213; compare to Col. 3:17, 23). I found these two chapters the least helpful of the book.

Byrd concluded her work with reflections on discipleship and following Christ, drawing largely from John Calvin, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. She writes, “Stay-at-home moms still want the same things that moms who work outside the home do, and that is to feel that they are contributing to their homes and their communities. Sadly, for the most part I think both groups feel as if they are drowning as they try to pull this off” (HT, 237). In light of that, Byrd reminded me how important it is for husbands, churches, and society at large to encourage the wives and mothers among them to see the eternally significant value that their endeavors possess and produce. Finally, her admonition to singles (HT, 238) was outstanding, urging them not to live it up in selfishness, but rather to prepare for a life of service.

In summary, despite the Two Kingdoms flavor at the end, I found Mrs. Byrd’s approach to be a winsome encouragement to godly femininity. As she stated in the beginning, this was a book for women, and my assessment is that it is a largely helpful one indeed.