

Review: *No Little Women*, by Aimee Byrd (Part 1)

By Mike Myers

In 2016 Aimee Byrd published her third book *No Little Women: Equipping All Women in the Household of God* (NLW). Instead of providing a chapter by chapter summary with comments, I will instead offer a very short introductory summary and move into commendations and critiques. I will follow this review with a second that will take a closer look at Mrs. Byrd's exegetical and methodological issues.

The wording for the title comes from 2 Timothy 3:6, where Paul warns against the subtleties of false teachers who would creep into houses and capture "little women" (*gunaikarion*, also translated silly, weak, gullible). In her own words, here are some keys to understanding her work:

Goal: "This is a book that aims to help the whole church by examining church initiatives for a group that makes up over half of our congregations—the women" (NLW, 11).

Targets: "This book is for competent women who are seeking a better way, as well as for those of you who would like to become more competent, as God has called you to be. This book is also for pastors and elders who would like every member of their church to be well equipped in the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God" (NLW, 14). I would draw the reader's attention to my previous reviews. There I demonstrated that Mrs. Byrd's target audience began with women, moved to both women and men, and now she also seeks to address officers in the church.

Thesis: I found no clearly stated thesis, as such, but the list of questions on page 14 outlines those issues she intended to address.

Commendable Emphases

The topic of *women's ministries* in general and the resources available to them in particular garner significant focus in *No Little Women*. On page 91 Mrs. Byrd voices her reservations for the terminology: "One theological concern that has been nagging away at me is the use of this word *ministry*." I completely agree that assigning this term *ministry* virtually to everyone and everything can deemphasize *the* ordained ministry of the Word and sacrament. If a church decides to have a particular aspect of its overall ministry dedicated to the ladies of the church, I too prefer the phrase women's *initiative*, which she offers as a helpful alternative (NLW, 104). She also rightly decries the often frothy, substance-less, "sentimental drivel" that characterizes *Women's Resources* in Christian publishing (NLW, 19-20, 30, 113-116). Identifying both the appeal and danger of authors like Beth Moore, Jen Hatmaker, Joyce Meyer, and others, Mrs. Byrd warns her readers, "Many of the top selling Christian books appear to have a high view of Scripture, but, once you get past the sparkling endorsements and attractive cover design, they teach extrabiblical revelation, mysticism, New Age spirituality, the prosperity gospel, and just plain bad exposition. These are not harmless books" (NLW, 116). With these points I fully agree.

A second major emphasis that Mrs. Byrd makes is that women of the church ought to read quality content and read it *well*. She graciously saves her readers from the mild torture of having to read Adler and Van Doren's *How to Read a Book* by providing a helpful summary of their suggested approach to reading (NLW, 202-215). I also intend to act on her encouragements for pastors to provide more reading suggestions, book reviews, and even bibliographies for their congregations. God has kindly given our church a treasure trove when it comes to good

literature. Pastors—myself included—need to encourage and direct their people to take up and read good books.

Finally, I was thankful that Mrs. Byrd also spent a significant amount of time urging her readers to love good theology and also carefully to discern false teaching. Her ninth chapter *Honing and Testing our Discernment Skills* provides some helpful questions to ask while reading, especially about the author’s hermeneutical approach, theology, and anthropology. She ends the chapter with a “workshop style” section, in which she provides excerpts from popular authors within Christian publishing with a view to identifying errors in their content and approach.

Critique

Exegesis and Biblical Theology

While discussing the need to guard against bad hermeneutics, Mrs. Byrd rightly identifies a serious problem: “Too often authors will read their own meaning into a text—one that fits their own teaching—rather than studying the passages and submitting to the meaning that is in the text. Often an author makes good and valid points while using poor exposition of Scripture to prove them, and that is a shame...we should never play fast and loose with God’s Word” (NLW, 236-237). Also, “We shouldn’t accept bad theology just for the sake of encouraging women to teach. All teachers should have the same standards for content and methods” (NLW, 149). To these statements I completely agree. Let us see if she follows her own advice.

Mrs. Byrd introduced the discussion of Eve’s failure in the Garden of Eden very briefly on pages 24-25. Instead of going into detail at this point, she opted to outline her understanding of the term *ezer* (a topic I will focus on in the next installment of this review). In this early section she asks, “Why didn’t [Satan] approach Adam? Was it because Eve was more susceptible to error?” Leaving that question unanswered, she seems to pivot to another topic by saying, “He [Satan] went for a target of value to bring about Adam’s fall” (NLW, 24). In chapter three she returns to this subject. There she lists several different points highlighting Eve’s failure, including operating as man’s opponent rather than ally, not warning Adam to turn away from evil, being hospitable to the enemy (see below), misquoting God, and failing to be a cobelligerent with Adam against evil (NLW, 69). While this is not wrong *per se*, most of these emphases are nowhere in the text of Genesis 3. On this side of the Fall, when we read Genesis 3, we are rightly suspicious of the serpent. However, Eve would have had no reason to suspect evil. In other words, in her state of innocence Eve had no inclination to fear, but rather an obligation to obey God.

So what should our first mother have done? Mrs. Byrd actually identifies the right answer in her first book *Housewife Theologian*. There she wrote, commenting on 1 Timothy 2:14-15,

[Paul] 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 (*Housewife Theologian*, 33; emphasis mine).

Eve erred not by failing to be a “cobelligerent with Adam against evil enemies,” but by engaging in this questionable conversation in isolation from the man from whom and for whom she was made (Gen. 2:22). For reasons unknown Mrs. Byrd does not mention 1 Timothy 2 even once in this section. It seems that if her views have not changed, certainly her emphasis has since writing

Housewife Theologian. I believe that this is an example of the author trying to make a point while using poor exposition of Scripture (see warning above).

The novel concept of Eve's failure in showing "hospitality" to the serpent appears again later in the same chapter. Mrs. Byrd tries to stretch her theme from the Garden into the home of Mary and Martha: "Unlike Eve, Martha is hospitable to the good teacher. Jesus doesn't creep into her household, either. Martha invites him" (NLW, 80). A couple paragraphs later, while highlighting the importance of discipleship for women, she brings this strange contrast up again, "Eve wanted to recognize good and evil on her own, so she ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, the one forbidden by the source of Good. Mary sat at the feet of Good and fed on his word" (NLW, 81). Luke 10:38-42 has nothing to do with a strained and forced parallel between Mary, Martha, and Eve, not even by way of contrast. This is simply bad exegesis and a poor attempt at biblical theology.

Representation of Sources

Another major problem in *No Little Women* is Mrs. Byrd's poor representation of sources. I will provide two examples. First, she grossly misrepresents John Piper on pages 139-140. I will cite a somewhat lengthy portion of her own words and then identify the problems:

There has been some troubling teaching under the banner of biblical manhood and womanhood that concerns me. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that all women submit to all men. So why would we teach that 'at the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's differing relationships'? I am not constantly looking for male leadership in my life. I am a married woman and a member of a church, and I understand the order needed in a household, but male leadership does not define my femininity. I'm not looking to my male neighbors, coworkers, or mail carriers to nurture their leadership. This kind of teaching perpetuates a constant authority/submission dynamic between men and women that can be very harmful. And because of it, there have been even stranger applications, such as why it would be ok for a man to ask directions from a housewife in her backyard if he were lost. Why would this even be a question? (NLW, 139-140)

First, John Piper *does not* teach that all women should submit to all men. While Mrs. Byrd does not explicitly claim that he does, the proximity of her statement to his words (in quotes above) leads the reader to think otherwise. The section in quotes is Dr. Piper's own "description" of womanhood from *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (BMW). In that book, Dr. Piper proceeds to explain what he means, and what he does not mean, over the course of six pages (46-52). All the while, he qualifies by saying his definition "is not exhaustive. There is more to femininity, but not less" (BMW, 46). Mrs. Byrd's immediate criticism seems either to misunderstand or to disregard Dr. Piper's words. He clearly says not to look for male leadership *generally*, but from *worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's differing relationships*. He never speaks of nurturing a mail carrier's leadership. Finally, the strawman she produces about the housewife's directions completely misconstrues Dr. Piper's words. He mentions this by way of illustration, not by forceful application. Here are his own words:

"To illustrate: it is simply impossible that from time to time a woman not be put in a position of influencing and guiding men. For example, a housewife in her backyard may be asked by a man how to get to the freeway...She has superior knowledge that the man needs and he submits himself to her guidance. But we all know that there is a way for that housewife to direct the man that neither of them feels their mature femininity or masculinity compromised" (BMW, 50).

Dr. Piper simply outlines how to exercise courtesy and preserve basic human dignity in the varying interactions and relations between the sexes. In fact, he states this explicitly: “I have in mind culturally appropriate expressions of respect for his kind of strength, and glad acceptance of his gentlemanly courtesies” (BMW, 50). Sadly, Mrs. Byrd’s caricature here is very misleading and grossly inaccurate (she repeats this in *Why Can We Be Friends?*, 25 and *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 22).

A second example of either dishonest or sloppy source work is Mrs. Byrd’s fanciful writing about Priscilla via John Calvin. Priscilla and Aquila are a wonderful example of a Christian couple dedicated to serving Christ and His Kingdom together. After mentioning their introduction in Acts 18, Mrs. Byrd writes, “From then on, it is interesting to note that this married couple is mentioned with Priscilla’s name first, every time but once.” (NLW, 141). While that sounds quite significant, the reality is far less exciting. All told, Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned only six times together in the Scripture. Three times Aquila is mentioned first. Three times Priscilla is mentioned first. If Mrs. Byrd is referring to occasions outside of Acts 18, then yes, she is correct: every time but once Priscilla is mentioned first—all two times (Rom 16:3 and 2 Tim 4:19).

Later when discussing their crucial instruction to Apollos, she writes, “Priscilla did not have an attitude to subvert his role as a preacher and take his position. But she played a major role as a necessary ally to help this preacher. And he listened to her. Calvin goes so far as to say: ‘One of the chief teachers of the Church was instructed by a woman’” (NLW, 142). As I pointed out [here](#), Calvin clearly emphasizes the humility of Apollos, and rightly so. However, Mrs. Byrd fails to report what he says *in the very next sentence*, “Notwithstanding, we must remember that Priscilla did execute this function of teaching at home in her own house, that she might not overthrow **the order prescribed by God and nature**” (Calvin’s Comments, Acts 18:26, emphasis mine). The reader can find more inaccurate uses of Priscilla on pages 182 and 200. For the sake of space, I have limited my examples to her misuse of John Piper and Priscilla (and Calvin). This demonstrates what I believe is an underlying problem in Mrs. Byrd’s work, namely, unfair, inaccurate, and even blatantly dishonest representation of source material.

Why have I taken the time to identify and outline these problems in *No Little Women*? First, I believe that this book demonstrates the product of a significant shift in Mrs. Byrd’s emphases and thinking. I mentioned this turning point at the end of my second review. Second, I write these reviews in response to Mrs. Byrd’s own request to be taken seriously. She wrote:

“So often, the theology of women such as these [Aimee McPherson, Sarah Young, Beth Moore, and others] is not critiqued because we don’t want to hurt feelings. Somehow, it comes off as not nice to critique a woman’s teaching. Well, that isn’t taking women seriously, either. It is not insulting to point out error. What is unloving is giving a teacher license to teach falsely because you like her personality, because you want to believe that it’s true, or, worse, because you don’t want to engage critically with a woman. Teachers will be accountable before God for what we say, so we should want to correct them” (NLW, 149-150).

My next review will demonstrate Mrs. Byrd’s faulty exegesis and understanding of the term *ezer* and also what I believe to be the most significant deficiency in this book.