

## **Review: *Recovering From Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, by Aimee Byrd**

By Mike Myers

In 2020 Zondervan Academic published Aimee Byrd's fifth book, *Recovering From Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: How the Church Needs to Rediscover Her Purpose*. Here is a basic overview of the major points of the book:

**Purpose:** “This isn’t a man-bashing book. And this isn’t a woman-empowerment book. This is a book that appeals to the reader to look at the yellow wallpaper in the church and to do something about it...One of our biggest challenges is to actually see this yellow wallpaper’s scrawling patterns that are stifling the force of the biblical message and strangling the church’s witness and growth. Don’t we want to rip those away and reveal the beauty and unity in God’s Word?” (19).<sup>1</sup> Later she writes, “I am writing because we need to recover a better way. We need to peel off this yellow wallpaper and reveal our true biblical aim. We are not directed to biblical manhood nor biblical womanhood; we are directed to Christ. Our aim is to behold Christ, as his bride, as fellow sons in the Son” (132).

**Target:** “[Charlotte Perkins] Gilman had her doctor in mind when she wrote her novella. She intended to open his eyes to this problem. But he refused to acknowledge her. I too hope to get the attention of a specific audience—church leaders, the ones entrusted with shepherding God's people, the ones who can prescribe a better approach, the ones who can lead the way forward to a richer culture in God's household” (19)

**Thesis:** After a gross mischaracterization of John Piper on page 22 (see *No Little Women*, 139-140 and *Why Can't We Be Friends*, 25), she writes, “This kind of teaching chokes the growth of God’s people. Certainly plenty of Christians disagree with this extreme of so-called manhood and womanhood. And yet it goes unchallenged and continues to cover the walls in many evangelical churches. It is also showcased in more nuanced ways that are *dull enough to confuse the eye in following*. And that is what I hope to address in this book” (22-23). In a [related blog post](#), Mrs. Byrd concisely summarizes her thesis: “...a contemporary movement has damaged the way that we disciple men and women in the church.” This book was her effort to highlight this while “focusing on the way we read scripture, the way we view discipleship, and our responsibilities to one another.”

Notably, this is the first book Mrs. Byrd has authored that included a disclaimer like this, “Of course, the opinions in the book are my own and do not represent my church or my session” (12). In this review, I will focus upon the origin and meaning of ‘yellow wallpaper’ and identify two serious categories of concern.

### **The Yellow Wallpaper**

Both on its cover and throughout its contents, this book prominently features yellow wallpaper. For this reason, grasping the meaning of yellow wallpaper symbolism—whatever it is—is essential to understanding Mrs. Byrd’s argument.

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<sup>1</sup> All unmarked page numbers in parentheses are from *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

In 1892 early [feminist](#) and eventual [lesbian](#) Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a quasi-autobiographical novella entitled “The Yellow Wallpaper.”<sup>2</sup> Through it Ms. Gilman criticized the stupidity—and I concur with her assessment—of a treatment regimen a physician had prescribed to treat her neurasthenia and depression. The fictional account narrates the experience of a woman confined to a large attic nursery who was treated in a condescending, patronizing manner. Forbidden from intellectual stimulation, separated from her baby and human interaction, she spends her time gazing at the walls covered with obnoxious yellow wallpaper. Eventually the woman—named Jane—peels all the paper off, releasing a figure trapped behind it. Horrified, the husband John faints, and the story ends with Jane crawling over him as she bizarrely creeps around the room. Mrs. Byrd calls the short work “a brilliant and disturbing exploration of the effects patriarchal attitudes and constrictions have on female psychosynthesis” (15).

Why does Mrs. Byrd focus upon yellow wallpaper? She asks this herself, “As an emancipated woman living in the twenty-first century, why am I so fixated on [it]?” (18). She sees it “as a result of the fall,” claims it is difficult to notice, and associates it with stereotypes that confine and hurt both men and women (18-19, 229). “It goes unchallenged” despite hanging on the walls of “many evangelical churches” (23), is something related to patriarchy that Ruth and Naomi help us to see (56); even Boaz helps to rip it down (59). Pulling it down reveals both “true complementarity of the sexes” and “our true biblical aim” (92, 132), but its existence has taken a toll on many with whom Mrs. Byrd has interacted (131). Here is what she writes on pages 168-169:

“I explained how easy it is to look outside of the church when we don’t feel invested in as disciples, when we aren’t being trained well to mature in the faith, and when we are stifled in contributing as active traditioners and reciprocal voices. However, both men and women are frequently placed in rooms with yellow wallpaper in the parachurch as well. Parachurch often reinforces bad gender tropes, outfitting and amplifying many of the divisions between men and women in the church...And it’s interesting to note the contradiction between the individualistic culture in which the biblical manhood and womanhood movement is thriving with its Biblicist interpretive methods, and the traditional values of family and community that CBMW is trying to uphold.

She encourages her readers to look for yellow wallpaper in their own churches and do the hard work of peeling it off despite potential difficulties: “And you don’t want to lose church members over it. Heck, you don’t want to lose your own job over it. As one man said, ‘It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!’” (227-228). Later she writes, “Here’s a yellow wallpaper spotting question: Are the women in your church the only ones learning about submission?” She then quotes Andrew Bartlett, “believers are called not to rule over other people but to be the ‘slave’ of all” (230).

So what does it mean? In order to understand Gilman’s usage of the yellow wallpaper metaphor, I have provided some excerpts from [The Yellow Wallpaper](#), emphases in **bold** are all mine:

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted **to get out** (139)...Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over...in the very shady spots **she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard** (143)...As soon as it was moonlight, and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. **I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled**, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper...I’ve got a rope

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<sup>2</sup> This [video](#) provides a helpful ten minute summary and analysis.

up here that even Jennie did not find. **If that woman does get out**, and tries to get away, I can tie her! (145)...“What is the matter?” he [John, the husband] cried “...what are you doing?” I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. ‘**I’ve got out at last,**’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane! And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, **so you can’t put me back!**’ Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!” (147).

In the [blog](#) post I cited above, Mrs. Byrd wrote,

“The yellow wallpaper is not a ‘feminist image,’ it is a metaphor in a book. A feminist wrote the book. I’m a writer. The yellow wallpaper provided a brilliant metaphor for how we need to identify and peel back (not break through) some damaging teaching in the church. I don’t understand the sensitivity over borrowing a metaphor.”

First, although Mrs. Byrd claims yellow wallpaper “is not a feminist image”, even very basic and popular-level analyses call Gilman’s work “[a feminist literary classic](#)” and “[a mainstay of feminist literary study](#)”? Second, Mrs. Byrd did not merely borrow the metaphor, she covered and filled her book with it. Third, in Gilman’s novella the tearing away of the yellow wallpaper is not concerned with exposing something unseen—like bad teaching—but with liberating that which is confined. Mrs. Byrd claims it does not mean ‘break through.’ I simply ask the reader to consider the three previous paragraphs and decide for yourself. I will return to this theme in part two of my review.

## Two Serious Concerns

In responding to some critical [questions](#) about her work, Mrs. Byrd [said](#),

“I wrote a book highlighting how a contemporary movement has damaged the way that we disciple men and women in the church, focusing on the way we read scripture, the way we view discipleship, and our responsibilities to one another. I wanted to offer an alternative resource that is faithful to Scripture.”

Is this work faithful to Scripture?

## Questions of Canonicity

Simply defined, the term ‘canon’ means rule or standard. Respecting Scripture, ‘canon’ refers to the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, “which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life” (2 Timothy 3:15-16, Westminster Confession of Faith 1.2). Scripture possesses self-attesting authority. In other words, the source of authority for Scripture is God alone. He needs to say nothing more than “Thus says the Lord” for His Word to be authoritative. God took well over a millennium to commit the entirety of His written Word to the church. Guided and enabled by the Holy Spirit, the covenant people heard His voice, followed Him, and would eventually recognize the inherent authority and truth of the sixty-six books of Scripture.

Mrs. Byrd introduces the topic of canonicity on page 37. Her goal is to prove that women had a part to play in the formation of the canon and that the Bible is neither a ‘patriarchal construction’ nor ‘androcentric’ (42). Later she writes, “Early in Scripture we see that the canon of God’s Word was not merely assembled by the most powerful male voices. Women too were

involved in the process of canonical selection” (45). Relying heavily on Christa McKirland, Mrs. Byrd presents Huldah as exhibit A: “Here we have a prophetess who is described as ‘arguably the first person to grant authoritative status to the Torah scroll deposited in the temple treasury,’ authenticating the Word of God largely accepted as the heart of the book of Deuteronomy” (46). She repeats the substance of this comment later, assuming its accuracy, on page 64.

No one grants authoritative status to Scripture. No one—man or woman—authenticates the Word of God. Only God does. The way Mrs. Byrd uses these words has no place in a proper understanding of the authority of God’s Word. It runs directly against WCF 1.4, which states “The authority of Holy Scripture...dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof.” Did God bless, honor, and use Huldah in her ministry to Josiah in those dark days of Judah? Indeed He did. But Huldah herself would recoil at the prospect of “granting authoritative status” to Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy had authoritative status the moment Moses put the words on the scroll. It has ever since.

Christians do not need to be embarrassed that God predominantly used men to write Scripture. Even in spoken, revelatory prophecy, women were a very small exception, which in fact proves the rule. Even so, the concepts of androcentrism (34, 42, 51, 64, 68, etc.) and gynocentric interruptions (51, 59-60, 68, 70) when discussing Scripture is unnecessary. God’s Word is pervasively christocentric and overarchingly theocentric. Here is a far better approach to God’s Word and the message it communicates, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?” (1 Corinthians 3:5). Who was Ruth, Boaz, Josiah, Huldah, Phoebe? They were trophies of grace and servants of the same. Their gifts, calling, and contributions to the Kingdom were different. They shared the desire to honor God and the Kingdom of His Son, but each had different contributions to make. Although Mrs. Byrd “wanted to offer an alternative resource that is faithful to Scripture,” my assessment is that instead she undercut the doctrine of Scripture itself.

### **Critical Influences**

My second serious concern with Mrs. Byrd’s fifth book is that it begins to adopt some methods of [critical theory](#) and clearly depends upon critical scholarship.

One feature of critical theory is “Standpoint Epistemology.” In his book *Why Social Justice is Not Biblical Justice*, Scott David Allen identifies three pillars of this unbiblical theory of knowledge: “1) knowledge is socially situated, 2) marginalized groups have an advantage in being able to spot biases that the dominant group cannot see, and 3) knowledge should be built upon the marginalized perspectives” (Allen, 82). Allow me to explain how Mrs. Byrd’s reliance on this theory becomes apparent in *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* by providing just one example (for others see pages 41-45, 51, 68, 145, 160).

Quoting Carolyn Custis James, Mrs. Byrd argues that part of the purpose of the book of Ruth is to place...

“‘a spotlight on the plight of women in the world for the whole church to learn.’ It is a corrective voice. Ruth and Naomi help us to see the yellow wallpaper. The widow and the barren woman are made visible to us. And yet ‘patriarchy is not the Bible’s message. Rather, it is the cultural backdrop against which the gospel message of Jesus stands out in sharpest relief.’”

She begins the next paragraph with, “Often we need a different set of eyes to show us our blind spots” (56). While that latter comment sounds innocuous, perhaps even necessary, it is simply a [motte](#) in the middle of Mrs. Byrd’s bailey.

A believer needs the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture. We do not need *voices* of men or women, nor does special knowledge arise from the marginalized or oppressed. By that I mean, we do not ultimately need their subjective experience or perspective to know objective truth sufficiently. Such perspectives may shed some light or provide unique applications, but it is not fundamentally necessary. What all sinners need is the Spirit to illumine their way to Christ, opening the objective truths of Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:14). The Lord powerfully uses the ministry of the Word to do this. Ministers do not derive their authority and usefulness in ministry from of their masculinity, but from the calling and blessing of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). It is not about female *voices* or male *voices*. It is about fidelity to the Spirit-inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God.

Mrs. Byrd also relies heavily on critical scholarship. In July 2020, Denny Burk called her book “a way-station to egalitarianism.” In his [review](#) he detailed not only her significant interaction with liberal/egalitarian writers, but also how she frequently employs their positions without criticism. For the sake of space, I refer the reader [there](#) for a detailed account of how significantly this influenced her work. But there is more. I have already discussed the extremely dangerous departure from orthodox canonicity above. Mrs. Byrd also seems to adopt critical scholarly views of Scripture itself.

For example, Mrs. Byrd tries to argue that Eve’s addition to God’s Word in Genesis 3:2-3 actually helps us see “more of the story behind the story” (207). Depending on P. Wayne Townsend, she argues, “Given this context for Genesis and the writer's familiarity with the Sinai law, we see that although ‘do not touch’ is not part of the prohibition God spoke to Adam, Eve is expanding on the story” (208). Not only is her explanation of this passage unfounded, note the nod to critical scholarship: “The writer’s familiarity with Sinai law.” Moses wrote the Law from Sinai; of course he had an intimate familiarity with it...unless that too is up for debate.

The Apostle Paul warned the Colossians, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Reflecting on this, John Calvin wrote, “He intimates, accordingly, that we who are the sheep of Christ repose in safety when we hold the unity of the faith, while, on the other hand, he likens the false apostles to plunderers that carry us away from the folds. Would you then be reckoned as belonging to Christ’s flock? Would you remain in his folds? **Do not deviate a nail’s breadth from purity of doctrine.** For unquestionably Christ will act the part of the good Shepherd by protecting us if we but **hear his voice**, and reject those of strangers” (emphasis mine). In my opinion, this book deviates far more than “a nail’s breadth” from the purity of the doctrine of God’s Word.

In part two I will discuss Mrs. Byrd’s treatment of Junia and Phoebe and close by outlining what I believe is the ultimate effect of *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.