
**A Review of Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women*.
New York: Howard Books, 2013. 256 pp. \$14.99.**

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Much has been said about feminism over the years. From non-Christians to Christians, people from varying walks of life claim feminism as their own. Sarah Bessey, however, is making a new claim: Jesus was a feminist.

In her new book, *Jesus Feminist*, Bessey argues that feminism finds its home in Christ (14). The book is a departure from the more typical didactic approach to talking about the gender debate. *Jesus Feminist* is Bessey's story. It's an account about how she learned to love God's people and live out her Christian life. It's also a story about how she came to see her feminism as part of her love for Jesus.

The Good

Perhaps no issue can get blood boiling in the church like feminism can. *Jesus Feminist*, however, avoids the rancor. Bessey is gracious in her tone. She doesn't resort to name calling. She seems to be genuinely humble about her view of women's roles in the church, home, and abroad. Even as someone who disagreed with her conclusions, I greatly appreciated her tone. In fact, I felt like she was someone I could have a conversation with about this issue without finding myself in the middle of a heated argument (48). I hope I can do that with her in person someday.

Unlike a lot of women who embrace feminism, Bessey came by it naturally. She didn't have a great awakening after years in an ultra-conservative church. Feminism is a part of her. So, in many ways, she is an outsider looking in on complementarianism. This perspective gives her some helpful insights. She asks some good questions and complementarians would do well to listen carefully. For example, in her early days in ministry she struggled with the typical generalizations of how men and women

operate (44–45). When she struggled to conceive, her heart ached as she heard sermons about being a “real woman”—i.e. having children (72). Bessey wonders if there is another way to talk about men and women, in a way that does not reduce their “realness” to marriage and children. I agree. Womanhood is not only about bearing children and loving a husband. If it were, then millions of women would be alienated from God's design. I don't think, however, that feminism is the answer.

Nothing New Under the Sun

For a book that is promoted as innovative, Bessey doesn't really say anything that hasn't already been said. While she is writing for a more mainstream audience, rather than the halls of academia—where so much of the debate has been housed in years past—I was a little surprised that she relied so heavily on the work of other egalitarians. I wrongly assumed that her book was embarking in new territory, but was reminded again that there really is nothing new under the sun. She cites William Webb's “redemptive movement hermeneutic” as an important way to read Peter and Paul (28).¹ When interpreting Paul's exhortation for women to be silent in church, she says that Paul was actually speaking against disorder and disruption from women who have never been allowed in such places until now (66). In talking about submission, she uses the egalitarian teaching on mutual submission to show that God's plan for marriage is for men and women to lead together (71–84). In many ways, the book compiles the various voices of egalitarianism and shows how she made them her own. Not a bad thing at all, especially if her goal is to help other women see that they can claim these voices as their own. But in

terms of innovation, the book doesn't present a lot by way of new ideas.

Broad Strokes and a Story

Bessey hurts her argument by painting complementarianism with such a broad brush. In her chapter on women in ministry, she reduces women's ministry to craft parties and fashion shows (125). This section seemed a little unfair to the countless women's ministries that are actually seeking to help women grow in their love for the Lord. Women like Susan Hunt and Nancy Leigh DeMoss have spent their lives working hard to help women love the Bible, love other women, and love what it means to be a woman. While (regretfully) some women's ministries can be shallow, it is a straw-man argument to speak of all women's ministry in this way.

Also, while Bessey spends a great deal of time interacting with other egalitarians, she spends virtually no time interacting with complementarians. She just presents her position as absolute fact with no room for disagreement; from a woman's ability to preach and teach (69), to the absurdity of women submitting to their husbands (72, 83). Her argument would have been strengthened by actually interacting with complementarians instead of interacting with stereotypes and fringe arguments.

Perhaps the most troubling, and most intriguing, part of Bessey's book is that she relies heavily on her own story—a story I loved reading. In some ways, she is the complete opposite of me. And that fascinated me. But in others, I found a deep connection. Like Bessey, I have faced pregnancy loss and the deep ache of wondering if I would ever bear children (106–121). I wrestled with finding my place as a woman when I wasn't yet married or couldn't yet bear children. But I came to very different conclusions.

As I already said, Bessey asks some very important questions that complementarians would do well to think about. Womanhood can't be reduced to a neat little box or checklist anymore than the Christian life can. But by relying on her own story and the stories of others she makes it very hard to disagree with her. Story is important. Story moves us. But story isn't absolute truth. Our experiences

don't make things right and true—even with the best of intentions.

Bessey would like for us all to get along with regard to the gender debate. I agree. Fighting words don't serve anyone. But at some point we have to agree to disagree and recognize that this is an area where we are not unified. Complementarians and egalitarians can both love the lost, proclaim the gospel, and serve in ministry but at the end of the day I do not see how we can do that together. The main premise of Bessey's book is that Jesus thinks women are people, too. I'm glad. So do I. Yet we see the application of equality differently.

Bessey has started a helpful dialogue. I hope that the tenor with which she has written this book provides a model for similar conversations in the future. While there really is nothing new under the sun, complementarians can all agree that we have not yet arrived and always need to understand more fully how God would have us live. While I appreciated Bessey's tone and humility, I am still not convinced that becoming a feminist helps us along that path.

ENDNOTES

¹William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).