

Effortless Egalitarianism

By Joanne Nystrom

Gordon D. Fee, Ph.D., is professor of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. A noted New Testament scholar and author, Fee has also written *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, which is available from CBE's book store.

The debate surrounding women in ministry is often accompanied with emphatic discussions and poignant testimonies. Noted New Testament scholar Dr. Gordon Fee merely shrugs his shoulders.

"This is a non-issue for me, because I was born and raised in a tradition where God obviously gifted people who were male and female."

Now professor of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, Fee was raised in the Pentecostal tradition, where both women and men served in every aspect of ministry, including the roles of pastor, missionary and prophet.

Fee remembers one couple in particular who were long-term missionaries in Indonesia who visited his church when they were on furlough.

"He was a good missionary and a great worker, but when it came to declaring," Fee said, "she was the preacher — a superb preacher, and far more articulate than he."

As his parents also held each other in high regard, Fee said there was never a controversy about the ways in which women could minister and serve in the home or church.

It wasn't until Fee began teaching at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston that he was drawn into the controversy about women in ministry. He was asked to sit on a panel with three other evangelical scholars discussing the issue.

At his chance to speak, Fee began by saying that he was born and raised in a tradition in which God obviously gifted both men and women. "That caused us to read texts like 1 Timothy 2 in light of what God had done," he added.

A well-known evangelical scholar who was also on the panel strongly criticized Fee for reading the text out of experience.

"The thing that bothers me [about] what you've just done," Fee replied, "is that you read the text out of your experience in the church as well, which doesn't have women in ministry. [You] don't recognize that you're even more conditioned by your culture than I am."

Responding to this kind of criticism, which Fee says he encounters regularly, is something he would rather not devote his time to. "I'm just not of a kind that's going to spend a lot of time fighting windmills," he said.

Fee was unable to avoid controversy though, when the public and press discovered Zondervan and the International Bible Society (IBS) were intending to publish an updated version of the NIV Bible approximately four years ago. One aspect of the new version was gender accurate language in reference to the people of God.

As a member of the New Testament team of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation, Fee suddenly found himself in the midst of a Bible battle. Beginning with its March 29, 1997 issue, *World* magazine led a critique of the new translation, calling it "the Stealth Bible" and "gender neutral." Others quickly joined in criticizing the translation.

"I still have a lot of pain about that," said Fee. "I am still having difficulty with the deliberate deceit ... that the *World* magazine did. And certain people allowed themselves to get caught into that, and without talking to us at all, called what we were doing into question."

Because of the pressure applied by the Bible's opponents, Zondervan and IBS made the decision not to publish the Bible in the United States. The New International Version, Inclusive Language Edition (NIVI), is currently being published in the United Kingdom by Hodder & Stoughton.

"My problem with that whole thing was that this was being driven by the market, not by scholarship, not

by integrity," said Fee, "and we were trying to do our work with great integrity as scholars."

"It's an unfortunate piece of American church history," he added. "It says something far more about a community driven by fear than by grace, and when people are driven by fear, they do things that grace would never allow them to do."

While Fee continues to serve on the Committee on Bible Translation, his recent work has included the book *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Eerdmans 2000). This book is a collection of essays, many of which appeared first in other publications.

While the essays address issues like wealth and possessions, worship and the church's global mission, two of the essays focus on women in ministry. One addresses hermeneutics relating to women in ministry, and another the question of gender issues and Paul, which was first given as a class lecture at Regent College.

By addressing this issue in lectures and other formats, Fee said he is seen as an advocate for women in ministry, but this advocacy is sometimes misunderstood.

"I care about the women who have been gifted very, very deeply," he said. "But my advocacy is not so much on their behalf, as it is on the behalf of the Holy Spirit in the church."

"God was there before me," he concluded. "To those whom he has gifted, who am I to say, 'God, you have to take this gift back.'"

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