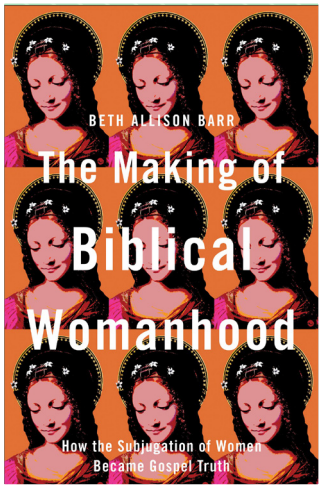
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Rev. Dr. Meredith Stone



The Making of Biblical Womanhood

By Beth Allison Barr

Overview

The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth by Dr. Beth Allison Barr explores the historical developments which led to modern evangelicalism's prioritization of the theology of male headship and female subjugation (sometimes called complementarianism).

Barr, associate professor of history and associate dean of the Graduate School at Baylor University, weaves often-unheard narratives of women in Christian history and Christian history's effects on women with personal anecdotes from her own story as a former Southern Baptist. She describes how she, as a Southern Baptist youth pastor's wife, struggled with the enforcement of women's subjugation in the churches she and her husband served, how she came to reject the concept of "biblical womanhood," how her husband was fired because of their beliefs regarding the equality of men and women, and why she ultimately decided she could no longer be silent about patriarchy and its abuses.

As a scholar of Christian history, Barr's argument is that the evangelical concept of "biblical womanhood" is not actually biblical, but instead arose from movements in history. She contends that patriarchy is not God's intention for humanity, but is the result of socio-cultural factors and institutional changes in the Christian church.

Beginning with the Bible itself, in chapters one and two, Barr's argument traces perspectives on some of the biblical texts which have been used to justify male headship and female submission. She contends that despite evangelicalism's argument that patriarchy is embedded within creation itself, patriarchy is actually the result of sin and not part of God's design for humanity. Moving on to deal with Pauline texts, Barr demonstrates how complementarians may be reading Paul incorrectly. She provides convincing evidence from Paul's own writings, as well as examples from the Greco-Roman world which Paul seems to refute, in order to demonstrate that Paul was actually a supporter of women in ministry and leadership roles in the early church.

In chapters three through seven, Barr presents examples from Christian history which trace the emergence of "biblical womanhood" and how it became sanctified by evangelicals as a necessary doctrine. Beginning with the medieval church, she shows how opportunities for women waned as the church moved to centralize its authority through an ordained and celibate priesthood. Subsequently, the Reformation brought additional diminishment of women. Though the removal of the priesthood would have seemed an opportune time to promote spiritual equality among men and women, the movement instead reinformed patriarchy by replacing the priesthood with the primacy of the family under the husband/father's authority. English Bible translations produced under the Reformation further advanced the elevation of male headship through "falsely universal language" (using "man/mankind" to refer to all people), and inserted early modern English ideas about marriage into the biblical text. Then, as the Industrial Revolution swept the modern world and moved work from the household into the public sphere, the "cult of domesticity" emerged to keep

women at home and out of the work force. These ideas were sanctified by the church and adapted into the concept of "biblical womanhood." The more recent evangelical concepts of the inerrancy of scripture and the "eternal subordination of the Son," were also key ideas which helped evangelicals baptize "biblical womanhood" as an inviolable doctrine.

Throughout Barr's historical re-telling of the effects of Christian history on women, she consistently demonstrates that despite subjugation and oppression, women continually adapted to patriarchy's ever-changing shape and found ways to minister, preach and lead.

In chapter eight, Barr closes the book by making a personal appeal for women and men to stand together in opposition to the ideas, language and actions of the evangelical church which assert power over women. Jesus' ministry was never about power over anyone, but always set women and others free. It's time for all those who follow Christ to do the same.

Rev. Dr. Meredith Stone is Executive Director of Baptist Women in Ministry. She has previously served as Associate Dean for Academics and Assistant Professor of Scripture and Ministry at Logsdon Seminary of Hardin-Simmons University and as an ordained minister in the roles of Teaching Pastor and Interim Pastor for Emerging Adults in Baptist congregations in Texas, as well as Women in Ministry Specialist for Texas Baptists. Stone is a graduate of Hardin-Simmons University (B.A., M.A.) and earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Biblical Interpretation from Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. She lives in Abilene, Texas, with her husband, James, and two daughters.

Book Discussion Questions

Chapter One

- Just as Barr's experiences as a pastor's wife and scholar led her to reject male headship and female submission, what experiences have prompted you to examine views on the roles and equality of women?
- If patriarchy exists in the Bible because the Bible was written in a patriarchal world, what are some other foundational concepts of our faith that might be connected to the world(s) in which biblical texts were written?
- How did you receive Barr's reading of the creation stories to reveal equality for women and men? How might this reading affect other ways we understand the nature of humanity in relationship with God?

Chapter Two

- Barr interprets Paul's writings about the role of women and his mention of women co-workers to present a case that Paul actually affirmed women's equality. Do you agree with her assessment of Paul's writings? Why or why not?
- If Paul actually never intended women's subjugation and there is evidence of women leading and ministering in the earliest congregations, why do you think the church moved toward patriarchal attitudes so quickly?

Chapter Three

- Which of the stories of women in medieval Christian history did you find remarkable?
- How might we recover some of the gifts of women's leadership and ministry (though sparse) in the pre-Reformation church in our own congregations and practice of faith?
- Barr presents the conundrum of the early church surrounding Mary Magdalene (either she was a preacher or had to be explained away, p. 110). If we reject women's subjugation and the evangelical notion of "biblical womanhood," is there anything that we have to explain away?

Chapter Four

- Barr describes how the Reformation could have promoted women's spiritual equality with men, but instead reenforced patriarchy by exchanging the authority of the priest for the authority of husbands. What would the church look like today if the Reformers had chosen equality for women over heightened patriarchal structures?
- How has the Reformation and evangelical elevation of marriage and family as priorities for women affected you and/or the women around you?
- Barr states that when power structures and centralized authorities are diminished, women thrive (140). In this vein, she describes how the mission field became an opportunity for women to lead and minister. Are there ways in which we might de-centralize aspects of congregational and denominational life in order to create systems in which women might thrive?

Chapter Five

- Why is language (both in the Bible and in our speech patterns) so important?
- Barr explains how biblical translations have been operative in enforcing and maintaining male headship and women's subjugation among evangelicals. With this knowledge of how translations can be manipulated by the ideology of the translators, how does this affect our views on how we read and interpret the Bible in general?
- Do you think our congregations should adopt particular biblical translations or use only gender-inclusive language in public worship? If not, why not? If so, how might we go about effecting that kind of change (assuming it would be a change for your congregation)?

Chapter Six

- Barr describes how "biblical womanhood" is more the result of the "cult of domesticity" and the move of work from the home to the public sphere in the Industrial Revolution than it is derived from scripture. If you did create a more "biblical" picture of womanhood, what would it look like?
- In the post-Reformation time frame, a woman's holiness moved from being outside the marriage state (virgin) to being inside a marriage/family relationship. How does this faulty notion of a women's holiness as exclusively tied to her sexuality affect women?
- "Women adapt to the ever-changing rules of patriarchy" (201). How have post-modern women in the 21st century adapted to the ever-changing rules of patriarchy?

Chapter Seven

- Barr adapts a saying from the movie *The Usual Suspects* to be, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing Christians that oppression is godly" (205). How have you seen oppression at work in Christianity of the past and present? Who are the people most hurt by Christianity's oppressions?
- Barr states how the concept of biblical inerrancy has contributed to the sanctification of women's subjugation. What are other ways insistence on inerrancy has corrupted the ways in which evangelical Christianity is practiced today?
- The inconsistency of Arianism and the eternal subordination of the Son in contrast to orthodox understandings of the Trinity are highlighted by Barr as she demonstrates the effects of this bad theology on complementarianism. How have you experienced, heard, or seen non-Trinitarian theology in the practice of faith around you?

Chapter Eight

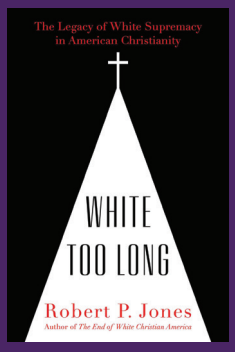
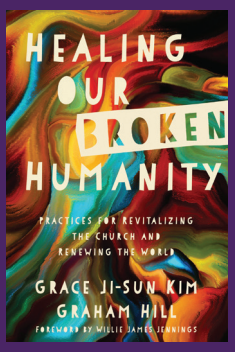
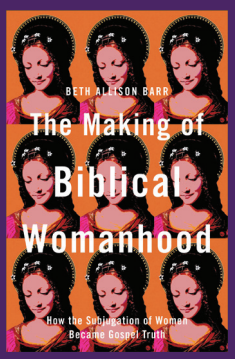
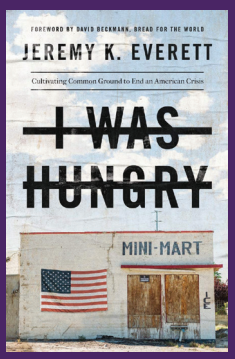
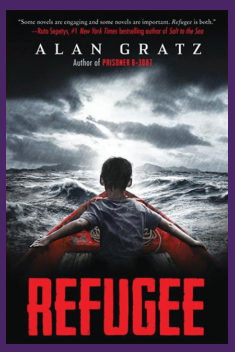
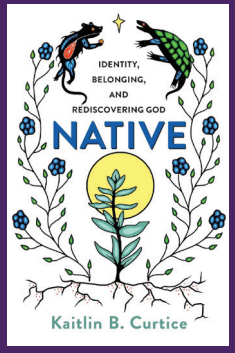
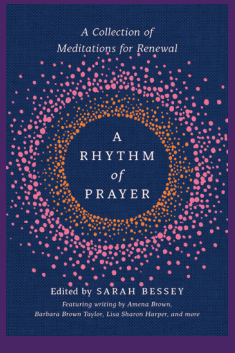
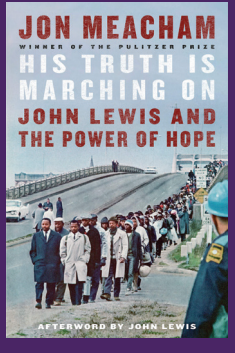
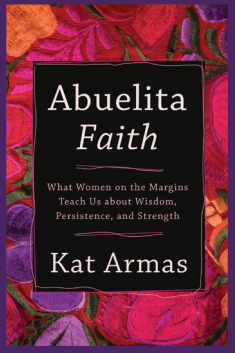
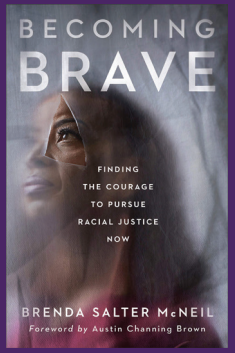
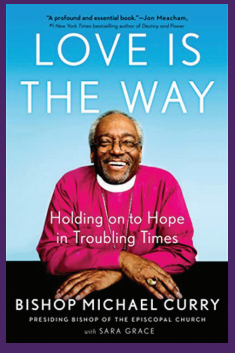
- In the same way in which Barr courageously describes her experience of patriarchy as contributing to abuse, how have you experienced patriarchy and theologies of male headship in abusive ways?
- Barr states, "Patriarchy walks hand in hand with racism, and it always has" (246). How would you respond to this statement?
- What are some practical ways in which we can work to dismantle patriarchy's hold on our congregational structures? More than simply empowering women to preach (though we should absolutely do that!), how can we liberate all the women in our congregations from patriarchal ideologies, attitudes, policies and structures?

Next Steps

If you are interested in learning more about the liberation of women from the notion of "biblical womanhood" and taking action in your own congregation, here are some potential next steps.

- Get involved with the work of Baptist Women in Ministry (*https://bwim.info/*), both at the national and state levels.
- Read further on the subject of women in the Bible, women in ministry, realities of bias against women in the workplace, and the oppression of women worldwide:
    - Meredith Stone, A Baptist Reflection on the Bible and Women in Ministry and Leadership, A Brief Booklet by Baptist Women in Ministry (2019) – *https://bwim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/A-Baptist-Reflection-on-the-Bible-Women-in-Ministry-and-Leadership-by-Meredith-Stone-1.pdf*
    - Alice Mathews, *Gender Roles and the People of God: Rethinking What We Were Taught About Men and Women in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).
    - Karoline Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016).
    - Elizabeth Flowers and Karen Seat, eds., *A Marginal Majority: Women, Gender, and a Reimagining of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021).
    - Joanne Lipman, *That's What She Said: What Men and Women Need to Know About Working Together* (New York: William Morrow, 2018).
    - Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).
- Visit with your pastor and church leadership about the structures in your congregation that might be limiting or subjugating women.

CBF Book Club 2021-22

We're excited to announce selections for this year's book club. With new subjects, great authors, more comprehensive reading guides and Fellowship-wide virtual events. We invite you and your congregation, Sunday school class or small group to join us as we read and learn together.

Learn more at ***www.cbf.net/books***.