

Biblical Feminism Inspired by 19th Century Missionary Movements, Says Haddad

In a Thursday evening, February 1 lecture heavily laced with biblical, theological, and historical references, the President of Christians for Biblical Equality asserted that it is inaccurate to say that radical feminists inspired the current wave of biblical feminists. The real inspiration, said Dr. Mimi Haddad, was the “great missionary impulse” of the 19th century.

Dr. Haddad’s lecture in Room 116 of Folwell Hall on the University of Minnesota’s East Bank campus was co-sponsored by Mars Hill Students and the MacLaurin Institute. According to the Institute’s executive director, Dr. Bob Osburn, the Institute recognizes that sincere interpreters of the Bible have come to different conclusions about the roles of women. He did acknowledge, however, that many in the academy have a default assumption that the Bible sees women as inferior and “powerless subjects to a violent and masculine Christian God,” and thus are prone to aggressively dismiss Christian truth claims. Haddad herself began by citing recent encounters with several evangelical female academics who are deeply troubled by the impression that “male headship is required throughout their adult lives”.

Haddad’s lecture surveyed the historical development of Christian views of women. In the first phase, from the time of Emperor Constantine through the early 1800s, women were seen as ontologically, or innately, and functionally inferior to men. This view, which was widely held by the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus, all the way up to the Reformers, like John Calvin, was grounded, said Haddad, in Plato’s idea that men are created by the gods and that women are to be ruled.

Haddad suggested that a review of Christian history up through roughly 1500 reveals the presence of many remarkable women of deep Christian conviction and courage. Many, like Paula (347-404 AD) and Appolonia, who died in 249 AD, were respected leaders in the church, while some, such as Theodora, the empress of the Byzantine Empire, often exercised their leadership.

Haddad only briefly alluded to a third phase in Christian views of women. She said that around 1970 the view emerged that women are ontologically equal, but functionally unequal. She reserved her attention to the second phase, the era of the “great missionary impulse,” from roughly 1808 to 1930. The women in this movement, which was significantly shaped by the revivalism that began in the 1830s, insisted on female equality. According to Haddad, 46 books were written during this period in support of female equality (all from a Christian perspective), which included equality of function in the church. Evangelical leaders of the 19th century, like A.J. Gordon and Fredrick Franson (founder of the Evangelical Free Church) urged women and men alike to the mission field.

According to Haddad, the theological grounding of these “first wave feminists,” which completely precede the radical and secular feminism of the 20th century, was their

identity in Christ. This contrasted with the views of Augustine, Aquinas, and others, which tended to see women's identity wrapped up with the Fall (emergence of human sinfulness), and more recent views that women's functional subordination is grounded in the view that, as a member of the Trinity, Jesus is subordinate to His Father.

Haddad, who holds her Master's degree from Gordon Conwell Seminary and her PhD from the University of Durham, is active in the Evangelical Theological Society and the Lausanne Movement, and was a recent speaker at the Urbana 06 conference in St Louis.