

This book emanates from an American evangelical background – but don't think that tells you all you need to know! There is a lively egalitarian movement amongst north American evangelicals, focussed in the work of Christians for Biblical Equality. Padgett takes on his fellow evangelicals who think women should submit to men as part and parcel of their Christian identity.

The very notion of submission is anathema to some feminist theologians but this book puts up a bold defence of it by arguing that a careful reading of the NT discloses a call to mutual submission in the church – so no sense of headship or hierarchy is entailed.

Chapter 1 sets out a history of the submission doctrine in American evangelicalism. While the personalities Padgett writes about may not be familiar to many UK readers (even evangelical ones), the story is worth hearing for it helps us see how things have developed here. In the course of this discussion, Padgett distinguishes two types of submission. Type 1 is where an inferior submits to a superior, usually involuntarily and always permanently. To use a technical word (which Padgett does not!) it is ontological submission – part of how God has made things. Type 2 submission is where someone voluntarily submits to an equal for a limited time and / or a specific purpose. This is functional subordination. In the church, we are called to submit to each other - preferring the needs of others to our own desires and without some people always being the ones submitted to!

Padgett argues that the NT calls on Christians to practice type 2 within church and never type 1. Type 1 is only encouraged in the later NT writings in so far as Christians submit to government authority etc.. (So this is not about relationships within the church but about living in a secular world). In the Trinity, Jesus submits to the will of the Father as type 2 (temporary, voluntary, between equals) – so the Trinity leads away from male headship not towards it.

The central part of the book is given over to some detailed but accessible discussion of all the usual suspects as regards NT texts – there is much really valuable material here showing that the texts which some use to justify women submitting to men actually imply just the opposite – mutual submission. The last chapter returns to practical concerns.

This is a very helpful, clear and readable book which is based on careful scholarship and which could help us in our dialogue with so-called conservative evangelicals in our own church.

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