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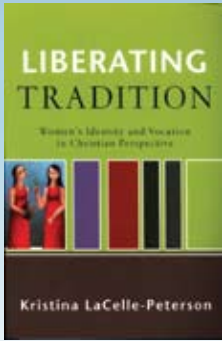
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Kristina LaCelle-Peterson's *Liberating Tradition: Women's Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective*

reviewed by Melanie Springer Mock

I am but a dabbler in egalitarian theory and thought. While I believe strongly in biblical equality, my convictions have always been vaguely defined, informed more by emotional sensibility and experience than by intellect and formal study. After all, I did not need religious scholars to tell me the Christian tradition has often treated women badly, nor that some evangelical interpretations of Scripture have squelched women's voices: I experienced as much every time I sat silently in my church's pews.

Without a schooled basis for my thinking, it was hard for me to intelligently discuss exactly why I believed men and women were created equally, why I assumed some people read the Bible incorrectly, and why I thought some church tradition had it wrong. Somehow, saying "this is truth because I feel it is" was not good enough, especially when debating with religious studies scholars at the conservative Christian university where I teach.

What I needed was a primer in biblical egalitarianism: a book that could lead me, step by step, through Scripture, showing me how women fit into the narrative of God's people, how Jesus valued women as part of his ministry, and how women served as leaders in both the Old and New Testament. Such a text might also include a re-reading of church tradition, one which considers the role of women in the early church, and the ways those roles were undermined — even eradicated — by patriarchal systems. An ideal book might even suggest ways egalitarianism works well in contemporary evangelical homes and churches, helping me to navigate the real world in which I live and work.

Kristina LaCelle-Peterson's *Liberating Tradition: Women's Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective* provides such a primer in biblical egalitarianism. LaCelle-Peterson, an associate professor of religion at Houghton College, does a credible job of outlining the important arguments for why Christianity has traditionally excluded women from equality with men and for why women need to be released from the narrow roles in religious institutions where they have for too long been held.

LaCelle-Peterson begins her text with the Bible, premising her exploration on the important question of what Scripture "actually says about women, about gender, and about how we conduct our lives together." Her careful reading of Genesis is compelling, though perhaps familiar to most, as is her discussion of the significant women characters in the Old and New Testaments. Nonetheless, LaCelle-Peterson's command of Scripture is impressive, and she provides ample evidence that the Bible establishes women's equal place in the story of God's people.

A subsequent chapter on marriage in the Bible covers interesting ground, and should be required reading for young women and men entering marriage trying to determine whether a hierarchical relationship is in fact biblically-based and God-blessed. Indeed, LaCelle-Peterson seems most animated in this and in other chapters that confront the contemporary dilemmas raised and sustained by patriarchal church traditions, such as the harmful influence of church tradition on women's body image and the ways language makes women invisible. For those wearied of hearing that "all men are created in God's image," LaCelle-Peterson convincingly shows that even a seemingly benign phrase carries numerous barbs, as she argues such language undermines the very ideas women hold of their selves, leading to unhealthy — and unholy — body images.

Other chapters address the role of women in church traditions, tracing the history of women's place in Christianity through the early church, into the medieval period and later reformation, and up through twentieth century evangelicalism. While interesting, this section on church history seems uncomfortably situated between chapters on egalitarian marriage and inclusive language. Certainly, there is a connection between church tradition and contemporary evangelical practices, and LaCelle-Peterson makes those relationships clear. Yet, at times, it seems *Liberating Tradition* cast its nets too widely, and a sense of a cogent narrative is challenged in trying to consider so much.

Still, LaCelle-Peterson's wide-ranging effort is especially useful for those desiring a basic understanding of biblical equality, of its thought and application. Though those well schooled in egalitarian theology will find LaCelle-Peterson's too fundamental, this should not be seen as a limitation in LaCelle-Peterson's work, only a suggestion of audience. Readers who need a basic course in biblical equality will find this an important, accessible, and encouraging text — one that will liberate Christian women and men to "join hands to serve God fully in our homes, our churches, and our world."



Melanie Springer Mock is an associate professor of writing and literature at George Fox University, in Newberg, Oregon. She is also the mother of two six-year-old boys. Her essays have appeared in *Christian Feminism Today*, *Literary Mama*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Brain, Child*, among other places. Her book, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Mennonite Objectors*, was published by Cascadia in 2003.