

Personal Reflections on a Misplaced Personal Reflection. By Ian Powell

Concerning the new Mathias book on Sermons.

Chapter Two of the new Matthias book on Sermons, *Women, Sermons and the Bible: Essays Interacting with John Dickson's Hearing Her Voice*, hereby referred to as WSB, reveals that this book is nothing like a Royal Commission seeking to unearth the truth, but more like a team of lawyers arguing a case.

That's okay.

Chapter Two of WSB is the least appropriate, and at the same time, the most revealing chapter for the thoughtful reader. This reluctant post is *not* a comment on the words of Chapter Two but an alert to the often forgotten work of editors; first, their noteworthy decision to include an incongruous chapter at all, and second, the editors decision to place it as a crucial gateway chapter.

One:

When I read the Chapter List I was immediately concerned and I wonder if you were. The book presents itself as a scholarly, "What does the Bible say" book. Brilliant. Good. Let's go. Why then have Chapter Two, and why so prominently placed? The chapter title is: '*One Woman's Voice: Some Personal Reflections on the Realities of Complementarian Ministry.*' What is the place and function of a "personal reflection" in a scholarly critique of the first edition of Dickson's book, *Hearing Her Voice (HHV)*? A book that is focused on the exact meaning of New Testament words.

Notice that any number of contrary "personal reflections" by women could easily have been found. Therefore it is fair to ask; why have the editors chosen to include this particularly scathing personal reaction in a book about Greek words? I am by nature and training a persuader, and so I tend to notice the form of arguments people use.

Our editors are using a classic persuasion method that I first learned watching "4Corners". It works like this: before the "facts" are "objectively" presented, a human story, normally a sad story often of injustice, is recounted to prepare us, orientate us and "soften us up". The aim is for the viewers to be especially receptive to the "facts" that will follow, so we arrive at the conclusion the producers (editors) have chosen. It's a very effective way to move an audience, especially if the viewers don't bother to notice what is being done with them. Despite ourselves, and our rational intentions, we are more easily convinced when our emotions are engaged. I was disappointed that our editors, two men I regard very highly, decided to follow this old, effective method, in what was presented as a scholarly book.

You can be absolutely certain that Dani Treweek was not asked to contribute simply because she is an excellent minister of the gospel, at one of our finest churches, St Matthias Paddington. The editors didn't say, "I wonder what Dani thinks – she's a prominent minister, let's ask her for a few thoughts." They knew exactly her negative take on the book they were critiquing; Treweek had posted much of this material on a friend's blog back in 2013, and in the discussion that ensued, many of her deductions had been corrected. No, Treweek was invited to contribute only because her particular reaction to HHV said what the editors knew would be useful to their chosen end.

Well so what?' You may ask. This is an unusual and noteworthy decision for a book seeking to be viewed as 'Scholarly', especially from a "scripture alone" people. We are dealing here with persuasion, not investigation. Though it's a very common method on TV current affairs shows and in popularist writings, it's not really congruous with a scholarly investigation. I suggest that the use of a personal reflection up front clearly reveals something important concerning the sort of book that is before us, something that would be inappropriate to just ignore. This is at its heart, a book of *persuasion*, and not one of pure Berean-like evangelical scholarship

Second:

If Treweek's "personal" points were so important, that they simply must have a wider audience, then the natural place for them in a genuinely scholarly work might have been as a postlude, but not up front in the ramp up. But our editors know it simply must go up front or it would fail completely for their purpose. It must go up front, to frame the case being argued. Chapter Two is crucial in prepping us "against" Dickson's clever but clumsy book. After Treweek's personal thoughts, it is difficult not to dislike Dickson or respect him less, though Dickson is entirely misrepresented. Again, my complaint is with the editors, not Treweek. They invited her to contribute, to sharpen up and republish her previous arguments, and made careful decisions about placement of her reflection in the context of WSB. They know why each chapter goes where. If not, they are incompetent editors, and they aren't. Awareness of the inclusion and deliberate placement of Chapter Two is useful to the astute reader; it reveals itself as a barrister's argument, not a judge's investigation. This book's conclusion was known long before publication. That's fine, it really is, but we the readers simply need to be aware of this reality, and here is where the odd Chapter Two decision helps us.

Chapter Two has no legitimate place in a simple truth seeking scholarly book. This chapter makes perfectly clear that it was put together with an iron-clad purpose. It functions as a means of portraying Dickson as hugely inaccurate concerning the real life female experience in the church, and additionally, that this self-crowned liberator of women is unaware of how male-o-centric he *really* is. In this I think sister Dani is plainly and outstandingly wrong in her understanding of brother John's arguments, but you cannot feasibly argue against her position as it comes from a place of personal experience and no doubt honest reflection. This, I feel, is part of the cleverness of the editors' move. In summary, placing one person's very negative personal response before proper

analysis tilts the reader against Dickson's book. Yet the only appropriate question is, 'What does the bible say and mean?' Not, 'How does one person feel about John's book?' We know that often what Peter says about Paul, says more about Paul than it does about Peter.

Third:

I propose that a better, more scholarly approach to editing would also have left out Chapter Two's crucial opening argument using Michael Bird's book. Michael who? The forced and unnatural marriage of these two writers, as if they were some sort of debating tag-team which they obviously aren't, was another inappropriate decision that the editors should have avoided.

Bird is an *Egalitarian*. Dickson is *not*; he is quite clearly a "Complementarian". Furthermore, WSB is clearly a response to John's book, so why is Bird so prominent?

I'd wager 95%+ of those of us interested in Berean-ing (Acts 17) John's thoughts on what the scriptures mean, couldn't care less about Bird's thoughts nor have we read his book. So why does Chapter Two start with Bird's book and why are the longest quotes, by far, from Bird's book.

I proffer that it helps paint a narrative, with Bird being the first runner and Dickson bringing it home. The alleged narrative of oppression may be in Bird's book, but it is simply *not* in Dickson's. But for the editors, it is useful to tie Dickson to Bird.

Not that I wish to pass judgement upon Bird's own book or arguments, this is terrifically convenient to allow John's views to be subverted via 'guilt by association.' I have read Treweek's chapter a few times and her portrayal of Dickson was utterly incompatible with what Dickson actually wrote.

The two men, Bird and Dickson, have become one in an unnatural union. Mature, fairer editing would not have allowed her other jumps in logic to go to print, but it is certainly helpful to discredit Dickson. I found myself disliking what John had done to this sister – except he hadn't. The editors failed to help the writer and to help us not be misled. Furthermore, with this awareness of the editors' intent, it should not surprise us that as the book develops, Dickson's arguments are so often over simplified, sometimes to the point of brutal misrepresentation, so they can more easily be hit out of the park. There is so much that is good in this book from Matthias Media, but when it is actually dealing directly with what Dickson says, it deals so often with a caricature of his writing, and at other times is simply erroneous.

I argue that the inclusion and placement of Chapter Two is a tell-tale warning for us all. It enables a charitable explanation for the invalid vocabulary themes that pop up in the first pages and keeps reappearing throughout. One powerful though invalid recurring theme is that John's proposal has invented a "new" or "*novel*" understanding of the word "teaching" in the pastoral epistles, etc. This is simply false.

His view might be wrong, but it should not be slandered as new or novel.

But it is again a useful approach that unnerves biblical conservatives like others and myself. As the weeks go on I am confident that this nonsense of "*novelty*" will be demonstrated to be false. Undoubtedly, it will take some weeks or so for this to occur.

I have heard the arguments Dickson articulates around academic, Sydney evangelical circles for years, but the intention to use a highly personal set of musings as a gateway chapter to dealing with these arguments, and the recurring position that Dickson's assertions are 'novel,' is factually weak, and poor and unfair editing.

If you have read *Hearing Her Voice*, then by all means read *Women, Sermons and the Bible*, but read it with an alertness of what Chapter Two reveals concerning their editorial decisions and intentions.

Congratulations to the one or two who finished the world's longest post and I apologise for being a dreadful writer.