



Coming to Evangelical Feminism: Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Jann Aldredge-Clanton in Conversation

In this conversation between Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Jann Aldredge-Clanton, recorded June 23, 2013, in St. Louis, Missouri, they discuss the path each of them took on their way to embracing and advocating for evangelical feminism. The transcript has been edited for readability and clarity. The video recording of the conversation is embedded at the bottom of the page.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

I am Jann Aldredge-Clanton.

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

I'm Letha Dawson Scanzoni. I grew up in Pennsylvania in a rural area, and I was sort of a tomboy. So, I always had the idea that girls and boys could do anything; you know, girls could do whatever boys could do.

And then through high school, I was a trombonist, and so that was unusual for a girl, and I was doing very well at it.

I'd never had an idea that women were inferior until I got to Moody. No; before that, I met [a] friend of Alice Christian's who started quoting Bible verses that said women were subordinate to men. And I disagreed. It didn't make sense. I couldn't believe that was the God I knew. How about you, Jann?

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

I grew up in a small town in Louisiana: Minden, Louisiana. My father was pastor of First Baptist Church. I got messages from the culture, I think more than from my parents, that girls, women, could grow up to be secretaries, nurses, or teachers. Those were the options.

And if you were going to college (and there was an emphasis in our home on education), teaching was probably the option. And, furthermore, you could do that and have a family, because you could maybe put off teaching until your children got to the age at which they were going to school. So those are the messages.

At church, I got, I think, a lot of messages that men were the ones who were to be in charge, from my father who was preaching and my mother who was not, even though she was a very, very powerful woman and she led youth Sunday school departments. I heard her speak—they never called it preach. But the message was that men were to be the leaders in the church.

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My enlightenment came later, after college, after marriage. And, actually, my enlightenment came through a book, *All We're Meant To Be*, by Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty. Letha, you were so much a part of that.

My husband David brought your book to me and just said, "You might be interested in this book." He hadn't read it, and if he had, I'm wondering if he would've brought it, because it was so transformative. It was my ... I call it my first epiphany.

All of a sudden, I realized that it made perfect biblical sense that women should be equal in the home and in the church. And feminism could not have reached me then through [Gloria Steinem](#) or through [Betty Friedan](#)—it had to be biblical feminism because that's what the Baptist Church said; everything had to be supported by the Bible.

You women [Nancy and Letha] did such a beautiful job of that. So that was transformative.

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

Well, I think that was very important to Nancy and me. When we wrote that book, we didn't even know each other.

To go back just a few years before, I had given my life to Jesus Christ as a child, about 11. And I thought my music could be used for God in any way.

I had a jazz band. I just didn't think of all the separation of Christianity and your life and what women could do. That was through high school.

Then, later, I felt a real calling to go into sacred music and I went to Moody Bible Institute, and that was where I began.

First, I had heard of it [women's limited roles] earlier at Eastman School of Music with the friends I went [there] with, who were in Youth for Christ and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. That was when I was beginning to hear that women and men were not really equal, that the Bible said *no*. I thought, "That isn't the God I know." So I decided to start reading on my own and investigating it on my own.

Several years later, there was an article in *Eternity* magazine. *Eternity* magazine talked about ... they had an article. Women, very few women, even in mainline churches, not to mention conservative and evangelical churches, were pastoring or very active. And there was an article from a Dallas seminary [professor Dr. Charles Riley] saying that absolutely a women's place was in the kitchen and men weren't in the kitchen. I don't know where he thought chefs came from, but men weren't in the kitchen. Men were to be the leaders in the churches and in the society and in the home. And, mentally, I started arguing with that, looking through scripture and

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finding all kinds of different things. And I wrote an article to the editor, and I had all these notes.

I still have all these little notes and arguments about this and that. And I went on and said, "Well, what about, you sing hymns that [Fanny Crosby](#) wrote; that's teaching. What do you mean women can't teach?" I was writing it that way and I thought, "They'll never publish it. It's going to be such a long letter," and I put it aside. I thought, *Someday I'll write a book on this*.

And later, when I got the idea, I felt very lonely. There just weren't other women talking that way.

Nancy Hardesty was assistant editor at *Eternity* magazine, and she knew I was think ... writing a book like this. So, she started sending me clippings. So did the other editors there.

Evangelicalism was quite different back then. This was in [the] '70s, [specifically] 1969. I met Nancy in '69. And we started the book.

I said, "How would you like to write a book with me?" Just out of [the] blue; I never met her. And she said, "Well, I haven't thought that much about feminism either, but I certainly agree with you. This is just the way it should be." And we started writing the book. It took years to get a publisher. And the whole idea was [to] be *all we are meant to be*. The Bible wants all people—women, men, different races, everyone—[to] be all we're meant to be. God loves us just that way.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

And it made such perfect sense to me. I thought since it convinced me that it would, my pastor of a pretty conservative Baptist church, that surely he would see the biblical evidence for this. And so I gave a copy to him and to the Chair of Deacons. The pastor never said anything to me. He told my husband to tell me that he had read it (he talked to a woman through the husband). And the Chair of Deacons said, "Oh, well, it was interesting." He was trying to be nice, but you could tell that that wasn't going to affect him in any way.

But it changed me so profoundly. I started thinking that it is so right for women to be equal in church and home. And so it affected my marriage and our relationship.

And then my second epiphany was at [Martha Gilmore's](#) ordination at Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas. She was the first woman in the south to be ordained at a Baptist church.

Your book gave me the intellectual biblical support, and then here it was embodied in flesh in her. And I saw, for the first time, women as well as men lay on hands in the Baptist tradition, up until that time. Now, it's been changed a lot, because women are being ordained. But only the ordained people would lay on hands, and [back then] that was all men. So, it was like an all

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men's club initiating another man. When I saw these women as well as men file by and bless Martha, it was just such a profound experience. My friend, sister, English professor (we were teaching at Dallas Baptist University at the time) [Raynal Barber](#) turned to me afterwards and said, "One day we're going to be going to your ordination." I was like, "No," and she said, "Well, I've seen it in you as you're counseling students academically."

That was only about a year after I'd finished my PhD in English. I thought that that was my career, and I didn't realize that I was discriminated against as an English professor. Raynal said, "Yes we are. Our salaries are not equal to the men." But I was just so glad to be teaching at this Baptist University! The rationale of the administration was, well, most of the women are married women and their husbands are helping support them, so they don't need equal salaries. But Raynal was sensitive to that.

The way I was counseling students—she saw that in me.

At that time, [I felt] a calling, but the calling was to write chapter and verse and cite and do what you and Nancy had done, but in a way that might reach the Baptist audience. I think the first work I did on this was debating [Dorothy Patterson](#), who's the wife of the architect of the Baptist fundamentalist movement. I debated her at Baptist History and Heritage [conference], and those papers were published. What I did was just take a lot from—I know I quoted your book, [Leonard Swidler's](#), and some others—and just put it in a condensed form and then try to get it out to the people in my denomination.

It's so interesting, though, how our paths have crossed and then recrossed.

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

Oh, yes.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

And you said that you didn't realize that women weren't equal until you were basically in the Christian world.

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

Right. Yes.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

And I didn't realize that I was really discriminated against until I became an ordained minister, because that epiphany and the prophecy that Raynal said, "One day we'll be going to your ordination," more and more [it] kept coming to me: *You're not supposed to just write about it;*

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you're supposed to do it. And you've got this southern accent, and you've got this disarming method, and so you can do it within [the denomination].

It was not until I was ordained that I experienced sexual harassment, and, of course, lack of job opportunities. It's sad that it is in the Christian world, so many times, (and not just Christian, all religions, the patriarchal religions), where women experience the most oppression.

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

And that is sad. Because the whole idea of Christianity is supposed to be equality and justice, "... in Christ there are neither male nor female ..." No longer that. Yes.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

It sounds like you started out with that, and then you got into ...

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

Right, exactly. Yeah. I tried to go along with it at first.

There were very liberal churches in my area who didn't [believe women could not be ministers]. (I had never seen a woman minister), but [the people at the liberal churches] thought, why not? They would have me come home from college in between [semesters] and I would play my trombone and they would like me to talk a little bit. They had heard I was becoming very religious, so they wanted to hear about it, and so I would teach the Bible and so on. And then they said, "But why don't you become a minister?" And I said, "Well, women aren't supposed to," because I was hearing all these [people tell me that.]

I met some Baptist people during that time, and, in fact, they had a ministry in prison with all male prisoners. And we went to the Pennsylvania state penitentiary, as I recall, I think a couple of different ones. But they would go there, and they would let me speak about what these hymns were meaning that I was playing, these trombone solos and everything. And I would talk, and then I would say, "Well, isn't that preaching and speaking before men?"

"Oh, that's different." And it didn't make sense to me then. They were the ones that said women weren't supposed to [preach], and they started pointing me to all these verses.

Then I thought I could go back to those so-called liberal churches that were open to this. They'd never seen a woman minister but I can teach my lessons in the summer when I'm home from college, teach these lessons to the people. It wasn't the [actual] church service—they had all the adults gather for Sunday school in the summer, all together. They said, "You can teach that," the Baptist people said, "but you have these verses in First Corinthians [that say] you

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have to wear a hat." So, I thought, "Okay, I'll wear a hat and then I can speak ..." And I would do it, that sort of thing.

When I was writing that letter [to *Eternity*] later, by then I was married and had children. I [was also going] to this church (it was during that time that we were helping start a little church). It was Orthodox Presbyterian, which is a very conservative church. I was involved in that. Then they brought in a pastor who had come from Reformed Presbyterian, who was very, very conservative. That's when I was writing this *Eternity* letter to answer the magazine. And the minister said he wanted ... [He said] his wife didn't read the Bible very well and she had heard I teach at different places, and so why couldn't I teach their adult Sunday school? And the minister came to the class.

Then I told him about the article in *Eternity*, and how I felt about it, and how I was going to argue about it and write this letter but then decided it was [so] long that they wouldn't publish it. And I said, "After all, I'm teaching here, and you're sitting there, the minister." He said, "Well, this is different. This is Sunday School. This isn't church." And I began say, "These arguments do not make any sense." That's what inspired me to get writing on this.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

The hat thing is funny. When I debated Dorothy Patterson at the Baptist History and Heritage Conference in Nashville, she wore a hat and the audience—mostly men but they were pretty progressive men, they were educated—I could feel them really resonating with the scriptural support that I was giving. And so, in the question-answer time, one of them raised his hand and said, "Dr. Patterson," she had a PhD, "why is it that you're using the scripture that women are not supposed to teach men, but here you are teaching all of us men?" And she said, "Well, I've got a hat, and that means that I'm submissive to my husband and even though my husband could not be here, I'm here under his authority."

Now, my husband, who was there, was at the back just about to die laughing. And I was sitting up there on the stage, yeah, laughing too.

And then, afterwards, she was still trying to convince me. And again, David was back there just laughing like, "Jann, why are you even continuing?" Because she would still point [at a Bible passage], "Well, it says this. This is what it says." And I said, "That's your interpretation of it." She said, "No, this is what it says." So yeah. And the hat ...

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

That's funny. Yeah.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

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Yeah.

Fran Mayes:

Tell us a little bit about your involvement with EEWC.

Letha Dawson Scanzoni:

Well, I was one of the founding mothers of it. After Nancy and I wrote *All We're Meant To Be*, we started getting letters. Oh, so many letters, of people saying, "I thought I was the only one who felt this way." And so we thought, "Well, we've got to get together somehow."

At the same time, [there] was a group meeting for bible study at North Park College—it was called "college" then. I think it's a university now—in Illinois. And the Bible study group called themselves Daughters of Sarah. We knew the people there, and they knew of us and what we were doing. So we started exchanging letters. And here are some names, and here are some names ...

Anne Eggebroten was one of the ones in California who was one of the first ones who wrote a letter to Nancy and me. [*All We're Meant to Be* was] published by Harper and Rhodes—it's now HarperOne—and the publisher forwarded the letter. It started out, "Lisa and Nancy, I love you."

She said she had read the book. She had gone into a library in graduate school, I believe it was. She was married by then. And she said, "I pulled this out with fear and trepidation off the library shelf when I heard about it, to see the chapter on marriage. I was sure it was going to say, women can be okay in the society and do anything they want. In the church they're limited. And in the home they're under their husband." And the chapter was about egalitarian marriage. She said that was the chapter that convinced her, and she got very active. A group of us eventually joined EEWC, I mean we *formed* EEWC.

Let me tell you the beginning of this, too.

There was a meeting of evangelical progressive people that were going to get together. And it was people like [Ron Sider](#), who now has Evangelicals for Social Action [now Christians for Social Action], and some others. We all knew each other. [Jim Wallis](#), [Sharon Galligher](#) from California came, and Nancy [Hardesty] was in the Chicago area then as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. She was invited because they knew her from *Eternity* magazine when she used to work there, where she didn't get equal pay ... because she was a single woman and she didn't need money like men did; that's what they told her. So anyway, she was one of the only women invited to this group that was going to get together, and they met on Skid Row, the YMCA, in Chicago, to talk about [Evangelicals being concerned about social justice issues](#). Because, in general, they had stayed out [of social justice issues]. [Evangelicals were concerned

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with] getting people to Christ but not about doing social justice in society. The group [met] to talk about this.

And then they decided to have another group [the next year]. [Again], they met over Thanksgiving weekend.

Well, that time, Nancy had volunteered—[there's an article on the web from our magazine where she told this story too](#)—she had volunteered that year, since she was only one of just a handful of women at the first meeting, to be secretary for the next year's meeting over Thanksgiving, that weekend of all weekends, to invite the people, to send out the invitations. And she said she did that on purpose.

She was going to get some progressives, because we were by then having all these names of people who were interested in Christian feminism. And so she sent out the invitation to a group of women. I was included, Lucille Dayton from *Daughters of Sarah*, several of us. And we were still just a handful among all these men who came.

[During that second meeting of] the Evangelicals for Social Concern, they decided we should have different caucuses go aside and talk about different issues. There was one on race, there was on women, thanks to Nancy, who had made sure they put a statement [about women] in the original, because they didn't have it on the agenda. And then we all met—the little pocket of women got together, people for African-American rights were together (at that point it was mostly that; I don't think we had any Asian American or any others at that time). And they were all in these different little groups talking about American environmental issues and so on.

And so, the Evangelical Women's Caucus [group], from that [Thanksgiving meeting], decided we should meet again. [And so we met in Washington, DC, in 1975](#), [and began calling ourselves] the Evangelical Women's Caucus Conference.

And from there on, we just kept going and we established bylaws and became EEWC.