

Women Are Persons

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Some years ago I listened to a group of five year old children being interviewed on CBC Radio. The interviewer was asking them what they appreciated about their mothers. Their answers were very revealing. "I like my mother because she lets me have two cookies before breakfast." "I like my mother because she serves me breakfast in bed." All the answers were self-centered. They were all related to what the mother did to serve her child. None of the children expressed appreciation for mother as a person.

This is symptomatic of our society. Even in the Christian church women are often valued for what they do rather than for who they are. This is why the women's liberation movement has struck a responsive chord in the hearts of many Christian women. They do not share the extreme views radical feminists espouse, but they do have a deep desire to be treated as persons of value and worth, not because of what they do but because of who they are as persons.

In a report to the House of Commons on May 6, 1982, the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs concluded,

We have found that wife battering is not a matter of slaps and flying crockery. Battered women are choked, kicked, bitten, punched, subjected to sexual assault, threatened and assailed with weapons. Their assailants are not simply men who have had a bad day, or who drink and become temporarily belligerent: they are men who, for whatever reason, behave violently towards the women they live with. We have found that such behavior is far too common. ...We have been given good reason to believe that every year in Canada one-tenth of the women who live with men as a couple are battered. Society should not expect or tolerate such behavior. ¹

In a handbook for pastoral care workers published in 1988, Roberta Morris wrote,

Research into the sexual abuse of children in Canada indicates that as many as one out of every two females and one in three males have been victims of one or more unwanted sexual acts, and that four in five of these sexual acts had been first committed against the person when they were children or youths. Three in five sexually abused children have been threatened or physically coerced by their assailants. The child usually knows the assailant. About one in four of the assailants is a family member or a person in a position of trust and about half are friends or acquaintances. One in six is a stranger. Virtually all assailants, 99 per cent, are males. ²

When I think of how women and girls are mistreated and abused by men in our society, it makes me angry, very angry; it also makes me sad, very sad. The psychological and spiritual suffering that is inflicted upon women through physical and sexual abuse breaks my heart. The wounds do not heal easily; the scars last a lifetime.

Secular feminists have accused the Christian church of contributing to the oppression of women. It is upsetting and disturbing to realize that there is some truth in their accusations. We must admit that some of the traditional teachings of the church have contributed to the oppression of women. However, it is my conviction that these teachings are neither biblical nor Christian. They are cultural accretions that need to be rooted out and rejected.

In this article I will deal with four false ideas that have been taught in the church in the past, ideas which still have their supporters today. These ideas keep women from enjoying the respect and dignity they deserve as persons created in the image of God. They also become obstacles that keep modern women from coming to Jesus Christ to receive forgiveness and new life.

The first false idea is that women are inferior to men.

The great Protestant reformer, John Calvin, wrote in his commentary on Corinthians, As the woman derives her origin from the man, she is therefore inferior in rank. ... as the woman was created for the sake of the man, she is therefore subject to him. ... God's eternal law ... has made the female sex subject to the authority of men. On this account all women are born, that they may acknowledge themselves inferior in consequence of the superiority of the male sex.³

Calvin advises women to accept their inferiority as a fact of creation. He writes, "Let the woman be satisfied with her state of subjection, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex."⁴

John Calvin wrote in the middle of the 16th century, but similar ideas are still being expressed in the last half of the 20th century. A present day evangelical scholar, Leon Morris, has written, "Neither in her origin, nor in the purpose for which she was created can the woman claim priority or even equality."⁵ Another evangelical scholar, Donald Guthrie, has stated, "The idea of woman's subjection is not only ingrained in the conviction of the mass of mankind ... but also appears to be inherent in the divine constitution of the race."⁶ In most areas I have deep respect for the writings of these men, but in this area I believe that they have been more influenced by our culture than they have by the teaching of the Word of God.

What does the Word of God teach? It teaches that women were created in the image of God in the same way men were. Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." God is personal, and part of what it means to be in the image of God is to be a person. To me this is basic. Every woman deserves to be treated as a person of value and worth, as an equal partner in the adventure of life. Many women have told me that they can quickly sense the difference between men who think of them as persons and those who treat them as sex objects.

The Word of God also teaches that woman was created as a companion and partner for man. Genesis 2:18, "The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." The King James Version has "a help meet for him." "Meet" is an old English word meaning "suitable". The Hebrew word translated "helper" or "help" in this verse does not in any way imply inferiority. In most cases, it is used of God being a helper to man. When God saw that man needed a companion to share life with him, a partner who would be equal to him, another person like himself, he created woman.

Some have argued that man is superior to woman because he was created first. But this argument doesn't necessarily follow. It could just as well be argued that there was a progression in creation from plant life to animal life to man, and that woman was the crown of God's creation. I much prefer Matthew Henry's comment on the creation of Eve from Adam's side. He said that she was "not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but under his arm to be protected and near his heart to be beloved."⁷

Our Lord never treated women as inferiors. He never spoke to them in a condescending or patronizing manner. He always treated them with respect as persons. He taught women in a time when most Jewish rabbis would not. He allowed women to be part of the team that travelled with him in his itinerant ministry. Jesus was and remains the best friend and supporter women have.

One often hears the argument that although women are equal to men before God, God still requires them to maintain a subordinate position to men in the home and in the church. Somehow such an argument is not very convincing. Most women conclude that the church actually believes that they are inferior or that it is unjustly treating them. A church accepted this sweeping statement on equality in their annual meeting,

We believe that we must demonstrate to the world around us that we are really one in Christ.

We need to show that we are all equal in Christ; no differences should be made because of race, language, social status, education or sex. In the church of Jesus Christ, there are no second class citizens.

Then later in the same meeting they refused to elect women as deacons on the grounds that women should not exercise authority in the church.

Men are also victims of the idea that women are inferior. I have counselled men who feel they are failures because they know that they are not superior to their wives. What a relief it would be for them if they could accept their wives as partners in a relationship to which each could freely bring the abilities and gifts God has given him or her. In such a relationship neither one would have anything to prove. Both could be themselves.

The second false idea is that women are responsible for mankind's fall into sin, and hence are still being punished by God for their mistake.

An early church father, Tertullian, wrote to women,

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of that divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert - that is, death - even the Son of God had to die.⁸

The assumption in Tertullian's words is that women deserve the bad treatment and oppression they receive because of what Eve did in the Garden of Eden.

What are the facts of the situation? The truth is that Adam was with Eve when she ate the forbidden fruit. They both knew that the fruit was forbidden, and they both disobeyed God by eating the fruit. They were both guilty of breaking the law of God (Genesis 3:6). If Adam had been given the responsibility of protecting and leading Eve, he should have stepped in and prevented her from eating, but he didn't. Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul states in Romans 5:12 that sin entered the world through Adam.

The third false idea is that women are tempters of the pure.

The early Christian monastics found that their sexual desires were the most persistent and the hardest to conquer. It was easy to conclude from this that women, the objects of their sexual

desires, were evil, and that it is somehow women's fault that men lust after them. Monasticism as an ideal in the Christian church has declined, but the idea that women are evil temptresses is still with us.

Do you think that I am overstating the case? Is this not the basic reason why many people are not willing clearly and unequivocally to pin the blame on the man in cases of incest and rape? Why else do some people think that a little seven or eight year old girl must have acted seductively? Why else do some people try to excuse a rapist by saying that his female victim must have enticed him in some way? The biblical truth is that before God man is responsible for his acts. In the Garden Adam tried to shift the blame for his sin unto Eve and men are still trying to do the same today.

Women do not remain untouched by this myth. It is common knowledge that victims of incest tend to blame themselves for what happened. A Christian woman, herself an incest survivor, wrote these poignant words,

Why do we keep silent, when we are raped by fathers, relatives, friends or strangers?
Why do we take the guilt that should be theirs? Why do we as women keep silent, until that silence stifles and destroys our very selves and leaves us hating what little is left?
Better to turn the hate outward - but that does not seem the way. We make excuses, we rationalize, we pardon, we psychoanalyze, and slowly we become nothing as men beat us, rape us, humiliate us, silence us. **We** are made in God's image. Jesus died for **us**. **We** are God's children. He is **our** Father. But men - are they our brothers?

On March 6, 1983, four men raped a woman in a tavern in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Nine to fifteen men were in the tavern at the time, but not one acted to help the victim. Mary Kay Blakely wrote an article on this case. In it, she refers to a study by two professors, Neil Malamuth of UCLA and Edward Donnerstein of the University of Wisconsin, which found that 66 per cent of men have "a conquest mentality" toward women. This scares me as it did her. It undermines and erodes the possibility of personal friendships between men and women. She asks, "Don't men understand that the 'conquest mentality' cuts them off from the love and friendship of women - for surely how can we love them when we must fear them?"⁹

The fourth false idea is that women are somehow the possession or the property of men.

Even the traditional marriage ceremony implies that a girl is in the possession of her father until he gives her to her husband. This element in the marriage service comes from the time when women were legally considered the property of their husbands. Within his home, he could do just about what he wished to those who were considered his property, that is, his wife and children.

This concept is not biblical. In the Bible, children are seen as gifts from God. They are given to parents to raise for God, but they still belong to him. Parents are responsible to God for how they treat their children. Can we believe that God wants any child abused, physically, mentally or sexually? Would he want any child battered or raped in her own home?

In the same way, a wife is a gift from God to her husband, but she is not his property, nor is she his slave. It is his responsibility to love her as Christ loved the church. Christ loved the church in a costly, self-sacrificial way. He gave his all to save us. He desires that each of us grow to

maturity, developing and learning to use all our gifts and abilities. A husband is to love and support and encourage his wife to become all that God intended her to be (Ephesians 5:25-30).

Roman law gave a father complete power over his children and a husband complete power over his wife. Christianity has been counteracting these pagan concepts with two liberating ideas. First, every person is created in the image of God and is of infinite value in the sight of God. Secondly, every person is responsible before God to treat others with love and respect, and this love and respect must begin in the home.

Conclusions

My reasons for writing this article are two-fold. First, I want to encourage the women of our congregations not to give up on the church. The false ideas which I have described are not biblical. These ideas are being challenged and rejected by many in the church. The cries of abused and oppressed women are being heard. Jesus truly is the best friend and supporter a woman can have.

Second, I want to challenge the men of our congregations to examine their attitudes toward women. Why should women have to put up with sexual harassment in the work place? Are we willing to speak up against such behaviour? Do we treat the women in our lives - our wives, our mothers, our daughters, our colleagues at work - with respect? Do we relate to them as persons? Do we avoid repeating or laughing at jokes that demean and degrade women?

Two points in conclusion. First, we live in a time of change. The relationships between men and women in the family, in the church and in society are being redefined. The challenges of today require strong men. Patricia Gundry is right when she writes, "It is to the credit of a man to encourage women to be strong. Only weak men demand weak women."¹⁰ I believe it was Leo Buscaglio who said, "It is the weak who are cruel; gentleness can only be expected from the strong."

Secondly, men become strong as they learn to walk in step with the Spirit of God because the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). No woman ever needs to be afraid of a man who has the fruit of the Spirit in his life. To have the fruit of the Spirit is to be like Christ, and no woman ever needs to be afraid of Christ.

FOOTNOTES

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1. *Report on Violence in the Family: Wife Battering*, House of Commons: Issue No. 34, 1982, p. 7
 2. Roberta Morris, *Ending Violence in Families: a Training Program for Pastoral Workers*, The United Church of Canada, 1988, p.43.
 3. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Calvin Translation Society, 1848, pp.357-358
 4. *Ibid*, p. 361
 5. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale, 1958, p.153
 6. Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale, 1957, p.76.

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7. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, Vol. 1, James Nisbet, 1706, Comments on Genesis 2:21, 22.
 8. Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, Eerdmans, 1956, p.14.
 9. Mary Kay Blakely, "The New Bedford Gang Rape: Who Were the Men?" *Ms.*, July, 1983, p.51.
 10. Patricia Gundry, *Woman Be Free!* Zondervan, 1977, p.111.

Published in the *Atlantic Baptist*, October 1989. Reprinted in *Priscilla Papers*, Spring 1994. *Priscilla Papers* is the journal of Christians for Biblical Equality.

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