

Theology and the Experience of Women

Maria L. Boccia

March is women's history month. As I reflected on this, I found myself wondering about the lack of voice of women in the church. Despite the diligent and excellent scholarship of godly theologians who affirm the full equality of women, there remains in the church a widely held belief in the subordination of women. Many who affirm this subordination also affirm the dignity and value of women, suggesting that subordination is only a matter of function and not of being. As I look around me, however, it is difficult not to conclude that a belief in the subordination of women leads to a devaluing of women, with often tragic results.

I'm sure you, as I, have seen news reports and read stories about the experience of women around the world. But have we considered the real human tragedy of this devaluing of women?

In China, the devaluing of females has led to an epidemic of sex-selective abortions. In 2009, a study published in the *British Medical Journal* estimated that in 2005 there were 32 million extra Chinese men under the age of 20 because of this selective abortion of female babies. This has led to an eruption of a human trafficking problem in the sex industry in China that is only just beginning to be understood.

In India, angry husbands and rejected boyfriends respond to women by throwing acid in their faces. This results in disfigurement, blindness, and sometimes death. The BBC reported one such story of Mamata. Her crime was that she refused to stay with her husband who had decided to take a second wife. After months of efforts to persuade her, he met with her and threw acid over her face and arms, leaving her permanently scarred. The BBC reports that, in a society where "looks are everything," especially for women, it has been difficult for her to get any kind of job, even as domestic help.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban know that terrorists are less effective in recruiting when women are educated. Therefore, one of their campaigns has been to destroy girls' schools. Attacks on the girls might take the form of gunfire, grenades, or as in India, throwing acid in the face. Despite this terror, many Afghan girls are determined to obtain an education and continue despite the threats to them for attending school.

In Darfur in Sudan, in Rwanda, and elsewhere, rape is a tool of war and genocide. In Sudan, over 2 million Sudanese of minority ethnic groups were herded into camps. According to the *New York Times*, the soldiers then inflicted gang rape upon thousands of women and girls, as many as 20 men raping one woman, often in front of their mothers and fathers or children. Babies conceived through these rapes are considered impure because their blood is diluted, and are often killed or abandoned.

And don't think that this kind of abuse of women is limited to "over there." Human sex trafficking is a significant problem in the United States as well. Charlotte, for example, has been rocked by the exposure of its own sex trafficking problem. It has been labelled by police the center of sex trafficking in the Southeast United States. Hundreds of young women are kidnapped and forced to work as prostitutes here in Charlotte alone. The violence of sex traffickers reported elsewhere in the world, including the drugging, beating, and rape of their victims, happens right here.

Ken Fong, senior pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles, asks some important questions, as reported in CBE's *Arise E-Newsletter*: "When some Christian groups interpret the Bible as teaching that God created women to live in a male-ruled hierarchy, that they must obediently submit to male 'heads' or risk violating a divine mandate, aren't they also contributing to the oppression of girls and women? . . . Even if the point is made that the Bible teaches that women are of equal value before God, if a person's being a female automatically and always means that she is overtly or subtly denied equal opportunities to learn, to lead, to teach, etc., that is oppressing her in the name of God."

The first Sunday in March, my church celebrated the gifts of women. I would like to end with the Prayer of Adoration and Confession of Sin which we prayed in church that Sunday:

"Created in your image, O God, male and female, we confess that we often forget this fact of life. As men, we forget that our God is a nurturing, sustaining and loving God. As women, we have forgotten to speak out against unacceptable patterns of domination and abuse. As people of faith, we forget that God saw everything made and, indeed, it was good. God, help us to see everything you have made and, indeed, to know that it is *very* good. In our worship, may we be less like Martha, who was distracted, and more like Mary, who sat at Jesus feet and listened. Mary chose the better part; may we do likewise, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

<http://connect.gordonconwell.edu/blogpost/190052/94567/Theology-and-the-Experience-of-Women.htm>

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