

Chapter 13.

Woman in the New Testament

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin... and the virgin name was Mary...and said:

"Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!...Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." Luke 1:28, 30, 35.

And Mary said:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name... he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree...He has helped his servant Israel... as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever." (Excerpts from Luke 1.)

Surely the greatest honor bestowed upon any human being was the dignity of bringing to birth God's own Son. Yet in all the feminist literature I have surveyed, not once have I seen significant reference to this Scripture, though many others have been quoted or misquoted. We will note a few of the many ways in which it is relevant to an understanding and appreciation of womanhood.

First, I believe we need to see God in action. God intervening on behalf of his people, in his own way, in his own time. God had chosen the nation Israel to demonstrate to the world his ways with his people. This nation was in trouble. Since 586 BC. when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Temple was destroyed, Israel had had no real independence. According to Josephus, no man's life and no woman's honor was safe under Herod the Great. Within the nation, the high priesthood became an object of bargaining, the sacred office sometimes going to the highest bidder. Victor Buksbazell says in his book, *Miriam the Virgin of Nazareth* :

"It was a tragic irony that the Hasmonean dynasty, which started out as a revolt against idolatry and foreign rule, in the end succumbed to alien ways and culture."

In this context, the condition of women was less than desirable. The priesthood, Israel's key to national health, had been infiltrated with pagan ideology and compromised worship. Adjunct to this was an unwholesome view of woman's worth. The very points in the law which were meant to secure to the woman spiritual headship and marital fidelity from men were twisted to imply women were inferior, and were used to license polygamy or promiscuity for men. According to most rabbinical customs of Jesus' time women were not allowed to study the Torah. Eliezer, a first-century rabbi, stated: "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness." The Talmud states: "Let a curse come upon the man who (must needs have) his wife or children say grace for him." There was a three-fold thanksgiving in the daily prayers of Jews: "Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praise be God that he has not created me an ignorant man."

In the great temple at Jerusalem women were limited to one outer court which was five steps below the court for men. In the synagogues the women were separated from the men, and were not allowed to read aloud or take any leading function. A rabbi regarded it as beneath his dignity to speak to a woman in public. Women were not allowed to bear witness in a court of law.

We may assume that women, then as now, rebelled both outwardly and inwardly against such attitudes and treatment. For example, when one reads of women being permitted to lay their hands on the sacrificial animal, the following is added: "Not that that was customary for women, but was to appease the women." Rabbinical sayings about women, such as "they are greedy at their food, eager to gossip, lazy and jealous," indicate not only a deplorable attitude toward women, but a lack of self-respect among the women themselves. Our actions are governed by our view of ourselves.

But then, as now, God knew about Israel's plight and he cared about its vagrant men and hurting women.

"When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4,5).

God, who knew and cared about the individual, also had a world view. God so loved the world (and all individuals who comprise it) that he gave his first-born to be the spiritual Head of a new humanity in whom:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

The Lord Jesus Christ, born a male, indicating the authority of his deity, born of woman and therefore free of Adam's sin, born under the law that he might fulfill it perfectly in spirit and in truth, was God's solution to the human dilemma. He revealed that redemptive plan, not to the rebellious who fought for their rights, but to the godly who waited before him in humility and faith.

Note the quality of womanhood in Mary, mother of Jesus, whose betrothed husband, Joseph, so respected her that though the law required the death penalty for infidelity he "being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). To that quality of manhood, God responded with the revelation of his plan for Jesus' birth.

Similarly, note the godliness and mutual respect of Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth who were "both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." While the custom was to divorce a wife who was childless, this man and woman had a spiritual unity which transcended the cultural practices and expectations. God honored their mutual trust with the birth of John the Baptist, though "Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years" (see Luke chapter 1).

Luke chapter 2 also tells us of a godly man named Simeon, righteous and devout and "looking for the consolation of Israel," to whom the Holy Spirit revealed the birth of Jesus. And there was a prophetess, Anna, who "did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day." Simeon and Anna were both brought by the Spirit of God to the Temple at the very hour when the child Jesus was brought there for the customary infant ritual, to witness the fulfillment of their Messianic hope and faith.

Characteristic of these godly men and women was the integrity of their worship, their commitment to God's way of deliverance, in which they evidenced their spiritual equality and mutual respect. Singularly absent from all was concern for personal rights, but all had invested their hopes and prayers in God's larger plan, the redemption of Israel and the Gentiles. Preoccupied with what God was doing to meet humanity's needs and willing to be expended to that end, they were met individually and united around the Person of His Son. It was their involvement with him which gave them dignity and honor before one another; they were willing to yield their personal autonomy to the larger framework of God's world. This is the perspective that frees us all from

the up-tight, threatened preoccupation with our rights and status.

If we get our toes stepped on by the insensitive or unwitting, we may certainly say "ouch," and speak the truth in love, but a retaliatory crusade violates every Christian ethic. We may safely leave our case with the One who when he was reviled, did not revile in return, but trusted in Him who judges justly. This is the Jesus of Nazareth who was so totally free of all the cultural prejudices of his time on earth that some contemporary writers refer to his "feminist attitude" toward women.

Luke 8:2, 3, and Mark 15 record that many women followed Jesus, some of whom are identified. The cultural pattern in which these women lived would have prohibited them from religious study, and in fact from leaving their households. Of Mary of Bethany the Gospel writers record a tender and costly act of devotion, which the Lord memorialized in a lasting tribute to her spiritual insight. Mary Magdalene was permitted the honor of being the first person to see the resurrected Lord. She was then commissioned by him to bear witness to his resurrection to the disciples, although custom invalidated the witness of a woman.

Jesus Christ touched the lifeless body of Jairus' daughter, and praised the faith of the ceremonially unclean woman who touched his garment (Matthew 9:20-22). In both cases, he was distinguishing between the spiritual symbolism and/or sanitary requirements of the law and the essential worth of the individual. He was teaching that the essential value of a person before God is not changed by his or her function. Contrary to rabbinical interpretation, God is not displeased with a woman who is menstruating; it was simply a function which needed to be acknowledged for purposes of sanitation. Also, symbolically, the flow of blood and a dead body would both be reminders of human finiteness.

Jesus initiated conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob (John 4:7-42) and his disciples "marveled that he was talking with a woman." In this instance, also, he strengthened the testimony of a woman, and validated her as a redeemable and valid person.

In the home of Mary and Martha, Mary was commended for taking what was considered a cultural male role, while Martha who was performing in the typical woman's function, was gently rebuked for having her priorities reversed. As with men, women must give first precedence to worship so that function does not become a distraction (Luke 10:38-42).

Luke also records an interesting incident in chapter 11, verses 27, 28.

"As he said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'"

It is plain that it was not Mary's biological function which gave her distinction, though by it she bore Jesus himself, but rather her identification as a devout and obedient woman of God. This identification gave her status with God. And though the birth of the Child gave dignity and meaning to the function of childbirth (as the Apostle Paul may well mean in 1 Timothy 2:15), Mary's status as a person was considered neither inferior nor superior. She was simply and profoundly God's person!

Jesus also strictly taught monogamous and lifelong marriage, and the alternative of celibacy (Matt. 19:3-12). Spiritual equality is not only a given in the marriage relationship, but necessary to its cohesiveness. It is to be an unbroken and unbreakable relationship, with the full commitment of each. Jesus reiterates this theme in Mark 10:6: "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one.' So they are no longer two but one. "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." Marriage is a symbol, for the unity of male and female, the equal worth of both.

It is interesting to note, however, that although Jesus' respect for women as totally human and equal in identity with men is unquestionable, the twelve apostles, whom he personally selected, were all men. Certainly we are not going to accuse our Lord of cultural prejudice! Nor is it even thinkable, as some have suggested, that he

was reluctant to supersede cultural mores as would have been necessary in the appointment of women. Jesus' entire ministry was characterized by upsetting traditional scruples. We have already outlined the numerous ways in which he did so as they related to women.

It appears that none of the women who followed him, deeply involved with his life and ministry from his birth to his death, ever clamored for equal rights with the apostles. The mother of the sons of Zebedee who requested positions of prominence for her sons in Jesus' kingdom, prompted Jesus to observe:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
Matthew 20:25-28

We are again reminded that maleness is the symbol of authority which ultimately has its source in the Sovereign Father-God. Male authority, in any dimension of life, is not a sign of superiority, but a complement to the female function of submission. Neither of these functional modes affects the essential identity or value of the person. All are "sons of God" (indicating our neutral sexuality in Christ), serving him and others in the context of our God-assigned sexual function, telling His story, not ours!

There can be no conflict between Jesus' doctrine and Paul's. Paul simply took the principles taught by our Lord and, being inspired, used them in his own teaching. From that premise, we will consider the major, and most contested, passages in the epistles concerning women.

There is, it seems to me, a striking similarity between Jesus' and Paul's relatedness with women. Paul followed the example of his Lord in encouraging and commending women to violate cultural tradition where cultural tradition denied the proper exercise their spiritual gifts. Priscilla (or Prisca), wife of Aquila, in whose house the Roman Christians gathered, is greeted along with her husband as Paul's "fellow worker" (Romans 16:3). She also made tents, traveled, risked her neck and expounded the Way, with her husband and in the company of the Apostle Paul (Acts 18 and Romans 16). One could hardly think of Priscilla as a passive believer!

Phoebe, by whom the Apostle sent his letter to the believers in Rome, was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae. Paul asked for her a reception "as befits the saints," expressing his gratitude because "she has been a helper of many and of myself as well." Lydia was the first convert in Europe. She was a business woman, and a "worshiper of God." "And when she was baptized, with her household, she besought us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay. And she prevailed upon us'" (Acts 16:13-15).

Her conversion resulted from an evangelistic thrust directed specifically to a women's prayer meeting! Note, she was a woman who could initiate response from men, but she did so with a proper appeal to their authority. "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord."

I believe this illustrates the subtle difference between male and female function indicated by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:7-12:

"For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.) That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels. (Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.)"

Paul is dealing with the cultural view of veils as the symbol of authority of husband over wife. Paul is using a

contemporary cultural pattern to affirm a spiritual principle. God's woman has the freedom to adapt to cultural modes, if they can be a vehicle for expressing truth (as in this case), or to defy cultural norms if they misrepresent her life in Christ (as in the case of immodest and suggestive apparel).

This passage is sometimes used to demonstrate an alleged prejudice of Paul against women; however I cannot comprehend the basis for such interpretation. That woman is the glory of man is to me one of the most beautiful things that can be said about woman! It is the ultimate aim of woman as "helper" to man. It is the full complement of female to male, the consummate wholeness of our humanity, that together we proclaim the glory of God.

Notice he does not say that she is the image and glory of man. She is the image of God, and that is why and how she may be the glory of man. Paul knows that it is our Godlikeness that makes us truly and wholly woman. It is in bearing his image that we find our identity and security. If Paul had said that we are to be the image and glory of man he would have been inconsistent with his affirmation of our spiritual equality in other passages. In this passage he is not dealing with the equal value of our basic humanity, but with our female function. To use the old philosophical argument about the chicken and the egg, when God states that the chicken comes first he does not therefore suggest that the egg loses status. The fact that the male was created first provides order but does not establish preeminence!

It is interesting that the Scriptures place the woman in the same relationship to man as the Son is to the Father. The Son is said to be the glory of the Father. Hebrews 3 :1 tells us that Jesus Christ reflects the glory of God's image, and John tells us in his Gospel that in beholding Jesus Christ we behold the reflected glory of the Father. This helps us understand the importance of our function to humanity. If all believers are to reflect the glory of God through their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, it would seem, then, that the uniqueness of the male-female relationship can only be recognized in terms of subjection by the woman to the governmental responsibility of the man in marriage and in the church, the effects of which will profoundly affect all of society.

The Pauline view of marriage harmonizes perfectly with our Lord's view. Each partner in the prescribed monogamous, lifelong marriage is to yield to the conjugal rights of the other (1 Corinthians 7:1-5). They are to be subject to one another as fellow-believers, but:

"The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:21-24).

According to God's order, man is to set the pace spiritually, to direct the affairs of the home in such a way that God is worshipped and glorified (in this way man is the glory of God). His wife is to support and nourish that commitment (in this way she is the glory of man). A husband is to give himself up for his wife as Christ loved and gave himself for the church; he is to love her as his own body. This is the reason for Christian marriage: to demonstrate the mystery relationship between Christ and his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:25-33). Far from being a suffocating relationship for either marriage partner, this design for Christian marriage frees each to be God's person, consistent with their gender distinctives as well as their spiritual equality.

The same pattern pertains to relationships within the church, where as brothers and sisters we respect one another's spiritual gifts and women are subject to the headship-responsibility of men in the function of those gifts. The man who properly understands his responsibility to nourish and cherish his wife's body as his own will relate with sensitivity to the women's spiritual function within the body of Christ. Culturally, an unmarried Jewish woman was under reproach, an unmarried Greek woman was a suspected profligate. Paul encourages women not to marry, that they may be "anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit" (1 Corinthians 7:34). Godly men in the church are to provide ministry opportunities for these women appropriate to their spiritual gifts and commitment.

1 Corinthians 11:5 says "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head" and thus establishes that women are not prohibited entirely from speaking in church. The prohibitive passages

pertain to (1) speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:20-40), (2) speaking out during teaching times (1 Timothy 2:11,12), and (3) teaching in such a way as to usurp the authority of the men (1 Timothy 2:12). Therefore, one can scarcely imagine a woman in a long-term teaching ministry over a congregation. This would almost inevitably put her in a position of headship-responsibility, which is clearly prohibited by these passages.

It seems evident that the purpose of Paul's statement of restraint upon women was to preserve and encourage male spiritual headship, in the home and in the church, and to maintain order in the church to facilitate the teaching of the Scriptures to both men and women. It is surely not his intention to muzzle spiritual gifts in either sex.

I believe today's church needs to be confronted with a challenge to use creatively the spiritual gifts invested in women. In many churches the only task to which women are considered suited is kitchen work and ministering to small children. Perhaps this is due to the false reasoning that men are unsuited for such ministries. It may be that we need to shuffle some "roles" and thus discover new aptitudes in both men and women! Acts 6:1-6 records that the task of serving tables was assigned to "seven men of good repute," who were commissioned for this work by prayer and the laying on of hands. This suggests both the possibility of men serving in this capacity and the dignity of this kind of ministry. There are no small chores in the church of Jesus Christ! Men who are free to share such chores in the home will be less inhibited about serving in these capacities in the church.

However, at no time, in any era, will it be either appropriate for Christian women to clamor for their rights. Such an attitude is, in fact, evidence that we are not qualified for ministry. Throughout the New Testament, the mature and godly woman is characterized by a gentle and quiet spirit (note: not gentleness and quietness, as this may be an affectation--rather a quality of spirit) which forms the basic and motivating thrust of her life. Further, all Christians are enjoined to consider our own vulnerability to temptation (Galatians 6:1) in restoring a fellow Christian overtaken in any trespass. The restoration is to be done in a spirit of gentleness. How ironic it would be for women to become dominant in church affairs through demanding the right to exercise their spiritual gifts! Here we would do well to remind ourselves of:

"The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens. 'I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut...'" from Rev. 3:7, 8.

Surely we do need to place in the hands of the holy one the responsibility to open and close doors for ministry, and then to joyfully submit ourselves to his sovereign choices.

It may well be that a wider use of Spirit-directed female subjectivity in the application of church doctrine might have alerted the church to a more sensitive relational approach and averted the rise of existentialism. We must learn from this and other reactionary movements, such as Women's Liberation, and then we must prayerfully guard against overcorrecting our own errors.

Another aspect of womanhood persistently dealt with by the Scriptures is female seductiveness.

"Bid the older women likewise to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands. This is to insure that the word of God may not be discredited." (Titus 2:3-5).

Modesty and decorum in dress and behavior are prescribed by the apostles. In contrast, designer Leo Narducci says that the woman who wears his revealing styles is one who is "sure of herself, who thinks of sex more openly...she's not concerned about nudity. She has a body and she knows it" . (Quoted in *Eternity* magazine, June, 1970). And to further quote Kerry Elliot in the article entitled "What the Well-dressed Woman Isn't Wearing:"

"Oh dear," you say, adjusting your straps to make yourself suddenly shapelier, "but I don't think of sex appeal when I wear my shorts and halter." Maybe you don't. But the fellows do. And I don't mean just the dirty old men either, unless you put most of the male population from puberty to senility in that category. If you don't believe me, read your ladies' magazines. The fashion writers know the words to use: "naughty, daring, seductive, slightly wicked..." (Note the date of that quotation is 1970. Shorts and halter are now considered ultra conservative. Nudity is so commonly accepted as to be virtually endemic in today's society. It would seem less than coincidence that rape is increasingly prevalent).

To put it more positively, woman might be considered a part of God's art form, the outer beauty simply giving witness to an inner spirit made beautiful by surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus Physical characteristics are less important to a man surrendered to his lordship. The woman who radiates the glory of his character is precious in God's sight, and motivated to use her body as a means of communicating who God is to the world. Viewing, our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit will encourage cleanliness, order, creativity, and honest beauty. Christian beauty is an art form.

The New Testament closes with a significant passage using woman as a symbol:

"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband...the Bride, the wife of the Lamb...the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel like a jasper, clear as crystal. (Excerpts from Revelation 21.)

Consistently throughout Scripture, woman is used to symbolize the people of God--in the Old Testament she is Israel, in the New she is the church, the Bride of Christ. She is the glory of man and the flower of humanity as God intended it to be. What a contrast to our shallow fantasies, our shabby romanticism, our female manipulating. It is the contrast between a life dedicated to self-centeredness and a life committed to the glory of God.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12: 24, 25).

Like the leper who was declared ceremonially unclean, to "dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46) our self-centeredness alienates us from God and man. Let us follow our Lord to the death of our self-centered demands, and rise with Him to abundant life. Because He lives we shall live also!

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