

Chapter 8.

The Female Mode

Why is the Statue of Liberty a woman rather than a man? Have you ever heard of Father Nature or Father Earth? Why are ships referred to in the feminine gender? Why do we instinctively refer to the delicately beautiful in nature as female, the sturdy and virile as male? And to peninsulans, San Francisco is our city we love her!

Throughout the Scriptures, symbols have consistent connotations, many of which are reflected in our literature as well as in the common vernacular. To some, the implications are threatening and demeaning; to others it is the acknowledgment of a unique mode of life as authentic and meaningful as maleness, but different in a way which is complementary to the other half of humanity.

Since the Scriptures constitute God's handbook for humanity, the consistency of its symbolism would appear to characterize the unique features of the sexes. On this premise, we may consider the following sampler of feminine symbols in the Scriptures as a probable definition of the basic intent of femaleness.

The dove of peace has a biblical origin. The Genesis record of Noah and the Ark pictures the patriarch using two birds to test post-flood conditions on the earth.

"He sent forth a raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth." "Then he sent forth a dove from him...but the dove found no place to set her foot." "He waited another seven days and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf."

The dove is used in the New Testament to symbolize the Holy Spirit, as in the baptism of Jesus recorded in Matthew 3:16. The Holy Spirit--called the "Helper" in the New American Standard Version, John 15:26; compare "helper" Genesis 2:20--does not speak on his own initiative (NASV) or authority (RSV), Jesus tells us in John 16:13. It is the Holy Spirit's work to declare and clarify to us the work of Christ who is our peace. So, by illuminating the Person of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit becomes the instrument of peace in our lives. Perhaps we may think of this aspect of the Holy Spirit's work as our model for the female role of helper and the consequence of peace in relationships.

Several years ago a man wrote an article in a leading magazine describing a women's meeting which began with hair-pulling and name-calling. He wrote with great sympathy for their frustration and their need to be recognized, and concluded by saying he felt women could be a great factor in bringing peace to the world if they were allowed a larger voice in political affairs! It is my observation that the segments of society to which women have contributed the elements of peace have so benefited because those women were at peace, first of all, with themselves. A hostile, bitter spirit is as likely as a bayonet to produce peace. A gentle, quiet spirit, undemanding and unthreatening, is God's instrument to restore sanity and tranquillity in an angry world.

Freedom is also symbolized in the Scriptures by a woman. Galatians, chapter 4, uses Sarah, the free woman, to symbolize that "the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother." From the twenty-first chapter of Revelation we learn that "the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" is "the bride, the wife of the Lamb." The free woman, whose progeny is born of faith in God's promise, pictures the people of God. Among this people dwells the Lord God Almighty, the center of their worship, their eternal light and glory. In the worship of him and his redeeming grace, God's people become the matrix of true freedom to all who enter her fellowship by faith in her Lord.

On the other hand, Hagar, the slave woman, pictures the old Jerusalem, the center of the law. A people who, lacking experience of the delivering grace of God, are locked into a pattern of dead works. A woman in bondage thus becomes the symbol of the life lived apart from the redemption and resources of the living Christ.

Wisdom, in the Book of Proverbs, is personified as a woman:

"Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table." (Proverbs 9:1, 2)

Clearly, she is a woman of both strength and dignity, who by her own choice and initiative has established her personal identity (built her house) on the perfect righteousness of Christ (seven, the scriptural number of perfection; pillars, the firm foundation).

Wisdom understands that she must initiate the experience of forgiveness amplified in 1 John Chapter 1 by: (1) walking in the light of God's truth, (2) expressing that truth in relationships with others, and (3) experiencing forgiveness and cleansing in the confession of sin thus exposed. In this way she "slaughtered her beasts," which is the allegorical statement of her personal appropriation of "the blood of Jesus Christ" or his atoning death. "She has mixed her wine" symbolizes the joy with which her life is characterized, a joy resulting from a secure spiritual identity. A joy which she is eager to share with others. And so she sets her table to which others are invited:

"Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave simpleness, and live and walk in the way of insight" (Proverbs 9:5,6).

Her life-message is extended through others, who take up the spirit and import of her godly perspective of herself and her freeing insights about life. A woman thus equipped for life is a living demonstration of the wisdom of God. By her example she initiates positive responses in others. Her life-style motivates others to live with freedom, joy, and dignity in the strength of a God-centered identity.

The woman whose life personifies wisdom knows that:

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." Proverbs 9:10

An example of this kind of applied-wisdom is cited by the Apostle Peter in his first letter. Peter prefaces the ways in which believers are to live as servants of God in serving one another by saying:

"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

The married woman, for instance, will motivate her husband to godliness by a life-style which speaks for itself, and does not need to be propped up with holy lectures and/or nagging and chiding. Therefore, Peter tells us:

"Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior." I Peter 3:1, 2

From this we may see that wisdom, which in the female mode is the subjective application of knowledge, or objective truth, is functional in productive and healing relationships. In Proverbs 9, the seductive woman, overt in her advances (she is noisy, wanton, shameless, she sits, she takes and she calls) initiates ungodly actions. Her life-message is a death sentence for those whom she motivates. There is neither wine nor blood in her personal identity, and therefore both joy and cleansing are absent from her relationships with others. She exploits them for personal gratification, and futility and death are the end product of her influence. Where there is no encounter with the atoning death of Christ, no experience of the Joy of his living Presence, there is no spiritual identity, no lasting personal fulfillment. There is no recourse to the "mind of Christ," the wisdom from above", and the resulting insecurity is evident in fraudulent relationships.

"Wisdom builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down" (Proverbs 14:1).

A woman who relates to life with godly wisdom is establishing a secure identity. Anything less is self-destructive. Repeatedly, the Old Testament prophets, calling God's recalcitrant, disobedient nation to repentance, referred to her as an unfaithful wife, a harlot. In her exile she has widowed her mother city. The daughter of Zion has departed all her majesty. The Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of Judah. She is a maiden whose lovers cannot comfort her. The epitome of spiritual unfaithfulness is the great harlot of Revelation, "who corrupted the earth with her fornication."

On the other hand, the new humanity, God's chosen and redeemed society, the church, is referred to as the Bride of Christ, the wife of the Lamb, a bride adorned for her husband. She is clothed with fine linen, bright and pure...the righteous deeds of the saints.

"Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure--for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." Rev. 19:7, 8

Again, the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, is pictured as the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, having the glory of God, "with radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal (Revelation 21:9-11). Again we are reminded of 1 Peter 3:3-5, and the woman there described as gentle and quiet in spirit, which attitude is said to be an imperishable jewel which in God's sight is very precious!

With superb poetic grace, the Song of Solomon depicts the love relationship between Christ and his Bride. The sensuous aspects of human love are used to depict the intimate quality of God's relationship with his own people. Clearly depicted here is the harmony of the spiritual with the emotional and physical aspects of our humanity. There is no suggestion here of what is sometimes called (wrongly) a "puritanical" view of sex, in which the physical act itself is considered impure. It depicts the beauty of a pure love between a man and a woman, a mutual devotion which matures into lifelong relationship.

It is this kind of beautiful marital fulfillment which depicts for us that the foundation for all such human love is the greatest, richest love of all--the love of the Bridegroom who died for his beloved bride, the church. We are reminded again that the source of all true love is the Father-God who gave his Son, who died for us when we were his enemies. It is he who made us for himself in order to make us the objects of his infinite and unequivocal love, the love which constrained him to die for his beloved. (See the Survey of the Song of Solomon in Revised Standard Version, pp. 640b).

The Apostle Paul expounds the message of the Song of Solomon in Ephesians 5:22-33. The teaching on headship and submission in the marriage relationship must be seen as the corollary to the theology (the God-Truth) of Ephesians. He begins with phrases so rich in spiritual romance that heart and mind fairly burst with ecstasy:

He blessed us with every spiritual blessing...He chose us....He destined us in love....He freely, lavishly, graced us in the Beloved with redemption and forgiveness...He revealed to us through wisdom and insight, the mystery of His will--the plan to unite all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth--hope in His calling....the

riches of His inheritance in us...resurrection power, above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named--forever.

And the consummate wonder and reality: He, the risen Christ, is the

"Head over all things for the church, which is His body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

To that Headship, then, we are enjoined in chapter 5 to be mutually submissive. That determines our attitude and governs our responses so that we may serve according to who we are as sexual beings, created for love relationship with God who called and equipped us with His life and love through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul now speaks of the great mystery: Christ and the church. Christ the Head, who loved the church and gave himself up for her, sanctified and cleansed her with the word, nourishes and cherishes her as his own body, and whose aim is her unblemished holiness (sometimes interpreted as "wholeness").

The appropriate and indeed exciting response to all of the above is the wives' subjection to the husband who is in turn subject to his Head. It is her reverent response to Christ who is also her Head. As her husband-head images the Headship of Christ over his church, the wife is privileged to image the obedient and reverent response of the church to Christ, her Head.

It is indeed a mystery! But such a mystery as has not been revealed in any cultural, religious or philosophical definition. It is unique to Christianity, and it is no wonder, then, that it has been so vehemently attacked, by those who prefer a more "reasonable" alternative.

It is truly the ultimate, if not the most representative, test of the authenticity of our mutual obedience to and dependence upon the transforming power of Christ in our human encounters. It tests our motivation, whether our commitment is truly focused on God's ultimate purpose, made clear by the Apostle Paul in his theological (God-premised) treatise in Ephesians 1-3.

Peace, freedom, wisdom, beauty, fidelity, love--all are symbolized in the female gender. Are they then exclusively female characteristics? Of course not! But may it be that the godly woman, whose gentle, quiet Spirit is her love-response to God's loving authority, in a unique way releases others to understand and experience these qualities of life. Is it not possible that the woman who responds with wise and loving submission to the authority of her husband might set him free to headship in the home? And this headship would, if universally practiced, set in motion a cycle of redemptive social responses which would restore order and love to humanity.

In an article in *Harper's* magazine July, 1973, excerpted from his book, "The Suicide of the Sexes," George Gilder makes some extraordinarily perceptive comments on the implications of sexuality in society. He articulates the disastrous results to society of minimizing sexual differences, and states that "sexual energy animates most of our activities and connects every individual to a family and a community, and through these to a past and a future." He further states that "sexuality is best examined not as sexology, physiology, or psychology, but as a study encompassing all the deepest purposes of a society."

With persuasive clarity he reasons that "males are the sexual outsiders and inferiors," who without long term commitments to and from women--without the institution of marriage--are exiles from the procreative chain of nature. "From almost the start," he says, "the boy's sexual identity is dependent on acts of exploration and initiative." These he feels are less vital to a woman, whose sexual identity is stamped in her very being, or patently obvious in her anatomy, even though she may fail to bear children.

While the views expressed by Mr. Gilder in this article are from a secular viewpoint, I see them as strongly supportive of the necessity for the traditional and scriptural female role of nurturer and motivator. If, indeed, the male is insecure in his sexuality and therefore afloat in his social identity, female dominance can only

heighten his sense of uncertainty and dispossess society of maleness. On the other hand, a woman, being secure in her sexual identity, can support maleness by developing in man a sense of headship responsibility. Such a woman can secure to society the love, intimacy, and companionship of marriage and the family by validating the man as father and provider.

Submission is a subtle and sensitive role in human relationships. Apart from a secure spiritual identity, it will be seen as a threat to personal autonomy. With her God-given sensitivity and a will subject to his loving wisdom, a woman can, by her example, teach this healing, cohesive principle to husband, family, church, and society. Will we relinquish this privilege and responsibility to a self-centered insistence on our rights? May we allow God to free us from bondage to ourselves and extend that liberty of spirit through us to others!

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