

# WOMANHOOD AND FEMINISM

ROSE DOWSETT, OVERSEAS MISSIONARY FELLOWSHIP AND  
GLASGOW BIBLE COLLEGE

Our topic is a minefield, and, like all minefields, liable to erupt in sudden explosions. It may be helpful, before we start walking through it, to identify and map some of the mines. Let me start with six.

## Mapping the Minefield

1. **The Fall.** I do not think it is any accident that one of the most fundamental effects of the Fall, as specified in Genesis 3:16, is that men will dominate women. It is important to register that this is a consequence of the Fall and not of creation, the product of sin and not of grace. We should then not be surprised, indeed we should expect to see the footprints of that sin tracked down through the pathways of history. Furthermore, it is precisely because of the sinful element in men's treatment of women that we find in the Gospels the Lord Jesus, the Saviour from sin, challenging male attitudes and actions, and demonstrating a radically different way of valuing women.

2. **History.** History is descriptive, not prescriptive. We need to be careful about deducing theology from what happened in the past. In so far as it is a legitimate exercise at all, we need all the time to take into account the warping effect of Genesis

3. This is the explanation, for example, why eighteen centuries of church history passed before Christians really tangled with the issue of slavery and the gospel logic of abolishing it. It is also why we cannot arrive at an understanding of Christian womanhood simply by looking at the past, even at the historical records of Scripture. We can see what women did, but not necessarily what they should have done. I take it that Jael with her tentpeg is descriptive but not prescriptive. We need to pay very careful attention to the example and teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels since here we have the example of the only unfallen man ever, relating to women and blowing apart many of the most entrenched and unquestioned assumptions and convictions of his male contemporaries.

We have a problem with history also because most of it has been written by men. Stephen Neill, that great church historian of the twentieth century, managed to write his classic *History of Christian Missions* while almost ignoring the role of women. Time and time again, where parallel illustrations might have been given of a key man and a key woman, the former is highlighted, the latter ignored. Inevitably it reinforces the impression that women have been irrelevant in the history of the church. Marginalised, yes; marginal, no. History is not only descriptive rather than prescriptive. It also suffers from selectivity.

**3. Tradition.** Tradition may be defined as the cumulative impact of history on fallen human beings. In other words, there is a very direct link with the two previous mines in the minefield. Here we need to ask some painful questions. How has Christian tradition measured up to biblical teaching? In all too many areas, we have to say sorrowfully that the answer is 'Not very well'. How has Christian tradition measured up specifically to biblical patterns of womanhood? I believe that the answer here, too, is 'Not very well'. You may think differently. At least integrity should make us suspect that, if we are so frequently able to make a mess of things in other areas, there is no intrinsic reason why in this one area we should have nothing to worry about. You will be aware, I suppose, of the many horrendous quotations from the Fathers and from theologians down through the centuries which make feminists so incensed. The question I want to ask is: 'How have these attitudes shaped tradition? And if those attitudes were themselves at least in part the product of fallen males' predilection for domination, will they not have produced a sinfully twisted and distorted tradition?'

Listen to some of these traditions with these questions in mind.

The woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred to separately in her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one. (Augustine, *On the Trinity* 12:7:10)

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Since our lives consist of two kinds of affairs, public and private, the Lord has divided the task between man and woman: to her he has assigned the responsibility of the home, while to the man is assigned the affairs of the state. (Chrysostom, *What Kind of Wife One should Marry* 4)<sup>1</sup>

The image of God, in its principal signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman. But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and the end of every creature. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia. 93, 4)

As the philosopher says, 'Woman is a misbegotten male'.... Woman was made to be a help to man. But she was not fitted to be a help to man except in generation, because another man would prove a more effective help in anything else. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 92, 1-2)<sup>2</sup>

When a woman thinks alone she thinks evil, for the woman was made from the crooked rib which is bent in the contrary direction from the man. Woman conspired constantly against spiritual good. Her very name, fe-mina, means 'absence of faith'. She is insatiable lust by nature. Because of this lust she consorts even with devils. It is for this reason that women are especially prone to the crime of witchcraft, from which men have been preserved by the maleness of Christ. (*Malleus Maleficarum*, fifteenth-century manual of the Dominican Inquisitors against witches)

Women are created in the image of God in an inferior degree. (Calvin, *Sermons on Job* 11, on Job 3:3)<sup>3</sup>

Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and broad hips. Women ought to stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon, keep house and bear and raise children. (Luther, *Table Talk*, no. 55)<sup>4</sup>

There are many more in the same vein. They betray attitudes and beliefs widely prevalent in the past; some of

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1 Quoted in S.B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1980), p.292.

2 Quoted in S.T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ, 1979), p.60.

3 Quoted by M. Potter, 'Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1985-86), p.727.

4 Ed. and tr. T.G. Tappert (*Luther's Works*, vol. 54; Philadelphia, 1967), p.8.

them are still evident today. They are, I believe, insupportable from Scripture, and also raise urgent questions as to the reliability of the traditions which have shaped the teaching and practice of the church.

**4. Culture.** Culture and tradition overlap, of course. But here I want to draw attention to the need to disentangle biblical givens from our own particular culture, or even our particular ecclesiastical sub-cultures. Too many western Christians assume that 'the way we do it and see it' is in some absolute way right. I am sad that very few people in Scotland, for example, when arguing about womanhood, the role of women in the church and feminism, ever bother to ask what our brothers and sisters in other cultures think about it all. Many Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America are deeply puzzled by our arguments and our practice. They see and do things differently – and may be thoroughly convinced that they are being biblical. My own personal experience has been that there are deeper prejudices against women in the church in Scotland than in any other country in which I have lived or worked. This raises important questions about the role of culture.

In particular, we need to think hard about the facts which have decisively shaped our culture in recent centuries. For more than two hundred years, the yeast of the Enlightenment and its logical offspring has been steadily penetrating every nook and cranny of our western culture. Of all people, we as Evangelicals should not be surprised that along with certain strengths have come many doorways to sin and rebellion, through which emboldened fallen men and women have surged in their pursuit of autonomy from the very God who created them. We all stand within our culture, and may not be as astute as we like to think we are at recognising how we have been shaped by it.

Of course, that can work more than one way in relation to our present topic. Some within the church would assert that any concession to feminism, an idol of our age, is manipulation by the god of this world, allowing our culture to mould and squeeze the church. At the opposite end of the spectrum others within the church would say that feminism as a movement, both secular and religious, is an important sign to the church. Two millennia of male domination have

obscured the radical message of Jesus Christ in relation to half the human race and it is time to recover it. It would not be the first time that God has challenged the church from without.

**5. Theological and Biblical Studies.** These studies have been dominated by men, by European and North American men. They have been largely couched in the logical, legal and philosophical methodologies which were shaped by our Graeco-Roman heritage, itself pagan and not Christian. Many of my Third-World theologian friends find it frustrating that they not only have to work in English, which may be their third or fourth language, but also, if they are to enter into international debate and be treated with other than condescension, must adopt western methodologies which are not intrinsically biblical and in which they may not be very comfortable. If they use others, they are regarded as second-rate.

Women have similar hurdles to negotiate if they dare to enter the preserves of men – and the world of professional theology is a very male bastion. They must talk like men, write like men, argue like men, think like men, if they are to be heard at all. What a pity! Spiritual perception is not a matter of logic and philosophy. In so far as women may be different in the way they think, respond to God and discern spiritual truth, those differences should enhance the thinking, responding and discerning of men for our mutual enrichment.

**6. My Personal Dilemma.** The very fact that I write as a woman affects your response. It also affects mine. I cannot blot out the accumulated experiences of the years. I cannot change the fact that perhaps some of you, consciously or subconsciously, had negative attitudes before you read my first word, that some of you probably cannot really hear what I am saying, just because I am a woman and not a man.

I cannot change the fact that I have often been hurt, often angered, by the treatment I have received at the hands of some Christian men in Scotland. I have been told by one Scottish evangelical Christian leader that no woman can have other than theological fluff between her ears; by another, that it is extremely rare to meet a thinking woman; by another, that my ministry in preaching and in lecturing in a Bible College is subversive, and conclusive evidence that I cannot care about the authority of Scripture.

I cannot forget the Southern Baptist minister I heard in the States urging the men of his congregation to beat their wives to help them become godly and submissive, and urging the wives to receive all violence as a gift from God. I cannot forget the many hurt Christian women I meet as I travel the country, who are struggling to use the gifts God has given them for the good of Christ's Body, the church, and yet are constantly headed off by men.

So I speak out of pain. But I can also, in the mercy of God, speak from the comfort of those who have encouraged and affirmed me and other women in Christian ministry. In particular, I have had the very great privilege of a husband who has encouraged me to be a partner with him in ministry as well as in the home.

The minefield is liberally primed. Can we negotiate it safely?

### **Popular Concepts of Christian Womanhood**

Bearing in mind the factors we have already looked at, all of which make it harder to perceive the truth, is it possible to define and describe Christian womanhood? Once one has got beyond the biological, what then? Are there things that are clearly cut and dried in Scripture?

The more I study, the harder I find it to come up with anything conclusive. Someone will say, 'Christian womanhood is about homemaking and rearing children.' But the biblical evidence is that the frequently assumed separation of private and public spheres, with woman in the one and man in the other, is very hard, if not impossible, to sustain. That should not surprise us, given that the creation mandate is given jointly to man and woman, not one bit to one and the other bit to the other. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the majority of instructions about rearing children are addressed to fathers at least equally and often primarily. And where does this leave the Christian woman who is single and childless? And is it not odd that this insistence that 'Women's place is in the home' seems to be implying that, contrary to the Lord Jesus' injunction in Matthew 6:31, a woman's concern should indeed revolve around what we shall eat, what we shall drink, what we shall wear: let her content herself with preparing the meals and ironing the shirts – such contentment is godly in a

woman, apparently. I can appreciate a meal lovingly prepared, or a pile of freshly ironed laundry. But I cannot for a moment see why an additional virtue is attached if the love and the time and the effort are provided by myself, but somehow diminished if the same love and time and effort are provided by my husband.

Someone else will say, 'Christian womanhood is about being meek and submissive, about being non-assertive, about not being domineering, about gentleness and goodness.' True. But all these qualities are to be true of Christian men as well. They have more to do with the fruit of the Spirit, to be evidenced in men and women alike, than with one gender over against the other. If I were a Christian man, I should hesitate to imply approval of the argument that 'Men are naturally more assertive, more aggressive, more concerned with larger concerns outside the small world of the home and family.' Such a description may reflect how it is; but that does not prove that this is how it should be. Perhaps, if women are more likely by nature or by nurture or by imposed necessity to be gentle servants, they are more fitted than men to be Christian leaders!

Someone else again will say, 'Christian womanhood is about not usurping headship, not exercising leadership in the church, not coveting what God has given to men.' Definition by negatives is usually a miserable business – and many Christian women, sadly, are more accustomed to hearing their role and calling described in negative terms than in positive terms. What a pity! This line of reasoning in any case may be falsely bolstered by an understanding of headship and leadership which is strongly hierarchical, in turn based on a faulty reading of early Genesis which makes women inferior to men. Headship and leadership undoubtedly there must be. But the New Testament has more to say about them in the context of sacrificial love than as a basis for ordering other people around or imposing one's will on others. Headship and leadership are to be the arena for living out mutual and voluntary submission in love, not an excuse for exercising structural or hierarchical subordination.

### **A Fresh Look at Genesis 1-3**

I think that all these attitudes (and we could trace many more of the same) owe more than they should to the kind of ideas we noted before in the teaching of influential church leaders and theologians of the past. And many of their ideas were derived, I believe sinfully or at the least mistakenly, from faulty assumptions about the first three chapters of Genesis. They assumed that Genesis teaches that a woman is inferior to a man, that she is not really made in the image of God although man is, that she was created to be a helper and everybody knows that the helper is subordinate and inferior to the one helped, that woman is more sinful than man and that the consequences of sin are all her fault, that man's dominion over woman is God's intended Creation pattern, that man naming woman 'woman' is clear evidence of his intended authority over her on a par with his intended authority over animals....

If, as I believe, these chapters of Genesis teach something very different, then we may need radically to challenge the centuries of belief and practice which have flowed from those faulty assumptions. Does Genesis 1:26-27 really teach that only males are made in the image of God, or does it teach that human beings, male and female, are equally made in the image of God? Probably the argument becomes circular when, as has often been the case, it is assumed that God is himself male rather than above and beyond the sexual categories that we label male and female. It has been pointed out too often to need demonstration here that the word 'helper', whatever its overtones in English, does not and cannot in Genesis involve inferiority in a hierarchy, since it is most often used in the Old Testament of God in relation to man. The formula of naming, associated with authority, is given in Genesis 3:20, after the Fall rather than before it. Before that, in Genesis 1:28, authority over the earth is given equally and jointly to both man and woman. The rule of man over woman in Genesis 3:16 is after the Fall, not before it: is not our calling as Christians to resist sin, not impose it?

### **The Teaching and Example of the Lord Jesus**

If traditional ideas about the inferiority and greater sinfulness of women, their lower place in a hierarchy pinnacled by men,



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the divine intention that men should dominate women, and so on were based on accurate interpretation of Genesis 1-3, I cannot help but conclude that the Lord Jesus must somehow have got everything wrong. For the treatment of women in his day flowed precisely out of those same kinds of traditional ideas – and it was exactly those convictions and practices that he consistently challenged. Contrary to all that was believed and done, Jesus taught and demonstrated that women were to be respected, listened to, taught. Women could be entrusted with theological conversations, and might sometimes be more spiritually perceptive and receptive than the men around them. A woman might teach men, even despite the mind-blowing double handicap of being both of the wrong nationality and sexually immoral. Men might not justify themselves, and blame women, in cases of adultery and divorce. Women were to be regarded as trustworthy witnesses, even to the most important events in the whole of human history. Women as much as men were the recipients of the grace and compassion of God, and, as such, equally frequently the focus of a miracle or the subject of a promise. Women were as fully human as men.

It is this picture, I think, that should make us take stock. The Lord Jesus seems to be affirming the equality, the complementarity, of women with men. He does not at any point, by word or action, suggest the inferiority of women. He does not reinforce the assumption that women's role is solely to revolve supportively and submissively round men. He clearly disapproves of the legislation which victimises women, leaving them at the mercy of unmerciful men. He does not send them away when they follow him; rather, he encourages them to draw closer and to listen harder. In a general way, women as much as men may come under his anger; in particular incidents, or in relation to specific categories (such as the religious leaders), it is, I think, always men against whom he expresses anger.

I am glad that as a woman I may know the value the Lord Jesus sets upon me, that I do not have to try to be a man or in any way feel inferior or apologise because I am not. There is great liberty in that. I am not sure that all Christian men understand the dignity of Christian womanhood. I am not sure that they understand either, that what unites us as human

beings made in the image of God is far more fundamental and of much greater significance than what divides us by virtue of differentiated gender. We need to realize that the differences between men and women are actually very minor, while those between human beings and the rest of creation are immense. It may be more important to define what is truly human than to define womanhood. And, just as hierarchy within the Trinity was thrown out as heresy by the early church, so now it is time to throw out as heresy the concept of hierarchy between men and women. As with the Persons of the Trinity, there is difference but equality, diversity but complementarity.

### **The Many Faces of Feminism**

Of course, 'feminism' is a highly charged word among many Christians. I am grieved that I have met rather few Scottish Evangelicals whose hostility to feminism is based on genuine understanding as opposed to superficial judgment or stampeding with the herd. That is underlined precisely by the widespread ignorance of the sheer variety of forms that feminism takes. Indeed, feminism is today so elastic a term as to be not very helpful at all. Let me illustrate the diversity with a few examples.

There are, among others, what we might term the Marxist feminists, whose main arguments closely parallel those of classic Marxism. It is because women the world over are separated from the means of production and are economically discriminated against that they are oppressed, so the argument goes. Even in our own society, the fact that housewives and stay-at-home mothers or carers are not paid a wage is evidence of the unfairness of the system. Only when women have complete economic independence, and parity with men, will they be free. Capitalism systematically victimises women. Now the Christian must reject the basic thesis of Marxist feminism on exactly the same grounds that he or she will reject Marxism. The fundamental problems in society spring from sin, not economics, though sin may of course be expressed through economic systems and arrangements. Creating a Marxist society will not set women free any more than a capitalist society does. At the same time, we need to be quite clear that capitalism does not set women free either.

For some radical feminists, however, the problem lies not in the economic structures of society but in patriarchy, the domination of society by men who have developed and now control all institutions and structures in their own male interest. For women to be really free, the only solution is to create a world in which women are completely self-sufficient and in which men can be totally ignored and avoided. In particular, women are slaves to their reproductive function; therefore we must give women total control over their own bodies (abortion as a right on demand) and find a way to separate reproduction from female biology and anatomy (conception in a test-tube, and pregnancy in a test-tube, or attached to a male liver or some other organ, or...). Children should be raised communally and marriage abolished. Sexual fulfilment will, of course, come through lesbianism. The Christian response to this must be first of all in terms of creation. For however little else we may be able to label definitively male or female, clearly God created human beings instinctively male and female in the biological sense. To tamper with this distinctive is to challenge the Creator. All the other issues derive from that primary fact.

Then there is a wide spectrum of what we might call liberal feminists. For many of them, the key issue is that of gender identity roles. 'What matters most, and can be changed', they say, 'is gender identity.' The problems spring not from nature but from nurture, that complex of cultural expectations and influences which packages and labels little girls one way, little boys another, and then ensures that all subsequent experiences, training and opportunities take them relentlessly to narrowly prescribed destinations. The little boy has a gun and a tool kit, the little girl a dustpan and brush and dolls. By adulthood, all that has happened is that the toys have become larger and somehow metamorphosed into the real thing. Why should not a father stay at home and care for his children while their mother goes out to work? Why should not a woman become an engineer or a train driver? The only problem is that such changes challenge our long-held gender stereotypes; and since it is men who have had a dominant role in establishing those stereotypes, in their own interests, of course, it will also be men who feel most threatened by changes.

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It is interesting that most of the 'successes' of feminism in this country, and most of the legislation designed to improve the rights and protection of women this century, have come in response to the pressures of liberal feminists. After all, they are the most reasonable, the most moderate. And it is also interesting that much of earlier liberal feminism, for example in the last century, led to very significant social reforms affecting the whole of society: for example, the abolition of slavery in the Southern States; the temperance movement and moves to deal with the scourge of alcoholism; the admission of women to higher education and the professions; the broadening of a political voice via the ballot box from a privileged minority of men to all adults, men and women. In other words, liberal feminism has often historically been associated with fundamental issues of justice, initially resisted by men but today accepted by most people, men and women, in our society as right. And it is also worth pointing out that many early liberal feminists were committed evangelical Christians whose convictions about society sprang directly from their study of the Scriptures.

And then there is Christian feminism. Now that, of course, is a red rag to some bulls. It is important to recognise that here, too, the spectrum is wide. On the one hand, some still call themselves Christians, but have moved so far from historic Christianity in any shape or form and sit so loose to the Scriptures in every way, that one wonders why they bother to claim the title. Among them are those who claim that God can only be God if redefined as female, as Mother not Father, and the Spirit as female Wisdom; that Jesus can only be Saviour if redefined as a woman – and there are female crucifixes to portray Christa. Some teach that the church is so hopelessly and irredeemably corrupted by patriarchy that we must create 'woman-church', with men excluded. This kind of feminism seeks to raise women's status by debasing men, and to deny categorically God's revelation about himself. God becomes an invention of the female imagination.

Or again, others see the role of the church and the message of the gospel as revolving around achieving social and economic justice for women. Salvation is political and economic, they say. But important though social and economic justice truly is, achieving it does not achieve

salvation – for men or women. We cannot adopt this kind of feminism, either, though we may need to think hard about how to create a genuinely more just world, for men and women both.

### **Real Questions for Real Christians**

Finally, there are the many genuine Christians who have real concerns that seem to fall at least under the edges of the feminist umbrella. They may take the Word of God utterly seriously, yet struggle with the reverberations of some of the mines in the minefield with which we started. If the interpretation of Genesis is faulty on which rests the assumption of human hierarchy with male superiority and female inferiority, what does that mean for the church today? A church that is founded on an error of that magnitude must surely have a lot to put right? Is it not important for women to struggle to gain a hearing, to seek to persuade leaders that they should be set free to serve alongside their brothers in Christ?

Why is it that there seem to be different rules for Christian women in Scotland and for women from the same churches who go overseas? If it is a clear matter of biblical principle that women may not teach men, for example, how is it that the majority of Third-World church-planting in the last hundred years has been pioneered by women whom God has seen fit to bless in their teaching and discipling? Why was it that God brought revival to several areas of China through the ministry of women when there were plenty of godly men available? Why is it, if it is all so crystal clear, that many Third-World Christians see it all quite differently and say that since Calvary and Pentecost the important issue is gift, not gender?

And what do you say to the Scottish man who would under no circumstances have a woman teach in church, but may allow her to 'report' in the church hall, or will listen to her mediated via a tape recorder? What happens when a woman, scripturally well taught and spiritually mature, is expected to listen to a man making a complete hash of things, distorting the meaning of the Word and misleading the people?

Is it really necessary to use exclusive male language in talking about the Lord's people? Is it not questionable to

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describe God in terms that inevitably project him as a larger than life exclusively male being?

If Acts and the Epistles show women working shoulder to shoulder with the men, why cannot that be so today? Why is the radical nature of the Lord's dealings with women not taken more seriously? Why are three exegetically hard passages from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy always thrown at me as simple and decisive, even though that means that other extensive portions of Scripture no longer make sense?

The questions tumble out. If the very expressing of them makes me a feminist, then so be it. I prefer to describe myself as a Christian with profound questionings about Christian womanhood. Further, I find many women, and some men, struggling with all these questions and more besides. In some cases, Christians find themselves in such pain over these issues that they cannot with integrity stay within their churches. Clearly, Evangelicals will not all reach agreement. Let us be sure that we respect those from whom we differ but who equally with ourselves seek to live by Scripture. Let us be sure, too, that we who claim to live by the Word are not in truth living by tradition.

On behalf of many of my Christian sisters in Scotland, and for the sake of the health and well-being of the church, may I appeal to you, my brothers in Christ, to listen to our questions, to hear our pain, to search the Scriptures again, and, if need be, to repent.