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# Evangelicals and Feminism

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*by Amy L. Newman*

As a woman with high ambitions and a diversity of interests that do not necessarily include marriage and motherhood, the writer has become quite sensitive to many of the issues being raised by the Women's Movement. At the same time, she has also become aware of a general opposition to the Movement in many evangelical circles which is both disturbing and disappointing. It is the view of this opposition that there is presented here a defense of feminism by examination of some of the areas of theological concern which often cause evangelicals hesitation as they evaluate the Women's Liberation Movement.

The approach of the writer is that of examining the theological implications of feminism. There are three main areas in which the theological implications of the Women's Movement have been brought into question. First, it seems that many evangelicals are convinced that the liberation and equality of women is not possible as long as an orthodox view of Scripture is maintained. Second, there appears to be a widespread conviction that women are trying to distort the understanding of God that is essential to the Christian tradition by making an issue of the language we use when speaking of God. Finally, there is a concern that male and female roles are being confused, a direct affront to "God's natural order."

## **Feminism and the Bible**

It is not clear that to be a feminist one must disregard or distort the message of Scripture. The place I choose to begin in order to support such an opinion is with the actions and words of Jesus Christ. Both Old and New Testament are most reliably interpreted in the light of Christ's life, and one can find no evidence that Jesus regarded women as inferior to men. On the contrary, He frequently ignored established laws and customs which were oppressive to women.

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*Miss Amy L. Newman is an alumna of Asbury Theological Seminary. She looks forward to a career in theological teaching. At present she is engaged in a doctoral program at Baylor University.*

Christ conversed with women in public, women were commissioned to bear witness of His resurrection to the disciples. He even encouraged Mary when she preferred to develop her intellectual capabilities at His feet rather than help Martha in the kitchen. Of even greater significance is the fact that Christ did not hesitate to relate a parable in which the image of God is presented as female (the parable of the woman who sought the lost coin).

It seems clear that Jesus Christ had no qualms about promoting the equality and dignity of women, even from within a society which was more oppressive than ours.

Turning to Scripture as a whole, the most frequent problem (on both sides) seems to be the tendency to isolate certain texts and ignore others. There are abundant indications in Scripture that equality is perfectly acceptable in God's sight, and that a loving and reciprocal relationship between the sexes is encouraged. I would highly recommend two books for those who would like to pursue a more extensive view of Scripture in relation to women: *All We're Meant to Be* by Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty (Waco: Word Books, 1974) and *Man as Male and Female* by Paul Jewett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

A final point which needs to be made here is the need for caution in distinguishing between eternal principles and those which belong to a certain period in time. Competent scholarship has never been content to lump all of Scripture together as universal truth, making each verse, regardless of context, a theological imperative. It might be well if we could all lay down our faith in tradition long enough to realize, as Virginia Mollenkott has eloquently stated elsewhere, that while Truth is indeed absolute, our human perception of absolute truth is always relative and we had therefore better remain open to the possibilities of new insights.

### **Language About God**

Another aspect of the developing feminist theology which seems to strike fear in the heart of conservatives is the problem of language about God. To some this appears to be a direct assault upon God Himself, a brazen attempt to distort the character of God as we know it. If this fear were proven to be well-founded, there would certainly be reason for concern. However, one must inquire as to whether much of the criticism directed at our cultural conceptions of God is not worthy of consideration.

Dr. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez spoke to this issue at the Inter-

seminary Women's Conference in Pittsburgh in March, 1975. Dr. Gonzalez clearly pointed out some of the resulting problems when all-male language is used in reference to God. One of the most obvious of these problems is that it becomes very easy to read our social patterns into our thought about God – what our particular culture says about masculinity. As a result, we may find ourselves limiting God to cultural stereotypes. The answer, of course, is not to use all-female language, either. Perhaps a simple awareness that the problem exists is sufficient at this time, an awareness that will allow one to expand his or her understanding somewhat of the nature of God's Being.

Here, too, Scripture sets a precedent. Not only did Christ use female imagery in reference to God, but we find such imagery in the Old Testament as well. For example, in Isaiah 66:13 God promises His people that "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you." What a shame if we cling to a lopsided image of God because of our own defensiveness.

When women question the language we use when speaking of God, they are not thereby questioning God's character, but rather society's characterization of God. I doubt that God is so insecure about His masculinity that He needs us to defend it for Him. It was Karl Barth who once commented on the arrogance that causes us to begin with the human in our searching for God, reading into God's character that which originates with us.

### **Male-Female Roles and "God's Natural Order"**

Many opponents of the Women's Movement fear that the distinctiveness of our masculinity and femininity is being downgraded, and that the order which God instituted in regard to the sexes is being ignored. There are two arguments which cast doubt upon the necessity for such anxiety.

First of all, concerning male-female roles, it seems clear that most people do not seem to realize how many of the attributes which we commonly term 'feminine' and 'masculine' have more to do with culture and tradition than with the human condition of being either male or female. I see this as an area in which a tremendous amount of work needs to be done in order to determine those basic qualities, other than biological (or because of the biological), that make a woman different from a man. (I'm afraid it's not that we smell good, have smooth legs, wear dresses, and can cook.)

From normal, natural differences between the sexes there have

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evolved elaborated social rituals and roles that are often oppressive to both men and women. I am convinced that if we can strip away an appreciable amount of the cultural garb that is used to distinguish men from women, there will emerge relationships which are much more comfortable and complementary. For example, perhaps women can learn to appreciate men who are sensitive and emotional, and will no longer risk the respect of their male peers by being rational and intelligent.

In regard to the existence of a “natural order,” one may observe that there was indeed a dominant-submissive relationship between man and woman which followed the onset of sin. This was one of the scars which sin inflicted upon the human race. But of what value, one may ask, is the grace that comes through Christ, if we accept it in theory only and do not allow ourselves to live as though this “new beginning” were a reality. The oft-quoted passage in Galatians which informs us that in Christ there is neither male nor female seems to be a good starting point from which one may develop a theology of freedom from the bonds of sin. May we never insult the redemption which God has so graciously provided by living as though we were not aware of the implications this redemption has for all our relationships, particularly the relationship between man and woman.

Thus, the woman or man who chooses to identify himself or herself with certain aspects of the feminist movement will find that such a position can be supported from a thoroughly evangelical position. One’s theological heritage need not be abandoned, in fact it may even be affirmed, by those who undertake a careful re-evaluation of their identity as male or female. We need not fear the new direction which our theological development is taking as long as we maintain our confidence in the Lordship of Christ over every aspect of our existence.

### **Conclusion**

Theology cannot be separated from the experience of the individual, particularly the individual’s encounter with God. This personal element is the root of all theologizing, and makes the difference between dry theory and a life expressive of significant relationships with both God and other persons.

The theology that has evolved from the Women’s Movement is likewise an expression of the common experience of a group of women, many from within the Christian tradition. Women have begun to discover themselves, and as they do, their new awareness takes many forms.

It is not surprising that frustration and even anger have surfaced as the account of history's pitiful treatment of women is understood.

The result is that women often find themselves in a difficult situation. The writer continues to see people alienated by the more radical women, while at the same time, 'nice' women continue to get stepped on. One of the problems facing Christian women is finding acceptable ways of getting themselves heard and respected. My own hope is that men will begin to be as sensitive and caring as they are capable of being and that women will be more tolerant of the slow learners.

What do women want? We merely want to be ourselves, not a product manufactured by society, an idealized woman that doesn't really exist. What a relief it would be to step down from the pedestal and be real people. The time is past, in fact, when women can be content to remain on a pedestal. That's like saying to a Black slave, *circa* 1850, "What are you complaining about? You get free room and board, don't you?" Women don't care about the free room and board any more.

It is here that the writer finds much common ground with other women in the Christian tradition who identify themselves as feminists. We just want to remind our churches and our society that women, not just men, are made in God's image. This simple observation is really the basis for any attempt to establish one's dignity as a person. We must set about the task of affirming the goodness of all of God's creation, particularly in the light of the reconciliation with God that is ours through Christ. Speaking personally, my own restoration is still taking place, and the fact that I am a woman should not hinder it.