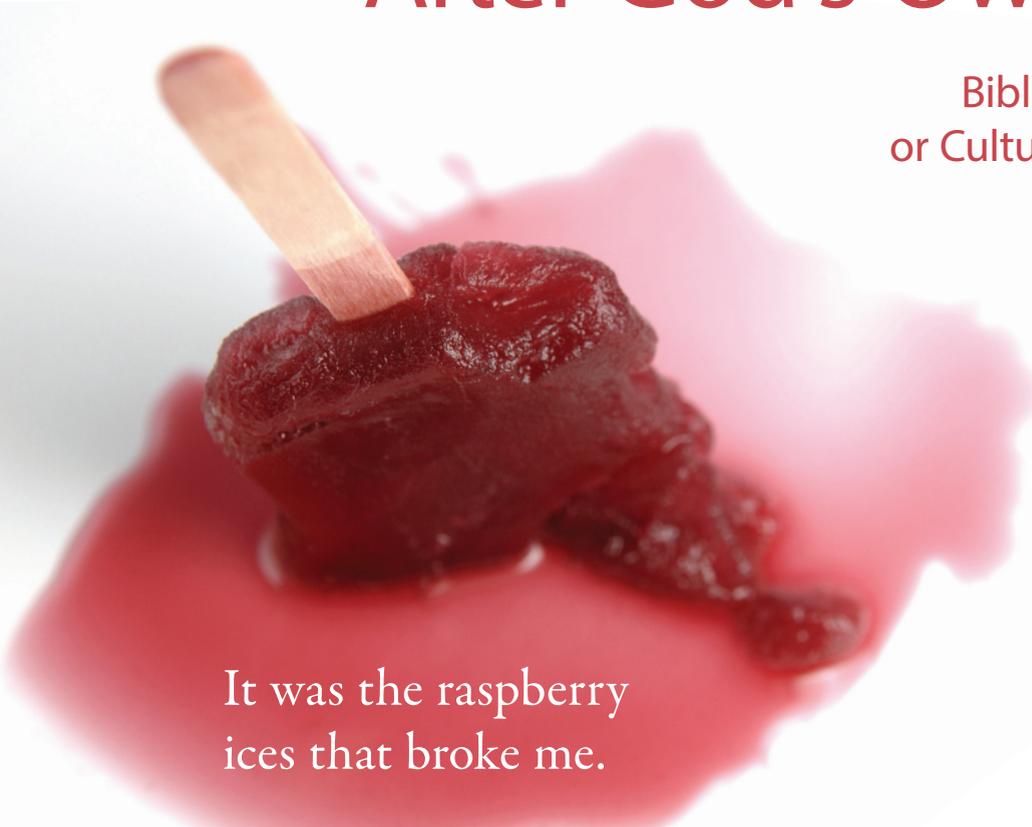


On Being a Woman After God's Own Heart

Biblical Womanhood,
or Cultural Womanhood?

by Jenny Rae Armstrong



It was the raspberry
ices that broke me.

It was the late nineties, and the women's Bible study I was attending was going through *A Woman After God's Own Heart* by Elizabeth George, one of those guides to "biblical womanhood" that offered a few good insights, but mostly just made me feel guilty and inadequate about my fledgling homemaking skills. Something about the theology seemed off, but as a young mom, I took the older, more experienced women's words to heart. Or at least I did until George described how she served her daughters raspberry ices when they came home from school, and a case of spiritual brain freeze spurred me to righteous rebellion.

See, I had spent much of my childhood in Liberia, a country that was in the midst of a horrific civil war. The women I had grown up with—strong women who loved Jesus and were certainly "women after God's own heart"—had been forced to flee their

concrete block houses and zinc shacks to take refuge in the jungle, or make the long, dangerous trek to Ghana seeking refuge and asylum. Some of them stayed in the city, facing massacres, starvation, and drugged teens carrying automatic weapons to shelter orphans and children separated from their families. They sure weren't serving up raspberry ices in sparkling goblets. If their children were alive, and they had anything to feed them, they thanked God for it.

The dichotomy between what I was being taught about "biblical womanhood" in church and the reality of what my loved ones in Liberia were facing was grotesque, and the insinuation that the measure of a woman's heart could be in any way related to the privileged frivolities of Western homemaking infuriated me. I voiced the protest that would change the trajectory of my theological development: "If it

doesn't work for African market women, it doesn't work for me." The gospel has to be good news for everyone willing to accept it, no matter their circumstances, or it isn't good news at all. Besides, why should middle-aged, white Americans get to define what constitutes "a woman after God's own heart?"

Most of our beliefs about what makes a "good woman" or a "good man" are derived from the culture or cultures we grew up in. A girl from northern China will navigate a very different set of gender expectations than a girl from the Czech Republic. An Aboriginal Australian boy deals with different social pressures than a boy being raised in Saudi Arabia. In the United States, conservative Christianity seems to have codified the 1950s housewife as the feminine ideal. Ironically, the June Cleavers of the world—those idealized 1950s housewives—

were largely raised by scrappy, independent-minded women who took in washing, did subsistence farming, and clocked long shifts in dangerous factories, thanking God for the work that allowed them to feed their families. When the experiences of people of color, the poor, and other marginalized groups are taken into account, the double-standards surrounding gender expectations become downright embarrassing, the sort of stunning hypocrisy that made Sojourner Truth stand up and declare “Ain’t I a woman?” Not only do gender expectations vary across cultures, they vary within culture, and from generation to generation.

For the most part, there is nothing inherently wrong with traditional gender roles, whatever those may be in our culture. Many of them evolved for reasons that made good sense at the time. And while social ideas about masculinity and femininity can be constrictive, they can also function as window dressing, adding richness and color to the beautiful diversity of human culture. I’m sure God takes even more delight in Indian women’s gorgeous saris and the elaborately beaded and braided hair of Maasai warriors than I do.

But when we absolutize our gender expectations, insisting that everyone meet our cultural standards of masculinity and femininity, we run into trouble. Not only do we misrepresent what the Bible has to say about men and women, boiling people down to caricatures, we also crush people under the weight of our human-made traditions—traditions we have erroneously equated with virtue and godliness. In Matthew 23, Jesus had strong words for the scribes and Pharisees who did just that,

accusing them of tying heavy burdens on people’s backs, slamming the door of heaven in people’s faces, and of being white-washed tombs, beautiful to look at from the outside, but full of death on the inside. So many people carry shame surrounding their inability to live up to cultural gender expectations that, contrary to the fretful insistence of some, have absolutely nothing to do with the gospel. We need to get busy lightening those burdens and propping doors open, making way for the wind of God’s Spirit to breathe life, freedom, and healing into those dry bones.

Ironically, as I was struggling through the cultural issues pressuring me to be a “nice Christian woman”—sweet, submissive, and a whiz with a feather duster—the Christian women of Liberia were rising up in bold rebellion against the disaster and debauchery that power-hungry men were bringing down on their nation. Liberia’s “Women in White” marched, danced, and sang in the streets, demanding an end to the fighting. They pledged abstinence until the war was over, effectively mobilizing men who didn’t seem quite as committed to the cause of peace as the women were (can you imagine what proponents of “biblical womanhood” would say to that?). When the warlords couldn’t come to an agreement during the peace talks, the women linked arms and blocked all the exits, insisting that if the warlords were going to act like little boys, they were going to treat them like little boys. Trapped, the men were shamed into an agreement. When the war was over, Liberian women rallied to elect

Africa’s first female head-of-state, the indomitable, Harvard-educated Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Their righteous rebellion was biblical in scope, and Johnson-Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, founder of the Women in White, later won a Nobel Peace Prize for their actions.

No doubt about it, these strong, courageous women were women after God’s own heart, women who hated violence and injustice, who acted on behalf of the vulnerable and oppressed, and who were willing to lay down their lives to bring about reconciliation. Proverbs 8:1-3 describes them well:

Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gate leading into the city, at the entrance, she cries aloud.

That’s the sort of biblical woman I want to be. No syrupy speech, picture-perfect house, or raspberry ices necessary. After all, charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (Proverbs 31:30).



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Know your history: Liberia and the Women in White

Civil war came to Liberia in 1989 and continued until 1997, when it paused briefly, only to resume in 1999. Liberian women, led by Leymah Gbowee, took matters into their own hands, forming Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. The women came to be known as the “Women in White” for the white T-shirts they wore to attract attention while protesting.

The movement began in 2002 as a group of women singing and praying in a fish market. In 2003, their peaceful protests forced the president and rebel forces to meet in Ghana for peace talks. A group of the women traveled to Ghana, surrounded the meeting hall where the negotiations took place, and held the delegates hostage there until a deal was reached.

The bold actions of Liberia’s Women in White brought an end to fourteen years of war.