

IS THERE A BIBLICAL FEMINISM?

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I am not proud of Christendom's track record on sexism. Many male interpreters of the Bible lead one to believe that Jesus had little or nothing to do with women. Only in the last two or three decades have scholars unearthed the integral part women played in Jesus' ministry. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her book *In Memory of Her* tells the story of one of the three main characters in holy week, the woman who anoints Jesus' head. Jesus is so moved by what she does that he exclaims "And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). Yet, prior to Fiorenza's work, this woman was viewed as an extra in the Gospel drama penciled into the margins of the New Testament. It is the male characters of passion week, Judas and Peter, whose stories have been told.

The church historically has been a patriarchal hierarchy with men at the top and women at the bottom. Religious history is dotted with arguments like the following: Women cannot be priests because there must be physical resemblance between the priest and his Lord; the female sex must be the inferior sex because God chose the male sex for his incarnation; Paul says in Eph. 5:24 that wives are to be subject in everything to their husbands, so it is clear that God intended that there be a divine hierarchy here on earth with men lording it over women and children. Such arguments have led to radical feminist outcries like Mary Daly's "the idea of a unique incarnation in a male. . . is inherently sexist and oppressive." Or more pithily "Since 'God' is male, the male is God ("The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion," *Quest*, I, p. 21).

Whereas I see no need to defend, only to lament, the sexism of Christendom, I do think feminine Christians should think again about what Jesus himself taught. Jesus was a man. How did his maleness affect how he related to, and what he taught about, women?

Before I began my research into feminist Christology I thought that feminists argued that men and women are equal, i.e. that we women can do anything men can do just as well as they can. But no, the research today points to how different men and women are. We differ not only biologically but intellectually. We reason differently. Take, for example, our approach to moral problems. Men and women, suggests Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*), work within different value structures, women

valuing relationships, men valuing individual rights. We even sin differently. Valerie Saiving in "The Human Situation: Feminine View" (*Womanspirit Rising*, pp. 25-35) argues that since a woman's biology reinforces her sexuality so graphically—we menstruate, bear children, lactate, go through menopause—we women are more secure in our sexuality and have less to prove. Men, on the other hand, have fewer built-in biological indicators and correspondingly have more to prove. This is good insofar as it encourages men to achieve and to be more creative, but it is also bad in that it encourages the sins of false pride, selfishness, grasping after power, exploitation and oppression. We women, on the other hand, find it easier to be self-giving and sacrificial. But we too have our own set of feminine sins: we lack a sense of identity apart from our family, we lack integrity, we lack decisiveness, we lack excellence. In short, we lack a sense of the importance of self.

Jesus and Temptation

Jesus without question was a man. The temptations he faced in the wilderness were temptations to power and self-aggrandizement, not temptations to the negation of self. Jesus is known to have called other people to self-sacrifice and selflessness (see Luke 9:59-62; Matt. 16:24-25; 19:21), a call most men, but not many women need to hear. Does this mean that Jesus, being out of touch with the feminine experience, preached a message applicable only to men? Or worse, is his message detrimental to women because it encourages us to continue in our self-demeaning sin? We already have a tendency to negate ourselves, and a call to self-sacrifice just compounds the error. So, is Jesus in fact a threat to women?

I Say No

Many radical feminists answer yes. I answer no. When Jesus was addressing women alone, he preached a different message than he preached to men. Jesus never tells a woman (as he does the rich young ruler) that she should sacrifice all that she has. He never heaps scorn upon women (as he does the Pharisees) for their pride or their self-righteousness. He never pulls women up short (as he does James and John) for their attempt to seize the privilege of sitting one on his left, one on his right. With women, Jesus takes an entirely different tack.

Look at his encounter with Mary and Martha. He tells Martha in so many words that Mary shouldn't be helping Martha serve; she should be doing theology with Jesus. He calls the Samaritan woman to focus on the higher questions of right worship and right relationship to God rather than on her daily chores. He even rebukes an anonymous woman in a crowd for complimenting Mary for having borne such a great son. This poor woman tries to compliment Jesus by

complimenting his mother, and Jesus retorts that no one is blessed just for her child-bearing. "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it (Luke 11:27)." In short, the Jesus of the Gospels calls women to develop themselves rather than sacrifice themselves. He calls them to do theology rather than being totally preoccupied with their domestic chores. He calls them to nurture their relationship to God rather than being defined by their relationships with their husband and children. It was men whom Jesus told to be more self-sacrificing, not women.

As an evangelical Christian, I believe, of course, that Jesus can do more than help women develop a healthy sense of self. I believe he can save us. Women have always been told that they need men to save them. We need our white knight in shining armor to rescue us from our own incompetence and to create for us a protected environment where we can safely exist as an ornament for our hero. But Jesus isn't that kind of sexist savior. In fact he died a grisly death in order to save us. I don't pretend to be able to give a new feminist theory of the atonement, but I do think a uniquely feminine experience gives real insight into what happened on the cross.

Many feminists are so horrified by the cross that they do not view it as either atoning or salvific. They view it as one more example of men crucifying men in power lust. But listen now to three medievalists who describe Jesus' death on the cross in terms of childbirth. First, St Anselm:

And if you had not died, you would not have brought forth.

For longing to bear sons into life,
You tasted death, and by dying, you begot them.

(The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm, p. 157)

Second, Marguerite d'Oingt, the thirteenth century prioress:

Ah, who has seen a woman give birth thus!
And when the hour of birth came, they placed
You on the bed of the Cross, And it is not astonishing
your veins reaptured, as you gave birth
in one single day,
to the whole world!

(Les Oeuvres de Marguerite d'Oingt, p. 33)

And last, Juliana of Norwich, the fourteenth century anchoress:

"We realize that all our mothers bear us for pain and for dying, and what is that? But our true mother, Jesus—All love—alone bears us for joy and for endless living, blessed may he be! Thus he sustains us within himself in love and hard labor, until the fulness of time."

(The Revelations of Divine Love, pp. 191-192)

ASKING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS:

IS THERE EQUALITY IN CHRISTIANS FOR BIBLICAL EQUALITY?

by Jeff, Bolton, writer and member of CBE's Twin Cities chapter

The commitment to equality to be found in Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) as an organization will hinge on our individual approaches to equality.

One approach is to view CBE as a feminist organization. But in the popular sense of the word, is CBE "feminist"? If it is, this column can serve as my official notification of resignation from CBE. I am not a feminist. But before you use this paper to cover your bird cage bottom or line the garbage can, listen to my reasoning.

"Feminist" and "feminism" are words that have become polluted by their use and abuse in the secular world. The words feminist and feminism have come to mean more than their original definition. If someone were to call me a feminist in the *true* definition of the word, I would proudly accept the title. I believe in the social, political, and—more importantly—the Biblically-based equality of all in Christ. But I can not accept the title of feminist because of what it seems to have become in the minds of the secular world and, unfortunately, in the minds of many Christians.

"Feminist" and "feminism" have become words used simply to define a new oppression, not a new equality. The feminists of the world do not seem to want equality, but unshared power. Strident feminists seem to advocate a change simply based on redefining the elitist power structure. And, like Russia throwing out the elitist Tsarist system for the equally elitist Communist system, the new oppression can only become worse. Unbridled power corrupts.

Would being a "feminist" organization help CBE? Does a "feminist" slant or view help CBE? I would say emphatically not.

Remember: We are CHRISTIANS FOR BIBLICAL EQUALITY, not Christians for Biblical Equality Focussing on Women's Issues. And with our particular focus on equality, we need to direct our views to the biblical equality of all. This means that we seek *Bible-based* equality for women—along with men, Blacks, Hispanics, Orientals, poor and any other group.

If we are concentrating only on women's rights and women's needs, then we will miss the needs and rights of the men in our group and in Christ's Body. By focussing on one group we denigrate the