



FAITH, FEMINISM AND FAMILY

Catherine Clark Kroeger

Faith, feminism and family are three of the highest priorities in my life, but no one has ever before invited me to write on all three topics at once. If I am to do so, I must begin at the beginning: with the book of Genesis. In an incredibly poetic story, we are told of a wise God who made all things and saw that they were good—that is, until it came to the creation of man. Then God saw that it was “not good” that man should be alone. Humanity, made in God’s image, must be relational as God is relational, sharing mutual love and joy and wholeness.

In the creation story, male and female were both made equally in the image of God. Woman was drawn from the very substance of man to share his dreams, his intellect, his emotions, and his spirituality. Greek tradition taught that women were made of an inferior substance, a cruel trick of the gods to despoil the potential of man. Hebrew tradition, however, described the woman as one who is like man, a blessed gift from the true and living God, bestowed to save man from loneliness.

The creation of the family is celebrated with Adam’s song: “This at last is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh!” And the two became one flesh, naked and unashamed, joyful in their togetherness, tender and caring in a newfound relationship.

The next chapter of Genesis is far less cheerful, and disaster lurks as man and woman lose their openness with one another and with God. Nevertheless, the family remains the mainstay of Israel’s faith.

The household was to be built upon the union of man and woman, bound together by sex and covenant. That covenant household was to become a haven for the alien and stranger, a center for instruction and influence to all who entered through its door, a bastion of righteousness upheld by prayer and commitment to the one true God.

From the resources of this most basic social unit, there was to be outreach to those in any sort of need or distress.

THE VALIANT WOMAN

The influence of the household for political, economic and social betterment of the community is well described in Proverbs 31. This chapter outlines the activities of the valiant woman whose husband serves as a judge at the traditional place for judgement, the city gate. The venture is a cooperative one, however, involving both wife and husband. The wife not only manages the household capably but appears to make a major contribution to the family finances. She engages in international trade, real estate dealings, agriculture, commercial manufacture of textile products, and sales. In terms of social service, her influence includes both practical material aid and positive emotional support. It is often argued that this ideal woman is in fact a composite of many women, but she does point to the manifold possibilities that could open for women, even in biblical times. This ideal woman is a full-orbed person in her own right, free to make her own decisions and to act on them responsibly. Her husband’s heart trusts in her, and her children rise up and call her blessed. Unlike most modern women, her household consists of enough people so that the workload can be shared.

The woman of Proverbs 31 is a far cry from the stereotypical harried housewife overwhelmed with babies, diapers, whiny kids, burned dinner and an absentee husband. The paradigm is a woman who has things under control. She even has domestic help that she directs, and she has time for real estate enterprises, cottage industry and agricultural projects as well as philanthropy and civic improvement. Her children and husband endorse her activities heartily. Her husband, a respected community leader, allows her the freedom to conduct her own affairs, and she responds with strong support for his judicial career.

She is accorded honor, respect and admiration because of her role in the community and in her own family. Most

of us do not have a houseful of servants, but we can insist upon some of the prerequisites that gave the woman in Proverbs 31 a coveted position. First of all, every human being has a right to reasonable rest. This is a major plank of the Ten Commandments. The principle of the Sabbath is one that was developed for the benefit of humanity, Jesus tells us. Perhaps rest is the most basic right of which women are deprived. It is well nigh impossible to keep one's sanity while caring for an infant twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Children are exasperating, exhilarating, exhausting, entertaining, enervating, adorable and infuriating. Everyone in the family benefits when a mother is not tottering on the edge of exhaustion.

The Bible calls on both fathers and mothers to impart their faith as they share life's daily activities with their children. Before the Industrial Age, men were far more involved in the upbringing of children and taught them largely by influence and example. Children accompanied parents to the field and shop, the market and fishing vessel. As they walked along, significant landmarks became interest-catching object lessons to recite the saving acts of God. The paradigm of the so-called "Christian" family, with father gone for untold hours and mother home alone with the children, is of modern manufacture.

The contemporary working wife finds some respite from child care during work hours but faces the so-called "second shift" when she gets home, doing all the household chores that didn't get done before she left for work. Large scale studies demonstrate that women do work significantly more hours per week than men. While the married woman can hope for some kind of assistance from her husband, single mothers know even more crushing loads of toil.

Here is an area where we need to apply Christian creativity. We have a clear biblical mandate. Some churches provide child care at minimal cost for a mother's day or night out. Other groups have cooperatives where mothers exchange child care services so that each may have some time to herself. Individual church members who notice a stressed-out mother can invite the kids over to make popcorn or listen to a story. Parents can befriend those who are alone and invite them into their homes. Bonds of friendship and affection can be formed, both for children and adults; having another adult around frequently alleviates some of the strife between children.

Is it right to put a child in day care? That depends upon the circumstances, and no two cases are alike, just as no two blades of grass are alike and no two leaves, either. One of our besetting sins is in making rules and roles to govern family life; but each situation is different. It is better to seek the mind of God and the good of every member of the family. Other things being equal, it is better to have one parent or the other with a young child; but there are many ways that this might be worked out.

It is crucial, however, that parents understand the importance of nurture and environment in the development

of young children. Rearing a child is of infinitely more worth to society than the production of an airplane. The pay scale is skewed and levels of respect seriously distorted, but thirty or forty years from now, the airplane will be obsolete, while the child will be just coming into his or her own. In the meantime, everything mother says, does, thinks, wears or cooks is terrible. And then these "ungrateful wretches" turn into incredibly wonderful human beings, seeking to become responsible citizens in the Kingdom of God.

A SENSE OF MISSION

A woman who chooses to raise a family must have a sense of mission. The woman of Proverbs 31 was respected because of the way she had chosen to organize her life. We need to be emphatic that there are many meaningful activities in which a woman can engage. If a woman chooses to be a mother, she must first understand herself as a child of God, made in God's image, redeemed by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is not God's purpose that she be shackled by the tyranny of her household, but that within her family she find expression of her faith.

There are traps that may subvert her mission. *First*, there can be the assignment of rigid roles within marriage and family. This ignores the diversity that God has built into human beings and the amazing potential for creative and constructive dynamics. The family in which one person makes all decisions is not the most healthy. Indeed, a recent study suggested that a strong indicator of impending divorce was a husband's refusal to listen to his wife. The lowest rates of abuse and dysfunction were found in families where decisions were made democratically.

It is quite true that the Bible says the husband is the head of the woman, but the language of the New Testament (Greek) did not ordinarily use the word in a metaphorical sense to designate someone who was chief or boss. Jesus was very much opposed to anyone being boss. "The gentiles desire to lord it over you, but among my disciples it shall not be so" (Mk 10:42-45). We must remember that Christ left no clearly designated leader among his band of followers, nor was it God's original intent to give Israel a king. Jesus apparently felt that a servant-master relationship was destructive of intimacy; for he said "I no longer call you servants, because the servant does not know what his or her master is going to do. Rather I call you friends" (Jn 15:15). Christ is indeed called head of the church; but a careful study of the passages on this subject reveal that the term evokes images of close relationship, of moving impulses and unity within the body.

In Ephesians 5, women are told to submit to their husbands as the church does to Christ. But even the most conservative lexicon will admit that *hupotasso*, the Greek word here translated "submit," has a number of meanings. It could mean to associate with, adhere to, be loyal to, discharge one's obligations toward, or relate in such a way as to make

meaning. Actually the whole of Ephesians 5 is about how the people of God are to relate to one another. All persons are to be *mutually submissive* one to another, says the text, including wives to their husbands and husbands to their wives (Eph 5:21ff).

Christ's own relationship to the church is not dictatorial but tender, encouraging the growth of God's people to their full potential. We mature by learning to make decisions, and so it is as Christ guides the church. Our submission is not unquestioning obedience but rather seeking with all of our capacities to live out a devoted commitment.

Second, an equally insidious trap is the idolization of the family. Keeping the family together is not the highest goal of the Christian faith. While the family has great importance, it is not accorded ultimate status in the Bible. Jesus indicated that there were other priorities higher than the family.

"Anyone who wants to be my follower must love me far more than they do their own father, mother, spouse, children, brothers or sisters—yes, more than their own life—otherwise they cannot be my disciple" (Lk 15:26).

Jesus himself was homeless, and relationships within his own family were sometimes strained. Some of the interchanges between Jesus and his mother were not altogether harmonious. We read further that Jesus' family came to take him because they had concluded that "he was beside himself." Later his brothers would be committed leaders in the church and his mother involved in its decision-making and fellowship. They came to understand those higher priorities. A woman once raised her voice as Jesus preached and declared, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that gave suck," and Jesus replied, "Yea, rather blessed are those that hear the Word of God and do it" (Lk 11:27-28).

Jesus viewed a woman as more than a baby machine, more than a professional people-producer. Her ultimate self-definition is not mother or wife, daughter, sister, or niece. Rather she is who she is *first* as a child of God, created, redeemed, sustained and empowered by God's grace. It is in this identity that she brings purpose, meaning and direction to her family.

Third, yet another trap by which women are ensnared is an authoritarianism that leads to abuse, a terrible scourge that lies hidden even in nice Christian families. Research indicates that abuse occurs at about the same rate in religious homes as it does in society as a whole. As people of faith, we hate to admit that the problem exists in our midst. Actually, we offer few positive resources to people in our own faith community, whether the problem is incest, rape, battering, intimidation, or verbal, sexual or emotional abuse. We refuse to believe the victim who summons up enough

courage to seek help in the church. Often our biggest priority is making sure that "no one knows", that the behavior of a supposedly model male church member is not revealed, that the status quo is not upset.

The Bible is devastatingly honest. Most of the families described in the Bible are perfectly awful, not to mention incredibly dysfunctional. Cain kills Abel, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, Jacob practices deceitful stratagems on his father, brother and father-in-law and barely escapes with his life. Abraham and Isaac both allow their wives to be inducted into other men's harems and even deny their marital relationship. Adultery, incest, murder and jealousy punctuate other accounts of family life. We think: Really, God, couldn't you have cleaned it up a little?

Let us acknowledge that the biblical pattern is not to hide abuse but to bring it in to the light. When the silence is broken, then God's people can address the problem. Energies can be directed to healing instead of hiding. Yes, it means admitting that our families are less than perfect, that we have not perfectly reflected the heavenly image of Christ and the church or of God's plan for families. But God commands the righteous to deliver the helpless from the hand of the violent. Let's get started with the job.

Let us confess that we are the imperfect and sinful people of God. We cannot be a forgiven people until we have confessed our failures and sought paths of restitution and healing. This can be a messy, costly and embarrassing process.

The good news is that God still works in families, even rotten ones. God is still the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Again and again the Bible promises grace to the children and children's children of those who love and trust God; and repeatedly special mercy is shown to families, whether those of Noah or Rahab or the Philippian jailer. Yes, the "begats" are there because they represent believing folk who struggled to impart their faith to their children as they ate their simple meals and walked along the roads or told them bedtime stories. The faith of parents still ignites the faith of children, not automatically or without struggle, but home-grown faith is still contagious. The promise of salvation is still there for those who will believe and to their children (Acts 2:39).

BOOK ALERT: Ruth Hoppin's book, *Priscilla's Letter: Finding the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, reviewed in *Priscilla Papers*, Fall 1998, has been taken out of print by the publisher, International Scholars Publications. Until further notice, order the book through interlibrary loan.