I recently had the dubious honor of being the only female passenger in the first class cabin of a crowded jet. As the plane landed and taxied toward the terminal, I, like all the men around me, quickly gathered my belongings and stood in the aisle. Apparently the ground crew was having difficulty opening the door, and after about ten minutes of listening to mechanical parts grind back and forth, one man, standing inches behind me blurted out, “Oh, it’s probably some stupid woman who can’t figure out how to open the door!” The other men chuckled, and I smiled like one of the boys, feeling strangely invisible and deeply humiliated by the entire circumstance. Yet, I couldn’t help but wonder if individuals would be as inclined to vent racist rather than sexist attitudes? Would they be as inclined to admit they thought Asian or African-Americans inept, particularly if one were present?

Covert (and perhaps unintentional) sexism is often as invisible to the perpetrators as it is to the victims. For example, I know of a successful Christian bookstore that sells buttons with “funny” slogans on them such as: “I’d quit school but I need the rest” or “I’m a male chauvinist pig.” The first slogan is, perhaps, humorous; the second, in my opinion, is another example of our wide and blind practice of demeaning women. Would that bookstore sell buttons that read “I’m a racist” or “I’m anti-Semitic”? What’s the difference? If racism (the erroneous belief that one race is superior to another) is a sin, so is sexism. I might even dare to argue that sexism (the erroneous belief that one sex is superior to the other, and the exercise of power of one sex over another) is a particularly heinous sin, when one considers that women are almost always an oppressed people within every oppressed people.

I am frequently reminded of the many parallels that exist among disadvantaged peoples. Recall the rhetoric some used to support slavery in the U.S.: some argued from Scripture (persons of color descended from Ham, the wicked son of Noah [Martin Marty, Pilgrims in Their Own Land, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1984, p. 242]); some argued on the basis of anatomy (African-Americans have smaller brains [ibid., p. 256]). Who has not heard similar rhetoric with regard to women? I remember listening to a highly respected Evangelical psychologist tell a radio audience that women have brains which are lateralized to the left, and hence are best suited for non-analytic, non-leadership, social service, and domestic roles. And, of course, one camp of scholarship points to Eve, her failings, and the subsequent (and just) subjugation of her gender.

It seems to me that one of the problems of injustice is that it casts a dense, seemingly impenetrable shadow over the face of God. In an account of Southern slaves in the U.S. we observe the following logic:

“Massa, may I ask you something?”

“Ask what you please?”

“Can you explain how it happened in lust place, that the white folks got the start of black folks, so as to make dem slaves and do all de work?”

“Uncle Pete, it’s no usetalking. It’s fo’ordained. The Bible tells you that the Lord fo’ordained the blacks to work, and the white man to boss”

“Dat’s so. But if dat’s so, then God’s no fair man!” [ibid., p. 242]

Finally, those of us who find ourselves in positions of power should view the influence we wield as an unearned gift, as a privilege and not a prerogative, for we are all ultimately powerless before our Lord. It seems to me that God has called the more powerful to display greater responsibility in serving the less powerful, in faithful submission to the truth, that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free.