

# DEAR WOMAN — LOVE, MAN

Roger Mitchell

The apostle Paul took that family model and turned it upside down. He taught early Christians that one of the marks of God's presence in their lives was submitting to one another by showing humility, respect and a willingness to give in. Although the word for "submit" was used in military settings for a "chain of command," that is definitely not the way Paul used it!

Paul then applied the principle of mutual submission to families. He not only told wives, children and slaves to practice that kind of humble respect, but he also expected men to do the same. What a radical departure from the "family values" of the day—husbands were to be considerate toward their wives, parents were to treat their children with dignity, and masters were to view slaves as fellow human beings!

So it seems that when the SBC statement places a fairly lopsided weight on wives submitting to their husbands, it works against what the Bible has in mind.

What really clinched it for me, though, was the way the Southern Baptist spin doctors tried to support the family statement. They knew that the term *submission* has all kinds of negative undertones for most people these days. So they justified their use of it by stating that women have "separate function" but are equal in worth.

So yeah, "separate" but "equal." That combination was not lost on many of us.

That got me thinking about T. B. Maston, one of my forerunners at Southwestern. Maston was a professor of ethics and a true civil rights pioneer. He was calling for racial integration—even for white SBC churches in the South—in the 1930s! His portrait hangs outside my former office, and I've often found myself asking him what he would do with the mess we've had in the SBC during the last few years.

I tried to imagine what Maston would have done if Southern Baptists had come up with a statement on race relations calling for segregation as the "biblical" approach. (Yes, many SBC churches were preaching in those days that segregation of the races was "God's plan" for human society.) Well, there is no way under the sun that Maston would have signed something like that.

At that moment, I knew what I had to do. In one sense, however, I really shouldn't compare myself with Maston. He faced death threats for his views. I've just had to give up my life's dream. But then, I'm not alone in that, am I?

Of course, my friends know that the real reason why I didn't sign is because my wife wouldn't let me.

I'm a number cruncher and concept designer, an engineer by training. By up-bringing, I'm an Evangelical Christian, having leaned toward fundamentalism throughout my early life in my search for all truth in the literal words and expressions of the Bible.

I work hard, really hard. I want the best for my wife and two teenagers. I take family and fathering seriously. I also take my religious life seriously. From an early age, through university, marriage, and on to where I am today, matters of faith and practice have been integral to my life. I have tried to be diligent in living-out what I understood to be the precepts advanced by pastors and parents. Sometimes this practice seemed closed-ended, dogmatically defined and prescribed. Sometimes, unanswered questions surfaced in my mind. Usually I was quick to squelch them.

That is, until the day I had been asked to speak in my local church. The event was to be in celebration of Earth Day. Respect and reverence for nature, God's great gift to us.

So my study began. In addition to Genesis and its admonition to subdue the earth, I looked afresh at ways we have failed to honor our environment. This study led me to look at cultures in which nature was not exploited but revered. I wanted to probe this great gift. What impressed me were the dualities present, both "masculine" and "feminine" forces.

While we Christians tend to masculinize the Creator—after all, the Scriptures are written by men and refer extensively to God in masculine language—still, here and there are traditionally feminine characteristics ascribed to God (cf. Mt 23:37; Ps 91: 4).

I pondered the potential for inequality that can result from denying, ignoring, or playing down the feminine aspect of the Creator. I was curious as to how and why this phenomenon came to imprint itself on the many generations of humankind in oftentimes inhumane ways.

I looked within myself. I challenged myself to honesty, honesty that transcends convention and ego needs and wants. What I came face to face with was an ugly fear. But rather than withdraw, I stood my ground. That's when I was hit—straight on—with bulldozer sensations of potential rejection. Was it possible that I was actually jealous of the woman's gift of childbearing? Was I unsettled by the thought

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that if the woman could somehow find a way to procreate without man, what need would she have of me?

“Pretty basic caveman stuff,” I cringed inside. But nonetheless, I willed myself to go with it. That’s when the paranoia hit. Could the resultant dynamics between men and women actually result from some form of cunning, forceful conspiracy by the most physically powerful of the genders?

I was suddenly overtaken by a need to purge myself of this possibility. My need was to confess, to apologize, beginning in the first person, as one man to one woman, but also to speak for all men down through the ages and throughout the globe who may have internalized these perceptions.

That’s when the words started to come. It was about a ten minute blizzard of thoughts. I scrawled them fast and in free form on my notebook.

I knew what I had written would need refining here and there. But the thought, the essence of the message, was there, as was my deep sincerity.

Since the writing of “Dear Woman – Love, Man” things have changed in my life. Not my work schedule. I still crunch numbers. My family remains very important to me, as does my religious faith. But now, there are differences, other differences. After you read the poem, I think you’ll be able to venture some guesses, to conjecture as to what some of those new thoughts might be.

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Dear Woman,

I’ve a heartfelt need of your affirmation  
that you’ll want to remain in association  
with me, when after I make this confession,  
that for ages I’ve engineered your abject subjugation.

Or will you instead take your legitimate leave,  
when you learn that you were always meant to be free?  
Oh, how I fear what may be the result  
when you grasp the enormity of my cunning insult.

I’m sorry, but you see, I’ve been so afraid  
that to come into your own, then it’d be me you’d evade,  
and with no need for me, I’d be cast aside  
having fulfilled my brief role in my phase of life’s tides.

The power to bring forth life, I confess  
is a Sacred Gift I can never possess!  
Not respectful enough of our intended balance,  
I cowered in fear of my own insignificance.

So I knocked you up and knocked you back down,  
and I made up a lie and passed it around  
and said that this mess was all your brewing,  
that you were behind the world’s most grievous undoing.

Original Sin’s what I laid heavy on you,  
A masterful plan to hide the truth.  
Then your Sacred Sanctum I appropriated  
and to the seat of all power myself elevated.

To placate my theft of your sovereign station  
a demeaning pedestal was your consolation.  
Cleverly, I undermined your sincere admiration  
in my plan to subject you to my domination.

I laid in wait, like a benign predator  
of you, when most vulnerable, then made you my debtor  
by holding out promises for all you hold dear.  
Then withdrew; and you became mine out of fear.

And like a god-head, your worship I willed.  
I bent you and broke you, your divine voice I stilled.  
Only to find what I claimed, I am not.  
I set myself up, in my own web I’ve been caught.

I succeeded in stealing what was not to be stolen.  
The theft I prevented the world from knowing  
was by proclaiming as Sacred an all-male Creator  
and denying Creatress, Femme Primogenitor.

The ramifications of these heinous misdeeds  
are evident in my abuses, I finally see.  
The imbalances caused by twisting the good and the right  
have infected the world with corruptive blight.

Woman’s mistreatment by man’s a reflection  
of earth’s rape and profane exploitation.  
Ecological crises, who can’t help but see,  
are the onslaught of patriarchal hegemony.

Spirit moves immutably toward liberation.  
Therein is the key to our mutual salvation.  
Together we advance, now equal and free  
as was always to be our destiny.

Correcting these errors? A monumental task!  
But to begin with, I have something important to ask.  
Apologies are all too shallow to say,  
But can you forgive me, and still love me, is that possible, I pray?

Love, Man