

The Feminist Movement (6) Women in Church History

Feminists crusade for equal rights. Women should have equal rights in the work force. But this issue has also led to a direct attack on the position of the female sex in the church. Feminists speak of discrimination within the church. They want to be equal partners and co-responsible for the church. Some women believe that the Bible has a male bias. Men wrote the Scriptures. Therefore its language is sexist. Some feminists claim that they find it difficult to call God our Father. Why can't God be called Mother? Man has determined for women what their religion should be. The sexist language of Scripture should be changed! That's why we have hymnals and even Bibles rephrased and reworded so as to avoid offending any person.

The National Council of Churches of Christ sponsored a new Bible translation which suppresses gender references to God "so that future generations will not have to grapple with the fact that God was once sexist." Mrs. Lois Wilson, one of the former moderators of the United Church of Canada, the first female president of the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, is now preparing a feminist critique of the Bible, funded by the United Church of Canada. She expects it to result in an anthology of bedtime stories for children that includes the role of women in biblical times. If the feminists want to be consistent, why stop with the Bible? Why not rewrite all classical literature? Why not the works of Shakespeare or Milton? This can't be done of course. Allan Bloom aptly noted that all literature up to today is sexist. "The Muses never sang to the poets about liberated women. It's the same old chanson from the Bible and Homer through Joyce and Proust."

The feminists have drawn a caricature of the church's historical position on women. They have tailor made their own version of Scripture. Not surprisingly they have rewritten the historical record to suit their own activist purposes. According to the feminists the church teaches that the most precious jewel in the crown of God's creation is the masculine part of humanity. A woman has a secondary role. She must be subservient at home and at work, in the affairs of the world and in the church. She may be seen but not heard. Because of this belief the church is patriarchal by its very nature, and has led to its hierarchal governmental structure. And since women have no equal rights in the church, the question of women's ordination can't even be raised. What do the Scriptures and the historical record of the church teach?

1. Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ elevated womanhood. According to the *Sojourner's* magazine He was a feminist. But our Lord has been claimed also by the laissez-faire capitalists, socialists, liberation theologians, etc. Jesus approached women with respect, as real persons, equal before God, and as His image bearers. He broke with the Rabbinic tradition of His times. Unlike the Rabbis, He had no condescending attitude towards them. He honored womanhood by choosing to come into the world through the virgin Mary. A woman was at the cradle, women accompanied Him to the cross, and women were the first ones to pass

on the Easter message. Dorothy Sayers mentions that our Lord took the questions and arguments of women seriously. He never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female. He had neither an axe to grind nor an uneasy male dignity to defend. And says Sayers, "There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature."

2. The Early Church

A careful study shows that women always have had an important role in the church. Women have made their contributions to the advancement of the Gospel. They were also among the early heroes and martyrs for the faith. But though these women were highly honored, they didn't function as ordained clergy or elders. One movement within the history of the early church was an exception. In Montanism women had a prominent leadership role.

Montanism

Montanism appeared in the area of Phrygia, Asia Minor, sometime around 165-170 A.D. The central leaders were Montanus and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla. Montanus believed himself to be the appointed prophet of God. Montanus and the two women leaders claimed to have received the Holy Spirit, predicted the imminent advent of the New Jerusalem, and spoke in tongues. In their movement the status women was achieved through confession, imprisonment and martyrdom. The Montanists were encouraged to regard themselves as an elite force of "spiritual Christians." Special fast days were called for since persecution and martyrdom were expected, and even encouraged. Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla, for example, understood herself to be chosen by God to proclaim His covenant and promise to His people.

"The Lord of this work and covenant and promise sent me as its elector and revealer and interpreter, as one who had been compelled willingly and unwillingly to learn the knowledge of God. "

One of Maximilla's predictions was that the end of the world would follow after her own death. In one of Priscilla's visions, Christ came to her in the form of a woman. Klawiter, the author of the article, *The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in Developing the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study of Montanism (Church History, Vol. 49, September, 1980, No. 3)*, takes this vision to signify at the very least that the feminine dimension of God was not denied by the Montanists.

The early church didn't accept the teachings of the Montanists. In 230 A.D. they were virtually excommunicated. The church refused to recognize the validity of their baptism.

3. The Middle Ages

Feminists can readily dig up excesses. And there have been excesses, unfortunate statements and false teachings. In Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* there are repeated references to women "as swamps and traps designed to swallow up the souls of men." One medieval saint even called women "vomit and ordure . . ."

Women have been portrayed as a threat to the virtue of celibates and the manliness of married men. Strange language in our modern ears! Church history shows that there is no perfection on this side of heaven. Injustices have occurred. Inconsistencies have been numerous. Misunderstanding and communications have marred men with the best of intentions. Ours is a fallen world. Pascal said,

"There is nothing on earth that does not show either the wretchedness of man, or the mercy of God, either the weakness of man without God, or the strength of man with God."

However, in their eagerness to remove every vestige of discrimination within the church, the feminists overlook the outstanding contributions of many women. Even the so-called Dark Middle Ages were blessed with some remarkably spiritual and able women, whose influence is still felt today.

Hildegard

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327) has been called the Father and founder of German mysticism. And this is true. But German mysticism has many names which preceded him, and most of them were women. One of the best known is Hildegard (1098-1179). She was a nun at fifteen. When she was thirty-two years old she began to receive visions and revelations. In 1136 she became abbess of Diessenberg. In the same year she was told to write down the content of her visions which were published in the work *Scivias* (i.e., *sciens vias Domini*, the one who knows the ways of the Lord). She felt called upon to reprove rulers; her correspondents included Henry II of England, the Emperor Frederick Bar-barossa; Pope Eugenius II, and various other church dignitaries. She also wrote poems, hymns, a morality play, besides works of medicine and natural history. Her other works include commentaries of the Gospels, the Athanasian creed and the Rule of St. Benedict. She was also a musician and an artist. Her illustrations in *Scivias* have been reproduced in our time. She was a remarkable, gifted, and courageous woman. Her life and work show that she neither felt oppressed nor discriminated against. Though she was not ordained, she had an honorable and influential place in the church of her time.

4. Saint Teresa of Avila

Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-82) wrote *A Life of Prayer*, - a book which has enriched the faith of thousands. In an age in which prayer is more written about than earnestly offered; her single-mindedness in her desire for God, her intensity of prayer life are still an inspiration. She also practiced "holy poverty"; a simple life, and earnestly sought the presence of the Lord. She was an outstanding woman, not because of militancy or strident flag waving for a cause. She was left a legacy which still stirs the souls of men and women alike. Clifton Berg gives this insightful description of her personality:

"Except for Cervantes, no other writer is better known in the Spanish speaking world than she is. Scholar and simple reader alike are enchanted by her, not because she is learned – she is not. Nor are readers impressed simply because of her devotion – though she does inspire all with her deep experience of life as the experience of prayer. People are impressed because she is just herself: in unconscious self forgetfulness; and practical, too; oh so practical!"

Other women could have been mentioned, who, in their own right, made a name for themselves in history. But I chose just two better known names to demonstrate that women have made a difference, whose works still speak.

Johan D. Tangelder
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