

## **The Feminist Movement (7)**

### **The Cry for "Rights!"**

Feminists are asserting their views with militancy and aggressiveness. They are demanding their basic rights. They call for equal opportunities. They intend to live and work as "free women," without the strictures of masculine society to keep them in bondage. Their literature speaks of battles won or lost.

Jeanne Richie, a public health nurse and free-lance writer said in a strident article in *The Christian Century* (Jan. 21, 1970), that the struggle of women to achieve full recognition as human beings is parallel and very similar to that of the blacks in America. And according to her, the clergy have shown more support for the campaign of black Americans for full rights than for the rights of women. She suggested that the clergy get information about the sexual exploitation of women. For a start, they should read Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, and Caroline Bird's book *Born Female*, which focuses on the economic discrimination against working women. Other feminist literature is listed as well. Readers of these materials were told to lay aside all questions of theology. The point of departure for any discussion on women's liberation should not be Scripture, but the social injustices as seen from the feminist perspective. Richie meant business. If her recommendations were not followed, women were going to be driven out of the church. Consequently, those who are concerned for the wellbeing of the church, should work to eliminate the "sex-caste system."

#### **Militant Determinism**

Feminism in the church is more than seeking equal opportunities or the elimination of sexist language. Even the ordination of women question is couched in militant terminology. The authors of *Rebirth of Feminism* say that the ordination of women could serve as the symbolic affirmation that the doctrine of "supra-ordination of man and subordination of woman" had finally been transcended. Ordination would purge the church of the "eternal feminine" interpretation of woman. Women would be then transformed into real people. Radical feminists within the church argue that there can be no equality until women are permitted to enter the ranks of the clergy as freely and frequently as men. They want their human rights. Equal opportunity for all!

Radical feminism is changing the very nature of the church and its mission. This thought struck me when I read an article by Dr. Daryl M. Balia, South African Methodist pastor and missiologist. He sees liberation as the object of mission. Says Balia:

"The object of mission is far less the non-believer, the agnostic, the atheist, as it is the dehumanized, the one stripped of his/her God-given dignity and human rights."

And needless to say, Balia sees the women in the church as oppressed, "the bureaucratic machinery of the churches inhibits their growth and full participation." Women are missing out on the leadership opportunities. That's why immediate attention must be given to foster the full participation in the liberation struggle.

Churches must move away from intransigent strictures. In support of his views, Dr. Balia refers to WCC's sub-unit, *Women in Church and Society* as an example of what should be done. The WCC emphasized four areas of concentration to combat the oppression of females:

1. Advocate for a more just participation of women within churches and draw attention to their concerns;
2. Enable women who often are not adequately prepared emotionally or politically to participate fully;
3. Examine – the theological assumptions which underlie the attitudes of churches and individuals that limit the participation of women;
4. Communicate with other churches and organizations the concerns of women, thus strengthening the advocacy role.

Balia doesn't think that church unity is possible until full equality for women has been achieved.

### **Secular Arguments**

What is one to think of these views and pronouncements? I think that they do no more than repeat what can be found in the secular press. Of course, feminists in the church will thoroughly disagree with me.

Human rights has become a topic of major concern. The women's rights movement is large and vocal. Rights are demanded. And all fair-minded people must oppose injustice, oppression and exploitation caused by nationality, religion, color of skin or sex. But what are human rights? How do we define them? How consistent are the feminists? For example, does a woman have the right to terminate her pregnancy? In the Western world, the right to life of an unborn child is severely attacked. But why are some Christian feminists pro-choice? I don't understand this. The feminist Virginia Ramey Mollenkott made the rather extraordinary claim that "nowhere does the Bible prohibit abortion." I don't know what Bible she reads; but as I read Scripture, I discover that human life – both of the born, and the unborn, is precious, and must be treated with respect and dignity.

The Bible doesn't mention human rights. Freedom is not put into the framework of rights. There is not even a biblical equivalent to the word "right." So how can feminists, or anyone else for that matter, clamor for their rights?

We live in a fallen world. In our rebellion to God, we have forfeited our rights. With respect to God, we deserve nothing. J. Andrew Kirk comments:

"Rights, if they exist, are given by the Creator. They depend, in biblical thinking, on the inescapable fact that God has bound Himself to human beings, that, in spite of man's drive to rid himself of God, he has committed himself for all time to

care for and liberate his special creation. Rights are granted both because of and in spite of man's sin. "

We may even speak of rights as duties we owe God. The Ten Commandments – illustrate this. In the first table of the Law, we are given a list of duties we owe to God, and in the second table, we are given a list of duties we owe our fellow man. And this list implies that we do possess rights to life, property, truth, etc. We are unique as human beings. We are God's image bearers; as such we have the right to be free from being treated as mere objects or things. All of us have dignity, whether poor, whatever color of skin, whether male or female. In the light of Scripture, human rights take on a new dimension. As Kirk points out:

"Whereas the language of rights tends to focus on legal minima, the gospel of God's righteousness calls us to discover and practice new obligations to our fellow human beings."

How do we then define human rights? Our covenant God defines the context of justice and liberty. And if justice and freedom are sought outside of the biblical context, they won't be found. St. Augustine's statement is still true for today: "True justice is not to be found, except in that republic whose foundation and ruler is Christ." When we view the human rights issue from a biblical perspective, we see that the so-called rights to equal pay, the right to marry, or the right to be ordained into the ministry of the Gospel in a church are more aspirations and wants than rights.

We are limited by Scriptures; yet for believers, human liberation comes through obedience to God and His Word, renouncing our rights in the service of others. (Rom. 15:1-3; Gal. 5:13ff)

### **Who Directs the Church?**

The militant feminists find their inspiration in ideas which having nothing in common with the teachings of the Scriptures. And when a church accepts secular ideas, confusion reigns. We are told by the world that the church must be relevant. Are we going to be intimidated by the world? Why should we be told by the world, secular and pagan, what we ought to believe and practice? Do we want to be faithful to the Scriptures, and to let it speak to our times, or should we let our social context determine what we should say, teach, and practice? The church is on a pilgrimage. "We don't have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come". (Heb. 13:14) The church is not out to seek the approval of the world, but the approval of God. Should the church modify its teaching because the times have changed and the social conditions demand it? The church's mission is to proclaim God's unchanged Word to a changing world. As the quotable critic of society and church, G.K. Chesterton said it so well:

"We do not want, as the newspapers say, a Church that will move with the world. We want a Church that will move the world. We want one that will move it away

from any of the things towards which it is now moving; for instance, the Servile State. It is by that test that history will really judge, or any Church, whether it is the real Church or no."

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