

The Role of Women in the Bible

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DISCOVERY PUBLISHING
the publications ministry of PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH
3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, California 94306
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www.pbc.org

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Discovery Publishing, *the publications ministry of*
Peninsula Bible Church
3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, California 94306

This paper is an adaptation of the lecture *The Role of Women in Worship in the Old Testament* given by Bruce K. Waltke, Professor of Old Testament, Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, Summer School, 1992.

This article is also available through the Regent College student newspaper, *Crux*.

Cover art:
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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I aim to offer a broad survey of the roles of women in the Bible, with particular emphasis on the Old Testament, to help the church appraise critically the impact feminism has had upon it. I offer these theological reflections to encourage and to assist the church to retain what is good from the feminist legacy and to reject what is bad.

Feminism has significantly impacted society at large, our churches, and our homes. Mary Kassian in her penetrating analysis of the feminist perspective, which she had once embraced, wrote:

We encounter and interact with the feminist perspective daily on issues such as gender roles, affirmative action, reproduction technology, abortion, rape, abuse, day care and pay equity.

Feminist ideology is also visible in the Church. Many books and articles have been published that claim Scripture supports undifferentiated roles for men and women. The ordination of women to leadership offices is commonplace. Denominational women's task forces, women's studies courses in seminaries, feminist theology, inclusive language, revised inclusive lectionaries and feminist rituals are well accepted in many denominations.¹

It is this legacy as it applies to the church that I aim to appraise in order to sift the wheat from the chaff and thereby edify the church.

HISTORY OF FEMINISM

To provide a context for this assessment, I will avoid the briar-patch of

¹ Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992), p. ix.

defining feminism, which is not essential for our purposes, and instead present Kassian's insightful analysis of its history. Probably basing herself on Mary Daly's thesis that to exist humanly is to name the self, to name the world, and to name God,² Kassian analyzes the history of feminism into three periods roughly congruent with the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

In the 1960s feminism was called women's liberation. It was a time when feminists disallowed men to define their identity and called upon women to define themselves. Kassian brings her discussion of this decade to the following conclusion:

As the first decade of the women's movement ended, women all across the continent began to claim the right to name and define themselves. By August 26, 1970, on the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage in America, twenty thousand women marched proudly down New York's Fifth Avenue identifying themselves as part of the women's liberation movement. Friedan summed up the tenor of the movement when, at the conclusion of the march, she blazed:

In the religion of my ancestors, there was a prayer that Jewish men said every morning. They prayed, "Thank thee, Lord, that I was not born a woman." Today...all women are going to be able to say... "Thank thee, Lord, that I was born a woman...."

After tonight, the politics of this nation will never be the same again...There is no way any man, woman, or child can escape the nature of our revolution....³

² Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 58.

³ Kassian, pp. 67.

According to Kassian, when in the 1970s women took it in hand to define the world (i.e., psychology, sociology, marriage, and so forth) from their perspective, the movement shifted from women's liberation to feminism. She summarizes:

Women were different from men, but this fact was not a source of shame, but rather a source of pride. Feminism taught that women ought to be proud of their different bodies and their different perceptions. The "male" interpretations of the past were therefore boldly rejected and replaced with interpretations reflecting a feminist definition of reality. The feminist view was so widely accepted in some circles that it became the mode and norm for truth. Women had not only claimed the right to name themselves, but also the right to name and define the world around them.⁴

During the 1980s feminism shifted to defining God. Kassian cites Rosemary Radford Ruether as an example:

If we are to seek an image of God beyond patriarchy, certain basic principles have to be acknowledged. First, we have to acknowledge the principle that the male has no special priority in imaging God. Christian theology has always recognized, theoretically, that all language for God is analogical and metaphorical, not literal. No particular image can be regarded as the exclusive image for God. Images for God must be drawn from the whole range of human experience, from both genders, and all social classes and cultures. To take one image drawn from one gender and in one sociological context (that of the

⁴ Kassian, pp. 87f.

ruling class) as normative for God is to legitimate this gender and social group as the normative possessors of the image of God and representatives of God on earth. This is idolatry.⁵

Kassian concludes:

*The phenomena of inclusive language recognized and further served to reinforce the paradigm offered by feminist theology. It, more than theological rhetoric, brought the feminist debate to the level of the ordinary believer, as women's studies had done. Feminist theology was thereby translated from an academic philosophy to the level of practical daily worship of the Christian community. Feminists had named themselves and their world, and now, through inclusive language, they and their Christian communities began to name God.*⁶

With that historical context I now turn to appraise by Scripture the impact of the feminist perspective, both positive and negative, upon the church.

HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES AND THE METHOD OF CRITICISM

Before looking at specific texts, however, we must address ourselves to the hermeneutical question of how texts that have been conditioned by historical particularity, especially those dealing with patriarchy, can be normative for the contemporary church.

The order of creation is normative. To transcend the historically particular and culturally conditioned situation in which Scripture is given

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Theology and Spirituality," *Christian Feminism*, p. 16, cited by Kassian, p. 140.

⁶ Kassian, p. 147.

and to find what is normative for the practice of the covenant people, I will first examine the role of women before the Fall. The two creation accounts, Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-25, represent God's design for men and women, husbands and wives. The rest of Scripture recounts a sacred story that to a large extent is moving toward the restoration of this ideal.⁷ It treats this charter for humanity as normative for the covenant community, though sometimes concessions are made because of the hardness of the human heart (see Matthew 19:8). In the light of this ideal I will examine the rest of the Old Testament and, in addition, note as necessary and appropriate some of its continuities and discontinuities with the New Testament.

The order of creation, which is set forth in these two accounts, stands behind the order of redemption, which is represented in the rest of Scripture. For example, the fourth commandment to refrain from work on the Sabbath (see Exodus 20:8-11) is based on the first creation account that God ceased his own work on that day (see Genesis 2:2-3). The seventh commandment to not commit adultery (see Exodus 20:14) is founded on the institution of marriage in the Garden of Eden according to the second creation account (see Genesis 2:18-25). The sixth commandment protects innocent life (see Exodus 20:15) because every life is created in God's image (see Genesis 1:26-28; cf. 5:1-3; 9:6).

Moreover, our Lord aimed to recapture for his church the Creator's original intention for marriage (see Matthew 19:3-9), and the apostle Paul based on these accounts his arguments concerning the roles of husbands and wives in the home and in the church (see 1 Corinthians 11:3-16; 1 Timothy 2:12-15).

In sum, the Bible is a story of Paradise lost in the first Adam and being

⁷ Revelation 21 and 22 present the end of that history in images representing the Garden of Eden as regained.

regained in the Second. The Garden of Eden symbolically represents the ideal culture that was lost, which Moses restored in the old Israel through the law given at Sinai and which Christ restores more perfectly in the new Israel through the law written on the heart.

Furthermore, the historically conditioned texts in the rest of the Old Testament cannot be ruled out-of-hand as not normative practices of the church in its worship before God for at least three reasons.

God ordained Israel's culture. First, God sovereignly ordained the culture in which he became incarnate. The roles played by godly women in ancient Israel are due to his design, not to chance. The sovereign God, not Lady Luck, is Israel's Lord. Since his sovereignty extends even to assigning the pagans their gods and their cultures (see Deuteronomy 4:19), we may rightly suppose that the Sovereign did not hand over to chance either his representation of himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, or the form of government for the nation that he chose to bless the world by embodying and disseminating his teaching (cf. Genesis 18:18-19).

Orthodox theology cannot consent to Krister Stendahl's comment, made while he was still dean of Harvard Divinity School, that God's numerous and strong masculine metaphors for himself are largely an accident.⁸ According to him, "The masculinity of God and of God-language is a cultural and linguistic accident, and I think one should also argue that the masculinity of Christ is in the same order. To be sure, Jesus Christ was a male, but that may be no more significant to his being than the fact that, presumably, his eyes were brown."⁹ In truth, however, the Bible, in contrast to other biographies, curiously does not mention anything about our Lord's

⁸ God uses six feminine similes for himself (e.g., Isaiah 42:14).

⁹ Cited by Kassian, p. 141.

physical appearance apart from his masculinity, suggesting that it does indeed have theological relevance. His incarnation occurred at the right time and in the right way according to God's own sovereign purposes (see Galatians 4:2-4).

Prophets critiqued Israel's culture but not patriarchy. Second, Israel's prophets, God's mouthpieces, were iconoclasts, not traditionalists, who called Israel into the dock for numerous injustices. Abraham Heschel in his justly praised work, *The Prophets*, makes the point:

They challenged the injustices of their culture. The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered and awesome, beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity. They exposed the scandalous pretensions, they challenged kings, priests, institutions and the temple.¹⁰

However, not one of these cultural revolutionaries regarded patriarchy as an unjust or oppressive form of government. Quite the contrary. They interpreted the rule by women as God's judgment against the sinful nation. Isaiah, for example, ridicules it: "Children are their oppressors, and women rule over them" (Isaiah 3:12 NRSV). They did not criticize patriarchy, but they did inveigh against the abuse of power that oppressed women: "The women of my people you cast out from their pleasant homes" (Micah 2:9). They gave a voice to those too weak to have a voice, especially the fatherless and widows: "They do not defend the fatherless, nor does the widow's cause come before them" (Isaiah 1:23).

The practice of Christ Jesus confirmed patriarchy. Third, our Lord was a revolutionary in his own age with regard to the role of women in worship. He amazed his disciples by conversing with one woman in particular because

¹⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 10.

he violated the prejudice of both the Jews and the Romans against women (see John 4:27). The Son of God bestowed dignity upon this Samaritan adulteress, who was "unclean" by Jewish standards, by revealing for the first time to her that worship would now be directed toward the Father in heaven, not toward mecca-like Jerusalem on earth (see John 4:21-25).

Moreover, our Lord entrusted women with the responsibility of being the original witnesses to his resurrection, which was the cornerstone of the Christian faith, though their testimony would have been discounted in a Roman court (see Luke 24:1-9). He rewarded the devotion of Mary of Magdala, out of whom he had cast seven demons, by allowing her to be the first person to meet him after his resurrection (see Mark 16:9-10; John 20:14-18). His disciples refused to believe Mary's report of the risen Lord. In fact, they dismissed it as an "idle tale" (see Mark 16:11; Luke 24:11). Later, Jesus rebuked them for their unwillingness to believe her (see Mark 16:14).

Yet our Lord implicitly confirmed the Old Testament patriarchy by not appointing a woman as an apostle, though women followed him, ministered to him, and were his close friends. Is it not nonsense to argue that Jesus, who was counterculture with respect to women, appointed only male apostles because he was culturally conditioned? Is it not plausible to think that had he intended to empower women to have equality with men in leadership, he would have called a woman to be an apostle, either before or after the resurrection?

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

If Kassian's analysis of the history of feminism is accurate, those forms of feminism that base their perspective about women, the world, and God on human autonomy, apart from the Bible's teaching, are fundamentally flawed.

Elsewhere I have argued that an adequate epistemology must be based on the Bible; not on human reason, experience (e.g., so-called "callings"),¹¹ or tradition (cf. Deuteronomy 8:3; Ezekiel 13:1-11; 28:6).¹²

This truth is symbolically represented in the second creation account by God's prohibition against eating of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil." "The tree of knowledge of good and evil" represents knowledge that is God's prerogative. As Christians we know that the only accurate description of reality is that which is known to God. He is the maker of reality and our only clear interpreter of it. Therefore only the good Creator and moral Sovereign of the universe can legislate inerrantly what promotes life and social well-being and what harms them. Our first parents, by seizing this prerogative for themselves in order to become equal with God, died spiritually and lost Paradise. To be sure, the forbidden fruit (i.e., living independently from God's revelation) appeared to be good for food (i.e., of practical value), pleasant to the eye (i.e., having aesthetic appeal), and desirable to make one wise (i.e., providing intellectual gratification). The price, however, was too high. They lost a relationship with both God, symbolized by hiding among the trees, and with one another, symbolized by putting a barrier of clothing between them.

Biblical feminists acknowledge the authority of the Bible, but they tend, I suggest, to interpret Scripture in a way that favors their social agenda, namely the equality of women in authority and leadership. Regarding their zeal to ordain women leaders, we need to ask, are they projecting their system upon the Bible, as a better system, and thereby imposing their own will for power against God's design? Until the twentieth century the church

¹¹ Religious experience is the common denominator of all religions. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in human nature* (London, Bombay, and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914).

¹² Bruce K. Waltke, "Exegesis and the Spiritual Life: Theology as Spiritual Formation," *Crux*, 30/3 (September, 1994): 28-35.

universally understood Scripture to teach male rule in the church,¹³ but I observe that many evangelical churches, certainly not all, have overthrown that heritage on the superficial basis that scholars are divided on the issue. The truth is, scholars are divided on most theological issues, including the Bible's trustworthiness. On that basis no doctrine is safe, and the liberal perspective and practice will prevail. Like the Bereans, we need to examine "every day" the Scriptures for ourselves to see what is the truth. Thiselton, citing Robert Morgan, rightly advised pastors to be on guard that "some disagreements about what the Bible means stem not from obscurities in the texts, but from conflicting aims of the interpreters."¹⁴ Back in 1980 Clark Pinnock observed, "I see a watering down of evangelical convictions which appears also in issues like feminism and homosexuality, where the expectations of the circle we move in are very powerful, and make us wish to have the Scriptures agree with them."¹⁵

MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

Feminism is also flawed in tending to give priority to fulfillment in careers outside of the home over and against fulfillment in childbearing within the marriage structure. Recently I counseled a female student who felt guilty in wanting to marry and bear children because her church wanted her to remain single and minister to its needs.

According to the first creation account, God created humanity as male and female (see Genesis 1:26-28; cf. Matthew 19:4), whereupon he blessed them (i.e., filled them with potency to reproduce life and to triumph over

¹³ See Bruce K. Waltke, "1 Timothy 2:8-15: Unique or Normative?", *Crux*, 28/1 (March, 1992): 22-27.

¹⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 588.

¹⁵ Cited in Philip Janowsky, *The Evangelical Essential* (Gresham, Oregon: Vision House, 1994), p. 129.

enemies [cf. Genesis 22:17]) and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply. He intended that they procreate his image and similitude (cf. Genesis 5:1-3), thereby affording the opportunity to as many people as possible to sit at his banquet table of life. Humanity is grounded in being male and female, an immutably fixed, natural reality. Feminism in its desire for freedom and power depreciates this fundamental design. As Pope John Paul II noted in his remarks to Roman Catholic bishops, "Grace never casts nature aside or cancels it out, but rather perfects it and ennobles it."¹⁶

In the second creation account God gives to Adam his bride and thereby institutes marriage, defining them now as husband and wife. By instituting marriage in the Garden of Eden, God represents marriage as an ideal and holy state, an act of worship (Hebrews 13:4). We recall that the church restores the Garden. Therefore, believers commit themselves in marriage to one another in the presence of God. Marriage is the only social institution that precedes the fall, and the homes established through marriage provide the foundation stones for society. (After the fall God instituted the state to protect society from criminals and the church to promote a new community of love in a world of hating and being hated [see Titus 3:3].)

The story of the gift of the bride to Adam emphasizes the goodness of marriage. The Lord's statement that Adam's singleness "is not good" (2:18) is highly emphatic. Instead of saying "it is lacking in goodness"—a normal Hebrew way of saying that a situation is less than ideal—he emphatically calls it in effect "bad." This account, with no trace of male chauvinism, ends with the coda that *the man* leave his parents to cling to his wife (see 2:24).

The rest of the Old Testament also defines marriage as a holy and an

¹⁶Richard John Neuhaus, "True Christian Feminism," *National Review* (November 25, 1988), p. 24.

ideal state. Though certainly marriage was not required for holiness, it is instructive to observe that the most holy people in the Old Testament were married. The high priest, who alone could enter once a year with awe and trembling into God's presence in the most holy place, was married.¹⁷ The Nazirite, the most holy person in the Old Testament by choice (not by birth as in the case of the high priest) likewise was married (see Numbers 6:1-21). By definition he or she was "separated" to God, but Nazirites never fasted sexually. They showed their separation to the Creator by not cutting their hair, just as an orchard was set apart to God by not pruning it and an altar dedicated to God was made of uncut stones. They symbolized their separation from earthly pleasures by not eating the fruit of the vine that cheers both gods and people (see Judges 9:13), and they showed they belonged to the God of life by a total separation from death. However, they did not show their separation to God by celibacy. Marriage was part of their consecration, worship, and holiness.

Paul, however, elevates singleness for "gifted" individuals to an even higher state than that of marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7). But his design is not to favor women's careers outside the home over motherhood within it, but in addition to minimizing the dangers of an "impending crisis" (verse 26) to enable them to be fully devoted to Christ without distraction (verses 32-35).¹⁸ Apart from this "giftedness," the apostle teaches as normative behavior that older women teach younger women "to love their husbands and be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will

¹⁷The high priest had to marry a virgin, not a widow or divorcee, to guarantee that the successor to his high and holy office was Aaron's offspring (see Leviticus 21:13-15), not because a formerly married woman was discarded as used property, as some feminists contend. In fact, the Old Testament looks with compassion on both (see Malachi 2:13-16, 3:5).

¹⁸For purposes of this paper I am not addressing the issue of celibacy for men.

malign the word of God" (Titus 2:4-5).

God elevated godly mothers to the highest status after the Fall. In sovereign grace he changed the fallen woman's affection to enmity against Satan (see Genesis 3:15). By his promise to give this new woman a triumphant, though suffering, offspring, he implicitly assigned this new woman the role of bearing the seed that would destroy the serpent, the adversary of God and humanity. The quintessential expression of that seed is Christ, who defeated Satan on the cross, but the mandate finds its fulfillment in every covenant child: "...The God of peace," says the apostle to the church at Rome, "will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). In response to God's promise to give the woman seed to defeat Satan, Adam in faith named his wife Eve, "because she would become the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:20). Every Christian mother by being in Christ bears his holy children (see 1 Corinthians 7:14; cf. Isaiah 53:10).

If a woman has suffered any loss of leadership through her creation (see 1 Timothy 2:12-13; cf. Genesis 2:18-25) and through her historical guilt in connection with the Fall (see 1 Timothy 2:14; cf. Genesis 3:1-13), says the apostle—if I understand him correctly—she will be saved from that loss through bearing children in Christ, if the children continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety (see Genesis 3:15; 1 Timothy 2:15). In short, the apostle is saying, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Pastors need to hold before the women of their churches Mary's response to the angel's announcement that she would be with child: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said," (Luke 1:38). Mary models for Christian women a most important aspect of womanhood in worship and ministry.

THE EQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

Most debated issues have the heuristic value of enabling one to see truth in a new way. Feminism, as the history sketched above shows, has had the heuristic value of reasserting the equality of women with men.

Unfortunately, as has been documented many times, both the synagogue and the church have not only failed to proclaim this glad truth but have shouted it down. It is a black mark in sacred history.

The error, however, lies with the interpreters of Scripture, not in the holy Bible itself. In the first creation account both man and woman are created in God's image. An image of deity in the ancient Near East, as D. J. A. Clines has shown, entailed dominion.¹⁹ He cites a cuneiform text dated about 675 B.C.: "It was said to Esarhaddon [the Assyrian king], 'A free man is as the shadow of god, the slave is as the shadow of a free man, but the king, he is like unto the very image of god.'"²⁰ In creating men and women in his image, God crowned them kings and queens to rule over his entire creation, including the mysterious serpent who "was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made" (see Genesis 3:1). Together, as the bearers of his image, they share this derivative authority to be culture-makers.

The second creation account reinforces this equality and clarifies it. When the Lord says, "I will make for Adam a helper suitable to him," he means he will form a woman who is equal to and adequate for the man. She stands opposite him in her sexual differentiation and equal with him in her personhood and dignity. Adam's response to her formation from his own body are a human being's only words preserved from before the Fall. Untouched by envy or a desire to dominate and control her, he celebrates

¹⁹ D.J.A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19 (1968):53-103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

with admiration her equality with him in elevated poetry:

“This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.”

At the same time he recognizes her sexual differentiation from him:

“She shall be called ‘woman,’
For she was taken out of man.”

(Genesis 2:23.)

The rest of the Old Testament reinforces women’s equality in nature and in dignity with men. Let me cite a few of many illustrations to make the point.

After Sarah had overreacted to the arrogance of her maidservant Hagar and had driven her out of the house, the angel of the Lord found the runaway Hagar at a well. He said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai...” (Genesis 16:8). The modern reader misses the significance of that address. This is the only instance in all of the many thousands of ancient Near Eastern texts in which a deity, or his messenger, calls a woman by name and thereby invests her with exalted dignity. Hagar is the Old Testament counterpart to the Samaritan woman (see John 4). Both were women, both were not of Abraham’s family, and both were sinners, yet God treated both with compassion, gave them special revelations, and bestowed on them unconventional dignity.

In the Old Testament women were called to be “prophetesses,” God’s mouthpieces in the world on an equal footing with prophets. Miriam (ca. 1400 B.C.; see Exodus 15:20f) was the first of several who are named, including Deborah (ca. 1120 B.C.; see Judges 4:4-7), Isaiah’s wife (ca. 725 B.C.; see Isaiah 8:3), Huldah (640 B.C.; see 2 Kings 22:12-20), and the false prophetess Noadiah (ca. 450 B.C.; see Nehemiah 6:14). Joel (see 2:28) predicts that in the last days the Lord will fulfill Moses’s prayer that all the Lord’s people, men and

women alike, become prophets (see Numbers 11:29). At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was given to both men and women, young and old alike, to enable them to proclaim boldly the triumphant news that Jesus is Lord of all, and to build his church.

Huldah is a most remarkable prophetess with regard to the question of women's roles in worship and ministry. During the reformation of Josiah, his workmen who were repairing the temple found the Book of the Law, which King Manasseh had neglected during the previous generation. Josiah directed five leaders to inquire of the Lord about the book. They went directly to this married prophetess to verify the book, not to her famous contemporaries, Jeremiah and Zephaniah. Clarence Vos in his doctoral dissertation on our topic comments:

That officials from the royal court went to a prophetess relatively unknown with so important a matter is strong indication that in this period of Israel's history there is little if any prejudice against a woman's offering of prophecy. If she had received the gift of prophecy, her words were to be given the same authority as those of men.²¹

Women and men were also equal in prayer. Covenant women prayed directly to God without the priestly mediation of their husbands. For example, when carnal Jacob defaulted in his responsibility to pray for his barren wife (see Genesis 30:1-2), in contrast to his godly forefathers who prayed for their children and wives (cf. 24:12-15; 25:21), Rachel petitioned God directly, and he listened to her and opened her womb (see 30:22-24). Barren Hannah also sought dignity and worth through childbearing. She too went

²¹ Clarence J. Vos, *Woman in Old Testament Worship* (Delft: N.V. Verenige Drukkerijen Judels & Brinkman, 1968), p. 168.

directly to God in prayer, independently from her husband Elkanah and the high priest Eli, both of whom were insensitive to her need. In fact, when challenged by Eli, she spoke up and defended her right (see 1 Samuel 1:14-16). She named her boy Samuel, "Asked of God," and dedicated him to the Lord with the prayer that he would introduce kingship into Israel (see 1 Samuel 2:10b). Hannah's prayer turned Israel around from the nadir of its spiritual history and political misfortune and started it on its upward ascent to its glory under David. A mother's prayer saved Israel and ruled it.

In addition to the prophetesses mentioned above, other women also received direct revelations from God. For example, when Rebekah felt the twins struggling in her womb, she asked the Lord, "Why is this happening to me?" (Genesis 25:22), a question written large across the page of history. The Lord revealed to her Jacob's triumph over Esau.

Women sang and danced in worship, expressions of the acme of life. Miriam and Deborah composed the two oldest pieces of literature preserved in the Bible, which are regarded by scholars as literary masterpieces (see Exodus 15 and Judges 5). Women celebrated before the Lord with singing, dancing, and tambourines (e.g., 1 Samuel 18:6; Psalm 68:25). But they were not a part of the temple choir.

Mothers stood on an equal footing with fathers in teaching children: "She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue" (Proverbs 31:26). Israel's sages were also cultural revolutionaries with regard to women's role of teaching in the home. The father's command to the son, "Do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverb 1:8), seems unexceptional to the modern reader. However, nowhere else in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, from the Euphrates to the Nile, is the mother mentioned as a teacher. In order for the mother to teach Israel's inherited wisdom, she

herself had first to be taught, suggesting that "son" in the Book of Proverbs is inclusive, not gender-specific.

Women in the Old Testament offered sacrifices and gifts along with men (cf. Leviticus 12:6). The laws for ceremonial cleansing in connection with bodily emissions were essentially the same for both sexes (see Leviticus 15). Women as well as men consecrated themselves to God as Nazirites (see Numbers 6:2). Sarah, when wronged by her female servant and by the apathy of her husband to the injustice inflicted upon her, appealed to God for justice, but she did not issue an ultimatum to Abraham that either Hagar go or she go (see Genesis 16:5).

The roles of women in ministry in the New Testament is better known. Luke takes pains to stress the important role that women played on Paul's second missionary journey when he established the church in Macedonia and Achaia (cf. Acts 16:13; 17:4, 12, 34; 18:2). The apostle had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging him to come and help him (see 16:9), but when he arrived he found women in prayer who became his first converts (vv. 11-15). Phoebe, Prisc(ill)a, Junia, Euodia, and Syntyche are celebrated as "minister" (*diakonos*), "co-worker" (*sunergos*), and "missionary" (*apostolos*).

The mutual submission of men and women to one another is unique to the New Testament. However, their equality before God in their nature, spiritual gifts, and prayer is found in both testaments. It is a dramatic irony that feminists who malign the Old Testament for its patriarchalism opened my eyes to this truth. In any case, the feminist perspective has had the heuristic benefit of illuminating these equalities. Thanks to this perspective, women are being liberated to use their gifts to enrich the church. This is a real gain.

The question of the role of women in the church is no longer whether women should be in ministry—they obviously should—but whether they should rule the church. We now turn to that question.

MALE PRIORITY IN GOVERNMENT

Feminists universally reject the patriarchal religion of the Bible. Nevertheless, male authority in the home and in the church is founded on the order of creation and reinforced in the order of redemption.

God established a patriarchy by creating Adam first and then creating the woman to help the man (see Genesis 2:18-22). As Paul noted in a passage dealing with the respective roles of men and women, one which demands its own study: "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man, neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Corinthians 11:8-9). If I understand Paul rightly, he gives priority to the man by the sequence of the creation of man and woman and by the purpose for which the woman was created. For those two reasons the man has priority in government. Is it not plausible to assume, if this interpretation is valid, that had God intended democracy, he would have formed Eve and Adam at the same time and would have said, "It is not good for the man or woman to be alone, I will make them to be helpers suitable to each other"? If he had wanted a matriarchy, would he not have formed Eve first and created the husband to be a suitable helper to his wife? However, he created a patriarchy in which the husband has authority.

God prepared Adam for leadership before giving him his bride by having him name the living creatures (see Genesis 2:19-20). In the ancient Near East, as today, naming is a form of leadership. For example, when the Israelites conquered Transjordan, they asserted their authority by renaming

the rebuilt cities (see Numbers 32:33, 38), and Pharaoh Neco asserted his rule over Eliakim by renaming him Jehoiakim (see 2 Kings 23:34). After the Lord gave Adam his bride, Adam tactfully used the passive form of construction, presumably not to dominate, to give his bride her generic name: "She shall be called 'woman'...." (Genesis 2:23b). After the Fall, he called out her personal name, Eve (see Genesis 3:20).²²

As a result of the Fall and God's judgment upon them, the woman desires to rule her husband, and he seeks to dominate her (see Genesis 3:16b).²³ The solution to this tragic power struggle that divides the home is the new creation in Christ, in which the husband humbles himself and in love serves his wife, and the wife submits herself to him in faithful obedience in everything.

The rest of Scripture sustains patriarchy, not democracy or matriarchy.

God, who is over all, represents himself by masculine names and titles, not feminine. He identifies himself as Father, Son and Spirit; not Parent, Child, and Spirit; or Mother, Daughter, and Spirit. Jesus taught his church to address God as "Father" (see Luke 11:2) and to baptize nations "in the name of Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). God's titles are King, not Queen, and Lord, not Mistress.²⁴ God, not mortals, has the right to name himself. It is inexcusable hubris on the part of mortals to change the images by which the eternal God chooses to represent himself. We cannot change his name or titles without committing idolatry, for we will have re-

²² In the rest of the Old Testament both parents name the children. Naming of children is ascribed to women twenty-six times, to men fourteen times, and to God five times.

²³ I arrived at this interpretation independently from Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 68f.

²⁴ In Psalm 123:2 David uses the simile of a maid to a mistress, but no Biblical writer uses "Mistress" as a title for God.

imaged him in a way other than the metaphors and the incarnation by which he revealed himself. His representations and incarnation are inseparable from his being.

Moreover, in contrast to this masculine imagery in Scripture, one cannot introduce feminine imagery without introducing sexual connotations. For example, in Hebrew grammar the masculine form is inclusive (i.e., with reference to animate beings it can be used of both male and female), but the feminine form is marked (i.e., with reference to animate beings, only the female is in view).²⁵

In the mystery of Godhead, in which the three persons are both one and equal, the Son obeys the Father, and the Spirit obeys both. Paradoxically Jesus says both, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), and, "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). Jesus veiled his own glory to follow the path of humble obedience (Philippians 2:6-11). The idea that hierarchy is an evil that can be transcended is a failed Marxist notion, not biblical teaching.

Although God gave Israel prophetesses, he did not give them priestesses, in contrast to other religions in the ancient Near East. We recall that it was the priests' duty to teach the Law of the Lord to the people (see Deuteronomy 17:9-11; 33:10) and the parents' duty to teach it in the home (see Deuteronomy 6:7-8).

A woman had the right to make vows to the Lord independently from her husband, as in the case of Hannah, but the husband, in the case of a married woman, and the father, in the case of a young daughter living in her father's house, had the right to overrule it: "But if her husband overrules her on the day that he hears it, he shall make void her vow which she took...and

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 108.

the LORD will release her" (Numbers 30:8). A wife or daughter could not overrule the husband's or father's authority in the home by claiming she had made a vow to the Lord, the higher Authority, which she was obliged to fulfill. The Lord stood behind the authority of a husband or father and did not overrule it. This was not because women were inferior but because the government of the home had to be protected. The vow of a widow or a divorcée was as binding on these unattached women as a vow was on a man (see Numbers 30:9).

It is on the spiritual foundation that husbands and wives submit to one another out of reverence for Christ that Paul specifies the relationship between a husband and wife. The husband expresses his submission to the wife by loving her as Christ loves the church, and she to him by obeying him in everything: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church...so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:21-24). Peter holds up Sarah as an example of a godly wife. In her self-talk, not in polite address (cf. Genesis 18:12), she referred to Abraham as her lord: "For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master" (1 Peter 3:5-6).

There are many texts in both testaments that teach that husbands have authority over their wives. For example, "The elder must be...the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2), never "...the wife of one husband." One cannot appoint a wife as a leader of the local church without upsetting this government, for if a wife were an elder, her husband would be subject to her authority: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority...." (Hebrews 13:17).

Deborah, who was married, is one clear exception to patriarchy (see Judges 4:4-7). Probably, however, she is the exception that proves the rule. In addition to being a prophetess, Deborah was "judging" (i.e., ruling) Israel. But the narrator makes his intention clear by carefully shaming the Israelite men at that time for the fear that made none of them dare to assume leadership. Note, for example, how Deborah shamed Barak, the military commander of Israel's army, for his failure to assume leadership. After she mediated God's command to him to join battle with Sisera, commander of the Canaanite army, Barak replied, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go." To which Deborah responded, "Very well...I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this [i.e., full of fear], the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman [i.e., to shame him]" (Judges 4:8-9; cf. Judges 9:54). Apparently the Lord raised up this exceptional woman, who was full of faith, to disgrace the men of Israel for their lack of faith, which was essential to leadership in the holy nation. If so, the story aims to reprove unfaithful men for not taking leadership, not to present an alternative norm to male authority. The story also shows, however, that the Lord is above culture and is not restricted by normative patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

We commend feminists for asserting the equality of women with men in nature, dignity, gifts, and ministry. However, we condemn the arrogance of those who autonomously name God, the world, and self. We also contend against those who see marriage as a galling bondage and those who look down upon motherhood within the structure of marriage as a lesser ministry than ministries outside the home. Finally, we find the insistence of feminists

on the equality of wives with husbands in authority and leadership as unbiblical.

It is essential to the message of the gospel that husbands love their wives and that wives submit to the authority of their husbands. If husbands and wives are equal in leadership, how does the husband exemplify a new model of leadership wherein the ruler becomes a servant (see Ephesians 5:25; cf. Matthew 20:25-28)? And if a woman seeks to become empowered as an equal to her husband in authority, how does she show the submission of the church to the Lord (see Ephesians 5:24)?

Tragically, the elders in the church and husbands in the home, often out of a distorted emphasis on their headship and their depreciation of the Spirit's gifts that empower women to minister, have both consciously and unconsciously suppressed women and quenched the Spirit. The feminist perspective has rightly exposed this abuse.

Again, however, the problem is our failure to interpret the Bible accurately. The model of leadership is that of a servant. Jesus models the Servant-King who so loved his queen that he died for her. The willingness to make the grand gesture of dying for a loved one becomes a practical reality only to the extent that one practices self-surrendering service as a way of life. The "servant" empowers his wife to use her spiritual gifts to their fullest potential. On the other hand, the Bible instructs the wife to respect her husband as her lord, which entails obeying him in everything. It is important to note that the Bible instructs neither the woman to manipulate the man to serve her, to be the proverbial "neck that turns the head," nor the husband to have his wife in subjection, to be the head that lords itself over the body. Serving and obeying in mutual subjection are inward beauties worked in our hearts, consciences, behaviors, and customs by the Holy Spirit. These are

ideals for which we strive, though recognizing we never fully attain them any more than any other perfections of holiness. Our failure to realize them perfectly should be accompanied by repentance and renewed faith, not by cynicism, despair, or seeking new social structures.

I am a member of a church in which I submit to women leaders whom I trust and respect, because I am called to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit until we come to the full knowledge of Christ (see Ephesians 4:1-13). It is wrong to divide the body of Christ, which confesses Jesus as Lord and believes in its heart that God raised him from the dead, on such nonmoral issues as modes of baptism, eschatology, belief in the continuation or cessation of gifts, and the church's form of government. However, I ask the members of my church and others like it, which I am fully persuaded sincerely "want to find out what is acceptable to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:10), to reassess whether their practice of ordaining women to rule them has been impacted by the feminist perspective or by the biblical.