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Feminism

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Rowntree Clifford, Paul
Publisher	Baptist Ministers Fellowship
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Download date	2026-09-23 05:25:55
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/159970

Feminism: a neglected Baptist issue

Paul Rowntree Clifford, former Professor of Religion, McMaster University, Canada, and President of the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, argues that sex is an outstanding example of the variety which God has built into the universe.

Feminism is one of the most important issues in the current debate about the future shape of British society, but it seems to have been given little serious attention in Baptist circles where their role has been largely taken for granted. The real issue in the current debate is about the proper balance between men and women and this is something to which Baptists as well as everyone else need to give serious attention. Unless we are seen to be aiming at a proper balance within the church we shall hardly be in a position to influence the public debate.

My principal concern in the debate is to stress that the essential differences between women and men, physical, psychological, temperamental, emotional and in terms of gifts and capabilities tend to be overlooked in the desire to establish equality between the sexes in the light of male domination and exploitation over the centuries. We need to insist that these differences are complementary and in no way justify the domination of one sex by the other. I believe that this conviction about the equality of men and women before God is an inescapable inference from the attitude of Jesus towards women which broke with the conventions of the time and pointed the way to a liberated role for women in society. Throughout the centuries this has been obscured by the patriarchal culture of male domination to which the Church has largely succumbed.

The issue has now come to the sharpest focus in the demand that the partnership of women and men in the Church should be radically rethought in the light of the changes that have taken place in society, but Christians have been slow to see that this is required by the very nature of the gospel they profess, the good news for all irrespective of sex, race, colour or any other classification. It is now at the forefront of the agenda of most of the Churches, and because it challenges inbred attitudes which

have long remained unacknowledged and uncriticized it has stirred up a great deal of resistance and controversy.

Undervalued, underused

The feminist revolt against male domination in the Church has been simmering for a long time even if it has come to be seen as an issue of major importance only comparatively recently when the ordination of women to the priesthood threatened to split the Church of England and has had wide repercussions throughout the Anglican communion all over the world.

Women ministers have long been accepted for ordination in other Churches in all parts of the world, but in practice their place has been grudgingly accepted in many quarters and their full potentiality undervalued and underused. Nearly seventy years ago the issue was raised by my father in his presidential address to the Baptist Union Assembly in Glasgow. The subject was featured on the day of his induction in 1933 on the front page of *The Glasgow Evening News* which carried the banner headline "Women Revolt Against The Church", anticipating by over half a century the recent preoccupation of the national press with the topic. My father spoke against the background of his unique partnership with my mother and

their joint leadership of a staff of over twenty at the West Ham Central Mission which they founded, where women outnumbered men by at least four to one. This address was referred to more recently by Nell Alexander, the first woman to be elected to the Presidency of the Baptist Union, as she looked round the male dominated Council Chamber at one of the sessions and exclaimed "How long, O Lord? How long?"¹

A classic example of the frustration felt by so many able women was expressed by Florence Nightingale before she left for her pioneering work in nursing the wounded of the Crimean war: 'I would have given the Church my head, my heart, my hand. She would have none of them. She told me to go back to do crochet in my mother's drawing room; or marry and look well at the head of my husband's table. "You may go to Sunday School if you like it", she said, but gave me no training for that. She gave me neither work to do for her nor education for it.'

Relegated

Opportunities have improved since then, but the Churches are still patriarchal and male dominated. Women, in spite of the fact that they constitute a great deal more than half the membership are largely relegated to subsidiary roles. They are expected to make tea, prepare meals and clean the auditorium, but as far leadership and decision making are concerned, these are largely in the hands of the minority of men, and this is reflected in the small proportion of women on the synods and councils of the various Churches. There is an obvious imbalance in this situation unless it is assumed that the proper role of women in the Church is a subservient one. It has to be recognized that a great many women are content that this should be so, but many are not.

It is not always sufficiently appreciated

that the controversy over the ordination of women is bound up with the clerical domination of all the Churches, and we are not likely to make much progress unless the question is viewed in this context. If we take seriously the definition of the Church as the whole people of God, we are bound to ask whether the ordained ministry has been accorded too dominant a role in it. The Church is not to be defined in terms of those ordained to ministerial office. The building called a church is the base where the congregation meet for worship and receiving the means of grace, where it is together as a Christian community. But its mission is where they are every hour, every day of the week. The balance between the two needs redressing if the Church is to be understood as the people of God and express its wholeness in which women and men have an equal share.

Equality

But equality is not to be defined simply in terms of the right to ordination to the full time ministry. Maternity leave and the care of children inhibit the ability of married women to undertake the responsibilities of the pastoral office and while this does not apply to those who choose a single vocation, it underlines the difference in roles between women and men. Moreover, wherever the ordination of women has been regarded as theologically completely acceptable, as in the Church of Scotland and the British Free Churches, the placement of women ministers has proved to be far from easy. It is argued that this is not simply due to prejudice, but springs from an intuitive insight that the office is more appropriately reserved for men.

On the other hand, the case for the ordination of women rests on the deeply held conviction that the inclusiveness of the gospel requires that women as well as men should exercise the complete

ministry, preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments and undertaking pastoral care. The distinctive gifts they bring to the ordained ministry do not simply free them from frustration, but add immeasurably to the witness of the Church and its effectiveness in mission. In the course of time, it is said, congregations will become used to this complementary ministry and the resistance to it will disappear in the light of experience.

Outstanding

The ordination of women to ministerial office is only one way in which full complementarity is to be achieved. They have made a distinctive contribution to the Christian mission in every tradition which has not always been given the recognition it deserves. They have been in the forefront of the modern overseas missionary enterprise; Mary Slessor of Calabar and Mildred Cable and Francesca French of the China Inland Mission are notable examples, and today over 50% of those serving in partnership with the young Churches of the Developing World are women. The leadership of the Salvation Army has been in the hands of the daughters of General Booth and other outstanding women. Women have been canonized as saints of the Church and widely recognized as authorities in spiritual direction of whom Lady Julian of Norwich, St Catherine of Sienna and St Teresa of Avila are striking examples. In recent times Evelyn Underhill, Dorothy Emmet and Olive Wyon have made notable contributions to theology and the philosophy of religion, the precursors of the feminist theologians of today. Women have taken the lead in the healing, educational and caring ministries of the Church, Mother Teresa being the outstanding example in recent years.

The balance of partnership with men may have been out of proportion due to the patriarchal structures in Church and

Baptist Ministers' Journal April 2001

society, but we should not underestimate the crucial part which women have played in the ministry and mission of the Church: a solid basis on which more fruitful co-operation can be built for the future. Florence Nightingale's experience has not been wholly typical.

However, more thinking needs to be done about the nature of the complementary roles of men and women and how the feminine and masculine may be more effectively combined in the expression of the gospel as embracing all humankind. Too little attention has been given, particularly in the Churches which stem from the Reformation, to the New Testament imagery of the Church as the bride of Christ and the place of the Virgin Mary in Christian devotion. It is one of the strange anomalies that those who would describe themselves as Evangelicals, affirming their orthodoxy particularly in relation to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, have then largely neglected the subject, fighting shy of any reference to the mother of our Lord.

Honoured, not Worshipped

No doubt this has been largely due to antagonism towards the Roman Church as such and to her veneration of the Virgin Mary which is so clearly a central feature in Roman Catholic devotion. It has been held to be a distortion of her place in Christian origins, resulting in unwarranted additions to the traditional credal affirmations as well as giving her a dangerously co-equal place in Christian worship.

There have obviously been exaggerations leading to actual distortion in popular Roman Catholic practice; in what branch of the Church has this not been the case in regard to some aspect of doctrine? But any unprejudiced and informed observer would be bound to recognize that this rests on a misunderstanding of the essence of Roman

Catholic devotion. The mother of our Lord is honoured², not worshipped, as the representative of the whole Church in acceptance of and obedience to him. 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word'. This is the model of Christian devotion and the essence of the Church's faith. The unique place of the Virgin Mary is that she had the privilege of bearing and giving birth to the Saviour of the world. In doing so she was not placed on equality with him, but was the forerunner of all those who would accept him.

This has been obscured by controversy about the later dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption which continue to be stumbling blocks for those who do not accept the infallibility of papal decrees. But that is not the point. The question I am asking is whether Christians of other traditions may not have much to learn from Roman Catholic

devotion to our Lady and whether this may not be one of the ways of establishing a better balance between the masculine and the feminine in the life of the Church.

Mother Church

Prejudices and misunderstandings die hard, and in the new climate of mutual acceptance and co-operation following the Second Vatican Council the time has come to explore with open minds all the issues which hitherto have proved to be stumbling blocks in the expectation that new insights will emerge which will lead to our common enrichment. This was the motivation of the late Martin Gillet, a remarkable Roman Catholic layman, who persuaded bishops of his own Church as well as leaders of the Anglican and Reformed Churches to sponsor the establishment of The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary.³ He believed that by bringing people of different communions together to study a subject

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B A P T I S T T I M E S

The year 2001 is many things. It is:

- the 150th anniversary of the Great Exhibition.
- the first year of the new millennium (not 2000!).
- the 100th anniversary of the birth of Walt Disney.
- the year Arthur C. Clarke chose for his popular space odyssey.
- the 100th anniversary of Queen Victoria's death.
- the probable year of a General Election.
- the 100th anniversary of the patenting of the Gillette safety razor.
- and the year when you could - and should - find all you need to know each week about the life and witness of Baptists and other Christians in Britain and the rest of the world by subscribing to the **Baptist Times** - an aid to understanding and a stimulus to prayer.

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which had hitherto kept them apart, the cause of Christian unity and mutual understanding could be advanced. The society has now been in existence for a number of years and notable contributions to the regular conferences have been made by theologians of all Christian traditions. So far it has made little impact on the Churches at large, perhaps because the subject has seemed too esoteric. However, it is at least an imaginative beginning for pointing the way forward in combining the feminine and the masculine in creative partnership.

It may be more fruitful to explore the relationship of the masculine and the feminine partnership of women and men in the Church by concentrating on their difference and complementarity than by looking for neutral terminology in thinking and speaking about God and about their relationship to one another. Rather than trying to reform the traditional language of addressing God, it may be more fruitful to pursue what is implied by calling God our Father and the Church our Mother with Mary as the focus of its faith and obedience.

Heaven and Hell

This depends on emphasizing the acceptance of difference as the essence of creative unity; its contrast is the belief that differences necessarily imply disunity and separation. In his famous allegory, "The Great Divorce",⁴ C.S. Lewis portrayed hell as miles of empty mean streets surrounding the bus stop to heaven: empty because, if you quarrelled with your neighbour in hell you could always move into the next

street. On earth you have to continue to live alongside your neighbour and that is why Jean-Paul Sartre could bring down the curtain in one of his plays with the line, 'Hell is other people'. The Christian understanding is the precise opposite: heaven is other people related to one another, their differences brought together in unity through reconciliation with God wrought by Jesus Christ on the cross.⁵ This is the basis for understanding the complementary relationship between women and men, and it has the widest implications which go far beyond partnership in the Church. The controversy over the ordination of women, like all other theological differences can only be resolved by holding together in communion, learning from and listening to one another until we have come to deeper insights under the guidance of the Spirit of God. Unless we do so, we have nothing to say to a world torn apart by nationalist idolatry, by racial, ethnic and sectarian strife.

To return to the limited theme of this article. Every insight is finite and partial, and we have much to learn about the way God is leading us into the future. Behind everything I have written are two basic convictions. The first is that women and men are essentially different and that sex is an outstanding example of the variety which God has built into the universe. The second is that the sexes are complementary and that the nature of this is what requires patient exploration. In this world the ideal is always beyond us, but for Christians the lode star is the promise that all things will ultimately be gathered together in perfect harmony in Christ. **bmj**

Notes

¹ Letter to Dean Stanley in "As Miss Nightingale Said", ed. Monica Bailey, Scutari Press, 1991, p.56.

² 2. Luke 1.38. (AV)

³ For information about activities and publications consult The General Secretary, The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 11, Belmont Road, Wallington, Surrey SM6 8TE. England

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London, Bles, 1945).

⁵ Cf. Eph. 2. 13-16.



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