Globethics Repository



The Church's Response to Feminism

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Dex, Shirley
Publisher	Baptist Historical Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-01 08:57:04
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/153087

Sociological Quarterly 25, 1984: 92-112.
Petty, Richard and John T. Cacioppo, *Attitudes and Persuasion: Classic and Contemporary Approaches*. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown. 1981.
Roof, Wade Clark, *Community and Commitment: Religious Plausibility in a Liberal Protestant Church*. New York: Elsevier. 1978.
Royle, Marjorie H., 'Women Pastors: What Happens After Placement?'. *Review of Religious Research,* 24: 2 (December) 1982: 116-126.
Ruether, Rosemary R., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Tradition*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1974.
Russell, Letty M., ed., *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Non-Sexist Interpretation of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster. 1976.
Steward, Margaret S., David S. Steward and Judith Dary, 'Women Who Choose A Man's Career: A Study of Women in Ministry'. Mimeographed. 1979.
Stromberg, A. H. and Shirley Harkess, ed., *Women Working: Theories and Facts in Perspective*. Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Co. 1978.
Tedin, Kent L., 'Religious Preference and Pro-Anti Activism on the Equal Rights Amendment Issue'. *Pacific Sociological Review,* 21 (January) 1978: 55-56.
Weidman, Judith L., ed., *Women Ministers: How Women Are Redefining Traditional Roles*. New York: Harper and Row. 1985.

EDWARD C. LEHMAN, Jr.
Professor Lehman is a Baptist who is Chairman of the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York at Brockhurst. He has undertaken a number of studies of attitudes to women's ministry, including that in the American Baptist Churches (ABC) and has recently undertaken a comparative study in the U.K.

o - o - o - o

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO FEMINISM

Secular Feminism's Impact

There is growing interest within the church in feminism and the issues this raises for women in the church(1). It looks very much as if a wholly secular movement, originating in the USA in the 1960s has become so powerful in secular thinking that it is forcing all our institutions, the church included, to rethink their attitudes towards women, womanhood, manhood and sexuality. Since it is often the younger, highly educated women within the church who are advocating and pressing for changes, we have to consider whether they have grown up in an environment which takes-for-granted many of the claims of feminism, without stopping to ask how far they can be reconciled, if not grounded in Christianity or Biblical teaching(2). Are feminist sympathists within the church being uncritical and undiscerning we might ask? Is this just the latest transitory fad to sweep through Western society? On the other hand, the older generation's lack of interest and sometimes strong opposition to any feminist ideas within the church could equally well be attributable to the same source; that is, to socialised and uncritical learning of secular gender roles, which are not necessarily 'Christian'. Christians

clearly need to do some careful thinking in sorting out how to respond to these issues.

It is possible to see why there is both support for and opposition to feminism within the church. Secular feminists claim that our Western society is one in which men dominate women, and men contrive to maintain and support their position of domination. Women are subordinate which means they are mostly dependent, exploited, vulnerable, manipulated and passive. Women's work, whether at home or in paid employment, is argued to be less important, of lower status and rewards, and contributes to their dependence on men. Women's subordination is institutionalised in the legal system, in education, and in the church. In practice, women's subordination means that women have to work in low-paid jobs, be wholly responsible for child care but with little recognition of its value, suffer downgrading in their occupational status, have lower chances of promotion, be expected to do the boring domestic work at home and in other spheres(3), (e.g. providing tea, refreshments and flower arrangements for church functions). Some secular feminists have been particularly critical of the role they claim that Christianity has had in increasing women's subordination over the centuries (O'Faolain and Martines, 1979; Atkinson, 1985). Secular feminists (e.g. liberals, Marxists and radicals) agree on the nature of the problems, although they disagree sometimes on the causes, and certainly on the solutions. The modern, highly educated woman does not find women's position very attractive. The idea that Christian women should accept this position as a servant role does not help to make it more palatable to them either. It is all too easy to ask why the similar servant role, incumbent upon Christian men, leaves them with a better lot.

Opposition to feminism within the church rightly reacts to the aggressive demand for 'women's rights'. Clearly, this presentation is not easily reconciled with descriptions of the fruits of the Spirit Christians should exhibit (Gal.5.22-3, I Cor.13 etc.). Opposition has also formed around the explicit and implicit attack on motherhood and the family which some feminists make, and Christian writers have wanted to defend motherhood as a woman's role (Hunt, 1980; Warren, 1981; Elliot, 1979). Not surprisingly, some Christian men feel threatened and criticised personally by feminist claims and react defensively. Others see feminist criticisms as an attack on the Biblical concepts of headship and authority within churches and homes.

There are obviously a wide range of Christian responses by those who are sympathetic to feminism and by those who oppose it, just as there are many varieties of secular feminists. (Interested readers should read Storkey (1985) for a full and helpful outline of these varieties). In this paper, we concentrate briefly upon some of the formulated responses from within the church which are sympathetic to feminism, asking whether they can be reconciled with other Christian thinking. The outcome of such an exercise forces one to think about how we should evaluate and respond to secular trends in general. The article ends, therefore, by considering this more general topic of how Christians can and should respond to contemporary culture.

Responses to feminism

So-called Christian feminism is not new, despite appearances. Gage, writing in the USA in 1893, described the problem of women within the church as well as in society at large, calling it an 'exposé of male

collaboration against the female sex'(4). Hers remains, nevertheless, a negative view of the future for women in the church. On a more positive note, Storkey (1985) describes a feminist movement amongst nineteenth century evangelicals linked to the campaigns fought for justice on other social issues like the abolition of slavery, the temperance movement, pressure for widespread education and better employment conditions. What started as a concern about moral reform extended into broader political and social issues which encompassed women's suffrage. The history of the changes which resulted is well known. In thinking about evaluating the current feminist arguments, it is worth remembering that benefits we now take for granted were the result, in no small measure, of campaigns in which women shared in the leadership. We now accept that slavery is abhorrent, that widespread education is desirable, and that women are equally as able as men to exercise a vote.

Whilst feminism within the church is not new, some of the contemporary responses certainly go beyond previous limits of what was thought to be acceptable 'Christian feminism'. There are those who have stayed within the church but who challenge some of the traditional, and most would think, the essential doctrines. One issue high on the agenda of the new Christian feminists has been the conventional way God is referred to as male, Father, Son of God. Some Christian feminists (Ruether, 1974) argue that this leaves women unable to identify with God, or with Christianity. One solution they suggest is to reverse all the terminology and call God 'Mother'. Storkey (1985) points out the dangers of such an approach which easily becomes 'one in which the God who discloses himself to us in his revelation is replaced by a god which we devise to meet our needs' (p.125). Following on from this, questions have been raised by these Christian feminists about the incarnation of Christ, about the notion of revelation etc., an unacceptable path to most Christians. Some Christian feminists do not travel all of the way down this path (Langley, 1983).

What Storkey (1985) calls 'Post Christian feminism' is an even more radical position which finds feminism irreconcilable with their Christianity. These feminists have taken a step outside the church. Mary Daly is the most prominent example of this position. Her writings include describing the Annunciation as a cosmic rape scene, the Antichrist as women's consciousness, the Second Coming as an arrival of female presence, and God as impersonal(5). Storkey (1985, p.128) summarises her doctrines as 'Sin is sexism, women are innocent, and Christ cannot save'. Clearly Post Christian feminism and the Christian feminism described above are outside the bounds of traditional Christianity and are impossible to reconcile with its fundamental doctrines. It is comforting for those of us who are more conservative, and yet who still want to address these issues, that there is an alternative, Biblical feminism, which Elaine Storkey and Evans (1983) have done much to develop.

Biblical feminism

Biblical feminism starts out by holding to the authority of the Scriptures, but is prepared to examine, and challenge where necessary, attitudes and ideas which are part of traditional interpretations of the Bible. The challenge to the tradition will be necessary if it turns out that the traditional view is not Biblical, or

not so clear and straightforward as had previously been thought. What we think are Christian values can turn out, on examination, to be based on secular thinking; and sometimes the origins of views can be, historically, relatively short-lived; for example, the idea that a woman's place is in the home dates back only to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Storkey adopts evangelical hermeneutical techniques and then advocates that interpretations of the Scriptures should be done against the background of a broad canvas of Scripture's themes; namely, those of creation, fall and redemption which disclose 'God as Creator, the meaning of humanness, the rejection of God's norms and a turning to sin, and the coming of Christ to buy back those who are his' (p.153). Within this framework, Storkey shows that it is possible for the Christian woman to be free in Christ, free to be human, free to be loving, free to be different from or similar to men, but not free to be autonomous; that it is not possible to go beyond God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit because there is no beyond; that one can resolve particular issues about the maleness of God by recognising a flaw in the logic of the initial formulation of the problem, this flaw is 'the equation of God's Fatherhood with maleness. For although to be an earthly and human father is to be undoubtedly male, it does not follow at all that to be God the Father is to be the Male. God is neither male nor female'. (p.125-6). It is also possible to consider feminist issues on their own merits and examine the Scriptures and other evidence on, for example, whether there are irreducible differences between men and women (Storkey, 1985a), or on what the concept of headship and submission mean (Storkey, 1985, pp.180-3).

It is possible to find affinities between what many feminists are saying and what Christians value. Feminists and Christians can agree in bemoaning the low status attached to motherhood, child-rearing and caring in general because they are conventionally women's work and unpaid; they can agree on the undesirability of pornography which devalues women as people to women as bodies or sex objects; they can agree on the way many images of women portrayed through advertising are degrading; they can object to the appeal of much advertising aimed at women which encourages them to seek a sort of femininity through make-up, deodorant, perfume and fashions etc. which was sickly, romanticised and over-sexed, but is now often unisex and masculine. Some feminists and Christians can also agree on the need to find true womanhood in a way which is not determined by men; this will be different from an approach where women seek to become (token) men, showing that they can be equal(6). On this latter point, Tournier (1981), drawing on his experience as a psychiatrist, suggests that women have a mission to bring humanising elements into a world which men and their machines have made inhuman, unattractive and even dangerous. It is not solely women who should be tender, gentle and caring, therefore. Tournier argues that women need to teach men how to value the sense of the person if we are to rescue our quality of life; 'the future belongs to tenderness' (p.126), he says. He also warns that men may not quickly or easily give up their fondness for 'showing off their prowess and their technical skill' (p.125) after centuries of practice. However, Christians will want to resist some feminists' advocacy of single sex marriages and other proposals which encourage the breakdown of heterosexual family life.

Response to secular trends

To conclude, some general lessons can be drawn about how we can respond to secular trends as Christians. Starting out with a sceptical view of secular movements would seem to be a prudent stance. Secular fads and fashions wax and wane and we would be failing as Christians if we went along with any and every new wind. We are warned, after all, that principalities and powers are at work in the world trying to distort the truth of God, degrading his creation and distracting Christians from their main purpose (Lewis, 1942; Eph.6.12-13). We need prayerful discernment, wisdom and prophetic insight to recognise and resist contemporary evil. At the same time, we need an open ear to what is going on, taking care to listen to what is being said, without relying on caricatures or stereotypes. Communicating the gospel to the contemporary world requires a listening ear at the very least. We must also be aware that truth can emerge from the most dubious sources, e.g. Balaam's ass. Having non-Christian motivation does not automatically mean that someone is wrong because of the common grace of our humanity. We may find that we can agree with some points in a secular programme, but not with all. Often it will be necessary to do this sort of dissection of the issues, examining them one by one and judging their individual merits. It might be possible to agree with secular feminist criticisms of women's position, but not with their proposed solutions. If we do not have a certain openness to change, important advances like the abolition of slavery will not take place in the future.

In summary, we must have an open mind and recognition that God can speak to us through many diverse channels. We must be prepared for him to show us that our traditional views are not Biblical. But our openness must be guarded by careful attention to the Scriptures. Where Biblical teaching is open to interpretation, so should we be; where it is clear and unambiguous, so should we be. May we have courage to stand out against anti-Christian thinking, but may we love our brothers and sisters in Christ when they differ from us, as well as our enemies.

NOTES

1 The number of books now available written by Christians on women is large, e.g. Hurley (1981), Lees (1984), Brand (1984), Evans (1983), Bebbington (1984). Denominational publications are now appearing on this topic, e.g. Dawson (1986) and Christian magazines often carry discussions of this issue.

2 The idea that it is largely the younger generation (under 40s) who have most interest in these issues is borne out by participants at recent Christian conferences on feminism and by those who write on this subject. The conferences were, 'Reclaiming The Image' 12th October 1985, Carrs Lane Centre, Birmingham, organised by June Osborne, and 'Men, Women and God' organised by Kathy Keay for The Evangelical Alliance, 28th September 1985, Kensington Chapel, London.

3 The statistical evidence for these generalisations can be found in a recent survey of women's employment in Britain, Martin and Roberts (1984).

4 Gage (1980, p.5) writes 'Tired of the obtuseness of the Church and State; indignant at the injustice of both towards women; at the wrong inflicted upon one-half of humanity by the other half in the

name of religion; finding appeal and argument alike met by the assertion that God designed the subjection of the woman, and yet her position had been higher under Christianity than ever before. Continually hearing these statements, and knowing them to be false, I refuted them...'.

5 Daly (1973, p.96), quoted in Storkey, says: 'A patriarchal divinity and His son are exactly not able to save us from the horrors of a patriarchal world. Rather, only radical feminism can open up human consciousness adequately to the desire for the non-hierarchical, non-oppressive society and reveal sexism as the basic model and source of oppression'.

6 The desire to be equal and similar to men is part of both liberal and Marxist feminist agendas.

Bibliography

J. D. Atkinson, 'Feminist Christianity', *Spare Rib* 156, 1985, pp.52-54.
D. Bebbington, 'Evangelicals and the Role of Women', *Christian Arena* 37/4, 1984, pp.19-23.
J. Brand, *A Woman's Privilege*, SPCK, 1984.
M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Boston Press, 1973.
R. Dawson, *And all that is unseen: a new look at women's work*, Church House Publishing, 1986.
E. Elliot, *Let Me Be a Woman*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1979.
M. Evans, *Women in the Bible*, Paternoster Press, 1983.
M. J. Gage, *Women, Church and State*, Persephone Press, Massachusetts, 1980. Reprinted from 1893 edition.
G. Hunt, 'Reclaiming motherhood for a restless culture', *Christianity Today*, XXIV, 9, 1980, pp.16-18.
J. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, IVP, 1981.
M. Langley, *Equal Woman: A Christian Feminist Perspective*, Marshalls Paperbacks, 1983.
S. Lees (ed.), *The Role of Women When Christians Disagree*, IVP, 1984.
C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Collins, 1942. 24th impression, 1976.
J. Martin and C. Roberts, *Women and Employment: a Lifetime Perspective*, Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1984.
J. O'Faolain and L. Martines (eds.), *Not in God's Image Women in History*, Virago, 1979.
R. R. Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish Christian Traditions*, Simon & Shuster, New York, 1974.
E. Storkey, *What s Right with Feminism*, SPCK, 1985.
E. Storkey, 'So What's the Difference?' *Third Way* 8, 12, 1985a, pp.24-27.
P. Tournier, *The Gift of Feeling*, SCM Press, 1981.
A. Warren, *Today's Christian Woman*, Kingsway Publications, 1981.

SHIRLEY DEX

Dr Dex, B.A., M.Sc., Lecturer in Economics at the University of Keele, and a member of Newcastle-under-Lyme Baptist Church, has recently been engaged in a study of women's work histories for the Department of Employment, and is convener of the Association of Christian Economists sponsored by the Shaftesbury Project.