

The Impact of Christ on Female/Male Relationships, March 6, 1991: UBC

Introduction

I was assigned the theme, "The Impact of Christ on Female/Male Relationships".

A few years ago, a man phoned me and asked if I had some time for a talk. He had read and kept, as it turned out, a letter to the editor of The Vancouver Sun I had written concerning a prison riot at Matsqui Institution. He had appreciated some of the points I had made concerning the evil of the prison.

We had a subsequent lively conversation until in passing, he discovered that I had a Christian commitment. "Not one who really takes the Bible seriously though?", he asked incredulously. He immediately cooled, and soon afterwards terminated the conversation, upon my affirmative response.

Bruce Cockburn says that he often qualifies his avowal of Christian faith by saying: "But I'm not one of those." He is obviously smarting under the identification of Christianity with things unsavoury said or done in the name of God and Christ. I can certainly identify with that when it comes to the issue of female/male relationships within the church.

Christ profoundly impacted female/male relationships during and since his times. The initial effect of his new way of modeling these relationships was so startling, that it was rather like a sudden dam burst flooding history with whole new ideas about what male and female meant for anyone "in Christ".

Christ, the Interpretative Guide

Before proceeding however to the actual topic, I feel I must clear one initial hurdle. This can be put as a question: Isn't the Bible itself "one of those" (to use Cockburn's expression), and patriarchal to the core?

I was raised in a Christian tradition known as 'Plymouth Brethren'. While the great Reformation rediscovery of the 'priesthood of all believers' was theoretically espoused in my upbringing, that everyone had equal access to God in Christ, the very name of the group predisposed a practice which denied all women equal standing before God. Women were to 'keep silent' in all aspects of formal worship (except singing), to wear a head covering as a sign of submission to the patriarchal headship of the male, only to engage in ministries to other women or to children, and to be fully subservient to the father or husband at home. But here's the rub: the Plymouth Brethren insist that this is all fundamentally biblical.

Likewise, it was widely held in the understanding of the Church Fathers that man fully represented God's image, whereas woman was only in God's image when included with the male, her 'head'. In this view, procreation becomes the only purpose for the female.

Hardly a respectful view of woman! In fact, there were only three possible roles for a woman in the view of most of the Church Fathers: woman as whore, woman as wife, and woman as virgin (Ruether, 1974, p. 163). Of these three, the third was far and away the ideal in western Christianity. This all developed in part from the Church Fathers' reading of the Bible.

At the turn of the last century a noted feminist published *The Woman's Bible*, claiming that the Bible is not a 'neutral' book, but a political weapon against woman's struggle for liberation, because the Bible bears the imprint of men who never saw nor talked with God. Many feminists dismiss the Bible outright since it seems hopelessly patriarchal. They ask the Serpent's question of the written text: "Has God said?" Others see it as at once a source of women's power and oppression.

The common starting-point for this dismissal of, or ambivalence towards, the Bible, is the experience of oppression by women. Seen from that perspective alone, the Bible is read with great suspicion, if not outright rejection.

Similarly, the more general problem of evil from within the experience of it leads many to deny God's goodness. The biblical writers Habakkuk and Job in particular wrestled with this. All who consider trusting God feel this tug.

At the end of the Book of Job, Job fought through to a new perspective from which to approach the problem of evil. In dialogue with God he says:

"You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'" (Job 42:4)

If we move to the perspective of faith, we find that the Bible turns the tables and profoundly questions us, such that we relinquish our role as the Bible's judge, and permit it rather relentlessly to probe us. For, as one New Testament writer puts it, "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Heb. 4:12 & 13)

In our darkness, we are like the child searching for the lost coin under the street lamp because there is (so we think) more light there, when in fact the coin's location is elsewhere, in (what seems) a place of darkness. Being powerful or powerless, oppressed or liberated, poor or rich, male or female, does not change the rules of the game. If we are to discover the liberating Word of God for us today, Jesus and the Bible know no other place to look than in the Bible.

Through what lens however should we look at the Bible? If it is through the lens of our experience of evil in all its senseless and baffling dimensions, including that of oppression, the Bible appears to hold out little help. But if the lens is changed to that of Jesus Christ, the starting-point of Christian faith, the Bible begins to come alive.

I can remember seeing a photograph years ago. The story went that a photographer happened to notice the play of shadow and light on fresh-fallen snow. When he developed the picture, suddenly a face jumped out at him: the face of Christ. When I looked at that photo, at first, all I saw were dark blotches. Most only saw that. But there came a point when suddenly the face of Jesus leapt out at me. And try as I might, I could never see just the dark blotches again.

That is something of how one needs to read the Bible. By allowing the face of Jesus to shine through everywhere. For, in the words of one writer:
[...] the Bible's message [is] a critique against a power-oriented world community which has a pyramid concept of justice. The Bible is more than a critique, however; it is a proclamation of Yahweh's [God's] establishment of an alternative community by which the world is made to know the way of Yahweh. The claim is that this is not a message, but the message of the Bible's multifaceted literature, a literature which is normative for the life of the human community today (Lind, 1990, p. 4).

On my word processor is a 'Find and Replace' function. I can find any text and replace it with any other text. Well, something of the sort happens in the Bible with Jesus: he allows us to find all patriarchal overlays, as he does all violence, all legalism, all oppressiveness, all that runs contrary to the way of self-giving love in the biblical text, and replace it with the 'gospel of peace' which Jesus came preaching and doing. For Jesus is the ultimate interpretative key who unlocks the latent meaning of the Bible and allows it to carry us to the sea, in spite of all human limitations.

Jesus and the Community of Equals

Now I will highlight three aspects of Jesus' life and teaching, to get at an understanding of his impact on female/male relationships. What emerges is Jesus' commitment to found a community of equals.

A. Christ and the Powers

First, Jesus challenged the established ways and institutions of his day, what the New Testament calls "principalities and powers". Jesus' inaugural statement about his mission was:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Lk 4:18 & 19.)

After a detailed study of the Bible's understanding of the "principalities and powers" under whose control we live out our days, one author concludes that they are "... the inner or spiritual essence... of an institution or state or system" (Wink, 1984, p. 104) - - with an invariable bent towards domination in relation to humanity. But Jesus challenged the powers precisely at the centre of their spirituality as they materialized in societal customs

and institutions. And it is said he triumphed over them.

Patriarchy is doubtless one of these "powers". According to the Old Testament account, after Adam's and Eve's rebellion, woman's "desire", as the Gen. 3:16 text says, resulted in a skewed power relationship to the man. From then on, the man would tend towards a relationship of domination over, rather than partnership with, the woman.

In Jesus' day, in pagan and Jewish culture, to be a woman was to be second-class and without any access to the privileges and freedoms of society. One of the rabbinical prayers was thankfulness to God that a man had not been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. The impact of Jesus upon women was to give them for the first time ever a dignity independent of men.

I read once of a non-white South African who went to Holland to pursue theological studies. He walked into a local shop, and the owner said something like, "May I help you, sir?" The South African broke into uncontrollable sobbing. For the first time ever, he had been addressed by a white as an equal. Something similar happened in Jesus' day to those women who came to follow him.

In our own day, there is still the crass misogyny of a Harold Ballard who could quip that the only position a woman should have is horizontal. But misogyny is also far more subtle. It is the pervasive use of the woman as no more than a sex object, man's playmate à la Playboy and a thousand replicas, or source of titillation and gratification from myriad advertisements to James Bond-type films or April O'Neil in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

From all that, Jesus came to set us free, thereby creating room for male and female to become all we're meant to be - - but at the expense of neither.

B. Jesus and the 'Fatherhood' of God

Second, the commonest name for God on the lips of Jesus was "Father". Even more intimate was his mother tongue expression, Abba, meaning 'daddy'. For the Church Fathers and many others, this was one sure indication that the whole patriarchal structure of male dominance was legitimated.

On the contrary, the very fact that Jesus consistently referred to God as "Father", and disallowed that title to be applied to any other, was a profound challenging of patriarchal fatherhood and all its privileges of male dominance and control. It was subversive of normal patriarchal images of 'fatherhood'. It pictured God the Father as nurturing, liberating, and self-giving.

Jesus' calling God Father, whom he then says to be like a nurturing mother hen gathering her chicks about her, is the surest signal that the patriarchal system is forever disallowed for all who would follow Jesus.

C. Jesus and Women

Third, to inference male-only church leadership from Jesus' choice of only male disciples misses the reality of a great number of women who likewise believed in and/or followed Jesus, including the Samaritan woman to whom alone Jesus revealed that he was the Messiah, and Mary Magdalene, who literally became the 'apostle of the apostles' in that she first proclaimed the Gospel - - the Good News of Jesus' resurrection - - to an incredulous group of male disciples.

In Jesus' interaction with women, Jesus affirmed full female personhood. He countered any adoration of his mother Mary because of her motherhood, rather praised her for her commitment to God. Jesus denied the patriarchal definition of a woman as a womb and two breasts, and said contrarily, "Rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it" (Luke 11:28) - - such as his mother.

Also, Jesus freely engaged in theological discussion with women over against the woman-excluding realities of theological education of the time. He encouraged such discussion with the Samaritan woman he met at a well, and praised Mary for her choice to dialogue with him, instead of only busying herself with housework, as her sister urged. Women, according to Jesus, had equal access to God.

Put negatively, nowhere in Jesus is there a hint of male superiority or condescension towards women. On the contrary, the vision of the kingdom of God was a call to wholeness, liberation, and mutuality in all human relationships. It was a 'feminist' vision, because it made room for all God's children in the kingdom. It was an 'abolitionist' initiative because it set out to demolish all power structures, institutions, and social customs which denied freedom to people. It was also a movement of deep solidarity with all the disempowered, disenfranchised, oppressed, marginalized people of Jesus' day. Women, children, and slaves were foremost as a class of 'poor' to whom Jesus had good news to preach, a good news that threatened the sociopolitical power arrangements of his - - and our - - day to the core.

In summary: "The woman-identified man, Jesus, called forth a discipleship of equals that still needs to be discovered and realized by women and men today" (Fiorenza, 1983, p. 154).

Paul and Women

Now I would like to look at three aspects of Paul's teaching about female/male relationships.

A. Neither Male nor Female

First, for many, the central assertion of Paul's understanding of female/male relationships is Galatians 3:28, which reads:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Likewise, the central Pauline text on freedom is found only a few chapters later, when he says:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.
(Gal. 5:1)

This of course is entirely consistent with Jesus' declaration at the beginning of his ministry, as discussed earlier: "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18b). Surely women fit into this Emancipation Declaration.

The statement about the eradication of all barriers to freedom based on power-plays and power-structures was likely quoted by Paul from a popular contemporary baptismal confession.

Gal. 3:28 says "No" therefore to any kind of domination based upon sexual divisions. "In Christ", one of Paul's favourite expressions to designate a Christian's new standing, had a concrete sociopolitical meaning in response to the power structures of patriarchy. It simply denied their legitimacy.

Paul of course knew this to be the reality where women are concerned in his own ministry. This is why scattered throughout his letters are indications that many of his co-workers in positions of authority and leadership were women.

B. Subordination

Second, why then, do we find in other letters ascribed to Paul a call for subordination or submission by women to men? In short, why do the New Testament books, Ephesians and Colossians, seem so patriarchal?

Some explain this by stating that these letters are not from Paul's hand, and therefore show how quickly the patriarchalizing reaction of early church leadership reinstated male dominance, all in the name of Paul.

I feel uncomfortable with this way out of the dilemma. I am more inclined instead to understand these texts, including another one in I Peter (2:13 - 3:7) in terms of a submission/victor, or a subordination/revolution motif found throughout the New Testament, especially in the example and teaching of Jesus himself. In brief, these texts point to Jesus, who willingly submitted himself to the rebellious powers on the cross, but that was not the end of the story! For Jesus' submission was like that of a disciplined martial artist: it was a move to absorb the evil of the "principalities and powers" ultimately to disarm and triumph over them!

So what appears on first blush as a purely status quo, 'conservative' response to the present ordering of things, upon a second look erupts with all the surprise of a revolution into something entirely the opposite! But the revolution is not necessarily immediate or violent. It is gradually transformative. So, for instance, the "No" of Paul to slavery showed itself finally centuries later in the Christian leadership of the 19th century abolition of slavery and the slave-trade movements. Likewise, in 19th century America, Bible-believing evangelicals were the first to speak out for women's liberation on several political fronts, including their receiving the right to vote. And there is currently a vast resurgence of feminism in Protestant and Catholic churches.

In all of these "subordination" texts appear the specific example and words of Jesus. The admonition is usually to 'put on' or 'clothe oneself with' Jesus Christ. The idea is that we are to be just like Jesus in response to the injustice, the power-play, the domination, the evil: Jesus who took the role of the 'suffering servant' and the way of the cross. This was done in hope! however, with the sure knowledge that the resurrection would ultimately overthrow and reverse the existing patterns of dominance and violence. Paul, or the unknown authors of these letters, counsels the way of the "patient revolutionary" doggedly set on a course of societal reversals.

And Paul tells us in Romans 8 that even the whole creation is similarly submissively exposed to evil in hope of the ultimate reversal. He says:

For the creation was subjected to frustration [to the evil powers of chaos], not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (19 - 21)

The word of caution I would add is: this concept of "revolutionary subordination" is not one that insists that the abused partner remain in that situation, patiently awaiting a reversal. Bitter experience in our society shows that such reversals rarely come. The New Testament bristles with the will to overthrow evil wherever encountered. But the accent is that this should not be through any form of retaliation, counter power-play, or tit-for-tat vengeance. That a woman however should do all in her power to extricate herself from abuse situations is as surely consistent with New Testament teaching as Paul's appeal to the 'Supreme Court' of Caesar in his day was an attempt to extricate himself from the injustices of Roman officials.

C. Headship

Third, headship in the New Testament, which the man is to exercise in relation to the woman, did not mean what it means today when we speak of the 'head' of a corporation. It meant more source or origin, as in the 'head' of a stream. Paul in one passage in I Cor. (11) says man is the head of the woman, since according to one of the Genesis accounts, she was made from his rib. But in the same passage, Paul recognizes that over all, God is

the ultimate source of male and female, while also acknowledging that the woman, in giving birth, is in a way the origin of man.

When elsewhere man's headship to woman is compared to that of Christ to the church, at the very minimum, that relationship is one of servant and friend.

It is therefore unacceptable to infer patriarchal dominance from the headship language in the New Testament. Whatever else it means, which is not entirely clear, it does not mean that - - despite longstanding Christian interpretation to the contrary.

In Jesus' teaching, he often used to say: "Let the one with ears to hear, hear." Likewise, we must be as discerning in our study of the Bible. If it is allowed to be nothing but dark blotches, as all too often in the history of the church it has been, it will prove oppressive and unfreeing. But if Jesus' face is seen throughout, it will prove to be the Ultimate Declaration of Emancipation.

René Girard, an internationally respected literary scholar, in a lifetime of research into the origins of violence in human society, declares that in the story of Jesus alone, there is a decisive break with the endless cycles of violence and scapegoating. He says: I certainly do not believe that the Bible gives us a political recipe for escaping violence and turning the world into a utopia. Rather, the Bible discloses certain truths about violence, which the readers are free to use as they see fit. So it is possible that the Bible can make many people more violent... In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut and dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail... a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic achievement of the trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world (Redekop, emphasis added).

Conclusion

I have tried to argue that the Bible, read through the lens of the work and words of Jesus, overall moves us towards freedom from all forms of oppression, including patriarchy, against which backdrop it is written. Jesus is the central player in this movement, one which promises to sweep all of history to an unimaginable triumph over violence and injustice. This is the promise of "kingdom come" and the "new creation".

Once, when I was attempting some elementary electrical wiring at home, my hand felt the surprise tingle of a live wire! I feel a similar unmistakable 'tingle' again and again as I attempt to follow Jesus, and discern and act out his incredible message of liberation. One Christian writer calls this being 'surprised by joy' and being suddenly overwhelmed by an indescribable yearning.

The Christian invitation is to come, feel the tingle!

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