

TWO STUDIES IN THE UNIQUE MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

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Summary: Commentary on 1 Timothy by William Hendriksen

STUDY 1

THE NATURE OF WOMAN REVEALED AT THE CREATION

Introduction

Problems connected with the subject

Speaking personally, this subject has, over a considerable period of time, caused me to face a number of problems. I hope I have overcome them, although I have the disadvantage of not being a woman! Many, of course, arise from my own personal viewpoint as a mere man, probably prejudices due to upbringing and culture. Others have arisen due to an inadequate overview of Bible teaching, so that the subject may be seen clearly in the light of biblical revelation as a whole, and not governed by some texts interpreted in isolation from the rest of Scripture.

The greatest problem, as already indicated, is this - that no matter how hard I try, I can never see the subject in its proper perspective because I am not a Christian woman. This takes us to the first main problem I found when looking closely and carefully at the subject.

1. A lack of suitable literature

Of recent years, a theologian historian has written on the developing place of women in the Christian Church in the first three centuries. There is a lack of books on the subject on my personal library shelves. Worse still, there are very few books on the ministry of Christian women written by women. The last few decades have improved the situation both in America and in Britain.

2. The problem of culture

Women feel differently concerning themselves depending on the culture in which they find themselves. They would therefore interpret Scripture according to their circumstances.

Since the time the New Testament was written, the role of women in the home and in society has changed enormously. The woman's role has never remained static, changing according to century, society, community, and educational opportunity. A British woman of the 20th Century would have a very different outlook to her Spanish sister, or a South American Indian woman, or an 18th Century wife of a working class man during the English Industrial Revolution. She would find Samuel Pepys' French-born wife in the 17th Century very different, say, from the wife of an Australian aboriginal.

Although women do differ from one another across the cultures, they are the same in many general ways because of one important common denominator - their womanhood.

Let us look then a little more closely at our title - **THE UNIQUE MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN.**

1. The status of the woman at the Creation [Genesis 2]

Notice first of all, the need of the man (2:18). She was to be his 'helper' - not subservient as a slave or servant. She was to be 'suitable' - that is, corresponding to the man, of similar nature, and an equal.

Charles Wesley, a happily married man, wrote this amazing poem in the 18th Century. I do not believe it has ever appeared in any hymnbook.

**'Not from his head was woman took,
As made her husband to o'erlook;
Nor from his feet as one designed,
The footstool of the stronger kind;
But fashioned for himself a bride;
An equal, taken from his side.'**

Notice also the status and function of the woman:

Verse 20 - the animals fell short of what the man really needed.

Verse 21 - she was fashioned from the side of the man. And also, she was taken from the man who was to become her husband, not from the earth. Unlike the animals, and even her husband, she was not made of the earth. Her origin was unique to herself.

Verse 22 - Then God gave her to the man. Adam took the woman as his responsibility. God brought her to the man, and handed her over, like a father might 'give away' his daughter to the prospective husband.

Verse 23 - because of her unique origin, the woman would be united with man - bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh. This indicates unity and equality.

2. The status of the woman was radically altered.

We can positively affirm that at the Fall of man and woman into sin, the status of the woman altered.

We notice that the woman had three attributes:

The first is her desirability. (2:24). She was worth leaving everything for, even the security of the family unit. She was someone to be desired.

The second attribute is her subtlety. (3:1) It may often puzzle us as to why the serpent made his way to Eve. Why did he go to the woman? There are three reasons that occur to me. **First**, because the woman is more complex in her thinking than the man. She is more subtle. **Second**, because she plays a more complex role than the man. Third, because she has greater influence over the man than the man has over the woman, but later, she has great influence over her children. The proof of this first statement is found in what happened subsequently.

The temptation of the woman, I think, throws some light on the woman's nature. In verses 5-6, we see that she wanted the best for her husband and herself. She wished them to become 'wise'. Then, in verse 6, we notice that she had already become domesticated. She saw that the fruit was good for food. She is already the economist - two Greek words meaning 'the law of the house'. Also in verse 6, Eve reveals the emotional side of her feminine nature - the fruit delighted her. Women are deeply stirred by adornment, dress, beauty, proportion, and shape. She is of such a nature that she finds delight in beautiful things. She possesses a nature that is more intuitive than factual, more artistic than technical; yet she can be both factual and technical.

We notice here also that her concerns are mapped out from the beginning. She feels fulfilled in marriage, the need to be 'wise'; in her home, and what is good for 'food'; and in beautiful things, whatever delights her.

The third attribute of the woman is the most obvious - she is a female. (3:16) She would bear children. She would be the mother of the living. Paul gives a very high status to this in 1 Timothy 2:15, where he saw women working out their place in God's saving purposes as those who would bear the children.

She would also take pleasure, and so would her husband, in married sexual relations. Not only would her husband desire her, but she would feel a deep desire for her husband. However, sin has altered the perfection and perspective of this physical relationship. Although, after the Fall, her pain would increase in child-bearing, she would still enjoy her husband's attentions.

There is one important change here in the relationship of the man and woman that did not exist before. The man would rule over her. She now becomes subject to her husband, which was a state not in existence before the Fall into sin.

There was one further change. Her name was changed from 'woman' (ISHAH = a female man) to 'Eve' (CHAVAH = the life-giving mother) This denoted the double role of the woman as a wife to her husband, and a mother to her children.

That, then, is a summary of the main differences between the man and the woman both before and after the Fall into sin. Now we come to the most difficult part!

Having considered the uniqueness of the woman from the Genesis account, we are in a better position to see in which areas of service a Christian woman will excel uniquely. Let us conclude by reminding ourselves of the woman's attributes:

She is an economist, a wife to her husband, a mother to her children, the giver of life, a lover of beauty and form, an intuitional and emotional grasp of the condition of other people because of her complexity.

STUDY 2

THE MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

Introduction

In our last Study, we considered the nature the woman in Genesis 2-3. We noted that there was an alteration in the status of the woman, but not in her essential nature or function.

The greatest change in her status was in relation to her husband. 'He shall rule over you' (3:16). The Septuagint Greek translation uses the verb KURIEUO from which is derived the noun KURIOS = Lord. This is found 1 Peter 3:6 - 'Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord [KURIOS].'

This was, and is, a voluntary subordination of the wife to the husband, in the same way as Christ subordinated himself to his Father. It in no way implies inequality. This is the right way, in this present dispensation, for a woman to conduct herself towards her husband. In the new and eternal life to come, this will no longer be necessary, for there will be no more marrying or giving in marriage.

In the temptation of Eve, I believe that we see some indication of the essential nature of the woman. Genesis 3:6 speaks of her domestication ('good for food'), her intuitional and emotional fulfilment ('delight to the eyes'), and her strong sense of family loyalty ('to make one wise')

Her submission to her husband, entirely voluntary, actually excludes her from certain forms of Christian service. But others aspects of her nature make it very possible for her to be of immense service to the Body of Christ.

1. Woman as the economist

She is the administrator of home affairs, the complexity of home arrangements and hospitality, the preparation of food. Of course, some women are better organisers and administrators than others. Some are excellent business women.

In Acts 16:14-15 we have a description of Lydia of Thyatira. She was presumably a single lady (there is no mention of a husband), and travelled freely around the Roman Empire in the luxury trade of supplying purple imperial dye. Her travels took her away from her home in Asia Minor, 300 miles from Corinth and 100 miles across the Aegean Sea. She mixed freely with high society, and took her own household with her. It is also interesting to note that the first European Christian was this woman, and the first European Christian Church met in her home.

Proverbs 31 presents a picture of the ideal wife. She had freedom to travel away from home (14), and was a business woman and agriculturist (16-18).

Even in Bible times, some women were free to engage in business and trading according to her abilities and education, provided their home life did not suffer. In Proverbs 31, the woman is praised both by he husband and her children. (28)

We must also think hard about how such talented women with organisational and administrative abilities might be best used in the churches, to the benefit of God's people, and to the glory of God.

2. Woman as the homemaker

'Housewife' is a peculiar word, seeming to imply marriage to a house, and chained to the kitchen sink! She is still her husband's helper, not a slave in the house. She should be involved in all areas of her husband's life, but in particular it is in the area of the home that the Christian woman offers the profoundest and greatest service for the Lord.

Within the family, the wife has a great spiritual service in relation to the children in her care. This does not mean that the husband has no part to play. However, consider the characters of the following who were formed under the special and godly influence of their mothers - the evangelist Dwight Lyman Moody, John Wesley, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Other examples can be found in their thousands.

A believing wife has a great responsibility to witness to her unbelieving husband. (1 Corinthians 7:13, 16) She is used by the Lord to do her husband good. She will witness to her obedience to Christ, and her love for him, by being obedient to her husband.

Lastly, in a Christian home, hospitality is a great blessing to many. Romans 12:13 states that it actually improves the life of the Church. Hebrews 13:2 refers us to the great blessing that came to Sarah and Abraham when they 'entertained angels unawares'.

3. A Christian woman's service in the Church

Romans 16:1-2 may be used to cite the example of the service of Phoebe of Cenchrea. Paul uses the word 'helper' (PROSTATIS = 'protector') of her. She was a 'servant' (DIACONOS = deacon). That she was in a technical sense a deacon cannot, I believe, ever be known with certainty. It is possible that women were recognised as deacons; and this is argued on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:11, where Paul says - 'Women must likewise be dignified ...', a verse which is found in the section on the calling of deacons.

But the fact remains that Paul was only too happy to recognise the service that numerous women offered to the churches.

So far as worship is concerned, Acts 1:14 is used by some expositors to show that women are mentioned as attending the pre-Pentecost meeting of the Church. Whether they prayed out loud is a matter of conjecture. However, we do have mention of women praying and prophesying publicly in 1 Corinthians 11:5; and this is widely recognised by commentators.

4. Some 'difficult' texts

1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

We find an emphasis here on submission (34) in line with what we have already discussed in Study 1. The word is also found in Ephesians 5:24, and 1 Peter 3:1. The very 'speak' is used 291 times in the New Testament. It just means 'talk' or 'say something'. Nowhere is it ever used of formal or public speech. 'Be silent' cannot refer to praying or prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:5). It appears to be linked with the asking of questions. (1 Corinthians 14:25)

What sort of speaking, then, is being referred to here? The consensus of opinion appears to be that these Corinthians women were breaking the orderliness of the services by asking questions.

'The prohibition is absolute, and extends to the asking of questions. This is to be done in the home.' (Geoffrey Wilson)

‘Here the apostles enjoin silence on their women in public assemblies, and to such a degree that they must not ask questions for their own information, but ask their husbands at home.’ (Matthew Henry)

“Some women (they sat apart from the men) were perhaps calling out questions and commenting knowingly on the things said in the service.’ Norman Hillier) He goes on to say that this did not bring the women into bondage, but rather, it enhanced their femininity. Even men were called to silence sometime over the exercise of tongues (verse 30). Notice that this discipline was imposed within the formal assembly of the Church.

(2) 1 Timothy 2:11

Here is a verse that refers to the teaching ministry of the elders of the Church. ‘Quietly’ means ‘tranquil’, or ‘peaceful’. William Hendriksen comments

‘Although these words, and their parallel in 1 Corinthians 14, may sound a trifle unfriendly, in reality they are the very opposite. In fact, they are expressive of a felling of tender sympathy and basic understanding. They mean: let a woman not enter a sphere of activity for which by dint of her creation she is not suited. Let not a woman yearn to exercise authority over a man by leading him in public worship. For the sake both of herself and of the spiritual welfare of the church, such unholy tampering with divine authority is forbidden.’

Hendriksen comments further that the women are not forbidden to teach outside a formal church service - ‘To be sure, Priscilla - as well as Aquilla - taught Apollos, but not from the pulpit (Acts 18:26).’

Finally, Hendriksen concludes in his commentary on 1 Timothy and Titus with a very good section on the ‘The dignity of Women in the Pauline Epistles (pages 11-114).

APPENDIX

WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN’S COMMENTARY ON 1 TIMOTHY

‘THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES’

(1) He mentions with favour the following, to many of whom he sends greetings: Phoebe, Prisca, ‘Mary,’ Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, the sister of Nereus, Apphia, Lois and Eunice (see Romans 16; Phil. 4; 2 Tim. 1; Philemon).

(2) He employs women in the service of the gospel (Rom. 16:1-3; Phil. 4:3); specifically, the older widows (1 Tim. 5:9, 10), deacons’ assistants (1 Tim. 3:11), women who are able to support others (1 Tim. 5:16). Cf. what the book of Acts says with reference to Lydia (16:14, 40), Dorcas (9:36), Mary the mother of John (12:2), and the daughters of Philip (21:8, 9). What a difference between the status of women in the early church, on the one hand, and in the Qumran sect, described in the Dead Sea Scrolls, on the other! In the church, women were given an honourable status. In the Qumran sect, women played hardly any part. See Millar Burrows, op. cit., pp. 233, 244 and 335.

(3) He emphasises that ‘in Christ’ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). In relation to him there is perfect equality.

(4) He recommends marriage, even for widows, and he praises the joys of Christian wifehood and motherhood (I Cor. 7:39; 1 Tim. 5:14; then 1 Tim. 2:15; 4:3). There are circumstances, however, under which Paul considers it better 'not to marry' (2 Cor. 7:26-27).

(5) Anyone who maintains that Paul holds women in low esteem should read the following passages. If they are honestly interpreted, one will have to admit that in many ways no man is ever able to bestow upon a woman the full honour which, according to Paul's teaching, should be bestowed upon her:

'For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her husband.' (I Cor. 7:14)

'The wife does not have power over her own body, but the husband has; and similarly, the husband has no power over his own body, but the wife has.' (1 Cor. 7:4)

'The woman is man's glory.' (1 Cor. 11:7).

'In the Lord neither is woman without (the) man, nor is man without (the) woman.' (1 Cor. 11:11).

'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it... Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies.... Let each one of you love his wife as he loves himself; and let the wife see to it that she respects her husband.' (Eph. 5:25.53)

Paul's practical attitude to women kingdom-workers is expressed in this beautiful, concise order:

'HELP THESE WOMEN' (Phil. 4:3).