

2008 Virginia Women in History

EXCERPTS FROM

Toward a Liberating Faith: A Primer on Feminist Theology

By Dr. Isabel Wood Rogers

“What's all the fuss about feminist theology?”

THE PRESBYTERIAN SURVEY raised that question back in March 1995, with Eva Stimson in the lead editorial stating the situation clearly. “Hardly anyone wants to be labeled a feminist these days. Even those who express support for feminist ideas often preface their remarks with the disclaimer, ‘I am not a feminist, but. . . .’ ‘And,’ she said, ‘the easiest way of destroying a woman’s reputation in the church is to label her a ‘radical feminist.’”

So what’s so bad about being a feminist? What is a feminist, anyway? The Catholic theologian Leonard Swidler says this: “By a *feminist* is meant a person who is in favor of, and who promotes, the equality of women with men, a person who advocates and practices treating women primarily as human persons (as men are so treated) and willingly contravenes social customs in so acting.” Hardly a radical position! Indeed, most of us would qualify.

Why, then, at the dawn of the Third Millennium, should we need an enterprise called “feminist theology”? . . . The answer lies in our history in the Church. Throughout most of the previous two millennia our theologians have indeed excluded and denigrated women, to such an extent that not too long ago Sarah Bentley and Claire Randall could write that “theology was the (often) silent partner in the oppression of women by organized religion.” For the teachings of the great theologians of the past on the subject of women—mostly negative—inevitably seeped into the thinking of the Church’s leadership, and they subliminally shaped attitudes towards women that linger even today. Let us look at some samples from Christian theologians in centuries past.

The Christian theological tradition begins, of course, with the Bible. Both Hebrew and Graeco-Roman societies were male-centered and male-dominated; women most often did not count as persons to be taken seriously. Most of the Biblical documents reflect this male focus. . .

There was a “one-sidedness” in the family, said Johnnes Pedersen in his classic study of Israel’s society, “which placed the center of gravity in the man only.” The home was “the father’s house,” and the wife’s task was to be “helpmeet,” her foremost duty being to bear him children. If she failed in that duty, he was free to divorce her or to take other wives.

In New Testament times most of the leaders, immersed in the male-centered Graeco-Roman culture, simply took male dominance for granted. . . .

Now, we're talking here about the giants of our theological history. They shaped our thinking about God and humanity—great doctrines like Trinity and Incarnation, the Original Sin and Atonement. But on the subject of women their ideas were somewhat problematic! There emerged in their writing two great recurring themes:

- *Women are not quite as human as men—they do not directly reflect the image of God.*
- *“Woman” is the source of sin in human life.*

Or listen to Thomas Aquinas, greatest theologian in the Medieval church (and much influenced by Aristotle). He believed that woman is a sort of misfit, a freak of nature. There is in her “something deficient or accidental. For the active power of the male seed intends to produce

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a perfect likeness of itself with male sex. If a female is conceived, this is due to lack of strength in the active power, to a defect in the mother, or to some external influence like that of a humid wind from the south. . . .”

Not only are women “defective human beings,” whose only possible purpose is childbearing; they are to be condemned, for it is women who brought sin into human life. Said Tertullian, in the early third century: “And do you not know that you are Eve?” . . . You are the gate of the devil, the traitor of the tree, the first deserter of divine Law: you are she who enticed the one whom the devil dare not approach; you broke so easily the image of God, man; on account of the death you deserved, even the Son of God had to die. . . .”

Things have changed, however—changed radically. In the past three decades has come what is really a *revolution* in the relations between women and men.

There were rumblings of change as far back as the 1790’s, when Mary Wollstonecraft in England wrote her *VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*. And in America in the Nineteenth Century, a full-blown women’s movement developed, expressed most notably in the 1848 Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, their “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” was radical for its time; they called for the elimination of the “tyranny” of men. Laughed at by religious leaders (quoting the Bible!) and vilified for demanding votes for women, they did not back down, and Stanton later took an even more radical step. Observing how religion had been used against women so often (for example, she attended an anti-slavery convention in London where English clergymen used the Bible to banish women to the balcony, thus barring their participation), she began to work toward producing *THE WOMEN’S BIBLE*, which was finally published in 1895. She and other scholars examined that one-tenth (by their count) of Biblical texts which deal with women, writing their own “corrective” commentaries on those passages.

All this lay in the past when the Twentieth Century Women’s Movement began to emerge in the 1970’s. A 1961 study of the status of women sponsored by the Kennedy Administration, and Betty Friedan’s 1963 volume, *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*, helped to open eyes and raise consciousness. The movement for liberation developed rapidly and spread across our nation, with women claiming more and more freedoms and opportunities. The central focus has seemed to be not one “right”, like the right to vote, but a total restructuring of the relationship between women and men, moving from domination and submission toward reciprocity and partnership. As Patricia Budd Kepler put it in 1972: “Women in our struggle for freedom do not want to stand against men; we want for the first time since creation to stand beside them and with them.”

In this “new wave” of feminism, women have moved into the workplace, onto the athletic field, into the pulpit—into areas of life where they had little entree before. And even those women who would resist the term “feminist” have been affected by all the change; their sense of themselves is different because of the events of three decades. . . .

[A pastor in Raleigh, North Carolina] told of a parishioner of hers, a young woman [Sue], who had been thinking seriously about leaving the church. The woman explained her reason: the church had come to seem increasingly irrelevant to her life as a woman. . . .

There are indeed many women like Sue in our congregations, who keep hearing words and phrases that exclude them; and they long for inclusion and affirmation. As women’s voices more and more come to be part of the theological dialogue, Sue and her companions will be finding their hunger satisfied.

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Twenty centuries of Biblical study and theological interpretation need not be cast aside. But women are making their voices heard, bringing new ways of talking about God and God's work among us. The church needs to listen carefully to these voices and to value their perspectives. God may be moving all of us, men and women together, closer to the full humanity God intends for us.

Source: Rogers, Isabel Wood. Toward a Liberating Faith: A Primer on Feminist Theology. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (USA), 1999.