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Growing Edges

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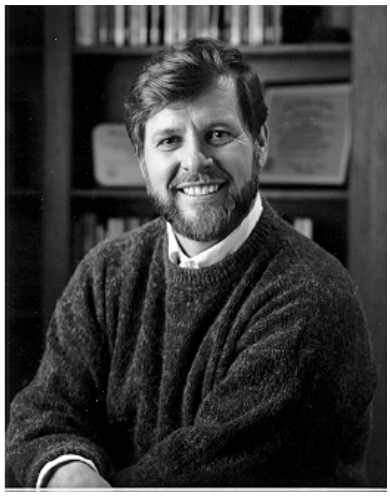
The Ministry of Reconciliation



No greater work can be given to us than "the ministry of reconciliation," to use Paul's phrase (2 Cor. 5:18). And the first and foremost word we are given to speak to a broken and alienated world is, "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). This is the first word, but it is not the only word. How urgently we today need reconciliation between races, reconciliation between nations, between people groups, between social, economic, and educational classes, and more. And on the human level perhaps the area most desperately in need of reconciliation is between women and men.

Sexism is the most common and close-at-hand form of discrimination we have. Friends, this is a bigotry straight from the pit! To deny a human being opportunities of service and ministry based solely on gender is the most dehumanizing of acts.

And it will not do to claim equality based on creation while postulating different ministry roles based on gender. We cannot with consistency affirm gender equality theoretically and at the same time limit the roles and self-determination of women. Men and women share different, though complementary, roles in such obvious matters as procreation. Also, we are given different roles based on intelligence, giftedness, and calling. But to deny a person ministry opportunity based on gender is to affirm the inequality of the sexes.

Today, in certain religious circles it is popular to reject the idea of the inferiority of women but still argue for the subordination of women. This simply cannot be done, at least not with consistency. The argument is a non sequitur which, in effect, says (a) woman is in no way inferior to man, (b) yet she is different from him, (c) therefore she is subordinate to him. The "therefore" simply doesn't follow! To say that woman must of necessity be subordinate is to say that she must of necessity be inferior.

Gender equality in privilege, responsibility, service, and ministry is a gospel imperative. It is an imperative rooted in the creation narrative, fulfilled in the revelation of Jesus Christ, and explained in the fundamental expression of Christian liberty given to us in the Epistle to the Galatians. It is an imperative well summarized in 1852 by the first woman ordained in the U.S., Antoinette Brown: "The Bible recognizes the rights, duties, and privileges of Woman as a public teacher as every way equal with those of Man: that it enjoins upon her no subjection that is not enjoined upon him; and that it truly and practically recognizes neither male nor female in Christ Jesus."

The great challenge is to bring the full implications of this gospel imperative into everyday practice. In churches, in homes, in offices, in marriages, in parenting, and more. The resources on the following pages are meant to help you on your way.

Peace and joy,

Richard J. Foster

Growing Together

Below are simple questions and practical exercises to help you work on the issue of sexism in our day. They are categorized under the RENOVARÉ streams of devotion.

Contemplative: The Prayer-Filled Life

- Meditate on Paul's revolutionary declaration, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).
  - — What racial and social and gender prejudices do I find in myself?
  - — What does this meditation teach me about my church and denomination?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?
- Prayerfully consider the various people you interact with in the course of a given week to see if there are ways you value them superficially.
  - — Do I devalue people who are less physically attractive?
  - — How does the age of a person affect my valuation of them?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?

Holiness: The Virtuous Life

- Be aware of actions or attitudes at office or home that reveal sexism.
  - — In business meetings do I interrupt women speakers more readily than men?
  - — Do I defer more quickly to men than to women?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?
- Watch for ways you project an attitude of superiority or inferiority around others.
  - — Does the way I dress express hidden fears about my worth?
  - — Do I regularly come into meetings late?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?

Charismatic: The Spirit-Empowered Life

- Study the amazing events in Acts 2, giving special attention to the all-inclusive nature of the Spirit's action, e.g. "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, . . . Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit," etc.
  - — What does this passage teach me about the Holy Spirit's lack of partiality and my tendency for partiality?
  - — When have I seen the Spirit freely ministering through "sons and daughters, men and women"?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?
- Watch in the next month for opportunities to engage in the ministry of reconciliation. Look to the Holy Spirit for wisdom and power to step into difficult situations.
  - — Where have I seen the deepest divisions among peoples?
  - — How have I been used as an agent of reconciliation? Are there things I would do differently next time?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?

Social Justice: The Compassionate Life

- In relationships, community life, and media be sensitive to any violation of basic justice—especially as it relates to blatant sexism. Consider actions in which you can be the voice for the voiceless, e.g. writing letters, informed confrontation with injustice, etc.
  - — How is this experience sensitizing me to issues of sexism in speech and action?
  - — Am I a safe person for those of the opposite sex to be around?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?

Evangelical: The Word-Centered Life

- No one knows the human authorship of our New Testament book of Hebrews. Some scholars have suggested that Priscilla (see Acts 18) may have written the book which could account for its anonymity as well as its frequent use of feminine perspectives. This question can never be answered with any assurance, but it can be a good exercise to read through Hebrews with the thought of Priscilla or some other early Christian woman as the author.
  - — Does this approach to Hebrews teach me anything new regarding the content of the book?
  - — Does it teach me anything new about myself?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?
- Consider the gospel mandate of evangelism (see Matt. 9:35-38 and Matt. 28:16-20).
  - — Would Jesus exclude more than half of the Christian work force from critical areas of this mandate?
  - — Am I clear to include all God's people in this mandate?
  - — Is God calling me to any specific action steps?

Richard J. Foster

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Personal Encounters with Sexism

by Lynda L. Graybeal

Attending a larger high school appealed to me. A chance to make new friends. Greater choice in course selection. Tougher academic standards. Teachers who encouraged achievement. More chances to apply for college scholarships. In the mid-1950s for a student to live in one rural Kansas district and attend school in another was not common. But my parents knew that graduating from the smaller school limited my choices. They met with both School Boards to get the transfer approved.

The first year flew by. Bookkeeping and shorthand were added to the academic basics. Band, instrumental and vocal ensembles, and a junior play rounded out the schedule. In the spring I searched for a summer job that utilized my new skills.

Looking to the future, at senior pre-enrollment I signed up for vocational and college prep courses and enrolled in a correspondence science class through a local college. Study became my top priority since high grades were just as important as entrance exam scores when colleges awarded scholarships. I was full of enthusiasm and hope. My future went beyond living and dying in the Pleasant Ridge community located on the highest hill between two towns. (Residents dubbed it "P" Ridge, i.e. Poverty Ridge.)

One November morning a classmate greeted me with a puzzled query: "Where were you?"

"What do you mean?," I replied.

"We took the college entrance exams Saturday? Didn't you know about it? Why weren't you there?"

Broken Dreams

This was my baptism into the real world of being on the bottom. I was not included because I was the wrong gender, from the wrong social class, and with the wrong economic resources. The principal and teachers decided who should take the college entrance exams not from objective standards like grade point averages and measurable potential, but from cultural criteria.

Although this happened almost forty years ago, remembering it still hurts. In that community, in that culture, in that time there was nothing I could do to reverse the damage done to my dreams, my life. A poor female from a rural area, I was powerless. There was no recourse, no going back. But the experience helped me discover several things about discrimination, especially discrimination based on gender.

Rooted In the Fall

In many Western cultures a person can overcome prejudice based on social and financial status, but we have yet to conquer discrimination based on gender. It continues to plague the relationships of men and women in every aspect of life—the family, business, government, and, sadly, religion, the one institution we expect to call us to a higher road, a better way. Why? Why is sexism so entrenched? Because it is rooted in the Fall.

Besides setting in motion the alienation of all human beings from God and the creation, the Fall ruptured the relationship between man and woman. We can hear the pathos as God describes the disastrous, personal consequences of their action to Eve: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen. 3:16, NIV). The intimacy, the oneness, the innocence is gone. Manipulation, cunning, and deceit become the order of the day. Adam and his male offspring will try to control Eve and her female descendants through the use of force and intimidation. Alienation marks their lives.

A Chameleon

From this beginning, sexism became a chameleon, taking on innumerable colors. It is explicit yet subtle, glaring yet camouflaged. Blatant examples abound: paying women less than men for identical work, refusing to grant financial credit to women, excluding people from leadership positions because they're the wrong gender, preferring men over women in job promotions and educational opportunities.

One of my husband's business associates is a successful insurance agent with enough income to be financially independent. Needing a new car, she went to a dealer's showroom. After looking at several and choosing one, she started to make the financial arrangements. Bluntly, the salesman said, "Bring your husband back with you, and then we'll talk price." This so infuriated our friend that she left the showroom and never returned. She told my husband that she went to

several dealers before finding one who was willing to sell her a car on time without her husband's co-signature.

Other forms of sexism are more subtle: jokes about "my wife's driving" or "my husband's snoring," discussions that exclude either women or men in mixed gatherings, stereotypes that assume one gender always fills certain roles, and more. Before my husband, Phil, and I got married, we agreed that we would never joke about each other's idiosyncrasies or failings in public. Phil has been excluded from discussions about children, and I have been excluded from discussions about theology. When we started the process of home mortgage applications for our recent move to Colorado, time after time we had to clarify that I was the primary wage earner. Many people are astonished to learn that Phil cooks and cleans.

One young lady recently shared with me her experience with sexism. Her car needed fixing, so she took it to a repair shop. Her fiancé went with her, but since it wasn't his car, he didn't know the specifics of the problem. Yet when the woman started explaining the problem to the mechanic, he completely ignored her, speaking only to her fiancé.

Dehumanizing, Demeaning, Debilitating

Discrimination in any form says that the victim is less than human. It is death dealing and spirit breaking. I winch and hurt for a couple whenever I hear the husband referred to as "my old man" or the wife referred to as "the little lady"—or worse. The old adage that "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is simply not true.

In A Reasonable Faith Tony Campolo says, "We can talk about goodness as anything that enhances the humanity of the individual and evil as anything that diminishes it." And because our gender is so tied to who we are as persons, sexism hurts and stunts humans more than any other "ism." It traps the oppressor in a never-ending cycle of fear of losing control over the other person. It limits the victim's God-ordained potential by denying opportunities for growth and development. It keeps men and women in bondage to their fear and their falleness.

But the good news is that Jesus Christ came to set us free from our biases and prejudices—racism, classism, sexism, ageism, ethnicism, ad infinitum. We are not bound by the Fall; Christ sets before us a new way, a new path where "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28, NRSV). In this paradigm everyone is freed from racial and ethnic discrimination. Social status loses its power to enslave. Together women and men work with God in all areas, bringing the power of the kingdom to the earth.

God does not restrict or limit us. He is in the business of empowering his children—female and male, rural and urban, old and young, dark and light and all the shades in between. And we must be about the business of helping others overcome the constraints placed upon them by culture, government, religion. If the Church ever hopes to recover credibility, it must lead the fight against discrimination in all its forms. How can the Church call for an end to classism, ageism, racism, and more when a congregation can elect a person to chair a committee that establishes guidelines for deacon ministry but cannot elect that same person to the office because of her gender?

Epilogue

Before my eighteenth birthday, I graduated as valedictorian of my class. Within fifteen months I received unexpected financial help and entered college. At the age of forty I reentered college and finished a B.A., graduating with honors. Eight years later I earned a graduate degree in Christian Ministry.

It hasn't been easy. I continue to experience discrimination in big and small ways. I have battled it in the past, fight it in the present, and will encounter it in the future. But I will not be a victim. I persist, knowing that there will come a day when worth is measured by no other criteria than our creation in the image of God.

Previously employed as a secretary at universities, businesses, and churches, Lynda Graybeal has worked as Richard Foster's Administrative Associate for over twelve years. Also Administrator of RENOVARÉ, she and Phil have two grown children and live in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

Going Deeper

Three books have helped me immensely to better understand our relationships within marriage and the Church: Heirs Together, Equal to Serve, and Women, Authority & The Bible. Unashamedly evangelical, the authors take Scriptural authority seriously without letting it hinder them from seeking new and fresh understandings.

In Heirs Together Patricia Gundry presents the best argument for equality and partnership in marriage I have read. She summarizes the key elements that affect marriage, gives tools to help us understand biblical passages on marriage, and deals with the practical working out of marriage. Gundry challenges our cultural assumptions and dispels many false notions about marriage relationships, replacing them with a distinct Christian model based on mutual submission. Heirs Together goes beyond discussing the issues; it offers solutions for the marriage problems that we all face—dividing responsibilities, making decisions, setting goals, fighting constructively. I hope it helps you as much as it has me.

Equal to Serve held my attention when it was first published, and it continues to be a primary resource for understanding the issues that surround women's service in the Church. A leading spokesperson for the equality of men and women, Gretchen Gaebelein Hull sees it as an issue of justice. She writes, ". . . all believers are equally redeemed and therefore equally eligible to serve."

Interweaving her personal story and struggle to serve in the Church with a survey of the attitudes and actions of a wide variety of biblical men and women, Gretchen provides evidence that women in the Old and New Testaments had broad freedom. She goes on to question the traditions many Christians blindly accept and to show us the attitudes God wants us to have. If you want to be challenged to yield your rights . . . your talents . . . your life in total service to Jesus Christ, read Equal to Serve.

A collection of essays and responses presented at the Evangelical Colloquium on Women and the Bible held in 1984, Women, Authority & the Bible is scholarly and readable, a winning combination. Alvera Mickelsen, the editor, chose papers by leaders who ask hard questions about women's roles in the Church. Not all of them agree on everything. But they do agree that we must begin with the question, "What does the Bible teach?" They also agree that too often poor exegesis has been used to advocate positions on either side. This book is not for the faint-hearted, but it is essential reading if you are concerned about the status of women in the Church. It is a wonderful resource that I use repeatedly.

Lynda L. Graybeal