

The Biblical Portrait of Women: Setting the Record Straight

Scripture: Leviticus 19:3, Exodus 20:12, Genesis 1:27; 5:1–2, Ephesians 5:23, 1 Peter 3:7, Proverbs 12:4

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The Bible is, and has always been, a revolutionary book. It stands like a coastal rock cliff to resist the surging, crashing waves of cultural change. And there may be no clearer demonstration of the Bible's immutable word than what it teaches about genuine femininity.

The Bible rightly exalts women against cultures that distort, degrade, and debase them. Many in our society tout the sexual and reproductive liberation of women against the supposed oppressive, outmoded strictures of the Bible. I have to ask, "In what way are women truly free? In what way does our culture honor them?" Sure they can vote; sure they have opportunities to compete in the marketplace. But are they really free? Is their dignity and honor intact?

I contend that women are used and abused more today than at any time in history. Pornography turns women into objects and victims of dirty, cowardly Peeping Toms who leer at them with greedy eyes. Throughout the world, women are traded like animals for sexual slavery. In more "civilized" places, men routinely use women for no-consequence, no-commitment sex only to leave them pregnant, without care and support. Abortion rights groups aid and abet male selfishness and irresponsibility, and they "free" women to murder their unborn children. Women are left alone, emotionally scarred, financially destitute, and experientially guilty, ashamed, and abandoned. Where's the freedom, dignity, and honor in that?

Modern technological advances have enabled the culture to mainstream the degradation of women like never before; but ancient cultures were no better. Women in pagan societies during biblical times were often treated with little more dignity than animals. Some of the best-known Greek philosophers—considered the brightest minds of their era—taught that women are inferior creatures by nature. Even in the Roman Empire (perhaps the very pinnacle of pre-Christian civilization) women were usually regarded as mere chattel—personal possessions of their husbands or fathers, with hardly any better standing than household slaves. That was vastly different from the Hebrew (and biblical) concepts of marriage as a joint inheritance, and parenthood as a partnership where *both* father and mother are to be revered and obeyed by the children (Leviticus 19:3).

Pagan *religion* tended to fuel and encourage the devaluation of women even more. Of course, Greek and Roman mythology had its goddesses (such as Diana and Aphrodite). But don't imagine for a moment that goddess-worship in any way raised the status of women in society. The opposite was true. Most temples devoted to goddesses were served by sacred prostitutes—priestesses who sold themselves for money, supposing they were performing a religious sacrament. Both the mythology and the practice of pagan religion have usually been overtly demeaning to women. Male pagan deities were capricious and sometimes wantonly misogynistic. Religious ceremonies were often blatantly obscene—including such things as erotic fertility rites, drunken temple orgies, perverted homosexual practices, and in the very worst cases, even human sacrifices.

Contrast all of that, ancient and contemporary, with the Bible. From cover to cover, the Bible exalts

women. In fact, it often seems to go out of the way to pay homage to them, to ennoble their roles in society and family, to acknowledge the importance of their influence, and to exalt the virtues of women who were particularly godly examples.

From the very first chapter of the Bible, we are taught that women, like men, bear the stamp of God's own image (Genesis 1:27; 5:1-2)—men and women were created equal. Women play prominent roles in many key biblical narratives. Wives are seen as venerated partners and cherished companions to their husbands, not merely slaves or pieces of household furniture (Genesis 2:20-24; Proverbs 19:14; Ecclesiastes 9:9). At Sinai, God commanded children to honor *both* father and mother (Exodus 20:12).

Of course, the Bible teaches divinely ordained role distinctions between men and women—many of which are perfectly evident from the circumstances of creation alone. For example, women have a unique and vital role in childbearing and the nurture of little ones. Women themselves also have a particular need for support and protection, because physically, they are "weaker vessels" (1 Peter 3:7 NKJV). Scripture establishes the proper order in the family and in the church accordingly, assigning the duties of headship and protection in the home to husbands (Ephesians 5:23) and appointing men in the church to the teaching and leadership roles (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

Yet women are by no means marginalized or relegated to any second-class status. The Bible teaches women are not only equals with men (Galatians 3:28), but are also set apart for special honor (1 Peter 3:7). Husbands are commanded to love their wives sacrificially, as Christ loves the church—even, if necessary, at the cost of their own lives (Ephesians 5:25-31). The Bible acknowledges and celebrates the priceless value of a virtuous woman (Proverbs 12:4; 31:10; 1 Corinthians 11:7).

Christianity, born at the intersection of East and West, elevated the status of women to an unprecedented height. Jesus' disciples included several women (Luke 8:1-3), a practice almost unheard of among the rabbis of His day. Not only that, He *encouraged* their discipleship by portraying it as something more needful than domestic service (Luke 10:38-42). In fact, Christ's first recorded, explicit disclosure of His own identity as the true Messiah was made to a Samaritan woman (John 4:25-26). He always treated women with the utmost dignity—even women who might otherwise be regarded as outcasts (Matthew 9:20-22; Luke 7:37-50; John 4:7-27). He blessed their children (Luke 18:15-16), raised their dead (Luke 7:12-15), forgave their sin (Luke 7:44-48), and restored their virtue and honor (John 8:4-11). Thus He exalted the position of womanhood itself.

It is no surprise therefore that women became prominent in the ministry of the early church (Acts 12:12-15; 1 Corinthians 11:11-15). On the day of Pentecost, when the New Testament church was born, women were there with the chief disciples, praying (Acts 1:12-14). Some were renowned for their good deeds (Acts 9:36); others for their hospitality (Acts 12:12; 16:14-15); still others for their understanding of sound doctrine and their spiritual giftedness (Acts 18:26; 21:8-9). John's second epistle was addressed to a prominent woman in one of the churches under his oversight. Even the apostle Paul, sometimes falsely caricatured by critics of Scripture as a male chauvinist, regularly ministered alongside women (Philippians 4:3). He recognized and applauded their faithfulness and their giftedness (Romans 16:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:5).

Naturally, as Christianity began to influence Western society, the status of women was dramatically improved. One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, wrote a work titled *On the Apparel of Women*, sometime near the end of the second century. He said pagan women who wore elaborate hair

ornaments, immodest clothing, and body decorations had actually been forced by society and fashion to abandon the superior splendor of true femininity. He noted by way of contrast that as the church had grown and the gospel had borne fruit, one of the visible results was the rise of a trend toward modesty in women's dress and a corresponding elevation of the status of women. He acknowledged that pagan men commonly complained, "Ever since she became a Christian, she walks in poorer garb!" Christian women even became known as "modesty's priestesses." But, Tertullian said, as believers who lived under the lordship of Christ, women were spiritually wealthier, more pure, and thus more glorious than the most extravagant women in pagan society. Clothed "with the silk of uprightness, the fine linen of holiness, the purple of modesty," they elevated feminine virtue to an unprecedented height.

Even the pagans recognized that. Chrysostom, perhaps the most eloquent preacher of the fourth century, recorded that one of his teachers, a pagan philosopher named Libanius, once said: "Heavens! What women you Christians have!" What prompted Libanius's outburst was hearing how Chrysostom's mother had remained chaste for more than two decades since becoming a widow at age twenty. As the influence of Christianity was felt more and more, women were less and less vilified or mistreated as objects for the amusement of men. Instead, women began to be honored for their virtue and faith.

In fact, Christian women converted out of pagan society were automatically freed from a host of demeaning practices. Emancipated from the public debauchery of temples and theaters (where women were systematically dishonored and devalued), they rose to prominence in home and church, where they were honored and admired for feminine virtues like hospitality, ministry to the sick, the care and nurture of their own families, and the loving labor of their hands (Acts 9:39).

That's always been the trend. Wherever the gospel has spread, the social, legal, and spiritual status of women has, as a rule, been elevated. When the gospel has been eclipsed (whether by repression, false religion, secularism, humanistic philosophy, or spiritual decay within the church), the status of women has declined accordingly.

Even when secular movements have arisen claiming to be concerned with women's rights, their efforts have generally been detrimental to the status of women. The feminist movement of our generation, for example, is a case in point. Feminism has devalued and defamed *femininity*. Natural gender distinctions are usually downplayed, dismissed, despised, or denied. As a result, women are now being sent into combat situations, subjected to grueling physical labor once reserved for men, exposed to all kinds of indignities in the workplace, and otherwise encouraged to act and talk like men. Meanwhile, modern feminists heap scorn on women who want family and household to be their first priorities; in so doing they disparage the role of motherhood, the one calling that is most uniquely and exclusively feminine. The whole message of feminist egalitarianism is that there is really nothing extraordinary about women. That is certainly not the message of Scripture. Scripture honors women *as women*, and it encourages them to seek honor in a uniquely feminine way (Proverbs 31:10-30).

Scripture never discounts the female intellect, downplays the talents and abilities of women, or discourages the right use of women's spiritual gifts. But whenever the Bible expressly talks about the marks of an excellent woman, the stress is always on feminine *virtue*. The most significant women in Scripture were influential not because of their careers, but because of their *character*. The message these women collectively give is not about "gender equality"; it's about true feminine excellence. And that is always exemplified in moral and spiritual qualities rather than by social standing, wealth, or physical appearance.

And that's setting the record straight. Far from denigrating women, the Bible promotes feminine freedom, dignity, and honor. Scripture paints for every culture the portrait of a *truly* beautiful woman. True feminine beauty is not about external adornment, "arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel"; *real* beauty is manifest instead in "the hidden person of the heart ... the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 3:3-4 NKJV).

Adapted from Twelve Extraordinary Women.

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