

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Women aren't second-class people in God's sight

Some Christians consider all feminists dangerous heretics. Based on what I read in the Bible, however, I believe that much of what Christian feminists are saying is similar to what Jesus said and did. We need to pay attention to it, not because of "political correctness" or any other current trend, but because God calls us to.



In the church we need to make our members aware of the many religious and social customs that keep women from using their abilities and their spiritual gifts to the fullest. We need to stop using these harmful customs, and to work toward getting other people to stop using them. When we fail to do so, we fail to follow the example set by Jesus.

Jesus rejected tradition's view of women

▪ Jesus repeatedly noticed women and called them out from the background. He noticed one woman who had been bent over for many years, and enabled her to stand up.

She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free ..."

—Luke 13:11-12

A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"

—Luke 11:27-28

▪ Jesus said that using their physical ability to be mothers was not the most important thing for women to do. Jesus saw women as whole people, not just as bodies.

The twelve were with him, as well as some women who ... provided for them out of their resources.

—Luke 8:1-3

▪ Jesus included women among his disciples. They traveled as part of the group and helped support it financially.

God opened my eyes

When feminists began to be prominent in the news in the 1960's and 70's, I thought they were ridiculous. They all seemed harsh and strident and very unattractive, and I was appalled by their public demonstrations that often included bra-burning. Besides, I didn't think they were saying anything that really mattered.



In more recent years, however, God has led me to believe that many Christian feminists are expressing God's will. I now see that a lot of what they are saying is vitally important for all of us, whether we're male or female. It's vitally important for our entire society, in fact.



Our stories are different but also alike

I believe that whether they realize it or not, most women have been held back to some degree by our male-oriented language, customs, and traditions. I know, however, that different women experience this in different ways and that some aspects of my life aren't representative of many other women's lives. I know that the ways in which I've been deprived because of being female have been minor compared to what many other women experience. In this issue of *Connections* I'm not even addressing the physical abuse or financial and other kinds of hardships that many women suffer. I'm simply telling some ways in which I've personally experienced our society's ways of making women second-class people.



By doing so I hope to encourage other women whose stories are different from mine to tell theirs, in their churches and elsewhere. Men need to tell theirs, too, and we need to hear each other's. That could help all of us to see how damaging some of our most familiar customs are, to both women and men. It could help to bring about some changes that our churches and our world urgently need.

▪ Jesus rebuked the people who criticized a woman for ministering to him in a close, personal way.

Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ..."

—Mark 14:6-9

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The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" ... Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman.

—John 4:25-27

▪ Jesus publicly discussed theology with a woman. According to the Bible he even let her be the first to know that he was the Messiah. And she was a woman that respectable people shunned.

▪ News of Jesus' resurrection came first from

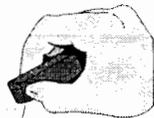
women, even though they lived in a society that wouldn't accept women's testimony in court. Jesus instructed these women not only to proclaim the gospel but also to proclaim it to men. As a result, the early church called one of them—Mary Magdalene—"the apostle to the apostles."



In a culture that treated women as nobodies and as men's property, Jesus treated them as capable people who were valuable in their own right. Isn't it time that we followed Jesus' example, especially in the church? I believe it's long past time. ❖

A painful memory

When I was in the 8th grade, all the 8th-graders at my school had to turn in lists of the courses we would take in the 9th through 12th grades. I had no idea what courses to list, so I listed everything I could remotely imagine needing: 4 years of English, 4 of math, 4 of science, and 4 of foreign language, plus other "solid subjects" to fill the schedule. I liked school and had always made top grades, so I saw no reason not to take as much as I could. But the counselor who had to approve our schedules, who didn't know me, was horrified. She immediately started erasing, and replacing math courses with study hall periods.



When I objected, she reluctantly put some of the math courses back, but she still wouldn't let me schedule solid geometry, the most advanced math course available in the high school I would attend. "You're not going to be an engineer, are you?" she asked with a sneer. "Oh no," I meekly answered. I had no idea what engineers did, but I knew that they were men, therefore I wasn't going to be one.

Years later when I was majoring in math in college, I needed the solid geometry that I could so easily have taken during high school. But many more years went by before I realized how I had been penalized merely for being female. Unfortunately, girls are still discouraged from entering many traditionally male professions.



The message is all around us

Words aren't the main way in which we're told that women belong only in the background. We get that message constantly from seeing the people around us, and that's the most powerful way of being taught something. It's like being brainwashed.

We often get the message from people we admire and trust, who want the best for us and who we feel have legitimate authority over us—our families, our churches, and other trusted people and institutions. That makes the message especially powerful.

We often fail to notice how our culture puts women down because it happens through customs that seem to be merely "the way things are."



▪ Clothing delivers the message

The skirts and high-heeled shoes that are often considered a requirement for looking feminine actually limit women unnecessarily. Fragile hose, polished fingernails, and costly hairdos that must be protected also restrict women needlessly.

In addition, women have traditionally been made the carriers of a lot of baggage that needlessly weighs us down. Because we carry purses and our husbands and children don't, they often expect us to carry whatever they don't want to be burdened by.



We're also expected to carry a lot of their emotional, social, and spiritual responsibilities for them. We're often asked to be religious for the whole family and to be self-sacrificing when men aren't. We're expected to look after our husbands' relationships with family members, to keep them on their

Some shocking evidence

Going through my parents' mementos after their deaths, I came across some surprising evidence of the brainwashing that was routinely done to women of my generation. I found a test that my mother had saved, which I had been given when I was 6. It involved writing sentences that a teacher read aloud to me. The sentences I had written from her dictation included this one—"Girls belong at home."

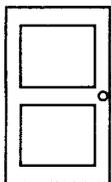


If that's not brainwashing, it's something awfully close, and although we rarely say this so blatantly now, we're still saying it in many other powerful ways.

diets, and to look after their social schedules and courtesies like thank-you notes and gift-giving.

▪ **Chivalry delivers the message**

Both men and women have convinced themselves that men do women a favor when they do chivalrous acts like opening doors for them. But unless a door is so heavy that a man's greater physical strength is needed for opening it, he may be doing the woman more harm than good. He is in effect telling her that she is less competent than men, or that if she is equally competent or more so, she should hide it. Although pampering women and keeping them on pedestals may show good intentions, it can actually do women more harm than good.



▪ **Money delivers the message**

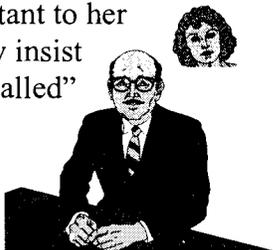


Often at evening social events during out-of-town meetings to which I accompany my husband, a man will ask me or another wife, "Have you been out spending your husband's money today?" Although I assume that these men

mean to be funny or that they're merely saying the only thing they know to say to women, to me their question feels like an insult. It reflects the widely-held but demeaning view that only men can and should be the world's income-earners. It wrongly implies that the money a woman spends belongs to her husband and must be doled out to her by him.

▪ **Unequal partnerships deliver the message**

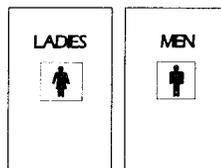
Whether it's the U.S. president's wife, a business executive or military officer's wife, or a bishop or pastor's wife, we often expect a male leader's wife to be a full-time but unpaid assistant to her husband in his job. The wife may insist that she is a full partner and is "called" to the job just as her husband is, but that doesn't hold water when only the husband has the job's title, authority, and security.



Our traditional claim that wives should stay at home looking after their children and household while their husbands go into the world to make the family's money doesn't hold water either. Expecting all women to fill all the home roles while their husbands fill the worldly ones ignores women's differing interests and abilities. It keeps them doing

only their families' grubby jobs like house-cleaning and trivial ones like grocery-shopping. It deprives wives of the challenge, recognition, and involvement in the world's decision-making that their husbands have. That's not real partnership.

▪ **Our choice of words delivers the message**

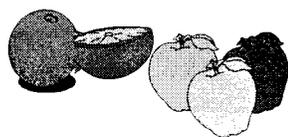


We give the wrong message when we use the word "ladies" (which implies a certain pattern of behavior) when we actually mean "women" (which refers only to biological features), yet we do that often. It's especially misleading to pair the word "ladies" (behavior) with the word "men" (biology alone).

We also give a harmful message when we use the word "men" to refer to all human beings, as many of the Bible's original documents do and as we've done in most of our writing and talking for centuries. Many Christians claim that using the word "men" to include women is justified, but if we apply this custom to anything other than people, we immediately see how unrealistic that claim is.



Suppose we applied it to apples and oranges. Suppose we used the word "apples" to refer to apples by themselves, and "oranges" to refer to oranges alone, but we also used "oranges" for groups that included both oranges and ap-



pples. It would be senseless. It would make oranges seem important and apples invisible. It would make oranges the standard for evaluating apples. Using masculine words for all human beings does that with regard to men and women.

Some Christians say we must keep using the all-masculine language of our hymns and scripture, however, because preserving the original words is essential. I disagree. The purpose of singing and reading scripture during worship isn't to study history or honor composers. Instead, it is to express our best understanding of what God is currently saying to us. And I can't believe that God is saying that women should be second-class citizens or second-class Christians. ❖



It's time to wake up

God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . ." —Genesis 1:26

We quote scriptures saying there is neither male nor female in Christ, but our churches' actions often give a very different

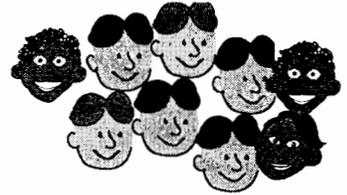
message. Women, like men, are made in God's image, and about 60% of church members and more than 50% of the U.S. population are female, yet many Christians refuse to give women their rightful place in the church and the world. We've made progress, but we still have a long way to go. It's time to

discard traditions that put women down or make them invisible. It's time for more Christians to wake up, to speak up, and to refuse to give up until the changes God is calling us to make have become a reality. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

God isn't one of the guys



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergy wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to more than 12000 readers in 49 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.