

Session 2

Role of Men in the Church

The Feminization of the 21st Century Church

“I will be a father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” II Corinthians 6:18

- I. Is the 21st century church a feminine church? Does the church continue to have sons as well as daughters? Let’s take a look at the evidence.
 - A. The statistics.
 1. According to George Barna, women are twice as likely as men to attend a church service during any given week. Sixty per cent of church members are women. Women are also 50% more likely to say they are “religious” and to state that they are “absolutely committed” to the Christian faith.
 2. The trend may be toward fewer men attending church compared to women during the 1990s.
 3. Men monopolize positions of authority in almost every sect and denomination of Christianity. Yet positions of authority are few and if they are subtracted from the equation, women dominate virtually every other activity in churches.
 4. Sunday schools lose 60 – 80% of their boys between 12 and 18 years.
 5. Two thirds of Sunday School teachers are women.
 6. Women are significantly more likely than men to:
 - Assert that the Bible is totally accurate
 - Be involved in a prayer group
 - Affirm the importance of religious faith in their life.
 - Choose a Biblical description of their God
 - Be involved in a ministry to the poor, sick and grieving
 - Describe themselves as born again Christians
 - Take responsibility for spiritual leadership in the home
 7. More conservative, evangelical faith traditions are more successful in fostering the faith of their male members. For example, churches of Christ have engaged a larger percentage of men actively in church work than most other religious groups.
 - B. The perception.
 1. Preachers are not very masculine and are known for relating better to women than men. As one male church member suggested, “life is a football game, with the men fighting it out on the gridiron, while the minister is up in the grandstand, explaining it to the ladies.” This is, naturally, an exaggeration but it is a perception nevertheless.
 2. Men who are interested in religion are less masculine than other men. (Promise Keepers has challenged this image.)

3. Christianity shields persons from the real world. Remember Marx, “Religion is an opiate of the people.” Real men must face the real world.
- C. The comparison with other faith traditions and other countries.
1. The Eastern Orthodox, Jews and Muslims are dominated from top to bottom by men.
 2. According to one survey, 36% of black Muslims are women.
 3. Yet in Christian churches throughout the world, women predominate.
 - a. According to one survey, in Germany, France, Norway, and Ireland women are 60 to 65% of the active churchgoers.
 - b. In Korea, India, and the Philippines, women are 65 to 70% of the active church goers.
- D. The caution.
1. Statistics can be misleading.
 2. The role of men may be changing (e.g. Promise Keepers, Focus on the Family).
- II. Reasons Christianity may be more appealing to women.
- A. The lack of male participation is not universal in Christianity nor in other religions in general. There is nothing inherent in Christianity which is more appealing to women than men. So why do we see the gender disparity?
 - B. One possibility is the “place” of men, women and Christianity in modern society. Men’s work moved out of the home with the industrial revolution. Women continued (until recently) to be responsible for the house and children. Religion had no place in the factory, politics or business, so men may have relegated it to the home and woman’s sphere.
 - C. Some suggest that men want women to be religious so that women will not rebel against their “place” in society, that they would find fulfillment in their practices of faith and not push for an equal position in the workplace. A variation on this theme is that women have found that the one sphere outside the home where they do have influence is in the church and they make the most of it by using their many talents in the church.
 - D. The Victorians tended to emphasize home, mother and God and glorified the woman in the home. Christianity was equated with the sheltered and sacred home and hearth. Men viewed this as a weakness.
 - E. Woman has been considered the “devout sex” in that she is more understanding about things of the heart and more spiritual. She is more humble, tender, more inclined to prayer, to charity and to hope. She is less egoistic, is unselfish and prone to sacrifice. (Alberione)
 - F. Nietzsche viewed Christianity as a religion for slaves, weaklings and the effeminate (he wasn’t that much of a man himself).
 - G. Christianity has been associated with verbal expression of emotion, especially the verbalization of the emotion of love, e.g. the song *Jesus Lover of My Soul* may be uncomfortable for some men to sing until they gain a much greater understanding of the Christian theology of love.

III. Countercurrents to the feminization of Christianity within the church.

- A. During the Middle Ages, the great challenge was to “inflict death or to die for Christ.” The Crusades were one of the outcomes of this view.
- B. Thomas Aquinas was known for his extreme analytical approach to scripture (the epitome of the “strong mind”).
- C. Historically, the Jesuits (the Society of Jesus) of the Roman Catholic Church placed greater emphasis upon the inner life as a spiritual combat. These men took on a military conception of obedience and order. They focused their “warfare” by teaching, preaching and especially defending the faith against the doctrines of the Enlightenment.
- D. Martin Luther reminded Christians that they were in a war and that the chief foe was the devil. He wrote, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”
- E. Early revivalism in the US emphasized sin, repentance, and redemption rather than grace and divine love. (e.g. Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”)
- F. Early 20th century evangelists often were associated with sports. For example, Billy Sunday was a professional baseball player.
- G. An early movement during the 20th century, the Men and Religion forward Movement, stressed the image of Jesus as the Successful Businessman, the Super Salesman.
- H. Within the Restoration movement, many of our heroes were men who exhibited masculine qualities, especially aggressiveness.
 - 1. Barton Stone was a frontier preacher. He viewed poverty and struggle as the natural consequence of following the Lord. The preacher was an itinerant, complete with saddlebags and gun.
 - 2. Alexander Campbell began the debate tradition in the Restoration movement.
 - 3. Foy E. Wallace was called the “little general” for his attacks on premillennialism.
 - 4. Homer Hailey, a well known preacher from the “anti” tradition, was a body builder.

IV. Masculinity as religion instead of Christianity.

- A. Man as god. e.g. the American Frontiersman, such as Natty Bumppo in the Leatherstocking Tales (natural man living off the land, passionate, self-reliant)
- B. The sexual act as the most important “peak experience”, not a spiritual act. (The rise of pornography)
- C. Sports as a natural religion.
 - 1. A civilized substitute for war. A realm for struggle.
 - 2. The mysticism of the movements of the athlete.
 - 3. The altruism of giving your body and soul to the “team.” “Leaving it all out on the playing field.”
 - 4. The risks involved in “extreme sports.”

- D. Brotherhoods.
 - 1. The Masons.
 - 2. Fraternities.
 - 3. The “Dog Pen” at Cleveland Browns games.
 - E. Imitations of War.
 - 1. The Boy Scouts.
 - 2. War games.
 - F. The extreme – the Fascist male in Europe,
- V. The women’s movement in society and in the church.
- A. Some make the case that if women become more active in leadership roles in the church, then men we be even more likely to escape their roles and responsibilities in the church.
 - B. There is little evidence, however, that this is the case. For example, in what ways has the women’s movement changed the church into an environment which is less attractive to men?
 - C. Rather, the blurring of the role of men in society has spilled over into the church. Men are struggling to find their identity. This is true of women as well, but perhaps the women’s movement has provided women with a foundation to establishing that identity (either by adopting the ideas of the movement or reacting to those ideas).

References

1. Alberione J: *Woman: Her Influence and Zeal as an Aid to the Priesthood*. Boston, St. Paul Editions, 1964
2. Podles LJ: *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*. Dallas, Spence Publishing Company, 1999