

I

## LIBERATING THE FEMALE BODY

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*Every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman.*<sup>1</sup>

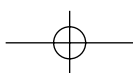
—Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215)

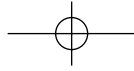
*God created man with a broad chest, not broad hips, so that in that part of him he can be wise; but that part out of which filth comes is small. In a woman, this is reversed. That is why she has much filth and little wisdom.*<sup>2</sup>

—Martin Luther (1483–1546)

*I listen to feminists and all these radical gals—most of them are failures. They've blown it. Some of them have been married, but they married some Casper Milquetoast who asked permission to go to the bathroom. These women just need a man in the house. That's all they need. Most of the feminists need a man to tell them what time of day it is and to lead them home. And they blew it and they're mad at all men. Feminists hate men. They're sexist. They hate men—that's their problem.*<sup>3</sup>

— Jerry Falwell (1933–)



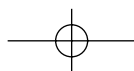
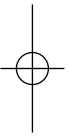
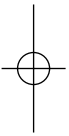


THE AWARD-WINNING HBO show *Sex and the City* chronicled the adventures of four women in their search for great sex and meaningful relationships. Carrie Bradshaw, the show's main character, attempted to capture in her columns the lives of those winning and losing in the game of love. Yet, in a very telling comment made during the series' nineteenth episode, Carrie confessed, "I write about sex, not love. What do I know about love?"

Carrie raised an interesting question. Are sex and love mutually exclusive? Can we experience great sex apart from the deep love developed through a familial relationship—a relationship based on mutual giving and vulnerability? Another of the show's characters, the uninhibited Samantha Jones, believed that we could. In fact, she questioned whether such familial relationships are even possible. During the fourteenth episode, she concluded, "Practically all the relationships I know are based on a foundation of lies and mutually accepted delusion."

Her words served as a stinging indictment of how she and many in the United States define relationships. It is sad that she did not see Christian-based relationships as offering much of an alternative. Could one of the foundational lies and mutually accepted delusions that Samantha alluded to have been how women have come to be perceived by our culture? And for those who are Christians, how has the biblical text contributed to that perception?

The way in which women have been perceived in Christendom has thwarted our ability to establish familial relationships that can lead to great sex. And although the ultimate goal of sexual ethics is not simply to have great sex, the creation of more intimate relationships that can lead to great sex is a highly desirable alternative to the consequences of oppressive relationships. But establishing familial relationships is hindered, in part, because of how women have been and continue to be perceived. Reading the scriptures through the lens of patriarchy has been used to justify advocating the male superiority as God ordained it. However, when we realize that these structures are a consequence of sin and not the order of things as ordained by God (as discussed in the Introduction), we can see that the ideal relationship is far from what historically has been perceived as God-sanctioned. Patriarchal structures prevent familial relationships—relationships based on mutual giving and vulnerability—from forming. Still, patriarchal tendencies are not solely limited to more conservative religious groups. Even within the more liberal mainstream society, women continue to be seen as less than men, especially when we consider that women are still not being paid the same as men for the same work performed at equal competency levels. For this reason, great, liberating sex can never take place until patriarchy



in the relationship is dismantled and the full humanity of women is acknowledged in both the religious and the secular cultural spheres.

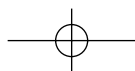
In this chapter, we turn our attention to the traditional role of women—specifically, how it is described within the biblical text and how that text has traditionally been interpreted. Although I recognize that most readers are already aware that patriarchy existed during biblical times and throughout the development of Christianity, I still think it is crucial to understand how the biblical text was and continues to be used to religiously justify the subordination of women. By reading the Bible with the eyes of those marginalized by the biblical text due to their gender, we can uncover how the overall structures during biblical times, as well as today, prevented women from realizing the full potential God created for them to live, even as they went about their lives maintaining a household, singing and laughing, falling in love, raising children, growing old, and dying in peace. By exploring how the Bible is read through the lens of patriarchy, we can begin to fully understand why Christian leaders are still determined to prevent women from fulfilling and performing certain roles in society.

### In God's Image

If I were to ask readers to close their eyes and imagine what God looks like, most would picture a male body. Maybe the image that would come to mind is something similar to Michelangelo's renowned mural *The Creation of Adam* (1512) in the Sistine Chapel, in which God is illustrated as an old but well-built white man with a flowing white beard. Eurocentric art has taught, normalized, and legitimized a white male image of God. And it is this image of God that justifies patriarchy and influences a sexual ethics detrimental to women. No discussion concerning sexual ethics can take place until we first debunk God's purported male gender.

Most of us refer to God as a "He" without giving it a second thought because we construct "Him" in our minds as male. Yet the biblical text teaches us that when humans were created, they were formed in the very image of God. According to the first creation story found in Genesis 1:27: "God created *adam* in God's image, in God's image God created him, male and female God created them." Most Bibles read by Americans have translated the Hebrew word *adam* as "man." The verse is hence rendered: "God created man in God's image."

But is rendering *adam* as "man" the proper translation? In Hebrew, *adam* can be used to refer to a proper name, as in Adam, the husband of Eve. *Adam* can also be translated to refer to a male-gender individual,

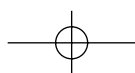


as opposed to the Hebrew word *issah* for “woman.” And finally, *adam* can be used to refer to mankind, as in all of humanity. Now the text tells us that when God created *adam*, *adam* was created as male and female by God. So, if we translate *adam* to mean the person Adam, or render *adam* as “man” as opposed to a woman, does this mean that Adam the person or generic man was created with both male and female genitalia? Probably not. But what if we were to translate *adam* to mean humanity? Is humanity male and female? Yes, both males and females make up humanity. For this reason, when reading Genesis 1:27, “humanity” is a better translation for the word *adam*.

The fact remains, however, that for the vast majority of Judeo-Christian history, God has been thought of as a male, just as Michelangelo painted him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But what does it mean that we conceive of God as male, complete with a penis? If the functions of a penis are to urinate and to copulate, why would Yahweh need a penis? Or does the penis have a spiritual meaning? If men conceive of women as castrated by the Almighty Himself and as envious of what only God and men possess, then, the reasoning goes, should it not be natural for women to submit to men—who, unlike women, are created like God? In the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) came to the conclusion, from a purely secular standpoint, that women are envious of men’s penises. If man, like God, has a penis, does it not stand to reason that all who have penises are closer to the perfect image of God? Following this line of thinking, the penis itself becomes a sacred object shared by God and males.

With this view in mind, it should not appear strange that in biblical times the great patriarchs of the faith, such as Abraham and Israel, placed great spiritual value on their penises by swearing oaths upon their genitals (Genesis 24:2–3; 47:29–31). More disturbing are biblical accounts concerning penises, such as the time God tried to kill Moses but was prevented by Zipporah, Moses’ quick-thinking wife, who cut off the foreskin of her son’s penis and rubbed it on Moses’ penis, thus appeasing God (Exodus 4:24–26). Or King David’s winning of his wife Michal through the gift of the foreskins of a hundred Philistine penises (2 Samuel 3:14).

What is important to note is that the sign of the covenant between God and man begins with the penis—specifically, cutting off its foreskin through the ritual of circumcision (Genesis 17:10–14). How then do women enter into a covenant with God if there is no penis to circumcise? It follows that to reserve that covenant for men only, the privilege of having a penis must therefore be protected at all costs from the threat of women. Hence the biblical enjoinder that if during a brawl, a woman



“puts out her hand and lay hold of [a man’s] genitals, then you shall cut off her hand and your eyes shall not pity her” (Deuteronomy 25:11–12).

It is true that the Bible refers to God as a “He,” but God is also said to have eyes, ears, a strong arm, and so on. God is anthropomorphized and given human features so that humans’ temporal minds can attempt to conceive of the eternal. The biblical text is not trying to tell us what color God’s eyes are; rather, it is meant to convey the concept that God sees, so the act of seeing is understood by humans through the symbolical language of giving God eyes. The same concept is in play when the biblical text says God is a burning bush (Exodus 3:2) or a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). Does this mean God is combusive? No; the symbol of burning fire helps us to better comprehend that which is beyond comprehension. And when the Bible refers to God as a mother who would not forget the child from her womb suckling her breast (Is. 49:15) or as birthing Israel (Deuteronomy 32:18), this isn’t intended to mean that God lactates and has a vagina; these too are symbols to aid our comprehension.

Contemporary scholars Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) were correct in asserting that one can only speak of or describe God through the use of symbols, connecting the meaning of one thing recognized by a given community that is comprehensible (such as *father*) with another thing that is beyond our ability to fully understand (that is, God).<sup>4</sup> As important as symbols are to help us better grasp the incomprehensible essence of the Divine, they are incapable of exhausting the reality of God. To take symbolic language literally (for example, God is exclusively male or female) leads to the absurd (for example, God has a penis or a vagina) and borders on idolatry (the creation of hierarchies in relationships according to who is closer to the Divine ideal). To speak of God as male, as fire, or as mother is to speak of God in symbols that, through analogies, convey limited knowledge for understanding what God is like.

The radical nature of the Hebrew God, as described in Genesis, is that unlike the gods of the surrounding Canaanite neighbors, Yahweh has no genitalia. The gods of the people surrounding the Hebrews were depicted in small statuettes about the size of a hand. If these gods were female they were manifested with large, pendulous breasts, broad hips, and prominently featured vaginas. The male god statuettes usually were depicted with large, protruding and erect penises. Even though this was the norm for fertility gods, the god of the Hebrews, who was also responsible for creating and sustaining all that has life, had neither breasts nor a penis. The revolutionary concept of the Hebrew god is that this God was neither male nor female and thus was male *and* female. In

short, this God named Yahweh was beyond gender. For this reason it was considered blasphemy to make any graven image of the true God (Exodus 20:4), for such a God was beyond the imagination of finite minds.

To give God a penis is to subjugate women to all those who also have penises. As feminist theologian Mary Daly (1928–) wrote, “If God is male, then the male is God.”<sup>5</sup> If men are gods, then women, because they lack a penis, fall short of divinity. Being less than men, women, as understood via the biblical text, were reduced to the status of property, incubators, the weaker sex, and the fallen Eve.

### *Women as Property*

In the introduction we noted that God’s perfect will for familial relationships was expressed in the verse “the man and woman were both naked, yet felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). However, the introduction of sin into paradise led to the perversion of God’s will for human relationships. Rather than man and woman finding their equality in the image of God, instead hierarchal structures were created. Patriarchy, being the first form of hierarchy, replaced the familial relationship originally established in the Garden. The consequence of the sin would be that the woman’s desire would be for her husband, while he ruled over her (Genesis 3:16).

But, readers may ask, didn’t God create a hierarchy in the Garden by making Eve subordinate to Adam? The biblical text does state that woman was created as Adam’s helpmate (Genesis 2:18), leading Augustine (354–430 C.E.) to conclude that “Woman was merely man’s helpmate, a function which pertains to her alone. She is not the image of God but as far as man is concerned, he is by himself the image of God.”<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word used for helpmate is *ezer*, from the root word meaning “support” or “help.” It is the same word used throughout the scriptures when referring to God. “God of my fathers [who] was my *helper*” (Exodus 18:4). The Psalmist heralds God as being the “*helper* of the orphans” (10:14) and assures the believer, “The Lord is with me, God is my *helper*” (118:7). In none of these cases, nor in any of the other places throughout the Bible in which God is referred to as our helpmate, does *ezer* imply subservience. We only assume the subordination or inferiority of the one called *ezer* when describing women. Maybe a better translation of *ezer* is the word *companion*, which connotes woman as a counterpart to man. Such a translation reinforces the hierarchy-free relationship originally created in Eden.

Nevertheless, the Fall was manifested by the transformation of woman’s autonomy from a human being to personal chattel. Women became the property of men because they were perceived as naturally inferior, created

by God either to be subordinate to men or as divine punishment for introducing sin into paradise—or both. Either way, as property, women became the extension of a man, and as such, any violation of a man's property became a direct violation of the man. This reasoning led to the female body—including the reproductive organs within her—becoming the property of the man who “rules over her.” Her purpose for existence was reduced to the quenching of the lustful thirst possessed by man and to bear the man's future heirs.

Throughout the Hebrew text it is taken for granted that women are the possessions of men. (The biblical text also relegated children to a subordinate position under the patriarchal authority of the father. If they were to strike their parent (Exodus 21:15), curse them (Leviticus 20:9), or constantly rebel against their father's authority (Deuteronomy 21:18–21), they could be put to death.) The text does not seriously consider or concentrate upon women's status, but focuses on the fact that their identity is formed by their sexual relationship to the man: virgin daughter, betrothal bride, married woman, mother, barren wife, or widow. Woman's dignity and worth as one created in the image of God is subordinated to the needs and desires of men. As chattel, women are often equated with a house or livestock (Deuteronomy 20:5–7), as demonstrated in the last commandment, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, wife, slave, ox, or donkey” (Exodus 20:17). Because women are excluded from being the subject of this command, the woman, like a house, slave, ox, or donkey, is reduced to an object, just another possession, another piece of property that belongs to the man and thus should not be coveted by another man.

The Hebrew Bible's attitude toward marriage mirrors what appears in the earlier Code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century B.C.E.), the legal codes of the Mesopotamian civilization that predated the Bible. Man, as the head of the family, had nearly unlimited rights and power over wives and children. Normatively, women were first under their father's authority, then with marriage they fell under the husband's rule. If a son were to outlive the father, he became the household head, with his mother falling under his authority. As property, a wife wasn't even considered part of the immediate family. For example, a priest was permitted to mourn the death of any member of his immediate family, except for his own wife or his married sister (Leviticus 21:1–4). Sexual activities such as prostitution, adultery, and incest were topics regulated under the category of property law. Participating in such acts concerned the trespass of another man's rights to his own property, not any violation of trust created within a mutually giving and vulnerable familial relationship. Intercourse with a woman who belonged to another man fell under

thievery of the other man's rights to his woman's body and his right to legitimate offspring.

Although the unfaithful wife faced harsh punishment (death), the man reserved for himself the right to engage in intercourse with a multitude of women, even to the point of keeping, as possessions, as many as his means permitted. The great patriarchs of the faith, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, had multiple wives and concubines, and they delighted themselves with the occasional prostitute (Genesis 38:15). King Solomon alone was recorded to have had over seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Even King David, a man after God's own heart, acquired a young virgin girl, the prettiest in all the land, to keep his bed warm during his declining years (1 Kings 1:1–3). The book of Leviticus, in giving instructions to men wishing to own a harem, provides only one prohibition, which is not to "own" sisters (Leviticus 18:18). The Hebrew Bible is clear that men could have multiple sex partners. Wives ensured legitimate heirs; all other sex partners existed for the pleasures of the flesh, or for creating political alliances. A woman, on the other hand, was limited to just one sex partner who ruled over her, unless she was a prostitute.

Adultery as a violation of trust within a loving relationship is a romantic modern concept that should not be read back into the biblical text. Patriarchy defined the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14) as an offense that can only be transgressed by women. The only time a man could be accused of adultery was if he trespassed on another man's "property," hence violating another man's rights (Leviticus 20:10). Ever wonder why the woman who was brought to Jesus, "caught in the very act of adultery" (John 8:3–11), was alone? After all, if she was caught in the *very act*, one would expect there to be another person in the room, right? But she and she alone was brought to Jesus because only she had sinned. Her sexual partner's marital status was irrelevant because patriarchy allowed him to engage in multiple sexual relationships. Consequently, no man needed to be brought to Jesus for punishment. But Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of patriarchy. When Jesus instructed those who were without this sin to throw the first stone, all the men walked away because they were no different from the one they accused.

If a man seduced (raped) a young virgin, he had but two choices: he either married her or paid her father a fixed sum. And even if the father refused to give his daughter in marriage, the seducer was still liable for paying the market value of her virginity. According to the biblical text, the true victim of the seduction was not the virgin girl, but her father. Her despoiling made her unsuitable for marriage, resulting

in financial hardship for her father (her owner). The marrying off of one's daughters was in many cases an important political decision, made to create profitable alliances with other families. Virginity was such a profitable commodity that when an unmarried daughter was violated the father had to be compensated for damages (Exodus 22:15–16).

Because it was the father's responsibility to prove his daughter's virginity when she climbed into her new husband's bed (Deuteronomy 22:13–21), the daughter's virginity became the father's asset to be traded at a future date with another man. It goes without saying that no such requirement of sexual purity was expected of men. If shortly after the marriage the husband suspected his bride of being "used property," he reserved the right to annul the marriage—as Joseph planned to do with Mary, until in a dream he was supernaturally reassured by an angel and convinced to keep her (Matthew 1:19–24). It was crucial, then, to prove virginity, usually by the parents displaying the wedding night bedsheets with bloodstains caused by rupture of the female hymen during the initial intercourse (Deuteronomy 22:13–21). If there was no blood, a chicken was always kept handy in case its throat needed to be slit at the last moment to provide the precious proof.

As sexual property, women could be claimed as war booty (no modern pun intended). War turned women into spoils of war that, along with other valuable possessions, go to the victors. The common practice in war was for the "armies of Yahweh" to kill the men (Deuteronomy 20:10–18), disperse the spoils of war, and kidnap the virgin women to go into servitude or provide sexual pleasure. If a soldier was captivated by a captured woman, he was allowed to bring her into his home and make her his wife. A captured woman could be taken as a wife, as long as she was a virgin and from some distant land, so as not to snare her captor into a Canaanite cult (Deuteronomy 21:10–14). She was permitted a month to mourn her parents, but after the time of grief, the marriage was to be consummated. But with the passage of time, if her husband tired of her, he could allow her to leave. However, he could not sell her, for as the Bible states, "he had the use of her."

As property, any woman could be offered up as ransom to save the lives of men. During Abraham's visit to Egypt, he grew frightened of the Pharaoh on account of his wife Sarah's beauty. To save himself from being killed so that the Pharaoh could take over his "possession," he claimed that Sarah was his sister and offered her up in exchange for sheep, cattle, donkeys, slaves, and camels (Genesis 12:10–20). Now what do we usually call a man today who offers up a woman in exchange for monetary goods? This sexual transaction is repeated. Later on, Abraham did the same thing with Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20). His son Isaac

followed in his father's footsteps by also offering Rebekah, his wife, to King Abimelech (Genesis 26:1–11).

Not only could women be offered up to save the lives of male family members, but they could also be sacrificed for the sake of male total strangers. A vivid example is illustrated in the story of Lot's daughters. One night, unknown visitors found a haven in Lot's home. When the presence of these foreign men became known throughout the city, the men of Sodom surrounded the house and demanded that the strangers be sent out so that they could be gang-raped. Lot approached the mob, hoping to protect the strangers taking refuge in his house. In appeasement, Lot offered the mob his two virgin daughters, encouraging them to "do to them as they see fit" (Genesis 19:7–8). In Lot's mind, his daughters were worth far less than the two strangers, only because the strangers were men.

A similar scenario is reported in the book of Judges 19–21. This time it was a Levite who found refuge, along with his concubine, in the home of an old man in the town of Gibeah. Again, as night fell, the men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that the Levite be sent out to be gang-raped. Like Lot, the old man went out to meet them, offering his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine as ransom, insisting that the men of the town do with them whatever they saw fit. This time the townsmen took the concubine, raped her all night long, and left her for dead, lying at the door of the house where the Levite soundly slept.

The stories of Lot and the Levite priest illustrate that because women were property, they could be offered up for sexual abuse if this would save and secure the lives of men. And women, as property, could also be used to gain authority over a rival. The best way for a man to announce a public challenge to a political or social rival was by taking control of his possessions, specifically his women. This concept is demonstrated in 2 Samuel 15–16. In these passages, David's authority as king was challenged by his son Absalom. Absalom mounted a rebellion that forced David to leave Jerusalem. Upon entering the city, Absalom consolidated his power and authority. How? By pitching a tent on the palace's housetop, in the sight of all Israel, and then proceeding to rape all of his father's concubines. This was not a sexual act motivated by lust. Women, as sexual property, were the means by which Absalom could wrestle away authority from his father. Absalom was giving public notice that he had taken his father's place and was now in control of his father's possessions.

### *Women as Incubators*

In patriarchy, one party must dominate (usually the male's role), while another must submit (usually women, children, and men conquered

through war). A careful reading of the biblical text reveals that with few exceptions—namely, Deborah the Judge (Judges 4) and Queen Esther (Esther), each of whom maneuvered within the patriarchal structures to carve out for herself a space for leadership—women’s identities were reduced to being extensions of their male counterparts, who were presented as the possessor of their female bodies. One of woman’s main purposes for existing was to produce heirs, specifically male heirs—a theme often repeated throughout the biblical text. The barren matriarch Sarai offered her slave girl Hagar to Abram for rape so that he could have an heir (Genesis 16:2). Rachel, Jacob’s wife, demanded of her husband, “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Genesis 30:1) as she competed with her sister Leah, also Jacob’s wife, for his attention—an attention obtained through the birthing of men. Also, we cannot forget Hannah, the prophet Samuel’s mother, who saw herself as worthless until God removed her barrenness (1 Samuel 1), or Michal, who was stricken with barrenness for speaking ill to her husband King David (2 Samuel 6:20–23). Even in the New Testament, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, rejoiced in her old age when she discovered that God had removed the reproach of her barrenness (Luke 1:24–25). For these women, barrenness was a humiliation.

Only through childbearing were women saved—a disturbing understanding of salvation, as reiterated by St. Paul: “It was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin. Nevertheless, she will be saved by childbearing” (1 Timothy 2:14–15). Is Paul—the promoter of salvation solely through grace, not works—actually implying that unlike men, women are saved through childbearing? No matter how we choose to interpret this scriptural passage to align it with our theological presuppositions, one thing is certain: salvation through childbearing is a concept rooted in patriarchy.

The early shapers of Christianity believed that the only purpose of a woman’s existence was to procreate. In fact, Augustine went as far as to claim that it would have been better if God had placed another man in the Garden with Adam instead of a woman (the original Adam and Steve?), because another man would have made a more suitable companion. Because of the need for procreation, God instead created Eve.<sup>7</sup> Relying on Augustine’s writings, the mediaeval scholar Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) would conclude that insofar as Adam’s purpose for existence was an end in and of itself, women’s *raison d’être* was to procreate.<sup>8</sup> Probably no other Christian thinker better captured the concept of woman as human breeders than Martin Luther, whose advice for women was to “Bring that child forth, and do it with all your might! If you die in the process, so pass on over, good for you! For you actually

die in a noble work and in obedience to God.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, according to Luther, women, as human breeders, have an obligation to fulfill God’s purpose for them, even if it costs them their lives.

But even though Christianity developed with the view that the sole purpose of women’s existence—and of sexual intercourse—is procreation, the irony is that women were believed to contribute little to the reproductive process. Evidence for this view is most notable in the multiple genealogical lists found in the Bible, in which men beget men. Women were seen as passive objects that germinated the life source found only in the male semen. Until the advent of modern biology, Christian church leaders such as Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.),<sup>10</sup> understood women as simply supplying the “formless matter of the body” required “in the begetting of men.” It was the man who supplied the “formative power” of semen.<sup>11</sup>

If the only natural reason for participating in sex is procreation, then why have sex with a barren woman? Or, for that matter, have sex with a woman after menopause? With procreation as the sole purpose, to do so would be akin to sowing seeds in a desert. Likewise, sex with a menstruating woman is deemed an abomination because of her inability to conceive during this phase of her cycle (Leviticus 15:24). Such acts are said to be “unnatural” because they are contrary to what was understood to be the natural purpose of sex: conceiving heirs. Any sexual act that does not directly lead to human conception automatically is defined as “unnatural,” be it oral sex, anal sex, homosexual sex, the use of condoms during sex, or sex for the pure sake of pleasure.

### *Women as the Weaker Sex*

An underlying assumption found throughout most Christian literature is that men are physically and morally superior to women, who are the weaker sex (*sexus infirmitas*). According to 1 Peter, “husbands must treat their wives with consideration, bestowing honor on her as one who, though she may be the weaker vessel, is truly a co-heir to the grace of life” (3:7). Although equal in grace, still the purpose for the woman as the “weaker vessel” is to be ruled by the man. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul insisted that women must cover their heads because the woman is the “glory of man.” Specifically, he wrote, “For man . . . is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. And man was not created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Corinthians 11:7–9). Augustine understood the order of creation in relationship to what he perceived to be a natural hierarchy. According to this understanding, because man

came first, and woman came from man's side, he was created in the image of God while she was created in the image of man. God creates natural dualism: spirit-flesh, rational-emotional, subject-object, and male-female. Because man was closer to the spirit, he was a rational subject ordained to rule—and because woman was closer to the flesh, she was an emotional object ordained to *be* ruled. Thus, subjecting woman to man became the natural manifestation of subjecting passion to reason.

“But as the church is subject to Christ, so also are wives to be subject to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:24). Just as the body had to submit to the spirit, which is superior, and the church had to submit to Christ, so too the wife had to submit to her husband. This logic concluded that prior to the Fall, man was superior to woman because he was closer to the image of God, whereas woman was inferior to man because she was created for and from man. For Augustine, patriarchy was not a consequence of sin, as we have argued, but rather God's will, which originated in the Garden. According to Augustine, “The Apostle has made known to us certain three unions, Christ and the Church, husband and wife, spirit and flesh. Of these the former consult for the good of the latter, the latter wait upon the former. All the things are good, when, in them, certain set over by way of pre-eminence, certain made subject in a becoming manner, observe the beauty of order.”<sup>12</sup>

The prevailing wisdom within Christianity was, and for many conservatives continues to be, that conforming to the natural order of the universe is as beneficial for the beasts, wives, and children as it is for the man. John Chrysostom (347–407) could argue that patriarchy demonstrated God's loving-kindness, because it existed to protect women from themselves; because Eve sinned and led man astray, woman was now content and secure under the protection of man's authority. Chrysostom emphasized that women now *desired* to have their husbands ruling over them, for it was better to fall under a man's lordship than enjoy a freedom that would cast her into the abyss.<sup>13</sup>

Martin Luther continued this classical understanding of woman as the weaker sex. A wife, for him, was a “half-child” whose husband's responsibility was to care for her as though she was a child.<sup>14</sup> Luther traced women's inferiority to the creation story. He wrote, “Because Satan sees that Adam is more excellent, he does not dare assail him, for he fears that his attempt may turn out to be useless . . . Satan, therefore, directs his attack on Eve as the weaker part.”<sup>15</sup> Woman's inferiority thus required man's governance for her own good.

The views of these Christian thinkers were formed through their reading of the biblical text in which the role of women, as being inferior to men, is normative. For example, although the church required that

the first-born son (or male animal) be consecrated to the Lord, no such requirements existed for the first-born daughter (Deuteronomy 15:19–23). Woman’s inferiority in religious matters allowed the man to whom she belonged (either her father or husband) to annul any pledge or vow she might have made to God (Numbers 30:3–15). Three times a year, God called all men to present themselves before God during the great national feasts. Women received no such calling (Exodus 23:14–19). They were frequently excluded from participating in temple rituals and festivals because they were deemed to be unclean due to their menstrual cycle (Leviticus 15:19). Likewise, they were forbidden to serve as priests, and priests could marry only virgins (Leviticus 21:1–9).

Women’s supposed inferiority also prevented them from preaching to or teaching men, a practice still common among many churches today. The idea of women in positions of leadership was considered contrary to the laws of nature. John Calvin (1509–1564), in his commentary on First Timothy 2:12, stated: “Woman, by nature (that is, by the ordinary law of God) is formed to obey; for the government of women has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing, and therefore, so to speak, it will be a mingling of heaven and earth, if women usurp the right to teach.”

Still, in spite of women being perceived as the weaker sex, it was believed that they could still be used by God, but in a type of usage that only reaffirmed women’s inferiority. If God used a woman as an instrument for God’s revelation, she would be raised beyond both her human and female condition. She would demonstrate any authority not in her own right, but as one whom God uses in spite of her inferiority. In effect, she was no different from Balaam’s ass, whom God used to speak a word of prophesy to the prophet (Numbers 22:26–30). God’s use of a donkey to proclaim God’s message did not make donkeys equal to man, and so it was with women, who, like jackasses, could speak for God but still remained unequal to men.

Women were considered the weaker sex, in part, because they were perceived to be the negation of men. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Law understood the legal concept of *person* to be male-centered; women (and children) were perceived to be incomplete males. Maleness was considered normative, the ideal. Anything that fell short of the norm fell short of God’s ideal. Thomas Aquinas wrote that “woman is [a] defective and misbegotten” male—probably due to “some external influence, such as that of a south wind, which is moist.”<sup>16</sup>

This ideology was manifested in how the physical differences between women and men were comprehended. Women’s genitalia were viewed as the anatomical antithesis of men’s. From as early as the second

century until the eighteenth century, the woman's cervix and vagina were imagined as an inverted penis. Even the internal position of the ovaries was construed to be the counterbalance to the external location of the testicles. In this one-sex model, women had reached only a lower evolutionary stage of development; this categorized them as something less than fully human—a “defective and misbegotten” man. Their stunted and inverse “penis” only served to prove their deficiency as human, their lack of complete maleness.

### *Women as Fallen Eves*

One of the major themes in Christian thought, still lingering to this day, is that women, represented by Eve, are the cause of sin and consequently the reason *mankind* was led astray from God's perfect will. According to this view, women's shapely curves are deemed to incite passion among holy men. They are the cause of man's disgrace and downfall. Because women lead men to lust, gender has to be regulated so as to restrain sex. Like their mother Eve, women are seen as the incarnation of temptation—specifically, sexual temptation. Tertullian (c. 160–220) proclaimed: “You [woman] are the one who opened the door to the devil . . . you are the one who persuaded [Adam] whom the devil was not strong enough to attack. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, man. Because of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.”<sup>17</sup>

Eve's action relegated all women to be subjugated to their men. St. Ambrose (339–97), the Bishop of Milan, voiced this conclusion: “[Adam] is found to be superior, whereas [Eve] . . . is found to be inferior. She was first to be deceived and was responsible for deceiving the man. The apostle Paul related that holy women have in olden times been subject to the stronger vessel and recommends them to obey their husbands as their masters. . . . The head of the woman is man, who, while he believed that he would have assistance of his wife, fell because of her.”<sup>18</sup> Eve's culpability for humanity's Fall was echoed by Martin Luther, who noted that prior to woman, Adam ruled over all the creatures with everything being in good and proper order, governed in the best possible fashion. But along came Eve and became the source of all of Adam's trials and tribulations.<sup>19</sup>

Women were cast as the eternal temptress, responsible for arousing desire among holy men. Eve and all women who follow were the reason why men become sexually excited. Augustine maintains that a battle exists between the mind and aroused penises, which are caused by women.<sup>20</sup> According to the Bible, women tempted the angels themselves:

some time after the Fall, women sexually seduced angels with their long hair (Genesis 6:1–4; 1 Corinthians 11:10), disrupting the fixed natural order between celestial and mortal beings, resulting in offspring that were understood to be the source of malignant powers. Women, as the cause of human sin and cosmic evil, could not be trusted. Their lack of leadership and sexual seductiveness validated a subordination that cannot be surmounted. Maybe in some future heavenly abode women would become spiritually equal to men. But that was in the future. In the meantime, and in spite of their “shortcomings,” women had to gracefully submit to men’s authority. This was how God designed the male-female relationship. Or as John Calvin would explain, “The vulgar proverb, indeed, is that [the woman] is a necessary evil . . . given as a companion and an associate to man, to assist him to live well.”<sup>21</sup>

Eve’s association with the Fall made her the counterpoint to Mary, the mother of Jesus, who served as the medium by which the agent of the world’s redemption entered history. Mary, as the eternal virgin, became the ideal model for Christian women to emulate. Women then were forced to choose between the mother and the temptress, between the virgin and the whore, and thus between the pivotal values of the ancient world: honor or shame.

In that world, a person’s place in the ancient social order was marked by either acquiring honor or inducing shame. It was crucial for men to maintain or improve the honor of their family while simultaneously avoiding anything that might bring shame upon the family name. Generally speaking, honor was understood as male-centered, for through the man’s participation in the public sphere, honor could be increased or decreased through his bold and aggressive actions when interacting with other men. Although honor was achieved in the public sphere, shame was created within the private sphere. Because of patriarchy, a woman who belonged to one man, yet was used by another, brought shame to the “owner” of her body. So to protect his honor, the man had to confine the woman to the household, where she could remain secure. Why? Because the locus of a man’s honor was found in his words, whereas the locus of a woman’s honor was found between her legs.

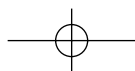
The residue of this ancient honor-shame value system can be seen throughout the development of Christianity. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, merchants going away for business or crusaders off to liberate the Holy Land would protect the family’s honor by fashioning a chastity belt for their wives. The belt was a metal contraption about the width of a hand, with a hole large enough to allow the wife to perform her necessary bodily functions, but small enough to prevent copulation. This chastity girdle fit over the wife’s hips and contained a lock whose

key the husband would take with him. He could leave with peace of mind that his sexual property was locked up and protected from trespassers (with the possible exception of the local locksmith). This drastic act was essential to ensure honor, because a woman who lost her “honor,” in the words of Martin Luther, “is quite worthless.”<sup>22</sup> Remaining tied to her domestic habitation forestalled shame. “As the snail carries its house with it,” Luther informs us, “so the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household, as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and that concern the state.”<sup>23</sup> Woman’s redemption from Eve’s influence, and from the shame she herself could bring upon the honor of her man’s name, was to seek virtue, either through chastity (which becomes solely her responsibility) or by becoming a prolific mother. If she was a mother, her worth and respect increased proportionately to the number of males she birthed.

### A Glimpse of Women Leaders

Women had two choices throughout Christian history: join a convent or get married. But whether a woman lived out her existence in a nunnery or in domesticity, she remained for the most part invisible within Christianity. True, women’s voices can be found contributing to Christian thought; for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), to name but a few. But they are exceptions to the rule. And even when these voices rose above the male norm, they were still trapped in the social structures of male superiority. Women had to first reaffirm the weaker sex’s position before being heard. Only then could they serve God by symbolically ceasing to be inferior women and instead becoming “men” capable of being used by God. For example, Julian of Norwich had to stress that in spite of the fact that she was a woman, God had still chosen her as a conduit for God’s teachings. “But God forbid that you should say or take it so that I am a teacher, for I mean not so, nor I meant never so. For I am a woman, ignorant, feeble and frail. . . . But because I am a woman, should I therefore believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, since that I saw in that same time that it is his will that it should be known?”<sup>24</sup>

In effect, the church has insisted that women must first become “born-again” men if they are to have any hope of being servants of the Lord. The early church father Jerome (c. 345–420 c.e.) made this clear: “As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.”<sup>25</sup>



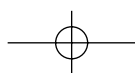
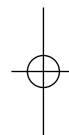
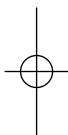
Through faith, then, a woman could transcend her limitations of being trapped in a female body and aspire to be as useful and worthy as a man.

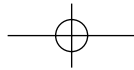
Ironically, Jesus didn't think being a woman was an obstacle to serving the Lord. Through deed, Jesus acted contrary to the normal expectations of his culture by conversing with women, either at the well (John 4:7) or in the process of carrying out his ministry (John 8:10). He included them as students (Luke 10:38–42) and as disciples (Luke 8:1–3).

According to Peter, one of the signs of the believing church was when “your sons *and daughters* prophesy” (Acts of the Apostles 2:17). This use of the word *prophesy* has little to do with predicting future events; to prophesy meant to proclaim God's words to God's people—what we today call preaching. The pouring out of God's Spirit is marked by both men and women preaching God's word, an action that in both past and present continues to be prohibited in many of our churches. Yet women throughout the New Testament occupied leadership positions in the church.

Some began churches, as in the case of Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:11–12); others were teachers of men, as in the case of Priscilla, an instructor of Apollos of Alexandria (Acts 18:24–28); several were preachers, as in the case of the four daughters of Phillip (Acts 21:8–9); and various women were church elders, as in the case of the elected lady (2 John 1–5). They were among the first citywide evangelists (John 4:39) and the first to preach the Gospel of Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:9). Paul sends his greetings and encouragements to women who served as deacons, such as Phoebe (Romans 16:1); as apostles, such as Junia (Romans 16:7); and as pastors, such as Priscilla (along with her husband Aquila) in either Ephesus or Rome (Romans 16:3–5), Chloe in either Corinth or Ephesus (1 Corinthians 1:11), Nympha in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15), and Apphia (along with two others) in Colossae (Philemon 1–2). These women preceded those women who served as priest or bishops during the days of the early church or acted as patrons underwriting ministerial activities.

By the third and fourth century of the Christian church, the opponents of women clergy had succeeded in imposing the prevalent sexism of the secular culture on the church's structures, thus bringing to an end the mark of the pouring out of the Spirit, the preaching of their “sons and daughters.”<sup>26</sup> Christ and the early church provided equality to women for church leadership, only to have, within a short time, the Gospel message distorted to justify women's subordination to men and their social structures. After the Roman Emperor Constantine's (c. 274–337) acceptance of Christianity as a state religion, there was a shift in worship practices from private house churches (the domain of women)



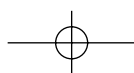
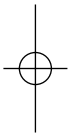
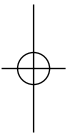


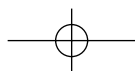
to public basilicas (the domain of men). As the house church became public, new converts refused to accept women's leadership in public life. Theologians, like Augustine, began to proclaim women priests as a heresy.<sup>27</sup> By 352, during the Council of Laodicea, women were no longer allowed ordination, which suggests that before this time women were indeed ordained. Christianity created unjust practices—practices that prevent familial relationships (and in turn the great sex to which familial relationships can lead) from properly developing.

### The Enduring Patriarchy

The brief historical overview of the role of women explored in this chapter reveals that women, since about the third century, have lacked—and in many cases still lack—the power to choose their role within the Christian church, whether it be creative, professional, or personal. Still, one can argue that the misogynistic views of women expressed by the giants of the Christian faith are ancient history, that Christianity today should not be judged by the sexism of former church scholars or by the societal norms of ancient times. But before we quickly dismiss how women used to be perceived by the church, we must recognize that much of what we define as our present Christian sexual morals continues to be based on and influenced by the historical understanding of woman as being the cause and contiguous perpetrator of sin. Today, with the strong cultural trend toward what is termed *political correctness*, the church has learned for the most part not to phrase male superiority in such misogynist fashion, yet the result remains the same—the understanding that women (specifically wives) should submit to men (husbands). Today, as in days of old, Ephesians 5:21–25 and Colossians 3:18–19 set up the marriage relationship in which husbands are commanded to love their wives but wives are commanded not to love, but to submit to their husbands. A few contemporary examples can illustrate this point.

James Dobson, popular psychologist turned political activist, wrote in his 1980 best-selling book *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*: “The primary responsibility for the provision of authority in the home has been assigned to men. . . . Whether women's activists like it or not, a Christian man is obligated to lead his family to the best of his ability . . . God apparently expects a *man* to be the ultimate decision maker in his family.”<sup>28</sup> And although Dobson does make exceptions for women who might have to work outside the home for financial reasons, still, it is revealing that the section on women in his 1982 tome *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions* is titled “The Homemaker.” A more recent and vivid example of the prevalent antiwoman Christian



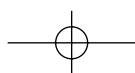


ideology presently being advocated can be found in the literature of Promise Keepers—a male Christian movement led by Bill McCartney, which serves as a backlash to the woman’s equality movement. In *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* (1994), evangelist Tony Brown shares what men’s response should be to their wives who want their husbands to be spiritually pure. The first thing, Brown says, “is sit down with your wife and say something like this: ‘Honey, I’ve made a terrible mistake. I’ve given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.’” Brown is not telling men to *ask* that their role be returned; he is telling them to “take it back.” He goes on to state, “I am convinced that the primary cause of this national crisis is the feminization of the American male.”<sup>29</sup>

Women’s submission to male leadership is also normalized by Tim and Beverly LaHaye, sex manual authors who wrote in 1978, “God designed man to be the aggressor, provider, and leader in his family. Somehow that is tied to his sex drive.”<sup>30</sup> Ironically, Beverly LaHaye has spent most of her adult life working outside the home, going around the nation giving lectures as to why women should not work outside the home. This subordinate role of women within a marriage relationship was reinforced by the Southern Baptist Convention during their 2000 meeting, at which they inserted into the *Baptist Faith and Message* the following proclamation:

A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the Church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.<sup>31</sup>

In short, husbands are to love their wives and wives are to submit to their husbands, but this power relationship is defined as equality. Still, not all pronouncements that confuse the historical trend of subjecting women with the Christian message are locked in a semi-benign, quasi-political correctness of expressing equality while advocating submissiveness, as voiced by Dobson, Brown, the LaHayes, or the Southern Baptist convention. Take, for example, Pat Robertson’s demonization of feminists. During his 1992 failed presidential run, he wrote a fundraising letter that stated: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy



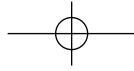
capitalism and become lesbians.”<sup>32</sup> Pat Buchanan, another presidential candidate (in 1996 and 2000), wrote in his 1983 syndicated newspaper column, “Rail as they will about ‘discrimination,’ women are simply not endowed by nature with the same measures of single-minded ambition and the will to succeed in the fiercely competitive world of Western capitalism.”<sup>33</sup> The Reverend Anthony Kennedy, vicar of the Church of England, while discussing female Anglican priests in 1994, wrote: “I would burn the bloody bitches . . . I can’t see how a woman can represent Jesus, who was undoubtedly male, at the altar. I would shoot the bastards if I was allowed. For me, it’s very simple. God made us male and female and as far as I’m concerned it’s impossible for women to be priests.”<sup>34</sup>

As these quotes demonstrate, most of our antiwoman views continue to be influenced by our lingering perception of women as property, walking incubators, or the cause of sin. Patriarchal rule, regardless of the benign spin proponents may attempt to give their views (for example, allowing that men and women are equal before God but given different gifts or roles), comes down to a fundamental premise: the inferiority of women. The Christian patriarchal ethics based on gender control presuppose unjust dominant-subordinate relational patterns that extend beyond women, as we shall explore in the next chapter.

### Fostering Biblical Emancipation

Any serious discussion about fostering and maintaining a healthy sexual familial relationship cannot take place until we address sexism and patriarchy. The historical subjugation of women is among the primary reasons we encounter such difficulties in trying to have great sex. The patriarchy’s dismissal of women as irrelevant to the creation of Christianity attempts to justify male claims of superiority and establishes a fear-based sexual ethical perspective. For sex to be great it must be free from unjust and abusive power relationships. This is not to infer that the only reason to eliminate patriarchy is so one can have great sex. Patriarchy should be eliminated because it is unjust and contrary to the basic gospel message of liberation for all who are created in the image of God.

When sex takes place in any hierarchical relationship in which women are subordinate to men, both parties are likely to be frustrated in their hopes for ultimate ecstasy. Sex may still be enjoyable, but to experience deep and profound pleasure is difficult, and some would say impossible. Why? Not because of the failure to employ bedroom maneuvers or maintain physical stamina, but rather because a familial relationship is absent. Great sex can happen only in an atmosphere that fosters mutual



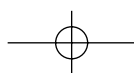
giving and vulnerability. It is mutual giving and vulnerability that creates intimacy, and without intimacy, sex cannot be great.

Patriarchy allows men the illusion that by possessing women as objects they somehow have possession and control over their own lives and existence. In reality, men as possessors of women also become subjugated to the very structures they create and establish for self-benefit. Why? Because those structures that privilege men with control also prevent them from fully experiencing the depths of intimacy, and that lack of intimacy prevents human fulfillment and closeness to God.

The greatest threat to mutual giving and vulnerability in relationships—and, by extension, to human and spiritual fulfillment—has historically been, and continues to be, the way in which women are perceived within patriarchy. Sex can never be liberated, or be liberating, as long as conditions in relationships prevent women from fully participating in the humanity created by God for them. As long as patriarchal structures define the personal and spiritual development of women, neither party in the relationship will be able to fully enjoy the passion possible through sex. This continues to be so even as well-meaning Christians often mention the need to return to a more literal interpretation of the scriptures. Unfortunately, most traditional readings of the biblical text, specifically on issues on sexuality, can prove to be quite unchristian, especially when the Bible is read through the eyes of patriarchy.

Again, Jesus' approach to women stands in marked contrast: it was quite antipatriarchal, if not downright liberative. In the Gospel of Luke appears a narrative that captures an exchange between Jesus and two sisters, Martha and Mary. According to the text: "In their travels it occurred that [Jesus] entered into a certain village. A certain woman by the name of Martha received him into her house. She had a sister named Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus to hear his words. But Martha was distracted with all the serving and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister left me alone to serve? Tell her then that she should help me.' Answering her Jesus said, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things when there is need of only one, and Mary chose the good part, which shall not be taken from her'" (10:38–42).

In this incident, Martha complains that she is overworked. Reading the usual English translations, we assume that she is overwhelmed with housework; however, the Greek word used in the text for serving is *diakonia*, a word usually translated as deacon. Hence, the work she is doing, and needs help in completing, is in relationship to her role as the deacon of this house church. Unfortunately, her duties and responsibilities as deacon deprive her of the opportunity to "sit at Jesus' feet," as her sister Mary did.



Mary, on this day, chose “to sit at Jesus’ feet,” rather than help Martha with her duties as the house-church deacon. To “sit at Jesus’ feet” does not mean that there were no chairs available so she was forced to sit on the floor; to sit at someone’s feet was, and still is, a euphemism for a teacher-student relationship. The student “sits at the feet” of the teacher, the rabbi. For example, we are told in Acts 22:3 that Paul sat “at the feet of Gamaliel”; that is, that Paul was a student of Gamaliel. During Jesus’ time women were forbidden to touch the biblical text, let alone read or study it. Contrary to all social and religious regulations of the time, Luke is telling us that Mary was Jesus’ student and disciple, just like the other twelve men sitting at his feet. In addition, both Martha and Mary are portrayed by John in his Gospel as well-known apostolic figures of the early church who were beloved by Christ (11:5). In the same way that Peter confesses the messiahship of Jesus (Matthew 16:15–19), so too does Martha as a spokesperson for the early church (John 11:27). And finally, through Mary’s evangelism, many came to believe in Jesus (John 11:45).<sup>35</sup>

Jesus’ commitment to debunking the patriarchy of his time can be seen in a retelling of the story through the eyes of marginalized women. In this retelling, the rabbi Jesus was received in the home of one of his apostles named Martha, who also served as founder and deacon of the house-church in Bethany in which she proclaimed God’s word. On this day her sister Mary the evangelist sat at the feet of Jesus to study Torah. Martha asked the rabbi to have his student help with the duties required by the deacon, but the rabbi responded that studying Torah was just as important as serving.<sup>36</sup> Hence, the same biblical text that has historically been used to enforce the oppression of women instead, as we have carefully delineated, contains the very seeds of liberation by which patriarchy can be challenged.