

My Liberation from Feminism

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There is a certain response from men that women naturally (whether they realize it or not) desire to elicit: a masculine benevolence that knows how to live with women in an understanding way, being both considerate and respectful toward those who are co-heirs in the gracious gift of life.

Secular feminists approach this desire stridently, from a position of anger. Christian women are taught to approach it gently, from a position of trust, knowing that God's Word commands men to live up to this desired standard (1 Peter 3:7) and commands women to cultivate a gentle and quiet spirit (v. 4).

In my own generation, it has been quite evident that marginalizing men through anger has had disastrous cultural effects. We have told men that we cannot count on them, and we have given them a plethora of ways to duck responsibility for the relationships they initiate and the children they create. The cultural indicators of this failure continue to climb: pornography, child abuse, public murders of estranged wives, fatherless children, and sexually transmitted diseases to name a few.

What is liberating for women about this mess?

Unforeseen Consequences

Growing up in the rebellious '70s, I did not foresee these consequences. Even as a child, my femininity was a source of confusion for me. The oldest of three daughters, I felt I always had to prove something to the boys—that I could be faster, smarter, and more aggressive than they were. I did not want any limits, and I looked for every opportunity to show my independence.

How I gloated and swaggered when Billy Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in a well-publicized "battle of the sexes" tennis match! As a teenager, I was also headstrong and not submitted to my father. I did not respect his decisions, and I sought to wear him down through constant arguing. Though my mother faithfully took my sisters and me to Mass each week, I lacked any real personal spiritual compass, and so I pursued whatever philosophies were currently popular.

I reached college filled to the brim with the “wisdom” of Cosmopolitan magazine, but I was to encounter something more insidious than fashion magazines—feminism and the Women’s Studies Department. Class after class promoted perpetual victimhood, disrespect toward all men, an overt embrace of lesbianism, and a broadly-directed, militant anger. I became a teaching assistant in that department for a semester before graduating with a bachelor’s degree in journalism and a certificate in women’s studies.

My twenties were more of the same and then some. I remember when I was twenty-nine I was so confused and depressed that I entered into therapy to figure out why I was so angry . . . and for that matter, why I was still single. (Not that the two could possibly be related, right?!) Obviously, I did not have a very positive outlook on my femininity, and my therapist did not make much headway.

However, God graciously intervened as I turned thirty. I took a pleasure trip to South Africa to visit my sister who was living there at the time. I heard the gospel while I was there, and during the last week of my trip, I heard an American pastor, C.J. Mahaney, preach in a church in Cape Town. He was so passionate for Jesus and so real! His relationship with Christ appealed to me, so I decided to respond to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in my life, and I gave my life to Christ. When I returned home, I called Pastor Mahaney’s church to obtain a recommendation for an evangelical church in my town.

The Culture Shock of Christianity

Though I felt God was calling me to this church, I was in for a culture shock! It was like being on another planet—the women and their viewpoints there were completely foreign to me. I remember meeting with my pastor and his wife shortly after I started attending and making a crack about submission. I did not think anyone still believed that part of the Bible! My pastor wisely asked me if I liked to read and then recommended *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* to me—theological reading not typically recommended to a two-month-old convert.

The Lord used that conversation to start retooling my concept of femininity and sexuality, overhauling my lifelong views on abortion, sexual immorality, and even submission. I read God’s Word, hungry to find out why my new church friends held views so different from anyone else I knew.

From Genesis, I came to understand that God is purposeful in His creation. From the Gospels, I came to understand that God is purposeful in His redemption. I saw He was quite serious about sexual purity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. I was also convicted that abortion was a terribly selfish action to avoid the consequences of sexual sin.

Just as importantly, I saw that God had made me female and that He had specific tasks and roles for women that would glorify Him to an unbelieving, yet watching, world. Slowly, I was becoming more concerned with His glory and not my own.

As I studied the Bible, I also studied the marriages of my new friends eager to see what this Christian concept of benevolent masculine leadership and joyful feminine submission actually looked like in real life. Though not perfect, what I saw was attractive. I saw men who sacrificed their own preferences and pleasures to make sure their wives and children were cultivated spiritually. These were men who took their responsibilities to be servant leaders seriously. They did not see marriage as a trap or children as an impediment to the pursuit of their own leisure and weekend hobbies. Instead, their families were seen as gifts worthy of their hard work.

Likewise, I saw that my married women friends sought to respect and build up their husbands. I was used to a stream of cracks from women about the uselessness and unreliability of men, but this I did not hear from the mature, married women in my church. Their submission seemed freeing . . . dare I say, liberating? They certainly seemed free from much of the discord, sarcasm, and disappointment I usually encountered in modern marriages.

Slowly I began to note that the teamwork in these marriages mirrored the teamwork in the church. While married men had the responsibility of leading their families, these same men were called to submit to the spiritual leaders God had put over them. In fact, when I was focused on the “limitations” I perceived in a wife’s submission to her husband, I showed that I had failed to understand that submission undergirds the entire concept of Christianity.

My greatest role model for submission is my Lord Himself whose obedient submission guaranteed my redemption. As Hebrews 5:7 says, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (NIV).

Over time, as I grew to know the Lord and His Word better, I realized that the independence I had worked so hard to protect as an unbeliever was a complete charade. As a helpless, finite creature, I was completely dependent on God for my very life and breath. I had not been independent. Rather, I had been stiff-necked. I came to realize that submission simply stripped me of my contentiousness, not my dignity as one created in the very image of God.

Single and Fully Feminine

Once I embraced the sweet fruit of feminine submission, I still had to figure out how to apply it to my everyday life. One area where I have struggled is what femininity should look like for a single woman. Because the Lord made the woman to be a helper, the contours of biblical femininity are usually sculpted through relationships with others—as wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt. Though I am definitely a daughter, sister, and aunt, I am not (yet) a wife or mother. But I know God created me female in His own image, and that He has given me this gift of singleness in this season of my life. These are not mutually exclusive concepts, but sometimes I still wrestle with how to express them both to the glory of God.

In late 1998, I moved to take a job as part of a church-planting ministry and to serve in a local church pastored by the pastor I met in South Africa, C.J. Mahaney. A year later, I attended a series of seminars on Titus 2 taught by his wife, Carolyn. Through her teaching, I realized that of the seven qualities Paul urges Titus to have older women teach to younger women, only two are explicitly directed at married women and one to mothers. That leaves at least four for all women, married or single. Despite my marital status, I was to be self-controlled, pure, busy at home, and kind. That is a tall order no matter how you look at it, but it does not mean I can ignore the other three qualities. There are implications for single women in the commands to love husbands and children as well as for wives to be subject to their husbands.

Based upon this passage, the following are some ways in which God has given me the grace to apply the Titus 2 virtues in my life and genuinely enjoy my femininity as a single woman.

1. “To love their husbands” (v. 4).

Because of all the worldly junk I had imbibed on the topics of feminism and relationships, I initially read a number of books on Christian marriage. I have continued to read widely on Christian marriage, and where appropriate, I have attended seminars. I want to have a biblical view of marriage should the Lord bring that gift.

But there is a practical application for my life now. I believe I can serve my married sisters best by shoring up their marriages. In our conversations and with my observations of their lives, I want to be able to help my married friends think biblically about their marriages and to think the best of their husbands. To unbelievers, I want to be prepared to explain the mystery of Christ and the Church in the institution of marriage. While the world tells us we have no valid knowledge to share unless we have experienced a particular aspect of life, God’s Word equips us for wise discernment regardless of our experiences or perhaps, in spite of them!

Finally, should God bring the gift of marriage, I want to love my future husband now by developing a biblical perspective on love, marriage, and a wife’s role well before our

wedding. I realize that the “wife of noble character” commended in Proverbs 31 brings her husband “good, and not harm, *all* the days of her life”—days before and days after marriage. What I am sowing now in these days of my life is part of God’s design in blessing my husband, not to mention bringing glory to the Lord no matter my marital status.

2. “To love their children” (v. 4).

Whether or not we actually give birth, women are called to nurture the new life around us in various ways. Before I became a Christian, I was not very interested in children. I assumed I might have children one day, but I was oblivious to the children around me and did not care to spend any time with them.

This is one area where God has made a tremendous change in my life. Over the years, I have had rich relationships with many children. The Lord has also given me evangelism opportunities with children. I have even created an informal Veggie Tales club with about a half dozen young boys in my neighborhood. They would stop by for sodas and videos, and I would share the gospel and pray with them.

Even though I do not have children of my own, I have three nieces and one nephew in whom to invest. It takes planning to be involved in their lives, but it is worth it to cultivate those relationships. Because I have vicariously experienced the thrills and sacrifices of motherhood as I have helped my sisters over the years, I have a window into that aspect of femininity. Just as importantly though, through these times together, I have developed one-on-one friendships with these small relatives of mine that I hope will flourish through the changing seasons of life ahead of us. I want to be a relevant relative of theirs, not a distant aunt.

That means declining vacation opportunities with my friends to spend my vacation with my far-away nieces. That means declining social events on weekends to babysit my nearby niece and nephew or taking a day off during summer to plan a special day of adventure with them. But that also means I am the beneficiary of funny voicemail messages, elaborately drawn pictures, special “treasures” wrapped in thick layers of tissue and tape, and excited hugs when I arrive at their front doors. Somehow, it does not seem one bit like sacrifice.

Perhaps these things contributed to a recent decision by one of my sisters and her husband to name me as guardian for their two daughters should they die in a mutual accident. Despite my being single, they thought I would rear their girls as close as possible to their values. Words cannot express how much that act of trust encouraged me!

3. “To be self-controlled” (v. 5).

My greatest challenge to self-control as a single woman is in the area of speculation about men and marriage. I do not think I am alone in this. I know I am called to wait and trust, but it is so easy for me to do the opposite—to either attempt to manipulate circumstances in my favor or to complain when others are blessed in courtship or marriage.

Over the years, the Lord has done much to kill the sin of self-pity in me regarding deferred hopes for marriage, and one fruit of that is that I now joyfully serve many couples as a wedding planner. But contentment can seem to come and go in my life like waves lapping the shore. Sometimes joy cascades over my soul like waves breaking on the beach. Other times joy seems to seep out of my life like the undertow of receding water. This is not the result of anything other than changing my focus: When the joy seems to be receding, I find myself critically regarding my circumstances rather than beholding the glory of God.

One specific way I do this is by “trying on” men in my mind. Judging from the conversations I have had with many single women, this is a common temptation. We tend to meet godly, attractive single men and immediately head down the path toward marriage, imagining what it would be like to court and wed this man. Having convinced ourselves that this is a possibility, we then read into his every move while hashing and rehashing each scenario with the “girlfriend network.” A good friend of mine calls this “dating in my mind”—a priceless phrase!

To exercise self-control in this area as single women is to put reasonable limits on the journaling and girlfriend conversations we have about our romantic interests. Talk has a way of making a desire an expectation, which eventually becomes a demand.

In my life, I have found I head into trouble when I record at length in my journal every interaction I have with a single man or when I am discussing this man with a broad range of friends. For me, self-control is to limit these detailed conversations to my accountability partners and to those over me in the Lord, such as my small group leader and his wife or my pastor and his wife. They know how I am weak, and they prayerfully encourage me to keep my focus where it belongs.

4. “Working at home” (v. 5).

This one has been a challenge for me as a single woman since I work outside the home to support myself. I have to be intentional about scheduling time to actually be at home one or two evenings a week. That is hard in my busy church, but this Titus 2 virtue gives me a vision for the priority of it.

Then there are the domestic arts. In my twenties, I lived with piles of dirty clothes and newspapers. My house was the crash pad between outside engagements. I had no

vision for domesticity. My family had a nickname for my cooking in this period: Fish wads and pudding lumps.

However, after I saw a love for the home arts modeled by the women of the church, I desired to change. I practiced cooking, began hosting dinner parties, started buying home décor, and even picked out my own china pattern. That was actually a big step for me, because it was hard to visit china departments without being forced to admit you don't have a wedding date. Now God has blessed me with my own house, and I am so happy to nest there that I should check for twigs in my hair before I leave for work!

Though single women are not afforded the blessing of being busy with our families at home, we can be busy with kingdom business at home. Our homes provide places where we can pray with others, counsel others, evangelize others, and serve through hospitality. Romans 12:13 clearly says to practice hospitality, and praise God, this command does not differentiate between married and singles!

No matter how our households are structured, our homes can be beacons of hope and hospitality in our neighborhoods. Just for this reason, I love to take pictures of those who have been in my home and display them with that Scripture from Romans.

The Freedom of Christ

Paul urged the Galatians to remember that “for freedom Christ has set us free” (5:1). Prior to my conversion, I saw Christianity as being a burden, a confining religion with many rules and regulations. I was not equipped to see that my own sin was the greatest yoke of slavery. As we have all done since Adam and Eve, I blamed others for the oppression of sin in my life. I thought I needed to be set free from men who belittled women, from jobs that were “stuck” in the “pink ghetto” of women’s work, and from the “burdens” of traditional sexual morals. I could not see that my own self-righteousness, pride, anger, and willfulness caused greater damage to real joy than any perceived curtailment to my freedom.

When Christ ushered in His kingdom, He surprised everyone—including His own disciples—with the “opposite world” He introduced. Everything was “backward” to the natural thinking of human beings. The greatest among us were servants. Our enemies were to be prayed for and even loved. What makes us unclean comes from inside us, in our hearts, not from what we put on or in us. To have life everlasting, we must be born again.

It does not make sense on first reading, but the Bible promises us that God’s wisdom is foolishness to a perishing world (1 Cor. 1:18–21). I am most grateful that He liberated me from my futile thinking and the bondage of sin and led me into the way everlasting.

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