

**“A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the Lord your God”
(Deut.22: 5).**

+ Lecture 3: Feminism & Christianity +

I) Definition of Feminism:

According to Webster’s New World Dictionary, feminism is defined as the movement to win political, economic, and social equality for women. This movement is really a collage of many movements that span over one and a half centuries and include a range of political and social ideologies as well as diverse understandings of women’s identities, roles and opportunities. The issue of whether a person is a feminist is considerably more complicated than it first appears. It may be that the real issue is which *kind* of feminist a person is.

II) Women in Christianity:

Christianity has restored to women their honor and dignity when God took flesh from Virgin Mary and completed the mystery of His Divine incarnation in her womb, “Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh” (1Tim.3: 16). Our Lord Jesus Christ treated women in a different way than the society, it was said that when He was speaking with the Samaritan woman, His disciples marveled that He talked with *a woman* (Jn.4: 27). When a woman was caught in the very act of adultery and was presented to Him {notice the discrimination of the Jews who let the man who was sinning with her escape} He did not condemn her but told her “go and sin no more” (Jn.8: 11).

Christ taught against considering women as sex objects {something that the feminist movement strives to accomplish} when He said: “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt.5: 28). There are many examples in the Bible showing Christ’s support to women, like defending the woman who poured the fragrant oil on His Holy head saying, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me” (Matt.26: 10), like praising the widow who gave two mites (Lk.21: 3), and like praising the faith of the woman of Canaan saying “O woman great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire” (Matt.15: 28).

On the day of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit was *equally* given to both men and women without discrimination as it was spoken by Joel the prophet, “I will pour My Spirit on all flesh: your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy” (Acts2: 17). Therefore we read in the Book of Acts about four virgin daughters of Philip the deacon who prophesied (Acts21: 9). St. Paul speaks of equality and unity when he says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, *there is neither male nor female*; for you are all *one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal.3: 28). Also he says, “For as woman was from the man, even so the man also is through the woman; but all things are from God” (1Corinth.11: 12).

In the 19th Century, Pope Cyrl IV encouraged the education of girls because His Holiness was convinced that educated mothers would raise their children better than the non-educated. It was said that Said Pasha, the governor of Egypt, argued with His Holiness about the equality of civil rights between men and women {something that Islam denies}. The Pope asked the governor, ‘If a woman does a good deed will God reward her less than a man who does the same, just because she is a woman?’

The governor answered, 'Certainly not'. Then the Pope said to him, 'Shouldn't the laws of the earth be as just as the laws of heaven?' And the governor couldn't answer[Ⓢ].

III) Theological approach:

Christ said to the Sadducees that in the resurrection everybody (males and females) will be like the angels of God (Matt22: 30). There is no gender difference among angels, "Who makes His angels spirits" (Ps.104: 4). There is no such thing as a female spirit or a male spirit. Therefore when you read in the Book of Genesis about the creation of woman (Gen.2: 22) you will notice that God did not breath into her nostrils a new or a different breath of life 'spirit' than the one He gave to man (Gen.2: 7).

Our Lord said to the Samaritan women, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn.4: 24). When we consider the topic of feminism in light of this verse and the absence of any gender difference between the spirits we can conclude that we mustn't let our gender difference which pertains to the body distract us from worshipping God in our spirits which are basically the same.

IV) The language of Scriptures:

It is written that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2Corinth.3: 6). Christ said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life" (Jn.6: 63). Since there is no gender difference among spirits, therefore we need to understand and read Scriptures beyond our gender limitation.

For example: St. Paul addresses the whole Church of the Corinthians (both men and women) saying, "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2Corinth.11: 2). Also Scriptures refer to God, angels, and the devil with masculine pronouns although there is no gender among Spirits.

V) Equal rights but different roles:

Consider the following verses: "For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body', is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body', is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members each one of them in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'"(1Corinth.12: 14-21).

+ Comments:

- 1) The above analogy was used by St. Paul to illustrate that among individuals (members) there are different roles set by God (Vrs.18) in wisdom so that the body (Church or society) would be complete. This difference in roles among individuals doesn't mean that there is inequality among them.
- 2) Men and women are equal in Christ but each one has a specific role given to him/her by God to fulfil. We must acknowledge that there are some roles in the society and even in Church that either men or women can fulfill on the other hand there are certain roles that cannot and should not be shared.

[Ⓢ] 'History of the Coptic Church' by Fr. Manasseh Yohana.

VI) The role of men and women in marriage:

+ “Likewise you wives be submissive to your own husbands... as Sarah obeyed Abraham calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror” (1Pet.3: 1,6).

+ “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife[Ⓢ], as also Christ is head of the Church...Therefore, just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything (in the Lord). Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it...So husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies...and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Eph.5: 22-33).

+ “Wives, submit to your own husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter (harsh) toward them” (Col.3: 18,19).

+ “Admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands” (Tit.2: 4,5).

+ **Comments:**

- 1) While neither gender is automatically ‘better’ than the other is, God expects the wives to submit to their husbands and the husbands to lead. This submission doesn’t make the wife in any way inferior to her husband, also it doesn’t give the husband the right to dominate, neglect or otherwise abuse his wife. God expects women to submit willingly to their husbands, freely, by a personal choice and not because their husbands have somehow forced them to do so (1Pet.3: 6). Finally this submission must be ‘in the Lord’ for the wife is not expected to obey her husband in what is against God’s commandments, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5: 29).
- 2) Husbands are expected to love their wives as Christ loved His Church and gave Himself for it (Eph.5: 22). They are also expected to lead their wives in the same manner Christ led the Church, through ‘servant leadership’. He led by example as He demonstrated extreme humility in washing the feet of the disciples (Jn.13: 12-15). The husband is not to abuse the submission of his wife but be ready himself to obey her as God instructed Abraham concerning Hagar and her son saying, “Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice” (Gen.21: 12).
- 3) Mutual respect is a very important aspect of a healthy marriage. Love, submission, leadership are perfected when there is mutual respect between the wife and her husband. Both the husband and the wife should understand that respect is something that we *earn*.
- 4) God expects us to live by His standards that are provided in the Bible and not those of the world. Society has twisted the marital roles and family life into something that God never intended it to be. Hence wives are afraid to submit and husbands are afraid to lead.
- 5) It is written, “Every wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands” (Prov.14: 1), also “Likewise you husbands dwell with them with understanding (wisdom)” (1Pet.3: 7). From this we learn the importance of wisdom for both wives and husbands, wives need wisdom to be able to submit and husbands need wisdom to be able to lead. So “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him (or her) ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach” (James1: 5). Read Jam.3: 17.

[Ⓢ] Will be discussed separately.

VII) The Head Issue:

St. Paul said: “For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the Church” (Eph.5: 23).

+ Comment:

Here St. Paul is not talking about superiority but about perfect union between the husband and his wife, and he is giving the example of Christ and the Church to show how men ought to love and sacrifice for their wives and how the wives should love and submit to their husbands. All of us should understand that as it is written that the husband is the head of the wife, it is also written that the excellent wife is a crown on his head (Prov.12: 4).

St. Paul also said: “The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1Corinth.11: 3).

+ Comments: (From the homilies of St. John Chrysostom)

- 1) When St. Paul says, ‘of every man’ one must understand it ‘of every believer’ since the unbeliever is not a member of the body of Christ (the Church).
- 2) The heretics read this verse ‘the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God’ and rush upon us with a certain declaration of inferiority, which out of these words they contrive against the Son. But they stumble against themselves. For if ‘the man be the head of woman’ and the head be of the same substance with the body, and ‘the head of Christ is God’ then the Son is of the same substance with the Father.
- 3) The heretics will reply to us saying that ‘It is not His being of another substance which we intend to show from the verse, but that He is under subjection’. But had St. Paul meant to speak of subjection and rule, as they say, he would not have brought forward the example of a wife and her husband, but rather of a slave and a master. For what if the wife is under subjection to her husband? It is as a wife, as free, as equal in honor. And the Son also, though He did become obedient to the Father, it was as the Son of God, it was as God. (A beautiful example of how the Orthodox doctrines are not mere information. See how the Doctrine of the Divinity of Christ affects the relation between the husband and wife).
- 4) It is shameful for a wife to acquire the leadership of the husband. She doesn’t mount up, but rather falls from her proper honor. Since not to abide within our own limits and the laws ordained of God, but to go beyond, is not an addition but a diminution. For as he who desires other men’s goods and seizes what is not his own, has not gained anything more, but is diminished, having lost even what he had (the same happened in the Garden of Eden). So likewise the woman doesn’t acquire the man’s dignity, but loses even the woman’s decency, which she had. And not from hence only is her reproach and shame, but also on account of her covetousness.

VIII) What does the Bible teach about the apparel of women?

+ “Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1Pet.3: 3,4).

+ Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered let her

also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered...Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is glory to her; for hair is given to her for a covering” (1Corinth.11: 5,6-13,14).

+ **Comments:**

- 1) The words of St. Peter and St. Paul (1Tim.2: 9) don't mean that women shouldn't comb their hair or shouldn't be dressed nicely, but they mean that women should focus primarily on the inner beauty of the heart and not be preoccupied with the outer grooming. Once a women reaches this gentle and quiet spirit she will automatically not need much of the outer adorning.
- 2) It is written. “Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised” (Prov.31: 30). A woman who fears the Lord would not have two kinds of apparel; one for Church and another for school and socializing for example. If there is a dress that you are embarrassed to wear to Church then you should not wear it *at all* simply because God is present everywhere.
- 3) St. Paul talks about covering the head and says that the hair is given to women as a covering so if a woman refuses to cover her head in Church then she might as well shave her head. As if he was saying, ‘If you cast away the covering appointed by the law of God, cast away likewise that appointed by nature (your hair)’. He also says that the head cover is a symbol of her submission to her husband, ‘For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, *because of the angels*’ (1Corinth.11: 10). For although you despise your husband, says he, yet reverence the angels. {From the homilies of St. John Chrysostom}.
- 4) We hear in the Liturgy about the seraphim with six wings. They cover their faces with two because they feel that they are not worthy to look at the glory of God, they cover their feet with two because they feel unworthy to be looked at by God, and they fly with the other two (Is.6: 2). It is sad to see Christian girls wearing short skirts and sleeveless tops. And to add to all this, they might be wearing a necklace with Christ crucified. What a combination!

IX) The role of women in Church:

Biblically and traditionally, there is no basis for women serving in any rank of the Priesthood. The language used for the writing of the New Testament is very accurate and specific. There is nothing debatable about “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1Tim.2: 12). As a mother the most important role of the woman is to raise good children. It is so important that it is linked to her own salvation “She will be saved in childbearing *if* they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self control’ (1Tim.2: 15). We read about the mother and grandmother of St. Timothy and how they affected his life (2Tim.1: 5), also St. Monica the mother of St. Augustine who did not cease to pray, with tears, for the salvation of her son.

There are many fields for women to serve the Church:

- Sunday school.
- Art (icon painting...).
- Translation.
- Evangelization.

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