

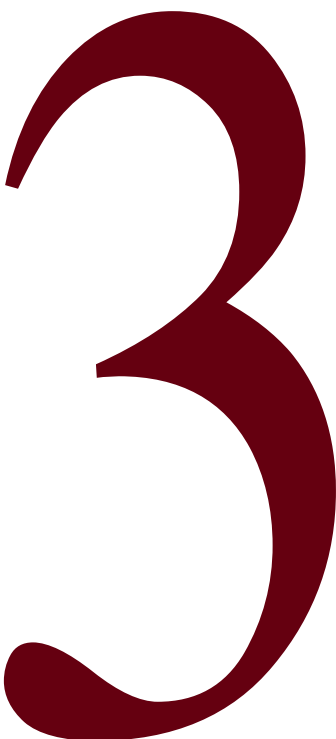
CHRISTIAN FEMINISM: PAST AND PRESENT

- “Recovering a Heritage: Evangelical Feminism,” by Donald W. Dayton and Lucille Sider Dayton
- “On a Firm Foundation,” by Ginny Earnest
- “Toward One Freedom,” by Joyce Hollyday

“**R**ecovering a Heritage” reveals evangelical Christianity’s rich 19th century history of feminist activism and other social justice work. Ginny Earnest explores different strands of 20th century feminism and challenges Christian feminists to live out their special insight that “the personal and political are always essentially spiritual.” As Joyce Hollyday explores, feminist Christians face conservative opposition—and the challenges of living out Christ’s liberating message in today’s changing family structures.

Questions to Consider

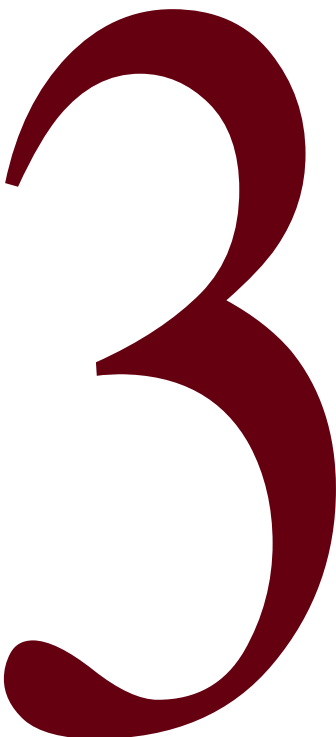
1. Were you surprised by Donald Dayton and Lucille Sider Dayton’s portrait of radical feminist evangelicals taking public leadership roles and forging feminist family structures? In what ways does this history enable you to put present-day evangelicalism in perspective?
2. As you read Earnest’s description of different historical strands of secular feminism—liberal, socialist, separatist, romantic, and womanist—where did you recognize elements that you have drawn from or could in the future? In what ways is feminism enriched by Christian faith, with its understanding of how God enables changed lives?
3. In what ways can family life today be inspired by the feminist leaders of the 19th century or later? In what specific ways do feminism, and other liberation movements, begin at home?
4. Feminism has often been linked to other liberation movements such as abolition and the civil rights movement. In contrast, Hollyday reports that she first experienced theories of racial and economic liberation as alternatives to feminism. How do you think different liberation movements are or should be linked?
5. The years since Hollyday wrote “Toward One Freedom” have seen further social change, such as an increased number of women working outside the home, an increased number of ordained women, and a backlash against the word “feminism.” What other ways have you seen family and church structures change? What has the family or church gained by these changes? What have they lost?



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Resources

- Find out more about the evangelical feminist heritage in *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* by Nancy A. Hardesty (University of Tennessee Press, 1999).
- Julie Polter explores strands of feminism in “When Body Meets Soul” (*Sojourners* magazine, September-October 1994).
- Read more of Joyce Hollyday’s words on biblical feminism in *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*, which contains 50 meditations on the lives of biblical women (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).



RECOVERING A HERITAGE: EVANGELICAL FEMINISM

by Donald W. Dayton and Lucille Sider Dayton

We have drawn attention to the post World War I “Great Reversal” (see the book by the same name by David Moberg) in which American “evangelical” Christians for the most part drew back from involvement in social reform movements. As a consequence, recent generations have assumed a natural dichotomy between the concerns of evangelicalism and the “social gospel” of other Christians. But this perspective is false and obscures a heritage that needs to be recovered.

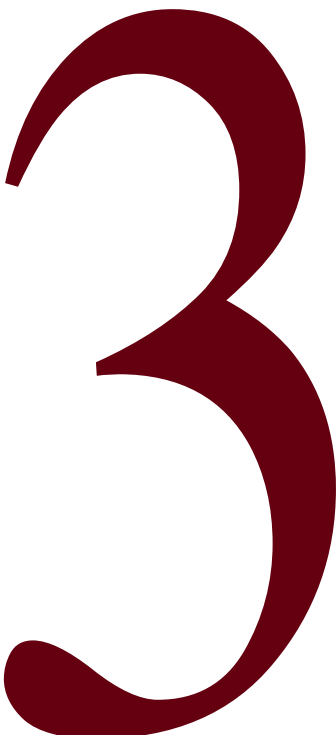
In fact, if one focuses on the more activist sons and daughters of the 18th century “Evangelical Awakenings” (rather than on the more doctrinally oriented forerunners of American fundamentalism), one can make a case that these persons were often the social radicals of earlier generations. We have tried to show that this was true for the heart of American “establishment evangelicalism”—Wheaton College and its founder Jonathan Blanchard. Here we would like to unfold something of the history of “evangelical feminism.”

The Wesleyan revival occurred at a crucial time in England’s history and was a part of (perhaps to some extent the cause of) a certain breaking down of older aristocratic and hierarchical patterns of society. A case can be made, in fact, that Methodism helped mediate in a peaceful way some of the radical social ideas of the more violent French Revolution (see Bernard Semmel’s book *The Methodist Revolution*). Such currents helped pave the way for new roles for women. As a “religion of the heart” rather than tradition or training, Methodism was a natural “leveler” more open to involvement of lower classes, laymen, women, and others held in check by more “established” and “hierarchical” forms of religion.

From the very beginning women played a major role in the “evangelical revival.” Perhaps it was in part due to the influence of a very powerful mother (who stirred controversy, for example, by turning her Sunday family worship into a service that 200 attended) that Wesley allowed women a new role in the church. After some hesitation he even encouraged a Mrs. Sarah Crosby to preach. After the death of her husband, Mrs. Mary Fletcher kept up the parish work and preached to crowds of 2,000-3,000 people. Other important women in early Methodism included Hester Rogers, Hannah Ball, Francis Pawson, Mary Taft, Sarah Bentley, and the Countess of Huntingdon.

This was so much the case that one writer, Robert Wearmouth (in *Methodism and the Common People of the 18th Century*) has claimed that “the emancipation of womanhood began with him (Wesley).” In the generation after Wesley these sentiments developed in a definitely feminist direction. Adam Clarke, whose famous multivolume commentary (1810) was a most important influence in the 19th century, insisted that “under the blessed spirit of Christianity they (women) have equal rights, equal privileges, and equal blessings, and let me add, they are equally useful.”

Similar developments were taking place in America under the influence of the “Great Awakening.” Here again women began to play a new role, especially in religious life. But it was under the influence of evangelist Charles G. Finney that things came to a head. One of his controversial “new measures” was the place he gave to women in his revival meetings. One of the earliest expressions of this took place the night Theodore Weld was converted in 1825 under the preaching of Finney. That night “seven females...confessed their sin in being restrained by their sex and prayed pub-



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lickly in succession at that very meeting.” Few but the Quakers had ever permitted anything like this before.

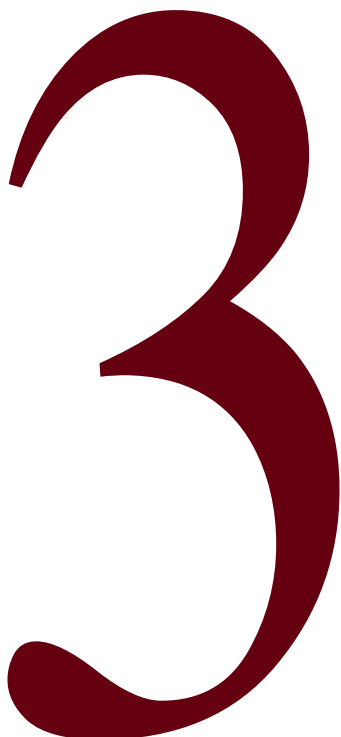
Weld was Finney’s assistant for a while before becoming perhaps the most influential abolitionist of his age. It was probably Weld that lay behind this particular “new measure.” In those days abolitionism and feminism were often conjoined. Weld later married Angelina Grimke. Angelina and her sister Sarah were the first women to speak publicly to mixed audiences in America—the issue was abolitionism—and the first to assert women’s rights. Among Sarah’s sentiments were: “I am persuaded that the rights of women, like the rights of slaves, need only to be examined, to be understood and asserted” (1837); “The New Testament has been referred to, and I am willing to abide by its decision, and must enter my protest against the false translations of some passages by the MEN who did that work...when we are admitted to the honor of studying Greek and Hebrew, we shall produce some various readings of the Bible, a little different from those we now have” (1837); “Men and women were CREATED EQUAL; they are moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do is right for a woman to do” (1837); “The literal translation of the word ‘Help-meet’ is a helper like unto himself; and is so rendered in the Septuagint and manifestly signifies a companion.” (For these quotes and related material, see Aileen Kraditor’s *Up from the Pedestal*.)

In 1835 Oberlin College opened with students largely abolitionized by Theodore Weld and with evangelist Finney as first professor of theology. Oberlin College was radically reformist and committed to abolitionism, peace activism, and “female reform” among other concerns. Oberlin was the first coeducational college, and this fact was the one item that its first president Asa Mahan wanted engraved on his tombstone. Among early graduates of Oberlin were a number of the most important feminists of the era. These women even carried feminism beyond the stance of Oberlin.

Lucy Stone, Oberlin class of 1847, refused to take her husband’s name, and was known as “Mrs. Stone.” When she married, she and her husband, Henry Blackwell, together signed a protest that declared that their marriage implied “no sanction of, nor promise of voluntary obedience to such of the present laws of marriage, as refuse to recognize the wife as an independent, rational being, While they confer upon the husband an injurious and unnatural superiority, investing him with legal powers which no man should possess.” And later the same couple founded in 1870 *The Women’s Home Journal*, the principal suffragist paper.

Another graduate of Oberlin was Congregationalist Antoinette Brown, the first woman to be ordained. Her ordination sermon was preached by Luther Lee, a Wesleyan Methodist minister. The Wesleyan Methodists, founded in 1842 over abolitionism, had also been particularly receptive to women’s rights. The “Seneca Falls” meeting of 1848 that first called for the right of women to vote had been held in a Wesleyan Church because only the abolitionists were open to such radical ideas. Lee defended in 1852 a number of women who attempted to speak at a temperance meeting, and it was natural that he be asked in 1853 to preach at Antoinette Brown’s ordination. His sermon on “Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel” was based on Galatians 3:28. It argued that “in the Church, of which Christ is the only head, males and females possess equal rights and privileges...if the text means anything, it means that males and females are equal in rights, privileges, and responsibilities upon the Christian platform...if males may preach the gospel so may females; and if males may receive ordination by the imposition of hands, or otherwise, so may females.”

Feminism after the Civil War was perhaps less permeated by an “evangelical” spirit, but even then their influence was felt. A dissertation by Ralph Spencer studies “Dr. Anna Howard Shaw: The Evangelical Feminist” (Boston University, 1972). Dr. Shaw was the second woman to attend Boston University’s School of Theology. After



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graduation she pastored Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist, and Methodist Protestant churches before returning to Boston to take a medical degree. After this study she threw herself into the struggle for women's rights for the rest of her life. The high point of her career was as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association during the period in which she set up the machinery for the campaign that won women the right to vote.

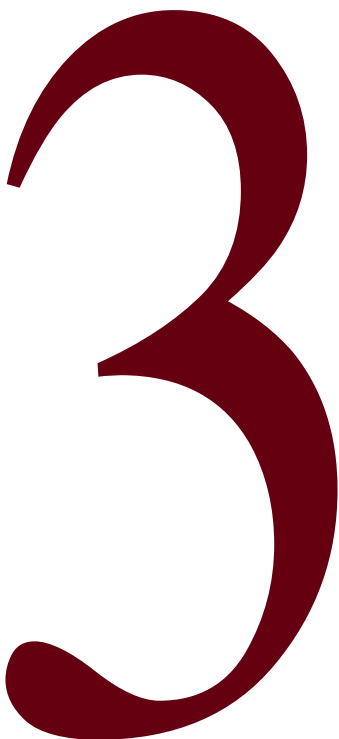
Another important feminist of the era was Francis Willard, founder and long-term president of the World Woman's Christian Temperance Union and for a while a co-worker with D. L. Moody. She felt that she had a supernatural call from God to proclaim the "gospel of woman's suffrage" and combined for many years this work with her temperance concerns. She was also the author of the book *Women in the Pulpit*. In this book one finds language such as "'Behold, I make all things new,' was the joyful declaration of women's great Deliverer. 'He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bound.' Above all other beings these words must refer to woman, who, without Christ, lies prostrate under society's pitiless and crushing pyramid. Whether they perceive it or not, it is chiefly ecclesiasticism and not Christianity that Robert Ingersoll and Elizabeth Cady Stanton have been fighting."

Another neglected figure has been Catherine Booth, who with her husband, William, founded the Salvation Army. Catherine had originally refused to marry William until he straightened out his ideas on women (he had suggested that "woman has a fibre more in the heart and a cell less in the brain"). Later she defended the right of women to preach in "Female Ministry," her contribution to pamphlet warfare on the subject. Catherine was a better speaker than her husband, and on some occasions William took care of the children while she preached. She was very concerned with raising her children with this new understanding. "I have tried to grind it into my boys that their sisters were just as intelligent and capable as themselves. Jesus Christ's principles were to put women on the same platform as men, although I am sorry to say his apostles did not always act upon it." As her son-in-law put it, "she was to the end of her days an unflinching, unflinching, uncompromising champion of woman's rights."

And even though his denomination was unwilling to go along, B. T. Roberts, founder of the Free Methodist Church, was firmly committed to the right of women to preach. In an 1891 book *Ordaining Women*, a sophisticated study that can be read with profit even today, Roberts advanced the usual arguments for the ordination of women. But in addition to this he went on to argue for a radical equality in the home: "The greatest domestic happiness always exists where husband and wife live together on terms of equality. Two men, having individual interests, united only by business ties, daily associate as partners for years, without either of them being in subjection to the other. They consider each other as equals. Then, cannot a man and woman, united in conjugal love, the strongest tie that can unite two human beings, having the same interests, live together in the same manner?"

But the movement toward women in the church was most intense in the "holiness movement" that emerged from Methodism in the late 19th century. Phoebe Palmer, a lay evangelist and the major force behind this movement, argued in *The Promise of the Father* (1859) on the basis of Acts 2 that, as prophesied in Joel 2:28, in the "latter days" the spirit was to be poured out on daughters as well as sons. (The argument was more sophisticated than the proof text sounds and involved an understanding of the restoration of a pre-fallen state of equality as well as a pneumatologically grounded doctrine of the right of women to preach.)

This argument gained force throughout the rest of the century and became a central theme of such groups as the Church of the Nazarene, the Pilgrim Holiness Church, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), etc. Mrs. J. Willing Fowler argued in the



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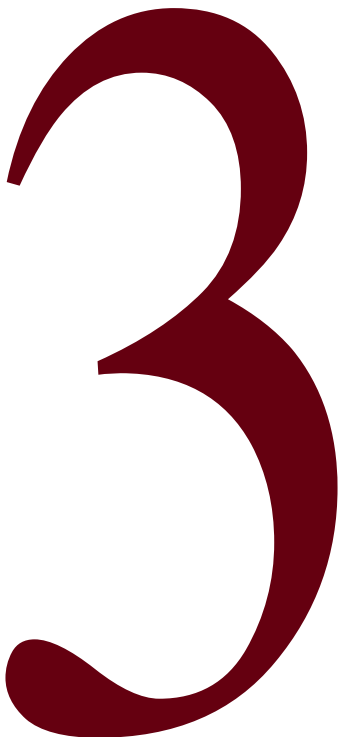
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Guide to Holiness just before the turn of the century that “Pentecost laid the axe at the root of the tree of social injustice... When the Pentecostal light shines most brightly, women do the bulk of common school teaching. They are also principals, professors, college presidents, and are admitted to all learned professions.” The original constitution of the Church of the Nazarene specifically recognized the right of women to preach. One entire conference from West Tennessee consisted for a while of only women ministers. And even the little denomination called the “Pillar of Fire” issued for a number of years a periodical titled *Woman’s Chains*. The spirit of these groups is well illustrated in a quotation from Seth Cook Rees, one of the founders of the Pilgrim Holiness Church: “Nothing but jealousy, prejudice, bigotry, and a stingy love for bossing in men have prevented woman’s public recognition by the church. No church that is acquainted with the Holy Ghost will object to the public ministry of women. We know scores of women who can preach the Gospel with a clearness, a power, and an efficacy seldom equaled by men. Sisters, let the Holy Ghost fill, call, and anoint you to preach the glorious Gospel of our Lord.” And his wife, Hulda, served with him as co-pastor and co-evangelist.

We could go on, but this is enough to indicate not only that there is wide-spread historical antecedent to “evangelical feminism,” but that in the 19th century it was evangelicals of various sorts that often took to most radical stances on the questions. Not only were most of the issues discussed on a sophisticated level in such groups in the 19th century, but there was also experimentation with equalitarian marriage, affirmation of the right of women to a full role in the church, concern with the socialization of children to sexist attitudes and roles, “co-pastorate” ministries, etc. It is indeed ironic that many of the descendants of these same groups are the most resistant to such ideas today. ■

Lucille Sider Dayton and Donald W. Dayton were contributing editors to The Post-American, the original name of Sojourners magazine. This article appeared in the August-September 1974 issue of The Post-American.



BUILDING ON THE HISTORY OF FEMINISM

by Ginny Earnest

We who like the children of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness of prejudice and ridicule for forty years feel a peculiar tenderness for the young women on whose shoulders we are about to leave our burdens....The younger women are starting with great advantages over us. They have the results of our experience; they have superior opportunities for education; they will find a more enlightened public sentiment for discussion; they will have more courage to take the rights which belong to them....Thus far women have been the mere echoes of men. Our laws and constitutions, our creeds and codes, and the customs of social life are all of masculine origin. The true woman is as yet a dream of the future.—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1888

It was 1888 when Elizabeth Cady Stanton made the above speech at the International Council on Women. Reading her comments in 1988—a full century later—it is clear that her optimistic prediction for the next generation went largely unfulfilled. In fact, the wave of self-conscious feminism of the 19th century all but died out in the next and successive generations, and women’s gains were either undone or absorbed into the status quo and taken for granted.

This century’s women’s movement, “the second wave,” began in the late 1950s. It was not fueled by the momentum of previous generations but rather was lit like a spark from some smoldering ember, ignited by the black civil rights movement. The women of the second wave generation, with few and notable exceptions, could not look to their mothers and grandmothers for a strategy for social change and personal empowerment. They inherited instead the same legacy of prejudice and ridicule—the same “society of masculine origin”—that the 19th-century feminists confronted. They had to build on a scant foundation and dim memories of distant times.

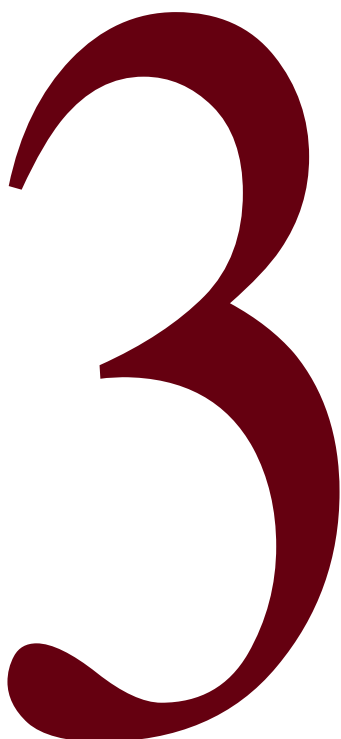
In the United States, the decades since the 1950s have been years of tremendous change. As civil rights legislation granted new rights to black people, laws were also expanded to include civil rights for women, and a number of significant court cases challenged discrimination on the basis of gender—all of this setting a more open legislative tone. The National Organization for Women was founded in 1966, and its lobbying efforts have been effective in state and national politics.

In the ’60s women began to write and publish as never before in history—essays, poetry, fiction, and research—and the sheer volume and content of the work altered our public attitudes toward women (and by extension, men). Women scholars in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, art, and religion began to challenge male assumptions and interpretive biases. Women’s experiences, language, symbols, and images became dynamic parts of popular culture.

Employment discrimination was challenged, and hundreds of jobs, professions, and unions that were closed to women were opened. Equal pay for equal work became a topic of debate and a goal for agitation.

Single and divorced women were finally able to obtain credit, sign leases, buy property, and obtain services that were previously denied them. And for the first time in Western history, women took access to information about birth control and their particular health care issues that had previously been denied to them by the male medical and clerical establishments. And that knowledge empowered women to make informed choices about their health.

Along with real and perceived changes in women’s opportunities in public life, of



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course, came tremendous upheaval and change in women's personal lives. Women began having different expectations and assumptions in relationship to their husbands and partners, in relationship to their children, in relationship to their parents and other family members. As women came to view themselves in healthier ways, they claimed more autonomy and individuality and began to ask more from those with whom they were in close relationship.

Perhaps the most important and notable change during the decades from the 1950s to the present is that women identified themselves as a group with common concerns and shared experience and began, within an intentional movement, to reach out to other women for support and companionship, for ideas and strategies, for identification and solidarity. And feminism was broadly known and acknowledged as a critique of the status quo and a force for social change.

Because so much has changed, we may be tempted to think that the victory is won and the goals realized. Yet the essential nature of patriarchal capitalism has remained unchanged. In spite of all the progress cited above, women have been largely kept out of the most powerful and influential areas of public life—government, business, and mass media—and therefore have limited impact in shaping our society. Sexism remains a powerful and pervasive reality and is still experienced by most women (whether they recognize it as such or not) in overt, covert, and subtle forms.

Our institutions have yielded to allow participation by some women (mostly white and privileged) in token numbers and token positions. Because of this the issues of race and class have remained divisive within the women's movement itself.

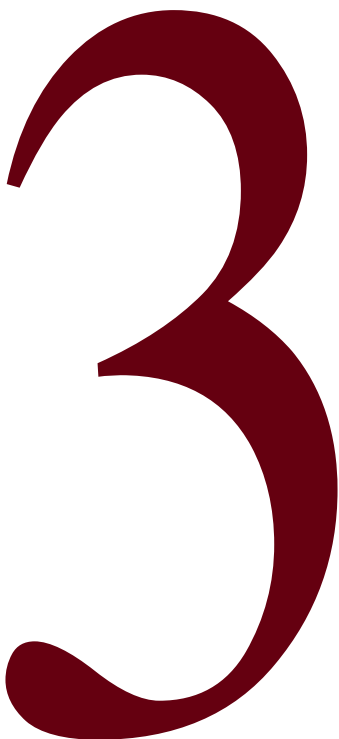
STANTON'S THOUGHTS serve to point us with great urgency toward the next generation and the future. Are we building a movement on the experience, thought, analysis, strategy, and vision of previous generations of feminists—or are women more deeply isolated than ever? Have the benefits of certain rights and advantages for some women served as positive building blocks or have they led to complacency and even arrogance for those who have benefited? Are women now clear enough about the rights that belong to us, and bold enough to claim them, or are we confused about the goals of liberation?

“The true woman is as yet a dream of the future.” Stanton thought that the dream was to be realized in the next generation, just out of her own struggling reach. And yet the dream remains elusive. We are now in danger of having it clouded over and submerged once again.

Ours is a vitally important time for building up and strengthening each other for the long haul—for the benefit of future generations. It is a vitally important time for overcoming the divisions and barriers between us and finding common ground. The task at hand is that of setting our feet on a firm foundation of feminist history, thought, and achievement and clarifying a common vision for the future. Christian feminists, both men and women, must consider the particular contributions we might make to the movement for social justice called feminism.

Basic to that task is the work of acquiring an understanding of feminism that is free of shallow or false media images, in order to avoid reaction and withdrawal. Feminism is not one simple philosophy or worldview but represents many streams of thought and varied approaches, all of which grow out of particular experiences and provide particular insights. The variety of “voices” known as feminism appear at times even to be contradictory, with the end result being confusion and disillusionment for many women and men. Rather than being problematic, the diversity of feminist theory could be viewed as a benefit if we see the strength of the varying approaches and evaluate with an eye toward understanding and synthesis.

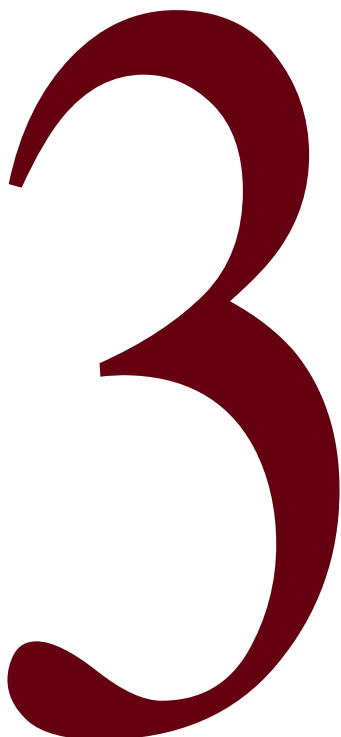
Against a force as demonic as sexism, we need each other and the unique contri-



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butions offered from our diversity. By synthesis we cannot mean anything as restrictive as adopting one perspective or one “correct” analysis because we would risk falling into the trap of elitism and exclusivity. Instead, the goal is respect and understanding in order to give each other room to grow and work. The following discussion of the streams of feminist thought is offered not to categorize and label, since it is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. It is an effort to provide useful handles and deeper insights.

THE FOUNDATION OF LIBERAL, or mainstream, feminism has already been discussed briefly here, with obvious admiration and gratitude for its achievements. It is also perhaps the most readily available form of feminism through media and popular culture. The basic goal of liberal feminism is equality under the Constitution and the law, and, as such, it takes the goals of all liberal reform movements in our history and applies them to women. The status of women as second-class citizens in a democracy is the primary concern of liberal feminism.

The notion of equality is a valuable one for the sake of political and economic reform in that it is an available avenue to improve markedly the conditions of daily life for many people. It provides women with a direct course of action and clear and measurable victories. It is also very American and holds great public appeal.

The problem with the platform of liberal feminism is that it is not critical enough of our society. Liberal feminism does not begin with a critique of patriarchy and so can lead to short-sighted or narrow solutions, such as viewing female military conscription as a goal worth campaigning for. What one should strive to be equal to, in this approach, is the standard our forefathers set for themselves: the privileges of white, propertied men in a capitalist system that demands a lower stratum—whether in this country or in the global community. Because our society’s myth and symbol system is based on a division between the deserving and the undeserving, people of color and all women will only achieve limited freedom and token acceptance in society as it stands.

The place of Christian feminist participation in liberal feminist organizations—as in other mainstream political channels—would be found at the point of pushing for a more probing analysis, while at the same time participating in and applauding valuable gains. It is important for two reasons not to stand too far removed from such efforts. The first is that we are—regardless of who we are—indebted to such reformers and their improvements on our institutions. The second, and perhaps more important, is that such distance leads to the illusion that we can remain pure from the taint of society. We cannot, and the arrogance of thinking that we can keeps us from solidarity with other people.

SOCIALIST FEMINISM provides a more thorough cultural critique. Feminist thought has been a cornerstone of socialism since its beginnings. In all of modern industrialization, women (and often children) have been part of the wage labor force and therefore, in socialist analysis, part of the oppressed and exploited working class. Emphasizing this perspective, socialist feminism recognizes that the exploitation of women is true the world over, in both domestic and public work.

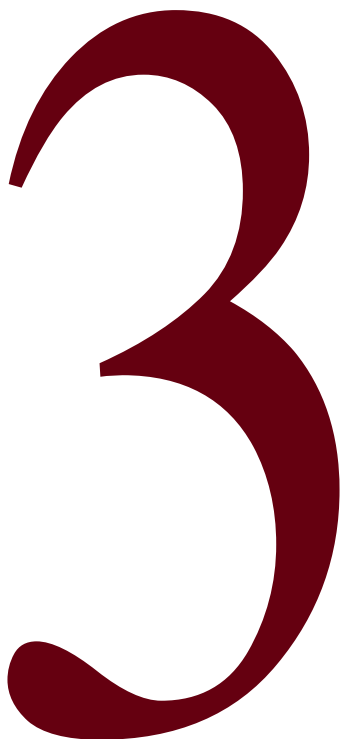
This basic assumption gives socialist feminism its global perspective and marks its most valuable contribution to feminist theory. Within a basic understanding of class oppression, just working conditions and economic independence are seen as the keys to women’s liberation.

Countries with a socialist economic orientation have in fact made great progress in relatively little time in implementing much of the socialist feminist agenda, and women are often better off than they were under the previous regimes. Laws have

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been changed to end discrimination in marriage and family life, in education and work, in civil and public life. Women in large numbers have been successfully integrated into the paid work force. Some socialist countries have also tried to alleviate the burdens of domestic work by opening state-run day-care centers.

Even so, in most socialist countries women are still segregated to the lower echelons of privilege and power and are not found in decision-making positions in any significant numbers, in either government or business. They are still paid less than men and have fewer opportunities for advancement. They are still seen as the primary caretakers in the home and with children, leaving them unable to participate as fully as men in public life—just as in most capitalist economies. And while German socialist Friedrich Engels challenged as bourgeois the notion that women are the weaker and less-competent sex, those stereotypes are still widely held and reinforced in socialist countries.

It is also true that socialism, like capitalism, emphasizes productivity and power among its highest values. Socialist feminism does not essentially challenge the male/female dualism rooted in other hierarchies of power and the progress of civilization over nature. Socialist feminist analysis points us away from middle-class and ethnocentric thinking and toward the broader concerns of the global community but does not confront patriarchal modes and values.

SEPARATIST, OR RADICAL, feminism offers a critique of patriarchal culture—its modes, systems, values, and objectives—in perceiving women as dominated body and suppressed emotion in a male-controlled world. It is radical in that it attempts to get to the core of the patriarchal problem. It is separatist in its solution.

Separatist analysis highlights the “differences” between men and women, whether inherent or socialized, and casts femaleness in positive terms and maleness in negative terms. Control, aggression, rationality, linear thinking, competition, and independence are viewed as masculine characteristics. Nurture, gentleness, emotion, associative thinking, cooperation, and interdependence are viewed as feminine characteristics.

It is worth noting that separatist feminists are not the only people who draw such masculine and feminine dichotomies. They are found in one form or another in almost every field and discipline in both academia and popular culture. What distinguishes separatist feminists is the choosing of feminine qualities and female culture and the rejecting of masculine qualities and male culture. Separatist feminists believe that, because of their relative powerlessness, women’s gifts and qualities will always be suppressed and exploited in the institutions of male culture, including the family, and in male/female relationships. Separatism is more of a political posture than a political agenda. It is self-marginalizing. It does not attempt to influence the culture at large, except by the refusal to participate and by example.

One of the results of this indifference to mainstream culture has been the freeing up of women’s artistic expression and language for the sheer joy and experimentation of it. Without concern for being misunderstood or offensive, artists and writers have tapped into enormous creative energy in describing and delighting in the female experience.

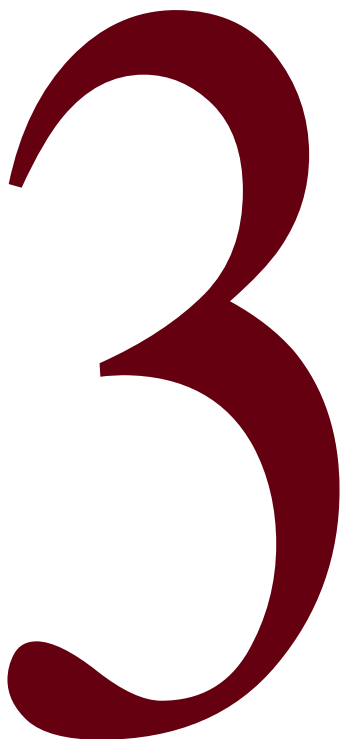
One of the insights of separatist feminism is its emphasis on the freedom and confidence that can come from participating in groups and events and work experiences only with women. But this form of empowerment is distinctly different from the discriminatory practices of male-only institutions. The former is an organizing tactic for mutual empowerment, the latter is an established structure for protecting exclusive power.

The dangers of separatist feminism lie within its understanding of the “differ-

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ences” between women and men and the positing of evil in men and the male world. It may help our understanding if we realize that this radical feminist belief is actually a reversal of traditional Christian doctrine with its theology of female moral and religious inferiority based on the second creation account in the book of Genesis. That foundation of Judeo-Christian theology has so influenced our culture that, in psychological terms, women become “the other” who is everything men do not want to be—the aberration to the male norm.

Separatist feminism makes men the enemy onto which women project all their own aggressive, competitive, or ego-driven tendencies, while at the same time denying the negative side of feminine characteristics and traits. In other words, it denies the full range of human potential to both women and men alike. While often well-founded in the pain of women’s experience, it is finally a conclusion drawn from despair. This projection does not allow the possibility of transformation and healing among men or in the relationships between women and men.

ROMANTIC FEMINISM also highlights the “differences” between male and female, or masculine and feminine, characteristics and traits but draws very different conclusions. Romantic feminists view the public and political world of men as imbalanced and in need of the correctives of nurture and compassion that are offered by women. Romantic feminists believe that women’s influence over the domestic world of home and children should be extended in order to civilize and soften the harsh male domain. Romantic feminists might, for example, believe that peaceful conflict resolution is more natural to women than to men, and, therefore, women’s unique perspective must be brought to bear on national defense and foreign policy.

The same understanding of this male/female, public/domestic dichotomy is the basis of what we might call the anti-feminist perspective. This view was evident in President Reagan’s thinking when he said that if it weren’t for women, men would still be wearing animal skins and carrying clubs. The anti-feminist perspective provides the basis of the political Right’s platform of patriarchal protection of family values.

The valuable contribution of romantic feminism is its recognition of the importance and value of women’s traditional roles and occupations. Romantic feminists have celebrated traditional women’s culture while acknowledging that it is suppressed and overlooked by the dominant culture. They have led the movement in rediscovering and reclaiming the contributions of women throughout history. They have also held on to a recognition of the value of mothering and family relationships that can seem at risk in other feminist analyses and goals.

The difficulty with the romantic feminist perspective is that it can serve to reinforce the dualism between male and female, masculine and feminine, public and private, political and personal. It can serve to keep women in the seemingly more feminine, and therefore more “appropriate,” roles of mothering and other domestic and support work. It can also serve to place the burden of men’s actions and problems on women’s shoulders, since it suggests that women should exercise a civilizing and softening role in our culture. In truth, however, women are not responsible for men and men’s choices.

IN HER 1985 BOOK *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker coined the term “womanist” to describe the unique perspective of black feminists. In describing what womanists are, Walker wrote, “Womanists love the struggle, womanists love the folk....” These two identifying characteristics make it clear that most black women have not had the more comfortable life of white middle- and upper-class women, have not been put on a pedestal, have not been considered delicate or in need of protection,

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and have not seen their liberation as women to be separate from their identity as black people. For North American black women, and for women of color the world over, the feminist agenda necessarily differs from that of white middle- and upper-middle-class women because of the triple burden of race, class, and sex.

The significance of these contributions to the feminist dialogue is considerable. That some women have struggled against tremendous odds and endured all manner of hardship is an important corrective to the social myth of woman as the weaker sex. Black women have the knowledge of their strength and forbearance, and this results in tremendous personal power—no matter what society may say, no matter how restricted their sphere of influence.

Black women's identification with black men and children in the struggle, first against slavery and then against racism, makes the bonds of race and family strong. It also acknowledges deep roots in domestic and rural traditions, which make up so much of black history, since the dominant culture (that is, white, male, and urban) was closed to black women and their families. Womanists are more in touch with the powerful stories and images of women from their history as a people.

The weakness of black feminist analysis lies within these strengths. The first is an occasional reluctance to critique the movement for black freedom at the point of its sexism. The second is the tendency to generalize about the experience and circumstances of white women without acknowledging their class and ethnic differences.

Individually, black women have contributed to and identify themselves with the other streams of feminism discussed here. Black feminists do not all think alike anymore than white feminists do. But all black women have the experience of being discriminated against in a racist society, and that experience makes their contributions vital to whatever vision feminism might offer for a just and humane future.

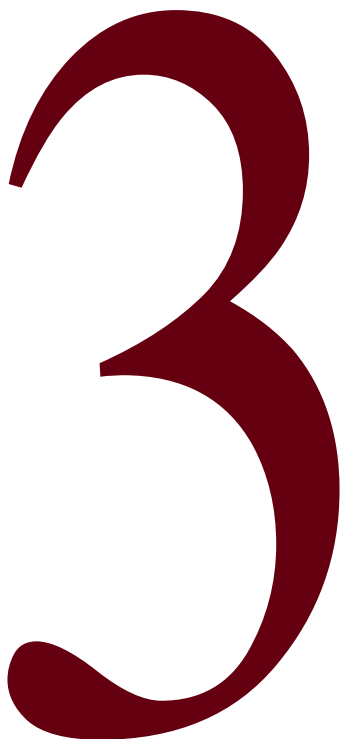
THE FEMINIST AXIOM says that the personal is always political. The unique contribution that women of faith can make to feminism is the insight that the personal and political are always essentially spiritual. The demands of feminism—in both our personal lives and in the culture at large—are too great to suggest simply reforming the status quo or making a few adjustments. Feminism is a movement toward radical change and transformation. Its actualization demands conversion, and conversion is always a spiritual issue requiring spiritual force.

We Christian feminists find ourselves in a paradoxical position. We stand within a tradition that has been and continues to be oppressive yet holds within its life and teaching the seeds for our empowerment and liberation. Both the wisdom and the prophetic writings in our scriptures give us images, instruction, and encouragement for our conversion. Our faith centers on the person of Jesus, God incarnate, who came to demonstrate a different way of being human. Central to the life and teaching of Jesus was the message of liberation—the good news of God's new order where the mighty are brought low and the humble exalted.

We have centuries of foremothers and forefathers in the faith whose lives testify to the fact that tremendous change can happen within a person, within a church, and within a society. Their witness reminds us to be open to the Spirit and never to lose courage.

Christian feminists also come from many experiences—both in the church and in the culture at large—and do not have one analysis of the problem of patriarchy or the goals of liberation. Some Christian feminists have chosen to remain within traditional church structures and models to bring about change. Others have chosen to step outside and begin to form new models that are life-giving for them.

The ability to listen carefully to other Christian feminists and respect different choices is grounded in our own security in what we have chosen and our trust in the



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Spirit. We need diversity of insight and approach within the church as well as within the culture.

One of the seeming contradictions within the streams of feminist thinking, Christian and otherwise, has to do with our basic understanding of male and female qualities and characteristics. Some feminist analysis seems to highlight perceived differences and makes them the foundation for strategizing, whether the solution affects a select group or is a tactic for changing an institution or the society as a whole.

Other streams of feminist thought seem to imply that there is no essential difference between men and women, except for their position in society. This view holds that men are formed by the experience of greater power and privilege and women are formed by the experience of powerlessness and deprivation.

Final proof for either perspective is elusive. Many of the studies conducted to determine tendencies reveal differences in the majority of women as compared to the majority of men, but whether those differences have to do with masculine and feminine distinctions or with our experiences in the world is perhaps impossible to determine.

It has been helpful to gain the insight that women tend to approach life in a somewhat different way than men, at least in our culture and under certain circumstances. However, such insights applied too broadly or held too rigidly seem to lead inevitably toward exclusion of those who are exceptions.

It may be best to view maleness and femaleness as a continuum of qualities, characteristics, and physical attributes and to realize that each of us, even after intensive gender socialization, simply falls somewhere along the continuum. As Dorothy Sayers said in her 1938 essay “The-Human-Not-Quite-Human,” it is unfortunate that men consider women to be the opposite sex instead of the neighboring sex. Being human means that we are uniquely ourselves and also more like each other than anything else in creation.

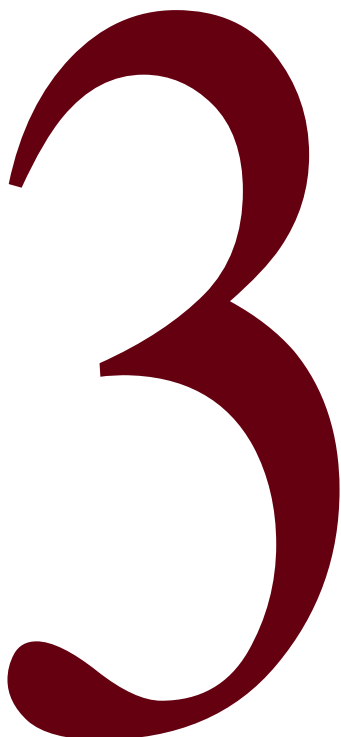
Sayers went on to say that men are considered to be both human and distinctly male, while women are viewed as particularly female, with every characteristic being attributed to their particularity. Liberation must include the rise in status for women to the position of being both fully human and distinctly female, with the full range of limitations and possibilities afforded by that position.

Liberation involves the corrective of valuing women’s past experience and the work that women have traditionally done. It also means taking away restrictions—whether they are legal or attitudinal—so that women can participate as fully as possible in all areas of life and work.

OUR VISION FOR liberation has to be deeply rooted in responsible analysis of gender, ethnic, and class oppression so that we don’t climb out of our ghetto by standing on someone else’s back. We live in a society, and beyond that, in a world, in which all the “isms” are interdependent, and it is difficult to get at one without tripping over another. It is tempting to over-simplify our analysis in order to achieve clarity, but the cost of doing so is high. We need to find ways of talking about our experience that do not create hierarchies of oppression or deny other people’s experiences.

When we choose a lifestyle of alienation and anger, we will simply become more alienated and angry beyond our choosing. It is also true that anger, when recognized and channeled, can be a positive and powerful force for change. Liberation must always contain in its promises the possibility of healing and personal wholeness. Therefore, it must always hold open the possibility of reconciliation.

Christian feminists have a powerful experience of reconciliation to offer to the broader women’s movement. We know that we ourselves have fallen short of God’s intention and have been given the gift of reconciliation. Knowing our own depend-



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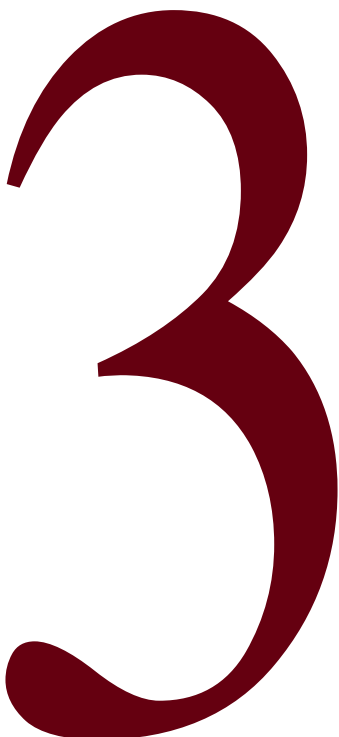
ence on grace can make us channels for grace and healing in the church and in the world, which includes speaking the truth with power.

Many women of faith precede us—biblical women, saints, preachers, healers, evangelical pioneers, and mystics—who all loved God and God’s way. In their tradition, we can proclaim the message of liberation in freedom and joy even in the very midst of struggle.

In her book *Beyond Power*, Marilyn French concludes that it will take centuries to overcome the hold that patriarchy has on every area of life in our society and throughout most of the world. That assessment can seem pessimistic and result in paralysis and hopelessness. Or it can remind us of the seriousness of our task, encourage us to rely on the Spirit for the power of conversion, and make us determined to, in our own generation and with all the resources at our disposal, contribute what we can to that eventual goal.

We have past centuries of women’s ideas and actions to build on; we have the wisdom and power of our spiritual tradition; and we have a wide, diverse, and dynamic movement in which to work. All of our creative imaginations are necessary for seeing a different kind of future. The true woman still waits in a dream-state for her awakening. ■

Ginny Earnest was coordinator of Sojourners Internship Program when this article appeared in the October 1988 issue of Sojourners magazine



TOWARD ONE FREEDOM

by Joyce Hollyday

The year was 1851, the place Akron, Ohio. The tension was thick at this women's rights convention, where clergy-led opposition denounced the equality of women by pointing to the sin of Eve and the masculinity of Jesus.

A tall, gaunt figure rose from a quiet corner and strode toward the platform. The audience recognized Sojourner Truth in the old face shaded by an awkward sunbonnet. A chorus of women's voices protested the presence of this former slave, fearing that the credibility of their cause would be undermined if onlookers thought women's rights were connected to the abolition of slavery. They shouted and hissed to prohibit her from speaking. But men were maligning her God, and Sojourner could not be kept silent. With poise, she thundered in her deep voice:

...That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere...Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gave me any best place! And aren't I a woman?...I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could ever head me—and aren't I a woman? I have borne five children and seen them all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and aren't I a woman?...Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him!

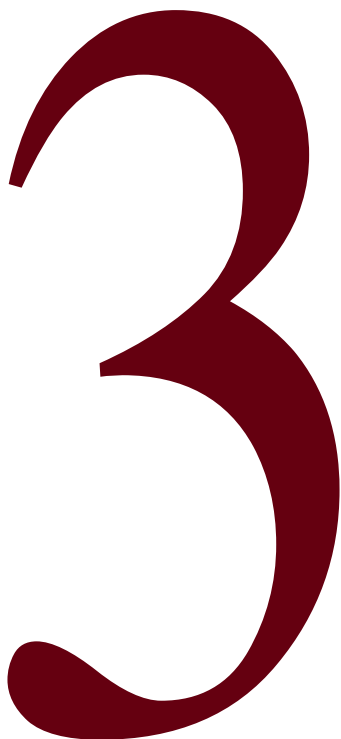
If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone—these together ought to be able to turn it back and get it rightside up again; and now that they're asking to do it, the men better let them.

It is ironic that, while scripture was often quoted to support the inferiority of women, the impetus for the early women's rights movement came largely from evangelical Christians. Today we find a similar dichotomy: Scripture is quoted to support differing sides of the women's issue.

Ours is an age of high divorce rates and increasing domestic violence. New concern for the family and traditional values is surfacing. Politically conservative Christians are among the strongest voices embracing a "pro-family" stance, which has as its cornerstone traditional roles for women. We are offered on an evangelical platter such phenomena as Bill Gothard's hierarchy of male-female relationships and Marabel Morgan's *Total Woman*. In the interest of protecting the family, these offerings maintain that fulfillment for women lies in being homemakers and pleasure-givers for their husbands.

The major target of such thought today is the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Rev. Jerry Falwell calls ERA "a unisexual device to eliminate the God-given differences" between men and women. American Christian Cause, which with other groups is organizing to stop ERA ratification, is circulating postcards addressed to President Carter, linking ERA to "unisex restrooms...and other immoral implications."

At a recent observance of the Salvation Army's centennial, actress-singer Dale Evans Rogers called all women to reject feminism, which will "tear down all the moral standards we have known." She said women must be "modern-day Deborahs," with strong faith in God. At the conclusion of her speech, a life-size statue of William Booth, credited as the founder of the Salvation Army, was unveiled. One wonders how Deborah, an Old Testament prophetess and judge, and Catherine Booth, who shared the founding of the Salvation Army and was known by many to be a better



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speaker for the cause than her husband, would have reacted to Mrs. Rogers' speech.

The interpretations of scripture upon which this position rests ignore Jesus' complete acceptance of women in a day when such acceptance was unheard of. Instead, its advocates point to Paul. Statements that he directed to specific churches at specific times about the role of women are made into broad theological principles. The clear leadership of women in the early church and Paul's support of them is overlooked. His word about the submission of women to their husbands is wrenched from its context of mutuality. It is interesting that those who would quote these passages from the epistles to justify male domination of women would not quote adjacent passages to condone slavery. To do either one is to distort the message of liberation that is the heart of the scriptures.

In the face of such distortions, we must recapture the radical nature of our evangelical heritage on the issue of feminism and place ourselves in the forefront of change. To do so means to unshackle ourselves from the weight of centuries of patriarchy in the church.

The Old Testament records a time when wives were property, sons were preferred over daughters, women were considered periodically unclean, and polygamy and concubinage were condoned. Conditions had improved by New Testament times, but women were still considered inferior and were deprived of many rights. Today we find even greater improvement; and yet there are those who would still saddle us with narrow images of Eve as temptress and Mary as puritanical paradox of virginity and motherhood.

WHILE WOMEN PARTICIPATE on many levels of the church's life, ordination is often seen as the central gauge of the progress of women in the church. A recent report by the National Council of Churches shows that women comprise 20 percent of all seminarians; upon graduation they are generally placed in small, often rural parishes and receive an average salary that is \$4,755 less than that of their male counterparts.

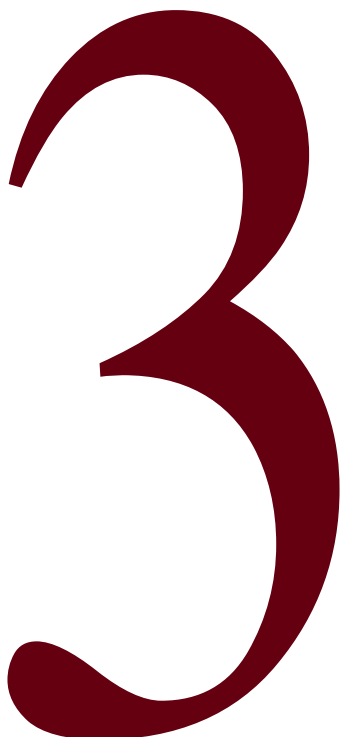
And several denominations still refuse to ordain them.

I began my own quest for ordination four years ago and gave it up a year later. The denomination in which I was raised was all too eager to be the pioneer in swelling its ranks with women ministers, placing more value on my gender than on my faith and thoughts. I finally left it when I was told that if I ever wanted to be transferred to another area—a prospect that was likely since I grew up in a largely rural church conference and was interested in urban ministry—I could wait 10 years for a “special appointment” (men wait five) or marry a man in the area to which I wished to move.

The second denomination with which I had ties was uncertain as to whether it wanted to ordain women at all. But its ambivalence was less distasteful to me than the patronizing response I had encountered from the first. However, I finally became impatient and had to choose between fighting structures and doing ministry in an unordained way. For me, the fight ended there. But it goes on for others in many places.

We can be thankful that the groundwork for feminism was laid in the mid-19th century by Sojourner Truth and many like her, who spoke and wrote about women's rights, particularly suffrage. Feminism then lay dormant for awhile, erupting again a century later, this time largely in the secular sector. In both cases, a handful of women held the vision and were willing to make the sacrifices and bear the pain and ridicule that their beliefs brought upon them.

I WAS 9 YEARS OLD when Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* appeared in the early 1960s, shattering myths and opening up new possibilities for women. It was written mostly about my mother and her generation. But for them, marriages and pat-



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terns were already set, children present and in the making. Only a minority of women were able to pay the price to make changes. Mine is the “transition generation.” We are the benefactors of the stir that was brewing even before we reached junior high. We do not suffer as many open wounds as women of our mothers’ generation, but we inherit the scars. Like any in a period of social upheaval, we feel both the pain and hope of new awareness about ourselves. We trust that our struggles will insure new social, vocational, and intellectual freedom for our sons and daughters.

I confess that I have been a reluctant feminist. I remember reading in seminary with great relish all the information I could find on black and Latin American theologies of liberation—the “important” theologies of really oppressed people. I largely ignored feminist theology, although it was my professor’s major focus.

It was too easy to accept the oppression of other people and not recognize my own. Perhaps there is something too painful in accepting our own weakness, something haughty in our desire to rescue others from theirs. Getting in touch with the oppression of women, however unimportant or removed it might once have seemed to us, is crucial to our understanding of ourselves.

We must understand our struggle on a personal level, facing the psychological and emotional dimensions of our upbringing. We must support each other in wrestling with our ambivalence about ourselves, our anger at our socialization, our desires to return to the stability of former roles, our mistakes when we step forward on shaky, new ground.

The myths that place men in “rational” boxes and women in “intuitive” ones must be challenged. We cannot deny the effect of our socialization, but we must acknowledge it simply for what it is—and not some God-ordained difference. Then we can work to develop skills we lack.

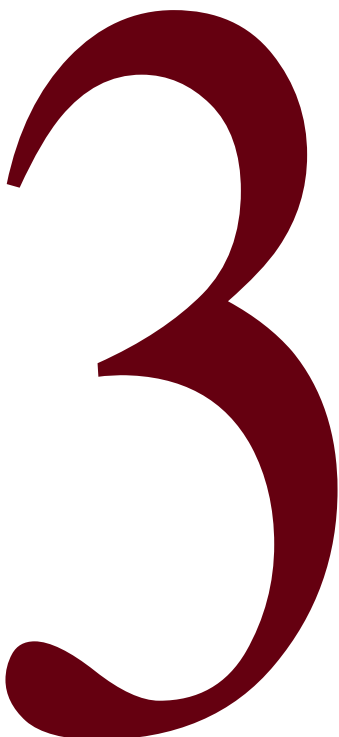
The personal freedom we find will make its way into our family structures. Children are precious gifts, and teaching and nurturing them are among the most important functions we can perform. Men should be free to share equally in the joy of our children’s growth, while we allow women to pursue other vocations if they choose to. We will need flexibility and patience.

It is too easy to blame the disintegration of the family and moral values on the changing role of women while ignoring mobility, technology, materialism, alienation from authority structures, and other factors that have set the tone of the times. If we cannot forge an alternative vision that will lend stability to the family as well as offer wholeness for all of its members, we can only expect the society to heed our conservative brothers and sisters and further entrench itself in old patterns. We need to cling to the stability of God’s faithfulness and liberation, not to our secure, former roles.

Grounding our identity in God will also lead some of us to choose singleness. This choice, traditionally for a man a sign of independence and for a woman inability to snare a husband, needs to be freed of stereotypes.

Our new self-awareness will compel us to work on the political level, building on progress already gained. New understandings and creativity are being infused into the society as women assume responsibility in areas which we have previously avoided or been kept out of. Moving toward vocations and family life unbound by role limitations will provide freedom for men as well as women. As we change our views of ourselves and our families, we will be restructuring institutions and living patterns. Part-time vocations, flexible work hours, and shared parenting must be considered with new openness. Communities of support will be valuable in these times.

THERE IS MUCH that we can benefit from in the secular feminist movement. Our Christian faith, however, will temper many feminist expressions of power. We cannot view the world as if it holds a limited amount of power, of which we are entitled a



Toward One Freedom (cont.)

portion. This view will only create competition among oppressed groups.

For us, power means taking control of our own lives so that we can give them away. We must continue to look to Jesus as our example. Jesus' power was immersed in servanthood; his life was one of submission.

To women who have been raised to "be submitted" and have found that oppressive, who have felt that they were destined to be slaves to husband, house, and children, these words raise immediate resistance. We must first of all know Jesus as our liberator, who frees and empowers us to serve. The freedom he gives is the difference between servanthood and slavery.

We also know Jesus to be one who is identified with the suffering of all people. It is significant that most of the leaders of the early women's rights movement were strong abolitionists. These women understood their own oppression to be part of a greater fabric of injustice.

Sojourner Truth deeply knew the oppression of both her race and her sex. The lives of women and men for whom mere survival is a daily struggle and poverty a tormenting bondage must add perspective to our own search for fulfillment and wholeness.

Jesus Christ came as liberator of all, so let us walk together toward one freedom. Perhaps our greatest compliment will be for onlookers to accuse us, as they did Sojourner Truth, of mixing our concerns. Such a mixture will not dilute the strength of our commitments, but only make more potent our common struggle for liberation. ■

Joyce Hollyday was associate editor of Sojourners magazine when this article appeared in the July 1980 issue.

