

## **MYSTICS & MARTYRS: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN TO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

*20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."*

(John 17:20-26, NRSV)

The unequal treatment of women has been a perpetual sin in the history of the church since the beginning. Over these past 2,000 years some churches have made more progress toward equality than others. For instance, the Baptist church that I grew up in had an all male Board of Deacons. And whereas the preacher might call on any man to stand and pray during a worship service, he (yes, always he) would never call on a woman to pray. The ushers who distributed orders of service and took up the offering were

always men. Sermons about wives submitting to their husbands were commonplace. While women were the backbone of the church, attending in greater numbers, teaching most of the Sunday School classes, visiting the sick, volunteering to assist in the church office, their official leadership positions were limited to the Women's Missionary Union and the equivalent program for girls. If any of the women resented the patriarchal nature of our church I never heard about it. The only controversy I remember was in the 1970's when some women wanted to wear pants to church on Sunday evenings! Nothing seemed unusual to me about this approach to Christianity. Other than different modes of baptism, I never knew that other churches were all that different from mine. After all, mine was the norm for over 10 million other Southern Baptists at the time.

Ours was not the only church that treated women unjustly. An unfortunate element in the history of the church including Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox is our poor track record in regards to women. However, throughout these past 2,000 years of male-dominated church history, there exists significant examples of spiritual and spirited women who could not and would not be confined to the narrow norms of the times when they heard the liberating call of God's Spirit. Without a doubt women made greater contributions in biblical times as well as throughout church history than we will ever know. Since men wrote the history books, women's contributions were often discounted and overlooked. Fortunately not all of these stories were lost and thus we keep alive the memories of these women and the spiritual contributions they made.

It should be noted that women played a significant role in the ministry of Jesus including substantial financial support. Unlike other men at the time, Jesus had an enlightened view of women and treated them with respect

and dignity. However, the role of women in the Bible is not the subject of today's sermon. Instead we will focus on the contributions of women in post-biblical times.

Much of my material is drawn from a chapter written by two of my favorite seminary professors, Glenn Hinson, from whom I took courses in church history and spiritual development, and Molly Marshall, who is now the president of a seminary, from whom I took systematic theology and much to my parents' chagrin, a seminar in feminist theology. Hinson and Marshall point out that while, "women's [contributions] paralleled that made by men, [they] also differed and complemented the male approach to spirituality" (*Becoming Christian: Dimensions of Spiritual Formation*, Bill J. Leonard editor, p. 116).

Protestants like us who do not emphasize the notion of saints tend to ignore the early Christian martyrs. While church history has often lauded the martyred men of the church, martyred women have not been given their due. Some ancient accounts, including the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, highlight the endurance and strength shown by women in the face of torture and persecution. It could be that, "For women, endurance during torture was not unlike the endurance of pain in childbirth" in ancient times (Ibid. p. 117). Specific histories, called martyrologies, offer lists and accounts of those who died confessing the name of Christ. A North African account from 180 A.D. lists the names of a dozen martyrs, half of whom were women.

Not only has the role of women as martyrs in the early church been overlooked, but so has their contributions to the rise of mysticism and monasteries. Many of us have heard of the "desert fathers," Christian men who, in the first several centuries of the church, fled the bustling cities in search of spiritual growth through lives of solitude in the desert. In truth there were also "desert mothers" who made

important contributions to the development of Christian contemplation. The New Testament and other early Christian documents speak of groups of widows and virgins who “performed acts of charity, extended hospitality to travelers, cared for orphans, nursed the sick, and rendered other ministries” including the ministry of intercessory prayer (Ibid. p. 118).

As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century accounts exist of exceptional women who made lasting spiritual contributions to the life of the church. Among these Macrina is credited with influencing her whole family toward lives of prayer and service to Christ. While she was the catalyst for spiritual transformation in her family, Macrina is best known for influencing her four brothers including Basil of the Great, who created the Rule that became the foundation of monastic life in the Eastern Orthodox churches, and Gregory of Nyssa, who as a bishop became the foremost orthodox theologian in Asia Minor (Ibid. pp. 118-119 and *The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Tradition*, p. 171). Through her profound influence on her brothers Macrina quite literally changed the course of church history forever.

Macrina “persuaded her mother to give up the ostentatious style of life she had pursued and form a religious community housed on one of the family estates in Cappadocia. The household was established and included family maids, now treated as equals instead of slaves” (Marshall and Hinson, p. 119). Other wealthy women helped found monasteries including Marcella, Paula, and Melania the Elder. Choosing lives of asceticism in a religious community gave women freedom to pursue a specific call or vocation from God, although they experienced exclusion from the higher orders, which required ordination (Ibid. p. 120).

In the Middle Ages women developed a type of mysticism called *Brautmystick* or “bridal mysticism.” Early

practitioners include Elizabeth of Schonau who “did not experience ecstasies or hallucinations. Rather, like Old Testament prophets, she felt the normal use of her physical senses suspended and received messages under girded with biblical citations...No one, she acknowledged, experiences God directly, but only ‘through the windows of faith’...At the base of the tradition rested the conviction that God reaches out in love toward those who reach out toward God in love” (Ibid. p. 121).

By the fourteenth century, bridal mysticism gained popularity among men as well. The most famous mystic of the day was Julian of Norwich. Her fame spread throughout England and people sought her guidance on spiritual as well as theological issues. “She is often cited for addressing God...as ‘our Mother,’ a custom extending back as far as the third-century theologian Clement of Alexandria” (Ibid. pp. 122-123). Another famous mystic, Catherine of Sienna, “played a significant role in church reform during her brief life. She was largely responsible for the return of the papacy from Avignon to Rome in 1378” (Ibid. p. 123).

Throughout the history of Christianity many women became great teachers of prayer, the most famous being Teresa of Avila, the first woman ever recognized as a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. While Teresa lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, she did not receive this honor until 1970. In 1555 Teresa experienced ecstatic trances, visions of Christ, and divine instructions. She founded a monastery in 1562 and labored to build others for both women and men throughout Spain. Teresa wrote three books including *The Way of Perfection*, *Life*, and *The Interior Castle*. People responded to the down-to-earth nature of her teachings (Ibid.).

Things changed with the rise of Protestantism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, monasteries were closed and contemplative vocations eliminated. Nevertheless, women continued to

make spiritual contributions in other areas of church life including Mother Ann Lee who founded the Shakers. Since Vatican II in 1963, more and more Protestants, including many women, have rediscovered the joy of contemplative prayer (Ibid. 124).

Despite the patriarchal nature of the church, courageous women, the majority of whose names we will never know, deepened their interior spiritual lives and profoundly improved the exterior world around them. On the one hand it saddens me that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century most women in the majority of churches worldwide experience discrimination and unequal opportunities. I am proud though of our church and denomination for going against societal norms in regards to treating women and men equally.

Equality does not mean uniformity. Differences between women and men, biologically, emotionally, and socially, influence spiritual differences. For so many centuries and even today, men's experiences are considered the norm and the measuring stick by which women's experiences are measured. Progress has been made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and I hope that the forces that would turn back the clock to the days of inequality do not prevail in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It should be noted that these forces are on the march.

God's goal for humanity, men and women alike, can be found in today's scripture lesson from John 17. These verses come from a prayer Jesus offered in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, the night before he died. Jesus prayed not only for the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, but for all of us through the ages who strive to be his faithful followers. Christ's earnest prayer was that we would all be one (17:22b). He never prayed that we would all be the same, he never prayed that we would all believe the exact same theology or practice the same spirituality. He prayed

that we would all be one. As U2's Bono sings, "We're one, but we're not the same. We have to carry each other."

Let us learn from one another, appreciating our similarities as well as our differences, striving always to follow Christ, each of us, female and male, sisters and brothers, one with each other and one with God. AMEN.

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## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

God of our mothers and God of our fathers, Creator of the universe and our Creator, we give you thanks this day for creating us female and male, so different and yet so similar. Forgive the churches through the centuries who have oppressed women, stifling the gifts of your Spirit within them. Grant our church the vision of an inclusive society and help us work to end inequality for all people, that every person might be granted dignity, freedom, and worth. So let it be, O God.

And now to you, O God, be all glory and blessing and honor. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.