

# Women's Liberation

BRENDA J. BUTKA

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Women's liberation. To many, these frightening words signify the breakdown of family and society and the unnatural desire on the part of women to adopt male mannerisms and dress, hold men's jobs, and be paid men's wages. The phrase evokes pictures of stragglehaired, jeans-clad females abandoning luckless husbands and babies to scream hoarsely in the streets or pen vindictive doctoral theses. Older citizens may summon up memories of suffragettes chaining themselves to the White House fence or going on hunger strikes in English jails.

Many people, including some conservative Christians, shrug the movement off as the aberration of a group of frustrated, unfulfilled (meaning "not happily married") women who ought to be taken in hand by firm husbands or fathers. Pressed about the theological base for their attitudes, they are likely to answer with a perfunctory reference to the Fall and the glib quotation of Pauline texts to the effect that women should keep silence in the church and be subservient to their husbands. As is often the case in its encounters with contemporary cultural phenomena, conservative Christianity tends to write off women's lib immediately as a nonexistent problem, since "biblical solutions" supporting its own current life-style and attitudes have been assumed.

## I

What is women's lib? Can Christianity learn anything from the movement? These are the questions that must be answered before we can examine the question of exactly what might be learned.

Briefly, the feminist movement is a protest against Freud's dictum, "anatomy is destiny." Lib advocates of every stripe resent being defined primarily in terms of their sex; they resent being thought of first as women and only second as human beings. They wish to be free to develop talents and

personality without being limited by what is considered appropriately "feminine."

A natural corollary is "men's liberation."<sup>1</sup> However, the movement operates against the background of patriarchal Western society, which has traditionally limited woman's role to family and home, allocating to men leadership positions in the family and outside the home. Until relatively recently, women were even viewed legally as nonpersons, unable to vote or own property. These strictures are vanishing, of course, and women are gaining a measure of legal autonomy, although in only some states is discrimination on the basis of sex completely prohibited. Other states have partial legislation to protect against certain types of sex discrimination, but some states have no such legislation whatever.<sup>2</sup>

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Even when such external regulations are removed, however, powerful internal regulations are still at work to discourage women from achieving maximum intellectual and personal potential. Little girls are carefully taught that their primary goal is to be wives and mothers. Not too long ago one small girl described her plans for the future: "First I want to be a mommy. Then I want to be a bride in the church. Then maybe a nurse." Although there seems to be some confusion in this little girl's mind about the chronological order in which she could legitimately accomplish her goals, it is fairly obvious that she has been meticulously schooled to "live her whole life in the pursuit of feminine fulfillment."<sup>3</sup>

Scholastic achievement is on a par with that of boys in grade school but tends to drop off as social interests take over and girls begin to realize that a well-trained mind and a wide range of interests are not as certain a route to social success and marriage as is average achievement in a typically feminine field coupled with external attractiveness and a sort of domestic docility. The trend continues into graduate school. In 1968, although nearly as many women as men had finished four years of college, only 36 percent of master's degree candidates and only 13 percent of doctoral candidates were women.<sup>4</sup> Even those who do excel often make only tentative plans for a career, invariably prefaced with, "Then of course I may get married instead." In short, currently the American ideal woman (which is the product of a long tradition of feminine inferiority) is the mother-wife-housewife, and girls are molded in that image at the expense of their total physical, emotional, and mental development.

Unfortunately, this image is at violent odds with reality and is contradictory to ideals of maximum exercise of talent and aptitude as well. The typical American mother does work outside the home during her married

life, in fact. During the year 1969, 39.6 percent of married women (whose husbands were also in the home) worked for wages. Even in the category where one would least expect working women — mothers with children under six years of age — nearly 30 percent were employed during the year.<sup>5</sup>

Not only does she work, but the typical woman tends to perform mainly clerical or other routine, low-skill tasks, since her dutiful rush into the mother-wife role pushed other goals aside. She also suffers a heavy burden of guilt, since she is not living up to the idealized image of full-time wife-mother, which she has accepted in accord with the view of society at large.

Why must this image persist? ask the feminists. Not only does it ignore woman's distinctive human characteristic, her mind, in order to enshrine her reproductive capacity, a purely biological ability possessed by all living things, but it ignores the fact that a large proportion of women do enter the working world in fact. Certainly the husband-father role is not seen in the same light as a full-time occupation. Why limit the rewards and frustrations of childrearing to the mother and require guilt if she does not conform? Why limit the rewards and frustrations of productive, paid work in the outside world to the father and force him to question his masculinity if he honestly enjoys caring for his children? For both idealistic and practical reasons, women's lib suggests rethinking both male and female roles in family and society.

## II

But much more is involved than simply what men and women do. The core of the issue is what men and women *are*. Identity is involved — not merely function. At present, women tend to be viewed and identified by the world simply as accessories belonging to a male, bearing first a father's name and then a husband's. Personality and ability are submerged in the ambition and accomplishments of the man nearest them. A woman becomes transparent, nonexistent as a person in her own right, as she lives vicariously through her family as daughter, wife, and mother. Schooled to regard family as purpose and goal, she herself has no interests or desires. The emptiness begins to show as the children demand less and less time; and when they are gone, she is left middle-aged in an empty house, her surrogate lives stripped away, no life of her own. The identity crisis which she avoided at twenty by marrying into someone else's identity strikes twice as hard at forty-five.

Women's liberation calls women to personhood, to an independence born of accomplishment that demands self-respect and the respect of others. Family is certainly not excluded from the feminist scheme. In fact, mutual

respect and independence form the basis for enduring love relationships and release much of the internal pressure that builds up when one person lives vicariously through another.

The movement is certainly not homogenous, however, and any attempt to characterize it is doomed to fail in some respect. Included under the same banner are widely different positions, ranging from the simple equal-wage advocate to the radical who proposes to replace patriarchal society with a matriarchy, to substitute female dominance for male. Such diversity of viewpoint makes for much infighting, results in sensational news coverage and confused general impact on the public, and prevents the movement from exerting pressure equal to its potential.

Is women's lib worth a Christian's notice?

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Since women make up half of the world to which Christianity's message is directed, and more than half the membership of the church, the question seems rhetorical. Moreover, the movement has become fairly well entrenched in contemporary culture, as a sampling of popular magazines or college-town bookstores reveals. It would seem that all cultural phenomena should be carefully evaluated by the church, since both members and the objects of their missionary outreach are encountered in the matrix of culture. If theology is in fact aimed at mediating religion and culture,<sup>6</sup> the women's lib movement should be absorbed into contemporary theological enterprise. At the very least, it should trigger some serious thinking.

### III

Given that women's lib exists, that we as Adventist Christians should look at and listen to it, what sorts of things might we be expected to learn?

A hierarchy of issues is involved, pyramiding from broad theoretical issues to detailed specifics, as, for example, the "question" of equal wages for women employees. Specific questions may be quite easily answered; but unless the hidden implications are uncovered, solutions will be piecemeal and temporary. The assumption that the movement can be disposed of by guaranteeing equal wages entirely misses the real thrust — the areas that should provoke real concern among Christians and perhaps lead to radical reversals in life-styles and attitudes. The topic breaks down into roughly three stages.

*First*, and most superficial, are the specific questions: Should women work outside the home? Should women be allowed on the church platform? Is ordination to the ministry taboo forever? Should women be placed in positions of responsibility and policy formation in the church organization or in their jobs?

Answers to many of these questions will spring out of a balanced consideration (if such be possible) of the family, its internal structure and significance, and its role in society. This is the *second* level, that of the social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, and psychology. However, the sciences are mainly descriptive, and their only pretense at prescription is a feeble reiteration of "what is, ought to be," or "what has been, is no longer working, and new structures are arising that ought to be."

When these sciences become more normative than descriptive, they move into the area of philosophy. This, the *third* and deepest level, is "where it's at" as far as "where it ought to be" is concerned, and certainly this level includes theology. One's theology (as implicit in one's religion, if not explicitly formulated), in fact, is the source for one's "philosophy," if not synonymous with it. Woman's role, like all other issues, must be encountered at all three levels.

Although not proposing to emerge with any ultimate solutions, or even to examine any of the issues in depth, I do intend to sketch briefly some of the directions in which the women's liberation movement might profitably lead our minds.

Most immediately, we might be jarred into considering the personhood of the faceless women who shepherd us from cradle to grave — our mothers, cooks, scrubwomen, secretaries, wives, nurses, elementary school teachers. I rather think a thoughtful inquiry would reveal untold potential that was frustrated or unrealized simply because of the sex of the possessor. Those who have achieved highly have often done so at great personal cost and have suffered unnecessarily.

Thus we might be led to acknowledge honestly — emotionally as well as intellectually — that the "problem" of unfortunate limitation because of sex does indeed exist. This initial "consciousness-raising" step is perhaps the most difficult to take, and the most significant. Quite a risk is involved, since the personal security of many people of both sexes is at stake — exactly as dissolution of the feudal system threatened both nobility and peasants, and as emancipation of the slaves upset the stability of both plantation owners and their human chattels.

If we take the risk, setting aside our vested interests in the status quo long enough to realize the depth of the "problem," we might begin to feel uncomfortably that our glib Pauline quotations don't ring quite true. A little biblical scholarship might well uncover other seemingly conflicting statements that wipe out class distinctions between male and female, along with other Old Testament discrimination between Jew and Gentile, slave

and freeman. Perhaps we might conclude that male-oriented Israelite society tinted the revelation that filtered through it, rather than assume that revelation itself is primarily male-oriented. We might recognize that the traditional arguments for excluding women from the ministry (the masculinity of Christ, the Old Testament priesthood, and the Twelve Apostles) are not employed by Paul mainly because he wanted church members to preserve the dignity of marriage according to the standards of his day in order that the church would cause no scandal. Perhaps Paul's pronouncements on women were never intended to be timeless theological absolutes. (This thought might in turn heighten awareness of the fact that much of what passes as theological absolute may be cultural in origin — which, of course, leads to consideration of, and perhaps reformulation of, doctrines of revelation — which is the foundation of religion).

Certainly a calm appraisal of the roles women have played as prophetesses, deaconesses, and so on, from Israelite times down to the present, would mitigate the force of Paul's flat statements that women should keep silent in church. Adventists, of course, have the further example of Ellen G. White. It would be profitable to study more thoroughly her ideas about women in the context of her time. The church might also be reminded that its own missions have been enormously effective in emancipating and educating women in all parts of the world. Like it or not, the church has been involved in the business of women's liberation for several centuries already, and the consistency required by principle may require firm, even outspoken, support of a moderate brand of feminism.

Once we have loosened our rigid misconceptions about what the Bible does or does not say about woman's role, we will be free to approach the problems of the twentieth-century family in a fresh, completely Christian manner. Christianity emphasizes the worth of the individual and his uniquenesses, and it is the responsibility of the Christian community to encourage and develop those uniquenesses and to break down all stereotypes that prevent individuals from freely encountering one another, in racial, religious, sexual, or financial context.

Quite possibly such an approach would lead away from the nuclear family life-style now in fashion back to the extended family or a communal situation (and, no, this is not abolishing monogamy or sanctioning promiscuity). The nuclear family unit itself would certainly be much more flexible and better able to meet varying needs of family members if it no longer operated under the maxim that, ideally, woman's place is in the home and only in the home. Wives would be free to combine career and family, and,

no less important, husbands would also be free to combine family with career, the reverse side of the women's liberation coin. Family patterns might shift from dependent-independent relationships, which make both parties uneasy, to a healthy interdependence of equals. Rather than living in a hot-house of exclusive motherlove, children might have time to develop relationships with fathers. The mother's importance outside the home might force the child to realize her individuality and see that she does not exist simply to fulfill his every whim. Women who have established an identity apart from the wife-mother role would no longer be left empty and purposeless in childless middle age.

Under this new pattern of family life, with its implications about the independent personhood of woman, answers to specific questions could emerge relatively painlessly without having to force through thickets of antiquated prejudice. Certainly both church and world would profit from additional talents released for the general good, even (perhaps especially) in such traditionally masculine areas as theology and institutional administration.

A careful ear tuned to the women's movement recognizes that the movement strikes indirectly at the heart of the relationship between man and God by forcing reevaluation of revelation, and strikes directly and forcefully at the relationships between man and man. At the very least it would be prudent to listen before it's too late. Perhaps this is the impetus we need to move a bit faster toward our goal of becoming "sons" of God, where, as Paul put it, "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."<sup>7</sup>

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 The underlying assumption is, of course, that sex role patterning is largely cultural rather than inherently biological, an assumption that can be supported by a wealth of anthropological data. See, for example, Margaret Mead's *Male and Female* (New York: William Morrow and Company 1949).
- 2 The geography of inequality, *McCall's*, p. 92 (February 1971).
- 3 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company 1963), p. 22.
- 4 United States Department of Labor, Manpower Administration. Manpower report of the President. Included is a report on manpower requirements, resources, utilization, and training, by the United States Department of Labor (Washington: United States Government Printing Office 1970).
- 5 Manpower report of the President.
- 6 Herold D. Weiss, The theological task, *Spectrum* 1:13-22 (Autumn 1969).
- 7 Galatians 3:28 RSV.