

Chapter 1.

# Identity Crisis

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The American woman remains in crisis. The propaganda designed to incite restlessness, if not revolution, is continually being repackaged to appeal to her insecurities, sense of worthlessness, and covert or overt desire for power. With heady rhetoric and persuasive statistics women are launched into shallow and temporary solutions to profound and spiritual problems. While much of the secular agenda has been accomplished and has influenced the entire cultural infra-structure of our nation, it remains a formidable public and political force, with yet more changes on their agenda.

Grassroots changes are occurring in the churches as well, beginning with seminaries and Christian colleges. Some of the changes reflect altered attitudes, based on biblical principles long neglected. Others are structural changes which often reflect "knee-jerk" responses by men in leadership to exposed weakness and failure, a problem of guilt to which confession and repentance are the needed and appropriate response. Over-correctives can be as damaging as the problems they address. The new imperative is for men and women to recognize where the lines should be drawn, based on well-established biblical principles, and then to have the spiritual integrity and courage to maintain what God has ordained.

Women's liberation movements have been a catalyst for consideration of woman's plight in every strata of society. We continue to be confronted with some aged issues in new garments. Hostile fingers forever point to the church, and indeed to the Judeo-Christian tradition, as the instigators of male-female disruption. Unfortunately, many of these claims can be substantiated, and will not be put off by simplistic disclaimers. By their very criticism, feminists give inadvertent testimony to the degree in which society is shaped by the church. When society is filled with angry, hurting, displaced people, the church, to whom her Lord gave the commission to be salt and light in the world, the revelation of truth and life, must take her rightful share of responsibility. We must be constantly alert to the enemy, Satan's, attempts to undermine and/or trivialize our true identity.

For this reason, it is imperative that those who comprise the Body of Christ continue to give serious, painstaking (and where necessary, painful) attention to the ways in which we are misrepresenting God's revealed way for humans to live and work together. There are two ways in which the church can substantiate the hostile claims against Judaic-Christian tradition. One is by perpetuating the misuse/abuse of biblical patterns, and the other is to accede to non-biblical, secular notions of human inter-relationships. Clearly, this is not an inconsequential skirmish. It is a call to wrestle with how the Body of Christ is affecting the basic moral structure of society, in both her individual members and corporately.

To whom shall we go for our directive? Who can define our human identity and its function? Human opinion is at best simply arbitrary, clouded by the dust of our humanity. We are simply physicians attempting to heal ourselves, sexual beings striving to define our sexuality. We form a jury to try ourselves. A detached observer is required; there is a beam in every human eye. C.S. Lewis warns of the dangers of "chronological snobbery"; that is, the tendency to accept whatever theory is currently in vogue as necessarily valid.

The issue of identity and role, both male and female, is as ancient as Adam and Eve. Both our human identity and our function were established by creative fiat, contested and distorted by the initial rebellion of the first pair and by succeeding cultural adaptations. The creative intent has been defied, misinterpreted and distorted through human ignorance and rebellion. The result is that social inequities of every kind have been given equal time by both sexes. This is the human dilemma, private rebellion become public, the corporate revelation of the individual human heart.

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, written in 1879, Helmer says, "Before everything else you're a wife and a mother." Nora replies, "I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before everything else I am a human being just as much as you are. At any rate I shall try to become one." Then, leaving behind a baffled, confused, and perhaps chastened man, Nora pursues her search for identity. How readily we who are women identify with her frustration, but the drama ends as the question is posed. We are left without answers, without definitions, because in a self-focused context there are none. It is therefore with both compassion and misgivings that we trace the futility of her pursuit.

For generations women have been demanding a positive answer to the question presented by Dorothy Sayers in her 1938 lecture, "Are Women Human?" Both women and men have grappled with the struggle of women to be acknowledged as completely human as men. Sigmund Freud wrote approximately twenty-six volumes trying to identify the problems of humanity. There are helpful analyses in his works, yet no identity emerges from all this effort. Many images have been projected of the female: earth mother, temptress, waif, matriarchal aggressor. Women have been characterized in extremes from bane to blessing, scourge to savior. But now that Gloria, Betty, and Virginia have become, shall we say, "household names," now that we have learned to express our outrage and define our hang-ups, are we any nearer to security and identity?

In a *Life* magazine article entitled "Women Are Learning to Express Outrage," a writer who attended numerous meetings of Women's Liberation describes her reactions: "These experiences unnerved me, despite reminders that I should not take it personally, and an understanding of what lay behind the war and hostility. The negative reactions toward me expressed a great deal of what Women's Lib is about: women's long-suppressed anger at being used, women's sense of vulnerability and defenselessness, women's suspicion and mistrust of other women, women's insecurity, lack of confidence in their judgment, the secret fear, as one girl put it, that maybe we are inferior."

The greatest rigor in any society facing man and woman is uncertainty, the lack of constants and absolutes. Technology has made a significant contribution to today's relativistic madness, but the misuse of technology is a symptom, not the cause. If man is the creation of God, then we slip our moorings if we, the creatures, declare our independence of our Creator. He is our constant, our absolute. In him is truth and life, and apart from him there is neither truth nor life.

We have two alternatives in assessing our identity. There really are but two, and they are totally different. Each provides promises, and each results in its own distinct life-style. Each requires commitment, and each precludes the other. We may attempt neutrality, but that is only an illusion. Life confronts us with the necessity of choosing. We may try to compromise, but that will result in hopeless ambivalence and fragmentation.

It is not a choice between verities. God is Truth, and apart from him there is no truth. Truth by its very nature is absolute and therefore uncompromising. To choose a God-centered identity is to opt for truth, the unfolding of reality. A self-focused identity is spurious and pseudo, counterfeit truth, camouflaged reality. It denies the truth about who we are, and alienates us from God, our Creator, by denying him his rightful prerogatives.

The fragmentation of today indicates that we were never intended to have a self-focused identity. God made us for himself, and only in relationship with him can we know who we are. He has not left us without a revelation of our identity. It is delineated in the manual (fmanual?) issued by our Maker. That manual is his Word. It is both the duty and privilege of the church to speak to societal needs from the authority and revelation of God's Word.

Prerequisite to clear understanding of biblical revelation is a readiness to set aside our cultural preconditioning, to be non-defensive and transparent, willing to personally respond to its incisiveness, to accept God's criteria for good rather than our own. Resistance to truth will give a negative connotation to what God is saying. In no way does God intend to strike at us with his Word. He created us with loving purpose. He offers us his unconditional acceptance; we need only receive it. We dare not presume to speak for God in the world with unacknowledged, unconfessed hostility and bitterness toward him and humanity. The church must defend neither hostile feminists nor pious pretenders cloaked in misapplied and/or misunderstood Bible phrases.

Who is equal to the task? Let none claim human infallibility! Only let us with appropriate humility confident that God is both Truth and Love, approaching his Word with positive expectancy and the awareness of our finiteness.

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