

Chapter 14.

## The Parable of Motherhood

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Legend has it that the earth as mother, the womb from which all living things are born and to which all return at death, was perhaps the earliest representation of the divine in proto-historic religions. The Great Mother Goddess, a powerful incarnation of the female principle as life-force, reigned over the sky, earth and underworld and revealed herself to humankind in the ever-renewing productivity of the earth and the ever-recurring rhythms of the moon...And woman, who shared the prodigious magic of procreation and nurture, whose menstrual cycle mysteriously coincided with the lunar cycle was the terrestrial link in this cosmic orbit of fertility. Fertility statuettes tell us that for our Paleolithic ancestors the generative force of the universe focuses in the female body. It is remarkable how many such legends survive among preliterate cultures of an earlier matriarchal period and a violent uprising by men in which they usurped female authority.

According to a myth, "...in the beginning the sorceress woman, Kra, taught women to dominate men through terror, transforming themselves into spirits by the use of masks. But the sun man, Kran, learned the secret and revealed it to the men. They promptly killed the women, sparing only the girls, and to legitimize their seizure of power they took over the masks and the magic."--From "The Downfall of Woman," by Dena Justin, *Intellectual Digest*, October 1973, reprinted from *Natural History* .

The above mythology is a spurious historical record; nevertheless, it is an illuminating one. In it we may see the projected distortions of human thinking, our fantasies, delusions and illusions about ourselves and others. In it we see the struggle for dominance as it actually exists in human hearts. How ironic to align ourselves in opposition to others, male or female, only to find that in the process we are destroying ourselves as well!

It is simply mind-boggling to observe "religious" rituals, so strikingly similar to the myths just related, being reenacted in contemporary scenarios. It is amazing that the lessons of the past should have so completely escaped the reckoning of educated, intelligent persons. It is appalling to see the perversity of some who once claimed to be "biblical feminists", in their "naming God" and arrogant claims of theological preeminence. It is vividly reminiscent of the satanic manipulation of Eve in Genesis chapter 3. They have remained in the forbidden garden, continued to eat of the forbidden fruit, and to heed the beguiling strategy of the enemy. The moral and spiritual carnage remains.

We return to the words of Genesis 3:20, where the one true God reveals his cosmic, loving purpose for woman:

"The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living."

It is understandable that pagan philosophers have misapplied and misinterpreted this Divine edict. One wonders, however, how such a man as Thomas Aquinas should derive from it that woman is "a misbegotten female...made in the image of man, not God."

Others, some Christian women included, have found these words, as well as some of the Apostle Paul's, threatening and demeaning. These individuals are reacting defensively to the misconceptions rather than looking for God's loving intent.

Simone de Beauvoir, the eminent French feminist, says:

"It is in maternity that woman fulfills her physiological destiny; it is her natural 'calling,' since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species. But we have seen already that human society is never abandoned wholly to nature. And for about a century the reproductive function in particular has no longer been at the mercy solely of biological chance; it has come under the voluntary control of human beings."

She then refers briefly to the use of contraceptives, from which is launched a plea for legalized abortion. It is not my intention to attempt a critique of Ms. de Beauvoir. However, she raises some issues which cannot be ignored since they are realities with which we must live and reckon.

It is heartening to find this articulate feminist acknowledging that maternity is woman's physical calling. Granting this innate sense of physiological destiny, one can scarcely avoid the conclusion that abortion is a serious assault on the female psyche, quite apart from any religious connotations of guilt. A deep sense of frustration and even worthlessness is the common experience of many childless women as well. Much of the argument for legalized abortion seems to equate it with the surgical removal of a malignancy. It seems to me that quite apart from the religious and societal factors, nature demands a more sensitive evaluation.

In the one paragraph quoted, Ms. de Beauvoir raises two issues which are at once separate yet inextricable: the woman as an individual, and woman woven into the fabric of society. For while it is true that each of us must be autonomous in some sense, it is also true that "no man (or woman) is an island." Society is us! A deteriorating, sick society is made up of deteriorating and sick individuals. Our legal system is a vital factor in controlling the brutality of one human against another, but the analgesic to pain will not cure its malignant cause. We must be prepared to face the consequences of the misuse of our sexuality, individually and corporately.

The function of the church has always been to direct compassion toward the symptoms of evil, and redemption to the cause. The true church of Jesus Christ is not an organization, but an organism comprised not of antiseptic superhumans, but redeemed sinners in varying stages of Christian maturity. The greatest hypocrisy of the church is not our political ambivalence, but the credibility gap between our verbal witness to truth and lives which deny it. The corrective to society's ills must be found in honest, pure, sensitive and loving sexual relationships within the community of Christ's disciples. Since we are God's ordained witness to truth, we must face the sexual inequities and ignorance within the community of believers with repentance and a relentless commitment to seeking and enacting God's truth with love.

My generation has inherited and perpetuated error, which, judging from much of the current literature, has provoked a reactionary response. The reactionary response in turn, will be over-corrected by their progeny. Truth out of balance becomes error! Let us pray for clear heads, and emotions controlled by a Spirit-directed focus on God's Word. Such a focus always faces life realistically. Only the Spirit of Truth can chart our course through the mish-mash of fantasy, illusion and intellectual speculation which comprises "natural" wisdom.

"And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them"  
(Genesis 3:21).

This beautiful picture of God ministering redemption to his creatures remains the only solution to the human dilemma. The way out is the way back to the God who made us for himself, the God who made woman so that he could "mother" mankind through her.

Eve, we are told in Genesis 3:20, was so named "because she was the mother of all living." It seems apparent from the biblical account that only Adam and Eve and the animals were then living. Her name was prophetic, of course, because she would bear physical children. However, it seems evident that her motherhood was far more extensive and of deeper significance than the merely physical. I am convinced that the physical, sensory life is a parable of the spiritual. Eve was mankind's mother equipped for her function by a special sensitivity toward life in all forms. Her physical anatomy symbolizes that she is equipped to nurture life, not as a mere

"baby machine" but in every dimension--physical, emotional and spiritual.

Few would claim that all life exists in only a physical dimension. Most will acknowledge that humans are three-dimensional. The Apostle Paul acknowledges the whole person as spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Surely the all-wise God who created us in his own likeness and image and designed us male and female would not fail to coordinate the functions of our humanity into an integrated unit. Since there are evident complementary physical differences between the sexes, there must also be a complement of emotional differences as well, spiritual equality serving as the basic human identity out of which the soul (mind, emotion, will) and body function. Our sexuality, then, must encompass the whole person, and being a woman a distinctive way of expressing our humanity, equal in value but different in mode from maleness.

The implications of Eve's name, together with the evident physical characteristics of the female, added to the cultural pattern most frequently acknowledged by society, indicate that the female mode is primarily one of nurturer. In the fourteenth century, Lady Julian wrote *The Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*. In this work she says: "God Almighty is our kindly Father; God All-Wisdom is our kindly Mother." Quoted in *Time* magazine, film critic Sandra Chevey says, "The consistencies of a patriarchal society are science, reason, and law, and in a matriarchal society they are art, magic, spirituality, and mystery."

My read on all of this, based on what I believe the scriptures clearly teach, is that a patriarchal society is the necessary structure for societal order. The "humanities" which nurture and develop the subjective gifts are woman's contribution within the patriarchal structure. They are indeed a complement, when God's order for sexual function is maintained. It is adversarial chaos when his design is preempted and disdained.

Dr. John Wakefield, a gifted industrial psychiatrist, has observed that a female executive who functions as a mother can maintain harmonious relationships and excel as an executive, because in the sensitivity of the female mode of nurturing she does not compete with men nor intimidate other women. A male executive, he continues, functions best as a father. If either attempts to reverse these sexual distinctives, relationships suffer and their executive function is jeopardized. Here again we see evidence that the mother-father functions are more than biological.

It is God's intention that every woman should function as a mother in society--as a spiritual mother, of which physical motherhood is a paradigm. An interesting corroboration of this is found in John 19:26,27. The Lord Jesus spoke to his mother from the cross: "Woman, behold your son," indicating John the disciple. Then, to John: "Behold your mother." John was of course not Mary's biological son, but the Lord, addressing her as "Woman" to acknowledge her full-orbed womanhood, then assigned her to John as his spiritual mother.

Jesus, the master teacher, frequently taught through parables. Nature is replete with parables of spiritual truth. Our plastic, urbanized society has deprived us of rich lessons from soil, plant and animal life and a general relatedness to the world of nature. One such parable, however, surrounds us persistently: the parable of natural birth. From the beginning, God gave us this living stereograph diagramming the method for nurturing life in every dimension.

Someone has said that "soul sex" (meaning sex enacted in the context of spiritual unity) is the "ultimate trip" of humanity. Actually, it is but symbolic of our "ultimate trip," which is our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, without which the symbol would be empty and irrelevant. The act of sex functions out of our identity; it is not our identity. Motherhood is also a function, expressive of life in its three dimensions. Each may be seen in the three stages of physical pregnancy: inception, gestation, delivery.

Genesis 4:1 records in three small words the first conception in human history: "Adam knew Eve." The word, "knew," suggests that life is produced, results from, intimate relationship. A relationship in which those involved really understand one another. This approach would restore sanity, meaning, and fulfillment to human sexuality. Life is intended to emanate from intimate love relationships. The matter of "knowing" one another implicates body, soul, and spirit.

"True sexuality is a function of the total personality, and is experienced and expressed only in the lives of genuinely mature people. Anybody listening carefully understands that many

people use sex as a language through which they whisper reassurance to themselves. That is the meaning of it for women or men who are uneasy about their own sexual identification and who use it to assure themselves of their femininity or masculinity rather than to communicate something to another person. It is perhaps the most tragic of all the uses of sex, because it leaves the man or woman fundamentally in isolation from another individual. This 'reassuring' use only underscores our human capacity to make other people into means of achieving our own ends. Such an attitude is the death of any genuine reaching out to another."

These wise words are quoted from an article in *Redbook* magazine, May, 1972, "The Sex Mystique," by Father Eugene C. Kennedy. We cannot really know one another without communicating as whole persons. God communicates his life to us in all three dimensions; we are to communicate the beauty of his character in every area of our lives.

We can have "knowing" relationships, when we learn to receive others as living, redeemable human beings--not as inferiors, and therefore "projects," nor as superiors and therefore "objects of worship. Receptivity is the beginning. The next step in the nurturing process is that of response, or relatedness. Once the initiated life is received, the whole body of the woman responds to that life within her. Her entire metabolism matches the demands of that life. Followed by this is delivery, or the release of that life. Pregnancy terminates, the umbilical cord is severed. This is a natural process with emotional and spiritual connotations.

The same pattern is followed in the new birth, or spiritual regeneration. We receive life; we do not initiate it. Spiritual life also emanates from relationship. "I know my sheep, and am known of mine," Jesus says (John 10:14). We cannot have spiritual life without that mutual, intimate knowing. Christ in me, and I in Christ, is not a casual relationship, a mere profession, a polite gesture, but a genuine possession of one another. God initiated our spiritual rebirth in the giving of his Son; it is up to us to receive him.

J.B. Phillips, in paraphrasing John 1:11, captures so well its poignancy:

"He came to his own home and his own people received him not!"

Natural and spiritual life are both contingent upon our willingness to be receivers. John 1:12 says

"...but to all who received him (the Lord Jesus Christ) he gave power to become children of God."

We are spiritually reborn when we receive the life introduced by the Spirit of God, symbolized by the inception of physical life.

Our Lord said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Giving is the end of the process. Receiving is the means by which we learn to give; indeed, we have nothing to give until we have first received. Ephesians 3:19 says, "...and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Fullness of life results from intimately knowing Jesus Christ, whom we have received by faith.

The Apostle Paul beautifully expresses this again in Philippians 3:10,

"...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

This is the way in which God's image is restored in us. The more we know him and understand his ways, the more demonstrable our likeness to him. This intimate relatedness with Christ results in true self-realization. In this reciprocal knowing, we truly learn to know ourselves. Being identified with Jesus Christ means to live

responsively to his life within us, to express the uniqueness of our individuality within the context of his character. We nurture God's life within us in the same way the mother's body responds to the growing fetus. We feed that new life with the milk and the meat of the Word of God. And as we submit to the demands of Christ's life within, our identification with him grows until we are able to say with the Apostle Paul,

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Then, as in the natural life where the fetus becomes the focal interest, the new taking precedence over the old, so,

"though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." (II Cor. 5:16)

As the mother's body is intent upon giving over all the nutriments necessary to the development of that new life within, so all we have and are is to be given over to the development and expression of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ.

Release is the third stage. There is a beautiful freedom in the Christian life, a freedom to be our true selves. But it comes from being subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ. This is the continuing paradox of the Christian life. We are released from the bondage of the old law of sin and death to the new principle of life and resurrection. We are liberated from the agonizing bondage of the old life, ("I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate..." Romans 7:19)--to a totally new principle, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, that sets us free from the law of sin and death. (Contrast Romans chapters 7 and 8.) In the physical sense we may have sterility, abortive pregnancy, or the full development and release of the child to a new life dependency. There is sterility if we do not receive life, abortion if we do not nurture it, abundant life if we release it to its intended purpose.

It is so also in the spiritual life. We have spiritual sterility (experienced emotionally and physically) if we do not receive Christ, aborted maturity if we do not nurture the new life with his Word and submit our will in obedience to him, and abundant life when we release his life to others, reproducing the character of Christ and making him incarnate for others to see and know. Released from the old self-centeredness, to the new liberty of dependency on Christ's life, we may teach and nurture that freedom in others.

The life of Jesus Christ which we receive by faith is meant to be disseminated into society. In receiving him we are reborn to a totally new resource for living: the love of God which serves and gives, forgives and accepts, for the sheer joy of loving. That quality of life is nurtured in us by knowing and communing with the Lord Jesus Christ, allowing his written Word to instruct us and his living Person to possess us. That relationship with him is consummated in fruitful relationships with others.

Romans 15:7 tells us how to begin:

"So open your hearts to one another as Christ has opened his heart to you, and God will be glorified" (Phillips paraphrase).

Limitlessly Christ receives us; we can measure our receptivity to him by our openness toward others.

Christ received us when we had nothing to offer but hostility and death. We too must learn to receive others where they are. Some have never experienced the new birth, but their physical, natural life is God's gift and

we must be respectful of God's investment in every person. We must identify with other's needs as he identifies with ours, meeting us where we are, gently drawing us to himself.

In order to nurture life in others we must be willing to learn to know them. This cannot be rushed. It requires a willingness to be imposed upon and a commitment to listening. And a willingness to be candid about our own lives. I wonder if the well-known "woman's intuition" may not be at least partially due to a more highly developed faculty for listening than is commonly found in men. We must learn to know one another according to God's wisdom, evaluating our needs and desires by his standards, so that we may nurture his life and character in one another. This is "body life" relatedness, growing together through mutual response to God's will and purpose for our lives.

This quality of relatedness must begin with our most intimate relationships if it is to have relevance elsewhere. We cannot live double lives, showing one face at home and another in public. Spiritual motherhood, the nurturing of Christ's life in ourselves and others, is a total lifestyle. It is the outward function of our identity, the evidence that we are God's woman.

We are all surrounded by needy, hurting people. Recognizing these needs and responding lovingly to them is what life is all about. If we are living from day to day just grudgingly doing the necessary elementary things without exposing ourselves to involvement with others' needs, then we have not even begun to really live! We are aborting life, rather than nurturing it. God intends for us to project his life into the human stream. This we do in very practical ways, finding where people are hurting, establishing the level of need in our homes, our neighborhoods, the church community, or wherever our lives touch others. All too often we know others only in terms of how they relate to us, whether they suit us temperamentally or satisfy the demands we make of them. There may be strangers in our own homes, maybe even in our own beds.

In ministering to others, both they and we must be aware that as spiritual mothers we are only channels of life, not Life itself. We are only qualified to nurture life in others when we, as the Macedonians, have first given ourselves to the Lord and then to others (2 Corinthians 8:5). The recognition that we must continually draw upon him will prevent inordinate and unwarranted dependencies. We will then faithfully direct others to Jesus Christ as the source of life and encourage full dependency on him. We and all to whom we minister must learn to feed on the bread of heaven. When we develop dependencies on individuals, rather than on Christ, we are developing spiritual invalidism, emotional crutches.

True spiritual motherhood is described in Galatians 4:19:

"My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"

We who have mothered physical progeny are often guilty of trying to reproduce ourselves in our children--our tastes, our culture, our frustrated ambitions, our image rather than God's. This can be extended to other relationships as well. Thus it is important that we do not use ourselves as the criterion for what is right and good, rather Christ.

Responding to other lives and nurturing Christ's life in them is often at least as painful as the process of natural birth. We cannot love without being vulnerable. However, while it hurts to love, the sterility of lovelessness is still more painful. The hurt we experience in order that Jesus Christ may be made known is the way in which we identify with his death, and that kind of identification is always followed by resurrection. It fulfills our humanity, gives significance and beauty to woman as nurturer and obeys our Lord's directive to be salt and light in the world.

Love is best experienced against a background of hostility; joy is greatest in contrast with sorrow; peace is at the core of the tornado. The quality of Christ's life transcends life circumstances. The expressions of his life are best displayed against the negative situations of our lives. Fully exposed, we may experience the full dimensions of genuine life.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you"

(Jeremiah 31:3).

In the Hebrew text the word "love" in the verse is in the feminine form. G. Campbell Morgan says, "This is another of the great texts in which that supreme and too often forgotten fact of the motherhood of God gleams out through the sacred declaration 'I have loved thee with an everlasting mother-love.'" God who is Spirit transcends gender, but as our All-sufficient provider, he nurtures us as a mother her child.

Mother-love is here characterized as everlasting and faithful--but again, this is God's love! Human love is conditional and profligate. But God offers to love through us; it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Weak human gestures at alleviating distress are merely a projection of our need to be needed. Providing emotional crutches, symptomatic salves, amplifying self-pity by coddling and pampering, is not nurturing the character of Christ. This is our human misconception of mother-love. Speaking the truth in love is God's way of building and nurturing us, and this is the method we are to use with ourselves and with others.

The godly woman ministers to others, not for ego-satisfaction (either her own or theirs) but that God may be glorified in his creation. This is her lifestyle and her life's goal. In the process of nurturing we learn authentic tenderness, compassion and sensitivity.

And what we have learned and demonstrated will become an example to others. Subject to our Father authority, we may be mothers in society, whether or not we have produced physical progeny. Some of the most beautiful nurturing I have witnessed has come through childless women who have extended surrogate motherhood to the needy with Christlike compassion and godly wisdom.

"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord." Isaiah 54:1

We return to the parable of birth, and what we have termed the principle of release. When a woman delivers a child, a new and different kind of relatedness develops. As we release, or express, Christ' life to others, we experience him in new ways. In loving others we are loving him; the cup of cold water dispensed in his name is our gift to him. Bearing fruit in every good work, we increase in the knowledge of God.

Spiritual motherhood is the expression of the femininity of God's character as seen in the servanthood of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a dimension of maturity intended for every Christian, whatever our function.

Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonica in his first letter, chapter 2 verse 7, "we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children." The word "nurse" translated from the Greek *trophos* is best translated "nursing mother." Paul also related to these believers as a father, described in verse eleven, "for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you..." Here we see the demonstrated maturity of one whose expressed goal for himself and others is to "lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory."

Paul is free to demonstrate the perfectly integrated character of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness of the godhead is expressed bodily. Paul, whose natural temperament was aggressive to the point of violence, exhibits in his mature Christian manhood the gentle strength of his Lord. But though he was a spiritual father-mother, one could never think of Paul as an effeminate man. He faithfully assumed his male leadership-responsibility in which he manifested the fruit of the Spirit, which is the character of the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 5:22, 23).

Deborah, Israel's beloved prophetess and judge, led the nation as a "mother in Israel" (see Judges 5:7). Although God gave her a unique position of counselor to the nation, she used her God-given insight to support and encourage sagging male leadership-responsibility. In the account related in Judges chapter 4, she maintains a position of wise and supportive counsel while at the same time recognizing the command of the Lord to Barak to assume his leadership-responsibility (see verses 6 and 7). Deborah, wife of Lappidoth,

prophetess, judge, was careful to preserve the delicate male-female roles even in an irregular situation. She preserved her sexual distinctive even in a position of counselor to a timid and insecure man.

Receiving others as lives whom God has given, to whom we may respond with adaptation and availability, is the way God intends all humans should live together. God intends us all, male and female, to share mutually all of the character-attributes of his Son, by the power of his Spirit, and in the exercise of his spiritual gifts. It is his intention that the distinctives of the male-female functions of loving authority and responsive, redemptive submission be clearly recognizable in our function. Our identity as whole, integrated people in the Lord Jesus Christ, gives us the freedom to be what we are, male or female, so the world may see demonstrated in our sexuality the love relationship between God who loves them and his people who are his love-slaves.

Like Mary, we may, subject to God's Spirit, make Jesus Christ incarnate. By her example, a woman may teach family, church and society the beauty and dignity of serving, nurturing and loving in order that the Lord Jesus Christ may live in us and among us. When we learn to live in this dimension, we will no longer be silent in the church or in society, but a living, vibrant mother to humanity's needs.

Then it may be said of us: "You've come a long way, baby!"

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