

A WOMAN'S IDENTITY

by Elaine Stedman

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Helmer says, "Before everything else you're a wife and a mother." Nora says, "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." 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 fear 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."

All of the above aptly describes woman's identity crisis. It is not simply a modern anomaly, but an age-old dilemma familiar to each individual. Eventually each of us recognizes the need to know who we are.

Much attention has been given to this identity crisis. Both women and men have grappled with our struggle to be equally human. Dorothy Sayers wrote an interesting little book entitled *Are Women Human?* A man named Freud wrote about 26 volumes trying to identify the problems of humanity. There are many intelligent definitions in his works, but no identity emerges from all these efforts. Many images have been projected of the female: the temptress, the waif, the matriarchal aggressor, earth mother, etc., but now that Sue, Gloria, Betty, and Germaine have become, shall we say, "household names", now that we have learned to express our outrage and define our hangups, are we any closer to having security and identity?

We were never intended to have a self-centered identity. We were expected to have a God-centered identity. When my car malfunctions I don't take it to the neighbor's car for analysis and repair. I refer it to the manufacturer. He has a manual (it's awkward to say "femanual") which describes his intention for that particular car and how it operates. There is a manual that goes with woman, issued by her Maker. Too often in approaching God's word, where we should expect to find our identity defined, we labor under a cultural preconditioning which gives a negative connotation to what God is saying. In no way does God intend to strike at us with his word. He does not think negatively toward us; we have his full acceptance. Let's trust him and approach his word from a positive stance. It is refreshing to return to the Bible after reading much of the current literature. His word is so simple and uncluttered, so concise, and yet infinitely profound---as profound as God himself.

Genesis 1:27 says, so simply: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 5:1, 2 says: "...when God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created." In those simple, concise words we have the summation of our equality, the duality and mutuality of our humanity. We see in those few uncomplicated words that we project the image of God as male and female, since God is male-female in his totality. It is necessary therefore to encompass both the male and the female in order to have a balanced projection of who God is.

We have heard a lot of complaints and seen a lot of cartoons about the use of the masculine pronoun for God. Actually the Hebrew language has no neuter gender, so, it is said the male theologians arbitrarily assigned to God the masculine gender. Lady Julian, who wrote in the 14th century, was not threatened by the masculine pronoun. She wrote a prophetic theological pronouncement in a book called *Sixteen Revelations of Divine*

Love: "God Almighty is our kindly Father; God All-Wisdom is our kindly Mother." She picked up what Genesis is saying---that God is Father-Mother, male-female. In this we find the definition of our roles and the assurance of our equality. (Interestingly, Wisdom is personified in the female gender in the book of Proverbs.)

The father is to represent leadership, authority, and objective truth. The mother's role is nurturing life in the framework of subjective truth: love, compassion, submission. These attributes are necessary to the role of nurturing life.

In each of the sexes is the shadow of the other---in the male the female; in the female the male. Each contributes to and fulfills the other by being wholly other. The wholeness of our mutual sexuality is the true expression of the image of God. We need to be concerned, then, with being whole women, as well as with what being whole women contributes toward making whole men. It is the two in complement which reflects the image of God. This is the definition of our humanity.

With this concept of spiritual equality all the Scriptures harmonize. All the Scriptures---even the Pauline epistles! In a recent issue of Christianity Today a cartoon depicted some women holding signs reading, "Women of Corinth Unite" and "Paul is a Chauvinist Pig". Paul was pictured as saying, "I see you got my letter!" Hopefully this was a spoof. I am a staunch defender of Paul and am convinced that he is greatly misunderstood. Consider his statement in Galatians 3:28: "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." Let's be fair---Paul has made a crystal clear declaration of our spiritual equality.

It is Paul who says in Ephesians 5:21,22: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord." He recognizes that our equality is spiritual and that it comes from our relationship to Jesus Christ, in whom we have absolute equality. Submission is our spiritual commitment, for which we are answerable to the Lord. Peter agrees, in 1 Peter 3: 7: "Likewise, you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life." Our spiritual equality is never in question; we have no need to picket for it.

The unity of mankind is symbolized in God's intention for the marriage relationship. Jesus says in Matthew 19:4-6: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one?' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." The oneness of the marriage relationship signifies, and is possible because of, our spiritual equality. It is to be an unbroken and unbreakable relationship for the very reason that therein is depicted our spiritual oneness and equality. Jesus reiterates this theme in Mark 10:6: "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. So they are no longer two but one.' What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." God planned the unity of our humanity from the beginning, when he created us male and female.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:7: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." This passage is sometimes used to demonstrate Paul's alleged prejudice against women but I simply cannot comprehend how it can be so used. To say that woman is the glory of man is to me one of the most beautiful things that can be said about woman! Notice he does not say that she is the image and glory of man. She is the image of God, and that is why and how she may be the glory of man. Paul knows that it is our God-likeness that makes us truly and wholly woman. It is in bearing his image that we find our identity and our security. If Paul had said that we are to be the image and glory of man he would have been inconsistent with his affirmation of our spiritual equality in other passages. In this passage he is not dealing with our equality, our basic humanity, but with our womanhood, our femaleness. The issue here is one of authority in human relationships---authority, not equality.

In verse 8 Paul says: "(For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.)" There is no problem here, as some have suggested, of "double jeopardy" for the woman. To use the old philosophical argument about the chicken and the egg, when God states that the chicken comes first he does not therefore suggest that the egg loses status. Let's not impose upon this passage our own cultural prejudices and thus infer what is not intended. The fact that the male was created first gives

priority, but not pre-eminence!

Genesis 2:18-25 is a beautiful, moving account of the tenderness and intimacy with which God harmonized the sexes in his method of creation: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" Doesn't that say volumes about God's concept of the woman he would create? She was to be suitable for the man. "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." And why do you suppose he did that? He was going to psyche Adam out! He would take him through the entire animal kingdom so that he could establish for himself that there was no suitability in any of the beasts. Then when he saw the woman God prepared he would recognize the uniqueness of God's creative purpose in her. He would then see at once the fitness and equality in this one created for mankind's duality. God is the Great Psychologist!

"So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." While Adam slept God removed the final barrier to his heart, the rib, and from it made the woman. Now the man was prepared to say: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman (Hebrew: ishshah) because she was taken out of Man (ish). Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." Sin had not yet defiled their humanity and so their nakedness was not an issue. And since their relationship with God was unbroken, and their identity therefore unthreatened, they had no need to mask their humanity nor to support it with contrived trappings.

In this tender account of our creation we see the harmonizing of the sexes and, as Paul declares, we also see the authority structure. He first created the man because it is in maleness that God's authority is portrayed. Paul reminds us that this is loving authority. In the male is invested the responsibility of leadership. But so that man would not mistake priority for pre-eminence God uses this carefully detailed process of creation to assure our understanding of equality and worth. In the words of Scripture "for the man there was not found a helper fit for him" we understand that Adam was carefully prepared to comprehend the fitness of the woman, that God had prepared for him a "thou", a complement to his maleness.

It is possible, I think probable, that our perception of time since the fall is different from that which preceded the entrance of sin in Eden. The Scriptures are not explicit but, as Peter reminds us, a day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day. So we might infer that God gave plenty of time to the creation of the man and the woman. I firmly believe that he gave equal time to Eve's creation. And isn't it interesting that he put the man to sleep while he formed the woman? He gave each a time to be alone with him.

This is highly significant. It is in this time alone with him that we find our identity---in that intimate alone---with-God relationship. It is an absolute necessity for each individual to establish initially, primarily, and as life's first cause, our relationship with God, our Creator and our Redeemer. We enter and we exit life alone. The personal intimacy of our relationship with God cannot and must not be mediated or interpolated by any other person. We must learn to confront life as his creatures, and in terms of his expectations, in order to understand life's demands. This basic commitment to God's activity and authority in our lives will require an habitual dying to pseudo and secondary relationships. We must keep him pre-eminent and our relationship with him inviolate. This is essential to our sense of identity. It is the manna of life, the daily necessity from which we receive our perspective, our purpose, and our power. It is the only thing that will save us from becoming entangled in confused and naive relationships, and it is the only thing that will save us from ourselves!

When we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as he is, then we will understand who we are. If we try to take our identity from another person we will simply exchange insecurities and weaknesses. When we take our identity from Jesus Christ he teaches us that without him we are empty vessels, forlorn of purpose, but with him we are totally adequate for life. In our relationship with him we have everything necessary to meet any demand life can place upon us. This realistic appraisal of him and of ourselves gives us balance in our identity.

This is the meaning of the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with

all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." The cycle begins with God. Our love relationship with him teaches us to love ourselves from his perspective, and this gives us freedom to love ourselves and others with self-detachment, and that is the only genuine love. Knowing that we are loved by God, and that he loves us unconditionally, gives us our sense of worth. This frees us from the futility of trying to become something that pleases God, with the accompanying duplicity and pretense of trying to be something we are not and cannot be. Before God we need no masks. We can be what we are and rest in his unconditional acceptance. That is the only source of security which is invulnerable.

When we have this security we no longer need to use other people to sustain our sense of identity. When we have a self-centered identity we are always dependent on others to support it. We then make unreasonable and unreasoning demands upon them, maneuvering and exploiting in every way known to woman. For instance, in a search for identity a woman will exploit a man with her body in a vain effort to establish relationship with him, debasing both her womanhood and his manhood. Or we can assume a spiritual pose---it's much more subtle---again trying to be what we are not in order to gain approval and thus hope to find security. But the game will be lost in self-deception before it is played. When we lie to ourselves we have already sacrificed our identity. Meanwhile we have violated another's humanity.

Sometimes this kind of dependency is called submission. That is one of the things submission is not. It is a fraudulent use of submission, and is not in fact submission at all, but rather a masked aggression.

Closely related to the identity issue is the problem of authority. Both must be settled ultimately and finally in our relationship to Jesus Christ. Once we have settled the question of whether God is going to be God in our lives, once we have submitted ourselves to his sovereign control, then we have settled the authority issue. The human relationships will fall in line naturally from that perspective. Our equality, our identity, and our relationship to authority are all resolved in our understanding of God's creative intent for humanity.

The Scriptures assure us that spiritual equality between the sexes was God's creative intention, and his stated perspective never varies, whether through Moses, Peter, or Paul. His intention for humanity is that he, the Lord of creation, be exactly that, to the end that his image be seen in his universe. This is God's world! It is not mine---it took me a long time to figure that one out.

A frightened young lady called me this week to tell me about a friend of hers who had been shot and was not expected to live. She wanted me to tell her what God was going to do, and she reminded me that her friend had only begun her life, with the implied suggestion that God had better do right by her! I just didn't happen to have a fresh scoop from heaven that day on what God's plans were, so I had to confess that I didn't know what he was going to do. But I did say further that it was really up to him, that he gives life and it is his prerogative to take it. What we need to figure out as early as possible is that life belongs to God, not to us. My life belongs to him. He is entitled to it. He designed it and made it. He has a purpose for it. He died for it! He has full rights to the title of my life, and I need to yield to---that authority. And when I do I am set free from self-authority and can say with Martin Luther: "A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none. A Christian is the most dutiful of all, and subject to everyone."

It is in the male-female unity of our humanity that God's Truth and Life are propagated and conveyed to the world. When the male-female relationships are in balance, Truth and Life are seen in balanced perspective, because it is the role of the male to present Truth and the role of the female to interpret that Truth into Life. That is why the woman has been given the sensitivity that is so uniquely female. This is pictured analogously in the physical relationship in which the sperm is introduced by the male and the female "interprets" it into the fetus. And this is why the final authority in human relationships is invested in the man. Authority is the necessary vehicle for Truth.

It is for this reason the woman must have God's perspective on the authority issue. And this is resolved when we, the clay, say "Yes" to the Potter, when we, the vessel, invite the indwelling Presence of Life, and when we change our "Whys?" into "Whatever, Lord." When we exchange self-authority for God's lordship and choose to be submissive to his sovereign, loving, omniscient authority---then we've come a long way, baby!

>From this perspective we no longer read the Scriptures defensively. because we see that God's design from

Genesis to Revelation is loving and purposeful. We see that, far from discriminating against the woman, God has set up deliberate safeguards to protect her delicate femininity. Genesis 3: 14 -19 is sometimes referred to as "the curse", but read without negative preconditioning it is evident that the curse was given to the serpent and to the ground; it was not applied to the man or the woman. Actually, God here imposed a new regime which would protect us from ourselves. He gave woman the authority needed to shield her from her own femaleness. He gave man, the therapy and discipline of work. In her assignment of motherhood, woman is given the framework for the expression of her creativity. She is to be "mother of all living"; that is the meaning of the name Eve. She is to be the glory of man, the demonstration of the life of God, and this is explicit in her femaleness. Her qualities of tenderness, compassion, perception, and submission are appropriate to her motherhood and complementary to maleness. Her contribution is so valuable that to protect it God, in the Levitical code for instance, strictly governs her moral behavior and permits her far less deviation than the male because she is to be the glory of humanity, and when she fails the whole structure crumbles! The very stringency of God's controls, which sometimes provoke our hostility, is evidence that in God's sight we are valuable!

When we see God's disciplines from the perspective of his love it makes such a difference! He wants to protect us from ourselves because it is his goal to make us the glory of humanity. It is interesting that the Scriptures place the woman in the same relationship to man as the Son is to the Father. The Son is said to be the glory of the Father. This helps us to understand the importance of our role to humanity. Hebrews 3:1 tells us that Jesus Christ reflects the glory of God's image, and John tells us in his gospel that in beholding Jesus Christ we behold the reflected glory of the Father. In Ephesians 3: 21 Christ is said to be glorified in the Church, and the Church is symbolized by the wife in the marriage relationship.

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." Even those who are so intent upon emphasizing our equality recognize that there are essential differences in our roles. And as Christians we can see that these are specific roles that God has assigned us. We can feel secure in that assignment because it comes from him, and we can find excitement and fulfillment in being thoroughly woman.

"The man called his wife's name Eve." The name, in Hebrew, resembles the word for living, a marginal reading in my Bible tells me. He named her thus because, he said, she "is the mother of all living." Who was living at this time? Apparently, according to the biblical account, only Adam and Eve and the animal world. 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. Ecologically speaking, she was mother to all living. This concept has even helped me to accept the hamsters in our house by reminding me that as women we are in unique relationship to all living things by Divine assignment. He has specially equipped us for sensitivity toward life in all forms. But this also means that we don't have to marry and/or produce physical children in order to accommodate the role of mother to humanity. This is the basic, essential role of the woman in society.

Dr. John Wakefield, an outstanding industrial psychiatrist who within recent months has become a committed Christian, told me in a recent conversation that he has observed in business that when a woman executive functions as a mother she does not compete with the males and she does not intimidate other females. In this way she can maintain harmonious relationships and excel as an executive. It is also true, he says, that a male executive needs to relate as a father. If either attempts to reverse roles, relationships suffer and their executive function is jeopardized.

An understanding of our motherhood role necessitates a definition of "mother" because we have all sorts of caricatures in our minds, and they are not all good by any means. I pursued this with Dr. Wakefield and he fully agreed that the role of mother means "nurturing life". The role of motherhood is intended for every woman. Obviously, this is not physical motherhood alone, but spiritual motherhood. Spiritual motherhood is woman's assignment, of which physical motherhood is a symbol. An interesting corroboration of this is found in John 19:25-27. The Lord 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 son, but the Lord,

addressing her as "Woman" and thus acknowledging her womanhood, then assigned her to John as his spiritual mother. The task, then, is to discover what constitutes true motherhood.

The process of motherhood is, first, receptivity---not the initiation of life, but the receiving of life, both in the physical and spiritual birth. Motherhood involves receiving the lives that are sent to us, not as projects, but as God-given persons whom he assigns to us for the purpose of nurturing his life in them. This makes a big difference in our attitude toward people. When we make mere projects of others it reveals the perspective we have of ourselves.

The next step in the motherhood process is response, so beautifully symbolized in physical birth by the way in which the body of the mother responds to the demands of the new life within, nurturing that life by means of adaptation and availability. In this way we are to respond with our whole being to the new life within, the person of Jesus Christ. God has infused us with his own life, and we are to nurture that life, not the old Adamic life. It needs to be fed with the proper nutrient, the word of God, by the consent of our will. Then we may nurture his life in others, by means of his life in us, so that it becomes a cycle of life unto life---but always his life, not ours.

The third step, or principle, is that of release. As in the case of physical pregnancy there is always an appropriate moment for cutting the umbilical cord. This demonstrates so well that the God-given life within us is not intended to be hoarded to ourselves but is intended for release to others. And in turn our relationship with others is to the end that they may become dependent not upon us but on the life of Jesus Christ. We are responsible to nurture his life in others by means of his life in us.

Science tells us about the law of biogenesis: "life comes only from life." This principle is true in every dimension of human experience. Physical life is produced only by physical life. Life begets life. Spiritual motherhood is a whole vast dimension of spiritual reproduction. We may give to others only as we receive from the Lord Jesus Christ, the source of Life. We need to learn that the flesh can only reproduce the flesh. But when we are instruments in the totality of our humanity---body, soul and spirit---of the Life of Jesus Christ, we will find that his life is nurture to every dimension of human experience. His life within us will equip us to minister to others as he ministers to us, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When we relate to others in terms of his life, not ours, this detaches us from need for self-aggrandizement, and we then know the fulfillment of living for the glory of God, the very purpose for which we were created! In this context, every activity and every expression is truly creative, because it is generated by his life.

"What a way to go!"

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