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SOCIAL CHANGE AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION: AN EVALUATION

by

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INTRODUCTION

Why are women asking for ordination and administrative roles in the church? Is this a change in women, or in society? Is it a sign of progress or decadence? What will it do to men--especially if the church is one of their last bastions of supremacy in society?

Throughout the Christian era women have had a part in church life, and have even had some minor leadership roles, particularly in such activities as Christian welfare ministry, care of the sick, teaching of young children, and occasional charismatic roles of prophecy or reform. But the church has been patriarchal, and even women's leadership roles have been secondary to those of men. With a decline of interest in religious activities on the part of men in general, however, membership has become in many churches predominantly female: religion is for women and children, not men.

It is possible that the de facto relegation of religious activity to women has begun to germinate in them a desire for the de jure acquisition of authority in religious organizations. If women are to do the work of the church, why shouldn't they have more say in directing it?

In the Seventh-day Adventist church a further pressure pushes women along the road toward ordination: it is the official stamp of authenticity on what the person says. Somehow ordination is the

final "degree" needed to prove that one is eligible to speak or to occupy a position. As long as women are denied ordination they are denied the right to be somebody in the church, even when they have ability and qualification for a position.

Outside the church women are making a dent in the upper levels of men's world of work, which makes them begin to wonder why they cannot have more leadership in the church. Real equality in the world of work is yet some time away, but rising expectations make women restive under the tight restrictions found in the church.

Undergirding the expectations for change are various trends in society in general and the family in particular that make time and energy available to women for other than their traditional family pursuits.

SOCIAL CHANGE

Converging trends in society

Several trends, or cultural drifts, in society as well as in the family have helped to make a place for women and have also helped to make it possible for them to move outside the family. Among these are higher levels of education for both men and women: more personal freedom; more sectors of the labor force providing jobs that do not require heavy manual labor nor very high levels of schooling (e.g. clerical, secretarial, sales, light industrial such as electronics assembly, personal service jobs not requiring heavy lifting and also having reasonably good hours, etc.); wars which take away male workers at least temporarily; depressions which make extra income necessary, or

or prosperity which makes extra jobs available: removal of many technological tasks from the home (such as weaving, most clothing construction, large parts of food preparation, dry cleaning, etc.), which at the same time creates a need for workers in the service industries that have taken over these tasks.

While these trends have affected both men and women, the greater effect has been on women, since men were already occupying a place outside the family, which in many cases was more important than their family role. The roles of children have also been affected, especially by educational trends and child labor laws.

Family changes

The family has changed profoundly in the last hundred or two hundred years--possibly more than it has changed through the rest of history. And the family changes have in most cases centered around the roles of women, since women's traditional role has been bound up with the family.*

One of the most profound changes has been in the reciprocal role relationships of husbands and wives (or father-mother). The traditional pattern all over the world has been patriarchal: the man had authority over the activities of not only his children, but also his wife. Legally she frequently had fewer freedoms and privileges than his children! Even

* While the focus here is on changes in women's roles, it is also true that men's roles have changed, partly because they are reciprocal to women's in the family, partly because of direct outside influences. For example, the Industrial Revolution pulled men out of the home to the factory. This put more of the responsibility for child rearing on the woman. If his pay was too small to support a family, as often happened, the wife, and usually the able-bodied children, also went to work in the factory.

in the societies where the lineage ran through the female side of the family, the authority belonged to the male. This has been a rational approach to family organization, for the woman, burdened with pregnancy and child care, needed a man to provide and to stand between society and her and their brood. But for various reasons--many of them outside the family--the patriarchal pattern is disappearing, especially in its stronger forms. The present family is more likely to be equalitarian in a modern, industrial society. Both husband and wife share authority over the children (or try to!), but do not have authority over each other. Laws in most places now reflect this equality, even to the refusal to grant routine alimony to a wife in case of divorce--or to go even further and grant alimony to a disabled husband.

Changes in the family cycle--or the "life history" of the family--are also great. Using the United States as an example, over the past hundred years the following changes are pertinent: The age at first marriage has become younger for both men and women, the number of children in the family has declined, the few children born are more likely to be "bunched" in the early years of marriage. Because the birth of children now occurs at younger ages for women, the home begins to be empty during school hours while the mother is relatively young--in her early thirties--and the actual "emptying of the nest" also comes earlier. But with added life expectancy, the couple can expect a long period of joint survival following the departure of the last child. This is a really new development. The earlier typical family cycle made the woman a widow before the last child left home. The new pattern allows a woman some twenty years of productive life (prior to the retirement age of 65)

unencumbered by the presence of any children in the home, but with the companionship of a spouse. If the relatively free period when the children are all in school is added, she may have thirty or thirty-five years when she has considerable time to devote to interests other than her immediate family. On the other hand, the decline in age at first marriage (to about a median of 20 for women) means that she may not have completed education for professional work prior to marriage. Either she must be satisfied with work not requiring a high level of education, or she will need to return to school when her children do. And of course, many wives are doing just that.

Another change is in the stability of the family. Less seriousness appears to be attached to the necessity for a legal beginning to a marriage relation and more to the interpersonal aspects. Living together without benefit of clergy or judge is not something new, of course, but the more open attitude toward such behavior is. High divorce rates are likewise a recent development, though the number of broken homes has not increased. The decrease in the death rate has balanced the increase in the divorce rate. But divorce no longer has the stigma it once had, and the divorcee has a high chance of remarrying.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Women's rights movements

Along with trends, cultural drifts, and various social movements in society and in the family have been movements specifically connected with women. In the nineteenth century these were called women's rights movements or feminism. In recent years the newer term has been women's

liberation or just "women's lib."

The earlier women's rights movements paralleled other freedom movements: antislavery, religious, political (democratic). Many women who were involved in the antislavery movement particularly, saw the similarity between the slave's position and that of women in general, and began to swing their activities toward women's rights as the antislavery movement reached its goals. Some of the goals of the earlier movements were suffrage, the right to higher education (college and professional) and legal control over one's own person. Change came slowly. The movement alone did not bring about the changes, but the changes came. Women were grudgingly admitted to colleges and universities and schools of medicine and law. Eventually they received the right to vote. Gradually they were given personal rights to property, to a separate existence as persons, and to custody of their children in the event of a contested divorce. Their place in the labor force was established, even though small. For the single women there was more place; married women had to wait until well into the twentieth century for any really recognized right to work outside the home.

By the middle of the twentieth century the women's rights movement seemed to be dead as a movement, for its goals had been reached. Actually a reverse movement began after World War II: back to the home, back to childbearing, away from advanced education. The suburban home, the station wagon, and four children seemed to represent the goals of the young woman of the late forties, the fifties and the beginning of the sixties.

This countermovement drew its theoretical support from Freudian

theory on the psyche and needs of women. Possibly the theme of the movement could be summed up in the phrase: Anatomy is destiny. The antifeminists deplored the non-family aspirations of women as unfeminine, unhealthful, unwise, and a threat to the ego of men. While the participation of women, including married women, in the labor force continued to rise, their entry into work requiring advanced training (such as Ph.D.) did not. The percentage of woman obtaining doctorates actually declined, mostly in response to higher rates of marriage and marriage at an earlier age. But babies became big business, and the baby boom an unexpected demographic phenomenon which began to take on frightening proportions.

And then came women's lib. Like the earlier women's rights movements, this latest movement is also a collection of movements going at different speeds and heading for different destinations. I would divide the present movement into three categories or submovements: the radical or revolutionary, the reform, and the moderate. There is considerable overlap and ambiguity, of course.

1. The revolutionary. The radical movement gets the headlines. It is "far out." It offends society by its demands. It espouses other radical causes. Some of its specific goals are abolishment or radical restructuring of the family, unlimited abortion, "sisterhood" which downgrades or excludes men as far as possible, complete equality in the educational and job market, and a womanpower which dominates men. Obviously it has rejected the premise that anatomy is destiny, and in fact claims that practically all male-female differences are the result of culture and socialization. It places just about as much value--sometimes more--on homosexuality as on heterosexuality, because it sees much of the

exploitation of women as originating in the sexual realm.

2. The Reform. The reform phase of the movement has aimed and worked mostly toward educational, political and economic equality. Some of this activity it shares with the radicals, but in a less militant way. Most legal activity comes from the reformers: changes in laws that hamper women's activities, suits for equal pay, sponsorship of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. Where the radical wing is separatist in nature--let women run their own show--the reformers are integrationist: let the women share equal rights, privileges and responsibilities with men all the way to the top. The reformers also work for the liberation of men to enter women's traditional fields. Women's lib advocates in both Protestant and Catholic religious circles are generally reformers--many of them in the true sense of reform: they point to the origins and early history of their respective groups, when women had more influence and authority.

3. The Moderate. What I am calling the moderate wing of the movement is asking for little more than the right to self-fulfillment and to equality or recognition as a person within the family. Self-fulfillment is defined as the right of a woman to decide what she wants to do in life--whether to marry and be a homemaker, or to skip marriage and be a single professional person, or to combine the two in some way. The moderates may really be part of the reformers--but a rather passive part.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The question is sometimes raised about the effectiveness of social movements as far as any permanent change in society is concerned. Does

change come about because of a social movement? Or are change and the movement simply associated phenomena? Probably the answer depends on the type of movement as well as the social climate in which it moves.

The classical analysis of the social movement gives it a life history consisting of four fairly distinct periods: (1) general unrest and agitation, (2) popular excitement and focus on more specific goals, (3) formalization and rapprochement with the society, (4) institutionalization of the movement into an organized body. Leadership parallels the stages. The earliest leader is the agitator who can stir things up, attract attention to need for change, lead the way to action. In the second stage the leader is a prophet who can picture the glorious results when the movement succeeds. In the third stage there is greater need for the statesman, or the public relations expert. And in the fourth stage the administrator takes over to manage the organization that results from the movement.

Obviously not all social movements fit exactly into the classical type. Religious movements which proceed from an early awakening to an organized church fit the model rather well. Many political movements, whether reform or revolutionary, also go through well-marked stages. But movements which are in part personal and expressive in nature, which aim for more personal freedom for individuals, do not seem to fit the scheme quite as well, especially in terms of final institutionalization. This is particularly true if they are integrationist and reform in nature rather than separatist and revolutionary. They may change a broader segment of society, however, since they are not self-contained.

The present women's lib movement certainly went through the first

stage, beginning about 1963. Betty Frieden's book Feminine Mystique is one of the early and effective pieces of agitation which began to call attention to the way society still perpetuated its injustices toward women. There has been a well-marked stage of popular excitement.

Women's caucuses are one example of this stage; what professional convention in recent years has not had its women's caucus to keep prominent the need for change at the higher levels of society? "Bra-burning" at the Miss American contest also marks this stage. The revolutionaries may be able to move more directly into stage three than the reformers, since the radicals may be heading toward a completely separate subgroup status in society. If the revolutionaries go in this separatist direction they may institutionalize into an organization, perhaps like the Black Muslims, or the Shakers, or the Freedom Party. They will then be sealed off from the rest of society, doing their own thing, getting occasional converts, but otherwise not affecting the rest of the people greatly.

The possibilities for the reform group are quite different. Their goals will be accomplished only if society as a whole is changed. It is hardly possible to institutionalize a movement that aims at total integration with the mainstream of society when that society is divided into only two groups with regard to the subject of the movement. Presently they are working with receptive men to gain more opportunity for women. So the reform movement has three possible outcomes:

Complete success, partial success, and no success. It has already reached some goals, so the third outcome can be rejected. Partial success is likely to mean continued movement because of rising expectations; total success will mean the end of the movement by assimilation into a changed society.

What has women's lib accomplished thus far? The radical revolutionaries have made a big splash and attracted much attention. Certainly they have made society conscious of and uncomfortable over many injustices. But they have not yet abolished men and taken over society. On the other extreme the moderates have been able to claim the right to self-fulfillment; society would much rather grant that, than have to accede to the demands of the radicals. In the middle, reformers are still working hard. The changes that they are asking for are actually much more devastating to the structure of society than the goals of the revolutionaries because there is much more chance that reform will be accomplished. The asked-for reform would mean a complete redistribution of power and authority for men and women at all levels.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

What is the likely change in society if the outcome of the reform movement is total or near-total success?

Society in general

The earliest result is likely to be a self-conscious quota system applied to the selection of men and women for educational openings, jobs, political spots, etc. Law will require that those in charge of any selective process make an attempt to balance the number of men and women. In some instances that will seem to lean toward the absurd: e.g., "job must be filled by a female, black, age 38-40, mother of twin boys, born in Montana." Only after the right of women is firmly established, so that they are chosen in more than token numbers for positions they are now denied, will the pendulum swing back to choice according to ability

and acceptable training or experience. But this process should make changes not only for women, but also for men. While women will be able to get into traditionally men's occupations, men should be able to get into traditionally women's occupations--also on the basis of ability and skill.

Women have been denied access to leadership levels, both economic and political, even more than to other traditionally men's jobs. This, too, is beginning to change, and the trend will undoubtedly accelerate.

Equal pay for equal work will become a reality, and will not even be news. As these changes come about, new attitudes will develop in society. Not all of the opposition to equality for women comes from men. A large portion comes from women still caught in the traditional beliefs about women's inabilities, physiological handicaps, and inherent submissive qualities. Fear about unwillingness of women to work for women or men to work for women will not dissipate overnight. Stereotypes about women will not vanish any faster than stereotypes about any other minority. Education is needed, though perhaps only a new generation growing up with the new education and a few new role models will be able to complete the change.

The family

Because the family is the basic institution in society, occupying a most respected position, anything which appears to threaten it becomes dangerous. Women's lib appears to do so. The revolutionaries actually challenge the family openly, as the source of much of the oppression of women. Historically they are more than partly correct in their assumption. But they do not have the power to abolish the family except perhaps for their own members, who are actually few in number.

But the goals of the reformers, when reached, will also affect the family deeply. This will not necessarily be in deleterious ways--complete equality both within and outside the family means an equal sharing of both rights and responsibilities. It is unlikely that any movement can ever enable men to bear or nurse children. That will remain both duty and privilege of women only. But men can share in the rearing of children in a much more active way than now, and such participation should be all to the good of the children.

What is defined as masculine or feminine may be at least partially redefined, for these are cultural states, not biological, although the new will have some common elements with the old. Biologically there are two sexes--male and female. But from the moment of birth the fact of sex is transformed into the definition of sex, according to the particular cultural patterns into which the child is born. And what we call feminine may be called masculine in another culture. Women's lib may be able to hasten a modification of our definitions so that men will not be thought less manly if they show a nurturing attitude toward children, or a sensitivity to the beautiful, or an emotional response to an event. And the reciprocal modification may allow women to use their intellectual talents openly without being considered a threat to their husbands, fathers or sons. In other words, men will be able to display emotion openly, and women to employ intelligence in their behavior.

More women will undoubtedly plan on careers of one kind or another as they plan to spend less time in the motherhood role--aided and abetted by women's lib. If a woman has a career for which she has spent many years preparing, she will need to be considered in the decision about where her

family locates. At the present time if a woman refuses to move where her husband wants to live she is legally guilty of desertion. But if her career is as important as his, in the future more moves may be made according to the scarcity or abundance of openings for either of the two careers--and it may be that the family will settle according to the wife's needs without either husband or wife feeling apologetic or guilty about it. Organizations hiring career men who have career wives may find that they cannot move such men on the kind of whim that has often been used in the past. This may be particularly hard on church organizations which specialize in apple-cart upsets at biennial or quadrennial intervals--or those who hope to get two workers for the price of one.

It seems rather clear that greater freedom for women is associated with a fairly high divorce rate. If women are free to do other things than just be homemakers, they are unlikely to put up with abuse, neglect or other unsatisfactory conditions. They won't have to. If family stability is defined only in the simplistic sense of little divorce, then liberation of women is a threat to the stability of the family. But another possibility also appears. If women are free to choose career with no marriage, career with marriage, or marriage without career, and be respected for themselves no matter which they choose, they are likely to be more choosy in whom they marry. Most divorces could best be prevented by more careful choice of partner in the first place and by more careful consideration of the potential dynamics of marriage. So it may be that the results of acceptance of reforms advocated by women's lib will be a drop in the marriage rate, and also a lowering of the divorce rate. And it might also mean more satisfied family members--especially

happier wives.

An interesting alternative pattern is also possible. A man may be able to make the same three choices as the woman in the future: he may choose career without marriage, career with marriage (both of which are traditional for men but not women), or he may choose marriage without career, presently a highly deviant role. In the last case the wife would be the support of the family, while he would follow what is now termed the homemaker (wife)role. And he would do so without having all the neighbors raise their eyebrows or the neighbors' children shun him. A transition stage to this pattern would be that of the family where the man combines self-employment (e.g. writing, art in some form, etc.) with homemaking tasks while his wife earns a regular paycheck. Although this is not presently a really approved role, it can be found. Women's lib is working for more choice for men as well as women, in the family as well as outside.

The church

In general, churches are conservative, even "liberal" churches. And this emphasis on the traditional tends to keep them patriarchal in structure. The whole tenor of Christian theology is man-centered, and not just in the generic sense. Present apologists may point to meanings that uphold the right of the woman to consideration if not equality, but somehow these meanings have been hidden from past generations. The theology of the church was developed in a patriarchal context; the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was written with a patriarchal family as the frame of reference.

Key points in general Christian theology show the implicit male authoritarianism: The trinitarian Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit

is male and defined in family terms. The hierarchies of angels are male, except when defined as supportive or nurturing, when they may be pictured in a feminine (not necessarily female) form. (Nurturance is a feminine role in western culture.) Creation put the male first, the female second. The female was deceived; the implication is that she was less intelligent than the male. Thus sin and the fall of man are blamed on woman. But the "mastermind" of evil is male, though lesser evil beings (witches) may be female. Mysteries of religion are male secrets, women are not usually allowed in the holiest places. Priesthood, which is a professionalization of the father role, is for males. Men are "defiled" by women, not vice versa. Women are "saved" by childbearing. The motherhood role of woman reaches its epitome in the madonna concept of Mary, the eternal virgin who can have motherhood without the contamination of sex. The church is symbolized by woman--a bride, still virgin, yet the mother of believers, and as woman subordinate in the patriarchal frame of reference to a male (Christ).

Women's lib, even its more moderate versions, challenges the church in two areas: (1) its structure: male-dominated, patriarchal, relegating women to the lowest rungs or making them work outside the authority structure entirely (as in the role of prophet); and (2) its theology, which gives the rationale for the shape of the hierarchy. This challenge is based on the fact that society is changing and the church as a social institution must also change or perish. The theology, or rationale for the organization of the church, is patriarchal because the culture in which it developed did not allow otherwise; now the culture allows a new interpretation. Possibly the church is not quite ready for the position

represented in a remark attributed to an anonymous angel: "I have seen God, and she is black." But it is certainly ready for some modification or, as I would choose to label it, some progress.

The church need not adopt altruistic reasons for change in its treatment of women. Selfish ones will serve as effectively: it is the results that matter.

Let us put it plainly: Can the church afford to waste the talents of the majority of its membership any longer if it is to accomplish the task set before it? This is essentially what the church's portion of the women's lib movement is asking.

Theology (the interpretation of Biblical statements) can be adjusted as necessary; this is not a new task for theologians. A study of changing theology with reference to slavery might give guidelines. More important pragmatically is a reordering of the structure of the church to allow full equality of opportunity for men and women. While the culture of New Testament times might have made this impossible, the culture now permits it. The culture may soon demand it. The question at this point is whether the church can lead in a necessary reform, or whether it must be pushed.

Conclusion

The goal of women's lib reform is not to make men and women the same, but to give them social equality. It seeks to end discrimination on the basis of sex to help both women and men become more complete persons, to allow them equal opportunity and equal access to both responsibilities and opportunities of society. While the accomplishing of these goals is producing some upheaval and a great deal of uncertainty, it is difficult

to see how it can degrade society. That which makes men and women full partners in the work of the family, the church, and society in general should lead to a better world.

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