

“Women and Suffrage”

An Article for the Chalcedon Website

Ronald Kirk

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I read with interest Susan Burn’s article here on the Chalcedon Website on “Bullies.” How men treat women has long been a serious concern—especially to women! It ought to be men’s concern also.

The Genesis Fall put enmity between men and women. This enmity by nature seems almost as powerful as the sexual attraction that brings us together in the first place, as Milton notes in *Paradise Lost*.

Contempt arises from woman’s lesser physical strength (because might makes right). Her version of logic can frustrate us. She often does not appreciate or enjoy our view of the good life. She wants to exorcise the playful boy in us.

Similarly, women entertain a quiet, or perhaps not so quiet, contempt of men. Women know they are smarter, cleaner and more civilized than men are. Thus, women may often upbraid their husbands and sons privately or publicly. Watch any television sitcom or any number of commercials and see women’s natural contempt for men glorified.

This is the battle of the sexes. I tell Christina, my lovely wife of over thirty years, “You drive me crazy!” She smiles and says, “Yes, and you love it!” She is right. I have long realized that the differences between us are in our nature and that my job is to live with my wife in understanding nonetheless, and that I must treat her as the less sturdy vessel—physically and spiritually (1 Peter 3:7). She is more sensitive, but more susceptible to deceit (Genesis 3:13; 2 Timothy 2:14). Accordingly, so as not to treat her presumptuously, I endeavor to treat my wife as if I was still winning her heart. However difficult it is sometimes to accept her as she is, that is my job. Moreover, a perpetual courtship redounds in pointed joy and blessing to me.

If you say I take a light attitude toward a very serious subject, you are right in this sense: Not taking our differences or myself too seriously has been an excellent survival technique. Besides, I have learned that if I get macho and throw my weight around, Providence always chastens me anyway.

I digress. The battle of the sexes, when not corrected by the work of the Holy Spirit, often results in tremendous damage to the home--God’s foundation of civilization. Historically the differences between the sexes have resulted in the mistreatment of women. In such an enlightened and loving home as John and Abigail Adams, Abigail wrote her husband: “In the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”¹ However much feminists love this quote or however much it is tongue in cheek, it should nonetheless be clear that Mrs. Adams identifies an important Christian relational principle.

Men ought to treat women according to the dignity Christ gave the ladies as co-heirs with Him (Galatians 3:28-29; Romans 8:16-17; 1 Peter 3:7). Numbers 27:7 and Joshua 17:4 demonstrate women’s equality of heritage in Canaan, and therefore of value as members of the covenant community. The woman’s head is her husband (1 Corinthians 11:3), but so that he may lay down his life for her as Christ did for the church. She is his holy responsibility, to care for her as for his own flesh (Ephesians 5:22-30). All authority granted by God is a stewardship of trust for order, to accomplish specific,

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limited purposes, and for the care of the one under authority. These are the essential principles of federalism—that Medieval Biblical principle institutionally adopted by Americans.²

Women are not second-class spiritual citizens, as Christ's treatment of His women followers reveals. Indeed, they could be more spiritually sensitive than the Disciples were (Luke 24:9-11). As Dr. Rushdoony points out, men are not intermediaries of their wife's relationship with Christ.³ There is neither male nor female in inherent value or place in redemption. Women are our help suitable for us (Genesis 2:20), but in no slavish sense. Marriage is for mutual ministry and service to the family. Headship is for order and the good of the woman and children, particularly protection. Women receive gifts of ability, for Gospel-supportive works to walk in, as well as men. Proverbs 31 indicates that the ideal wife is entrepreneurial and accomplished, to the complete blessing of the home. The Deborah and Barak story of Judges 4 suggests that God enables women to fill spiritual vacuums left by men. True, God imposes certain limits and women are not to exercise doctrinal authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12). However, wrongfully to inhibit their God-given gifts is to quench the Holy Spirit and possibly encourage women to adopt sinful outlets of their abilities such as gossip, manipulation, or usurpation. (This thought corresponds to Ephesians 6:4's admonition not to frustrate the children.) Thus, Abigail Adams recognized that the federal principle properly applies to women. A federal relationship is a covenantal one by definition. The essence of this principle is voluntary association and reciprocal authority—choosing one's representative and submitting to him, within his proper sphere. Responsibilities bear both upon the one with authority and the one submitted to it.

As an aside, one of the strongest arguments for an active fatherhood is the natural contempt of a son for his mother. I have observed this phenomenon as a serious concern in the home where the father has adopted the attitude that the home and children concern only the woman. The man is the provider and that is that. Rather, a most important fatherly function is to establish respect for the mother in the son. If the son shows disrespect to mom, he answers to dad. This presumes, of course, that dad is a good example and properly honors his wife. If the natural attitude is not corrected, the contempt carries over into the son's marriage, who is now a man of determined habit. Similarly, good Christian mothers ought also to work very hard to cultivate respect in their daughters for their fathers and brothers. Respect works both ways.

Because women are coheirs with Christ, their voice is important to the home and civil society. One of the historical grounds of civil suffrage in the United States was ownership of real property. Again, Numbers 27:7 and Joshua 17:4 indicate God's acknowledgement of and His blessing upon the legitimacy of property ownership by women, as an aspect of the future good of the national covenant. Where men systematically bully women personally or civilly (in defiance of such commandment as found in Exodus 21:7-11), then Biblically speaking, women have a legitimate complaint. However, women, as the result of America's cultural secularization of the nineteenth century, humanistically turned to anti-family, political solutions. Rather than trust Christ and appeal to their husbands, rather than be patient by faith and work righteously toward redress, women demanded a direct civil vote.

The women's civil vote clearly democratized America to its hurt. It violated the federal principle of local self-government based upon relationships in increasingly large spheres. The women's vote compromised the sanctity of the home, introducing a legally sanctioned friction between the masculine and feminine heads of the household. (Suffrage for eighteen-year-olds likewise added to the breakdown of the unity of a home.) In his American history lectures, Dr. Rushdoony called this leveling and breakdown of federal relationships *atomization* of society, such that the only remaining authority in

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society is the state in its largest spheres. No more do local institutions of increasingly greater scale bring unity to communities through various authority and peer relationships, where unity brings greater local political power. Rather it is increasingly every man (and woman) for himself.

When confronted by the suffrage issue, men did not listen and repent, as Christian men ought. Rather, they did the most irresponsible thing they could do. To get women off their backs, they answered, "Yes, dear, take the vote," thus further driving the wedge dividing the home.

If direct feminine suffrage is not Christian, what is a Christian view? Noah Webster says Suffrage is "A vote; a voice given in deciding a controverted question, or in the choice of a man for an office or trust. Nothing can be more grateful to a good man than to be elevated to office by the unbiased suffrages of free enlightened citizens."⁴ Thus, suffrage is a voice. According to the federal model, a man must represent his home to civil society. His vote must represent the good of his wife and home. He must listen to her and to his children. Good faith may require he contradict her wishes sometimes, but he must do so only after he seriously considers her view. This is the nature of representative government. The final responsibility rests with him. Therefore, he bears the burden before Christ that his vote represents godly love.

The principle of feminine suffrage adopted by American Heritage Christian Church in Camarillo, California provides a possible solution. Seeking to establish a Biblical polity, the church in the mid-eighties found women's suffrage properly to be mediate—that is, through men. As an elder-based, congregational, representative and federal republic, each household cast a vote. Our experience represents an interesting example of an attempt to practice applied Biblical Christianity in a generally unfavorable political climate. Elder Martin Selbrede initiated, and with Christian attorney James Griffith, worked with the Secretary of State regarding adequate feminine representation. We established mediate suffrage for women as an element of our by-laws, citing the American Puritan's *Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline* as historic precedent. Thus, we bound ourselves. It was incumbent upon the masculine head of every household to represent his wife's rightful interest in the church. For women without husbands or fathers in the church, the elders voted mediately for them. In this view, like the husband of a wife, the elder must speak on behalf of the widow and single woman—truly representing their concerns. The elder must as right listen and take seriously the interests of the single woman.

We men will no doubt answer to the Lord one day over our treatment of women. Realizing that women are spiritual and moral equals, though under authority, we ought to re-evaluate our governmental positions toward them. Too often, we have allowed the principle of federal headship to become a license for personal despotism. Real men need not establish their own worth at someone else's expense. If the American Christian home will rear godly children for the generations, we must resist the natural tendencies, exacerbated by feminism, to polarize the sexes, and instead replace natural contempt with the self-sacrificial love of Christ.

¹ L. H. Butterfield (ed.) *Adams Family Correspondence*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 369-370; quoted at <http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-5022.html>.

² Rousas Rushdoony, *This Independent Republic* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2001), pp. 13-22.

³ Rousas Rushdoony, *The Roots of Reconstruction* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1991), pp. 215-219.

⁴ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language (1828)* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1980).