

BIBLE LIGHT

On

WOMAN SUFFRAGE

Catherine Waugh McCulloch

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There are many modern problems to which no Bible concordance can give us a clew. There are social questions today pressing for solution which Christ never named in words. He never said specifically that we should drag the little girl widows of India from the funeral pyre; that we should unbind the tortured feet of Chinese women; that we should keep little children from work in underground mines; that we should make sanitary our prisons or do Red Cross work. Nor did Jesus say in so many words, "Let women vote."

But Christianity will solve these newer problems if we study the spirit of Christ's words and then apply the treatment most in accord with His life and teachings.

No class needed Jesus more than did women. Their long continued slavery, their degradation, their ignorance, the age-long suppression of all their aspirations, made them the saddest class to whom Christ came.

He was a friend who differed from every human friend women had ever gained. The kindness of men had been limited to the women they made their slaves or their toys, but Christ's kindness extended to every woman who came before Him. He did not slight the Samaritan woman of alien blood, He did not chide the mothers with little children who doubtless wearied Him, He did not repulse the Magdalene with her box of precious ointment, nor did He scorn the woman taken in, but He looked beyond to her equally guilty accusers and administered this rebuke: "He that is without sin among you let him first cast a stone at her."

He gave no encouragement to Martha's notion that every woman's place is in the kitchen, and there only. He said Mary had chosen that better part.

He said that He came to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that were bruised.

Women knew that they were poor, were broken-hearted and bruised. They were bound by

custom, were captives of greed and lust and were the most powerless of human beings. They endured all the sufferings of the men of their own and in addition the slights and abuses heaped on them because they were women. They better appreciated the need of the gospel of love, of peace, of equality, of benevolence than could the sanctimonious Sadducee, the hypocritical Pharisee, or the purse proud publican. Christ told them that He came that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly. To their empty lives, to their starved hearts, to their longing minds, this was a glorious prospect, the prospect of an abundant rich, full life. They recognized in His gospel the greatest uplifting force that had ever come to women. So they were numerous among His followers, last at the cross and first at the sepulcher.

The Jews to whom Christ came were better prepared than any other existing nation for a just recognition of women. They had learned in the books of Moses that men were made of the same flesh and blood, and that over the newly created world they had been given joint dominion.

They easily explained woman's subservient position as a punishment for sin, and every Jewish mother hoped a coming child might lift the curse from her sex. Perhaps some thought the Genesis statement, that woman should bring forth her children in sorrow and be subject to her husband, a divine command for all ages. Some early Christian teachers so construed it when they forbade the use of any anesthetic by a woman in childbirth, on the ground that God wanted women to suffer. Who could worship or love so cruel a God? Our God never wanted women to suffer, to be humiliated, to be degraded. Someone's sin, doubtless the sin and neglect of many is responsible for women's physical suffering and social degradation. This statement in Genesis was not a law, but a prophecy of what the future held for women- a prophecy fulfilled by the sufferings of millions of wives and mothers through thousands of years. This prophecy would no more be called a command of God than the statement made at the same time to man, that he should eat his bread in the sweat of his face and that he should eat the herb of the field. If that also is a command to endure through countless generation, then any man who eats meat is wicked, for it was said that he would eat herbs, and any man who eats without perspiration is flying in the face of his Creator. This is no more absurd than to claim that God ordained women to suffer and to obey.

The scientists of today quite agree with the Genesis parable concerning creation; that creation was in the ascending scale, first the lower creatures, then the higher animals, then man, and last at the apex the more complex woman. The order of creation affords no argument why

women should over men, though Paul in 1. Tim. 2:13 so seems to regard it. It might rather be a reason why men should obey women. The question as to joint government was foreshadowed in the Genesis statement, "to them" that is male and female humanity, "gave his dominion."

The Jews, it is true, were for centuries only semi-civilized, and were always somewhat affected by the less civilized heathen nations near them. We cannot expect to find their early treatment of women a model fit in every respect for modern twentieth century men to follow. But they strove toward better things. Their Ten Commandments directed the honoring of mothers as well as fathers. Even their calling women unclean at certain times so protected women from lustful approach that the health and purity of the Jewish people have been a marvel down to the present day. Even the provision for a bill of divorcement gave women a certain legal standing not granted among nations where a wife might be cast off with no reason at a husband's pleasure. Moses recognized the daughters' right to a share in their father Zelophedad's inheritance, evidently the early beginning of women's property rights. He early recognized the right of women to the fruits of their own toil when repulsing the shepherds who were about to steal the water drawn by the daughters of Jethro for their own flocks.

The Jews showed liberality toward the brilliant women who could do work commonly accounted too high for women. Miriam composed and sang her song, as did Mary her Magnificat. Deborah led her armies to victory and then for forty years ruled her people in peace. One great victory did not make her covet the title of a great warrior. She sought rather to cultivate the arts and industries which best flourish in times of peace. Huldah, the prophetess, and Anna, the priestess did their holy work with none to object because of their sex.

The Jews' high ideal of what women might do, and he, was set before them in the last twenty-one verses of the last chapter of Proverbs. A lofty type of womanhood is there pictured, a woman well developed in every department of learning and endeavor, a woman who might well typify all the brilliant women of even this century. Into this portrait of the ideal woman were doubtless put traits from the lives of many great Jewish women. It was a composite word picture. This ideal was like the Ten Commandments, a great and noble image of perfection toward which they constantly strove. These verses, before the days of books, passed from one generation to another by repetition. Parents taught their children to recite such poems, and these children in turn taught their own little ones. Doubtless Mary taught these words and many other psalms and proverbs to Jesus after the manner of Jewish parents. She could do it. Mary's own Magnificat

showed her to be a woman of lofty feeling, patriotic sentiment, fervent piety and intellectual strength. Sons of such mothers respect women. These words may have been the very ones which were most responsible for Christ's kindly treatment of women, for by no word or look or gesture did He treat them as inferior to men. To women after His resurrection was the first command given to spread abroad the tidings that he was risen. Not only the Mary's but many other women were among the faithful workers in the early church. They helped from the audiences and they were among those who preached or prophesied. The four daughters of Philip prophesied, with no criticism concerning their own sex, and Dorcas was a renowned almoner of the early church.

The great leader Paul had taught them many things about liberty and the kindly treatment of slaves. To him one human soul (Onesimus, a slave) was as great as another (even Philemon, the master). Paul taught them that there was neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, but that they were all one in Christ Jesus. He frequently recognized and approved of women's work in the church. Among the women commended by Paul or honorably mentioned by him were Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, mother of Rufus, Julia Nereus' sister Claudia, and Apphia.

Some have claimed that Paul wholly opposed women's preaching and recommended to them only humbler tasks. But a careful reading of all his letters will show that he was only trying to conform somewhat to the customs of the day then prevalent among Eastern peoples, and was advising a line of conduct which might draw toward Christian women the least possible criticisms. He plainly recognized them as preachers when he advised them to keep their heads covered when they preached or prophesied (I. Xoe. II:5), or when they prayed (13th verse)-- only a becoming deference to Eastern custom. He commanded (Phil 4:3), "Help those women which labored with me in the gospel." His commendation of Phoebe, who succored many, even himself, and who served the church in Cenchrea, doubtless as deacon, his frequent references to Priscilla, who trained Apollos how to preach, show his attitude toward the dignified utterances of holy women. He recognized (I. Tim. 1:5 and 3:15, Acts 16:1) the valuable training Timothy had received from his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, "From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures." Timothy's father was a Greek from whom he could not have learned this.

It is true that he advised the Corinthian women about what to wear when they prophesied, and also asked them to keep silence (1. Cor. 14:34), adding that it was a shame for them to speak, or (properly translated) to chatter in the church. So it would be now. It would be a shame

for men or women so to behave. But the Corinthian women were not graduates of universities and theological schools, as some women are today.

Whatever it was Paul meant, he plainly intended it for those of ancient times and not for us today under such different conditions. His kindness to the humble (Rom. 15:31) - "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak" - might well rouse men to help women; and his encouragement "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free" - should spur women to help themselves. When we cease our scrutiny of these few verses and read all Paul wrote, we discover a great love for liberty and justice which today would doubtless place him with John Stuart Mill, Jacob Bright, Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison and other men who have stood for woman suffrage.

Peter, too, is another whose words about wifely submission have been translated by our opponents to mean, "Do not let women vote." Now voting has nothing to do with obeying a husband. We may or may not obey and yet to be disfranchised is worse than obeying the command of our own husbands; it means obeying the laws made by husbands of every one else. If Peter meant that all women everywhere should obey whatever sort of a husband each might have, sober or drunken, honest or knavish, chaste or dissolute, intelligent or ignorant, kind or cruel, pious or blasphemous, then on that subject Peter was not inspired. Even the best of husbands today may sometimes err in a command to a wife, and a discreet and pious wife will use her own best judgment as to when she should obey and when she should disobey. Our vow to our church pledges us to obey God; our oath of allegiance to our native land pledges us to obey our country's laws, regardless of our husbands' orders. Governments no longer punish a husband for a wife's crime. She must go to jail or be hung for her own deeds. So she is wise to consider before she obeys. Peter shows his unfamiliarity with ancient scripture in holding up Sarah as an example of obedient wifedom. She may have called Abraham "Lord," to flatter his vanity, for all of Laban's relatives were "up to tricks," but when it came to poor Hagar and innocent Ishmael, Abraham obeyed Sarah. Perhaps Peter intended a humorous touch when he advised wives to obey as Sarah did; that is, to obey when it suited them.

Peter's words too should be read, to appreciate fully his words to wives. He, who found it so hard to be patient and submissive, recommended to all, submission as a cardinal virtue. "Be subject to every ordinance of man, *** king*** governors. Honor the king. Servants are in subjection to your master. Wives are in subjection to your husbands. Ye younger, be subject unto

the elder. Gird yourselves with humility to serve one another." So if any husband ever quotes Peter as authority for wifely obedience, the wife in turn may quote Peter's words, "Gird yourselves with humility to serve one another."

Paul also commended to all, both men and women, "Submitting yourselves one to another" (Ephesians 5:12), and "Put on therefore humbleness of mind" (Col. 3:12).

The women today who graduate from universities and lead great reform movements are different from the majority of women to whom Paul and Peter wrote. We today carry out the spirit of these writings in conforming generally to the laws and customs of the nations among which we dwell, changing as these nonessentials differ.

With Christ's example before us, with Paul's words that there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus, that we are all one, and Peter's words to husbands and wives that they are heirs together of the great of life and should be of one mind, what ought we to do to bring our present civilization up to the high standard set by the Gospel? We must admit that Christianity has been the inspiration which has already partly lifted women out of the degradation of heathenism and bondage of the dark ages. But it has not yet brought woman full freedom for self-development and helpfulness. It has not yet made her man's political equal throughout Christendom. There are more important matters before us today than whether a woman should speak veiled or unveiled, whether she should wear jewels or not, and whether her hair should be braided or not.

Women should be joint guardians with their husbands of their children. They should have an equal share in family property; they should be paid equal for equal work. Every school and profession should be open to them. Divorce and inheritance should be equal. Laws should protect them from man's greed by limiting the hours of woman's labor, and protect from man's lust by punishing severely, vile assaults on women. Women under official custody should be under the control of women. Troubled childhood should be safeguarded. All these desirable reforms can come through the vote of women, and such laws have been passed where women vote. To secure this vote for women in the United States, Christian women must unite.

Christian men are in power in all European countries, in America, both North and South, in Australia, and in great portions of Africa and Asia. If they will carry out in their laws Christ's teachings concerning women, there will be freedom and justice through civilized nations, and Christian women co-operating powerfully with Christian men will help bring in the era of peace on earth and good will to men promised by the angels 1900 years ago.

