

Where Are The Men?

And Is that the Best Question?

Part 3

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Polarization of Male vs. Female Leadership Roles has caused Harm

Continuing on in the series, I would further add that the societal pressure limiting women for so many years which led to the women's movement has also lent a dissonant note to this concern for Believers. If the church has misunderstood the status of women in regard to men, even with His Word as a standard, how much more is it true that society has done the same. I lived through much of the heyday of the Feminist Movement, and as a graduate student became familiar with some of the more strident voices demanding "equal rights" for women in all areas beyond just voting. Some of the more militant voices were hostile and aggressive toward men and family life, while the moderate voices simply wanted freedom to learn and work as their talents led them.

Is it coincidental that I recently learned that one of the most militant voices against marriage and family life, Shulamith Firestone, came from an orthodox Jewish family, which she perceived as cold and legalistic? (In those days I didn't recognize a Jewish name. Her younger sister, Rabbi Tirzah Firestone M. A later wrote a book about her renewed commitment to her Jewish heritage, exploring Kabbalah and including her perceptions of Shulamith's rebelliousness and the changes that softened life in their home. ¹)

As is so often the case, issues coming to the surface caused people to become polarized in their views. An equally damaging "either/or" characterization of men and women ensued: militant feminist or passive female. Men became either progressive types or "male chauvinist pigs." Are you old enough to remember? I believe that this battle further polarized the status of women within the church just as it did in general society. A woman who identified primarily as a wife, mother and homemaker was idealized as the epitome of Biblical womanhood while one who chose other pursuits could easily be villainized. A woman who quietly went along with her husband or men in general was considered to be appropriately respectful while one who dared to challenge or question was relegated to the defiant feminist status. Somehow, the example of the Proverbs 31 woman seemed lost: *she* was esteemed for her wise dealings with matters at home *and* business affairs. A man who dominated women was revered as powerful and a man who deferred to woman was called names we don't mention in polite company. A polarized issue results in oversimplification of a complex issue to an either/or one. I can't speak personally to this but suspect that men lost freedom to relate to women individually, instead finding it necessary to categorize them as one of those "feminists" or not. Perhaps an inner dialogue went something like this, "Will I be politically incorrect if I open a door for this woman? Will she be offended or appreciative? Better just avoid the whole thing."

¹ *With Roots In Heaven: One Woman's Passionate Journey into the Heart of Her Faith* (Plume:1998).

It seems to me that fear and immaturity played roles in this as well. When men and women find themselves cast in a light or role that is stereotypical but not necessarily true for them, fear of how their actions will be perceived grows. If I don't want to be seen as one of *those* feminists, I must be very careful not to appear challenging in any way. If I want to be respected as a man I can't let a woman have too much influence on me, or at least it can't be known!

I have also recently been given a man's comment on the question of female leadership, which is almost identical to a statement made by a male friend nearly 25 years ago. "If the women are willing to do everything, the men will just head out to the golf course..." To my ears, this sounds like more of a maturity issue than a male--female battle. Who wouldn't *rather* play, yet those with leadership attributes and maturity see a need and take initiative, whether men or women.

Now we can perhaps see the double bind, the "you can't win for losing" aspect of defining women's role that has paralyzed us for so long. Organizations have a mixed record of success in implementing Scriptural principles accurately. Women have long been deferred from formal leadership roles with the understanding that this was contrary to Scriptural teaching, despite recognition of the various female leaders, at least eight, to whom Paul related. Jamie L. Perez, M.Ed., author of *Romans: From the Mind of Paul*, provided an excellent summary of women leaders in Sha'ul/Paul's time.

*[Re. Phoebe] Sha'ul/Paul requested that the Roman congregation give her the same esteem, assistance, and authority as they had given to him. This needs to be repeated. This was a woman who possessed and exercised authority over men and women in the Messianic community with Sha'ul's full approval and encouragement. This was not considered abnormal or contrary to a woman's place in society. To the contrary, Sha'ul appeared very comfortable with her status and position within the Messianic community. Based on YeshaYahu's/Isaiah's example, she appears to have attained this status, not because she sought it but because she humbly made herself available in whatever capacity God needed her. Leadership, authority, or power did not appear to be her goal but simply was the result of her faithful service.*²

*Women, just like men, must be evaluated on their character, merit, and overall abilities, rather than by their gender. Just as God historically used women in positions that defied society's norm, He continues to use women today.*³

There are some bodies of Believers in which women do have leadership roles and some in which they are ordained as clergy, yet the subtle underlying perceptions often remain. (The question of whether or not women "should" be ordained as clergy is beyond the over all scope of this paper.) Often women have feared asserting their gifts and being considered "pushy" or one of the other unpleasant labels accorded to strong women. Men have feared listening to a woman's input and being considered weak. In this unnecessary battle, much discernment and wisdom has been lost.

² *Romans: From the Mind of Paul*; Perez, Writer's Club Press, Lincoln, NE. 2001; page 340.

³ *Ibid*; page 341.

Could it be fair to say that by man's traditions, or by misunderstanding of Paul's teaching, in a selective way and by diminishing the authority and value of the Torah/entire Scripture, the fullness of our Elohim's character and design for leadership by both men and women who are strong and mature has been diminished? When women's ways of knowing and seeing have been excluded from leadership within the Body of Messiah one half of His creation has nearly been silenced.

NEXT TIME: Leadership within the Community: Development from the Ground Up.