

## WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF A WOMAN?

Does He expect anything other than He expects of a man? The Scriptures are clear that men and women are equal in Jesus Christ. And they are just as clear that God is no respecter of persons. Is it time to rethink our view of the Christian woman?

Where the Bible is silent, details will have to be worked out according to the consciences of individuals, families, and church congregations. But when and where the Lord has spoken, we must listen and act accordingly.

My thanks to the men and women who have worked so conscientiously to help me think through this issue. We offer this study with the prayer that it will renew your appreciation for the wisdom of God and the woman of His design.

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## WHAT'S A WOMAN TO BE?

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was historic legislation for women in the workplace. The U.S. Congress declared that persons with equal training, education, and experience shall have equal pay regardless of race, nationality, religion, or sex.

Today's woman, however, needs more than equal pay for equal work. She needs to be able to come to terms with the complexities of a world that is giving mixed signals about what a woman is to be. A generation that has admired women like Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, and Corazon Aquino needs to recover its dignity in the face of pornography, teen rebellion, divorce, and economic disadvantage. A woman needs to cope with fatigue, disillusionment, anger, and depression.

The trouble hasn't surfaced overnight. Thirty years ago, jazz artist Billy Tipton realized that society would not give a woman opportunity in the field of jazz. Billy lived 30 years as a man. Yet when he died suddenly, he was found by emergency medical personnel to be a woman. Her life reminds us that our world *does* treat men and women differently. Billy's life also reminds us that women sometimes feel it's necessary to hide their femininity in order to find fulfillment in a "man's world." Sometimes a woman ends up denying something of her own soul just to survive.

## HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

In the beginning, woman was created for companionship, conversation, and co-rulership of the earth. Today she is not the person she used to be. Neither is her male counterpart. Both suffer from distortions of gender that limit their ability to give one another the love and help they were

made to give. Both are plagued by a twistedness rooted deep in their souls. Both reflect caricatures that betray their inner trouble:

### MASCULINE TWISTS

Macho man	Mamma's boy	Tom cat
Gym rat	Gambler	Boarder
General	Lush	Money machine
Workaholic	Fan	Wimp
Closet queen	Archie Bunker	Dirty old man
Good ol' boy	Lone Ranger	Couch potato

### FEMININE TWISTS

Tough girl	Daddy's girl	Tramp
Party girl	Gold digger	Primadonna
Witch	Drinker	Shopper
Superwoman	Phone company	Maid
Dumb blonde	Baby machine	Painted lady
Fashion plate	Food service	Door mat

Unfortunately, there is no safe way to be wrong. Both sexes suffer for each other's mistakes, but women seem to feel most acutely the resulting symptoms of poverty, loneliness, boredom, abuse, and depression. Too many women see the damage transferred to their own children, who leave home angry, confused, and wondering whether the life their mother gave them is really worth living.

### WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF A WOMAN?

Today's woman needs to look back to go forward. Like her male counterpart, she needs to rediscover the plan of her Designer. Before she can fulfill her distinct feminine identity, she must admit that trying to live on her own terms and by her own strength doesn't work. Before she can find real fulfillment and security, she must be willing to change her mind about where hope is found, and then go back to the pattern and protective shelter of the One who created both men and women for Himself (Ps. 91:1-6).

The Bible offers that plan. It shows a woman how to live with dignity and serenity. It urges her to experience the difference the Lord can make in her life. It encourages her to trust God Himself for the ability to live with:

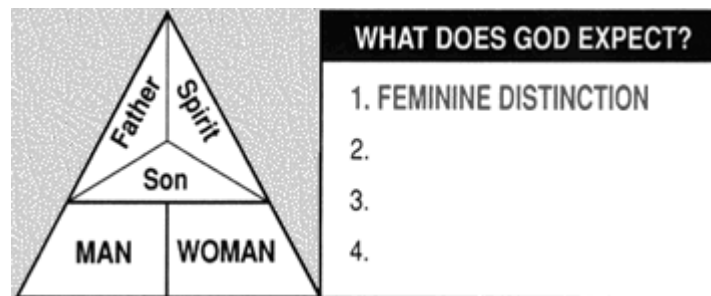
- [Feminine Distinction](#)
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These are the main elements of the plan we'll be looking at. As we begin, however, it's important to see that each of these points will be applied to women living under many different kinds of conditions--some ideal, others far from good. The Word of God covers a variety of circumstances with its unchanging principles. The Scriptures introduce us to many women, including a godly woman judge, prophetesses, queens, singles, wives, mothers, and even converted prostitutes. The Bible honors the high calling of women who choose to marry, have children, and nurture them for God. But it also makes it clear that for some the single life is better. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul show that you can remain faithful to your sexual identity while living the single life.

A proper understanding of what is and is not optional can help us to untangle the knotted ropes of tradition and opinion that keep women from coming to terms with the lordship of Christ.

To begin, it's important to realize that God expects a woman to live with:

## WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF A WOMAN? Feminine Distinction



Imagine a sexless race. No maternal order would bear the unequal obligations and responsibilities of childbearing. Modern lawmakers would not have to struggle with the issue of whether or not a woman deserves special legal protection to compensate her for the inescapable physical requirements of having babies. Lady Justice would not have to argue paternity issues with sexually mature males who have never grown up. We would not be faced with the immeasurable problem of teenage promiscuity, or with the specter of children having children.

Yes, our Creator could have avoided the problem of sexuality altogether. He could have devised a different method of reproduction. After declaring that it was not good for man to be alone, He could have developed a method by which genetic information was clipped from Adam's fingernail and planted in the ground. Little Adams could have been raised on a vine and harvested like cucumbers and squash.

Yet, the Lord had a better idea. Rather than giving Adam cloned companions who saw and experienced life just as he did, the all-wise God created a woman. Moses told us that after making man, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him' " (Gen. 2:18).

Interestingly, the Genesis account of human and sexual origins doesn't tell us *what* made Eve the feminine complement she was. It tells us *who* made her feminine. It tells us who masterminded the effects of the male hormones and the genetic programming of the 23rd chromosome.

To that original creative pattern, every culture adds its own shaping and detail. Every society develops its own definition of femininity. Yet in spite of all the cultural ad-libbing, the basic biological script is followed. Whether in Canada, Colombia, or China, girls come into a world that eventually teaches them to walk and talk like a woman. Girls learn early that boys are different. They see the results of genetic and hormonal differences that cause boys to be more muscular and aggressive and loud. They learn that a little girl is to grow up to be a woman who in a special feminine way is to be kind, compassionate, sensitive, and tender.

As a result of these self-evident, yet adaptable differences, there have been many attempts to define the core nature of masculinity and femininity. Some have suggested that hormonally induced male aggressiveness tends to make him an initiator, while women find fulfillment in being responders. Others believe that because of differences beginning in fetal development, men have a statistical edge in objective and spatial reasoning, while women excel in the equally important logic of the heart.

In *His Needs, Her Needs*, author Willard Harley suggests that men and women have a different priority system. Harley says that men tend to desire, in this order, (1) sexual fulfillment, (2) recreational companionship, (3) an attractive spouse, (4) domestic support, and (5) admiration. He says, however, that women's priorities seem to be for (1) affection, (2) conversation, (3) honesty and openness, (4) financial support, and (5) family commitment.

As real as sexual differences are, though, many are not absolute or mutually exclusive. The same Bible that describes our sexual origins and differences also makes it clear that the categories overlap. The Scriptures themselves show that it is foolish to say that a woman should never lead, be strong, or assert herself. Deborah, Abigail, Huldah, Esther, and the daughters of Zelophehad are all examples of women who knew how and when to assert themselves in a godly way. It is just as unthinkable to suppose that a real man should not be sensitive, emotional, compassionate, and responsive to the needs of others. Moses, David, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul all expressed emotions of compassion and gentleness.

In short, God made men and women to be much the same, yet significantly and wonderfully different. Even though the scope of these differences is difficult to determine, and even though many are culturally defined, the Bible is very strong in maintaining the distinctions.

**Distinctions in appearance (Deut. 22:5).** Moses warned against cross-dressing. He said that a woman must not wear a man's clothing, nor a man a woman's clothing. Since both men and women wore flowing robes in Eastern culture, we should not jump to Western conclusions. It's doubtful that the principle of Deuteronomy 22:5 would forbid women from wearing slacks, or men kilts. Yet it certainly means that neither sex should wear anything for the purpose of looking like the other.

To this the apostle Paul added his own God-given conviction that even nature itself teaches that men maintain masculine appearance.

Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her (1 Cor.11:14,15).

Here the Scriptures do not provide a basis for "legalistic" criticism. Paul doesn't say how long is too long for a man, nor how short is too short for a woman. Instead he appeals to a higher law. He appeals to nature itself, implying that at some point masculine and feminine distinctions become a self-evident issue.

Distinctions in roles. Is a woman's place in the home? Is that really where she can find her God-given role? The answer depends on whether or not she is married, whether she has children who need her care, and whether or not her husband is able to provide for the basic needs of the home. Women like Ruth, Deborah, and Anna are among many biblical woman who had roles outside the home.

Yet nothing should diminish the honor of the woman who does choose to marry, have children, manage the home and use it as a place of Christian hospitality (1 Tim. 5:10,14). Nothing should be said to discourage the mother who believes she can best serve her children by being there when they need her. The fact that many women don't have that option should not be reason to rule out the ideal. After all, it was the apostle Paul who encouraged older women to:

Admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed (Titus 2:4,5).

This is not advice for all women. It refers to young wives and mothers. More specifically, it refers to young wives and mothers who have husbands who can and do make it possible for them to work in the home. They are the women who must be encouraged to find fulfillment in the very important profession of raising children and managing the home.

Is this to say that a woman must "stay at home" and honor her husband as head of the house because she, as a woman, is less intelligent or capable than a man? Individual intelligence and competence have nothing to do with it. It's a matter of God's design for families.

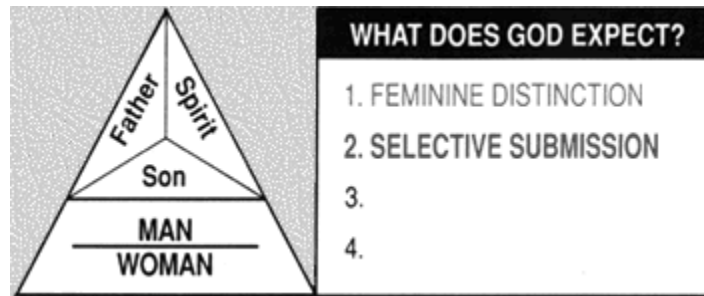
**Distinctions in sexual relationships.** Men who pursue romantic relationships with men, and women who pursue romantic relationships with women dishonor themselves. The apostle Paul lamented such an error when he wrote:

Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another (Rom. 1:26,27 NIV).

This is not to say that lesbian women do not have reasons for hating and fearing male relationships. Many have never known anything but abusive, arrogant, unloving men. It's

understandable that they would retreat from seeking intimacy with a man. But as understandable as it may be, homosexuality is self-destructive. It is not an "enlightened" alternative. A woman caught in such a trap needs to call out to the Lord for His help. She needs to repent of her wrong, appeal to the mercy and love of Christ, and seek the encouragement of a Christian support group that can help her to renew her mind and affections in the Lord.

## WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF A WOMAN? Selective Submission



The idea of submission is difficult for many women to deal with. But it should help if a woman can know for sure that (1) this is really what God wants, and (2) she has not only an opportunity but a responsibility to be selective in carrying out such an assignment.

Let's first take a look at what the Bible says about the kind of submission God expects of a married woman. It involves a response that goes beyond the universal principle of Christian submission. After making it clear that *mutual* submission is a mark of Spirit-filled relationships, Paul went on to say:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything (Eph. 5:22-24).

From God's point of view, this kind of submission is not a negotiable issue. It is not just a question of what a woman committed herself to when she spoke her marriage vows. The Word of God says unmistakably that a wife is to follow the lead of her husband just as her husband is responsible to love her as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25). Obedience and recognition of a husband's leadership comes with the territory of being a Christian wife (1 Cor. 11:1-3; Eph. 5:22-24).

The apostle Peter wrote that such submission is right even if a husband is not being the kind of godly, loving, sacrificing person he should be.

Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives (1 Pet. 3:1,2).

This is one side of the issue. The other side is that this submission should not be mindlessly servile and passive. This submission should be active and selective. Obviously God does not ask all women to submit to all men at all times and in all places. Neither does the Lord expect a married woman always to obey her husband or church leader, any more than He expects a citizen always to obey the government (Acts 5:29).

The actions of Ananias and Sapphira, as recorded for us in Acts 5:1-11, are a noteworthy example of a wife who foolishly went along with her husband's sin and lost her life in the process. Acts 5:2 says that Sapphira was aware of her husband's attempt to mislead the church of God. Yet, "being aware," she didn't object and refuse to go along with his plan. Instead, she conspired with him to lie to the church about the amount of their contribution. The result was that God struck both of them dead. In retrospect, it is clear that Sapphira should not have gone along with her husband's wishes.

Abigail, on the other hand, is an example of a woman who did just the opposite of Sapphira. She did not submit to her husband's wishes, and by her noncompliance actually saved her life and those of her household (1 Sam. 25:18-44). Abigail recognized that her "mean and surly" husband was defying David, servant of the Most High God. Showing herself to be an intelligent and godly woman, she acted unilaterally to counteract the foolishness of her husband. He died for his foolishness, and she lived to become the wife of King David.

Yet, having made a point of these two examples, we must acknowledge them as exceptions to the rule of marital submission. The rule is that if a woman chooses to marry, she becomes responsible to follow the lead of her husband. Only when her husband asks something that is in direct conflict with the will of God is she free to do otherwise.

Certainly such submission is made much easier when a Christian husband is the kind of person God wants him to be. Blessed is the woman who has a husband who shows love, gentleness, reasonableness, patience, and fairness to her. That's God's pattern. But keep in mind that neither role is dependent on whether the other partner is doing his or her part. A husband is to serve his wife lovingly whether she is submissive or not. A wife is to be obedient and submissive whether or not her husband is showing her Christlike love.

Such a pattern does not fit the mode of our egalitarian culture. The right kind of submission is a test of faith in God. Submission, however, is not just a feminine challenge. It's a challenge for men in the military, athletics, or business. It's a test of character for children moving through adolescence. It can also be very hard for women in the home or the church.

The idea of any submissive role at all can frustrate and anger a woman. The association might be likened to the uneasiness many people feel while riding in the back seat of a car or taxicab. By being dependent on the judgment and skill of someone else, the passenger feels a loss of any ability to protect himself. When the driver seems negligent, careless, and irresponsible, the rider experiences feelings of resentment, fear, and anger.

Some of that frustration is what a woman can feel in the home or the church. She soon learns that men are far from perfect. How can she then commit herself to their care and judgment? How can she knowingly and voluntarily go along for the ride, especially when it soon becomes apparent that she sees almost everything from a significantly different point of view? With such thoughts in mind, let's take a look at the kind of submission called for in the Scriptures.

**A married woman is as responsible to follow her husband as her husband is responsible to follow the Lord (Eph. 5:21-33).** Her motive should be to submit to her husband as a way of showing her confidence in the Lord. If that is her perspective, then knowing that the Lord has her best interests at heart will help to minimize any natural resentment or anger that such dependence might elicit. She takes heart in the fact that the Lord understands her. He listens to her, knows her needs, and when necessary will be the judge between her and her husband.

Sarah, wife of Abraham, seemed to understand this. While she is honored by Peter as a model of respectful submission (1 Pet. 3:5,6), the Genesis account adds some important details, which show what kind of woman Sarah was. We see how two imperfect people can hurt and mislead one another. We also see how after helping to make a mess of things, a woman can still find in the Lord the strength she needs to express her feelings and appeal to her husband's conscience. We may conclude, therefore, that a woman who is known for submissiveness is not necessarily passive.

In Genesis 16:5 we find Sarah confronting Abraham with deep hurt and displeasure. While admitting her own mistake in encouraging Abraham to have a child by her servant, Sarah suggests that the ball is now in Abraham's court to address a bad situation gone worse. After misleading Abraham into having a child by her servant, she says:

My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The Lord judge between you and me. So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please" (Gen.16:5,6).

Notice a couple of things. First, Sarah was not mindlessly passive. She had been deeply hurt, and she let her husband know how she felt. Second, she recognized that she and her husband were being watched. When she said, "The Lord judge between you and me," she showed her awareness that her husband was also accountable to God. Abraham seems to have felt the weight of her appeal, because he again deferred to her wishes.

In light of Sarah's relationship with Abraham, let's ask some questions. What if a husband tells his wife to do something that is in direct conflict with her responsibility to God? What if her husband tells her to lie, or to indulge in his twisted craving for pornography or wife-swapping? What if her husband tells her to sign income tax forms that she knows are inaccurate? She must take a firm stand, while trying to maintain her dignity and gracious spirit (1 Pet. 3:1). She must let her husband know that her first responsibility is to remain true to her Lord. The Lord, after all, is the one who holds her security in the palm of His own hand.



A husband may die, suffer a stroke, have an accident, or become unfaithful. How then can a woman find her security in a mere man? She can if her submission to her husband mirrors her willingness to submit to the Lord.

**A woman, married or single, is to take a supportive role in the church (1 Cor. 11:3-16; 1 Tim. 2:11-15).** In many ways a woman in the church can be likened to a member of a baseball, basketball, or volleyball team that competes under the leadership of a player-coach. As a team member, she is a full participant. But along with the rest of the team, she follows the lead of their team leader.

In a similar way, the women of the New Testament church are pictured as team members--co-workers with men in the gospel, but not elders, pastors, or apostles. The New Testament makes it clear that women are not to be in a position of doctrinal authority over men.

Paul often expressed his appreciation for women as co-workers in the gospel. But he also cast them in a supportive role in the church. While they actively prayed and prophesied (1 Cor. 11:5), worked, learned, and worshiped side by side with men in the church, women were not to challenge men in the public debate, discussion, and definition of doctrine. Paul wrote:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression (1 Tim. 2:11-14).

Paul was consistent with his own Teacher. Jesus respected women. He took them seriously. He counted them among His companions and disciples. He cared for them and taught them. He gave them consideration uncommon in their day. But when it came to naming 12 apostles, He did not include a woman.

Paul could have clarified matters by using the kind of reasoning he used in handling other cultural sensitivities (Rom. 14:1-23). He could have opened the door for women, so they could eventually move into the roles of pastor-teacher and elder. But he didn't. He didn't leave room for his words to be interpreted merely in terms of custom. He reached back cross-culturally and cross-time to a pattern that he linked to both creation and the fall of man into sin (1 Tim. 2:12-14).

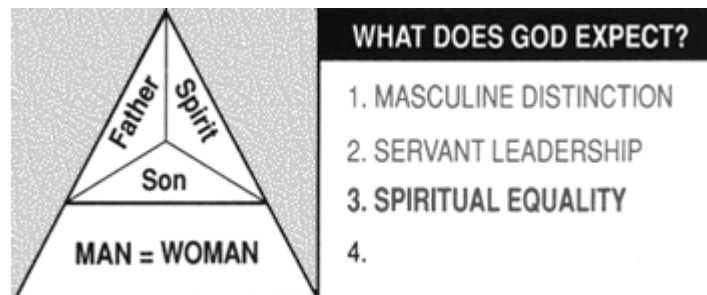
Paul expressed affection and appreciation to women he acknowledged as co-laborers and spiritual equals in Christ (Rom. 16:1-3,6,13,15; Gal. 3:26-28; Phil. 4:3). He encouraged mature women to teach younger sisters in Christ (Titus 2:3-5). But when it came to the issue of whether or not a woman could be in a role of authoritative teacher over a man, Paul was consistent with the principle that a woman pleases God by taking a supportive role in the church.

It is at this point that we should be careful not to overlook the strategic need for women to help women in the church. Whether we're talking about one-to-one discipleship, Bible studies, or special-need support groups, women should not overlook the needs of each other. What a

tragedy it is when women lose a sense of the unlimited opportunities they have to help one another, to provide hospitality, and to develop outreach! The needs of others, men and women, young and old alike, are too pressing to allow ourselves to become distracted and embittered over the masculine limitation God has placed on the office of elder. In many ways it is a back-to-Eden problem. If we're not careful, we can once again lose sight of a whole garden of opportunities while becoming preoccupied with the one "fruit" that has been put off limits.

We can't overemphasize how much women need the help of other women to think as they should about themselves, about God, about their homes and their families, and about their other relationships. Single women need encouragement. Married women need encouragement too. Older widows and teenage girls need strengthening companionship, phone calls, letters, and other creative expressions of kindness. Women all around us are walking the edge of despair. Without a Christlike embrace, they might give in to the overwhelming crush of their own loneliness and crisis. For lack of strengthening relationships, women young and old are caving in to sexual pressures, reaching out for chemical or alcoholic crutches, or giving in to the materialistic mood of our times.

## WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF A WOMAN? Spiritual Equality



One of the most self-evident facts of life is that all men are *not* created equal. Neither are women. In countless ways, there is no justice or fairness on earth. Life as it is usually lived is a struggle of unequals.

What is true, however, is that all persons are equally created. All people are equally dependent on the Lord for every breath and heartbeat. All are equally accountable. Inequalities of roles, material wealth, physical condition, social standing, or education do not change the ways in which all people *are* equal.

**Equal in Honor.** Differences of roles do not necessarily imply differences of honor or worth. Being submissive does not imply inferiority of person. Jesus Christ showed us that. He lived on earth "under the law" (Gal. 4:4), under the authority of His parents (Luke 2:51), under the authority of government leaders (Matt. 22:21), and above all, under the authority of His heavenly Father.

The apostle Paul used the Lord Jesus as an example of one who lived under the headship of God just as woman is to live under the headship of man (1 Cor. 11:3). Yet, by assuming such a servant role, Christ did not diminish His honor. Jesus did not become less than God when He temporarily laid aside the expression of His splendor and took on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:2-8). He didn't degrade and dehumanize Himself by humbling Himself and becoming obedient even to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). By such a role, He actually confirmed His honor. By voluntarily accepting His obedient, submissive role, He actually gave the Father reason to exalt Him and give Him a name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9-11).

In this way, Jesus gave woman a precedent for believing that her supportive role does not in any way signal that she is less of a person, less in honor, or less in potential. She is merely different in form and role for the purpose of carrying out the distinct design and purposes of God.

**Equal in Nature.** While God the Father and God the Son are different and distinct persons, they are equal and co-eternal in nature. So, man and woman, while having different roles in family and church, are made in the image of God.

If the Lord had wanted us to believe otherwise, if He had wanted to emphasize sexual diversity rather than unity, He could have made man out of the dust of the ground and woman out of a whisp of cumulus cloud. Instead, the Lord created woman so that Adam would exclaim:

This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man (Gen. 2:23).

Try to put yourself in the place of Adam and Eve. The emotion would be similar to what a new mother feels as she looks at the miracle and wonder of the newborn that has been formed within her own body.

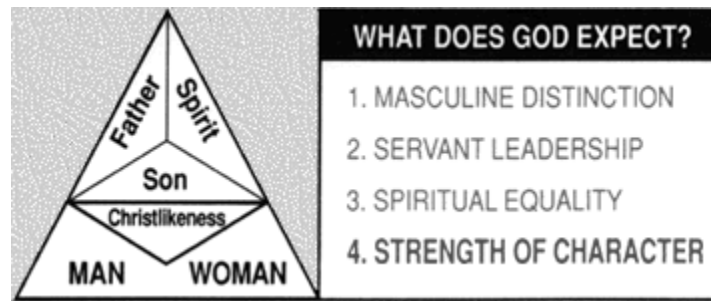
**Equal in Jesus Christ.** This is the most important of all emancipation proclamations. The apostle Paul wrote:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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 (Gal. 3:26-28).

This puts in marvelous perspective the nature of our temporal differences. Peter declares that men and women are now co-heirs of God's wonderful gift of life in Christ (1 Pet. 3:7).

This means that a man has no basis for pride, no basis for presumption, no basis for doing anything but loving, honoring, and serving the woman God made. This truth is like an earthmover knocking down hills and filling in valleys. It says that men and women stand on equal ground before God. Differences of function and form do not signal differences of essence or equality. They reflect differences in roles.

## WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF A WOMAN? Strength Of Character



The most beautiful women in the world are not those who parade in swimsuits and evening gowns before judges and television cameras. The real finalists and winners are those women who have the inner glow of grace and compassion. No amount of physical beauty can match the spiritual dignity or attractiveness of a mature woman of God. She is a person of serenity because her trust and security is in the Lord. She is a person of dignity because her value and sense of significance is found in God. She will reflect a kind of inner beauty that does more than call attention to herself. It is a beauty that is far more important than anything merely skin deep.

**A woman's strength of character is found in the person and example of Jesus Christ.** He knew how to live under even the worst kind of authority and still make the best of it. Even though He was the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus didn't insist on coming into the world in the role of a king.

The apostle Peter described Christ's ability to live under misused authority and then used His example to show what God can do in a woman.

Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on fine apparel; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands (1 Pet. 3:3-5).

Because Peter links this counsel with the example of Christ, who is said to have suffered physical torture without resistance (1 Pet. 2:21-24), we need to be careful with its application. Some might be inclined to say that this also reflects the extent to which a submissive wife should endure the abuse of her husband.

Our Lord's example does not mean that a woman should endure any and all physical abuse from a man just because He allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross without going for help. Jesus did not always put Himself at the mercy of the mobs and their governors. He did not take pleasure in being beaten. He allowed Himself to be at their mercy only when He knew His suffering would bring salvation to all men and women. At other times, Christ wisely took evasive action.

What Peter wants us to see, however, is that throughout our Lord's life He showed unparalleled strength of character. He never stopped being godly just because He was living under the shadow of evil authority. He never returned evil for evil or insult for insult. He didn't because He knew that His future, His security, His hope, His provision was not found in men but in His Father.

The result was that Jesus reflected a graciousness and strength that was rooted not in passive aggressiveness but in the strength of His relationship with the Father. It is that same strength of spirit that He can now produce in any woman who chooses to find her security and example in Him.

There is no more beautiful woman than one who is clothed in the Lord Jesus Christ. She is marked by tender kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, joy, and thankfulness (Col. 3:12-17). None of these are sold in a clothing store. None can be bought at any price. Yet all are free to any woman who chooses to live in Christ, even as He Himself lives in her.

**A woman's strength of character is found in an ancient formula.** The apostle Peter said, "For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands" (3:5). A woman who wants to be strong and beautiful will not put her confidence in expensive jewelry, fine clothes, and cosmetics (3:3). That doesn't mean she won't use them. It means she won't count on them.

The godly woman puts her real confidence in the graciousness, strength, and integrity that comes from her relationship to Christ. Her beauty will come naturally. Quite unconsciously she will become a model of what God can do in a woman. She will prove that the best-dressed women wear dignity, strength, honor, and quiet confidence in God as unfading sources of beauty. And according to Peter, if she is married, her beauty comes in being submissive to her husband.

**A woman's strength of character is made perfect in weakness.** In that sense, a woman's strength of character is like a man's. Referring to the inner strength that comes from the Spirit of God, Paul wrote, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Then in the twelfth chapter of the same letter he wrote again of his struggle to cope with physical weakness. He found that the Lord wouldn't remove it but would only say, " 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Living in a weaker vessel (1 Pet. 3:7) can be an advantage. Relative physical weakness can be an occasion for a woman to become strong in the Lord. An awareness of any weakness gives her a reason to depend on the strength of the Lord.

**A woman's strength of character must be channeled through her circumstances.** If she is single, she should prayerfully consider all of her options. She should ask whether or not the

Lord has given her a deep and abiding desire to devote all of her attention to Him and the service of His people. It's the kind of radical potential Paul had in mind when he wrote:

The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world--how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction (1 Cor. 7:34,35).

Paul, himself single, was close to the Lord when he wrote this. He saw the value of being free to devote oneself entirely to the Lord and to the eternal, spiritual needs of His people.

Paul also knew that many people are not able to serve the Lord with single undivided attention (1 Cor. 7:17-40). He recognized the obvious--that many women are already thoroughly committed to their husbands and children. To them, Paul pointed out that strength of character means something very different. It was to such already committed persons that he wrote:

The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things--that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed (Titus 2:3-5).

Character blooms where it is planted, through the all-sufficient strength of Christ!

## WHAT ABOUT THE ABUSED WOMAN?

An abused woman should never think that it is her Christian obligation to remain passively silent. When threatened or injured, she should not hesitate to seek protective counsel and shelter. Being a Christian does not mean that she has a spiritual obligation to endure abuse. The Lord doesn't ask a woman to passively endure marital or sexual violence. This kind of violence is not the same as suffering persecution for the sake of the gospel.

If you or someone you know is experiencing such circumstances, please think carefully about the implications of what our Lord Himself said in giving this advice to injured persons:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector (Matt. 18:15-17).

An abused woman needs far more protection than the irate deacon who finds that he has been cheated in business by another brother. It is time for the church to come to the support of our hurting sisters. We live in a day of heartbreaking domestic violence. We must not allow our women to live in bondage and fear. No man has a right to take selfish and heartless advantage of a woman! Furthermore, no woman does a man a favor by allowing him to continue in his sin until finally shaken by an angry God.

We must do to others as we would have them do to us (Matt. 7:12). Christian mother and father, imagine your own daughter suffering at the hands of an abusive husband. Would you want a pastor or counselor to tell your daughter to concentrate on being a more submissive and obedient wife? More likely you would want the Christian support-person to consider seriously your daughter's need for shelter, financial aid, counseling, and family support. I'm sure you would not see the Christian rule of "submission" as applicable if it were your daughter who was enduring unjust, illegal, and inhuman treatment. There is no reason for us to have to make referrals to social agencies until we have first provided the kind of help that we as a church are able to provide.

We need to take the same kind of action we would take if it became apparent that one of the deacons were stealing from the Sunday offering.

## WHO ARE THE BIBLICAL MODELS?

The women of the Bible give us a wealth of information about what God expects of a woman. Let's look at some Old Testament examples.

**Abigail** was a woman who showed strength of character when she appealed to David to spare the life of her foolish husband and his household. She acted with courage and initiative, independently of her drunken husband (1 Sam. 25).

**The daughters of Zelophehad** acted with spiritual equality when they went to Moses and the leaders of Israel with the complaint that the inheritance laws were not fair. Because Zelophehad had died in the wilderness without any sons, his family was not going to receive an apportionment of land that they deserved. So his surviving daughters challenged the inheritance laws and had them changed to be more equitable (Num. 27:1-11).

**Deborah** showed spiritual equality in that God chose her to be a prophetess and judge of Israel. But her feminine distinction was apparent when she deferred to Barak to lead the troops into battle against their oppressors (Judg. 4:1-24).

**Esther's** feminine distinction was used by God to put her in a place of powerful influence with the king. It was because of her God-given beauty that she was chosen to be the queen. Esther also showed strength of character by putting her own life on the line to save her people (Esth. 2:1-18; 4:10--7:10).

**Naomi**, while in a foreign land, experienced great loss through the death of her husband and her two sons (Ruth 1:3-5). When she returned to Bethlehem, she was destitute and bitter--feeling that God had caused her hardships (1:20,21). However, she showed strength of character by not allowing her bitterness to blind her to God's hand of blessing. When she saw that God was working circumstances for her good, she immediately praised Him for His kindness (2:20).

**Ruth** showed selective submission and strength of character by refusing to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi, even though it meant giving up her homeland, her people, and her pagan god and embracing a place and culture foreign to her (1:6-18). Ruth submitted, however, to all of Naomi's instructions about what to say and do in her relationship with Boaz (2:22,23; 3:1-6). She was unselfish (2:14,18), industrious (2:3-7), kind (2:11; 3:10), virtuous (3:11), and "better to [Naomi] than seven sons" (4:15). She used her feminine distinction to be more attractive to Boaz (3:3). And she showed spiritual equality in asking Boaz to fulfill his legal obligation to redeem her (3:9).

**The virtuous woman** described in Proverbs 31:10-31 has the following characteristics:

- She is a commendable wife and mother.
- She lives for her home and family.
- She is industrious.
- She is self-disciplined and orderly.
- She is a sharp business woman.
- She has good, refined tastes.
- She manifests the grace of hospitality.
- She is charitable in time of need.
- She is spiritually minded.

## DOES GOD EXPECT TOO MUCH?

"Please, no more studies on the virtuous woman. I already feel inadequate, and every time I hear a sermon on the 'superwoman' of Proverbs 31, it just makes me feel worse than I already do."

Many women feel that way. They know they can't be all that God wants them to be. They are ready to give up before they start.

So what is the answer? Does God expect more than a woman can give? Yes, He does. He requires behavior that demands superhuman strength. He expects a woman to have attitudes that are beyond her abilities. He maintains standards she can never measure up to.

Yet, God is also understanding, loving, and graciously merciful. He doesn't just point demandingly at the mess we've made. He doesn't practice spiritual blackmail with a mile-long list of our sins. Through Jesus Christ, He stoops with love and grace to the most lowly person. Through the inexpressibly painful death of His own Son, He offers forgiveness, complete and



irrevocable. Then He offers to do in us everything He asks us to do (1 Thess. 4:1-8). Through the good news of Jesus Christ, God offers hope, life, strength, and status to all women and men who will admit their need and surrender to His mercy.

That's where we must begin. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved (Acts 16:31). Begin and end with the God who doesn't ask for anything that He doesn't also freely offer.