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## Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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### LATIMER COMMENT 19

#### THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

##### A Response to the 'Peace and Justice' Working Paper for the 1988 Lambeth Conference

The divergent attitudes taken to the Bible in this paper are less surprising in view of the diverse contributors, but it remains surprising that the editors were not more ready to refuse quite unsuitable material. Some of the material in the section on 'The Oppression of Women' is important as evidence that women are indeed oppressed in some societies, and one hopes that it is stated accurately, as evidence needs to be; but the opening part of the section, which deals with the Bible and makes an almost incredible attempt to blame the oppression of women upon the Bible, is an outrage.

The text with which the section begins (Gal. 5:1) is of very doubtful relevance, since it is concerned with the 'slavery' of literal obedience to the Mosaic Law and not with the 'slavery' of female oppression. And what consistency is there in beginning by quoting a text, supposedly in favour of one's case, and then immediately proceeding to attack the Bible from which it is drawn?

After the text, the section opens by asserting that 'the oppression of women is certainly the oldest form of oppression in human history', which may or may not be true, and then proceeds to identify this oppression with the 'subordination' of woman to man. It may be remarked in passing that subordination is not the same thing as oppression, otherwise one would have to say that the subordination of children to their parents or of subjects to their rulers is also the same thing as oppression, which of course it is not. Order in the family and in society, which involves some having more authority than others, is the remedy to chaos, and is essentially a blessing. Needless to say, since human nature is sinful (and this applies to the subordinate as well as the authoritative party), an element of oppression is always liable to come in, but that does not mean that authority and subordination are in themselves oppressive. On the contrary, if order were abolished, there would be no restraint on human sin, and oppression would become much worse. Of course, in the widespread rebellion against the idea of authority in modern secular thinking, there is a great reluctance to recognise this, but it remains true, even though this same reluctance is now infecting many in the church.

How far the categories of authority and subordination may properly be applied to men and women is, of course, in great dispute at the present time. Historically, the categories have been applied to men and women, to a greater or lesser extent, both in the family and in society. Nor have they been absent from the Christian congregation (where St. Paul likewise emphasises the desirability of 'order', it will be recalled, in I Cor. 14). The campaign for female emancipation, in the earlier years of this century, succeeded in removing most of the oppressive features of female subordination in Western society (though not all), but modern feminism wants it to be abolished altogether. Whether this would be for the real benefit of women, or of the family, the world and the church, some Anglicans (both men and women) beg leave to question; and they believe that they have support for their doubts in the Bible itself.

The contributors of the section on 'The Oppression of Women' evidently do not disagree with them in this. They freely admit that the Bible applies the categories of authority and subordination to men and women (which many Christian feminists have recently wanted to deny). But, having already identified subordination with oppression, they then go on to caricature the teaching of the Bible in the following monstrous fashion :

'Religion has played a major role in this subordination. The Bible expresses a fear of women and a limited recognition of women as persons, attributing to them characteristics of the oppressed - slyness, cunning, aggression, and deception. If a woman is good, she is so because she has overcome all the bad natural traits of women.'

The best answer to this, would be to challenge the contributors to produce chapter and verse for any of these statements. It is perhaps out of a consciousness that they could not, that they go on to say 'The church fathers tend to follow this lead', and then quote some of the most unguarded statements of a few of the Fathers, taken out of their context, and imply that statements of the same sort are to be found in the Bible, which they certainly are not. There may be an element of misogyny in the book of Ecclesiasticus, but Ecclesiasticus comes in the Apocrypha, and is not part of the Anglican canon of Scripture (Article 6).

In reality, all that is pure and noble in the conception of womanhood is to be found in the pages of the Bible. The statement about the Bible quoted above reflects either a total ignorance of the Bible or a wilful misrepresentation of it, and seems likely to have been copied uncritically from some extreme and anti-Christian feminist source.

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