

THE DANCE OF THE FEMINISTS

BY BEVERLY DALE

Without feminists and the woman's movement, I fear we would each be tempted to live as "unambiguous women." This is one who "puts a man at the center of one's life" and then allows "to occur only what honors his prime position. One's own desires and quests are always secondary" (Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Writing a Woman's Life*, Norton, 2008). I was raised to be an unambiguous woman, thanks to the church.

I always went to church when the doors swung open. But even though I memorized Bible verses and taught in vacation Bible school, Sunday school, church camp, and youth group, I never heard that being a female was good. I knew I could not be a pastor or expect a man's salary, that we were to submit to male authority (God was, after all, male), and that God's approval came through child rearing (1 Tim 2:15).

Later, sociology classes in college exposed me to research documenting how women's lives — my life — were limited and confined to certain areas, while the women's movement taught me that being female was good and that we deserved equal access to the board room and the ball court. Girl

... was I mad! Why had I never heard that freedom and acceptance from the pulpit of my church?

When I attended seminary I read of Christianity's church fathers, who had taught that "Woman is defective and misbegotten" (Thomas Aquinas) and that "The woman ... is not the image of God, but, as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself the image of God" (St. Augustine). And, one of the telling statements that justified the church's targeting of women during witch hunts was, "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil" (in *Malleus Maleficarum*). I learned this while modern-day preachers condemned feminism for its "radical stances."

Feminist theologians undermined my views that women were only mothers, only wives, and only half as good as men. They advocated against stifling boundaries that imprison "unambiguous women." Thanks to Christian feminists, I could separate the Jesus I knew and the God whom I had experienced from the perversions of a hierarchical and male-dominated church and society. But the domination model's sin and the gospel's liberation I learned at the feet of feminists, not male preachers.

Feminists urge us to liberate ourselves by believing in our power and embracing our wondrous female bodies, our fertility, and our beauty. They urge us to live freely as ambiguous women tapping our feet and singing. To love ourselves and our female bodies unashamedly is radical to a death-dealing world that uses power to control. The domination model calls for competition, but feminists call for nurture. Domination calls for procreation with few options, but feminists call for freedom over our own bodies.

The traditional call to "be fruitful and multiply," "subdue," and "have dominion" (Gen 1:28) has been used to justify conquering and controlling by force, but ambiguous women who listen to their hearts and the spirit of the gospel know that it really means to "go forth and make love." When we listen to the voices of feminists, we are liberated from all that holds us down. We begin to dream new dreams and see new visions of possibility. Some will say this is radical. Jerry

Falwell said, "The biblical condemnation of feminism has to do with its radical philosophy and goals. That's the bottom line."

It is true that to dance to a different drumbeat other than a controlling machismo and rampant militarism is radical, but the future of our children and our world depend on it. And the invitation to dance is radical because it invites everyone, not just a select few, and just as we are, not as someone else wants us to be.

Falwell was dead wrong that the Bible condemns feminism. In *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperOne, 2009), theologian John Dominic Crossan reminds us that Jesus' relationships to men and women were characterized by "radical egalitarianism." Thanks to the feminists inside the church, men or women, I see the gospel is liberation. This is radical and biblical. But until we all believe it, we need feminists to keep reminding us. How else will we learn to dance?



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