

What Makes a Free Methodist Feminist?

By Christy Mesaros-Winckles

Occasionally I'm asked why I call myself a feminist. Now that my blog is getting a few readers I'm getting this question more often. [Visit www.freemethodistfeminist.com] The concept of a "Free Methodist Feminist" seems like an oxymoron. Yet, I stand by this term. I am a feminist. While there are definitely some feminists who distance themselves from organized religion and view organized religion as just another way to enforce patriarchy, I don't see it that way. Christianity and feminism are compatible. The basic premise of Benjamin Titus Roberts's book *Ordaining Women* is one of the earliest and most radical rhetorical arguments favoring gender equality. It is foundational to my concept of what Christian feminism entails.

As Roberts notes in his conclusions (capitalization original to the pamphlet):

"THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, IN THE PROVISIONS WHICH IT MAKES, AND IN THE AGENCIES WHICH IT EMPLOYS, FOR THE SALVATION OF MANKIND, KNOWS NO DISTINCTION OF RACE, CONDITION, OR SEX, THEREFORE NO PERSON EVIDENTLY CALLED OF GOD TO THE GOSPEL MINISTRY, AND DULY QUALIFIED FOR IT, SHOULD BE REFUSED ORDINATION ON ACCOUNT OF RACE, CONDITION, OR SEX" (104).



B. T. Roberts

Christian feminism is grounded on the assumption that God created man and woman equal. Both are valued, and it was not intended for one sex to rule the other. In the opening chapter of Genesis there is no distinction in the roles assigned to the first man and woman. Both are given dominion over the garden and creation. After the fall, God cursed humanity and man was given dominion over woman – for a time. However, as Roberts notes in his chapter "Objections – Old Testament" that opposition to gender equality is both Scriptural and natural. Roberts address both of these arguments when he discusses how women and men are naturally happiest when in partnership with one another. He then goes on to illustrate how Christ re-established the original intent for gender – partnership and equality:

"The greatest domestic happiness always exists where husband and wife live together on terms of equality. Two men, having individual interests, united only by business ties, daily associate as partners for years, without either of them being in subjection to the other. They consider each other as equals; and treat each other as equals. Then, cannot a man and woman, united by conjugal love, the strongest tie that can unite two human beings, having *the same* interests, live together in the same manner? Christ came to repair the ruin wrought by the fall. In Him, and in Him only, is Paradise *restored*" (36).

Today the concept that men are the leaders and women the followers has become more than just a theological stance. It was become *naturalized*. What this means is there is little room for the belief in Biblical gender equality. Men were ordained to rule and any other stance is contrary to scripture. Paul's writings are often used to substantiate this claimed male dominance. Yet, if we read the Bible as inspired by God but also taking into account the historical and cultural conditions that influenced Paul's writing, male headship can be argued against. Roberts himself often returns to the original Greek to illustrate problematic interpretations that favor male superiority. In his chapter "Objections – New Testament" Roberts observes that the belief in male superiority not only degrades women's role in society but also their role in the church. Since his primary purpose for writing "On Ordaining Women" was to garner support for women's ordination, after it was defeated at the 1890 Free Methodist General Conference, he uses key passages from the New Testament to illustrate the contradictions in the male headship rhetoric:

"It is urged that Paul in express words forbids women to become ministers of the Gospel. In proof of this, two passages are quoted:

'Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.'—1 Cor. 14:34, 35.

'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.'—1 Tim. 2:11, 12.

1. These are the only passages of the kind in the Bible. There are no others that seem to forbid woman to preach, or to perform all the other duties of a minister of the Gospel.

2. No denomination applies these passages *literally*. If they did, they would not allow:

(1.) Women to sing in church. For to sing is not to *keep silence*.

(2.) Nor to pray; for the same reason

(3.) Nor to testify; for to testify is to *speak*.

(4.) Nor to teach in the Sabbath school or elsewhere; for the statement is general—*I suffer not a woman to teach*.

(5.) Nor to write religious books, or for religious periodicals; for this is to *teach*.

Notice. *Preaching is not specified*. It is forbidden only as it is one method of *breaking the silence*, one mode of *teaching*. So far, then, all are agreed that these words of Paul are not to be taken *literally*. The most rigid Presbyterians allow women to sing in the church, and to teach in the Sabbath school" (40-41).

Christian feminism does not seek to place women ahead of men. It does not seek to upset the gospel message. However, it is radical in that it is fighting against a centuries old interpretation of male dominance. Roberts himself faced numerous roadblocks in his quest for women's ordination and did not live to see women ordained in the Free Methodist Church. It is not a stance for the faint of heart. It is a stance for the person called to use prophetic rhetoric to stimulate change, to draw attention to issues in society, and who is not afraid of the backlash that will come from pushing back against social norms.

Just as Roberts believed, when you acknowledge the value in both men and women you cannot deny their equality. Thus, by using the term "feminist" I am seeking to illustrate the value and respect women deserve. Their right to pursue ministry; their right to preach; their right to be a stay at home mother if they want; their right to pursue career and vocation. Christian feminism seeks to promote the welfare of both men and women, and in the spirit of early Free Methodism to continue to fight to gain acceptance of egalitarian theology and access to ministry for women. The glass ceiling (male-headship and patriarchy) that prevents women from being able to pursue God call must be smashed. Therefore, we shouldn't be afraid to call ourselves both Christians and feminists. The terms are compatible. We need to use the word without fear because feminism is the pursuit for equality and social justice and that pursuit is a Godly one.

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