

## “Christian and Female”

I welcome back those who have returned from Annual Conference. Jim called me from an ice cream parlor at 10:30 p.m. the other night. Is there anything more Brethren than that?

I'd like you to think, for a minute, about the story of Adam and Eve. When did you first hear it? What were you taught that it is about? Everybody—almost literally everyone—on the earth knows the story. It's part of the Torah, and it's also in the Qur'an (twice!). For Christians, it's part of our narrative of salvation: Adam and Eve sinned, and Jesus came to atone for those sins so that we can be saved. The writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament set out that understanding of original sin and its corresponding sacrifice. Paul, of course, lived in the heyday of the Roman Empire and wrote for his own society about issues that were relevant to them. One of Paul's main agendas in writing to the faithful around the Roman Empire was to let them know that Adam and Eve and all their descendants had been forgiven for Adam and Eve's sin: disobedience to God. Paul was speaking to people who had never heard of the afterlife he promised. He stressed that because their sins had been forgiven, they would have an eternal afterlife where their struggles would disappear. It's easy to understand why some of the earliest converts were women and enslaved people.

As the Christian religion began to spread around late antique Europe, however, the interpretation of what exactly happened in the Garden of Eden took a different turn. The theologians of this period were celibate men who had decided that sexuality was dangerous. One of the most famous writers of that time, Augustine of Hippo, argued that sexual relations were the ultimate turning away from God because pleasure tempted people away from prayer. Augustine himself suffered from a serious case of guilt because before he became a Christian, he had taken a lover who had borne him a child—something that Roman society of his time thought was perfectly normal. Of course Augustine understood that a faith that doesn't have babies becomes a dead faith. But for him, sex was only a necessary evil to protect humanity from extinction.

Augustine's guilt over pleasure shaped his belief that sexuality would destroy his chance for salvation. In his view, you could serve God and choose celibacy, or choose sexuality and disappoint God. He supported this with some of the writings of Paul, who had advised his followers not to marry. Paul had advised this because he thought Jesus would return so quickly that the faithful would only have to wait a little while, so getting married and having kids wasn't really his priority. Over time, as Jesus did not return as Paul expected, religious people influenced by Augustine retroactively decided that Paul's discomfort with marriage was the same as Augustine's had been: marriage allowed for sex. Picked up by others, that idea percolated through the consciousness of religious people in the early Middle Ages.

Sex or salvation? This desperate conundrum affected many readers of the Old Testament, and sometime in the early Middle Ages, the sin of Genesis 2 and 3 turned from disobedience to sex. From your high horse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you might wonder where that reading comes from, because if you look at the text where Eve decides to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, she's after knowledge, not sex:

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate... (Gen. 3:6, NRSV)*

It's important to remember that not only could 98% of the people in the ancient past not read, but the Bible was now in Latin, a language which no one spoke any more. The priests of the day made a connection to sexuality based on what happened after Adam and Eve ate the apple: Adam and Eve, having eaten the fruit, discovered that they were "naked." They were so embarrassed that they covered themselves with leaves. God, strolling around the garden, realized that Adam and Eve were hiding and thundered, "Who told you that you were naked?" Medieval people wondered: now that Adam and Eve could tell good from evil, had they discovered that being naked was evil? The finger-pointing afterward as Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent, is kind of comical. In fact, as a scholar I'm convinced that the original story has a lot of laughs in it, because of puns and plays on words that don't come through in translation. If you want to know more about that, ask me sometime.

The punishments aren't comical at all, though. The punishment of the serpent is to crawl on its belly and to have women hate snakes (making us wonder, did it have legs before?). Women are cursed with increased pain in childbirth and sexual desire. Adam is cursed, of course, with farming. (No comment.) It's not difficult to see that childbirth is a result of sex, so ancient people seem to have reasoned that the punishment fit the crime. Nakedness is bad; women suffer in childbirth; ergo it's all about sex.

Over the centuries, that interpretation of what Adam and Eve did was used to justify systems in which male control was asserted over women, both in terms of what they were allowed to do and to have, and to what parts of religion they were allowed access. Even though I don't think many theologians today would support this point of view, that discomfort with sex and that need for control of sexuality have shaped a lot of our institutions. I would argue that, among other things, it is one of the root reasons for the "double standard" in our society in which adultery in men is considered to be less serious than adultery by women.

I saw that point of view a lot as a teenager growing up in Alabama, where fundamentalism is a way of life, and most people you met were either Baptist or Methodist. We were Methodist, which was the theology my mother could stand. She took seriously the old joke about Methodists being Baptists who can read. (Sorry, Pastor Ben.)

Sexism props up so much of what makes the modern fundamentalist church that it's inescapable. As a child and adolescent, I rejected that narrative and I rejected religion as a result. Not only could I not accept the literal interpretation of the Creation being seven twenty-four-hour days Eastern standard time, I could not accept the reading of the text that made me a slave to the shape of my physical body. So when I met Jim in college and learned that he was a Southern Baptist (and had eight perfect years of Sunday School attendance) I was initially worried that if I met his family they would expect beliefs from me that I did not have. That did happen a little bit, but Jim's family have been nothing but good to me and accepting of me—that is, they have given me the benefit of the doubt. Lucky me!

In graduate school Jim and I began attending a progressive Baptist church. I was astonished to learn that there were interpretations of Genesis that weren't the ones I had grown up hearing. I got introduced to Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:28), in which he writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ." That means: I've got a soul, and you've got one, and God loves both just the same. This interpretation did a lot to help me understand that Christianity has space for seeing whole, real people and not just their anatomy or their socioeconomic status. I also think that it makes good arguments for economic and social equality. But the key takeaway from that time in my life was that believing in God doesn't require a literal reading of the Bible. There should be a difference between reading about the ordeals of distant figures like Tamar or Ruth and deciding that those stories mean that we should imitate these people because it's "biblical." I don't believe that God is some kind of heavenly CEO who structures what He wants by dictating our social hierarchies. In fact, according to Jesus, that's not what He wants at all. His kingdom is not of this world, right?

So how do we let go of the historical sexism of our religious institutions? We all know that Jesus liked women and included them, even when his male disciples were being difficult. You all know the traditions: Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, Mary of Bethany who wiped Jesus's feet dry with her hair. I'm not comfortable, though, with the idea that if you just name all the women in scripture a few times a year, it will fix everything. As one of my colleagues put it to me years ago, "Singling out the women in history is like putting chocolate chips in cookie dough. They may make a better, more just cookie, but they're not essential to it." Instead, we should remember that we—all of us—are the body of Christ. Everyone is essential to God. That's why our welcoming statement here at Stone Church is so meaningful to me.

Humans are very, very good at singling out differences between "us" and "them." We can resist that pull if we are mindful about our faith and realize that Jesus included everybody—everyone of all colors; everyone of all genders; everyone of all ages and abilities. Yes (and this is hard), even the ones who have decided that their love of country is part of their love of God, and the ones that believe that biology is destiny.