

The Emergence and Rise of Mennonite Feminism

Ken Stoltzfus (Sr.), written in the mid 1990's

America experienced a major social revolution in the 1960-70's. Its timing coincided precisely with sociological changes that were also taking place in the Mennonite Church, and the merger of these two events shaped our heart to its very core.

The Nation

The 1960's were indelibly marked by the Civil Rights Movement; the Free Speech Movement; the hippies and their LSD; the renaissance of rock music; the rise and fall of the militant Black Panther Movement, and in 1969, the "coming out" of the gay movement.

University campuses became centers of festering discontent, and it was not unusual for the president's office to be taken over by angry students.

By then the U.S. had been engaged in the Vietnam War for some years, and several things about this conflict were becoming increasingly disturbing to the American public. For one, our president had lied to us about the level of our military involvement. Secondly, it was clearly a no-win war that was being managed from the Pentagon rather than from the field. It was more a political exercise than a military operation. The nation felt betrayed.

By the late '60's an ensuing wave of public resistance to the war led to often-violent, anti-war demonstrations in most major American cities. It became an ugly scene. Even returning Vietnam veterans were met with open hostility rather than the hero's welcome that our military men had always been accorded.

Those of us who experienced that era will never forget the trauma such events brought upon our nation.

Out of this milieu there arose a pervasive contempt for authority. It reached beyond the university campus and attitudes toward the government, to the principle of authority in general. It was the beginning of a new era in the nation and the church - - one that would alter them more than could ever have been imagined.

The Church

I grew up in a Mennonite community in southeastern Pennsylvania, and lived there until 1967. There was little question in the Mennonite Church that men were "the head of the home". The Biblical instruction, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord." (Eph. 5:22) was frequently preached and rarely challenged. The women's wearing of the prayer veiling as a symbol of their submission was practiced almost without question.

However, verse 25, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself

up for it," was *not* presented as a standard for men. Women almost solely bore the responsibility for making the home function smoothly, and men had little accountability in expressing their headship. It was a situation much like what is practiced even today in some conservative circles.

This represents a misuse of the scripture. It is unjust, and as in the case of an oppressive government, it will eventually be resisted. The church was a seedbed waiting for rain, and it "poured" in the 1960-70's.

At that time the larger Mennonite church was in a transition of sorts from being a rural folk where a high school education was the norm, to a more urban people with an increasing number of college graduates. We were progressively emerging from our social isolation and integrating into the larger community. We were transitioning from our historic simplicity of thought to a growing intellectualism.

We were a church that was becoming empowered for change at the very time that America was going through her own social revolution and was enjoying a growing disdain for authority. The convergence of these two dynamics was explosive. Our historic spiritual underpinnings were weakened, and room was made for something altogether different.

The Emergence of Feminism

As a student at Eastern Mennonite College and Seminary from 1967-74; a reader of church periodicals; an attendee at many church conferences; a speaker in numerous churches across the northeast and central U.S. in 1972-73; and a pastor from 1974-88, I witnessed firsthand the unfolding drama that was taking place.

As the breakdown of respect for authority in the nation progressed, the church experienced an accompanying diminishing of respect for God and His Word. This led to a growing freedom to question the scriptures. Updated "principles of Biblical interpretation" were devised in our colleges and seminaries to accommodate the new attitude toward the scriptures.

As respect for God and His Word was eroded, a new way was being offered in its place. It was making mankind more its own god, rather than being so dependent upon a relationship with the God of the ages. The door was opened to elements of humanism, Eastern religions, and New Age thought. All of these challenge the authority of God and His Word, and minimize our need for them. The answer to man's need now lies within himself rather than in His humble surrender to a sovereign God. Feminism was one of the greatest beneficiaries of these changes.

On the surface, feminism can appear to be an enlightened approach to family life. There is something about it that can seem so appropriate to the sincere Christian heart. However, it is quite different from what it appears!

At its very core, feminism represents the throwing off of all authority, not just the authority of a husband. Further, while it proposes to advocate equality, its truest nature is one of superiority. It is the superiority of humans over God and person over person. This characteristic is less immediately obvious, but it is fundamental to the spirit of feminism.

Feminism's connection to the gay and lesbian rights movement is well known and hardly disputed.

"Evangelical feminism", as it is sometimes called, is sometimes less openly arrogant, but it still embraces the basic tenets of secular feminism. While its expression may be somewhat "sanctified", one needs to realize that it follows the spirit of secular feminism in making the human mind superior to the mind of God and the authority of the scriptures. That is the only way it can supplant the truths about His design for family and church life that God has established for all generations, and which the church had always believed!

Feminism had opportunity to grow in the church because men were *not* leading in a godly way, and there was truly a need for change. Cultural revolution was in process, and our new-found Mennonite intellectualism thrived on it.

Few Christians who are under 50¹ today, realize how much the change that followed was shaped by the anti-authority spirit of that day. Little do they understand that the egalitarian approach to family life that is so freely accepted in the larger Christian community is rooted in such soil!

The Rise to Power

I was a pastor in the Mennonite community from 1974-88. Countless seminars and conference sessions were devoted to this issue over those years.

In the mid-late 1970's, the "new thinkers" were in the minority. They asked for equal right to be heard in the church, and were graciously granted their request.

As we moved into the '80's, however, the balance shifted. More and more conference and denominational leaders were promoting the feminist agenda - - and they were now reluctant to grant those who represented the more historic (Biblical) view, the opportunity to influence the direction of the church.

When attempting to express themselves, or when voicing concern about where these changes were leading us, the more conservative thinkers were simply dismissed.

The tide had turned. The "equality" the new leaders had been given was now denied to those who differed with them. The "superior" spirit of feminism was making itself known.

Through this period, egalitarianism superceded active leadership in the mind of many pastors. Men of vision were hard to find. As a fellow-pastor told me, "I am here to do what the people want". I sometimes referred to it as a "non-leadership, leadership style". It is a perfect recipe for confusion and ineffectiveness - - in the home or church.

In the mid and late '80's the reference to God as "she" became increasingly popular in our Eastern Mennonite and Goshen/Elkhart institutions, and the ordination of women was an accepted practice in more and more conferences. There was a growing freedom in church periodicals to defend homosexuality, and to label those who objected, as "narrow and insensitive".

Church leaders felt increasingly free to make themselves judges of God's Word, rather than humbly bowing themselves before it. One day in the mid '80's I got into a discussion with a church leader who was defending homosexuality. When I protested on the basis of scripture, she said, "The church needs to decide what truth is for the time we live in. Truth changes from era to era, and it is up to the community of believers to decide what it is for us."

In the early '80's the basic precepts of feminism became the official position of the larger Mennonite Church. That is, roles in the home, church and society are shaped primarily by gifting. The recognition of gender-related roles was officially abandoned. But it was only a small part of a "theological package" the church had bought into.

Conclusion

Feminism promotes a human-centered rather than a God-centered approach to life, in both our relationships with God and with each other.

The incredulous timing of social upheaval in America, and the urbanization and rising intellectualism of the Mennonite Church, provided fertile soil for feminism to take root and to grow to maturity in the church.

It was truly revolutionary. Our church's spiritual infrastructure was crushed. A wide crevasse was created between "historic Anabaptism" and what it now means to be "contemporary Mennonite". And rarely has the message of Jeremiah 2:13 seemed more applicable.

Whether Mennonite leaders knew it or not, feminism's call for "equality" was not its real goal. It was merely a doorway through which to gain ascendance.

(Written in the mid 1990's, info below updated July, 2010)
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ⁱ That would be about 65, in 2010