

## Patriarchy's Legacy

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Last Sunday, I hope I held up the Ten Commandments as reinterpreted by Jesus, as a model of how disciples are to love God with all their heart, mind, and strength, and their neighbors as themselves. These commandments bring life, and it abundantly. In the introduction of the sermon, I mentioned that there is another side to these commandments, and I'd like to look at the harm the commandments have caused, but this would have to wait for another day. I am referring not only to the patriarchal basis of the commandments, but of the Hebrew Bible generally, and the New Testament as well. By patriarchy, I mean the prominence given to men, husbands, and first-born sons. By prominence, I mean the power given to them over wives, sons, daughters, slaves, and females in general. I didn't anticipate having to go to this topic so quickly, but the recent decision by the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade* has made it necessary. Regardless of your view on abortion, larger issues are at stake here.

How this works out in the Ten commandments is noteworthy. First of all, all the commandments are given to men only. The "you shall not" is always masculine, singular. Literally, it is "You (a man) shall not...." So, the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment states, *You [a man] shall not covet your neighbor's wife*. Need I say more? Well, I will. The commandment goes on to say, *Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor*. You see, women could not own property, so all these things men were not to covet were owned by other men. Women are totally ignored.

In the account of the creation of Eve, Adam is offered many options for a wife. He declined them all. Then God presented Eve to him and Adam claimed her. The notable thing here is that Eve had no say in the matter. No wife had any say in their marriages because all were arranged by their fathers, or in absence of a father, the eldest son. Even Levirate marriage, where a widow of childbearing age is to be married to a brother of her deceased husband was done without her consent. In short, women were property and under total control of men from birth to death.

According to the Genesis account of the story of Adam and Eve, God anticipated the dominance of males over females when he told Eve that her decision to be her own God would lead to pain in childbirth and *your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you*. This is not what God wanted. It is a consequence of humans desiring to go their own way in opposition to God's way. What is God's way? Two chapters earlier we read that *Then God said, "Let us make humankind*

*in our image, according to our likeness; and let **them** have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of **God he created them; male and female** he created them. Men and women were intended from the beginning to have dominion over the creation together, as equals, working side by side in partnership. Patriarchy is the unintended consequence of disobedience to God. And men quickly seized the opportunity to dominate women.*

Women fare only slightly better in the New Testament. One of the results of modern biblical scholarship is that we now know that the apostle Paul probably wrote only seven of the thirteen books attributed to him. When this is realized his writings begin to make more sense. How could the same Paul write, Gal.3 *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, **there is no longer male and female**; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* And in 1Timothy, <sup>11</sup>*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. <sup>12</sup>I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. <sup>13</sup>For Adam was formed first, then Eve; <sup>14</sup>and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. <sup>15</sup>Yet she will be saved through childbearing....* [barefoot and in the kitchen for sure]

The same person could not have written both these instructions. The real Paul supported Jesus' notion of an egalitarian community called the Kingdom of God where people live in equality as God first intended. The false Paul in 1Timothy was unable to free himself from the patriarchy of his culture and advocated keeping women in subjection. It's interesting that both of these views of women in the church have existed from the beginning and certainly exist in our own day.

A recent declaration by the largest denomination in America said that although men and women are equal in the eyes of God, wives are to be in subjection to their husbands. That the husband is the head of the family. In that denomination, women are not allowed to preach or be pastors, and cannot teach adult men. So, men and women are equal in the eyes of God, but not in eyes of their church.

Since the moment Roe v. Wade was made the law of the land, conservative Christians have been hard at work to do two things: overturn Roe by filling the court with their justices, and make America over as best as they could into a vehicle more like Evangelical Christianity. In my opinion, and I hope you give this serious consideration, both of these goals are driven by patriarchal notions that

they believe are biblically based. AND—their insistence on patriarchy stems less from biblical notions of what should be than it is their misogyny: the belief in the innate superiority of men over women.

Now men, if you haven't learned this already, women own you. They outwit you on a regular basis. Precisely because they can't wrestle you to the ground until you shout "Uncle!", they use their brains to gain advantage. One such husband put it this way. "My wife makes all the small decisions and I make the large ones. For instance, she chooses our house, the neighborhood, the schools our children attend, and keeps the house books. I on the other hand decide if we should go to war in Ukraine." In order to retain the advantage, men resort to patriarchy.

Psychologists who study human tendencies find that people often believe what they prefer the truth to be, not what is actually true. IOW, we believe what we want to believe. Take many of the outlandish conspiracy theories believed by millions of Americans. One such has Hillary Clinton sponsoring a pedophile ring in the basement of a pizza shop in Washington, D.C. This was thoroughly debunked by the likes of the NY Times and Fox News, yet it continues to be believed by many today.

As with conspiracy theories that have no basis in fact, many men would like to believe that they deserve to be king of the hill. So, when an authority such as a church presents a view ostensibly from the Bible, many are eager to support it.

The rise of patriarchy that has taken over the church in many instances is now enshrined in the American Constitution. Women are now, once again, second-class citizens. Where men have full control over their own bodies, women's control is severely restricted. In fact, their control is restricted to what men have decided it should be for them. Four men. And one woman coopted by her religion. The legacy of patriarchy.

I don't want to get into the "When does life begin wars," as this is not only extremely controversial, but also impossible to determine. I do want to shed some light on what we can learn from the Bible, though, since it seems to be the place most conservative Christians think they get an answer.

In the creation story of Adam, Genesis 2:7 has, *the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.* Jews have long interpreted this passage to mean that when a person takes his or her first breath they enter life; not before. If a stillbirth or

miscarriage occurs, only a potential life is lost. This interpretation is borne out in the Law of Moses. God is explaining the law of Lex Talionis, or “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” It’s the law of retaliation, whereby a suitable punishment must resemble the offense committed. IOW, if only an eye is harmed, two eyes cannot be taken as punishment.

In Exodus 21, we read, *When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine.* <sup>23</sup>*If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life,* <sup>24</sup>*eye for eye, tooth for tooth....*

It follows that an unborn fetus has not reached the status of a human where a life is required should a miscarriage occur. Pushing the moment of the beginning of life back to conception is not a biblical notion. I say this, not to end the argument, as the question of the beginning of life is not limited to the biblical witness. However, pro-life Christians claim they have the Bible on their side, and it isn’t.

I must say that I would take pro-life concerns much more seriously if those who profess it showed any interest in the lives of those actually born. These are the same people who oppose childcare, want to imprison women who have abortions, cut programs that feed hungry kids, tear children away from their mothers at the southern border and then lock them in cages and make no effort to reunite them, and are unwilling to support health measures that keep poor women’s mortality rate in childbirth the highest among civilized nations.

Too many children are born into this world who never have a chance for a good life either because of poverty, abandonment, or careless parents who never bestow the gift of love. Our prisons are full of them. When this happens, one’s irresponsibility becomes societies obligation, and many in our society seem unwilling to provide options for better lives.

As I said in the beginning of this sermon, more is at stake here than Roe v. Wade. The position and status of women is now in jeopardy. We must find ways to restore the equality now denied. Jesus said he came to give life and that abundantly. Regardless of how we feel about the end of Roe v. Wade, God would have us resist the forces of inequality wherever they are found. In doing so, we are doing the work of God. AMEN