

# ST. LUKE'S INN OF COURT

## “Law & Religion Forum”

Volume 1, Apostolate Paper #40

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**“A History of the Anglican Church—Part XXVI:  
An Essay on the Role of Christian Lawyers and Judges within the Secular  
State”©**

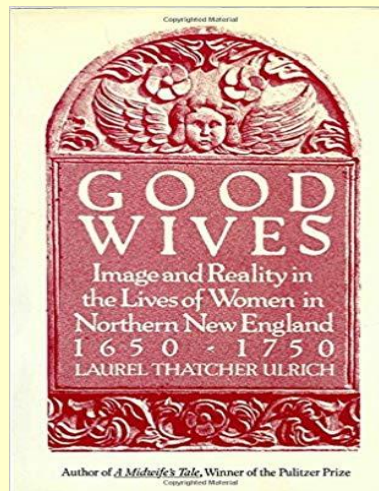
**By**

**Roderick O. Ford, Litt.D., D.D., J.D.**

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**“GOOD WIVES” – A Book Report**

Section One: Bathsheba (Proverbs 31: 10-31)



**By**  
**Laurel Thatcher Ulrich**

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The ideas expressed in this Apostolate Paper are wholly those of the author, and subject to modification as a result of on-going research into this subject matter. This paper is currently being revised and edited, but this version is submitted for the purpose of sharing Christian scholarship with clergy, the legal profession, and the general public.

## **PREFACE**

The organized Christian church of the Twenty-First Century is in crisis and at a crossroad. Christianity as a whole is in flux. And I believe that Christian lawyers and judges are on the frontlines of the conflict and changes which are today challenging both the Christian church and the Christian religion. Christian lawyers and judges have the power to influence and shape the social, economic, political, and legal landscape in a way that will allow Christianity and other faith-based institutions to evangelize the world for the betterment of all human beings. I write this essay, and a series of future essays, in an effort to persuade the American legal profession to rethink and reconsider one of its most critical and important jurisprudential foundations: the Christian religion. To this end, I hereby present the thirty-ninth essay in this series: “A History of the Anglican Church—Part XXVI.”

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The United States of America is today in dire need of “good wives.” There are, to be sure, state and local governmental laws and statutes governing the institution of marriage in each of our fifty states, but our predominant materialistic, misogynistic social order, our self-centered preoccupations with social status and careers, and our unchristian customs and unconventional sexual norms, no longer give us the spiritual strength and the spiritual insight to preserve, value, and sustain the institution of marriage. American women ought to be encouraged to seek as their highest aim and achievement motherhood and the institution of marriage-- not academic degrees and professional careers! And they should endeavor to be, above all else, “good wives.” But not only that, we should also venerate such women who choose motherhood and the institution of marriage— women such as Rose Elizabeth Kennedy, Barbara Bush, and Coretta Scott King—as the highest ideal of America’s values and goals.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is presented in honor of the preeminent historian **Dr. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (A.B., Queens College, C.U.N.Y.; M.A., George Washington University; Ph.D., Howard University)**. Dr. Penn was a pioneering professor of women’s history at Morgan State University. “Her book *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* was a ground-breaking work that recovered the histories of black women in the women's suffrage movement in the United States.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosalyn\\_Terborg-Penn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosalyn_Terborg-Penn) During the academic year 1987-88, Dr. Penn taught me world history courses 101 and 102, and during the fall of 1988, the advanced history course titled “History of the African Diaspora.” Dr. Penn introduced me the Afrocentric viewpoint of world history, including Pan Africanism. She remained a dear life-long friend and consultant throughout my professional career as a lawyer.

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**One of my last communications with Dr. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn occurred on February 2, 2014, as follows:**

“02/02/2014, 14:32

Hello Roderick,

Who was the author of the "waronthehorizon" site you sent to me? First, the references mentioned have been taken out of historical context. Much of what the person quoted was stated 40 to 60 years ago, but has been spun to be current. Second, I used Chancellor Williams book, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, when teaching different periods of Black thought in US History at Morgan, and you know I would not demonize myself. Williams died in the early 1970s. Third, John Henrik Clarke was one of my mentors and we worked on projects together. He was very supportive of me as a person and of Black women historians, regardless of shade, back in the 1970s and 1980s. He passed away about twenty years ago, so neither Clarke nor Williams could have possibly made statements about Baraka Obama, for example, who came on the scene in the twenty-first century. Consider the source, read critically, and filter out fiction.

Take care, Dr. Penn

02/02/2014, 15:38

...

Very Kind Regards, Roderick Ford”

When I was a college and law student during the late 1980s and early 90s, I longed for, and sought after, a “good wife”—with her noble and Christian ideals of industry, charity, and modesty— the sort of “good wife” as described in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750*.<sup>2</sup> And I suspect that, in seeking a “good wife,” I was a typical heterosexual American male college student. In other ways, I suppose that I was also an atypical student: for I had been significantly influenced by rural, southern and Christian culture which included well-defined gender roles for men and women.

My first image of the ideal female companion was partly extracted from “white” Christian and “white” popular culture. But the extraordinary example of black wives to the scores of black farmers, who lived in rural northern Florida, where I grew up, also significantly influenced my idea of the “good wife.” These black wives were committed in theory, ideal, action and deed to carrying out the literal meaning of St. Peter’s and St. Paul’s directions on the Christian marriage. And this commitment was reinforced by both the church and the secular court. Indeed, the common law of the American South was largely the loosely-organized customary practices of local, rural communities, which upheld the idea that “in order to know the law, one must know the Bible” and “to know the Bible, is to know the law.”

I was at heart, during my twenties and thirties, a southerner, a southern gentleman, and a devout Christian. Indeed, I did not know these things until I went away for college in the North,— the Northerners jokingly dubbed me a “southern gentleman.” I was, of course, not a Confederate Christian southerner, but I believed in the South’s divinity and purpose—the South of the Sorrow Songs, of the old Negro Spirituals, and of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream. I loved the South, including all of her children—red, white, and black—and the South’s great centres of culture and learning: the University of South Carolina in Columbia; Emory, Morehouse, and Spellman in Atlanta; Vanderbilt and Fisk in Nashville; the University of Virginia in Charlottesville; and the research triangle in Raleigh-Durham.

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<sup>2</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1991).

Like most Southerners of my generation, I believed in some form of separation between the sexes and in distinct gender roles, both within the home and in society. I did not see myself as cruel, unusual, prejudiced, or bigoted in my views; but rather I had been trained to view the family unit as the basic and most important unit of society, and I defined the basic family unit as comprising the union between man and wife, and their children. All of this was reinforced in my mind by my Christian upbringing, the Book of Genesis, the Gospel, the Letters of St. Paul, and the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo: Christ was the head of man; and man was the head of the woman. And although I remained very liberal in most aspects of women's history and women's rights, I did not think that women and men should be construed as "interchangeable parts" in every aspect of society.

During the mid-1990s, I read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and this masterpiece only reinforced my inclinations regarding sex differences and sex roles. In fact, I especially agreed with de Tocqueville on his account of gender roles. De Tocqueville lucidly set forth in *Democracy in America*, the following:

There are people in Europe who, confounding together the different characteristics of the sexes, would make man and woman into beings not only equal but alike. They would give to both the same functions, impose on both the same duties, and grant to both the same rights; they would mix them in all things--their occupations, their pleasures, their business. It may readily be conceived that by thus attempting to make one sex equal to the other, both are degraded, and from so preposterous a medley of the works of nature nothing could ever result but weak men and disorderly women....

Thus the Americans do not think that man and woman have either the duty or the right to perform the same offices, but they show an equal regard for both their respective parts; and though their lot is different, they consider both of them as beings of equal value. They do not give to the courage of woman the same form or the same direction as to that of man, but they never doubt her courage; and if they hold that man and his partner ought not always to exercise their intellect and understanding in the same manner, they at least believe the understanding of the one to be as sound as that of the other, and her intellect to be as clear. Thus, then, while they have allowed the social

inferiority of woman to continue, they have done all they could to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man; and in this respect they appear to me to have excellently understood the true principle of democratic improvement.

As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow that although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, now that I am drawing to the close of this work, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women.<sup>3</sup>

Gender roles were different depending upon the region of the country and type of environment. For instance, I had the rather unique experience of being able to compare rural southern blacks to their urban northern counterparts, and I noticed stark contrasts between the very strong position and the very positive role of the black farmer as father and husband to the dislocated, weak position of northern black male workers who had been systematically denied their common law rights as father and head of the household. For indeed, until very recently, the common law in the United States recognized stark contracts between men and women, and generally recognized men as the “head of the household.” Within the rural southern communities, during the 1970s and early 1980s, men were still very much acknowledged in both law and custom as the “head of the household.” Today we deprecated the uneducated African American farmer of the period 1880 to 1960; and we assume that his third-grade level education rendered him unmanly, uncivil, and unrespectable. But as I can recall, during the 1970s, southern black farmers were well respected as husbands or as fathers, and their wives naturally took on the roles of homemakers, caregivers, nurses, teachers, and the like. Gender relations within the African American communities throughout the rural South—particularly in the great farming communities—also appeared to be fairly stable in the 1970s and 80s. For, indeed, it was not degrading for the southern black woman to take a

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g. Appendix A, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*.



subordinate place to her black husband, in support of the family unit. All of this was taken for granted, and was expected.

From what I can today recall, my dear mother was a devout Christian woman and the typical traditional, southern rural African American wife. She held firm to the ideals in Ulrich's *Good Wives*,-- and this was especially true of nearly all the black wives of the black farmers whom I knew! This list includes: Mrs. Ruth H.; Mrs. Ruby W.; Mrs. Inez S.; Mrs. Nancy M.; Mrs. Helena W.; Mrs. Arlene B.; Mrs. Louise I.; and countless others. All of these women were "good wives," and all of them were married to African American farmers, in the local farming communities where I grew up. And just as in colonial New England, divorce was non-existent, or at least extremely rare, among the African American farming communities of northern Florida and southern Georgia. *There were unwritten conjugal duties, and well-defined roles amongst them.* The wife's domain was the home and the household; the husband's role was the barnyard, the tractor, and the field. The African American wives of those black farmers seldom, if ever, worked in the fields. At the center of those communities, too, was typically the primitive African Baptist church or the African Methodist church, where the Bible's ideals and ideas of marriage, gender, and gender roles were reinforced. Those African American ideals were, without question, copied from their white American neighbors, who generally reinforced the same Christian belief systems.

When at Morgan State University, in Baltimore, I met and intermingled with young women from all over the United States and the world-- the most beautiful young ladies from the U.S. Virgin Islands, the British West Indies, New York, Michigan, Connecticut, Maryland, etc. --- I was subconsciously confronted with a sense of cultural anachronism within my image of the rural, southern, and traditional "good wife." In college and law school, my expectations for female companionship were confronted with the modern view of American womanhood and marriage! And I evolved!

My ideal "good wife" slowly became my ideal "equal [female] partner"—a change in attitude that was thrust upon me by the modern-day social norms of the 90s. But I never lost my southern, Christian conception of distinct gender roles. As I started to seriously engage young women in romantic relationships with the view towards marriage, I struggled to reconcile my traditional conception



regarding gender roles—as I had observed them in northern Florida-- with the modern-day trend toward gender equality, as I observed in larger urban areas in the North. Indeed, within my Christian and southern worldview, “gender equality” seemed untested and needlessly risked damaging the already-fragile “husband-wife” and “father-mother-child” relationships within the African American community. For these reasons, Alexis de Tocqueville seemed to me, at least in part, correct: for with the modern idea of “gender equality” came also suspicion, struggle, competition, miscommunication, domestic violence, and divorce! And as I moved into the late 1990s and early 2000s, I recognized that the African American community was especially hard-pressed at the task of stabilizing their family-support structures, including establishing gender rules, customs, norms and traditions which might sustain the plight of the black family, -- not to mention withstanding economic distress and the rise of mass incarceration!

As I today recall, gender relations among young African American men and women during the late 1980s and early 90s were uncertain, stressful, and somewhat cold and stiff. Black marriages and family formation were more and more infrequent and difficult; and heterosexual romance between younger African Americans became more and more unwholesome and impure.<sup>4</sup>

I nevertheless maintained the Puritan’s ideal of romance and marriage in mind when I was a young man during the 90s. And I struggled greatly with what appeared as ingrained mistrust, suspicion, and an inexplicable breakdown in gender relations between young African American men and women. Unfortunately, this subject of gender relations was never the concern of serious academic discussion—not even among leading African American scholars. (The students discussed this topic in the student union or before special symposiums)

For example, one of my favorite and most influential professors in college was an African American female professor named Rosalyn Terborg-Penn , who was, as I can recall, a rather attractive light-brown, mulatto-looking woman. Dr. Penn was a champion and veteran of the America civil-rights movement of the

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<sup>4</sup> One day, during the year 1996, while on the campus of Fisk University, in Nashville, I met a most physically attractive black woman whom I wished to ask out on a date; but moments later she appeared on stage as one of the guest speakers at a conference which I had attended, where she admitted to having contracted HIV, which had advanced to the stage of AIDS! At that moment, I was arrested by a sense of sexual caution and Christian decency! There were serious problems facing us during the 1990s.

1960s. She was a proud advocate of pan-Africanism; and she was a pioneer in women's history (and particularly African American women's history). When I met this woman during the Fall of 1987, I must confess that I was relieved to find such a woman amongst my race! For not only was she very professional and well-educated—but she was also a champion of the oppressed. I liked Dr. Penn, because she was an advocate for social justice for women and people of color. And I got the impression that she considered me to be one of her most “gifted” students. She told me so. We held many academic and professional conversations outside of the classroom, and we never stopped communicating for the next thirty years! I would share with Dr. Penn, for instance, the plight of African American workers as well as the need for African American historians to develop a system for functioning as trial experts in civil rights litigation, so that the historical purpose and meaning of American civil rights laws do not evaporate under the stress of powerful special interests.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Penn indicated to me that she was impressed with my knowledge of the Bible,— a knowledge which I took for granted, because I had assumed that every student had had the same or a similar religious upbringing as mine. And yet somehow I was surprised to learn that Dr. Penn was not a Christian, and she emphatically shunned all things Christian! This was perhaps the first person that I knew and genuinely liked, and yet who was not a Christian. Nor did Dr. Penn seem to place much value on emphasizing the role of African American women as “good wives”—this to say, as wives, mothers, and homemakers— even within the context

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of the plight of the African American family. Why not focus on solving the African American social, political, and economic problems through focusing on the plight of the black family? Why were the nation's great African American female scholars ignoring this perspective? In retrospect, I believe that this lack of emphasis of "good wives" in Dr. Penn's teachings and published works, together with the dearth of such emphasis within the African American Academy, are tragic omissions!

Black men need "good wives," and without them the plight of the black race in America must remain a negligible force. Today, the African American "good wife" is ignored; the rules of *charity*, *industry*, and *modesty* that govern "good wives" are, within the black community, somewhat ignored, if not altogether deprecated, within the historiography of African American women, in favor of outward, worldly achievements beyond the household and the family.

I was too inexperienced during undergraduate college to note, as I would notice about ten years after I graduated from college in 1991, that nearly every African American female professor, such as Dr. Penn, seldom mentioned, if not altogether ignored, the history of the *custom, practice, religious ritual, and laws of the conjugal relations* between African and African American men and women, both during and following the institution of slavery.

Nor was there, within the African American academy, any serious thought upon the subject matter of carefully studying or improving the conjugal relations between African American men and women. I sought out the young woman in college who might make me a "good wife," but I never got the impression that "being a good wife" was the objective or goal of collegiate education. The "good wife" was not something that most African American women whom I encountered held up as important or as preeminent. I wanted a "good wife," but "being and becoming a good wife" was not encouraged, taught, or stressed in church, the university, or society. And then, suddenly, one autumn day in 1989, W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* fell into my lap! And then I began to read the riddle of the Sphinx:

*I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem,  
As the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.  
Look not upon me, because I am black,*

*Because the sun hath looked upon me:  
My mother's children were angry with me;  
They made me the keeper of the vineyards;  
But mine own vineyard have I not kept.*

-- The Song of Solomon<sup>6</sup>

Then I learned from *The Souls of Black Folk* that the black and darker sisters of America have a rather tragic and lawless history as wife and mother,-- a tragic and lawless history which the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan would have remedied with family government and high ethical standards extracted from the Sacred Scriptures. This "Puritan family government" and "Puritan ethical standard" essentially constituted the same social order which the great French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about in *Democracy in America*, where he attributed the greatness of the young United States of America to "the superiority of their women."<sup>7</sup>

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In colonial and Puritan New England, the daily roles, duties, obligations, expectations, and status of women were orchestrated by Biblical ideas and ideals, which, in turn, became part and parcel of the English Common law on family and marriage. Indeed, England's Chancery and ecclesiastical courts enforced not simply rules and statutes, but they regulated English customary practices and traditions regarding women's role, duties, and place within society as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

As Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich points out in her great book, *Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England: 1650-1750*, the Bible's female heroines were studied with meticulous detail and laid the foundation for female development and conjugal practice in England and colonial

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<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," *Writings* (New York, N.Y.: The Library of America, 1986), p. 439.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A, Alexis de Tocqueville, "How the Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes," *Democracy in America*.

<sup>8</sup> These customary roles and duties formed an integral part of the institution of English marriage. See, e.g., A History of the Anglican Church, Part XI, "Of the Christian Law of Marriage (1300 to early 1600s). This essay should be read in conjunction with Part XI, "Of the Christian Marriage," because the ideas and subject matter discussed herein revolve largely around virtues and duties married women.

North America.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Ulrich highlights three primary examples for how the Puritans in colonial New England used the Bible to define the role of women in society:

1. First, Dr. Ulrich uses the example of **Bathsheba**, who was the wife of King David and the mother of King Solomon, as found in Proverbs 31:10-31. **[Section One]**.

2. Second, she relies upon the example of **Eve**, the mother of humankind, as set forth in the Book of Genesis. **[Section Two]**.

3. Lastly, she turns to the war-heroine **Jael**, as described in Judges 5:24-31, “The Song of Deborah.”<sup>10</sup> **[Section Three]**.

English women, then, were expected to live up to Biblical virtues, which Dr. Ulrich calls “good wives,” and which the colonial New Englanders called “goodwife.”<sup>11</sup> These women were governed by well-defined, unwritten rules and customs, all of which were extracted from Calvinistic ideals of the society and family. Though the status of women were separate from those of men, their role as “good wives” in society was “protected,” “elevated,” “exempt from hard or most manual labor,” and “held in high esteems as essential.”<sup>12</sup>

The Puritan New Englanders wished to have good wives who were dutiful, loyal, and dependable— “deputy husbands” who could run the home and the family business in the husband’s absence, if necessary.<sup>13</sup> They were literally the “second-half” of husband, but totally dependent upon their husbands. This was part and parcel of the scheme called “Family Government” in colonial New England. Thus, the family was the most important nuclear ingredient within governments of Puritan New England:

The family was the cornerstone of the society where the closest scrutiny and continuous religious instruction occurred. Thus people with no family were placed in one. The townsfolk carefully monitored activities within the households to insure that the family maintained

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<sup>9</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

the harmony that characterized God’s original creation. If trouble arose, the church elders would intervene, removing children, apprentices, and servants. Government officials were empowered to grant a divorce so that a contentious husband and wife might enter more-pleasing matrimonial covenants, although it rarely happened. A hierarchy existed within a family so that all would know their places, thus avoiding competition and arguments. The husband was at the head and represented the family unit in all public and church affairs; the wife deferred to him and supervised the private household affairs. The husband also was responsible for raising the children in a strict fashion that would suppress their naturally sinful instincts. If any stepped out of their prescribed roles, it was believed that they would be vulnerable to the temptations of Satan. Similar hierarchies in the larger society were expected to promote the same harmony. The most important was the religious hierarchy, with the minister at the top and the church elders below him, followed by the church members; at the bottom were the non-church members. By law everyone had to pay taxes to support the minister, attend church regularly, and conform to Puritan practices and precepts.<sup>14</sup>

The paper [Section One] highlights both the Christian foundations for the role of wives in English society but also the tremendous value and contribution of “good wives” to New England’s development during the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries. This installment on “Bathsheba” is part one within a three-part series.

## SUMMARY

This essay is in essence a “book report” on Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s classic work, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*. Dr. Ulrich sets forth the proposition that Christian virtue governed the custom of women throughout the American colonial period. The woman was held to a separate and subordinate status; but her status also followed the status of her husband, with whom her entire identity was fused in order to form an entity known as “one person” before the law. The chief role was that of

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<sup>14</sup> “Puritans,” Encyclopedia.com



housewife, and it was indeed a revered honor for a woman to have the reputation of being a “good wife.” The “good wife” was revered as the “virtuous woman” whose “price is far above rubies,” as stated in Proverbs 31, and as exemplified in the lives of noble and virtuous women found throughout the Bible. The Puritans of colonial New England strictly construed the Bible and considered it to be authoritative, operative law. For this reason, almost every aspect of the customs and duties which were imposed upon New England’s women came from some source in the Bible. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s groundbreaking work, *Good Wives*, describes three of the Bible’s influential characters—Bathsheba, Eve, and Jael—in order to explain precisely how the lives and examples of the Bible’s female heroines and role-models were used to fashion and shape the culture, custom, and duties of New England and English women. What resulted in New England and in colonial America was a well-organized, morally wholesome, and refined social order which held American women in very high esteem. Writing on this same subject several decades after 1750, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville would attribute the greatness of the young United States of America to the “superiority of their women.” See Appendix A, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*. Well-defined gender roles, based upon family welfare and high moral standards, served well the New England Puritans and the colonial American communities. A striking contrast, for instance, can be displayed from the impact of the institution of chattel slavery upon the African American community, such that the validity of the Puritan standard of sex, gender, and morality has stood the test of time.

## **Part XXVI. Anglican Church: “Puritanism and the Status of Women in Colonial New England (1600-1750)” -- Section One: *Bathsheba***

In colonial New England, “the myth of Bathsheba encompassed the productive roles of housewives and deputy husbands, the social roles of mistresses and neighbors, and the intellectual and spiritual roles of committed Christians.”<sup>15</sup> “[E]ach aspect of female life described here can be found in idealized form in the Bible in the description of the ‘virtuous woman’ of Proverbs, chapter 31. The Puritans called this paragon ‘Bathsheba,’ assuming rather logically that Solomon could only have learned such an appreciation for huswifery from his mother.... In English and American sermons Bathsheba was remembered as a virtuous

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<sup>15</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 84.



housewife, a godly woman whose industrious labors gave mythical significance to the ordinary tasks assigned to her sex.”<sup>16</sup> “To describe this virtuous Bathsheba is to outline the major components of the housekeeping role in early America.”<sup>17</sup> For these reasons, it would be helpful to review the biblical passages which inspired this myth of the virtuous Bathsheba:

**Proverbs 31:10-31**

*The Woman Who Fears the Lord*

“Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.  
The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.

She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.  
She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.

She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.  
She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.  
She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.

She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night.  
She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.  
She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet.

She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.  
Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.

She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant.  
Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.

She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.  
She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.

Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.  
Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.  
Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.”

In *Good Wives*, Dr. Ulrich provides three very vivid examples of the proverbial “Bathsheba,” to wit: “Magdalen Wear, Hannah Grafton, and Beatrice Plummer were all ‘typical’ New England housewives of the period, 1650-1750.”<sup>18</sup> “[W]e can simply assert,” Dr. Ulrich writes, “that the lives of early American housewives were distinguished less by the tasks they performed than by forms of social organization which linked economic responsibilities to family responsibilities and which tied each woman’s household to the larger world after her village or town.”<sup>19</sup>

As Dr. Ulrich teaches us in her path-breaking research in *Good Wives*, the Bible (e.g., passages such as Proverbs 31) was relied upon to form and shape the female’s customs, duties, and culture throughout English and colonial American society.

#### **A. Bible Law: Bathsheba (Proverbs 31: 1-31)**

In both England and colonial America, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Englishwoman’s primary domain was the home. “By English tradition, a woman’s environment was the family dwelling and the yard or yards surrounding it.”<sup>20</sup> But unless we keep Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations in mind, regarding the significance and value of distinct gender roles, we might easily fall into the twenty-first century trap of assuming that “difference” means “discrimination” and hence “all discrimination is inherently evil.” Indeed, as Dr. Ulrich has pointed out, “[f]or most historians, as for almost all antiquarians, the quintessential early American woman has been a churner of cream and a spinner of wool. Because home manufacturing has all but disappeared from modern housekeeping, many scholars have assumed that the key change in female economic life has been a shift from ‘production’ to ‘consumption,’ a shift precipitated by the industrial

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 13.

revolution. This is far too simple, obscuring the variety which existed even in the pre-industrial world.”<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Ulrich informs us in her masterpiece *Good Wives*, there were “major economic variations” among American colonial women, depending upon the occupations of their husbands, but their general obligations and duties as “good wives” were fairly uniform. This was true even taking into consideration the urban or suburban dwellers in Boston and comparing them to those women who lived in far-away rural communities. The commercial centres certainly differed from the agricultural centres. For example, “[a]lthough the wives of Salem shopkeepers, craftsmen, and mariners still kept a pig or two ‘at the door,’ agriculture had become a less pronounced theme in their daily work.”<sup>22</sup> “Thus, rather straightforward contrasts between frontier, farming, and commercial communities explain many of the variations in the inventory data.”<sup>23</sup> But at the same time, the duties and obligations of all colonial housewives remained remarkably similar, regardless of their location or class within the society.

As Dr. Ulrich explains, the nature of women’s work was vast, complex, and indispensable work:

For centuries the industrious Bathsheba has been pictured sitting at a spinning wheel—‘She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.’ Perhaps it is time to suggest a new icon for women’s history. Certainly spinning was an important female craft in northern New England, linked not only to housework but to mothering, but it was one enterprise among many. Spinning wheels are such intriguing and picturesque objects, so resonant with antiquity, that they tend to obscure rather than clarify the nature of female economic life, making home production the essential element in early American huswifery and the era of industrialization the period of crucial change. Challenging the symbolism of the wheel not only undermines the popular stereotype, it questions a prevailing emphasis in women’s history.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

An alternate symbol might be the pocket. In early America a woman's pocket was not attached to her clothing, but tied around her waist with a string or tape. . . . Much better than a spinning wheel, this homely object symbolizes the obscurity, the versatility, and the personal nature of the housekeeping role. A woman sat at a wheel, but she carried her pocket with her from room to room, from house to yard, from yard to street. The items which it contained would shift from day to day and from year to year, but they would of necessity be small, easily lost, yet precious. A pocket could be a mended and patched pouch of plain homespun or a rich personal ornament boldly embroidered in crewel. It reflected the status as well as the skills of its owner. Whether it contained cellar keys or a paper of pins, a packet of seeds or a baby's bib, a hank of yarn or a Testament, it characterized the social complexity as well as the demanding diversity of women's work.<sup>24</sup>

The organized nature of this so-called women's work cannot be fairly appraised or estimated, but its impact upon the development of American society was significant. See, e.g., Appendix A, Alexis de Tocqueville.

## **2. Deputy Husbands**

Nor should we deprecate the Christian ideal of the conjugal relationship.<sup>25</sup> The husband was expected to love his wife as his own flesh; the wife was expected to honor, revere, and respect her husband.<sup>26</sup> The husband and the wife were fused into one person and became "one flesh."<sup>27</sup> The husband voted on behalf of the entire household, and the husband made the final decisions on behalf of the wife and the household, but not, of course, without taking into consideration the wife's input, wisdom, and advice.<sup>28</sup> The wife was subordinate to the husband, but she was not to be treated as a child or disrespected as an imbecile.<sup>29</sup> The idea was that both husband and wife would act as a "family unit," and as such, function as a sub-unit

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> See, generally, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

to the local government, that was part and parcel of the larger government. This was the Puritan “family government” system.

There were three general rules that were basic to family government in colonial New England:

1. The husband was supreme in the external affairs of the family. As its titular head, he had both the right and the responsibility to represent it in its dealings with the outside world.
2. A husband’s decisions would, however, incorporate his wife’s opinions and interest. (Barney expected to hear their minds from him.)
3. Should fate or circumstances prevent the husband from fulfilling his role, the wife could appropriately stand in his place. As one seventeenth-century Englishman explained it, a woman ‘in her husband’s absence, is wife and deputy-husband, which makes her double the files of her diligence. At this return he finds all things so well he wonders to see himself at home when he was abroad.’<sup>30</sup>

Here, in Ulrich’s *Good Wives*, we also find very vivid support to explain why, a century later, Alexis de Tocqueville opined that “the superiority of their women” was the foundation for the new United States’ great success. American women were not simply expected to function as baby-producing machines or as sex objects, but they were expected to function as the “vice president” of the household, and ready and capable of stepping in and taking over the practical affairs of running the family farm, family business, or any other business affair which belonged to the husband.

Thus referring to this role as a “deputy husband,” Dr. Ulrich explains that “[a] wife was expected to become expert in the management of a household and the care of children, but she was also asked to assist in the economic affairs of her husband, becoming his representative and even his surrogate if circumstances demanded it. These two roles were compatible in the premodern world because the home was the communication center of family enterprise if not always the actual place of work. As long as business transactions remained personal and a woman

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

had the support of a familiar environment, she could move rather easily from the role of housewife to the role of deputy husband, though few women were prepared either by education or by experience to become ‘independent women of affairs.’”<sup>31</sup>

The result was that, in truth, colonial American women were almost as knowledgeable of the practical affairs of their husbands as their husbands. This knowledge followed the position, station, occupation, and status of their husbands. “Skilled service was their major contribution, secure support their primary compensation.... The skilled service of a wife included the specialized house-keeping skills described in the last chapter, but it also embraced the responsibilities of a deputy husband. Since most productive work was based within the family, there were many opportunities for a wife to ‘double the files of her diligence.’ A weaver’s wife... might wind quills. A merchant’s wife... might keep shop. A farmer’s wife... might plant corn.”<sup>32</sup> “Under the right conditions any wife not only could double as a husband, she had the responsibility to do so.”<sup>33</sup> “[D]uring a prolonged absence of her husband a woman might become involved in more weighty matters.”<sup>34</sup>

In fact, this knowledge amongst women was not only encourage but it was both expected and indispensable. As Dr. Ulrich writes, “[a]s deputy husbands a few women... might emerge from anonymity; most women did not. Yet both sets of evidence must be analyzed apart from modern assumptions about the importance of the role of deputy husband cannot be determined by counting the number of women who used it to achieve independence. To talk about the independence of colonial wives is not only an anachronism but a contradiction in logic. A woman became a wife by virtue of her dependence, her solemnly vowed commitment to her husband. No matter how colorful the exceptions, land and livelihood in this society were normally transmitted from father to son...”<sup>35</sup>

Dr. Ulrich points out that one important example of when a woman’s role as “deputy husband” might be called into action is during wartime, such an “Indian war” or skirmish, or during the period of the American Revolutionary War. “[T]he

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp. 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

American Revolution affected many patriot women in a strikingly different way. At first reluctantly and then with increasing confidence and skill, these wives took up the management of farms and business while their husbands were away at war.”<sup>36</sup>

### 3. A Friendly Neighbor

In the New England community, women were the glue that held community relations intact. Homes, household members, neighborhoods, and communities were self-reliant and interdependent<sup>37</sup>, and thus through sheer necessity the good housewife was a community person who got along well with her neighbors. “[W]omen, though excluded from formal authority, played a central role in the communication networks which bonded or sundered neighborhoods.”<sup>38</sup> “Borrowing was part of the rhythm of life at all social levels. Families not only shared commodities. They shared the work which produced them.... Berrying, washing, spinning were female specialties which might bring neighbors together. Sharing work, women shared other responsibilities as well.”<sup>39</sup>

And although housewives were of different rank—upper, middle, and lower classes, they were nevertheless interdependent and lived in close connection and were unified by the Puritan church and the town square. “Thus, relationships among female neighbors could form in a number of directions. They could be both vertical and horizontal, involving economic links between servants and mistresses as well as close friendships among women of comparable position.”<sup>40</sup> In any event, colonial women were governed by well-defined rules in their relations one with another: first, the “Rule of Modesty”; second, the “Rule of Industry”; and, third, the “Rule of Charity.”

All three of these rules were tied to the biblical figure Bathsheba. As Dr. Ulrich further explains in *Good Wives*, “[a]ll three Rules are expressed in Proverbs 31. Bathsheba was involved in many discrete tasks, as we have seen, but behind all her effort was the *Rule of Industry*....”<sup>41</sup> “Like the virtuous woman of the Bible,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 59.



she also ‘stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.’ In the larger sense, this *Rule of Charity* meant neighborly concern, a general willingness to extend oneself to meet the needs of others.”<sup>42</sup> “The *Rule of Modesty* was keyed to the concept of hierarchy in a somewhat different way. Because her husband was ‘known in the gates’ and sat ‘among the elders of the land,’ the virtuous woman of Proverbs was entitled to dress in ‘silk and purple’ and to make herself ‘coverings of tapestry,’ but she did not take these visible emblems too seriously, knowing even as she adorned herself that ‘beauty is vain.’”<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Pretty Gentlewoman

Finally, Dr. Ulrich points out that the distinctive Christian duties of industry, charity, and modesty differed very little amongst colonial New England’s wives, regardless of their social standing and status. The only difference is that the upper-class housewives—the so-called gentlewomen—were much more refined and elegant in the performance of those same duties. Hence, Dr. Ulrich observes that “[p]retty gentlewomen simply refined the skills which all good housewives shared. To a knowledge of plain sewing and common cookery they added a concern for grace and style.... Her gentility determined that she would spend at least some of her time updating and remodeling her clothing, that she could afford to send a piece of silk to England to be dyed and ‘water’d with large water,’ and that she would know how to monogram as well as construct her husband’s scarves. Embellishmen. Refinement. Polish.”<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Differences in sex or gender roles in colonial New England were based largely upon the Bible and biblical figures such as Bathsheba, who was the wife of King David and the mother of King Solomon. The biblical description of Bathsheba can be found in Proverbs 31: 10-31. The Christian woman, therefore, was expected to pattern her thoughts and behavior after the spirit of Christ, as depicted in the life of the venerable Bathsheba. The English chancery and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

ecclesiastical courts incorporated these sacred beliefs and customs regarding the role of the wife into the English common law of marriage. And although the modern, twenty-first century view is that sex or gender differences deprecated the dignity and status of colonial women, Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Good Wives* and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy In America* clearly teach us that these gender differences were highly ethical, humane, and elevated the dignity both of women and the family, resulting in tremendous social force within the American republic.

**THE END**

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## APPENDIX A

### Chapter XII, "How the Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes"

*Democracy In America* (1836)

By

Alexis de Tocqueville

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#### HOW THE AMERICANS UNDERSTAND THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

*I have shown how democracy destroys or modifies the different inequalities that originate in society; but is this all, or does it not ultimately affect that great inequality of man and woman which has seemed, up to the present day, to be eternally based in human nature? I believe that the social changes that bring nearer to the same level the father and son, the master and servant, and, in general, superiors and inferiors will raise woman and make her more and more the equal of man. But here, more than ever, I feel the necessity of making myself clearly understood; for there is no subject on which the coarse and lawless fancies of our age have taken a freer range.*

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“There are people in Europe who, confounding together the different characteristics of the sexes, would make man and woman into beings not only equal but alike. They would give to both the same functions, impose on both the same duties, and grant to both the same rights; they would mix them in all things--their occupations, their pleasures, their business. It may readily be conceived that by thus attempting to make one sex equal to the other, both are degraded, and from so preposterous a medley of the works of nature nothing could ever result but weak men and disorderly women.

“It is not thus that the Americans understand that species of democratic equality which may be established between the sexes. They admit that as nature has appointed such wide differences between the physical and moral constitution of man and woman, her manifest design was to give a distinct employment to their various faculties; and they hold that improvement does not consist in making beings so dissimilar do pretty nearly the same things, but in causing each of them to fulfill their respective tasks in the best possible manner. The Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy which governs the manufacturers of our age, by carefully dividing the duties of man from those of woman in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on.

“In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways that are always different. American women never manage the outward concerns of the family or conduct a business or take a part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields or to make any of those laborious efforts which demand the exertion of physical strength. No families are so poor as to form an exception to this rule. If, on the one hand, an American woman cannot escape from the quiet circle of domestic employments, she is never forced, on the other, to go beyond it. Hence it is that the women of America, who often exhibit a masculine strength of understanding and a manly energy, generally preserve great delicacy of personal appearance and always retain the manners of women although they sometimes show that they have the hearts and minds of men.

“Nor have the Americans ever supposed that one consequence of democratic principles is the subversion of marital power or the confusion of the natural authorities in families. They hold that every association must have a head in order to accomplish its object, and that the natural head of the conjugal association is man. They do not therefore deny him the right of directing his partner, and they maintain that in the smaller association of husband and wife as well as in the great social community the object of democracy is to regulate and legalize the powers that are necessary, and not to subvert all power.

“This opinion is not peculiar to one sex and contested by the other; I never observed that the women of America consider conjugal authority as a fortunate usurpation of their rights, or that they thought themselves degraded by submitting to it. It appeared to me, on the contrary, that they attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their own will and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke, not to shake it off. Such, at least, is the feeling expressed by the most virtuous of their sex; the others are silent; and in the United States it is not the practice for a guilty wife to clamor for the rights of women while she is trampling on her own holiest duties.

“It has often been remarked that in Europe a certain degree of contempt lurks even in the flattery which men lavish upon women; although a European frequently affects to be the slave of woman, it may be seen that he never sincerely thinks her his equal. In the United States men seldom compliment women, but they daily show how much they esteem them. They constantly display an entire confidence in the understanding of a wife and a profound respect for her freedom; they have decided that her mind is just as fitted as that of a man to discover the plain truth, and her heart as firm to embrace it; and they have never sought to place her virtue, any more than his, under the shelter of prejudice, ignorance, and fear.

“It would seem in Europe, where man so easily submits to the despotic sway of women, that they are nevertheless deprived of some of the greatest attributes of the human species and considered as seductive but imperfect beings; and (what may well provoke astonishment) women ultimately look upon themselves in the same light and almost consider it as a privilege that they are entitled to show themselves futile, feeble, and timid. The women of America claim no such privileges.

“Again, it may be said that in our morals we have reserved strange immunities to man, so that there is, as it were, one virtue for his use and another for the guidance of his partner, and that, according to the opinion of the public, the very same act may be punished alternately as a crime

or only as a fault. The Americans do not know this iniquitous division of duties and rights; among them the seducer is as much dishonored as his victim.

“It is true that the Americans rarely lavish upon women those eager attentions which are commonly paid them in Europe, but their conduct to women always implies that they suppose them to be virtuous and refined; and such is the respect entertained for the moral freedom of the sex that in the presence of a woman the most guarded language is used lest her ear should be offended by an expression. In America a young unmarried woman may alone and without fear undertake a long journey.

“The legislators of the United States, who have mitigated almost all the penalties of criminal law, still make rape a capital offense, and no crime is visited with more inexorable severity by public opinion. This may be accounted for; as the Americans can conceive nothing more precious than a woman's honor and nothing which ought so much to be respected as her independence, they hold that no punishment is too severe for the man who deprives her of them against her will. In France, where the same offense is visited with far milder penalties, it is frequently difficult to get a verdict from a jury against the prisoner. Is this a consequence of contempt of decency or contempt of women? I cannot but believe that it is a contempt of both.

“Thus the Americans do not think that man and woman have either the duty or the right to perform the same offices, but they show an equal regard for both their respective parts; and though their lot is different, they consider both of them as beings of equal value. They do not give to the courage of woman the same form or the same direction as to that of man, but they never doubt her courage; and if they hold that man and his partner ought not always to exercise their intellect and understanding in the same manner, they at least believe the understanding of the one to be as sound as that of the other, and her intellect to be as clear. Thus, then, while they have allowed the social inferiority of woman to continue, they have done all they could to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man; and in this respect they appear to me to have excellently understood the true principle of democratic improvement.

“As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow that although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, now that I am drawing to the close of this work, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women.”