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If a Calvinist Had Coffee With a Feminist



by Julia K. Stronks

I'm beginning this essay with the feminist technique of situating myself within the topics covered. I graduated from Dordt College in 1982. I had transferred to Dordt as a sophomore because I was interested in the Reformed worldview that the institution emphasized. As a political science

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major I read Calvin, Althusius, Kuyper, Bavinck, Dooyeweerd, and Groen van Prinsterer. I absorbed it all; I appreciated it all. And, if you had asked me then if I was a feminist, I would have said, "No way. I like men." I was grateful to the feminists of the early 1970s because they had paved the way for me to go to law school, but I had no interest in feminist perspective.

From college I went directly to law school at the University of Iowa. Then I joined a large general practice law firm in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was the mid-1980s and an unfortunate era for fashion. I had big hair, big shoulder pads, a little bow tie on my suit, power heels, and red lipstick. I powered my way through the cases I was given and never thought twice about feminism or women's issues. Then, in 1990, I had a baby, and everything changed. I had gone back to graduate school when I became pregnant so that I would be able to spend more time at home with the baby. One day I was sitting at a picnic table with my friends, all new moms and their kids. We were talking about diapers and laundry. The conversation hit me between the eyes. Diapers? Laundry? How had my life turned into a discussion about these things?

Eventually, I joined the faculty at Whitworth University, a small Presbyterian university in the Pacific Northwest. Over the years I have seen a similar thing happen over and over. Smart girls come from high school by the droves. They have earned high grades and high test scores. They dominate in college. They earn great grades, and

they do internships and write amazing papers. Then they graduate and go off into the world. But when they return for their ten-year college reunion, the women are talking about their children, and the men are talking about their careers. At some point in the reunion weekend, some of these young women will take me aside and say, “Julia, I love my children. I picked this life. But I was going to change the world. How did this happen to me?” They have the same look on their faces that I had on mine the day I discovered that my conversations were mostly about laundry.

Now some reading this paper might be thinking, “There is nothing wrong with that. Those young women are being great mothers. That is exactly what they are supposed to do.” My point is *not* that there is something wrong with their lives. My point is that it is interesting that so little has changed in the thirty years since I was a college student. It is interesting that the public and private lives of Christian men and women have changed so little over the years. Consider even the contributors to this group of essays; few women participated, and this lack is reflective of my experience at the majority of Christian conferences where I speak. And so, at the age of almost fifty, for the first time in my life I have become interested in feminism.

This essay considers three aspects of this hypothetical coffee between a feminist and a Calvinist: What would the two have in common? What might the feminist learn from the Calvinist? And what might the Calvinist learn from the feminist?

Defining the terms: Calvinists and Feminists

In politics, the Calvinist tradition emphasizes a number of themes. First, in the words of Abraham Kuyper, there is “not one square inch” of creation that does not belong to God. Our politics, our family life, our law—all of these—are subject to God. Second, we think of our world as fallen but redeemed. The themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration shape our understanding of our job in this world. God created the world in perfect form. The fall resulted in a broken creation: broken relationships, broken institutions, and a broken connection between God and humans. However, Christ’s death and resurrec-

tion redeemed our creation, and we live now with confidence that God guides us in the work we do while we are waiting for full restoration with God in the new earth. Third, God’s creation includes people, certainly, but it also includes social structures in society. Families, communities of worship, economic institutions, non-government associations—all of these—have responsibilities in the world. A biblical view of government recognizes that these social structures must be allowed to exist in a way that responds to God’s call. This respect for the uniqueness of each structure is called *structural pluralism*. In order for structural pluralism to flourish, *confessional pluralism* within these structures must be allowed. Even though the majority might believe that families or schools should operate in a particular way, confessional pluralism suggests that government should protect the space that allows even minority views (often Christian views) to flourish. Fourth, as Christians we are called to concern ourselves with the poor, the weak, and the sick. Fifth, God will achieve God’s work through a number of different channels. Included in those channels, Christians will be used to work for the glory of God, but through common grace, we know that God will often use those who are not Christians to reveal truth. We do not fear other perspectives—we can be confident that God will lead us as we listen to others and use discernment to determine what God is working to show us.

Feminists, on the other hand, are harder to define. There are many different kinds of feminists, and the word itself carries a great deal of baggage. However, in politics in the United States, two feminist views have emerged as dominant: the radical feminist perspective and the liberal feminist perspective.

The radical perspective represents a very small number of voices, but it is the target of the vast majority of Christian critics. Radical feminists emphasize the role of patriarchy in society and view most social institutions as examples of male oppression. They often argue that men and women are different and that women have qualities that make them better suited to positions of leadership: women are less divisive and more conciliatory. Radical feminists have sometimes argued that marriage and mothering are forms of male domi-

nance in our culture, and radical feminism has led commentators like Pat Robertson to say things like this:

[T]he feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.¹

Liberal feminists, however, make up the vast majority of feminists in this country and present a far less controversial perspective. Their primary emphasis is rights-oriented. Liberal feminists have the same fundamental presuppositions as others in our democracy. They agree that representation,

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federalism, a market economy, private property and rule of law are fundamental to a well-organized society. But, they argue, these elements have far too often left women out. As a result, their emphasis is on equality for women. Liberal feminists consider whether women are represented in Congress or in the courts; they argue for equitable treatment under the law, and they encourage consideration of equality in areas impacted by the market.

Calvinists and Feminists in common

When most people hear the word “feminist” they think of the women’s movement of the 1970s. Many Christians are surprised to learn that there have been four feminist movements in the United States and that all four of them have involved ac-

tive work by Christian women. Moreover, all four movements have focused on justice for the poor, the sick, and the weak—the very things that we in the Calvinist tradition have emphasized as part of our calling in a broken but redeemed world.

The first feminist movement in the United States occurred during the founding of the new Republic. Mary Wollstonecraft was a British author and intellectual writer during the 1700s. She wrote essays on rights and is best known for her piece called *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Wollstonecraft was a humanist and rejected the teachings of Christianity. However, women in what was to become the United States were interested in Wollstonecraft’s work. Abigail Adams, wife of second President John Adams and friend to George Washington, read much of what was written by Wollstonecraft. Though Wollstonecraft framed her perspective in humanist terms, Adams understood women’s rights to be grounded in the fact that women were created by God as equal to men. She encouraged her husband and George Washington to consider this perspective in their shaping of the new country. Even though she was not ultimately successful, she and other women of that time reflect the first significant movement toward gaining equal property and voting rights for women. In a famous letter to her husband, Abigail Adams demonstrates her understanding of equality when she writes, “If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.”²

The second feminist movement in this country evolved with the abolition movement. From the early 1800s until the Civil War, those concerned with suffrage for women were also active in the movement against slavery. During this period Lucy Stone represents the role that Christian women played. Stone was a committed Christian who read the Bible over and over. She was a Congregationalist but was kicked out of two different church congregations because she insisted that the life of Jesus demonstrated that men and women are equal in God’s eyes. She challenged American churches to reform by bringing their treatment of women in line with Christ’s model.

In addition to her attention to women's rights, she was also a committed advocate of abolition, tax reform, and temperance. Stone is credited for sparking the feminist interests of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and the three women together, all Christians in their early years, are often referred to as the foundation of American feminism.

Another part of this era is the beginning of what we now think of as the "gender as construction" discussion. This discussion is illustrated by the words of Sojourner Truth, a freed slave living in Ohio toward the end of her life. She was a Baptist and is famous for her off-the-cuff remarks at a meeting held in her church that modeled the earlier Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights. After a number of people had spoken, Truth asked for permission to speak and went to the front of the room:

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.³

Sojourner Truth's poignant words highlight an important question: what does it mean to be female? Are attributes we ascribe to women those instituted by God, or are they socially constructed? These are issues we still debate and discuss today.

The early 1900s, the third wave of American feminism, are well-known as a time in which suffrage was a key concern, but it is important to note that racial and economic justice were themes of equal interest to the women fighting for the right to vote. Three Christian women are illustrative of this work. Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker's Movement, was active on behalf of the poor, immigrants, and workers, who often experienced abuse at the hands of their employers. Ida Wells was a journalist who wrote about lynching and other criminal injustices suffered by the African American community. She worked on a wide variety of matters related to gender and economic justice as they impacted race, and eventually she began the NAACP. Alice Paul, a Quaker, led nonviolent protests for suffrage, getting arrested and beaten for her work. She then led a hunger strike in prison and was force-fed with straws pushed down her throat causing tremendous pain. After women received the vote, Paul worked toward a Ph.D. and a law degree. She continued to work for economic, racial, and gender justice throughout her life.

The 1970s women's movement, or fourth wave of American feminism, is best known for its emphasis on abortion and birth control, but a closer look

discovers aspects of the movement that focused on justice for a wide variety of citizens. Delores Huerta spent decades working with Caesar Chavez in pursuit of fair treatment of migrant workers and with him started the United Farm Workers of America. The mother of eleven children, she often spoke of her Catholic faith as giving her motivation and comfort in her work. Elizabeth Farians was one of the founders of NOW. As a Catholic theologian she has argued that male and female are both created in the image of God. It was she who first crafted the buttons claiming “Jesus was a Feminist.”

All four feminist movements emphasized justice for the poor and the weak, but it’s also important to note that the solution toward which most feminists worked was government intervention and legislative control. This is a point at which Calvinists can contribute to the discussion.

Feminists learning from Calvinists

The two points at which feminists can learn from Calvinists have to do with the role of government and the value of human life. Feminists have established a firm track record on valuing human life that exists. Their concern for human rights, for economic and racial justice, and for those who struggle in the world is clear. In addition, American feminists have worked hard on the issue of birth control, arguing that every child born should be a child that is wanted. However, in recent decades some feminist emphases on rights have translated into a lack of concern for unborn children. The debate about abortion has been used as a litmus test for those who self-identify as feminists. Further, the rhetoric of the pro-choice and pro-life debates has diminished real public discussion about the role of government in protecting life.

Because Calvinists emphasize government’s responsibility to do justice, Calvinists are in a unique position to encourage discussion about abortion that focuses on justice to all involved in the debates: the woman, the unborn child, the father, and the community at large. The majority of Americans, including those who identify themselves as feminists, position themselves somewhere between those who would advocate abortion on demand

and those who would criminalize abortion at any point in a pregnancy. Wise, balanced discussion in this area is needed.

A second area where Calvinists can contribute is the point of discussion about the role of government to achieve certain goods. American feminists, like Americans in general, are quick to turn to government to solve all problems. Legislation and litigation are the first tools to which reformers turn. However, government cannot and should not do all things. Because Calvinists have a developed understanding of the plurality of institutions in society, they are well positioned to encourage a holis-

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tic view of social change. The goals of economic, racial, and gender justice cannot be achieved by government alone. Families, businesses, schools, non-governmental organizations—all of these—must play a role in bringing about a just society. Calvinists, with their emphasis on structural and confessional pluralism, can encourage a diverse approach to working toward justice to all groups.

Calvinists learning from Feminists: methodology

One of the most important areas to which Christians of all sorts should pay more attention is methodology in understanding the world. Feminist methodology, like most postmodern views, emphasizes narrative, listening, and experience as tools for understanding others. The following parable illustrates the approach that feminists advocate:

The Blind Men and the Elephant

by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,

Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a WALL!”

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Ho, what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ‘tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a SPEAR!”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a SNAKE!”

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he:
“‘Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a TREE!”

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a FAN!”

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a ROPE!”

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!⁴

This fable is often interpreted by Christians as a postmodern rejection of God’s Truth, but feminist methodology interprets the parable in a different way. Feminists argue that we can understand the world only when we all listen to each other and learn from the experience of each other. In this parable each blind man understands the elephant in part. Likewise, in our world each person understands reality only in part. It is only by pooling our experience that we can see the full identity of problems or solutions.

For example, if one polls middle-class Christians and asks them what they feel is the most challenging issue that government must confront with respect to the family, most will say that government should recognize the need for a parent to be in the home. As a result, they also say that tax policy and day-care-voucher systems should be revamped so that parents who want to be home with their children are encouraged to do so. But, if one polls Americans across age, ethnicity, worldview perspectives, gender, and economic background, a different view of challenges to the family emerges. In this case the issue that is highlighted by the vast majority of people is family violence.

In our country, intimate-partner violence is a critical problem. Over the course of their lifetimes, one in four women will report some form of intimate-partner abuse. Three women are killed every day by their partners in this country. There are more than 500 rapes or sexual assaults per day.⁵

Child abuse is another challenge. Every ten seconds, a report of child abuse is filed in our country. More than four children per day are killed by a parent or parent figure. Eighty percent of adults who were abused as children meet the diagnostic for psychological disorders, and over sixty percent of those who are currently in drug rehab were abused.

Sex-trafficking is also a growing issue in our country. Over 50,000 women and girls are trafficked into the United States every year and enter

into lives of prostitution. These numbers are horrifying, but all three of these issues are responsive to changes in public policy and to pressure or changes in social institutions.

Violence is an issue on which both feminists and Calvinists can join together without controversy. Decreasing family violence and sexual assault meets the feminist goal of justice for women, and it also meets the Calvinist's goal of strengthening families and caring for the vulnerable.

In this hypothetical coffee between a feminist and a Calvinist, my hope would be that the two would find that though they might have different motives, they also have much in common in objectives. Calvinists in the Twenty-first Century should embrace feminists and be eager to work with them for mutually compatible goals.

Endnotes

1. "Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked," *Washington Post*, August 23, 1992.
2. "Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776." www.thelizlibrary.org/suffrage/abigail.htm.
3. Sojourner Truth: "Ain't I a Woman?," December 1851, Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio. *Modern History Sourcebook*. www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.html
4. Godfrey Saxe, John (1816-1887). "The Blind Men and the Elephant." www.constitution.org/col/blind_men.htm
5. All statistics on violence are drawn from the American Bar Association's domestic violence report. new.abanet.org/domesticviolence/Pages/Statistics.aspx.