April C. Wells*

The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy: Destruction of the Mental, Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical Health of Women

Introduction

"But God is a God of order."
"God made man first and woman second . . ."

These phrases echo in the writer's mind as people attempt to define and limit the roles of women based on sex. In Gen. 21:12 God told Abraham to do whatever Sarah instructed, but many men are not heeding the voice of women—persons who cry out from the pain of being oppressed within society and the Church.

The female's sense of inferiority is socially determined and conditioned at birth. Because of societal pressures regarding the assigned sex roles of women, they suffer low self-esteem, distorted self-image (including body-image), and confusion regarding their purpose in life. These factors play a crucial role in the decided increase of depression, suicide, drug, and alcohol use among women. Not only are these results destroying the lives of millions of women daily, but they further devastate families and communities, resulting in a universal impact on the mental, emotional, and physical health of communities.

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At this point, it is necessary to examine several terms: patriarchy, power, authority, and control. Power denotes the inherent ability or admitted right to rule, govern, and determine. In the church, this power is associated with God; however, it is also the dominant characteristic of patriarchal cultures where dominance is assigned to the male gender. Thus, patriarchy is a form of social organization where government, rule, or domination by men, e.g., a family/tribe where the father or the eldest male is recognized as the head of the family/tribe.[1] Within patriarchal cultures, power allocated to males provides authority to give commands, enforce obedience, and make decisions. When authority is used to regulate, restrain, or curb, it becomes control.[2]

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the church's contribution to the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical destruction of women relevant to their roles and status in a patriarchal society. Special attention will be given to the overwhelming impact that patriarchy and sexism have upon women, both within the church and in communities served by the church. Finally, viable ideas, suggestions, and methodologies will be provided to assist Christian leaders, congregations, and communities in progressing towards optimizing human relationships which lead to healthier women, healthier communities, and reconciliation.

Have We Come a Long Way, Baby?

Within the past year, the writer has worked with numerous women and men in treatment for substance abuse.

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[1]"Patriarchy," *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia* [software], (Chicago: Compton's New Media, 1995).

[2]Ibid.

Each comes with a different story, yet each account is the same—a lack of knowledge regarding identity and purpose. Based on discussions, observations, and experiments conducted with African-American women and men in treatment, several conclusions were made regarding their understanding of the identity and purpose of women as defined by patriarchy.

In the first experiment, each woman and man was instructed to stand separately and turn, facing their chair. They were then asked to grasp the arms of the chair. The next instruction was, "Do ten jumping-jacks." Each woman responded, "I can't." When asked why they couldn't, they said, "Because I'm holding the chair."

After conducting the same experiment with the men, none said they could not do the jumping-jacks. Instead, each let go of the chair and proceeded to do the exercise. The different responses led to the conclusion that men, on the one hand, have experienced male-privilege in a patriarchal culture and recognize their ability to exercise power to act. Women, on the other hand, do not feel that they have the ability to give themselves permission to act and wait for approval from others. Again, patriarchy further perpetuates such unwholesome thinking. From a spiritual perspective, patriarchy may also be the culprit behind women's difficulty in "letting go" of anger and pain that leads to carrying heavier "baggage" than men. In other words, patriarchal cultures do not give women permission to be angry.

While conducting an experiment with other African-American women and men in treatment for substance abuse, the men were asked what it meant to be a man. They rapidly shouted words such as "king," "master," "power," "provider," etc. When the women were asked to define what it meant to be a woman, there was silence and uncertainty. Eventually,

three words timidly and slowly came forth . . . "mother," "care-taker," and "sustainer." Their actions determine that men often have had voice in a patriarchal society that clearly defines and establishes their role as "men," while women have yet fully to discover their voice and define or redefine themselves in a patriarchal culture. Instead, patriarchy has defined them in relation to their responsibility to men and children.

Men's Attitudes Concerning Their Position in Relation to Women
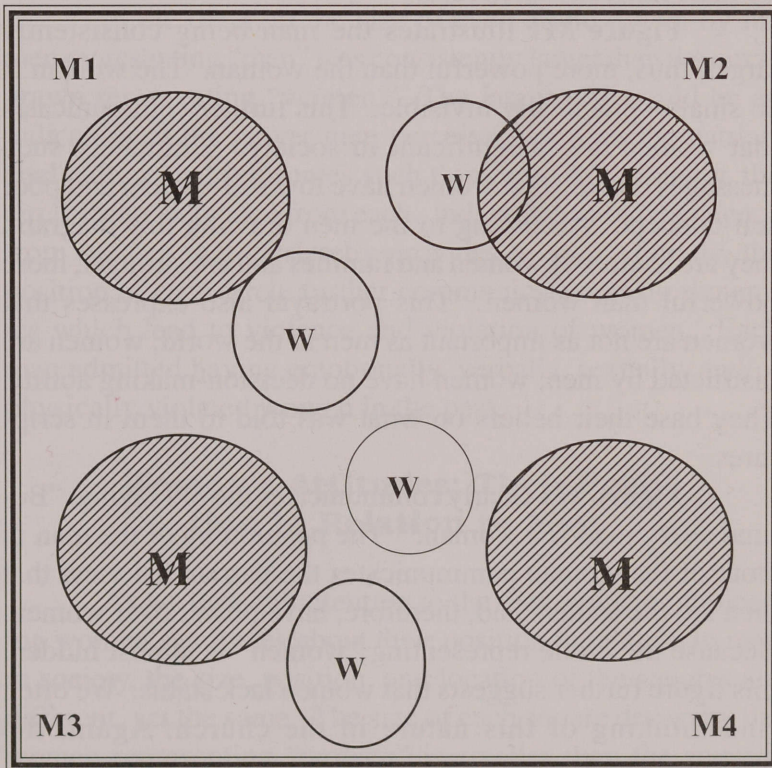
Because sexist attitudes resulting from patriarchy create conflict in relationships between women and men, another experiment was conducted to help understand their attitudes in relationship to each other. Each person was instructed to draw circles on a chalkboard to describe their relationship in society. Circles representing women were marked with a "W." Circles representing men were marked with an "M." When making an assessment of the men's attitudes about their position in relation to women in society, the size, position, and location of the circles were analyzed. With reference to the diagram located on the preceding page, below are given the results of the four primary diagrams drawn by male African Americans.

Figure M1 illustrates the man being consistently larger, thus, more powerful than the woman. The woman is so small—practically invisible. This further communicates that women are insignificant in society. Ultimately such messages convey that women have low self-esteem and poor self-concept. According to the men drawing this diagram, they are leaders of women and families and are stronger, more powerful than women. This portrayal also expresses that women are not as important as men in the world; women are instructed by men; women have no decision-making ability. They base their beliefs on what was told to them in scriptures.

Figure M2 clearly communicates the old saying: "Behind every man is a woman." The positioning of the man in front of the woman communicates the patriarchal view that men are the leaders and, therefore, have power over women. Because the circle representing "women" is almost hidden, this figure further suggests that women lack status. We often find thinking of this nature in the church. Again, the

circle representing "woman" is smaller, suggesting less power.

 Figure M3 also shows the circle representing men to be larger. While the circle representing women is slightly larger than the other circles, it is still smaller than the circle for men. Additionally, the man who drew this circle attempted to show equality by placing the circles side by side. However, the size and placement of the circles still communicate differences in power and independence from women.

 Finally, in **Figure M4**, the circle representing men communicates a power that is "above" woman. The men drawing these circles cited Genesis 3:16 as the basis for their beliefs. Again, the power of the woman is beneath and less than the man.

 In the diagram the size of each circle drawn by the men representing "men" was consistently larger than the circle drawn representing "women." The larger size could be an indication of the power men perceive based on the patriarchal culture that reinforces such thinking. Additionally, the circles were detached from each, indicating an independence from women that patriarchy provides to men. Finally, the position of each circle further communicates power dynamics which lead to violence and violation of women. Each man admitted having emotionally, verbally, sexually, and/or physically violated women in the past.

Women's Attitudes: Their Position in Relation to Men

 As we turn our attention to the diagram communicating women's attitudes about their position in relation to men in society, the size, position, and location of the squares are different, yet the same. The size of each square drawn by the women representing "women" is smaller than the squares

drawn representing "men." Unlike the squares drawn by the men, each square drawn by the women representing "women" is consistently attached in some way to the square representing "men." This seems to suggest that women do not recognize their identity as separate from men, and that they only define themselves in relationship to men. While patriarchy has provided men with privilege and power that supersedes women, they have also been conditioned to the rules of patriarchy that damage and destroy their mental, emotional, and physical health.
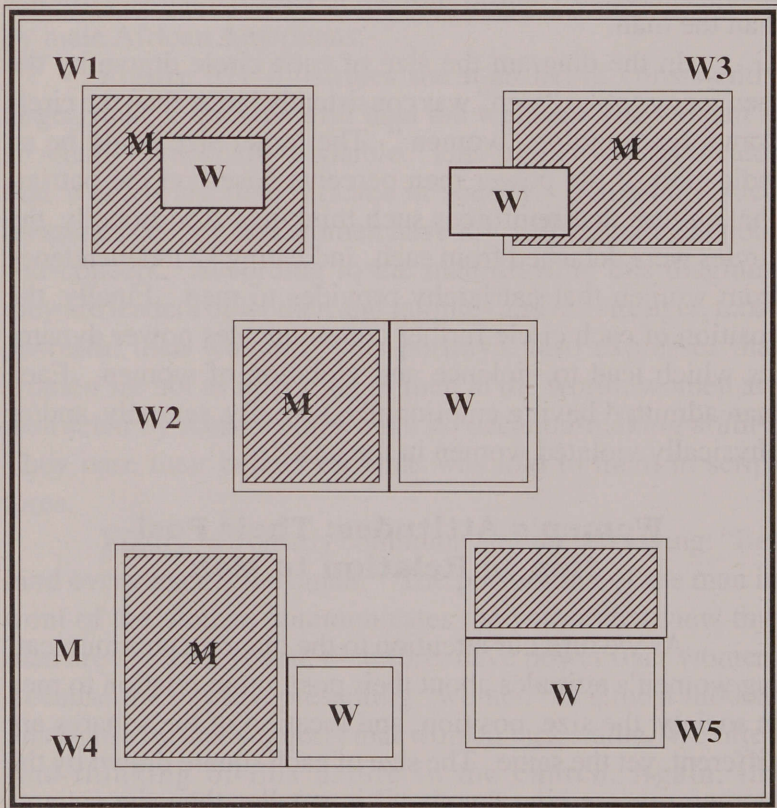
In **Figure W1**, square "W" is small indicating inferiority and a sense of powerlessness. The women who drew these squares feel they are inside the man who has to be around them as a protector. These are also women in violently abusive relationships.

Figure W2 suggests that women are incomplete without men and dependent upon them to complete their identity. The women who drew these squares indicate that women are not whole unless they have a man to make them so.

Figure W3 again communicates the old adage: "Behind every man is a woman." The women who drew these squares agree with many men who suggest that the male should lead the woman. Their beliefs were based on biblical teachings, suggesting that women be submissive and silent.

Figures W4 and **W5** were drawn by women who suggest that men should have more power than women because "a man should be a man." When asked what this means, they said that they do not want men in their lives that let them have their way. These women have a tendency to identify the role of men as fathers while identifying their own role as "little girls" that need to be "kept in line." Additionally, they have often been in relationships with controlling men who were emotionally and physically abusive. Control and the abuse of power of men is reinforced by women conditioned by patriarchy.

Figure W5 illustrates difficulty in communicating the placement of women in relationship to men in society. The women drawing this diagram suggest that the square is primarily representative of men and that women are somewhere in it.

It should be noted that each woman represented in the diagram has been a victim of emotional, verbal, sexual, and/or physical abuse inflicted by men. If the mental, emo-

tional, and physical health of women is ever to be healed, it is necessary for women to discover or rediscover their voices, to own and embrace their power, to redefine themselves in a society destructive to their essence, being, and purpose in life.

Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice

Stereotypes of women are strongly rooted in patriarchy. The rigid stereotypes of women are well documented. Among clinicians, there is a strong negative assessment of what constitutes mental health for a woman as compared to a mentally healthy man. Additionally, these assessments parallel the sex-role stereotypes prevalent in our patriarchal culture. The assessment of women is that they are more passive, more submissive, less independent, less of a risk-taker, less competitive, more easily influenced, and less objective. These stereotyped societal standards of sex behavior are negative evaluations and also a "Catch 22" for women. Women risk being criticized for not being feminine if they adopt the socially-desirable behaviors of the healthier competent mature male. If, however, they adopt the less healthy or socially desirable behavior of a female, they risk being considered deficient and immature.

Different behaviors are encouraged or discouraged based on sex assignments. Behaviors demonstrated by girls which tend to be rewarded include conforming, being emotional, submissive, shy, or dependent. When girls are assertive, aggressive, independent, or behave actively, the behaviors tend to be discouraged or rejected because they are considered "masculine" in patriarchal cultures. For these reasons, many women will avoid success and achievement to prevent the expected negative consequences.

In terms of "affiliation achievement," data suggest that females have a tendency to base their self-esteem on whether or not they receive affection, rather than on what they have accomplished. This may be due to the importance of "being loved" during development.

> By the time women reach adulthood, they have lower self-esteem than men, have not accomplished as much academically, and tend to suffer more from symptoms of dissatisfaction and frustration. . . . [T]he very nature of differential child rearing, societal demands, and sex role stereotypes predispose to self-destructive behavior patterns and emotional problems.[3]

Sex-Role Stereotypes

John Bradshaw, in *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, suggests that "our sex-role scripts are rigid, divisive, and shaming in that they are caricatures of maleness and femaleness that cause us to over identify with parts of us and fail to allow for complete wholeness."[4] It has been suggested that at an early age, girls are taught to act differently and possess different aspirations from boys. Additionally, girls are instructed not to expect or achieve in arenas that are considered traditionally masculine, e.g., pastor, politician, etc.

Sterotypes of Women Described by Men

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[3]S. V. Levin, L. E. Kamin, and E. L. Levine, "Sexism and Psychiatry: Theory and Review," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 44, no. 3 (1974): 332.

[4]John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1988), 69.

The terms appearing in the cartoon below are representative of the language utilized when men describe women as stereotypes. The negative and inferior attributes of these become part of a woman's self-concept. In other words, women become what they are through conditioning. "The tendency for women to denigrate themselves in this manner can be seen as evidence of the powerful social pressures to conform to the sex-role standards of our society."[5] While the church, in reflecting these societal standards, does not create the dilemma for women, it is an extremely powerful influ-

- **emotional**
- **need men**
- **shop-a-holics**
- **weak**
- **sensitive**
- **illogical/irrational**
- **can't drive**
- **moody**
- **gossip**

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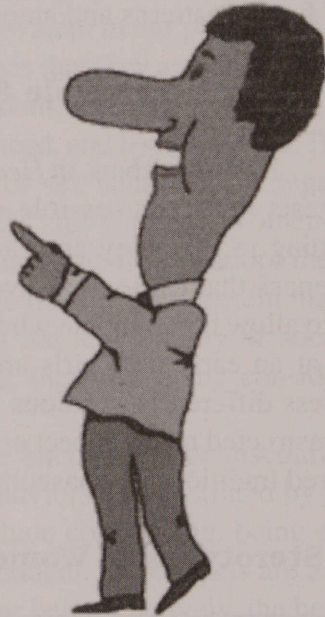
[5]Inge Broverman and others, "Sex Role Stereotypes: A Current Appraisal," *Journal of Social Issues* 28, no. 2 (1972): 75.

ence in perpetuating these sex-role sterotypes.

Many women subscribe to a belief system, suggesting an inferiority in holding positions of authority. This is due to what women have been taught about themselves by men, who, privileged by a patriarchal society, express their misogynist views from the pulpit as the voice of God. We find the same drama in observing the tendency of many African Americans refusing to solicit the service of other African Americans. For centuries, they were told by many Caucasians: "White is right and Black is bad." The Bible was used as the weapon. As African Americans bought into their belief system that they were "bad," they automatically began soliciting the services of white mechanics, doctors, and lawyers.

Although our attitudes and beliefs about ourselves play a crucial role in the question of sex-role stereotypes, our experiences are also a part of the challenge. Most, if not all of us, are guilty of associating and projecting past hurtful experiences by members of a certain group onto other members of the same group. The results are racism, sexism, and classism. After preaching a Good Friday service two years ago, the writer was approached by a woman who said, "I ain't never liked women preachers, but you have changed my mind." While a way was found to glean a compliment, there was surprise because her sister was a "woman preacher" and leader in that church. Later, taking the time to talk with her about her feelings toward "women preachers," the writer learned that when she was growing up, her mother died and left her to the care of her sister. Often, she was the object of her sister's authority, resulting in unresolved resentment. While the domination of her sister may have been the result of patriarchy, her own unresolved resentment may have af-

fected her view of all "women preachers."

Our patriarchal culture constantly communicates stereotypical messages. Look at television commercials. Last week, a TJ Maxx commercial showed a woman on a treadmill, chasing a TJ Maxx shopping bag as though it were a carrot dangling in front of her. The commercial clearly proclaimed the age-old stereotype that women have an innate need to shop, or that women are practically addicted to shopping. While it may be the experience of many men that the women in their lives spend a great deal of time shopping, it is necessary to examine the psychology behind such behavior. Because patriarchal societies define the social acceptance of women based on body-image, appearance, etc., many women spend billions of dollars on clothing, cosmetics, and such to be socially accepted in a patriarchal society. So, while it may be true that many women have a propensity to shop, the reasoning is sanctioned by the patriarchal culture which perpetuates social pressures of rejection of women.

The Cost of Patriarchy

Society shapes feminine behavior by the expectations and reinforcements placed upon females through patriarchy. It is suggested that one of the social conditions which tends to make sex and violence occur together is traced to boys overcoming their unconscious fear of being feminine by "compulsive masculinity." Case studies suggest that violence is not merely a response to frustration but is felt by the perpetrator as a requirement of the male role. One response to doubts about one's masculinity is "compulsive masculinity," an exaggerated insistence on differentiating females from males. Readiness to exhibit superior strength makes this a

clear-cut distinction.[6]

There was an African-American woman reared with her younger brother and older male cousin by their grandmother. Although she was older than her male sibling, her role was a middle child with one year separating each of the three children. It was difficult to accept her "femaleness" as a child because it often felt like "a curse, or punishment." She spoke of times when her grandmother would assign all indoor household chores to her. This included washing clothes and dishes, etc. The two boys were required only to take out the trash. Although their grandmother cooked all the meals, only the girl was required to assist. The boys would also be given three to four strips of bacon while the girl was given one to two. Her grandmother's reasoning was based on a biblical teaching that boys needed more food to grow strong so they could work to provide for their families; girls were to stay "slim" and take care of their families in the home.

Because children often associate the provision of food with love, she interpreted the sizable portions given to the boys to mean that they were more loved than she. Later, she succumbed to an eating disorder and suffered sexual abuse by an uncle. As a teenager, she was sexually harassed by male deacons in her Baptist church. This violation at the hands of male authority figures further added to her resentment and inability to determine for herself to be female in a home, church, and society filled with male-domination and male-privilege. Her story describes the feelings of numerous women born in a society that judges, condemns, and abuses power against women simply because God made them female.

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[6]Jackson Toby, "Violence and the Masculine Ideal: Some Qualitative Data," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 364 (March 1996): 19-27.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: An Examination of the Church

In a study conducted by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, over 30 million African Americans report that they are members of the Black Church.[7] Of the 30 million members, 70 percent are females. However, 96 percent of the pastors are male.[8] Thus, the Black Church, whose membership is predominately female, has almost exclusively male leadership.[9]

In the motion picture, *The Color Purple,* Oprah Winfrey, in her role as Sophia, said: ". . . a girl child ain't safe in a home full of men."[10] Thus, a woman is not safe in a society or church dominated by men. "Womanist ethicists and theologians recognize that African-American women are oppressed in at least three areas: racism, sexism, and classism and conclude that there are inextricable links between these oppressions and abuse."[11]

In many churches all over the world, there is controversy concerning the role and status of women; sexism is the

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[7]See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

[8]Ibid., 304.

[9]Deborah A. Austin, "In the Middle of Everyday Life: The Space Black Clergywomen Create," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXII (1995): 210.

[10]See Alice Walker, *The Color Purple: A Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), and the motion picture, based upon Walker's work, produced by Steven Speilberg.

[11]Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune, ed., *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 188.

determining factor. Sexism is discrimination against people on the basis of sex;[12] specifically, inequity against and prejudicial stereotyping of women. It is important to understand that sexism is not only about bias, but power and control. Continued sexism perpetuated by the church is evidenced by the exclusion of women from various forms of church leadership or the assignment of women to traditional roles. Such evidence suggests that the church is not whole and needs healing.

For generations, the Bible has been used as the weapon of choice to keep women *in their place*. This method has become an extremely dangerous misuse of power and control; resulting in horrifying consequences of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse. It is an imposition comprised of unjust corrupt practice, derived from the overwhelming sexist attitudes perpetuated by the church. The victims of such cruel oppressive practices make up the majority of congregations and provide the greatest amount of financial support to the church. These victims are women—women who have been subjected to the abuse of power and control in a church family headed by men who systematically keep them in an oppressive state.

In June 1984, for example, the 14.1 million-member Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution which excluded women from pastoral leadership because "the man was first in creation and the woman first in the Edenic fall."[13] This resolution implies that *first* means superior and women are equivalent to sin. Because Eve has been associated with

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[12]"Sexism," *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia* [software], (Chicago: Compton's New Media, 1995).

[13]Russ Chandler, "Southern Baptist Delegates Reject Ordination of Women," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* 16 June, 1984, sec. 4, p.17.

being the cause of humanity's fall, anyone belonging to the
group labeled "woman" bears the same negative images as-
sociated with her. The following are common negative im-
ages assigned to women based on patriarchal interpretations
and storytelling associated with Eve in scripture:

- Woman is created for the sake of man: a helpmeet
  to cure his loneliness (2:18-23).
- Woman tempted man to disobey and thus she is
  responsible for sin in the world (3:6); she is untrust-
  worthy, gullible, and simpleminded.
- A male God creates first man (2:7) and last woman
  (2:22); first means superior and last means infe-
  rior or subordinate.
- Woman's desire for man (3:16) is God's way of
  keeping her faithful and submissive to her husband.
- God gives man the right to rule over woman (3:16).
- Man names woman (2:23) and thus has power
  over her.[14]

In her book, *Discovering Eve*,[15] Carol Meyers pro-
vides a reconstruction of the roles of women based on ar-
chaeological discoveries. She further dispels many of the
false patriarchal views oppressive to women in their fami-
lies, churches, and society.

Discrimination, Violence, and
Violation Against Women

[14]Phyliss Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 73. Trible lists these in sequence defined by the verses constituting the story.

[15]See Carolyn Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1991.

The church is a mirror of the events occurring in society. Thus, patriarchy means patriarchy in the church. For some, the church is the House of God; however, for many others, it is a *Home of Horror* where internal structures of hierarchy exist as those in authority, predominantly men, oversee and oppress those in the congregation, primarily women. Despite the fact that women are created by God in the image of God and equipped to carry out the purpose and mission of the church, women continue to be discriminated against and excluded from various roles of service within the community of faith to which God has called them—leadership and authority. In many cases, policies have been implemented to provide women with opportunities to serve as active participants in various positions of leadership; women are still only tolerated.

To be tolerated does not necessarily mean that one is accepted and embraced as a part of the community. It only adds to the pre-existing feelings of inadequacy, displacement, and low self-esteem experienced by many women in "a man's world." This sense of displacement has contributed to the high rates of depression, suicide, anorexia, bulimia, drug and alcohol addiction, and sexually transmitted diseases among women. Additionally, the devaluation of women has led to even higher rates of discrimination, rape, and domestic violence. It is these acts of violation and violence that further diminish the mental, emotional, and physical health of women in our communities.

Abuse, oppression, and sin are synonymous despite correctives suggested by liberation theology. Sin is discussed and the oppression of women tumbles about. Because Christian leaders have too often ignored this subject, the relationship between women in the church and the church is often, if not always, an abusive one. The church is the abuser; women

are victims. Such abuse takes place behind the closed doors of a *Home of Horror* thought to be the *House of God*.

While battery is the single major cause of injury to women each year in America with three to four million women being severely assaulted by their husbands, ex-husbands or boyfriends,[16] there is another type of mauling occurring in the church. Millions of women enter into these *Homes of Horror* each Sunday and occasionally through the week only to be *choked* with submission, *spat* upon with obedience, *hit* with scriptures, *pushed* aside (not ordained), *bitten* with the poison of fear and intimidation, *dragged* by their own purse strings and continuously *kicked* by silence, denial, and lies by their church families. It is enough to make one wonder if God is really male when such injustices, oppressions, and abuses of women continue.

Not unlike the patriarchal culture whose domestic violence rates have reached epidemic proportions, this *Home of Horror*, called the church, is filled with women who continue to be victimized by those whose power violate their God-given rights, essence, and purpose in life. They are women in an abusive situation who do not realize their own power to change their status. They are women who remain faithful to this *predicament* for reasons similar to those in battering situations at home:

> They [men] don't mean it. They said they were sorry and things would get better. They need me/us; we can fix it if we just try harder and are better. I'd leave, but

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[16]See James Alsdurf and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), back cover.

how can I survive outside. I/We have nowhere else to go.[17]

Although attempts have been made by some Christian leaders to further the health of women, there is a tendency to confine women to roles identified as "woman-specific roles," e.g., Women's Day and Women's Ministry. Perhaps in the struggle to find some rationale for God calling women to ministry and other "non-traditional" roles the idea developed that God needed women to preach to and work with women only. This views women who preach as "women preachers," and women who pastor churches as "women pastors." Thus, gender is the defining characteristic of women in the church. This writer remembers being invited by a male Baptist pastor to preach for Women's Day service and replying, "Sure, and I'm also available to preach for Men's Day." His bewildered expression is evidence that an intentional effort needs to be made to recognize, include, and embrace women in all aspects of ministry.

In "For God So Loved the World," JoAnne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker state that "our continuing presence in the church is a sign of the depth of our oppression which leads to the conclusion that in order to be liberated we must leave the church, make our exodus from the halls of the oppressor."[18] According to Brown and Parker, "in order for women to become whole, the patriarchal culture that shapes abuse must be rejected and women must disassociate themselves from the institutions that perpetuate and glorify their suffering."[19] This means that Christian leaders in the church

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[17]Adams, *Violence Against Women*, 37.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Ibid., 38.

must also reject patriarchy. The challenge is to operate the House of God in a way that mirrors the patriarchal culture which it reflects. "Only if the church is the place where cycles of abuse are named, condemned, and broken can it be a haven of blessing and a place of peace for women. That the church is such a place is not clearly evident."[20]

This raises two questions: is it necessary for women to leave the Church to be liberated and liberate a community of people? Should women realize their power (financial or otherwise) and rid the church of its abusers and abusiveness? While some ask the question, "Why do women stay in abusive relationships?", a better question may be, "What in our community is keeping them there?"[21] Should women stay in the church in an attempt to *fix* the institution? Or, is the best solution to liberating a community of people (not just women) found in the community of people? This is the point at which redefining the roles of women in society and the church become a crucial element for discussion.

Reconciliation

Beginning with Christian Leaders

Many issues need to be addressed within the church, including gender equality that stem from our attitude towards persons. Delos Miles says that the first and most important principle of ministry according to Christ may be respect for personality, or rather, dignity. Jesus revealed a profound respect for every person with whom He dealt, and theology can

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[20]Ibid.
[21]Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission*, 33.

be used as a faith principle which does the same.[22] Christian leaders, who are predominantly men, must assess their individual attitudes towards women.

When the church chooses the love of power over the power of love, the result is often confusion. Harold Bussell writes in *Unholy Devotion*:

> If we are in positions of power over others and we fail to place controls on ourselves, we subtly and unknowingly start to control others. Power that elevates a leader beyond contradiction . . . will lead both the leader and the followers down a road marked by broken relationships, exploitation, and control. Power that tempers and checks itself and is wrapped in compassion is the pathway to gentleness, caring, and maturity. Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' Jesus is our model of service and leadership.[23]

Black liberation theologian, James H. Cone, distinguishes between the non-threatening love of many Christians and that radical love of Jesus which demands justice:

> There is no place in Christian theology for sentimental love—love without risk or cost. Love demands all, the whole of one's being. Thus, for [women] to believe the word of God about [God's] love revealed in Christ, [she] must be prepared to meet head-on the sen-

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[22]Delos Miles, *Master Principles of Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), 11.

[23]Harold L. Bussell, *Unholy Devotion: Why Cults Lure Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 70.

timental 'Christian' love of [men], which would make [her] a non-person.[24]

Women in the church do not need a love or church which conflicts with the validity of their personhood. Howard Thurman puts it this way:

> Think of it! A religious fellowship in which the central emphasis would be the worship of God in whose presence men and women of whatever pattern of living and orientation might be merged into increasing moments of inclusiveness. Conceivably, such a religious fellowship would inspire and sustain the kind of program in which at the level of activity and function experiences of unity would be more compelling than the concepts, the habit patterns, the prejudices, and the beliefs that divide.[25]

To the writer's surprise, many African-American men enrolled at theological seminaries do not realize the privilege granted them by the patriarchal structures and culture in which they live, work, and play. There is a tendency to be trapped in the competition of whose pain is greater: the racism experienced by African-American men or the racism and sexism experienced by African-American women.

Because one of the greatest (if not *the* greatest) chal-

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[24]Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," in *Black Theology*, vol. II, ed. Gayraud Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 92, 274.

[25]Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972), 150.

lenges women and women in leadership face is other women, it is necessary for women to conduct the same self-assessment as men. Women must take time to conduct an honest reflection of their feelings about being a woman, evaluate their attitudes and beliefs about women in ministry; assess their attitude towards women in leadership, and question their willingness or unwillingness to comply to female leadership, e.g., pastor, priest, Bishop, or Pope. If women who make up the majority of church congregations and hold the economic power of the church would dare to re-evaluate the messages played in their heads concerning their identity as women, the oppressive acts of those in the minority can be eliminated.

In her book, *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Trible says, "To tell and hear tales of terror is to wrestle demons in the night, without a compassionate God to save us."[26] With this said, it is important for women to begin telling their stories through their own experience no matter how horrific it may be. Women must give themselves permission to re-define themselves and own the power they have in their possession to develop effective ways of creating healthier lives which in turn creates a healthier community.

Using "The Word" To Heal

In discussing the mental, emotional, and physical health of women, it is important to understand that these health concerns are not "women's questions" but community issues. When we are called into community and fellowship (*Koinonia*) with God, we are called to share a place of belonging as a unified body of individuals. A Womanist approach is es-

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[26]Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 4.

sential because it examines the relationship between race, gender, and abuse; it examines the historical and contemporary effects of abuse on the lives of women while validating their personhood and experiences; and it maintains a connection between healing, liberation, and transformation of the entire community. In contradiction to the racist and sexist models for relationship, Womanists reveal that a love of self and community is a necessary element for creating relationships of healing and liberation.[27]

Now that we have examined how the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of people affect the health of women in the church and the communities served by the church, it is important that we discuss the relationship of words (language) that produce images and symbols determining self-image and self-concept. In order for the community of faith to be liberated from the oppressive practices within, it must find words that are empowering to all members of that community. To use language that refers to all members of the congregation as brothers and acknowledges God as He, Him, His, and Father excludes women, thereby rendering them invisible. Additionally, it suggests that being male is the norm and fails to build relationships with the entire community.

According to Jacquelyn Grant, "language is a prolegomena to doing theology that determines how God will be discussed and how people will image God."[28] Grant also suggests that the critical question is, "How shall a community of faith imagine Divinity?" when language forms thoughts, ideas, and images that can affirm or deny; include or exclude; em-

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[27]Ibid., 194.
[28]Jacquelyn Grant, "Power of Language: Language of [Em]-Power[ment]," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXI (Fall 1993-Spring 1994): 81-93.

power or disempower. Additionally, she believes language is designed and contrived; she offers the following support-ive information.[29]

> In 1553, Thomas Wilson argued in England that men precede women in speaking and ruled that gender sequence be "he and she"; "husband and wife"; not "she and he" and "wife and husband." This was done in an effort to produce a notion of natural superiority.

> In 1646, Joshua Poole stressed male superiority and it was determined that male gender was justifiable.

> Between 1736 and 1788, grammatical rules were developed to determine that male gender was more com-prehensive.

> In 1850, an act of parliament legally determined that the word "he" would stand for "she."

Even the language of space and posture in many churches communicates a division of status based on sex. The pastor, usually male, is seated in an elevated position of au-thority located front and center in the House of God. In light of my Baptist tradition, deacons (usually male) and deacon-esses are seated on opposite sides of the church. In some cases, deacons are seated on the first pew while deaconesses are on the second pew located behind them. What do these various forms of communication say about *community*? It implies that the unity in the community has been replaced by

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[29]Systematic Theology lecture at ITC by Jacquelyn Grant, Sept. 17, 1996.

division masked in order. The church is filled with so much order that is it now *out of order*, and women are suffering tremendously.

At this point, it is not necessary to cite scriptures to validate the legitimacy of women in roles outside of those assigned by patriarchal systems. To do this only continues the debate. What *is* necessary is that attention be given to possible solutions to the challenges women face as a community of faith. This can be accomplished by getting to the "heart of the matter" which is the hearts of the people who participate actively and passively, e.g., silence, in the oppressive practices of exclusion and denial of women. This effort requires persons to face, deal with, and abandon their individual belief systems consisting of biases rooted in fear. Whenever the value systems of people are challenged, there is a fear that something will be eliminated. Usually the fear is of a loss of power. What is not realized is that standing side by side strengthens, empowers, and restores health to the entire community. It is here that effective dialogue results in effective change.

The "HOW" to Healthier Communities

Effective change occurs, the writer suggests, through **H**onesty, **O**pen-mindedness, and **W**illingness to accomplish the following:

- Assess individual attitudes and feelings toward women and women in leadership.
- Conduct self-reflection of the possibility of being led by women with authority.
- Discuss any attitudes/beliefs shaped by patriarchy.

- Admit and discuss fears or insecurities which cause biases. Recognize that there is a problem.
- Be willing to do what it takes to help eliminate the situation.
- Abandon attitudes, beliefs, or feelings that hinder the health of women.
- Offer support to women through community workshops and organizations.
- Have churches include sensitivity training and awareness seminars to discuss women's health and attitudes/beliefs shaped by patriarchy.
- Assist in developing systems of accountability whereby policies are implemented and enforced.
- Include above recommendations as part of the curriculum for seminary.

Conclusion

Inevitably, the church must recognize, accept, and embrace women apart from the necessary, but perfunctorily assigned roles if the church can ever be what God called it to be—a community of faith.

We must become each other's harvest and in doing so, we will begin to recognize the gift of life we have in each other and turn away from battering ourselves into victimization. One place to begin gaining new images is in the life of a church that no longer condones business as usual refusing to transmit obstrusively irreligious versions of domination and subordination.[30]

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[30]Adams, *Violence Against Women*, 69.

If we begin by establishing that God created female and male in the image of God, we can conclude that "female" is a divine characteristic of God. One cannot discuss health without discussing healing—the root of both. Thus, to be in community is to be whole and to be whole is to be healed.