

# **SOCIETY, WOMEN, AND THE CHURCH**

by, Betty Stirling

April, 1976

## **Society, Women, and the Church**

Church members are a part of society, and a church is, in some aspects, a social institution. Even though church members may live by a different standard of behavior than society as a whole, and obey a higher than earthly authority, they must make their decisions within and relate to the society in which they live. Hence, if the church is to know how to apply its basic principles within society, it must be acquainted with that society.

The church affirms, on the one hand, the concept of the priesthood of all believers which implies the equality of believers. On the other hand, the church is confronted with the principle that liberties or rights implied by equality must not be exercised in cultures where their exercise would be offensive and thus hinder the church in its primary task of spreading the gospel. The purpose of this paper is to characterize for the church the recent changing social attitudes toward women in order that the church may effectively apply its unique principles within contemporary society.

This paper will consider the conditions that have affected women's roles from 1900 to the present, and the changes in roles. Many church members were old enough when the twentieth century began to be acquainted personally with this segment of history, and to have seen the changes that each passing decade has brought. The discussion will be limited to the United States, although similar patterns can be traced in other parts of the world, either contemporaneously or at a later period.

Certain events are important as context. During the years from 1900 to the present, the United States has been involved in four wars; World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnamese War. It suffered through a major depression and at least two notable recessions.

Political movements felt by much of society include prohibition and its overthrow, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war, environmentalist and other student protest activities.

Specific questions to be explored in this historical context includes What has been the American woman's place in the family since 1900? How has it changed? What has been her relation to the work force? How has she been educated? Where has she been in the political scene? What have been the attitudes of society toward her and her roles?

### **Women in the Family**

When the twentieth century dawned, woman's place was in the home—as it had been since Eden. Not every woman was married, of course. Nor did every woman stay in the home; many had jobs. But the norm was home. In 1900 slightly more than 58 percent of the women aged 14 and over were married; over 15 percent were widowed; and an infinitesimal number were divorced. In 1970 the married category was almost 10 percent higher than in 1900; fewer were widowed, and about four percent were divorced. More women have married in recent years; mortality rates are down, while divorce rates are up. It should be noted that even though divorce rates have gone up, mortality rates among the married have declined. Remarriage is frequent among the divorced, so at any given time, most women are married, and the number of broken homes is probably not greater than in 1900.

Changes in the family cycle have been striking. The family cycle is the life history of a family, beginning with marriage and ending with death of the spouses. In 1900, the typical family cycle started with the woman in her early twenties, the man in his middle twenties. The woman's childbearing years extended into her early thirties; she had four or five children. By the time she was in her early forties, the children began to leave home. Before the last child left home, one of the spouses (typically the husband) died, leaving the other to launch the last child and live widowed for a while.

The family cycle in the mid-1970's is different. It starts earlier: about age twenty for the typical woman,

early twenties for her husband. The children are fewer—two or perhaps three. They will be born early in the marriage. By the time the mother is in her early thirties they are in school. When she is in her middle forties they have probably left the nest permanently. Increased life expectancy means that after the children leave, the typical couple will have twenty or more years together before death ends the family cycle.

What are the implications of these changing family patterns? Since more women are married now than in earlier times, fewer single women are available for the various jobs that society designates as women's jobs. Hence if these jobs are to be filled by women, the women will be married—or divorced or widowed. Since women get married at earlier ages, they have fewer years to work before marriage. In fact, they may be in school until marriage.

But another possibility appears: when married women have fewer children, and have these children earlier in the marriage, and are married at younger ages, they are free of the major burdens of child care by age 35, which gives them 30 years of potential work time before the standard retirement age of 65. Some are ready for work by age 30, which gives an even longer period.

But home is more than child care. There is cooking, washing, housecleaning, and all the other activities that are necessary to keep the family in working order.

A tremendous number of inventions have revolutionized these activities. The invention of the washing machine was important; the invention of the automatic washer and drier and no-iron fabrics was even more so. Automatic dishwashers, self-cleaning ovens, controlled-heat burners on stoves, microwave ovens and slow-cookers, no-frost refrigerators and freezers and a host of other appliances have turned the kitchen into something that would not be recognized by the housewife of 1900. Add to that the supermarket and its abundance of prepared or semi-prepared foods, and the second car which makes it easier to get there.

Yet not all of this automation has reduced women's work, for with the availability of power for improving performance, the standards have gone up. More variety is

expected in meals and more attention to good nutrition. Clothing is changed more frequently—children are no longer "sewed up" into the underwear for the winter! The parlor is no longer reserved for company, but becomes the everyday family playroom, and that requires more cleaning. And with the availability of the car, the woman frequently becomes the taxi driver to get all members of the family to their various appointments.

Another factor is also important. While the automatic washer reduces both time and energy needed for the family washing, it is much more expensive than the washboard. The automatic dishwasher is more expensive than the dishpan and dishrag. And vegesteaks are more expensive than navy beans. But since housewives are not paid for their labor, increased efficiency is not reflected in higher wages. Nor is the man paid more because his wife is more efficient. What frequently happens is that the woman must take an outside job in order to help pay for the tools that will make her home more efficient.

The trend in family-related responsibilities is that women have had to devote less time per day and fewer years to traditional women's activities of child care and home-making. More of their now lengthened lifetime is available for activities that are not related to the home. Yet at the same time, higher standards and greater expectations in all family activities have often put a heavier psychological demand on the woman who has chosen to pursue outside work.

### **Women's Education**

By 1900 women in the U.S. had made important gains in higher education. They could choose to enter college, professional school, or graduate school. They were not welcome in all schools, but the number open to them was increasing. At the present time very few schools are closed to women students.

Women are still not well represented in many disciplines, however, and some of this lack of representation is due to either open or more subtle discrimination against them. Courses leading to work in the "women's occupations"—nursing, elementary teaching, secretarial—naturally have the highest proportion of women students. The humanities

get many women students, possibly because of the tradition that the genteel woman should know a little about art, music and French. Social sciences attract some women students. The natural sciences as a whole have fewer women enrollees, though it varies from a good proportion in biology to very few in physics and mathematics. The proportions of women students in programs for medicine, law, journalism, business administration, veterinary medicine, and engineering is low. It is increasing because schools are under pressure to cease discriminating against women applicants, and more women are being encouraged to apply.

An interesting trend has been observed in the numbers of women who obtain higher degrees. The number of college graduates (baccalaureate degree) has more than doubled since 1900, though most of the increase came before 1920. The number acquiring master's degrees has increased in about the same way. But the proportion who have completed the doctorate actually declined after 1930, though it has recently begun to climb again. Probably the trend toward earlier marriage and the post-war baby boom discouraged long years of education.

The high educational level of women now is an encouragement to work outside the home. Few women have taken degrees in homemaking. Even home economics or family life education programs have seldom pointed toward wifhood or motherhood, though they may turn out to be useful for these roles.

The increasing likelihood that a married woman will return to school to complete an unfinished program or to improve her skills is another evidence of a changing view of the roles of women.

Changes being made in elementary and secondary textbooks to give a broader picture of women's activities will undoubtedly affect the way the new generation—both male and female—views women's roles.

### **Labor Force**

The most marked evidence of changing roles of women is the changing pattern of labor force participation. The labor force figures are also the most telling evidence of discrimination against women.

In 1900 about five percent of all married women worked outside the home at any given time. By the 1970's this labor force participation has risen to over 40 percent.

The proportion of single women working has not changed as much, but the proportion of women who are single has declined. So the composition of the female labor force has changed from predominantly single to predominantly married.

The ages for working outside the home have also changed. When workers were principally single women, the average age of working women was in the late teens and early twenties. Now that married women are in the majority, the average is in the late thirties and early forties—women who have gone to work after having children.

The male-female distribution in the labor force has also changed. In 1900 less than 20 percent of all workers were women. In the 1970's it is about 40 percent.

The kinds of work that women do has shifted over the years. In the early years of the century domestic service and unskilled factory or other employment engaged the majority of women workers. During the first decade of the century women were breaking into the secretarial (stenographic) business areas. And it is most interesting to see the comments of such magazines as Ladies Home Journal, which deplored the new trend. Such work was too difficult, too heavy, too tiring for women, and should be left with men!

During World War I women had further opportunity to invade fields dominated by men. With many young American men gone off to Europe, women took over some mechanical jobs and even drove streetcars. Nor did they relinquish all the jobs when Johnny came marching home. A cartoon of the era showed a woman, wrench in hand, refusing to leave the driver's seat in a trolley car while the former male driver fumed at the door.

The depression opened more positions, but largely because employers could hire women for less money. Equal work for lower pay had been traditional and hard-hit businesses needed this solution. There were even cases reported of an employer firing a man and hiring his wife at half the salary. While such instances were no doubt few, the rumors

that grew from them did nothing to improve the lot of the working woman, who was seen as "taking a job away from" a deserving man. The rumor also had it that he needed the money for his starving family while she was working for "pin money" for frivolous things. The facts show otherwise, of course.

During World War II women made their greatest gains both in number and kinds of jobs. A much larger proportion of men were taken into the armed forces than during World War I, leaving many openings. The material needs of war increased the number of jobs while the pool of labor declined. "Rosie the Riveter" filled the void. And again, as after the first world war, not all the Rosies chose to return home when the men came back.

In spite of women's entrance into "men's" jobs, however, they are still concentrated in certain fields associated traditionally with women; nursing, secretarial, elementary teaching, retail sales and clerical work. While women are entering such professions as law, medicine, and college or university teaching in increasing numbers, they are only a small proportion of either the professional or administrative workers.

Society has become more and more accepting of the working woman—as long as she does not demand equal treatment, or the right to enter certain kinds of work. Officially, discrimination in both jobs and pay have ended, but much indirect and subtle discrimination still exists, as can be shown by the earnings statistics, for example, in colleges.

### **Women's Rights**

The women's rights movement was going strong at the beginning of the twentieth century. The main focus, as it had been for many years, was the right to vote, but there v/as a push toward gaining legal equality in family matters, and some forays into the labor problem. While women were pushing into new fields, much of the labor force activity was an attempt to help the factory women get better treatment. By 1920 women had obtained the vote and made some legal gains, and the women's rights movement was slowing down.

The women's rights movement remained relatively quiescent through the twenties, thirties and forties. In

fact, by the fifties, many women thought the rights movement was really finished. Women were entering the labor force in increasing numbers, and they were entering some new fields. It seemed to many only a question of time (possibly a long time) until they obtained full rights in the political, economic, and personal areas. The anti-feminist movement of the post-World War II years was a setback in some ways, but did not seem to have a major impact on either attitudes or behavior.

Then in the early 1960's a new women's rights movement began. In a way it was a counter-movement to the anti-feminist movement, which in turn had been counter to the women's rights movement. The new movement worked first through what came to be known as consciousness-raising—a groping for a meaning to life and an attempt to make sense of a totally home-centered role in a time of changing social conditions. The new movement, called women's liberation to distinguish it from the earlier movements, soon moved into radicalism, and spawned a number of organizations, some militant, some educational.

The women's lib movement has not really been one unified movement, but rather three loosely integrated movements—radical or revolutionary, reform, and moderate. The radical wing gets the headlines—and turns off many women who are not interested in separation from men or bra-burning or homosexuality. Yet it has been important for its militant calling attention to the injustices done to women. The reform wing had worked for legal change that would bring women equal rights with men. It has also worked for liberation for men. It is not separatist, but wants equality and integration. It is not out to destroy the family, but to strengthen the equalitarian family where men can have time to be fathers and women mothers. The moderate wing engages mostly in consciousness-raising. There are Christian women's groups in both the reform and moderate wings.

The women's lib movement has had considerable impact on society since the middle 1960's. Many of the early leaders in the movement had received their training in the civil rights movement of the 1950's and early 1960's; many continued to work for ethnic minority rights as well as for the rights of the women's minority. Equal opportunity, equal pay, and affirmative action are the result of the

joint efforts of the two parallel movements.

### **Attitudes Toward Women**

The collective attitudes of the members of society toward women can be examined through magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, and opinion polls. Magazines cover the period from 1900. Radio, TV, and opinion polls are more recent. Polling began on a widespread scale in the 1930's. Analysis shows the following change in attitude as reflected in the public media:

1. Woman's place is in the home. 1900-1914.
2. Woman's place is really in the home, but unmarried women should help out their country while men are off to war. 1914-1918.
3. Woman's place is really in the home, but unmarried women can work, and married women without children can work in the early years of marriage. 1918-1929.
4. Woman's place is in the home because she should not be taking work away from men. 1929-1940.
5. Woman's place is really the home, but the needs of the country take precedence over individual needs, so she should help out the war effort. 1940-1945.
6. Woman's place is the home, except if she needs to work temporarily to help her husband get through college, or when she is first married and doesn't have children. 1945-1950.
7. Woman's place is in the home during the years her children need her, i.e., mother's place is in the home. 1950-1965.
8. A woman's place is wherever she chooses, providing she does not neglect her family, or take a job away from a man, or threaten his ego. 1965-1973.
9. Where is a woman's place? Home, work outside home—the role definition is ambiguous in both areas.

Whenever the needs of society have called women out of the home to help, the home-bound role expectation has been weakened. And once weakened, the behavior has not returned to an earlier stage. In attitude, the sentiment for a home-centered role strengthened after World War II. But the exceptions allowed the behavior to continue toward greater freedom of choice of roles.

## Conclusion

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have probably seen the greatest change in the roles of women in the world's history. An interacting combination of social conditions which have made it possible and desirable for women to participate in the economic, political, and social world, in connection with a series of family developments which reduced the time and involvement in traditional home roles, have thrown all members of society into a state of uncertainty. Behavior has moved in the direction of less exclusive focus on home roles, but attitudes have not always kept pace. Rising expectations of greater equality that are not matched by new cultural norms or social opportunities result in frustration to women.

What of the future? Emphasis on small family size because of overpopulation and environmental problems will reduce the need for women to devote a lengthy period of their lives to home roles. Economic conditions will doubtless require more of their attention to outside work. This shift will soon require that girls think as carefully about occupational choice as boys, since they will be devoting almost as much of their lifetime to paid employment. More regular participation in work will result in even more demand for an equal place in the decision-making levels of business, government, education, and church.

The time is here when women can choose marriage without outside employment (the traditional pattern), marriage with regular outside work or career, or career without marriage. The time when society will approve any of these choices as of equal value should not be far away. And it may be that not too far in the future the same three choices will also be open to men.

Society as a whole has made great progress in integrating women into full membership and encouraging full use of their talents. It still has a long way to go before there is true equality between men and women. But the knowledge that there is hope keeps people trying. Where does the church, as a social institution, fit into this picture?