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Freedom from abuse

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It must have been one o'clock in the morning when she knocked on our door. Frightened, crying, with her little boy in tow, she asked if they could stay the night. She and the man in her life had fought. He had beaten her. She had fled with her son.

In the morning, she cried again, looking at her face and thinking that her nose was broken and that she would be "ugly." We prayed together about this, and the swelling disappeared. Soon the nose was without a mark or bump, and her face returned to its usual lovely appearance. She stayed with us for several weeks, before deciding to return to her boyfriend. Over the years since then, there have been ups and downs, but she has gained increasing mental and emotional freedom. And she's achieved economic and personal independence.

Regardless of where they live or what their economic status is, it's important for women to realize they have a right to be respected by the men in their lives. A woman is not a possession to be used or abused at will, nor are women trophies to be collected. God created woman and man equal. And both are blessed as they realize that equality is a divine right.

In the original Biblical account of creation, God created "male and female" in His/Her image and likeness and blessed them equally with goodness and dominion. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." This record of creation concludes with the blessing, "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." (Gen 1:27, 28, 31).

The creator endowed both female and male with "dominion." This God-endowed dominion, in the Biblical sense, doesn't imply domination or subjugation, but has the higher spiritual meaning of God-given freedom. Divine liberty is not the freedom to do whatever we want. It's the freedom to do what is right. So the same dominion that frees women to express courage, confidence, and independence also frees men to express commitment, care, and stability. Each one is free to do rightly, free to express the goodness of God.

What endows one with freedom and dominion is one's relation to God. God is the supreme authority, the loving Father-Mother. God as divine Love includes all, embracing each one in His tender care. No child of God is less worthy than another. So no one is destined to subservience or superiority. As God is the dear Father-Mother of each one, each is equally blessed and deserving of respect.

It's important for women to recognize their relation to God and their divine right to equality and freedom. This is not a matter of denying cultural tradition or heritage. Rather it's a case of not being unjustly limited by them. It takes moral courage to question centuries of inequality or subservience. But God's Christ gives us the courage to do so.

Christ Jesus helped women overcome some of the strict cultural limitations of his era. When Jewish men were forbidden to even speak to Samaritan women, Jesus not only held a theological dialogue with a woman, but revealed himself to this stranger as Christ. (John 4) She became one of the first female preachers, carrying the word of Christ to the men of her village and encouraging them to come and discern for themselves if Jesus was the promised Messiah.

And, when tradition would have excluded a woman with a questionable reputation from approaching Jesus while he was dining with Simon the Pharisee, Jesus rebuked his host (and indirectly the tradition that excluded the woman) while blessing her (Luke 7:36-50). Further, when another woman was condemned for adultery, while the male she was with was either freed or ignored, Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of her accusers. Then he forgave the woman, telling her to "Go, and sin no more" (John 8:3-11).

In each situation, Jesus upheld the higher nature of the individual, maintaining the equality of male and female. No child of God was

considered either superior or inferior. Those who humbly sought the Christ were uplifted, while those who arrogantly stood on human tradition were corrected. Saint Paul later explained how irrelevant gender is in the Christian community: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:27).

Mary Baker Eddy, Founder of the Church of Christ, Scientist, experienced inequities in human culture and tradition. Her second husband and her father gave her only son to another family without her knowledge or permission. In that era, women had no legal rights over their own children. This same husband abandoned her for long periods without income. And he felt at liberty to consort with other women.

Yet after Mrs. Eddy discovered that God's law reigns supreme on earth, she was able to free herself from such disrespect. Seen in the light of her life experience, her words in *Science and Health* take on special significance: "The wintry blasts of earth may uproot the flowers of affection, and scatter them to the winds; but this severance of fleshly ties serves to unite thought more closely to God, for Love supports the struggling heart until it ceases to sigh over the world and begins to unfold its wings for heaven" (57:24).

We discern the true equality of women and men as we are newborn in Christ. This rebirth elevates both female and male to their original status as the blessed of God. The more woman depends on God for companionship and support, the more she will realize her God-ordained dominion and freedom. The more man commits himself to God and conforms to divine law, the more he, too, will experience dominion and freedom. And from this higher, spiritual view, each one--male and female--will discover new meaning in the Scriptural promise. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (II Cor 3:17).