ROLE OF MOTHERS IN THE FAMILY, CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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Much of the confusion and misunderstanding with regard to the role of women in the church, family and in society, has to do with the failure of recognizing that the family, like any other institution in society, is influenced by changes taking place in society. The family, like individuals, does not operate in a social vacuum, but in a socio-cultural-historical environment, which changes with time. The role of mothers in today’s world has grown past the traditional and African role of motherhood exemplified by being ‘perpetual housewives’. Their roles now transcend into the society, the church and most importantly, the family. This paper does not boast to be exhaustive of the roles of mothers but attempts to underline the major responsibilities of mothers regarding the family, the society and the church.

A) MOTHERS AND THE CHURCH

JESUS’ TREATMENT OF WOMEN

Jesus’ treatment of women was radically different from that of His contemporaries. In Christ’s day, women were not formally taught, nor could they actively participate in worship. They were made to sit at the back of the synagogues. When a Jewish mother gave birth to a son there was great rejoicing. When a daughter was born there was often sympathy and disappointment expressed. Only sons had rights of inheritance.

According to the Talmud (the Jewish civil and religious laws), the books of Moses (the Torah) should rather be burned than to be transmitted by a woman. In the temple, women were put into a separate area, the Court of Women. Men would often divorce their wives if their wives could bear no children. Some divorce laws were so liberal that if a wife burned a meal, it was enough reason to divorce her.

Women were generally under some man’s authority and were without independent status or means of support. They normally stayed at home and when they went out into public, their faces were normally covered. Women were viewed as a major
source of evil in the world (lust, adultery, prostitution, etc.). One sect of Pharisees, called Bleeding Pharisees, walked around closing their eyes so as not to be stained by looking at women.

The relaxed manner in which Jesus dealt with women, the dignity and respect He showed them, was strikingly different from the norms of His day, and, I might add, much of our world today. Jesus broke the cultural norms of the day by treating women first as people, then as women. Jesus freely and publicly talked with mothers in spite of what people thought. One such incident is the account of the Samaritan woman at the well recorded in John 4. In the eyes of the Jews, she was the lowest of the low. She was a Samaritan, a woman, and an immoral one at that, yet Jesus openly talked to her to the surprise of even the disciples. Scripture emphasizes that it was through this woman that many of the “men” in the village eventually came to believe. The first Samaritan converts (mostly men) were won to Christ, not through a man, but a woman’s testimony.

The first person to whom Jesus revealed His messiahship was the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:26). Several major New Testament doctrines were first given to women who then passed them on to men (e.g. “God is Spirit”—John 4:24; “I am the resurrection and the life.”—John 11:25, etc.). The first person to perceive and understand the cross was a woman (Mark 14:3-9). Even though John and Peter were the first at the tomb first, the first resurrection appearance was not to them but to a woman, Mary Magdalene, who, along with some other women, were the first to proclaim the resurrection. The first miracle performed was initiated by a woman (Virgin Mary, His mother) and involved a woman (Matthew 15:21-28).

From the cradle to the cross, mothers were vitally involved in virtually every area of Christ’s life. Mothers witnessed His crucifixion (Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 23:49), accompanied His body to the sepulchre (Matthew 27:61), and prepared spices for His burial (Luke 23:56). Some of the last words spoken to the cross was to a woman, His mother (John 19:26, 27). Jesus allowed women to touch Him. He touched them on numerous occasions (e.g., Luke 7:38, 13:13; Matthew 9:20, 26:7; Mark 5:23, etc.). He allowed Mary, Lazarus’s sister, to take down her hair in His presence, a cultural sign of immodesty, and use her hair to wipe His feet after anointing them.
with ointment (John 11:2). He also allowed her to sit at His feet and be taught along with the men.

Jesus made women the object of numerous stories and parables illustrating the nature and workings of God (i.e., “The kingdom of God is like women . . .,” “. . . a certain widow had a mite”). Women always had direct access to Him without going through their husbands or other men. Some of Jesus’s closest friends were women (e.g., Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, etc.). Further, Jesus taught in the Court of Women (Mark 12:38-44). In the account of the women caught in adultery, as recorded in John 8:1-11, Jesus went against the norms of the day and treated the men as equally accountable; “Let Him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at this woman. . .”

**BLESSED VIRGIN MARY: THE PERFECT STANDARD FOR ALL MOTHERS**

Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ held women in high esteem in the person of the Virgin Mary, for He chose her to be His Mother because of her chastity and godliness so that she deserved that the Holy Spirit descend on her, purify her, absolve her from sin and sanctify her. Through the descent of the Holy Spirit, she conceived in her womb the Divine Fire, thus giving birth to the Divine Son, the Lord Incarnate. We call her Theotokos, which means the Mother of God who gave birth to God Incarnate.

Although the Virgin Mary restored the early status of Eve, which she had lost after her fall, she never obtained the grace of priesthood. She ranked, however, high above prophets, clergy, martyrs, confessors, apostles and evangelists; for she was the one who informed the Apostles of what had happened to her since Gabriel’s annunciation of the divine conception. The Virgin Mary was the first to evangelize the Good News of Christ and to believe in His divine power. We consider her to be above the prophets. She prophesied about herself, saying: "From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His Name. And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation” (Lk. 1:48-50).
Jesus Christ honoured his mother, the Virgin Mary while He was a child, and took care of her, providing for her sustenance in His adulthood after the death of Joseph who was betrothed to her. She took care of her husband, Joseph and her son Jesus throughout her lifetime. She was there to look for her son in the temple for about three days. She was there at the passion of Christ to see her son’s crucifixion, the highest suffering a mother can ever experience in the history of the world, yet she kept calm and patiently swallowed everything.

B) WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

Women play a significant role in the establishment of a family and in taking care of it, raising children and bringing them up.

While Christian marriage is to involve mutual love and submission between two believers (Eph. 5:21), four passages in the New Testament expressly give to wives the responsibility to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1). This voluntary submission of one equal to another is an expression of love for God and a desire to follow His design as revealed in His Word. It is never pictured as demeaning or in any way diminishing the wife’s equality. Rather the husband is called to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25) and to serve as the leader in a relationship of two equals.

While husbands and fathers have been given the primary responsibility for the leadership of their children (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1 Tim. 3:4–5), wives and mothers are urged to be “workers at home” (Titus 2:5), meaning that they are called to be managers of the household. Their home and their children are to be their priority, in contrast to the world’s emphasis today on careers and fulltime jobs for women outside the home.

Mothers should play the following roles in the family:

- Submit to their husbands
- Respect and obey their husbands
- Take care of their children
- Provide their kids with their needs
- Never to spare the rod and spoil the child
- Shower love on their children
- Closely watch the behaviour of their children
- Correct and discipline their children when they are wrong
- Constantly advise their husbands on the right paths
- Mothers ought to be prayer warriors and leaders in the home
- Mothers should be good cooks and also teach their children (daughters and sons), the skills of cooking.
- Mothers should constantly teach their children morals
- Encourage their husbands in times of need and difficulty.
- Mothers are to teach their daughters good dress sense
- Mothers are to teach their children the ways of God.

C) MOTHERS AND THE SOCIETY

Africa’s traditional society was not as fair to women as we would like to think. Often they were used and handled like personal property of men, exploited, oppressed and degraded. In Africa often women have been treated as “second-class” as portrayed in many African proverbs and sayings. In most of these proverbs, women are referred to as stoves, old cooking pots, large wooden stirring spoons, hoes, cows, merino sheep, fields and fires and even dogs usually with a derogatory meaning. “Does woman speak in public?” “Is the woman considered person?” “When are you going to make me a babe?” “Woman is the devil’s tail”.

Women themselves seem to accept this situation. When there is an unidentified noise and someone asks, who is there? A woman answers: "It is nobody, just me!" In some cultures people think that it is not worth educating a girl because later she will get married and no longer belong to the family. In other groups after husband’s death, the woman is forced to marry one of his brothers to get children in the name
of the former husband (Luo community in Kenya for example). Again some women are forced to get married with men against their will only because they can pay a big dowry. In most parts of Africa women are still the property of the men who father them or marry them. In some societies, it is the uncle who holds sway over a woman's life. It makes little difference any talk of women's liberation is met with cynicism, hostility or ridicule.

In many African societies, the traditional role of woman seems to be largely passive. "Women in general are educated to believe that being born female means to be born innately inferior damaged that there is something with us. We are told that we are needed as mothers, caretakers, cheap labour in the field and factories. Due to women's low self esteem they under-rate themselves and leave leadership role to men. The traditional way is that women do most of the work in the church and in the society and men hold most of the leadership".

**HERE IS THE TRUTH ABOUT MOTHERS' ROLES IN THE SOCIETY**

- Mothers are custodians of physical beauty, intelligence, tenderness, compassion, patience and tolerance for the benefit of the society.

- A home without a mother today is looked down upon and often the object of ridicule by society. The home is also shunned by people because it is considered unblessed hence cursed. Who in his right mind would want to visit a home not graced by presence of a good mother?

- Not all women in Africa are regarded as mothers. Not in the limited sense of bearing children, but in the larger sense of beings the one's God blessed with the gift of continuity of the life line and the linking of man with fellow man. A woman, who even though may have not borne children of her own, is often referred to as a mother in most African societies. A man who beats up his wife is considered by society to be weak in mind and utterly lacking in moral character.
- Mothers play a complementary role together with their husbands in the society for entrenchment of better societal values

- Mothers are also called to be great leaders in the society. To take up leadership positions so as to stop corrupt practices in the society

- Mothers are to teach morals in the society. They are called to be good teachers, not just about education but also of disciplines

CONCLUSION

Mothers are called today to be world savers and world changers, their roles in the family, society and the church are inevitable and until they courageously take up their God-given roles, this world will not be a better place.