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Daughters of Sarah

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Some Thoughts on Power

by Reta Finger

Now that the Daughters of Sarah have begun thinking about power, I find many aspects of life hooking into it. A concept surfaced in our discussion of Jan Lundblad's article on power (in the January/February issue of our magazine) that struck hard. "All power comes from God, and *each of us has received a measure of it*," we observed. Each of us? The little people in the world who feel helpless to change anything in their lives? Women who are told it is best to submit and be silent? In this article I would like to share how my thinking has been stimulated by this profound thought, particularly as it relates to women.

If it is true that each of us has been given a measure of God's power, then there are many women who need to make some radical alterations of their self-image and begin assuming the power that is already theirs. If we have been given power, we should use it. To refuse is to belittle ourselves like the servant who buried his talent in the earth for fear of his master.

We Christian women need to shake off the myths that we are less competent than men and therefore need to be protected. We need to take responsibility for our lives and learn to respect and enjoy ourselves. Only then will we be able to use the power that is inherently ours.

My own life has been a struggle toward a good self-image, a sense of worth and achievement. Within my family there are some strong tendencies toward feelings of inferiority, and in moments of discouragement, I used to be afraid I had too many genes against me. Furthermore, I have had a problem with

stuttering all my life, and often had to fight feelings of appearing less intelligent and less powerful than all my fluent friends and colleagues.

The reason I got into feminism in the first place is because it felt so good to be reminded that women had as much worth as men. Since I began reading and thinking in this area five years ago, my confidence in myself has greatly increased. I realize that I like myself, enjoy my own company, and have more competence and clout than I used to think.

Nevertheless, a sense of self-worth is not static, and I continually make a conscious effort to think positively about myself, to open my life to God's total acceptance of me and to believe that other people like me, and then the more I am able to reach out and enjoy them. It's a nice cycle once you get started, with much power for good hidden there.

In my life I have met many Christian women who have been limited by low self-esteem. I am very sensitive to this because I know how it feels. In both formal and informal groups where men and women are present, women still tend to talk less than men, and when they do, they are often hesitant and apologetic.

Recently I talked with a woman who spoke very rapidly. I called attention to it (stutterers are easily intimidated by fast talkers!) and her explanation surprised me. "I started talking fast in high school. I felt that other people had more important things to say and I'd better quickly say what I had to, so they could get back to more important things."

Since I began thinking about this topic, I have been

There will always be *someone* bigger than us. There will always be someone stronger or richer who carries more clout. So if we are wanting power in the worldly sense, we will never have enough to really be safe.

In this issue of *Daughters of Sarah*, we are exploring alternatives to the power of might. It is only practical. It is only Christian. The more we discuss what the Bible says about power, the more apparent it becomes that God gives a special power to the weak. There is power in serving. There is power in humility and vulnerability.

How do we tap that power? How do we use it? How does an "unworldly" power stand up in a "worldly" situation?

In "Some Thoughts On Power", Reta Finger examines the power that each of us has from God. She calls us to use this gift instead of burying it. There is a certain responsibility that comes with personhood.

"Little Women," by Grainne Kieckbusch, is a good description of the way the world's values have been turned topsy-turvy in God's kingdom. In the early church, *little* is *big*. Insignificant is honorably mentioned. What can we learn from this example?

We have reprinted two analytical articles on rape from the Mennonite Central Committee Women's Task Force *Report*. They cut through the myths about rape to focus on some basic cause-effect relationships.

How *does* a Christian woman deal with the hard facts? How can we use the power God gives us against the very real threat of getting hurt? Sheryl Lee Olsen offers some practical suggestions for the Christian woman-on-the-street.

These are not final solutions to our questions about power. We have a lot to learn about the way God works in the world and the way God wants us to work in the world. But we hope the issue will stimulate your thinking on the subject because it is important.

Purpose

We are Christians, we are also feminists. Some say we cannot be both, but Christianity and feminism for us are inseparable.

DAUGHTERS OF SARAH is our attempt to share our discoveries, our struggles, and our growth as Christian women. We are committed to Scripture and we seek to find in it meaning for our lives. We are rooted in a historical tradition of women who have served God in innumerable ways and we seek guidance from their example. We are convinced that Christianity is relevant to all areas of women's lives today. We seek ways to act out our faith.

DAUGHTERS OF SARAH is published bimonthly. The articles which appear here do not necessarily represent a consensus, rather we seek to provide a forum for varying viewpoints within Christian feminism. We welcome your subscriptions, suggestions, news, comments, and contributions.

Members

Jeanne Baly, Carol Brown, Naomi Burnett, Lorrie Carlson, Carol Christian, Lucille Sider Dayton, Jan Erickson-Pearson, Reta Finger, Nancy Hardesty, Kay King, Janet Kling, Carla Lang, Irene Lee, Jan Lundblad, Mary Miller, Mona Mord, Juanita Natalino, Sue Nelson, Sheryl Lee Olsen, Margie Porcella, Mariys Rudeen, Marilyn Sandin, Beverly Swan, Sue Wentz, Sherrie Zimbelman.

trying to recognize my own power. I get so used to repeating something five or six times to my children that it comes as a shock to realize that people really do listen to me. My husband asks me what I want to do with a free evening—and on the strength of some vacillating, non-committal remark I make, he changes his entire plans. If I do not realize what power I have in that situation, misunderstandings arise and we end up ruining the whole evening.

I speak to a church leader about teaching a class with Virginia Mollenkott's study kit *Women, Men and the Bible*. Before I know it, I am writing out a course description and fifteen people have signed up.

I make one neutral statement to an acquaintance and find it comes back to me in the shape of strong criticism. Perhaps that is why women have been traditionally viewed as gossipers: they talk too freely because they do not realize what great power lies behind their words.

This leads to my next point. *Power that is not used consciously and constructively will be used unconsciously and destructively.*

Repressive structures which result in a woman's low self-esteem will not simply bury her power, like some inert mass. Many a strong woman fit to openly lead and challenge others, has been suppressed, only to use that power to resent, hurt or manipulate others. In other cases, the energy is turned inward and results in depression or psychosomatic problems which lead to self-destruction.

Women have been conditioned to use their power indirectly. "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Or the message of *The Total Woman*, which, put crudely, means: manipulate your husband by submitting to him and then you'll get what you want. One gets much less affirmation and credit for indirect power, however, and a woman is often left feeling less important than had she been able to use her power directly and receive a due reward for it.

I once lived in the same household with a person who very easily became depressed. When she was down, she would come to dinner, speak only when spoken to, and then return to the refuge of her room. What a cloud hung over our house! I asked her once how I should relate to her when she felt that way. "Just ignore me. Pretend I'm not there." She felt powerless and she assumed her existence made no difference within the household. Instead, her depression gave her tremendous power over us, banishing the pleasant atmosphere we might have otherwise

50-50?

"It is an unusual marriage that includes equal partnership in household chores, despite the publicized image of 'modern marriages' and the efforts of the women's liberation movement, according to a Cornell University home economist.

The woman is still doing most of the work, even in homes which both spouses hold outside jobs, Margaret Sanik said.

Here are her findings:

- If there are no children and the wife is not employed, she averages 5.7 hours a day on housework; her husband averages 1.4 hours.
- If the wife is employed, her time decreases to 3.7 hours of work, but the husband's decreases to 1.2.
- If the couple has one child, a nonemployed wife spends 7.4 hours on home chores and her husband 1.7 hours. If that same wife is employed, she spends 5.1 hours on domestic jobs and her husband spends 1.9 hours.

—Chicago Tribune, Feb. 13, 1978

enjoyed. Fortunately I have a strong drive toward cheerfulness, so I made a conscious effort to use my own power to live in joy and lighten the atmosphere.

But how does a woman start using power if she feels weak? How do you cheer up if you feel rotten and worthless? Here is where the gospel of Jesus can give hope to a woman where, in the structures of secular society, she would continue to be trapped. *A woman's power can be used most constructively in the kingdom of God when her life is transparent to others, the good and bad, strong and weak parts.*

In the world we have been taught to show only the parts of ourselves that look good. Men want to appear strong, aggressive and intelligent, women attractive and charming. The weak, ugly sides of ourselves must be hidden. Only then will we be successful.

How different is Paul's eloquent description of a believer's self-image in 2 Corinthians 4:5-10 (NEB):

"It is not ourselves that we proclaim; we proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake. For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness light shines,' has caused his light to shine

within us, to give the light of revelation—the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

“We are no better than pots of earthenware to contain this treasure, and this proves that such transcendent power does not come from us, but is God’s alone. Hard-pressed on every side, we are never hemmed in; bewildered, we are never at our wits’ end; hunted, we are never abandoned to our fate; struck down, we are not left to die. Wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body, also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives.”

The power we have received from God—*women* as well—is to demonstrate both strength and weakness. We need to recognize that we are jugs made of the soil of the earth, but containing a great treasure. As we show forth this treasure—the power of Jesus—we are not to be ashamed of our earthly pots. Indeed, part of the treasure itself is death, the death Jesus died.

Such paradoxes are hard to grasp, and harder yet to practice. I do know, however, that when I open up my life to others and admit my faults and weaknesses, power is released. Since September of last year, I have been learning this truth at a deeper level. At that time I began speech therapy, a behavior modification approach which involves not only using a new speech technique but also explaining it to others. I have been amazed at the release that comes from talking about my handicap. As I explain the technique or inform someone that I intend to use it, I can feel tension draining away from me, and a new power for fluent speech. My past habit was always to hide my handicap as much as possible, which only made me stutter more. My energy went into hiding and stuttering; when I expose my problem, energy is released to use the technique and speak more fluently.

Nevertheless, this is not a one-shot miracle cure. I feel strong resistance to calling attention to my speech. I still want to hide and not assume my power to use the technique. Changing a habit ingrained for thirty years means, most of the time, just plain gutting it out.

My strength lies in exposing my weakness. I am fortunate to be able to demonstrate the truth of Jesus’ gospel in such an obvious way. What are some examples from your lives?

There is another aspect to power-demonstrated-through weakness that has a particular bearing on traditional female roles. Jesus said that those who

would be greatest in the kingdom of God must become servants of all. That is revolutionary stuff, but it is generally much easier for women to take the message of servanthood to heart than for men. Women through history have been servants. The hard part for them to believe is that it is just that kind of work that will make them VIPs in Jesus’ kingdom.

Usually secular feminism encourages assertiveness and male-emulation in women. Serving coffee to a boss or cleaning up after a sloppy husband—real servant work—are exactly those tasks to be avoided or at least shared equally with men. The way to success in a man’s world is to climb the ladder like a man.

What happens to a sincere Christian woman who hears the call to servanthood and yet values herself too much to be stepped on and taken for granted? It is a hard question, but I believe we can find an answer in the gospel.

Paul capsulizes the example of Jesus in Phil. 2:5-11 (NEB): “Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death—death on a cross. *Therefore* God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven, on earth, and in the depths—and every tongue confess, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord,’ to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus became a servant; *therefore* God raised him to the heights and gave him all power. This passage implies that servanthood *confers* power and greatness. I do not yet understand the full implications of that concept. But that it is a special message for women there is no doubt.

If women have been conditioned to servanthood in ways men have not, then they must have a special authority or power that men do not have. C. S. Lewis makes an interesting observation in his book *Screw-tape Letters*. (Please note that Lewis is posing as one devil writing to another, so the “Enemy” is God and “Our Father” means Satan.)

“A woman means by Unselfishness chiefly taking trouble for others; a man means not giving trouble to others. As a result, a woman who is quite far gone in the Enemy’s service will make a nuisance of herself on a larger scale than any man except those whom

Our Father has dominated completely; and, conversely, a man will live long in the Enemy's camp before he undertakes as much spontaneous work to please others as a quite ordinary woman may do every day." (*Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis)

I believe that special power given to women lies in being able to *teach men how to be servants*. How else will men learn how to do "spontaneous work to please others," save by patient demonstration and continual teaching?

Men need to be trained, as girls have been by their mothers, to see work. Dishes in the sink. Crumbs on the floor. A leaking diaper. Clothes draped over a chair. Many well-meaning men are simply oblivious; somehow, little things get taken care of by magic.

We women dare not give up on our men. By creation we have been called into an eternal relationship with them. As the Holy Spirit is sent to be the Helper alongside of us, to teach us all things; so are women called as helpers of men, to teach them how to enter into and become great in God's kingdom.

Pat Mainardi's article on housework in the previous issue of *Daughters* is very helpful in pointing out how men resist dirty work and showing women what they are up against. When I was a kid, I distinctly remember playing dumb when my mother wanted me to help around the house. She would become so

exasperated she'd find it easier to do the work herself, while I triumphantly escaped to my latest Nancy Drew mystery. How many of us women do the dirty work ourselves because it's so much easier than to try to teach a man how to do it?

Other areas of life also reflect male domination and female servitude—church, government, most occupations—you name it. Women need to get together and talk about ways they can support each other in the task of teaching men how to be true servants in all these areas of life.

I wonder what would happen if more women started using more of the power they have been given and which they have earned many times over. We might eventually even have nuclear disarmament!

Are there any thoughts or incidents from your lives which put flesh on some of these ideas? We'd like to hear about them.

—Reta Finger does most of the copy editing and book reviewing for *Daughters of Sarah*. She is a member of Circle Church in Lombard, Ill. where she lives with her husband and two sons.



REMEMBERING A FRIEND

Several months ago, Barbara Cederberg suffered a brief interruption in her search for all she was meant to be. Her illness hit suddenly, about Christmastime, stunning her family and friends. She was a senior psychology major at Chicago's North Park College and a member of *Daughters of Sarah*.

We take comfort now, in knowing her suffering is over and that she is continuing her search in the presence of the Lord she loves.

Barbara Cederberg, born August 22, 1932, died of leukemia February 7, 1978. Wife of Nils H. Cederberg, mother of Jeffrey, Douglas, Glenn, and Mark. We miss her.

