

WOMEN MINISTRY/LEADERSHIP IN PATRIARCHAL CULTURES/SOCIETIES

By Kelly E. Preston

Where would we be without the influence of women leaders throughout history and today? Perhaps a more important question is where would we be without the influence of those who have obediently fulfilled the call of God on their lives? This question covers both women and men. For this research paper, I would like to take a closer look at the lives of women who followed the leading of God and fulfilled a specific mission here on earth in the midst of living in patriarchal societies.

I have been both surprised and encouraged by the lives of many women who have stepped out bravely in the midst of incredible odds to do what they believed they were created to do. From Queen Esther in the Old Testament to Joan of Arc in the Renaissance period to Pearl S. Buck in the 20th Century, these women bravely stood up and faced incredible challenges. Not only did they accept adversity, they conquered the impossible in the Name of God.

Psalm 37:23 reminds us that as believers, we can be confident that our “steps are firm in the Lord.” As women in Christ, the Lord will properly equip His daughters to fulfill their calling. Both women and men are “created in the image of God,” according to Genesis 1:27, and according to Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” There is unwavering strength in the plan of God and He is faithful to lead every step of the journey.

Throughout history, in patriarchal societies men were primarily given leadership roles, however, women were also looked to for influence and wisdom. In fact, up until the 18th and 19th Centuries, women held professional and leadership roles within their communities. Women also represented their husbands in business exchanges. Some women owned and operated their own businesses. If a woman's husband died and she was able to support herself and her children through her work then she was not expected to remarry. Surprisingly, it was not until closer to the Industrial Revolution in the late 1800's that women experienced more oppression and boundaries that kept them inside the home. Their influence in the public sector and society in general dwindled significantly during this time.

There is much to be learned from the women who followed their passions and dreams in the midst of great oppression. The Old Testament records the life of Queen Esther who was limited in her authority as a queen. Her existence was merely for the pleasure of the king. However, God had chosen her to play a vital role in history. Through Esther, the Jews would be saved.

Esther's life started out far from palace walls. She was a devout Jew who was raised by her cousin, Mordecai, and then selected to become part of King Xerxes' harem. She gained unusual favor with the king and his household and she quickly stood out among the other young women in the harem. King Xerxes was pleased with Esther and selected her to be his queen. Not long after Esther became queen the lives of the Jewish people were put in jeopardy. Esther was faced with a choice. She could use her position for good and intervene on behalf

of the Jewish people, and possibly risk her life, or she could stay in her comfortable in her palace and be unconcerned with the lives of innocent people. Needing advice, she went to her cousin, Mordecai, whom she trusted deeply. Mordecai's advice was recorded in the Old Testament in Esther 4:14, "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" After receiving this encouragement, Queen Esther decided to fast and pray for God's wisdom and the favor of her husband, King Xerxes. After her time in prayer, she asked for an audience with the king. Though Esther held a high position, she did not have the authority or right to make decisions that would reverse laws that had been set into motion by the king. She risked her life by asking for an audience with the King Xerxes and again by requesting that he change his mind about the sparing the lives of the Jews. God was on her side. He chose Esther for the purpose of saving the Jewish people. God gave her favor with the king and he decided not to execute the Jewish people. Indeed, she was in the right place at the right time according to the plan of God.

Joan of Arc was born in the Renaissance Era near the end of the Hundred Year's War between France and England. At a time when women did not fight in war, let alone command an army of soldiers, Joan was chosen by God to fight for the freedom of France. As a teenage girl, Joan took command of the French army and victoriously drove out the English from their stations of control throughout the country of France. She was devoted to God and knew from an early age that she had been chosen for a specific mission. That mission was to lift the siege off the city of Orleans, pave the way for Charles VII to be crowned king of France in

the city of Reims, and deliver France from the control of England. All of these things she achieved. She was known for her honesty and fearlessness. She did not apologize for her moral standards or her relationship with God. In fact, it was said by witnesses, that Joan operated in the strength and wisdom of God. Miracles surrounded her short life and in 1920 the Catholic Church declared Joan of Arc a hero of the Faith and a saint.

In 1892 a girl named Pearl was born to a missionary family serving in the country of China. She too was chosen for a specific purpose. Pearl S. Buck was raised in China and though her parents were missionaries, she did not grow up in a happy home. Her father did not have a high regard for women in general and as a result her mother experienced oppression and unhappiness in her marriage. Her mother was however, passionately devoted to her children. To Pearl's father, Christian beliefs were superior to those of the Chinese culture. He looked down on the Chinese people unless they converted to Christianity. Pearl felt alienated both culturally and physically from the Chinese children and therefore did not have many friends growing up. She spent significant portions of time alone either playing or writing in her journal. As an adult, Pearl began to see the Chinese through much different eyes than her father did.

When Pearl grew up she met and married an American missionary to China, John Lossing Buck. She respected their loyalty to family and work. Pearl's marriage to John Lossing Buck was unhappy at best and she experienced additional hardship when her first and only child was born mentally disabled. Through complications of giving birth, Buck would be unable to have more

children. Her circumstances created unhappy chaos in her life, but she used those setbacks to continue doing what she loved which was writing. Through much adversity, Buck found her writing voice and poured herself into her novels. Her second novel was *The Good Earth*. In this story, Buck introduced the Chinese to the Western World. After *The Good Earth* was published, it was later adapted as a movie and then went on to win a Pulitzer Prize. Buck continued writing for the remainder of her life. Her literature caught the attention of the Western world and she became the first American woman to win a Nobel Prize for literature in 1938.

Growing up in an oppressive home and then continuing to live in a Communist society, Buck found a way to use her talents in writing to “provide both China and America telling glimpses of each other and foster exchange and understanding between the two.”¹ Her choice to use her gifts in writing impacted the relationship and understanding of two powerful and dominating countries. These nations have a strong influence on the rest of the world and Buck played a role in shaping their views of each other. In Buck’s words, “The basic discovery about any people is the discovery of the relationship between its men and its women.”² It took bravery to look outside the opinions and views she was raised with as a child and come to her own conclusions about life. She took an honest look at the Chinese people and culture and allowed what she observed to shape her rather than simply believing what she heard growing up. Her unhappy

¹ Kimmel, Elizabeth Cody. *Ladies First: Daring American Women Who Were Second to None*: (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006.) Page 85

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marriage and other personal struggles took a toll on Buck. Eventually, she divorced John Lossing Buck and married her publisher, Richard Walsh. It is said of Buck that she wrote continuously until her death in 1973. In her lifetime, she published over 70 books.

Perhaps many 20th Century women can relate with Pearl S. Buck, those who either lived prior to the right to vote or if they experienced their own personal oppression living in a home with a father or husband that was not respectful of women. It was common in the public sector and in the religious arenas for women to be expected to remain unseen and unheard. As a child, I remember my uncle saying often that children should be seen and not heard. I think this was the way women were looked at as well. America is known for being the “land of the free,” but it was not a place of freedom for all of its citizens until the middle of the 20th Century. Both African-Americans and women were treated as a sub-culture. They did not have the same rights as Caucasian men. However, things began to change for women during the second wave of the feminist movement in 1920 when women were given the right to vote. By the mid 1960’s women were more readily taking on public and professional leadership roles. In the 1980’s women began to climb cooperate ladders as well as start their own companies. By the end of the 20th Century, the work place was no longer just a “boys club.”

Although women received more opportunities to serve in leadership roles within the community and government, the Church was slow to follow. The Church, even with its various denominations, seemed to hold a standard against

women in leadership roles. Not all denominations hesitated to recognize and ordain women. The Assemblies of God recognized and ordained females from their beginning early in the 20th Century. Thankfully, other denominations are shifting this way and today there is a significant population of female clergy.

Sally Priesand was born in 1946 in Cleveland, Ohio. She was raised in a Jewish family and attended a local synagogue that was a Reform Branch of Judaism. In her teen years, Priesand stood out as a passionate and devout follower of the Jewish faith. She actively participated in the festivals and ceremonies at her synagogue. She shared the teachings with her friends and anyone else that would listen. Priesand took her beliefs and practices seriously and received a scholarship from her synagogue to attend the Hebrew Union College in 1964. There her interest and passion to teach others the practices of Judaism grew more intense. Though her goal was not to create uproar among her professors and leaders in the faith, she did want to become a rabbi. People opposed the idea of Priesand becoming ordained. No woman had ever been ordained as a rabbi before and it was thought to be sacrilegious. Instead of arguing with skeptics and naysayers, Priesand chose to spend time with those that supported and encouraged her. “In those days I did not think very much about being a pioneer, nor was it my intention to champion the rights of women. I just wanted to be a rabbi.”³ Priesand chose not to look at the odds stacked against her. She knew in her heart what she wanted to do and pursued her passion of leading others in her faith and practices and in 1972, Priesand was ordained as the first female rabbi.

³ Kimmel, Elizabeth Cody. *Ladies First: Daring American Women Who Were Second to None*. (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006.) Page 100

Following her ordination, Priesand applied for several clergy positions, all of which she was rejected. After several years of waiting, she became rabbi of Temple Beth El in New Jersey. Later she moved and became the rabbi at the Monmouth Reform Temple where she still serves today. Unknowingly, Priesand opened the door for other females to be ordained as rabbis.

Sally Priesand's story reminds me of an elderly lady I had the privilege of meeting in Springfield, Missouri in 1998. She was a retired minister and a resident of Maranatha Village retirement home. Then at the age of 81, she loved to share about her life in the pastorate. While talking with her one day, I realized that she pastored a church long before it was accepted for women to serve in that leadership capacity. I asked her why she believed God called both men and women into full-time ministry and she said, "I know women are called because He called and anointed me." That was all the proof she needed to face opposition and adversity as a female pastor in a patriarchal community. It did not matter what others thought because she knew she was called.

While my husband and I were serving as missionaries in North Africa and The Middle East, we witnessed the ordination ceremony of the first female pastor. She was ordained because she had already been pastoring and doing the same things the male leaders were doing. She was officially recognized for what she had already been doing. She had not asked the church leaders for this title. She merely followed what God put in her heart and served Him faithfully. She actively lead many Muslims to Christ and disciplined them in the faith. Though I cannot disclose her name, the meaning is, "to be safe." This young women lived

up to her name by comforting those whose hearts were broken and visiting the hurting. She gave herself in service for the One who saved and rescued her. I conclude with her story because the danger she faces not only as a Christian in a Muslim country, but as a female pastor, is life threatening. She is living and working in the 21st Century and faces similar danger as Queen Esther and Joan of Arc did when they stepped out in faith. She is a woman with a call of God on her life and she is living and serving in a male dominated culture.

Freedom for women has changed dramatically in America over the past seventy years. No longer are eyebrows raised when a woman is announced a company president or a government official. For many denominations women are recognized and respected for their leadership roles. There are many examples of female preachers today. One of my favorite teachers is Beth Moore. Her devotion to God and desire for His Word to be known is inspiring. She comes from a denomination known for not recognizing women in authoritative roles, yet she has an incredible following of both women and men. I believe she is anointed by God and faithfully following His will for her life. Her teachings are instrumental in changing lives for the glory of God.

The women mentioned in this paper do not hail from the same backgrounds and their lives span over thousands of years, but the tie that binds them is their passion to fulfill their missions. Time will only tell the full impact their lives made on the world in which they lived.

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