CHAPTER 11

Merchandised Women: Priceless, Called and Empowered

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Introduction

Within a week of marrying my husband, David, thirty-eight years ago, we left for ministry in India and ten other nations in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. And so began my personal introduction to the diverse ways in which cultures value women and define their role in society at large and in the church specifically. The journey revealed a thread of common challenges that women face globally. Most specifically in the past twenty years, this ministry journey offered an understanding how a woman's sexual experiences in particular tend to define how she is valued by culture, the church, and herself in her own personal identity as a woman.

This chapter will briefly explore some contrasting cultural perspectives on the social and existential value of girl children and women and their sexual identities. These perspectives will be contrasted with a Scriptural reading respecting the value of girls and women and particularly illuminated in how Jesus related to women who were considered ‘sinners’ in their community’s eyes. Next, my ministry experiences with prostituted women and children through the outreach of Project Rescue will serve as a case study to identify essential elements in ministry to sexually exploited women and girls in order to bring greater physical, social, cultural, and spiritual freedom. Finally, the chapter will highlight the critical role of Pentecostal women in seeking life-changing hope and freedom for women whom society and even the church too frequently identify as ‘prostitutes,’ ‘bad women,’ and ‘whores.’

Though others identify them as such, Scripture teaches that Jesus knows them by name—their real names. Pentecostals should consider that Christ came to seek them out through the disarming work of the Holy Spirit and offers them a different future and new identity as transformed daughters of God. This chapter will attempt to provide insights into who ‘merchandised women’ really are in God’s eyes as indicated in Scripture, because, as recipients of Jesus’ mission, they are our mission as well.
Contrasting Cultural Perspectives on the Value of the Girl Child

The value placed on a girl child compared to a boy child is apparent from the time of birth, and before birth, even as the baby is carried in the mother's womb. Although cultures around the world vary greatly in how females are valued, similar perspectives are held by large percentages of the earth's population. Contrasting views characteristic of the Two-Thirds World and Western World in America will be presented. In light of the focus of this chapter on 'merchandised women,' particular attention will be given to sexual exploitation of women and girls through pornography, the sale of their bodies for sex, and the impact of these injustices on victims.

Two-Thirds World Perspectives

The two most populous nations in the world, China and India, are known for their traditional cultural preference for boy children over girl children. A distorted value of the girl child is reflected in the willingness to accept or at least tolerate the practices of gender-specific abortion and even infanticide of girl babies in order to accommodate parents' wishes for a son.1 It is telling that a daughter's birth in India is frequently met with open tears of disappointment rather than celebration, because she is viewed as a financial liability rather than a source of pride and status.

Out of 7.2 billion people in the world, 1.3 billion live in China, and 1.2 billion live in India.2 This represents approximately 35 percent of the world's population in two nations that hold or are at least greatly influenced by this traditional view of girls as being secondary and less valuable than boys. The percentage does not include those Chinese and Indian immigrants who now live in other nations of the world but continue to hold this deeply traditional cultural view as well.

If one were also to add the very large populations of Muslim nations in Asia and the Middle East where sons are also valued and preferred over daughters, the extent to which girls are devalued globally becomes more apparent. This problem is no small issue as it provides fertile ground for injustice against women and girls, including the buying and selling of them for purposes of sexual exploitation. This gender-distorted worldview underlies the cultural and economic rationale that girls are not valuable, but rather an economic liability.

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