

The Evangelical Transformation of African Families

by Francine Thomas

Evangelical missionary activity in Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has, for the most part, been centered in the ministries of teaching, preaching, healing and prayer as well as recruiting and sending missionaries. While these vehicles remain crucial for spreading the Gospel, they are increasingly being employed to deliver new perspectives on "the radical Judeo-Christian idea of a God who loves us, and who asks that we love each other in return." ¹

One approach in particular addresses the "double bind" dilemma faced by churches worldwide as they are called upon to deal with family, marriage and morality issues in today's world. In her book, "The Redemption of Love," social and organizational psychologist Carrie Miles explains that liberal churches stand to lose authority if they acquiesce to social change, while conservative churches risk losing credibility precisely because they resist doing so. She believes the answer to this problem lies in a novel approach that looks "to the Bible not just for solutions for today's problems, but also for a clear understanding of their causes." Toward this end she applies to Scripture the relatively new tools of socioeconomics or economic sociology, "an interdisciplinary approach that has been hailed as 'the new paradigm' for the social-scientific study of religion."^{2 2}

This paper will look at how Miles' work addresses the realities and consequences of mankind's departure from God's original design for life and how both male and female have "suffered the physical consequences of living outside of God's abundant provision."³ Miles believes that decisions about how to allocate scarce resources after the Fall became "the driving force of human life, a force that corrupted sexuality and destroyed the oneness for which man and woman were created."⁴

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life; It will produce thorns and thistles for you; and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you will return. (Ge 3.17-19, NIV).

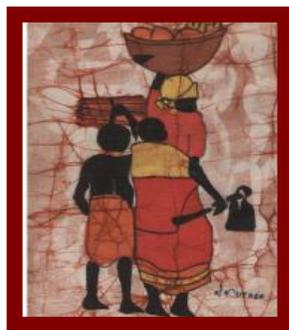
The chief aim of this paper, then, is to highlight the promising new methodology that is making strides in changing the religious and cultural mindset of a people bound by unyielding and destructive traditional biases. Empower International Ministries, the organization founded by Miles, has used this innovative approach in Burundi, Uganda, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zambia and is currently making plans to take the program to other African nations. Her methods from the beginning have involved working with existing ministries in developing countries "to promote the biblical message of the equal dignity and potential for unity among all human beings, regardless of gender, age, race, social, or family status." ⁵ By using a kind of "train-the-trainer" methodology in which Empower instructors hold workshops in designated towns and cities, pastors and lay leaders are equipped to carry this teaching to their own congregations. In virtually every instance, reports show that marriages and families are being transformed, and women especially are enjoying a sense of equality and freedom never before experienced.

Miles points out in less-developed, historically non-Christian countries, the notion of equality may often stand in sharp contrast to customary practices, especially in societies where social interactions among fellow human beings, and even with the gods, are based on material exchange. It is precisely because of this that she feels it is necessary to begin the discussion by examining God's perfect design for marriage, gender and family, and why and how it became corrupted. By doing so, we are in a better position to understand why people behave as they do, why they believe and value the things they do and how their choices shape identity. From a

pragmatic point of view, it explains the trade-offs people make in spending money, and in expending time, effort and energy.

Such an economic sociological perspective works, Miles says, because the Bible's "central story of creation, fall, and redemption asks whether we as individuals and as a society will live only by bread (materially) or by the Word of God (spiritually)." She feels that only by understanding the "material forces influencing our behaviors, beliefs, and identities can we rid ourselves, our families, and our churches of those that are worldly and destructive." ⁶

Miles presents two especially poignant examples to graphically illustrate the condition of women in sub-Saharan Africa. In the batik shown on the left (next page), the woman's burden is apparent. "The hoe and the produce-laden basket on the woman's head tell us that she is on her way home after a long day in the fields....Her small helper, and the baby on her back, symbolize the many children she will be expected to bear. Bare feet suggest her poverty." ⁷ On the right is a photograph of a woman walking beside a man. She is depicted wearing flimsy flip flops while the man has on more substantial shoes. Around her waist a baby is held close to her body by a yellow wrap, a convenience that frees her hands to carry other items. Perhaps most revealing is the obvious disparity between the woman carrying roofing metal on her head and the man beside her balancing nothing more than the cigarette he is smoking.



(Illustrations used by permission of author)

These scenes are typical of everyday life observed along many of the dusty, rut-filled roads of east Africa. But sights like these beg the question of how such inequity could become the norm for this society and others like it. To answer this Miles explains that in the beginning man and woman had no reason to compete for resources for God fully intended that all of creation should share in abundant unity and joy. But sadly one of the consequences of the Fall was a kind of patriarchy in which women, children and even most men were subordinated to the service of the powerful few in an effort to provide for their needs. The result was that as male and female were segregated in their roles of labor they became alienated from one another.

Not surprisingly, contemporary critics point to religion as being the source and supporter of patriarchal injustice. Miles insists, however, that the Bible teaches exactly the opposite.

"Patriarchy and its abuses, including the alienation of woman and man from each other, resulted from the struggle to provide for the material needs of life outside of the Creator's abundance, a state God never intended human beings to experience in the first place." ⁸

Sociologist, Kyriacos Markides provides similar insight:

"By focusing primarily on the material world "we lose our connection to Heaven. We lose the relationship with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed prior to the Fall, or that the Prodigal Son had prior to his decision to leave the heavenly Palace. This split is at the core of our existential predicament and is the cause of all subsequent psychic turmoil and suffering." ⁹

Miles explains that even though Paul is sometimes accused of taking a stand against marriage, sex and women, his teachings present the appropriate use of power in which "the head does not rule the body but rather facilitates unity with it." ¹⁰

Some argue the sexual revolution, rising rates of divorce, promiscuity, and out-of-wedlock births have caused the erosion of the family. But Miles believes such thinking should be reversed. In other words, it is because the family has broken down that we are witnessing an

increase of these situations. This is a subtle, but important distinction, she says, one based on studies showing that technological advances over the last two hundred years have eliminated the imperative for families to produce enough children to provide labor to meet their economic needs as was often the case in preindustrial societies. "As the material incentives and constraints that necessitated bearing children have evaporated, the institutions of family, marriage, and traditional sexual morality have all collapsed." What is needed, Miles says, is a way to "rebuild a new base to support the love, human connectedness, and concern for each other that we still crave." ¹¹ That is to say, a sound biblical theology of marriage and family is required to right many of the wrongs that shackle Christian families and give them freedom to function as God intended.

This is precisely the reason Empower International Ministries has written a course specifically designed for families in churches where tradition and culture have obscured God's plan to redeem love between a man and wife and their children as well as love for others. In the "New Man, New Woman, New Life" study guide, participants are encouraged to identify practices that need to be changed in order to live as God intended. For instance, men in Africa strive to maintain their pride and avoid embarrassment by exacting revenge on anyone who causes them to be ridiculed or insulted. The Gospel of Matthew, however, points to a better way. "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (5.38-41). Jesus emphasized that such behavior can only come from loving God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and loving "your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10.27). Understanding this is

crucial particularly for those in honor/shame cultures where attempts to embarrass one another often result in ethnic rivalries.

African men frequently attempt to prove their manhood with behavior that is destructive not only to themselves, but also to their families. For example, drinking a lot of alcohol and sleeping with many women often come from a need to project power and virility. But no matter what the motivation may be, Scripture shows this behavior is sinful. In Matthew Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (5.27-28). The product of this adultery unfortunately is the subjugation and shame of women and the deterioration of family life. As the Empower study points out, Jesus criticized many of the assumptions concerning what it means to be a man. "The New Man in Christ does not require prestige or money or sexual exploits, nor does he try to be above other people." ¹²

Jesus provided a personal illustration of this concept when he washed the feet of his disciples in a remarkable act of humility toward others. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," he said (Jn 13.3-10, 12-17). While foot washing was a practical necessity for first century people who wore sandals everywhere, it was nevertheless considered a degrading task, even for Jewish servants. In fact, it was such a humiliating chore that only Gentile slaves were required to perform this service. But as Jesus did on so many occasions, he turned the accepted thinking on its head and showed that those who would be first must be last. "If you want to enter into life, obey the commandments...Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself," (Mt 19.16-25).

How then should a man treat his wife? The answer is revealed in the book of Genesis when God fashions woman out of man and Adam quickly observes, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Ge 2.23). His response clearly indicates a sense of completion as he joyfully greets the creation of his mate. As Miles points out, when God made woman out of man the act was not intended to be a divisive one, but rather a unifying one. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Ge 2.24).

Miles explains the concept of "one" conveys a number of meanings. For instance, it can signify something that is complete, whole, equal to, or has equivalent, identity, sameness, or is united in some manner. "This oneness means that, contrary to the teachings of the theologians who used creation to argue for male dominion or a chain of command (and the complaints of feminist critics who believe that the Bible does support sexual hierarchy), there is nothing in Genesis 2 that contradicts the egalitarianism of Genesis 1. There is no mandate given for hierarchy in marriage or justification for male authority over female.¹³ Miles explains this further.

"Unlike the recently 'hot' school of philosophy, postmodernism, which analyzes or deconstructs all human relationships in terms of power, the biblical teachings about women and men are not about power and authority at all...The reason given in Genesis 2 for woman's existence in no way implies her inferiority, but neither does it support the notion that she is complete in herself...Rather, sexuality in creation belongs not to the individual but to the relationship. Female and male exist only for the sake of the other. Power has nothing to do with it."¹⁴

God made male and female to meet the yearning for someone who is like us yet different in a way that unifies us even more. Sexuality in creation, Miles says, was intended for consumption, not production.

It is important to note Scripture indicates that although the man and his wife in the Garden were both naked, they felt no shame, either physically or emotionally. They were without pretense or defense. They did not strive to take advantage over the other one for they had no need to do so. But because they gave in to the temptation to be like God, sin broke not only their relationship with him, but with one another.

A number of theologians feel that because disobedience dictated new roles for the first man and woman, humankind should not seek to escape the consequences of sin. For instance, some go so far as to say that women ought to refrain from taking painkillers during childbirth or ask to be relieved of the obligation to obey men. After all, this is woman's just payment for her gender's role in the Fall. However, by making such an argument, Miles feels that humanity is left without any hope of reinstating the unity of relationship that God originally intended. She adds that in cursing the ground God did not change the basic nature of man and woman or the way God wanted them to live. What he did change was the way they *would* live. God's gracious gifts seen in Genesis 1 would no longer be considered blessings. Instead, they would become problematic necessities, and the drive to achieve them would negatively affect sexuality making it more utilitarian than emotional.

The results of mankind's defection are seen in less developed countries like Africa where women who are valued mostly for their ability to bear children and run a household, are nevertheless resented for their sexuality. Statistics show that even today children are still viewed as critical resources of production in many traditional rural economies. For instance, where the fertility rate in an industrialized nation might be two children per family, in an agricultural nation like Kenya, for example, the need for farming usually requires a much larger family, perhaps as

many as ten children. For infertile couples in lands like this, the inability to have children could very well spell economic disaster. ¹⁵

In the late twentieth century debates about sexual equality in the West revolved around universal acknowledgment that women had less power and enjoyed fewer achievements than men. Miles does not see this as being the result of some innate pre-determination, but believes it merely to be an arrangement shaped by the material, economic demands of living in an agrarian world where resources were scarce. She explains that prior to the 1960s and 1970s women were typically not involved in activities outside the home that gave men power over each other and over women. Because domestic duties consumed their time, women were limited in their freedom to pursue other interests or participate in careers outside of the home. This appears to refute academic theories of gender which claim that men became dominant over women because of their superior size, strength and aggression. Instead, Miles believes it is simply a reflection of women's unique ability to bear children. They did what men could not do, not because they could not match men in size, strength or aggression, but because only the female body was equipped to bear and feed children. Men's competitive edge against women in the workplace, Miles says, came not from their greater physical strength, but from their ability to marry women. ¹⁶

I must admit when I read this I could almost hear the incredulous outcry from men countering, "What about those of us who are single yet hold high positions in the marketplace?" In truth, I do not believe Miles is saying that men could not be powerful or successful without a woman at home supporting them, but rather that having a woman in the home frees men to pursue opportunities in the workplace.

Certainly, while this division of labor along lines of gender explains the historic subordination of women as being somewhat less capable than men, the last few years have

shown us that even in Africa women are stepping out of the shadow of their male counterparts to take a more prominent role in such surprising arenas as politics. A new-found freedom can also be seen in many African churches where women serve as pastors and leaders, an indication that gender-specific roles are beginning to expand in a number of ways.

Miles makes an interesting observation, though, one that bears further consideration. She says that men today, as in the past, still do not like to take advice or direction from anyone, wife, friend or even pastor. "Indeed, some atheists' and agnostics' decisions against belief stem from their Adam-like resistance to letting anyone or anything else control their life, even God." Taken to the extreme, she believes this compulsion for men to control those around them externally "results in violence, war, and abuse and internally in despair, self-loathing, substance abuse, and heart attacks." ¹⁷

Given all the forces that hinder God's plan for abundant life within the family and the world, how can Christians maintain a balanced understanding of God's will, especially in the face of urgent but changing material demands and incentives? Miles admits that no matter how hard we may try, it is impossible to completely reinstate the idyllic life of the Garden. However, reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ does give us the blessed opportunity to let go of many of the anxieties and fears we inherited from the Fall. We can, in effect, move towards reconciliation with each other. With a closer reading of the Gospels, we discover many of Jesus' teachings were "designed to combat specific social practices that limit us as gendered beings." ¹⁸ She continues by saying that "Jesus undid the effects of the curse on the ground, but even more important, he attacked humankind's enduring allegiance to the reason for that curse, our first and universal sin. The applications of his teachings against this compelling human drive for power and control over other people go a long way toward redeeming the relationship between man and

woman" and in affirming the value of a woman beyond her biological functions.¹⁹ It is possible that in suffering a degrading death Jesus showed refusal to compete for honor and authority over others is not shameful, but is instead an indication of a changed life, a redeemed life.¹²⁰

This is the new economy of God's Kingdom, Miles says, one that must address issues like African women who are obliged to have sex with their HIV-infected husbands simply because it is their wifely duty. This is obviously the feeling of many husbands who, when asked about the possibility of their wives contracting aids and dying, say that at least it would be a good death.

Such men typically do not choose a wife for companionship.

"Husbands and wives rarely move around together. When you see two Africans holding hands, they are almost always same-sex friends. Emotional support? Again no. If a man has a problem, he goes to his uncle, not his wife. Further, in less-developed economies, people may have more children than they can feed, clothe, educate, or otherwise care for—because the purpose of having children is for the children to care for you."²¹²¹

According to Miles' research, the developing world is increasingly affected by the technological and social changes prevalent in the more advanced post-Christian world. Yet even in these areas, young, educated citizens grapple with what kind of marriages to form, the appropriate number of children to have and how to treat them. They also struggle with what the "new man" should look like and what role women should play in such an economy.

Because many countries are at a crossroad due to rapid socio-economic change and the spread of Christianity, Miles feels that there has never been a more critical time to reach them with biblically accurate teaching on gender and family. Christianity has not done all it could do in challenging consequences of the Fall with such irregularities as old patriarchal systems that dictate women be covered with veils and head scarves and submit to arranged marriages, polygamy, forced pregnancies or female genital mutilation. "Conservative Christian teachings on

male dominance and female submission, blindly imposed on unindustrialized economics, maintain the relative powerlessness of women and cultural belief in their inferiority." ²² So if Christianity is currently undergoing a "return to scriptural roots" as author Philip Jenkins believes, now is the time to reintroduce God's original design of a fulfilling and honorable family life.²³

According to testimony by Frank Tweheyo, a pastor in Kabale, Uganda, and Empower's Pan African Program Coordinator, notions of women as second class beasts of burden are being overthrown as a result of this ministry's message. "The men are getting out of the prison of oppressing women and women are also coming out of the prison of feeling inferior, all being lifted together by the transforming power of Christ's agape love!" He adds that priests and pastors alike are changing their preaching and are repenting for having taught the subordination of woman to man and the superiority of man in the household.²⁴

Tweheyo speaks of how gratifying it is to watch reconciliations taking place in homes and relationships as a result of accepting the ideal of the "New Man, New Woman, New Life" teaching. Husbands and wives are now sharing resources and even bank accounts, something unheard of in Africa. Amazingly, husbands are beginning to offer support for wives who feel called to the ministry themselves. Tweheyo has firsthand knowledge of this successful arrangement since his own wife is also a pastor. Their marriage is a living example to all who hear this message of redemption. "As Jesus teaches men and women alike to renounce sin and to relinquish control of their lives to God, they gain freedom from the burdens and privilege of gender. Jesus tells them to stop worrying about their life, for he will provide for their needs. With life no longer a zero-sum game, competition, honor, and control are no longer necessary."²⁵

So while mankind still must work to provide the necessities of life, Jesus offers this assurance.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear," (Mt 6.25).

The ideal for sexuality remains a "one flesh" unity as shown in the creation account and emphasized by Jesus and Paul. Miles holds up the Song of Songs in the Bible to illustrate the full meaning and blessings of becoming one flesh and to reveal the necessary steps to achieve this ideal. And even though the psalms were written under a patriarchal mindset, it is still a relevant message regardless of material circumstances. To African Christians the admonition is the same. "Fathers should no longer use their children for their own purposes, but should raise them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6.4). Husbands must be concerned for their wives as valuable creations of God and not simply use them for reproductive purposes. The flip side of the coin is true as well. Those in subordinate positions, whether wife, child or servant, must no longer try to manipulate those over them, but instead support and honor them with agape love (Eph 5.21, 22, 33; 6.1-3, 6-7.)

"Accepting Jesus's teaching frees humanity from the scarcity of the world of thorns, from the fears and the imperatives that result in gender restrictions, from the obligations and anxieties that divide man and woman and make love into a matter of economics. Shed of them, man and woman can return to the kind of marriage that Jesus said is the ideal." ²⁶ We know this because Scripture tells us it is so. "The two will become one flesh" (Mt 19.5). In Ephesians 6 Paul asks men to not only serve their wives, but also to become of one will and desire with them. In 1 Corinthians 11.7 Paul writes that man is the head of the woman, but that "woman is the glory of man." The paradox, Miles explains, is that it is the head that makes the body glorious, while it is the body that brings glory to the head. "Love and self-sacrifice for the sake of the other's

sanctification result in the reciprocal glorification of both parties. One is the fullness of the one who fills, and together they are magnificent." ²⁷ And just as this is a quest for unity within marriage, so too is it a call for unity within the body of believers. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12.12).

I could do no better than to close with Miles' own words.

"The Bible offers us an irresistible positive—a love that is soul-stirring, deep, and passionate—and tells us that God had this in mind for us from the beginning. Christianity offers guidance in sexual issues not because Christianity is against sex but because it is so very much for it...Our duty is to let our redemption, our joy, our peace, and our love for each other permeate our lives to such an extent that we become the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden...The Bible offers a single, simple idea for marriage: a union of two souls that is romantic, poetic, and by worldly standards completely impractical...Redeemed as Christians and as lovers, we keep the fruit of our own vineyards." ²⁸

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Carrie A. Miles. n.p.[cited 20 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.empowerinternational.orgweb>.
 - ² Carrie A. Miles. *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2006) 10-11.
 - ³ Ibid., 11.
 - ⁴ Ibid.
 - ⁵ Ibid, 19
 - ⁶ Ibid, 11.
 - ⁷ Miles. [cited 20 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.empowerinternational.org>.
 - ⁸ Carrie A. Miles. *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2006) 12.
 - ⁹ Kyriacos C. Markides. *The Mountain of Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 214.
 - ¹⁰ Miles. *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2006) 16.
 - ¹¹ Miles, Ibid, 13.
 - ¹² Carrie A. Miles, Laurence R. Iannaccone, *New Man, New Woman, New Life* (Empower International Ministries, 2010) 20.
 - ¹³ Miles. *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2006) 28.
 - ¹⁴ Ibid., 29.
 - ¹⁵ Miles, Ibid., 37.
 - ¹⁶ Ibid., 43.
 - ¹⁷ Miles, Ibid., 47.
 - ¹⁸ Miles. *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2006) 55.
 - ¹⁹ Ibid., 58.
 - ²⁰ Ibid., 77.
 - ²¹ Ibid., 209.
 - ²² Miles. n.p.[cited 20 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.empowerinternational.org>.
 - ²³ Philip Jenkins. *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) ix.
 - ²⁴ Miles.,Ibid.
 - ²⁵ Miles. n.p.[cited 20 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.empowerinternational.org>.
 - ²⁶ Miles. *The Redemption of Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2006) 100.
 - ²⁷ Miles, Ibid., 100.
 - ²⁸ Ibid., 209.