

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The Long Shadow of 9/11

Last weekend the United States, and indeed the world, remembered the horrors of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. It has been ten years! Ten years ago, America was united but that unity has evaporated. Ten years ago, the attack fostered a sense of mission, renewing the US in its spirit and its self-understanding. Today, to some extent confusion and a sense of despair reign. Certainly, a sense of fear lingers over the nation: A sense that we are still vulnerable, still open to attack. A short review of American history gives focus to the many wars that our nation has fought. Most of the years encompassing the American Revolution (1776-1781) were not good years. The Continental Army lost many strategic battles and at times there was no certainty that America would be successful in its goal of independence from Great Britain. The War of 1812 was in effect a second war for independence from Britain. During that war Britain invaded the US, burned its capital in Washington and seemed on the edge of victory. But Andrew Jackson and others decimated the British army and a status quo was reached. The American Civil War was arguably the bloodiest of all America's conflicts. Over 620,000 men were killed, the most deadly war in our history, even exceeding the losses of World War II. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 was a brutal attack on our Pacific fleet. With all of these attacks and wars, the news of these horrible events took days, if not weeks, to reach the nation's citizens. But the terrorist attack of 9/11 at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the crash near Shanksville, PA were on the national news instantly. The second plane crashing into the South Tower of the World Trade Center was seen by millions on national TV. All of the horror of that day is burned into our national psyche. We will never forget that day of terror!! Ten years later, politically, financially and socially, America seems to have lost its way. That sense of fear, of anxiety, is real and at times almost overwhelming. It is this long shadow of fear that I seek to address in this *Perspective*.

To do so, I want to turn to Psalm 46. The anonymous psalmist writes his psalm, we believe, at the time of Sennacherib, the emperor of the Assyrian empire, during his 701 BC attempt to lay siege to Jerusalem during Hezekiah's reign. Assyria had conquered the northern ten tribes in 722 BC and its new ruler was now seeking dominance over Judah. In Psalm 46:1-3, the psalmist counsels Jerusalem that God is their refuge and strength, an ever present help in this time of trouble. It is God who is their security, their protection and His presence and power were real. Therefore, "we will not fear," he declares. He is counseling Judah to focus on God, not Sennacherib. He is the one they should fear, not Assyria. Further, to drive home his point, he uses hyperbolic language framed around four "though" statements: though the earth should give way, though the mountains slide into the sea, though that sea roars and foams with fury and though the mountains quake—we will not fear. In effect, he is affirming the unalterable faith and trust of Judah in Almighty God.

In Psalm 46:4-7, the Psalmist builds on the empowering presence of God, and compares His presence to a river that nurtures and protects Jerusalem. God's presence and His protection of the "city of God" mean that Jerusalem will "not be moved, will not fall." That strong sense of stability and security is compared to the mountains falling into the sea (v. 2), the quaking mountains of v. 3 and the nations tottering in v. 6. As God speaks (v. 6), the nations totter and crumble. Why would Jerusalem fear with a God like that, he admonishes. Further, God's names indicate why He is their source of strength and security: "The Lord of Hosts" is a military title meaning that He commands the hosts of the armies of heaven and at His command they will do anything for Him. Additionally, he is the "God of Jacob," the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who made unconditional and eternal promises to these patriarchs. He will never renege on those promises.

Finally, in Psalm 46: 8-11, the psalmist beckons Judah to consider "the works of YHWH." This has echoes of Isaiah 40:21-24, where YHWH sits on His throne high above the earth and from that vantage point earth's humans resemble grasshoppers. Isaiah affirms that God is the creator who created everything—the vast universe filled with stars that He has named (see v. 26) and the earth which is like dust (v. 12). He is also the Sovereign God who rules over His world, including the political rulers of earth's kingdoms. He has the power "to reduce these rulers to nothing." They are like plants that He plants and then He blows on them; they then wither and die and join the dustbin of history (see vv. 24-25). He is the absolute Sovereign of His realm and nothing and no one compares with Him. [One can certainly reflect on the formation of the USSR, the first militantly atheistic regime in human history, a regime of utter brutality and totalitarian power. Indeed, the brutality of Lenin and especially Stalin exceeded that of Adolf Hitler. The arrogance of that regime reached its peak in the 1960s when Nikita Khrushchev declared that they would launch their cosmonauts into space, find God and topple Him from His throne. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, God "blew on" the USSR and it collapsed. Who toppled whom?] Returning to Psalm 46, and thinking of the future kingdom of God manifested in the coming millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ, the psalmist sees a time when wars will cease, military armaments will be destroyed and the entire earth will confess Him as the exalted Sovereign (see vv. 8-10). In v. 11, the psalmist repeats the refrain of God as Lord of Hosts and the covenant-making God of Israel. In short, YHWH is a mighty fortress protecting and guarding His people.

Two additional thoughts:

1. What happened to Sennacherib? The Bible says that he and his armies were defeated by Almighty God supernaturally (see 2 Kings 19:32-37) in which he lost 185,000 of his men. He returned to Nineveh and was assassinated in 681 BC.
2. The power and faith of Psalm 46 greatly influenced Martin Luther, who in the midst of his struggles with both Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire and the leaders of Roman Catholicism used this psalm as the basis for his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

The long shadow of 9/11 is certainly a shadow of fear and anxiety. May God enable us, however, to focus on Him, not al Qaeda or the powers of this world that genuinely threaten our security. We must be vigilant as a nation and be prepared for any attack. But, as with the psalmist of Psalm 46, God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble.

May the tenth anniversary of 9/11 be a time of spiritual renewal and revival for America, for it is only God who is the antidote to our fears and anxieties.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

Jesus as a Liberator of Women

Without question, one of the most hotly debated issues in American evangelicalism is the role of women in the church; there are good and godly leaders on both sides of nearly every question of this debate. One issue that cannot be debated, however, is that the Scriptures affirm the equality of men and women, both in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), in their position in Christ (Galatians 3:28) and as joint heirs (1 Peter 3:7). While the Bible proclaims equality, it also argues for functional differences—role differences—within the home (Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19) and within the church (1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-36; 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 3:1-13. 5:1-25; Titus 1:6-9). Whatever the precise meanings and applications of these crucial Pauline passages, church history bears witness to an extraordinary number of women in strategic places of ministry in the early church. The Gospel was a liberating force in the ancient world. When challenged by the Gospel, old and established traditions, rooted in human prejudice, gradually died. Contempt, discrimination and demeaning references often characterized rabbinic teachings about women. Rabbis, for instance, were encouraged not to teach or even speak to women. Also, according to Jewish tradition, women could never be a part of the count needed to establish a synagogue. But Luke cited both men and women who were baptized and persecuted and who contributed to the growth of the church (Acts 5:14; 8:12; 9:2; 17:4, 12). This challenge to ancient tradition began with Jesus' earthly ministry, in which women played a most significant role. Many women supported the ministry of Jesus and the Twelve financially and ministered to Him personally (see Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41 and Luke 8:3). The Gospels usually depict Mary, sister of Martha, as seated at Jesus' feet—an honor normally given to men. Several women had the immensely important distinction of bearing the news of Christ's resurrection—a quite remarkable honor in light of strict Jewish teachings on valid testimony. Not only were women involved in the ministry of Jesus, they were part of the events at Pentecost (see Acts 4:14). Since the narrative of events in the upper room continues into chapter 2, we must assume that the women present were likewise filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:1-4).

The Book of Acts also gives accounts of women who played active roles in the ministry of the early church:

1. Dorcas (Tabitha) was the only woman in the New Testament to be called a "disciple" (9:36). Her death caused a major stir in Joppa, causing Peter to come and perform one of his greatest miracles—raising her from the dead.
2. Mary of Jerusalem, John Mark's mother (12:12), was a wealthy widow whose house became the vital hub of the Jerusalem church. There the young church found refuge and security during the intense persecutions of Herod Agrippa.

3. One of the more remarkable women of the NT was Priscilla (Prisca). She and her husband, Aquila, early converts to the faith who were banished from Rome, were intimate friends of Paul, with whom they shared hospitality and the craft of tentmaking (Acts 18:1-3). Also, in some way they had risked their lives for Paul (Romans 16:3-5), perhaps at the same time heightening his awareness of the growing church in Rome. Most significantly, both Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos, the eloquent preacher from Alexandria, “and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Obviously, Priscilla knew biblical truth and could explain it with clarity. That the ministry of this couple was well-known and widespread is evidenced by the frequent references to them in Paul’s writings (see Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19). Tradition has it that Priscilla was martyred in Rome.
4. Another woman of the NT was Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2). Because she was probably the bearer of Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul commends her to the Roman church, that they “receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints,” and “help her in whatever manner she may need of you.” He also says of her that she was a “helper” to many (v. 2). The word “helper” clearly implies active and important functions in the church. Was she therefore representing Paul in some official capacity, as perhaps a “deaconess” (servant of v. 1), as some have argued? From these two verses, we simply cannot be certain that she held an authoritative office in the church at Cenchrea. We do know that Phoebe was significant enough for Paul to go out of his way to single her out and ask the Roman church to take care of her.
5. Two passages also indicate that women functioned as prophets in the early church. Acts 21:9 introduces Philip the evangelist as having four daughters who were “prophetesses.” From Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:5, it would seem that Phillip’s daughters were not exceptions, for Paul’s instruction about women’s head coverings occurs in the context of women “praying or prophesying” in the worship service. Whatever the nature of these ministries, women, gifted by the Holy Spirit, exercised notable responsibilities in the early church.
6. Other women in the NT filled pivotal roles of ministry in the early church. Euodias and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3) were identified as “fellow workers” with Paul, a remarkable designation when one remembers that Paul also labeled Titus and Timothy as “fellow workers.” Paul classifies Andronicus and Junias [Junia] (Romans 16:7)—most probably a woman—as “outstanding among the apostles,” most likely a reference to their role as ones commissioned by the Roman church for special duties, not the NT office of apostle. Finally, in the list of “fellow workers” in Romans 16, ten to the 29 people commended by Paul were women.

Women thus played a decisive role in the beginning of Christianity. Their work both complemented the duties of men and involved some leadership responsibilities. Although there are no recorded examples of women evangelists, elders, or formal teachers of biblical truth, their function was both vibrant and vital in the ongoing progress of the Gospel—a clear testimony to the liberating power of Jesus Christ.

See James P. Eckman in *Confident Living* (February 1991), pp. 18-19.