

Empower International Ministries



A Christianity that Does Not Harm Women

Carrie A. Miles

“What are they saying?” I asked my translator. My audience in the Anglican cathedral in Burundi, Central Africa, had been responsive but generally quiet as I took them through the Creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. Now, in the midst of the discussion about the Fall in Genesis 3, suddenly they were buzzing among themselves.

“They are saying,” he replied, looking puzzled himself, ““Does she mean that the woman wasn’t cursed?””

“That’s right, the woman wasn’t cursed,” I repeated to my audience. The idea that God cursed the woman is a common misperception, and not just in Africa. “Look carefully at the text. The word ‘cursed’ is used only about the serpent and the ground. Nothing else.”

I continued my talk but the buzzing continued as well.

“Now what are they saying?” I again asked my translator.

“They are asking, ‘Do you really mean that woman *isn’t* cursed?’”

In many societies, people believe that words pronounced as a curse will come true. If a father says to a child, “You will never amount to anything,” or if someone hires a witchdoctor to curse a neighbor whom he envies, everyone expects those cursed to sicken, lose their possessions, fail their exams, and otherwise wither away.

So when Genesis 3:16 is believed to be a curse from God, women appear doomed to fulfill its words: Woman *must* bear children in sorrow, serve the man, and become his sexual property. Further, being cursed means that woman no longer shares in the blessings given to both man and woman in Genesis 1—dominion over the earth and every good thing for food. If any particular woman has access to more than the necessities of life, it is entirely at the pleasure of her husband. But how hard should men work to increase the welfare of women when even women believe that God has cursed them?

Half the Sky, by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, depicts the oppression and abuse that is the lot of women and girls in developing countries. In a January 9, 2010 column in *The New York Times*, Kristof quoted former US president Jimmy Carter in decrying religion’s part in reinforcing that oppression, particularly by endorsing the idea that women are inferior to men.

My experiences in Africa lead me to agree with Carter and Kristof. Customs disadvantageous to women existed prior to the introduction of Christianity in Africa, and Christian missionaries fought many of them. However, the theology they brought with them of women’s inferiority—based in part on the same misunderstanding of the curse of Genesis 3—allowed other harmful customary beliefs to continue with a new biblically-based authority.

However, the story of Christianity in Africa does not end there. A Christianity true to Jesus’ teachings has enormous potential to increase the welfare of women in developing countries. The Burundi’s reaction to learning that

The African Woman’s Burden



It seems that each time we go to Africa, someone gives us an item like this batik depicting, “the African Woman’s Burden”. 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 (women do the farming in sub-Saharan Africa and produce most of the food consumed there). The firewood carried by the child remind us of the many hours that the mother will spend cooking that food. In some versions of this image, the woman is clearly pregnant as well. This and the baby on her back symbolize the many children she will be expected to bear. Bare feet suggest her poverty.



Art reflects life, as this photo taken along the road in Burundi shows. Inside that yellow wrap around the woman’s middle is a baby. She carries roofing metal on her head, while her man’s burden is nothing more than the cigarette he is smoking.



God did not curse woman was only the first of many liberating biblical surprises that my colleagues, American and African alike, and I are discovering in studying the Bible together through Empower International Ministries.

Bible study may seem like a low priority for a continent wracked by ethnic violence, poverty, and rape used as a weapon of war. Our experiences there, however, tell us that such evils will not be eliminated without the personal and cultural transformation wrought by the Word of God.

Some of the biblical surprises that have great practical (and woman-affirming) meaning for our African colleagues include: God blessed woman equally with man with dominion of the earth (Genesis 1:28). Jesus taught that woman's worth transcends her customary functions of child bearer (Luke 11:27), household servant (Luke 10:38-41), and sexual property of men (Luke 7:38-48 and others). Husbands are commanded to love their wives and sacrifice themselves for them, not to rule them or use them as beasts of burden (Eph 5:25-33). Moreover, Jesus frees men from the burdens of seeking to dominate each other (Mark 10:41-45) – burdens that lead to ethnic strife and war.

Interestingly, the surprises come not because our African partners do not know the Bible. Not only the clergy, but many of the lay people with whom we work, know the Bible better than the average American Christian. They also take it far more seriously. Rather, the surprises come because Africans, like many of us, were taught to read the Bible through the lens of gender bias. Our job at Empower is to rid us all of those distorted glasses.

For us Americans, the greatest surprise is the eagerness with which our African colleagues have received the Bible's liberating message. When the Burundi group asked for the second time if I really meant that women are not cursed, I explained that the bad things that God predicted would happen in Genesis 3:16 were not a curse on women, but rather his description of the consequences of the curse on the ground. If your toddler is reaching toward the fire, I asked, and you say, "No, don't touch – that will hurt you," have you cursed the child? God did not curse any of us but waits patiently to restore us all, male and female, to the unity and equality for which we were created.

I wondered if they accepted that explanation—even with crackerjack translators, the language difference is always an obstacle—but there was no more buzzing in that morning's session.



I got my answer after lunch. As we reassembled, a choir sprung up and sang in the local language. There was not a choir scheduled, but I thought nothing of it. Then my translator leaned over and whispered, "They are singing about when King Balak sent Balaam to curse the children of Israel." Do you remember the story? God sent an angel to block Balaam's path, but no one saw it except the ass Balaam was riding. Balaam, impatient with his balking beast, beat the animal until it finally turned and spoke to him. The song's refrain captures the truth of women's status in God's eyes, a truth that, it turned out, Africans are eager to embrace: "You can't curse what God has blessed."

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Empower International works alongside existing ministries in developing countries to promote biblical teachings on the equal worth and potential for unity among all human beings in Christ, regardless of gender, age, race, social, or family status. For information about Empower, visit www.EmpowerInternational.org or email EIM@fastmail.fm.

