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Women and the Law

By
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I have been asked to speak today on the issue of Women and the Law

How do laws impact us in our daily lives? Laws exist for man's welfare, well-being and safety. We all know that Society cannot function without laws and rules. Governments cannot exist without law and order. Business cannot be conducted without certain legal guidelines. Even Nature has her laws! It is therefore safe to say that in every area of life human society requires direction and laws. . Also, for Society to have a healthy morality it is important to have laws in place that define what is wrong as well as what is right. Both are essential. Can you imagine how our road system would be even more chaotic and dangerous if there were no rules of the road?

Should it surprise us that God governs the universe by His laws? Let's briefly examine Christian history.

Our Creator knew that man really didn't understand all of His righteous ways, therefore He provided an extensive list of laws to govern His nation Israel, after their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. And the beginnings of these laws (all of which are discussed in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy) are what we call the Ten Commandments-- which God Himself wrote first on stone tablets at Mt. Sinai. The Ten Commandments helped to define sin, instructed on proper relationships between human beings and the Creator, and appropriate relationships between human beings. The Ten Commandments also taught on the causes of suffering and provided warnings of the consequences of mistreating our fellow human beings. In writing about the importance of the Ten Commandments, a Scottish pastor Sandy Shaw argues that God's laws were created to help us live within the limitations which God has set. And that by doing so, we enjoy liberty.

Probably no period in time better illustrates God's purposes and ways than the period of the judges in Israel. For, although the people had been given God's Laws, there was no government, as we know it, or civil administration in the land. There were no politicians to make laws and no policemen to enforce them; the people were just trusted to know right from wrong. However, the Israelites demanded a human king to rule over them, and in response God appointed judges. These judges were appointed by God to decide legal matters, and to take the lead in war, when necessary.

As we talk about women and the law, let us first look at Judge Deborah who was a powerful woman and leader in biblical history. God raised up Deborah as a deliverer to rescue the Israelites from their oppression. Her story is found in [Judges](#) Books Four and Five, and is largely about success against all odds. She was the only woman to be a Judge of Israel, the equivalent of king, and was also a prophetess. As Judge, she was also leader of the army of Israel. It is not known exactly how she came to be chosen for

this position, but it is quite evident in the bible that her leadership was greatly honored. Though everything about the times and the culture was against Deborah serving as the leader of the nation, she did, and very successfully. Though her army was vastly outnumbered, they prevailed against their enemies. Deborah never allowed the circumstances around her to overwhelm her or interfere with her belief in God's promises to her. In Chapter Five of Judges, Deborah sings to the Lord with thanks and praise for delivering the Israelites from the Canaanites. In her song, she also thanked God specifically for what He had done for the nation of Israel, and recounted the miracles He had performed. Deborah could certainly have been a braggart considering her unprecedented position of authority and her success as leader of the Israeli Army, instead, she gave all the glory to God. She humbly recognized God's work and thanked Him for it. Deborah was a great role model in judicial history. Her behavior, courage and humility set examples for all Christian women to follow-- for she kept her eyes focused on God and not the circumstances around her. She reminds us that we women have the potential to do great things for God if we will only listen, trust and obey Him.

Now let us briefly look at the state of the law and women today.

In our secular modern society laws are designed to protect basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled. These include civil and political rights, the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, equality before the law, social, cultural and economic rights, including the right to participate in culture, the right to food, the right to work, and the right to education. Sadly, women disproportionately face human rights injustices and gender-based discrimination. Women and children account for most casualties of war and make up most of the world's refugees, displaced and poor populations. According to Amnesty International, at least 1 out of every 3 women worldwide are beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Today, more than 1 million children, mostly girls, are forced into prostitution every year. Her Excellency Mary Robinson, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has said, and I quote: "Bonded labour and the traffic in women and children have become our modern day versions of slavery."

Discrimination against women and girls has been determined to be a basic cause of malnutrition. The very high rates of child malnutrition and low birth weight through many third world nations have been linked to such factors as women's poor access to education and their low levels of participation in paid employment. In fact, women comprise 70% of the world's poor. These statistics are indeed disturbing.

Until quite recently, discussions of human rights issues often failed to recognize the plight of women around the globe-- especially as they related to the subordination of and injustices against women. Thankfully however, efforts are increasingly being made to ensure that laws (on the international, national and regional levels) address injustices and discrimination (whether economic, social or political) against women. Women, especially in the legal profession are standing up to champion the cause, and although gender equality is still far from being a reality, there is increased awareness of the status of women and hope for change.

I would like to highlight an example of a female legal practitioner who has been making a difference in the lives of poor and marginalized women. **Barrister Oby Nwankwo**, a retired Chief Magistrate established an NGO (or non- governmental organization) in 1996 in Eastern Nigeria known as **the Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre or CIRDDOC**. CIRDDOC has been tackling human's rights issues faced by women not only in Nigeria, and in Africa but internationally. Under Mrs. Nwankwo's leadership, **CIRDDOC has worked tirelessly and effectively within Nigeria and on the world**

stage to promote human rights and women's rights, gender equality, facilitation of access to justice and the rule of law, and the enhancement of the level of legal literacy. CIRDDOC has trained non lawyers at community levels as paralegals to provide free legal and counseling services to the poor and marginalized women who cannot access the services because of their un-affordability. This is aimed at bringing legal services closer to the people. CIRDDOC has led conferences in Nigeria and other countries to raise awareness and encourage legislation to address human rights issues. It has for example worked to ease the plight of widows in Eastern Nigeria who are often forced out or denied access to their family's property and estate after the death of their husbands by providing them with legal representation. Many of the widows through such help are able to regain access to their marital properties, and able to care for their children. CIRDDOC was at the forefront of the campaign for laws to prohibit oppressive widowhood practices in Igboland. These laws now exist in Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra and Imo states.

Hosea chapter 4 verse 6 says "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge". Knowledge indeed is powerful. Education, especially in law is an important tool available to equip women to fight to ensure basic human rights and opportunities for all women. According to Catalyst, a leading nonprofit membership organization, women throughout the world continue to enter the legal profession in increasing numbers. We pray that this trend continues. There is strength in numbers. As more women become legal practitioners, greater strides can be made in creating policy and legal changes, enforcing laws and holding governments, the judiciary and policy making bodies accountable to their responsibilities to ensure the human rights of women and others who remain disenfranchised and voiceless in society. Thank you for your time, and God bless.