

***SVS Webinar: Lighting Your Lamps with the Wise Bridesmaids***  
***A Discussion on Biblical Femininity***

Men Are from Eden, Women are from Eden: A Love Letter to the Church, to the World and to God

This talk will be divided into two parts. In part one, I will briefly present some of my research on the vision of sanctified gender relations given to us in the Song of Songs, and the invitation to asceticism that it communicates as being to be the sole route to accessing said sanctified reality. In part two, I will examine how this information helps us codify a vision of ministry that is both formed by, as well as directed toward, spreading the good news that the desire for both fulfillment in, and freedom from, our gendered identity, is a genuine possibility, for anyone willing to claim to him or herself, what Christ, and Christ alone, has won for us through His sacrifice on the cross. Gender is a fundamental (and inescapable) aspect of our experience of embodied life. Understanding what femininity is, as conceived in the mind of God and expressed in the Scriptures, permits both men and women alike, access to a mystery that has the power, if handled correctly, to transform our lives from within, and to transport our lives beyond, slavery to the psychological straightjacket and emotional torture instrument that is gender, in its unredeemed, lapsarian image.

We will begin with a quote from Elder Aimilianos' teachings on the book of Isaiah:

*“The correct way is to read Scripture with simplicity and to allow God to tell us what He wants to tell us. It's one thing to read Scripture because you want to collect information, and another thing to read it because you want to acquire its true content, that is, the Holy Spirit.”*

Scholars have multiple views on what Song of Songs is about, but I believe that first and foremost, the Song is a passionate and tender exposition of spiritual love between God and humankind. At first glance, however, it appears to be a polyphonic poem that explores—in vivid detail—the intimate love shared between a man and a woman. The Song invites the reader into the sacred space of a reconfigured Eden in order to demonstrate that recovery of the unbroken union between God and humankind—the Adamic priesthood—experienced prior to the fall, is a precondition for experience of the vision of love it gives us. The Song references Sinai, to demonstrate to the reader that ascetic purification and preparation (which Sinai, as synonymous with the Ten Commandments, Mosaic law and the elimination of all idols, represents), are requirements for entrance into the mystical union that the Song details. Sinai is the vital link between the paradise that existed prior to the transgression, and the eschatological state of paradise we are being invited to enter into after it. The Song's vision of intimacy is predicated on the “virginity” of the Shulamite, who, in being set apart in the same way as the Israelites, demonstrates to the Bridegroom that she is devoted to Him alone. Her consecration cleanses her heart of its idols, which in turn engenders the state of “emptiness” required for the the infilling of divine love—the consummation of the mystical marriage—that the Song is pointing to.

Thus, more than being an erotic text that functions as an auxiliary to healing human relations through the satisfaction of desire, I believe that the Song is primarily an ascetic text, which seeks to agitate internal transformation in those reading it. That the Song is occupied with *erōs* is evident. But the Song's vision of the healed human *erōs* does not occur simply as a result of engagement in intentionally therapeutic human

union. Nor, as an automatic result of baptism. Rather, the fallen human *erōs* is transformed through sustained and relentless purificatory contact with the love of God. Through a vision of intimate love, the Song invites the reader to *participate* in this contemplative and purgative process. Engagement with this mystical dimension permits the reader entrance into the heavenly mysteries that the Song conceals. Mysteries that are concealed or revealed in response to the attitude with which the Song is approached. The attitude of humility and trust, of which Elder Aimilianos speaks, is conceptualized within the unique idiom of the Song as *bridal*: the feminine principle of submissive intensity/ dynamic receptivity/ responsive passivity, that continually seeks to be emptied of itself and to be acted *upon* and *in* (penetrated) by the passionate and unitive, divine love of God.

Although the physical, emotional, intellectual—and spiritual—pleasure that the text offers the reader comes through the senses, these are senses that have been purified, rehabilitated, healed, sanctified and, ultimately, transfigured. And it is for this reason that the more common, literal reading of the Song, precludes entrance into the deeper realities of mystical union. Although correct in acknowledging the paradisiacal, and the fact that the Song is offering medication for the gendered sickness that results from the fall, for the Song's vision to be truly experienced—which is a blessedness that is beyond the senses (because it is spiritual) but that is realized through them (because we are embodied)—there must first be preparatory purification. Ushering the reader along in their ascetic journey, the Song uses human love as a mystagogical tool to transport the sense-bound worshiper into the divine realm that is beyond the senses, and in so doing communicate to him or her, the kind of relationship between the masculine and the feminine that God wants to give us—and the practical steps required to bring it about. First, obedience to the commandments, second, the individual and corporate cleansing engendered by continual exodus out of the kingdom of darkness, and third, the mystical purification of the human *erōs* by the Holy Spirit, of which the sole means of access is absolute commitment to a consecrated life of worship. If that sounds scary, consider what is being offered in response: a unique gender reality defined by holiness, purity, ease, freedom, joy, perpetual pleasure, festivity, celebration, excitement, empowerment, mystery, depth, affection, comfort, support, partnership, understanding, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual inspiration, absolute satisfaction and mutually reciprocal reverence.

The Adamic priesthood is the life of continual infilling, the life of drinking from the source of life, in unity and in community. In Eden each has exactly what they need because each is filled with the Living Spirit *Himself*, and each does not, as a result, seek that which is outside of his or her calling. Yes, our gender is not arbitrary. God's creation of us as either man or woman is a significant aspect of the calling that He has ordained for each of us, prior to our creation. Thus getting to grips with who we are, as gendered, embodied beings, and being at peace with this aspect of our reality, is a pivotal step in the revelation and release of our individual callings. The Scriptures invite us to put aside the destructive drive to overcome one another—man over woman, woman over man—and instead enter into our mutually submissive *shared calling*, as priests, prophets and kings. Further, as children of God, we have a responsibility to live out this reality, so that we can witness to the world the biblical fact that gender freedom results from proclamation of Christ's Lordship over one's life. The Church's liberation from the world's violent (in whatever form) subjugation and devaluation of femininity on the one hand, or from its assent to a distorted vision of femininity (and masculinity) that is fuelled by unaddressed grief, unhealed wounds and subterranean reservoirs of rage, on the other, is a crucial aspect of her ability to witness to a gender-obsessed generation.

As we can see, an exploration of biblical femininity has become a discussion about worship and being filled with the Spirit (or not). Which brings us to the wise virgins and St Seraphim of Sarov. What we are seeing being communicated through this parable, is, as St Seraphim of Sarov teaches, something more subtle than simply the storing up of virtue through the practice of doing good deeds (honorable though this of course is). Rather, it reveals an important mystery pertaining to the Holy Spirit. Rather than acquiring virtue in a general sense (a directive vulnerable to the temptation of legalism), the virgins instead witness to a holy, though not yet fully realized, inward imperative, to acquire the Holy Spirit. The oil that the virgins are storing up is not merely natural oil, it is the oil of God, the Holy Spirit Himself. Through acquisition of the Holy Spirit, the goal of Christian life according to St Seraphim (as well as saints such as St Herman of Alaska, St Silouan the Athonite, and St Nektarios of Aegina, who likewise worked out their salvation according to the bridal—that is unitive—principle), the worshiper is filled with the joyous oil of God. An infilling that is unending, because God is infinite. Connecting with the infinite source of love, and entering into the mystery of divine infilling, distinguishes Christian sanctification from other methods concerned with the transformation of the human *erōs* through esoteric praxis. Through Christ alone, God facilitates circumstances in which the human *erōs* is transformed through the sluicing, flushing, cleansing and polishing activity of the divine Holy Spirit, which transforms the human soul, through streams of heavenly grace. The powers accessed through practices that contradict God's will are by necessity cut off from Him, the infinite source, and are, therefore, finite in form. The gift that the Bridegroom desires to give us, however, has no end. And it is this gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit, that alone empowers the worshiper to overcome the restriction, oppression, destruction, and ultimately, death, of the power of the flesh—the source of all our gender woes.

This leads us into another exquisite mystery. The mystery of what it means to be set apart as a living vessel for God. It would seem that the unique and specific phenomena of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, which is not exactly an every day, run of the mill occurrence, would require circumstances that are likewise unique and specific. In the same way that an earthly surgeon prefers to work in an environment that is clean, secure, devoid of distractions, and facilitated by a team of specialists, likewise does Christ, the Heavenly Surgeon. And the specialist environment that He chooses to do this work in, is that of the consecrated life. A life that has been purified of worldly distractions. A life that is filled with sacred activity that electrifies the spiritual senses to the delicate, multisensory messaging of His Holy Spirit. A life that has been distinguished specifically for His Kingdom purposes. This oil of joy is the oil of consecration. The treasure that is acquired as a result of sacrificing the self for the glory of God, the biblical definition of love—“And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5.2). Absolute celibacy is a specific means of reaching Golgotha, and for those for whom it is ordained, it can be an accelerated route to the perfection that God commands of us: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5.48). However, the virginity of the maidens in the parable and the maiden in the Song, is primarily that of spiritual virginity, virginity of soul, that is—consecration. And this is a blessed state that is asked, nay commanded, of all those who have come to know, or desire to know, God as their Father: “Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord God Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6.17–18).

But what does this mean, practically? The call to holiness is something that most Christians are aware of, but its absence in our own lives is not necessarily due to disobedience. In many cases, the problem is a

lack of clarity as to what precisely it looks like in practice. The prayer, fasting and vigil of the wise virgins reinforces a lesson given to us by Adam and Eve in Eden—the primary purpose of human life on planet Earth is the worship of God. In prioritizing this activity, over all others, all the riches of heaven are revealed unto, and released into, the believer. If we put this before all else, then all else will be given to us: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6.33). Perhaps we know this, on an intellectual level. What really matters is whether or not we are living it out. The holy fast has just begun, so we are reaping the benefits of increasing what we give to God through offering prayers of repentance, and reducing what we take from God through limiting what we consume. But the calendrical schedule of services established by the Church is not the end itself. Like the individual rules assigned to ascetics by their elders, the Church in her wisdom, prescribes a corporate rule for her flock to follow. However, this obligatory rule, challenging though it may be, is simply the minimal requirement for the flock to *live*. It girds the spirit. However, it is the life of worship that emanates from this liturgical schedule that allows the spirit to fly and determines where we stand in relation to God’s holiness. And this life of worship, that is *inner* worship, can be understood through one simple image—an undivided heart with the Lord Jesus at its center, enthroned and in glory. In the peace and quiet of the wilderness, Christ is asking us to look within. Is there room to receive Him? Do we have time to honor Him as our King? Is He priority number one?

Eden communicates to us God’s will for relationship: it is tripartite in structure, complimentary, cooperative, mutually liberating, and eucharistic. By operating from a place of *thanksgiving*, a biospiritual process is generated that results in infilling. A spiritual principle demonstrated through Christ, the original icon of *kenosis*, and His prayers to the Father, which always *begin* with thanksgiving. In *giving* thanks, Christ, as His creatures Adam and Eve, the Shulamite of the Song, and the wise virgins of the parable after them, teaches us that the self-emptying of worship, agitates interior movement that results in the creation of inner space, which operates as a vacuum, drawing ever more grace into the life of the worshiper. A word of thanks has the power to completely flip reality, transforming it from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the natural to the supernatural, from the earthly to the heavenly. It, like the Song, transfers us from one reality to another that is entirely other. Thus, it might be fruitful to, if you are a man, reflect on all the graces and opportunities that are open to you as a man and give thanks for them, and if you are a woman, contemplate all the blessings and freedoms afforded you as a woman and give thanks for them too. Thanksgiving both requires, and engenders, creativity in our thinking, and has the capacity to turn apparently oppressive circumstances into blessed opportunities that have the power—if approached with humility—to set us free.

Gender freedom. It is possible, but only through Christ. Because Christ alone, was the One who responded to *oppression*, not with violent rebellion, military might or the manipulative power of magic, but with obedience to God, thanksgiving, and forgiveness. “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11.25). These are not easy words. But this is not a suggestion, it is a commandment. God cannot demand of us what is impossible. Therefore, these words, as difficult as they might be to accept, must be possible to obey. Through the healing power of Christ’s love, the wounds we have acquired in relation to gender, whether emotional, psychological, or physical, the wounds that make it so hard to forgive, can and will be healed by Christ, the Surgeon of our souls: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2.24). He is poised and waiting, with healing under His wings: do we have the courage to

invite Him into the buried pain and broken places that inhibit us from forgiving all those who have hurt us in this way, and in so doing, bring about release?

There has never been as much information circulating about gender as at this current time, yet there is more confusion about this topic than ever before. The codification and interrogation of this aspect of our reality by the academy has made it very complicated, but away from the manipulation of the media industry and the programming of the entertainment industry, in the stillness of the desert, masculinity...femininity...being a man...being a woman...is actually rather...simple. What has emerged for me, through the writing of this talk, is this: men and women are more similar than they are different. In their natural, differentiated state—man/ woman—they are at root, the same—human. We are made in the image of God. Thus, we reflect oneness. We are different but we are the same: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1.27). We are two, but ultimately, we are one: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28).