What is the value of a little girl? That question is answered in a multiplicity of ways from one society to another around the world. Even within one culture, various subcultures vary greatly in the value attached to girls. Even within the same city . . . .

♦ Kamatapura in the city of Bombay is a world in which the value of the girl child is a very real issue defined in terms of hard currency. Block after block of multistory buildings are home to tens of thousands of Nepali women and girls, tricked into slavery in the commercial sex trade. Their lives and futures have been sold by their impoverished parents for as little as $25, and they are brutalized and tortured until they began to accept the inevitability of their fate. Their value to their “employers” will diminish with their age and with the increasingly probable onset of AIDS and sexual disease.

♦ Only kilometers away in the same city, the value of a woman is being defined very differently but with no less distortion. The exploding film industry of “Bollywood” in Bombay is providing a whole new definition to the value of a woman in India. Based on beauty and blatant sexuality, the up-and-coming movie stars are becoming the new idols in Indian culture. Like their voluptuous predecessors who decorate the walls of Hindu temples, 21st century goddesses cover the gaudy billboards of Bombay’s teeming streets. However rich and famous, their value as a woman is no less distorted than that of their sisters in Kamatapura.

♦ Minutes away in the prestigious neighborhoods of old Bombay, young women of affluence from high caste families pursue higher degrees while their mothers enjoy the cultural and social life of the city. Theirs is the challenge of finding meaning and identity in a world of cultural cross-currents. Will they be the dutiful daughters of tradition or “new Indian women”, finding significance through education, wealth, and professional attainment?

In a relatively small number of societies in our world, women are given dominant roles with lineage being traced through their ancestral line. In others, the value of women and their corresponding roles are roughly comparable to those of the male members of their society, with equivalent roles and responsibilities.

Yet in far too much of the world, women are viewed as lesser in value, even as children of “a lesser god”. While the birth of a male child is cause for great celebration, the birth of a girl child is frequently attended by sadness and solemnity. From her birth, a girl is considered little more than the property of the male members of her family. She may be neglected, underfed, undereducated, abused and sold as property. Her primary significance as a person is derived from her relationship with the male members of her family, whether fathers, husbands or sons. Her value is associated with her ability to bear a child, particularly a male child. Her life and future are to a great extent in the hands of men.
But how does God view the girl child and woman? What is their value in His eyes?
According to the creation account in Genesis, woman is a creation of God (Gen. 1:27; Mark 10:6; 1 Cor. 11:13), lovingly made in His very own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26; 5:1). She was created as an equal partner and helper for man, to serve God with him (2:18). God blessed the woman He created (Gen. 5:2) and gave her authority with man over the other lifeforms He had fashioned (Gen. 1:28-30). As God saw woman as a part of His creation, He valued her as good in His eyes (vs. 31).

The value God places on His female creation is revealed in the roles He ordained them to fill in accomplishing His eternal purposes at pivotal moments in the history of His people. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was called by God as a prophetess and leader during the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt (Exodus 15:21). Deborah, a prophetess and wife of Laapidoth, was chosen by God to lead the Israelites into victorious battle against the Canaanites (Judges 4). Ruth, a Moabite woman, established herself in Israel’s history by becoming the ancestress of King David (Ruth 4:18-22) and Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1 & 5). The Jewess Esther was sovereignty ordained by God to become queen in a land of exile in order to deliver His people from destruction (Esther 4:14).

The record of the New Testament is just as illuminating in the ways women were used as instruments of God’s purposes in the life and ministry of His Son Jesus. God’s favor with the young Mary was dramatically pronounced by an angel who announced that she would give birth to the incarnate Son of God (Luke 1:30,31). After His birth, the elderly prophetess Anna attended the infant Jesus’ presentation at the temple and announced the significance of His birth “to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36-38).

During the terrifying hours of Jesus’ crucifixion when the earth shook in agony, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee faithfully stayed to attend their dying Lord (Matt. 27:55-56). After Jesus’ death, it was devoted women disciples who followed to the place where His body had been taken, returned with spices for burial, and discovered that He had risen from the dead (Luke 23:55-6; 24:1-6). Theirs was the joy of first announcing the message of Jesus’ resurrection that would forever change the course of human destiny!

If how one treats others corresponds to the value one places on them, the manner in which Jesus treated women during His life on earth is also revealing. As He traveled with His disciples through Samaria, Jesus demonstrated His value for a Samaritan woman at the well by engaging her in conversation and revealing His identity as the Messiah (John 4:26). In spite of His disciples surprise at His behavior and the woman’s less than circumspect reputation, Jesus’ actions spoke clearly that the Samaritan woman was worthy of hearing and receiving Truth and sharing it with others in her community. Amazingly to those who watched, this woman mattered to the Son of God.
Jesus demonstrated respect and concern for women in a culture that frequently relegated them to secondary, even menial, status. For example, His relationship with Mary and Martha is mirrored in His concern for them at their brother’s death (John 11). The way in which the sisters freely related their frustrations and fears to Jesus speaks to the level of friendship that He shared with them as well as with their brother (vs. 21, 28, 32). This was the Mary who anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume and wiped His feet with her hair (John 12:1-3). On that occasion when Judas publicly objected to her extravagant action, Jesus publicly defended Mary’s act of devotion to her Lord (John 12:7).

Another meaningful glimpse of Jesus’ awareness and concern for women is provided in Luke 13: 10-17. While teaching in a synagogue, the Master Teacher caught sight of a woman who had been crippled eighteen years. Calling her to Himself, He laid His hands on her and healed her - to the indignation of those watching. Rebuking His critics for their hypocrisy, Jesus honored the rejoicing woman with a reminder that she was “a daughter of Abraham”, deserving of the freedom from bondage that He bestowed (vs. 16).

In Luke 8, both a young girl who has died and an older woman with a 12-year history of bleeding are the focus of the compassionate Son of God. While on His way to pray over Jairus’ young daughter, Jesus sensed that healing had come to someone in the crowd who touched Him. Knowing in fact who had touched Him, the Lord nonetheless called the woman with an issue of blood out of the crowd and commended her publicly for her great faith (8:47-48).

Even a woman who was imminently to be stoned by the religious leaders of the day was treated with concern and dignity by the Son of God. The apostle John records a dramatic scene in which a woman caught in the act of adultery was physically forced before Jesus by the accusing Pharisees (John 8:1-11). When questioned about what this sinful woman’s fate should be, Jesus did not add to her humiliation. Instead He addressed her directly, recognizing her sin without condemning her, offering her a future free from the bondage of sin. Yes, by His consistently compassionate actions toward them and a willingness to include them in His life and ministry, Jesus revealed time and again that women were created as daughters of God, intended recipients of His love and redemptive work.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, it was left to His disciples to carry on His work, empowered by the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15, Acts 2:4). According to the record of New Testament writers, women along with men were called, gifted and empowered by God for diverse ministries within the Early Church. Among the women named and commended for their active role were: Priscilla, a teacher and co-worker with the Apostle Paul (Rom. 16:3; Acts 18:23-28), Phoebe, a deaconess (Rom 16:1-2); and Junia, an apostle (Rom. 16:7). Throughout Paul’s writings, a number of women are commended for their help in the ministries of the fledgling church (Rom. 16:1-12). It is evident that women were not only created by God and recipients of Christ’s redemption, but an integral part of the Spirit-empowered ministries of the Body of Christ.

This is not to say that the traditional roles of women are not valued in Scripture.
For contemporary women in Western societies who tend to undervalue the roles of wife and mother, God’s Word provides a healthy balance. The woman of Proverbs 31 would challenge any 21st century counterpart in industriousness and entrepreneurial enterprise. Yet she is also a trustworthy, devoted wife and involved mother. While commended for her excellence outside the home, she is equally commended for her commitment to those within her home.

The New Testament includes numerous passages in which women are exhorted in their roles as wives and mothers. In Paul’s letter to Titus, he instructs older women to instruct young women to love their husbands and children (Titus 2:3-4). The apostle Peter also encourages respectful, loving, submitted relationships between wives and husbands in 1 Peter 3:1-7. Paul clearly considered the relationship of husbands and wives to be an important topic in the life of faith as he addresses the subject again at length when writing to the church in Ephesus (Ephes. 5:22-33).

It is significant to note the caring response of God recorded in Scripture to the concerns of women related to their traditional cultural roles. The agony of Hannah over her inability to bear a son touched the heart of her heavenly Father, and He granted her a son (1 Sam. 1:15-20). Similarly, God knew the disgrace of Elisabeth’s barrenness in a Middle Eastern culture and blessed her with a son who would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah (Luke 1:7, 13, 24-25). While God has plans and purposes for His female creation that frequently exceed and are not limited to the traditional roles of culture, He is clearly compassionate and sensitive to women’s traditional roles as well.

Then what is the biblical responsibility of the Church to 21st century women? Given the biblical record of God’s creation, His love and desired redemption of all humankind, the message of the Gospel is good news to be proclaimed and practiced by the Body of Christ. For women around the world, especially those who have suffered injustice, the message of the transforming love of Christ is relevant, healing, and liberating . . .

For women who have been betrayed by their earthly fathers, God is a heavenly Father who will never betray their trust (Deut. 33:26-27; Psalm 62:5-8).

For women who have suffered rejection in their earthly community, faith in the One who was also rejected brings them into a loving community of faith (Ephes. 2:19-22).

For those who have lost their earthly home through conflict and war, God promises an eternal home in security where they will forever be with Him (John 14:1-3).

For women of affluence who lack peace and purpose, Jesus offers His peace and a meaningful new life with eternal significance (2 Cor. 5:17).
But if the church brings women to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, is its’ responsibility complete? According to the teachings of the Apostle Paul, the Church is also responsible to educate believers to recognize and utilize their God-given gifts for the good of the interdependent Body of Christ (I Cor. 12). In a world where the contribution of women is frequently overlooked, minimized, or narrowly defined by tradition, the message that God works in all persons and gives the manifestation of His Spirit to every believer (I Cor. 12:6-7) is a message that must be heard. Only then can women around the world fully realize the purposes for which a loving God has given them life.

Conclusion
While the birth of a daughter is greeted with sadness and disappointment in too many parts of our world, the heavenly Father rejoices in the life of every girl-child born. They have been created by God in His image and gifted for His purposes and glory. May God help us His church to value His creation. May we lead women around the world to redemption through Jesus Christ and to meaningful Spirit-empowered lives through which their Heavenly Father will be glorified!