

WOMEN IN JESUS' MINISTRY AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

ABSTRACT

Jesus deliberately undermined the traditional patriarchal framework so obviously a part of Old Testament culture and religion. His teachings and way of life were such that, according to the contention of many, only in support of an equalitarian view of male-female. This analysis of Jesus stance on women has become increasingly accepted as the correct interpretation of the relevant material in the four Gospels. This research explores the perspective of Jesus concerning women and how well their relationship was while He was ministering on earth. Considering this, examples of women Jesus came across are discussed. It is probable that Jesus' teachings attracted women in part because of the new roles and equal status they were granted in the Christian community. There were many cults in Greece and Rome that were for men only or, at best, allowed women to participate in very limited ways. Judaism offered women proselytes a special restriction place at best, for they were faced with the rabbinic restrictions that limited their participation in religious functions. While women were able neither to make up the quorum necessary to found a synagogue, nor to receive the Jewish covenant sign, these limitations did not exist in the Christian community. The necessary and sufficient explanation of why Christianity differed from its religious mother, Judaism, in these matters is that Jesus broke with both biblical and rabbinic traditions that restricted women's roles in religious practices, and that He rejected attempts to devalue the worth of a woman, or her word of witness. This was a right that women did not have in contemporary Judaism or in many pagan cults.

Keywords: Disciples, Gospels, Jesus, Women.

Introduction

It's true that Jesus choose twelve disciples which all of them were men, but from the beginning of Jesus ministry to the end, women were always around him working tirelessly. Jesus' high regard for women is seen in how He recognized their intrinsic equality with men, in how He ministered to women, and in the dignity, He accorded to women during his ministry. Jesus' recognition of role distinctions for men and women is demonstrated by His choosing only men to serve as His apostles with their primary tasks

of preaching, teaching, and governing. Women, however, served in other important capacities, such as praying, providing financial assistance, ministering to physical needs, voicing their theological understanding, and witnessing to the resurrection.

Some may question whether Jesus' teaching and practice regarding the status of women harmonize with the rest of Biblical truth. Was His teaching radically different from Old Testament revelation? Are Jesus and Paul contradictory? Is a wife's submission to her husband a one-way street, or are there mutual aspects involved in the teaching about submission?¹ Different positions have been taken relative to these questions, ranging from that of radical feminists² to more traditional evangelical views. The evangelical community seeks to interpret the text as inspired and authoritative. Such is the case with a number of evangelical feminists who are discarding the more traditional viewpoints.³

Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus

At this moment, the researcher wants to look at women in the life and teaching of Jesus, therefore the main objective is to show that Jesus placed a high value on women in his ministry. One starting place for the evidence in the New Testament is to examine the position of women in the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. The evidence in the four Gospels demonstrates that our Lord placed a high value on women, while He continued to recognize role peculiarities for men and women.

Christ Placed a High Value on Women. The place of women in the first-century Roman world and in Judaism has been well documented and set forth in several recent books.⁴ Most often, women were regarded as second-class citizens. Even the Old Testament presents situations where women were depersonalized. But such indications do not equal endorsement. God never authorized or approved behavior that depersonalized women. There are other things recorded in Scripture such as child sacrifice, polygamy, ritualistic sex in religion, and wife abuse that have never been sanctioned by God. However, Jesus' regard for women was much different from that of His contemporaries. Evans terms Jesus' approach to women as "revolutionary"

¹ Alvera Mickelsen, *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 71.

² Letty M. Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 130.

³ Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), p. 60.

⁴ James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 20.

for His era.⁵ But was His treatment of women out of character with Old Testament revelation, or with later New Testament practice?

Additionally, Jesus demonstrated the high value he placed on women by recognizing their intrinsic value as persons. For Christ, women have an intrinsic value equal to that of men. Jesus said, “. . . at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (Matthew 19:4; cf. Genesis 1:27). Women are created in the image of God just as men are. Like men, they have self awareness, personal freedom, a measure of self-determination, and personal responsibility for their actions.

Regarding this Scanzoni and Hardesty submit that “Jesus came to earth not primarily as a male but as a person. He treated women not primarily as females but as human beings.”⁶ Jesus recognized women as fellow human beings. Disciples come in two sexes, male and female. Females are seen by Jesus as genuine persons, not simply as the objects of male desire. Hurley believes “the foundation-stone of Jesus’ attitude toward women was his vision of them as persons to whom and for whom he had come. He did not perceive them primarily in terms of their sex, age or marital status; he seems to have considered them in terms of their relation (or lack of one) to God.”⁷

Also, Jesus Demonstrated the High Value He Placed on Women by Ministering to Women. Another way in which Jesus showed the high value He placed on women was in ministering to them in a vital and practical manner-both physically and spiritually. Numerous healings and the casting out of demons from women display Jesus’ care and concern for women. Several such incidents are only briefly recorded. Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law and allowed her in return to minister to Him (Mark 1:30-31; Matthew 8:14-15; Luke 4:38-39). Jesus also was concerned for a widow in Nain (Luke 7:11-15). He met her as she was weeping just before burying her only son. With compassion, He spoke to her and raised her son to life. Later, Christ healed a woman who was hopelessly bent over for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17). Courageously, on the Sabbath and inside the synagogue before hostile religious leaders, Jesus helped and defended this poor woman. He spoke to her, tenderly placed His hands on her, and caused her to stand erect, for which she glorified God. He then acknowledged her equal standing with men in Israel’s religious heritage by referring to her as a daughter of Abraham (cf. John 8:33, 39).

⁵ Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women’s Roles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), P. 24

⁶ Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women’s Liberation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974), p. 56.

⁷ James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 83

The fourth Gospel records Jesus' concern for His mother's welfare as voiced in His dying words to John (19:26-27). Jesus wanted His mother to be cared for properly after His death. Besides ministering to physical needs, Jesus dealt with women spiritually. The foremost example of this is found in John 4.⁸ Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman as an individual and met her specific needs. Jesus apparently showed her the same attention, care and interest He showed to men. In fact, an interesting contrast is evident between Nicodemus (chapter 3) and the Samaritan woman (chapter 4). He was secretive; she was open. He doubted; she accepted. Thus, Jesus showed how highly He valued women by ministering to them and meeting their needs—even the need to be heard. He healed women, dialogued with them, and showed women the same care and concern He showed to men.⁹

Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated the high value He placed on women by according them dignity in his ministry. Jesus accorded dignity to women in His ministry in three ways: by employing women as illustrations in His teaching, by teaching women theological truths, and by having women participate in His life and ministry. Jesus' ministry gave a renewed respect to the place of women in His society. Jesus not only chose women to illustrate His teaching, but also was concerned that women should be allowed to sit under His teaching as well. This may not seem surprising to those ready to enter the twenty-first century, but it was unusual in Jesus' day.

An additional way that Jesus accorded dignity to women during His ministry was in having women participate in His life and ministry. Luke 2 mentions both the briefest and the most extensive of female associations in the life of Jesus. Anna of Asher was a godly, aged prophetess who resided in the temple area (Luke 2:36-38).¹⁰

The Relationship between Jesus and Women in His Ministry

Christ performs great signs and wonders on behalf of women in his ministry. However, how did Jesus relate to women? How did He treat them? There are some instances in the scriptures whereby Jesus communicates to women during his ministry here on earth.

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975).

⁹ Aida Bensaçon Spencer, "Women in the Church: A Biblical Study of the Role of Women in the Church", *Trinity Journal* 8:1 (Spring, 1987).

¹⁰ James A. Borland, "*Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus*" (1991). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 110.

Jesus Made Provision for His Mother: the first thing to note is how Jesus related to his mother. A man's true self is often best revealed in his own home, to those who are closely associated with him. What was Jesus' attitude toward His mother? How did He regard her status as a woman? How did He relate to her? The gospels present four incidents that give us some indications regarding Jesus' relation to Mary. The first of these was at the Passover visit in Jerusalem when Jesus at the age of 12 was becoming a *bar-mitzvah*, a son of the law (Luke 2:41-51). It was a great epoch in Jesus' life, for He now revealed a consciousness of His Messianic mission. The second episode took place in Cana, where, according to John's Gospel, Jesus performed His first miracle, or "sign" (John 2:1-12). Jesus, His disciples, and His mother were guests at a wedding festival. He was now nearly 30 years of age.¹¹ The third incident apparently occurred at Capernaum (Mark 3:19), where a large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus teach (Matt 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21). At this time our Lord was so busy that He scarcely had time to eat (Mark 3:20). Reports of this reached His family, who were concerned not only about His physical well-being but about His mental balance, as well. In the final scene we see Mary standing by the cross of Jesus (John 19:25-27). Jesus loved His mother. What could He say that would brighten her heart at such a time? All He could do was to commit her to the care of the beloved disciple John, who accepted the sacred trust given him.¹²

An Adulterous Woman Finds Forgiveness: The story of the adulterous woman (John 7:53-8:11) discloses Jesus' tender dealings with women—in this case, a woman of ill repute. The account asserts that she was "caught in the act of adultery" (John 8:4, RSV). But the record makes it clear that she was brought to Jesus for the sole purpose of trapping Him into saying something that could be used against Him.³⁸ They hoped He would either acquit the woman, thus in effect setting aside the Law of Moses, or condemn her, thus challenging the Roman authorities who alone had the right to impose capital punishment. These would-be guardians of the law revealed their own male prejudices. Why was not the man who had committed adultery with her also brought before Jesus? Why was he allowed to escape?³⁹ According to the Mosaic law both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be executed (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). Though He did not condone the behavior of the adulterous woman, He did not condemn her, but admonished her, "Go, and do not sin again."¹³

¹¹ Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, p. 94.

¹² Alicia Craig Faxon, *Women and Jesus*, p. 11.

¹³ David Daube, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69 (1950): 138.

Sympathizing women from Jerusalem: Another scene near the close of Jesus' life is worth noting. On the way to Golgotha to be crucified, Jesus was attracted by the demonstration of grief by a company of women who followed Him on the *Via Dolorosa* (Luke 23:27-31). This company apparently consisted of sympathizing women from Jerusalem. Alfred Plummer notes, "In the Gospels there is no instance of a woman being hostile to Christ." Although He was touched by the grief of these Jerusalem women, He felt that it was misplaced. Our Lord was not being driven to an unwilling death but was voluntarily giving His life for the world—even for them. These women would do better to weep for the same cause for which He wept—a doomed Jerusalem whose judgments might have been averted. "Weep for yourselves and for your children," He urged (w. 28, RSV). He foresaw the doom of Jerusalem. If an innocent one like Jesus could be crucified, what would be the fate of guilty Jerusalem?¹⁴

Women in Jesus Ministry

Jesus appointed twelve men as his disciples. This is sometimes used as a reason why women should not be in particular forms of ministry and leadership, but it is more often seen as an inevitable concession to the culture of the day: the ministry of women apostles would have been unacceptable when the testimony of a woman was disregarded in a court of law. The choice of twelve men was also a symbolic act: twelve male apostles, reminiscent of the ancient patriarchs, was an eschatological sign denoting that Jesus was reconstituting the ancient people of God.

However, while the twelve clearly have a special place, it is also clear that they were not intended to be unique in ministry, first because the nature of ministry had changed, and second because Jesus also chose and sent out others.¹⁵ Among this number, and like the twelve men, close to Jesus, were a number of women followers, whose pattern of discipleship and potential leadership closely mirrors that of the men. The fact that women were followers at all, in a culture where few women were literate or had any formal education, is in contrast to the accepted practices of the day (women were discouraged in rabbinic laws from leaving their homes). By highlighting findings from recent scholarship on the Gospels, it is possible to argue that Jesus developed women as leaders by encouraging them to follow him in preparation for when they in turn would lead others.

Luke 8:1-3 is one key passage. Here we see that a number of women accompanied Jesus, along with the twelve (who are listed in 6:12-19). In his

¹⁴ Walter F. Specht, *Jesus and Women*

¹⁵ Carolyn Custis James, *Lost Women of the Bible* (Zondervan, 2005).

study of named women in the Gospels, *Gospel Women*, Richard Bauckham, cites a definition of this ‘summary statement’: it indicates that the circumstances described happened ‘repeatedly within an indefinite period of time’. In other words, while this is one small reference, it indicates that women regularly accompanied Jesus in this way.¹⁶

Throughout the Gospels there are two groups of disciples – those who left their homes and families literally to follow Jesus, and others who listened to Jesus as he came to them. Luke reminds his readers here that women were among those who literally followed Jesus as well as among those who flocked to hear his teaching. Bauckham makes it clear that these women were not being assigned a gender-specific role, such as women ordinarily played in a family situation.

All the Synoptic Gospels speak of women accompanying Jesus in his travelling ministry (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49). They are there at the cross (Luke 23:27,49) and the tomb (Luke 23:49), which must have taken some courage. They witnessed the resurrection (Luke 24:1-11). In John’s Gospel, women are given places as exemplary disciples and full-fledged apostles, which some have argued is evidence for women’s leadership in the Johannine community. Mary Magdalene is the premier example.¹⁷

In Luke 9 we read how the twelve are sent out; Jesus gave them ‘power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill’ (9:1-2). This is one of relatively few occasions in the Gospels where we see the twelve involved in ministry (9:6).

In chapter 10, we read how seventy-two others are sent out, and it seems highly likely that women are included among these), given the emphasis Jesus places on the women who followed Jesus, and that there are hints in the New Testament of husband and wife missionary teams (Priscilla and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia in Romans 16:3 and 7) and of pairs of women (Tryphena and Tryphosa in Romans 16:12). Thus women, while not being chosen in the same way as the twelve, were certainly ‘with’ Jesus, invested in, and then entrusted with ministry. Therefore, the women were with Jesus throughout his ministry, observing him, and being prepared for the time

¹⁶ Aída Besançon Spencer, ‘Jesus’ Treatment of Women in the Gospels’ in RW Pierce and RM Groothuis (eds) *Discovering Biblical Equality* (IVP, 2005).

¹⁷ Ruth B Edwards, *The Case for Women’s Ministry* (SPCK, 1989).

when, after the resurrection, they in turn would be commissioned for ministry.¹⁸

The Place of Women in the Contemporary Ministry

Virtually in the contemporary time, the place of women cannot be over emphasised, and however, women are doing well and better than men in the ministry nowadays (In the contemporary time). More importantly, women are zealous in the work of the Lord than men almost all our churches in the modern day. In addition, men are reluctant in serving the Lord and women are taken roughly all group and units in the church, in fact they dominated all groups.

Furthermore, women have contributed much to the ministry of the church throughout history. However, their role in these areas has never been free from controversy. Today, most church bodies are discussing the place of women in their ministries. Crucial to these discussions for many of us are the matters of faithful biblical interpretation. Modern debates over the ordination of women often miss the crucial and basic issues of the holistic concept of the ministry of the Church reflected in the New Testament. Of course, no person should be ordained or given any responsibilities of ministry within the Church because of gender or for the sake of a “point.” On the other hand, we have affirmed in the Church that no person, called and gifted by God, should be denied any role of ministry or leadership in the Church because of one’s gender or the other.

Conclusion

Having said, the role of Women in Jesus ministry, however, the researcher wants to contextualize it in our own context, that it women in the ministry today their roles and place in the church. In contrast to the Rabbis, Jesus used many illustrations from the life experiences of women. He obviously did not regard them as second-rate human beings but in every respect as equal to men. When questioned regarding divorce, He set forth God’s ideal of marriage as an inviolable lifelong union of a man and a woman. He plainly condemned the trivial procedure by which men in His day divorced their wives.

Significantly, Jesus’ own relation with women, and His treatment of them as equals, was revolutionary in His time. He freely associated with, and presented His message to, both men and women. Women were treated in every sense as on the same level with men. He treated His own mother with respect and deference and was concerned about providing for her future

¹⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (T&T Clark, 2002), 56.

even as He hung on the cross. He departed from Jewish conventions and rules of propriety by conversing with women and teaching them publicly and privately. Many of His miracles were performed on behalf of women.

More than once He risked ceremonial defilement to minister to them. Among His special friends were such women as Martha and Mary of Bethany. He graciously accepted Mary's affectionate act of anointing and described it as a beautiful expression of love. Although He did not designate women as apostles, He did accept a group of Galilean women as followers, permitting them to accompany Him in His mission and accepting their financial support. While Jesus accepted the devotion and love of women, His association with them was always on a high spiritual plane.

Conclusively, the researcher wants to assert that in the contemporary time any ministry that will impact lives and change the situations facing the church the roles and place of women is very important. Therefore, if you think about choir in the church women were dominated, people who are going out for evangelism women were dominated and other groups in the church, Thus by His (Jesus) style of life, in opposition to the age in which He lived, and by His open acceptance of women and His respect for their personalities, Jesus definitely championed women's right to honour and dignity.

Sources

Bauckham, Richard *Gospel Women*. Chicago: T&T Clark, 2002.

Borland, James A. "Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus" *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 110. 1991.

Brown, Raymond E. "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 36. 1975.

Daube, David "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69. 1950.

Edwards, Ruth B *The Case for Women's Ministry*. SPCK, 1989.

Evans, Mary J. *Women in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women's Roles*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983.

Faxon, Alicia Craig *Women and Jesus*.

Hull, Gretchen Gaebelein *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1987.

Hurley, James B. *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.

James, Carolyn Custis *Lost Women of the Bible*. Zondervan, 2005.

Jewett, Paul K. *Man as Male and Female*.

- Mickelsen, Alvera *Women, Authority and the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986.
- Russell, Letty M. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985.
- Scanzoni Letha and Hardesty, Nancy *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974.
- Spencer, Aida Bensaçon "Women in the Church: A Biblical Study of the Role of Women in the Church", *Trinity Journal* 8:1 Spring, 1987.
- Spencer, Aída Bensaçon 'Jesus' Treatment of Women in the Gospels' in RW Pierce and RM Groothuis (eds) *Discovering Biblical Equality*. IVP, 2005.