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Jesus and women.

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Timothy Geddert

A New Vision for Humanity

With the possible exception of the angel's announcement of the coming conception, the scriptural record never shows us Mary at home. She is hurrying off to Elizabeth, then going to Bethlehem for the census, then to Jerusalem for purification rites, down to Egypt, back to Nazareth, then to Jerusalem again for Passover, to Cana for the wedding, to Capernaum, to a city near the Sea of Galilee with her other sons to persuade Jesus to come home, and finally to Jerusalem again. — Dorothy A. Pape, In Search of God's Ideal Woman

Jesus lived in an age of sexual discrimination. Women were the objects of abuse and dehumanization. Most were barred from full participation in public life and from leadership roles in Jewish religion.

Twentieth-century Christians disagree whether women are to be excluded from certain leadership roles

because of their sex. Those who say some leadership roles are divinely ordained to be filled only by men would deny that the issue is sexual discrimination. The issue is rather "creation order" (see Ch. 3). Those who believe that women should participate fully at all levels of church ministry and leadership see the exclusion of women from some ministry roles as a form of sexual discrimination.

These two issues (discrimination and exclusion) were, in fact, two sides of the same coin in first-century Palestine. The radical way in which Jesus related to women dealt with both issues at the same time and has important implications for the contemporary church seeking to live out Jesus' vision for humanity.

A MAN OUT OF STEP WITH HIS WORLD

Jesus, though divine, knew how to relate to humankind; though righteous, how to relate to sinners; though king of kings, how to relate to common people; and though a man, how to relate to women. Dorothy Sayers in Are Women Human? writes:

They [women] had never known a man like this Man — there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend... (p. 47).

Jesus' way of relating to women contrasted sharply with the rabbis' way. Their approach was to foster at-

titudes and introduce legislation designed to keep women out of public life as far as possible. In their eyes, women had two primary roles: to raise children for their husbands, and to satisfy their husband's sexual desires lest he satisfy them immorally elsewhere. No rabbi would have had women disciples, and some Jewish religious groups shunned the company of women altogether.

In contrast to the rabbis, Jesus related openly and naturally with women of all sorts, respectable and immoral (Lk. 7:37; 8:2,3; Jn. 4:17,18), "clean" and "unclean" (Mk. 5:30-34). He touched them (Mk. 1:31) and let them touch him (Lk. 7:39). He even defended a sinful woman for kissing him in public (Lk. 7:45-47)!

Women were also a part of the entourage that followed Jesus as he traveled around the country ministering to the crowds (Lk. 8:1-3). Not only did women accompany him, they ministered to him (Mk. 15:41), with him (Lk. 8:1-3), and for him (Jn. 4:28-30, 39-42).

Jesus openly engaged in theological discussions with women (Jn. 4:7-26; 11:21-27; Mk. 7:24-29), something no rabbi of the first century would have considered. He entrusted some of his most important self-revelations to women. To the woman at the well he revealed himself as Christ [Messiah] and "I am" [i.e., Yahweh] (cf. Jn. 4:25,26). To Martha he revealed himself as the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25). In return, women were among those who most clearly understood his identity (Jn. 11:27) and his mission (Mk. 14:3-9). Interestingly, the resurrection message was first entrusted to women by the angel who commissioned them to tell the male disciples (Mk. 16:7; Jn. 20:18-20).

In Luke 10:38-41 Jesus chides Martha for being distracted with the meal preparations and affirms her sis-

ter Mary who “sat at the Lord's feet.” The incident is much more than a call to value the contemplative life over the active. It is a clear endorsement of theological education for women. Mary had taken the posture of a rabbi's disciple. Jesus implicitly invites Martha to join her there.

PRINCIPLES THAT SHAPED JESUS' WAY OF RELATING TO WOMEN

What vision motivated Jesus to relate to women as he did? Jesus' mission was to usher in God's Kingdom, a kingdom defined as “doing God's will on earth, as it is done in heaven” (Mt. 6:10). His mission was to act out God's will in all things and to call and prepare followers to do the same. This meant living by principles that were at odds with his contemporaries. What principles influenced the way Jesus related to people and to women in particular?

Jesus Related to People as People

We are accustomed to defining “male” and “female” in terms of their respective roles in the home, society, and the church. People living in the first century did so even more sharply. Jesus' startling contribution was not to take the “feminine role” and modify it. Instead, he ignored it! Some may object to this statement on the grounds that he chose only men as his twelve official disciples. It is true that only men were selected for this role and we must assess the significance of this fact. But apart from his selection of apostles, it is impossible to detect any difference between the way Jesus treated men and the way he treated women.

Jesus consistently lessened the significance of religious status, social standing, and economic situation. For Jesus, religious status counted for nothing and its lack was not a deficiency. Wealth did not increase one's worth nor poverty decrease it. The handicapped were as important as the able-bodied, the servant as important as the master, the child as important as the parent. If Jesus made any "class" distinctions at all, it was to engage in affirmative action, helping the underprivileged, the marginalized, and the oppressed gain what society denied them.

Jesus clearly looked beyond his own race, nation, and gender. Throughout his ministry, and decisively through his death, Jesus prepared the way so that Gentiles could be members alongside and equal to Jews in God's new humanity. By his actions, Jesus showed that a woman has an intrinsic value just as great as that of a man. For Jesus, the equality of male and female was not a distant goal; it was a self-evident fact.

Jesus worked in a variety of ways to eliminate strictly enforced differences of role based on gender. He gave women public roles unheard of in their society; and when men fought for authority and honor he called them to accept precisely that to which first-century women were normally consigned — servanthood. He practiced it supremely himself (Mk. 10:35-45).

Jesus Dealt with the Root Cause of Sexual Discrimination

One of the main reasons women were the objects of sexual discrimination in first-century Palestine was that men viewed them first and foremost as sexual beings, not as human beings. Jesus reversed that priority.

He attacked the problem of sexual discrimination at its root, male lust.

First-century rabbis blamed women for most immoral sexual behavior (see Jn. 8:3-6). Women were seen as temptresses. The solution was to keep women out of public life (so that men would not be tempted) and in the home (where a woman could satisfy her husband's sexual desires).

Jesus agreed with the Jewish rabbis that lust is wrong, but he disagreed that it was inevitable in the presence of a woman. When Jesus said, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has adulterated her already in his heart" (Mt. 5:28), he did much more than move the basis of adultery from open actions to hidden thoughts. He provided a radically new solution to the problem of lust. Adultery was to be prevented by making men responsible for their own lustful thoughts, not by removing women from their sight.

Lust is inevitable for men if women are viewed first and foremost as sexual beings whose primary function is to satisfy men's sexual desire. It is deliberate sin if women are first and foremost human beings made in God's image.

Jesus Made Family Relationships Subordinate to Kingdom Work

In the first century, a woman was defined almost exclusively in terms of her family relations. One day a Jewish woman called out to Jesus, "Blessed is the mother who gave birth and nursed you" (Lk. 11:27). Jesus countered with "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (11:28). Jesus made it clear that a woman's status and blessedness do not depend on the children she bears, however great they may be. He

also clearly implied that when a woman orders the priorities of her life, she must never rank motherhood higher than kingdom work. But Jesus went even further. He declared that his own mother, the one whom this unnamed Jewess called "blessed," could not be considered a member of Jesus' true family unless she qualified, not by physical parenthood, but by her own obedience to God's will (Mk. 3:31-35).

Women, like men, are blessed if they hear God's word and obey. When Jesus looked down from his cross and declared to Mary and John, "Behold your son—behold your mother" (Jn. 19:25-27), he was not merely caring for his physical mother. He was defining his spiritual family. Mary and John, a woman and a man, stand there as models of discipleship and members of a spiritual family because they heard God's word and obeyed. They followed Jesus to his cross.

Jesus Refused to Accept the Fallen World as Normal

No aspect of Jesus' vision has such far-reaching implications as the fact that he simply refused to accept the fallen conditions of this world as normal.

According to the rabbis, if men normally look on women lustfully, women should be excluded from public life. Jesus refused to accept what was common as the norm. The ideal is the norm, not common behavior.

Jesus used the same approach when asked what grounds made divorce legitimate (Mk. 12:18-27). His questioners assumed that the fallen world was the norm and that its failures had to be reckoned with and controlled. Jesus said that God's original intention at creation is the norm. The kingdom of God is not defined as humans doing their own will in the least destructive

way. It is defined as humans doing God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. The ideal is the norm.

Clearly we live in a fallen world, and Jesus knew that better than any of us. In a fallen world we need guidelines to help regulate our affairs, but Jesus refused to accept the fallen world as the norm. Many of his teachings appear foolish when evaluated by the standards of this world. The problem is with the world, not with Jesus' vision of the kingdom.

JESUS' EARLIEST FOLLOWERS CATCH THE VISION

Jesus' own attitude to the question of gender relations was significantly affected by his "other-worldly" vision. He called his followers to fix their eyes on a kingdom in which the child, the servant, and women provide models of greatness. He called humanity to look back to the time before sin corrupted them and to see God's creative design. He called humanity to look forward past their final redemption to see themselves and each other as they were destined finally to be. He called humanity to look around and see God's will coming to pass on earth as it already operated in heaven. He called his followers to live by his vision of the kingdom.

The gospel writers were among the first to catch the vision. We know that because they passed on the stories about Jesus' revolutionary way of treating humanity, and women in particular. But we also know it because they structured their gospel accounts in ways which challenge the discerning reader to catch the vision, especially with regard to gender relations.

At strategic points in his narrative, Mark places stories of women who practiced active faith (5:25-34; 7:25-

30) and self-denying service (12:41-44; 14:3-9) to contrast uncomprehending, faithless, self-seeking men (cf. esp. 4:40; 8:21; 9:32; 9:33,34; 10:35-37; 13:1,2; 14:50).

It has long been recognized that Luke highlights Jesus' interaction with women. In at least twelve places Luke provides matching pairs of events, one involving a man and one a woman. Sometimes the paired events demonstrate that women and men are equal in their standing before God, are equally gifted, and are equally commissioned to serve. Sometimes they reveal women as the primary models for divine-human encounters, encounters which were impossible with the less faithful men around Jesus.

Recent writers have also pointed out that Luke's gospel begins and ends with special divine commissionings of women into ministry. God commissions a woman (Jesus' mother) prior to Jesus' birth (Lk. 1:26-38), and he commissions women subsequent to Jesus' resurrection (24:1-11). These commissionings stand parallel in form to all the major commissionings for ministry in Acts.

As already shown, John's gospel significantly highlights Jesus' interactions with women. The Samaritan woman to whom Jesus reveals his messianic and divine identity and who evangelizes her village, Mary who sits at Jesus' feet and anoints him for burial, Martha who responds to Jesus' word with a full confession of Christian faith, Mary Magdalene (apostle to the apostles) — all these stand as models for hearing the word of God and doing it. If leadership is a function of creative initiative and decisive action, the women who are depicted by John are well-qualified for the role.

The gospel writers do not ignore stories where men model faithful discipleship, but they seem to highlight

those which feature women. It appears that the writers took affirmative action, attempting to bring a measure of balance in a world that favored men even more than ours does. However, the final goal is not to replace the male-oriented status quo with a feminist perspective. The final goal is to see humanity with the vision of Christ, a vision articulated so well by Paul in Galatians 3:28, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That is God's final will for his people, no matter how long it takes before the vision is fully realized.

THE REALISM OF JESUS

The New Testament does not hold out the hope that prior to God's final intervention to fully establish his kingdom, the will of God will ever be fully practiced on earth as it is in heaven. However, we must never forget that the mandate for Christian behavior is never "what people do." It is "what God calls them to do."

Jesus lived in the real world; and though he prepared the soil for the full implementation of his kingdom vision, he did not himself institute all the radical changes that the implementation of that vision would entail.

This is most clearly seen in Jesus' response to the Jew/Gentile question. His vision was clearly the establishment of a kingdom in which racial barriers would be eliminated, yet he limited his ministry almost exclusively to Jews. He strongly criticized Jewish religious leaders for their prejudice against and exclusion of Gentiles. He lessened the hold of Jewish ceremonial laws which held Gentiles at a distance. He even prepared the people for the abolition of Jewish food laws

(Mk. 7:19), but he did not directly evangelize Gentiles. In fact, God did not initiate the Gentile mission even at Pentecost. The destruction of Jew/Gentile barriers was part of the kingdom vision Jesus died to achieve. But it did not take effect right away. It happened within the developing history of the church (see Acts 10-15).

Nor did Jesus fully implement his vision for the abolition of social/economic discrimination. The abolition of slavery was not even contemplated as an agenda within first-century Christianity, but its eventual abolition was nonetheless an outcome of Christ's kingdom vision.

Jesus' vision for the abolition of sexual discrimination has also not been fully implemented. Some Bible students maintain that Jesus appointed only men to be his officially designated apostles because he intended to uphold a divinely ordained, role-differentiated, hierarchical "creation order," but a different explanation is more in keeping with Jesus' kingdom vision.

He did not appoint women for the same reason that he excluded Gentiles and slaves. The time was not ripe. The soil had not been sufficiently prepared. Just as Gentiles had to be "brought near through the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13) before they could be prepared for church ministries, so also women had to be called first to sit at Jesus' feet before they could be prepared for church ministries. Just as the church had to let Christ's kingdom vision re-shape many inherited racial prejudices before Gentiles could be fully incorporated into the church, so also the church must let Christ's kingdom vision re-shape many inherited sexual prejudices before women can be fully incorporated into church leadership.

THE CHALLENGE FOR TODAY

The challenge for today is to keep implementing the vision of Galatians 3:28. Several decades passed before the church understood that “neither Jew nor Greek” meant Jews and Greeks could be equal partners within the renewed humanity. Many centuries passed before the church understood that “neither slave nor free” meant that slavery could and should be abolished. We do not know how long it will take until the church understands that “neither male nor female” means that both genders are called equally to the ministries of the church.

The New Testament was not designed to establish limits in the implementation of the vision; it was designed to provide models and mandates for its continuing implementation. Implementing the kingdom vision for the abolition of racial discrimination in the church took place at different times and in different ways in Jerusalem and in Antioch.

Implementing the kingdom vision for the abolition of social/economic discrimination in the church also took place in different ways in the first-century churches of the Roman Empire and in the nineteenth-century churches of the American southern states.

We should not be surprised if implementing the kingdom vision for the abolition of sexual discrimination in the church takes place differently in the twentieth century than in the first, in predominately Muslim countries than in modern Europe or North America, and in rural communities than in urban settings.

Our world is diverse; our churches are diverse as well. While we sometimes struggle with disagreements and uncertainty, we must never lose sight of the radical

principles Jesus so clearly instituted in his own ministry. If we practice these principles, we will certainly make progress in dealing with the sexual discrimination still existing in the church. If we practice these principles, the kingdom vision will become ever clearer and we will be able to see more clearly the implications for the ministry of women in the church.

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