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Women in the Life and Teachings of  
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James A. Borland  
Liberty University, jborland@liberty.edu

## Chapter 4

# WOMEN IN THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS

*James A. Borland*

This chapter has two goals: (1) to show that Jesus placed a high value on women, and (2) to show that Jesus recognized role distinctions for men and women. 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?<sup>1</sup>

Different positions have been taken relative to these questions, ranging from that of radical feminists<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> For Hull, Bilezikian, and others, sex roles are essentially unimportant. They see no "subordination of women to men" in home, church, or society, but rather a "mutual submission and therefore equal opportunity for men and women to serve in both church and society."<sup>4</sup> Equal opportunity to serve as an ordained elder, bishop, pastor, or teacher is one of their primary concerns.

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 distinctions for men and women.

### **I. 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.<sup>5</sup> Most frequently, 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.

The cultural mores and the historical setting into which God spoke His revelation must be distinguished from that revelation itself. Only God's Word is inspired, not human folkways and customs.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, later cultural developments and deviations from God's truth must not be confused with revelation from God.

Jesus' regard for women was much different from that of His contemporaries. Evans terms Jesus' approach to women as "revolutionary" for His era.<sup>7</sup> But was His treatment of women out of character with Old Testament revelation, or with later New Testament practice? Other chapters in this volume will show that it was not.

A. 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.

Scanzoni and Hardesty point out 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>

Examples of this even-handed treatment of women by Jesus are found in the four Gospels. First, Jesus regularly addressed women directly while in public. This was unusual for a man to do (John 4:27). The disciples were amazed to see Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4:7-26). He also spoke freely with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:10-11).<sup>11</sup> Luke, who gives ample attention to women in his Gospel, notes that Jesus spoke publicly with the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12-13), the woman with the bleeding disorder (Luke 8:48; cf. Matthew 9:22; Mark 5:34), and a woman who called to Him from a crowd (Luke 11:27-28). Similarly, Jesus addressed a woman bent over for eighteen years (Luke 13:12) and a group of women on the route to the cross (Luke 23:27-31).

A second aspect of Jesus’ regard for the full intrinsic value of women is seen in how He spoke to the women He addressed. He spoke in a thoughtful, caring manner. Each synoptic writer records Jesus addressing the woman with the bleeding disorder tenderly as “daughter” (references above) and referring to the bent woman as a “daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13:16). Bloesch infers that “Jesus called the Jewish women ‘daughters of Abraham’ (Luke 13:16), thereby according them a spiritual status equal to that of men.”<sup>12</sup>

Third, Jesus did not gloss over sin in the lives of the women He met. He held women personally responsible for their own sin as seen in His dealings with the woman at the well (John 4:16-18), the woman taken in adultery (John 8:10-11), and the sinful woman who anointed His feet (Luke 7:44-50). Their sin was not condoned, but confronted. Each had the personal freedom and a measure of self-determination to deal with the issues of sin, repentance, and forgiveness.

Jesus’ regard for the intrinsic equality of women and men is also exhibited in his view of divorce and lust. In His treatment of divorce (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18), Jesus clearly regards women not as property but as persons. They have legitimate rights and should be respected. Evans succinctly notes, “Women are not objects to be dismissed at will.”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus’ condemnation of the sin of lust was crucial in allowing Him and His followers to enjoy social contact as male and female, something nearly foreign to the Jewish mores of His age. Jesus said that “anyone who look sat a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Why not separate men and women to avoid temptation as the rabbis practiced? Because Jesus came to seek and to save, to teach and to reach (Luke 19:10). That included women as well as men. Jesus’ disciples were to have a righteousness that “surpasses that of the Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20).

Jesus “called upon his disciples to discipline their thoughts rather than to avoid women.”<sup>14</sup> Lust does not have to be fed but can be controlled. Jesus demanded such

control from His disciples, allowing males and females to associate together and to work in harmony with one another. Although such social contact between the sexes would be unthinkable to first-century rabbis, Jesus' teaching about the sinfulness of lust helps to explain the relationship men and women sustain both in His earthly ministry and in the apostolic church.<sup>15</sup> In the early church, women frequently labored together with men (Acts 16:14-15; Romans 16:3, 12; Philippians 4:3).

#### B. 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).

Mentioned in all three Synoptic Gospels are two additional interwoven stories. Illustrating great faith while breaking religious and social customs, a poor woman, rendered ceremonially unclean for twelve years by a bleeding disorder, touched Jesus in a large crowd (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). Instead of rebuking her, Jesus addressed her tenderly as "daughter," publicly strengthened her faith, and bid her go in God's peace.<sup>16</sup> Jesus then proceeded to the house of Jairus, who, with his wife, had just lost a twelve-year-old daughter. In addition to being rendered ceremonially unclean by the woman's touch in the crowd (Leviticus 15:19-22), Jesus also touched the dead girl and restored her to her parents (Matthew 9:23-25; Mark 5:35-43; Luke 8:49-56). Jesus' ministry to needy and hurting women is clearly seen in these events. From the bottom of the social order to the top (the girl's father was a ruler of the synagogue), Jesus aided women just as He did men.

Another woman, a foreigner, a Canaanite of Syrophenicia, whose daughter was demon-possessed, asked Jesus' help (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). She was persistent, intelligent, and witty, and exemplified great faith, a phrase elsewhere applied only to a centurion (Matthew 8:10; Luke 7:9). In rabbinic writings women are seldom presented positively and rarely illustrate faith or theological acumen.<sup>17</sup> But Jesus used her as an illustration of His previous teaching about defilement (Matthew 15:10-20; Mark 7:14-23). Jesus' disciples considered this Gentile woman unclean (cf. Acts 10:28). Jesus tested her spiritual tenacity, enlarged her understanding of spiritual truth, then granted her request, complimenting her for her faith.

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. 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. Jesus also taught her specific religious truths about God,

worship, and the Messiah. As great as these particulars are, some feminists have exaggerated the details and surmised additional concepts to enhance the role of women.<sup>18</sup> However, three aspects of this occasion do stand out. (1) Jesus spoke to a woman (v. 27), which amazed the disciples. (2) She was a Samaritan (v. 9). (3) He taught her religious truth in contrast to the current rabbinic practices. This point is more fully developed in a later section of this chapter. Two other passages (John 7:53-8:11 and Luke 7:37-50), commented on above, show Christ meeting similar spiritual needs in other women.

Two additional incidents deserve mention. On one occasion a woman spoke up from the crowd saying how blessed Jesus' mother was to bear and nurse Him (Luke 11:27-28). Jesus did two important things. He gave her His undivided attention by listening to her comment, and He mildly corrected her and pointed her toward further spiritual understanding. He said that hearing and keeping the Word of God are the primary spiritual tasks. Jesus does not deny His mother's place of importance, but goes beyond it to a wider spiritual truth.

An additional story concerns Salome, Zebedee's wife (cf. Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1), ambitiously seeking positions of utmost power and honor for her two sons, James and John. She seems to have "worshiped" with a selfish motive (Matthew 20:20-22). This incident comes only shortly after Jesus' promise of thrones to the twelve (Matthew 19:28). In fact, the disciples "thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once" (Luke 19:11). They were anxious to secure their positions of authority. James and John may have asked through their mother, not desiring a further rebuke from Christ for seeking preeminence (Mark 9:34-37; Luke 9:46-48). Again, Jesus' mild rebuff is turned into a spiritual lesson on humility and self-sacrifice. Jesus was consistently willing to dialogue and interact with women.

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.

### C. 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: (1) by employing women as illustrations in His teaching, (2) by teaching women theological truths, and (3) by having women participate in His life and ministry. As indicated above in Section A (and also note 5), women were not always held in high repute by many of Jesus' contemporaries. Jesus' ministry gave a renewed respect to the place of women in His society.

First, women were employed by Jesus quite freely as illustrations in His teaching. Mention of the queen of the south (Matthew 12:42; cf. Luke 11:31) reminded His audience how a foreign queen travelled far to find the truth, but it was also used to warn of coming judgment for those who reject Christ. Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to the leaven worked into bread dough by a woman (Matthew 13:33). Some debate whether the leaven represents the rapid expansion of God's kingdom or rather the spread of evil (cf. Matthew 16:6, 12). In either case, Jesus chose to use an illustration that would no doubt awaken the interest of His female listeners.

Jesus also taught (Matthew 24:41; cf. Luke 17:34-37) that at the time of His second coming (in power and glory) women would be about their daily tasks, in this case grinding grain on a hand-mill. These women as well as men will be divided and judged over their relationship to Christ. One goes to judgment (Luke 17:37), while the other enters into the kingdom. Another parable Jesus taught mentioning women almost exclusively is that of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-10). Jesus used them as examples of readiness (or lack of the same) for Christ's kingdom.

Jesus mentioned the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:26) as an example of those outside Israel who receive God's blessings. The healing of the leper Naaman (Luke 4:27; cf. 2 Kings 5:2-4) illustrated the same point one verse later, but brought thoughts to mind of the faithful witness of the Israelite maid.

Jesus' parable of lost things (sheep, shekel, and son) in Luke 15 presents some interesting parallels between the shepherd and the woman. Jesus uses male and female, each with different roles, with neither elevated or depreciated.<sup>19</sup> Both serve to illustrate God's seeking the lost and rejoicing over their salvation.

The need for steadfast prayer was illustrated by a widow's persistence before a corrupt judge (Luke 18:1-5). Female hearers must have taken heart to hear Jesus praise a woman's persistence in their male-dominated culture. Jesus also commented on a poor widow who gave all she had to God in the women's court of the temple (Luke 21:1-4; cf. 20:1; Mark 12:41-44). Her heart attitude allowed her to give a much larger percentage (she gave 100 percent) than all the others because she must have trusted God to fully meet her needs.

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.

Feminists see Luke 10:38-42 as crucial in showing women being taught by Christ. Hull calls it "the most significant encounter . . . because it taught that women should prefer studying theology over a preoccupation with domestic chores."<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, Hull misrepresents "traditionalists" when she reports them as saying women should not study theology.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, women are to learn and apply the Word of God. This is vitally important. But actually, the application is much broader than Hull implies. Every believer must make countless decisions throughout life, constantly choosing to act as a pupil with Jesus as the teacher. It does not mean that other duties or Christian graces are to be ignored, but it does imply that some things ("what is better," v. 42) are more important than other things. There are no role distinctions for learning from Christ.

On a later visit of Jesus to Bethany, it was Martha who was taught by Jesus while Mary sat in the house (John 11:20). For Martha, "Her growth is his goal, even in the midst of her tears of mourning for her brother" (Lazarus).<sup>22</sup> Jesus instructed her about the resurrection, and even that He was the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26). Thereupon, Martha gave a superb confession about Christ, saying, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (John 11:27, nkjv). On two other occasions Christ personally taught female disciples, even if in non-traditional teaching settings. On His way to the crucifixion, Jesus gave an extended proverb to a group of wailing women (Luke 23:27-31). He said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'" He was saying that the future would see a worse judgment, probably using an a fortiori argument. If Christ, whom Pilate declared to be an innocent man, could be crucified, what will happen to those whom Rome judges to be guilty? Christ's final teaching to a woman is contained in His post-resurrection words to Mary Magdalene concerning His ascension (John 20:17). Jesus asks Mary to convey His words to the others, which she does (20:18).

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). She gave thanks for Jesus, whom she recognized as Messiah, when His parents presented him to God at six weeks of age (Luke 2:22; cf. Exodus 13:12, 15; Leviticus 12:2-6). Luke purposely pairs

her actions with those of Simeon, just as he balances Zachariah's story with that of Mary's. Care is taken to show female participation.

The woman whom God chose to have the most extensive association with Jesus was His mother, Mary. But apart from the annunciation and birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, she is mentioned only five times in the Gospels-the trip to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-51); the Cana wedding (John 2:1-11); accompanying Jesus to Capernaum (John 2:12); asking for Jesus (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21); and at the cross (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25-27). Mary's life was significant for at least three reasons. (1) She was a first-hand witness of Jesus' divine origin and true humanity. (2) She was a tremendous model of godliness, faith, dedication, and patience, among other good qualities. (3) She, along with other women, was incorporated into the new life of the church at Pentecost.<sup>23</sup>

Other women who participated in Christ's life fit into one of two groups-(1) those who served Him in some way, and (2) those who witnessed to His resurrection.

In the first category were two one-time participants as well as a group of women who served more frequently. Two women served Christ by anointing Him. Luke records an anointing of His feet by a notoriously sinful woman (7:36-50). The other Gospels tell of Mary's anointing of His head and feet with a pound of precious spikenard (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:2-8). These women served Christ out of love and appreciation, but Mary's anointing was even more significant because she did it with a view to His approaching death (Matthew 26:12; Mark 14:8; John 12:7). Mary had true spiritual insight, no doubt gained from Jesus' teaching. They both were truly thankful, and Christ accepted their thanks while healing, forgiving, and liberating as the different cases called for.

Those who ministered to Christ more frequently included Martha in Judea and a group of women in Galilee. Luke 10:40 records Martha attempting to get a meal ready for about fifteen persons. Jesus did not order her to stop serving but gently corrected her attitude about Mary. Martha served at another supper just a week before Christ's death (John 12:2), suggesting that her service was more than just occasional.

Luke 8:2-3 recounts another group of women who ministered to Jesus and His disciples financially.<sup>24</sup> They may have served Jesus in other general ways as well, since the term is used of these women twice elsewhere without any reference to money (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:41).<sup>25</sup> Their labor was important and some of their names are recorded-Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. There were also many others (Luke 8:3). We are not told how often these women travelled with Christ and the apostles. Hurley has suggested that they were more active while Jesus was in the Galilee region near their homes,<sup>26</sup> but Matthew 27:56 mentions their travel with Christ all the way to Jerusalem. Apparently when Jesus travelled in Judea (most of John's Gospel) and Samaria, He may sometimes have had the apostles make other arrangements for food and other provisions (Luke 9:52).

A final indication of the dignity accorded women in the ministry of Jesus is seen in the importance given to women in the resurrection accounts. In Christ's day, women were not considered reliable witnesses. Josephus warns, for example, "But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex."<sup>27</sup> Still, God chose to use women as His initial witnesses to His disciples.

It may be an overstatement to say that the women sent from the tomb were "certainly . . . given a 'quasi-apostolic role.'"<sup>28</sup> To invent the role of a quasi-apostle seems foreign to the intent of these passages. The uniqueness of the role of an apostle will be discussed in the next major section of this chapter.

The question remains, why were the women chosen as witnesses of the resurrection? Was God bestowing a special honor on these women? Was God trying to indicate larger roles for women in His new community of believers? I believe both were intended.

All four Gospel writers bestow a great honor on the women who lovingly and with servant hearts came early to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, thus paying their last respects. What if they were frightened and surprised by what they saw and heard (Matthew 28:5-8; Mark 16:5-8; Luke 24:2-9; John 20:1-2)? They still faithfully bore witness of Jesus' resurrection to His disciples and, no doubt, to countless others in the months and years that followed.

Some have contrasted the faith of the women witnesses with the unbelief of the apostles, but as Hurley notes, "Neither the women nor the disciples were really ready for the resurrection. The women had to be convinced by the angel."<sup>29</sup> The important point is that God did use women along with men at this strategic juncture in human history.

These women not only were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, but also stand perpetually as examples for all believers. These women led the way in proclaiming the gospel—that Christ died for our sins, was buried, but rose again for our justification the third day. The duty and high privilege of witnessing for Christ is still open to every believer, without distinction as to gender.

## **II. Christ Recognized Role Distinctions for Men and Women.**

Christ not only valued women very highly, but also demonstrated a clear role distinction between men and women. Nowhere is this issue seen more clearly than in Jesus' selection of only men for the role of apostle. Many Biblical feminists question the significance of this obvious role distinction, or explain it as cultural or as temporary. Siddons's brief comment is that dangers in travel and the "male-dominated" social structure of the time were reasons for the apostles' being only men.<sup>30</sup>

But Jesus was not averse to breaking social customs when He felt it necessary. He criticized Pharisees to their face in public (Matthew 23:13-36), healed on the sabbath (Mark 1:21-27; Luke 13:14; John 5:8-10), and cleansed the temple (John 2:14-17; Matthew 21:12-13). Against custom, Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-9), ate with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:11), and even ate with unwashed hands (Mark 7:1-23)! The point is that when moral issues were at stake, Jesus did not bend to cultural pressure. No, it was not social custom or cultural pressure that caused Jesus to appoint an all-male group of apostles. Had He so desired, He could easily have appointed six men and their wives as apostles, since the wives of the apostles frequently accompanied them (1 Corinthians 9:5). But no such arrangement was initiated.

In fact, Jewish culture did accept women into positions of leadership. Just three decades before Herod the Great took over as king, Israel was ruled for years by Queen Alexandra. The fact that an occasional judge (Deborah, Judges 4-5), or ruler (Athaliah, 2 Kings 11:3) was a woman also demonstrates that female leadership was possible. Even though many women have excellent leadership qualities, God still has clear role distinctions in mind when apostleship and eldership are considered.

After spending all night in prayer (Luke 6:12), Jesus chose His twelve apostles (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:13-19). Apostleship was to involve leadership, rulership, and the reception of special revelation. Several functions of the apostles were immediately discernible: (1) The apostles were to be with Christ, undoubtedly to learn extensively and to be trained firsthand (Mark 3:14-15). (2) The apostles were the obvious official leaders in the early church. See Acts 2:14; 5:12, 18, 40, 42; 6:2-4; 9:29; 15:2, and Galatians 1:17. (3) Special rulership was committed to the apostles. Christ promised that the apostles would sit on twelve thrones ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). (4) Christ promised the apostles reception of special revelation (John 16:13-15) and a special teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). (5) As a testimony of the

fact that male leadership in the church has been permanently established by Christ, the names of the twelve apostles are forever inscribed on the very foundations of heaven itself. “Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:14, nkjv).

None of the above roles was performed by the women who followed Christ or ministered to Him. Though highly valued and given a new dignity by Christ, their roles were different from those of the men Christ selected for His top leadership positions. Women gave to Christ, served Him, fellowshipped with Him, accompanied Him, learned from Him, prayed, and testified of their salvation<sup>31</sup> or of Christ’s resurrection. But no woman in Christ’s ministry was called, commissioned, or named as an apostle, or even performed in the role of an apostle. These roles and functions Christ reserved for men.<sup>32</sup>

Spencer discounts these distinctions implied in Christ’s choice of men as His apostles. She reasons, “If Jesus’ choice of twelve male disciples signifies that females should not be leaders in the church, then, consistently his choice also signifies that Gentiles should not be leaders in the church.”<sup>33</sup> In another setting Spencer voiced the same argument. “If the twelve included only Jews, why should we not say that only Jews can be pastors/elders?”<sup>34</sup>

Her logic can be seen in the following syllogism:

- A. Jesus chose only male apostles.
- B. Jesus chose only Jewish apostles.
- C. Therefore, church elders must be male and Jewish.

Of course, the argument is invalid, so the conclusion is unproven. Historically, we know it to be false. Spencer wants us to see that Gentiles did occupy eldership positions in scores of “Gentile” churches founded by Paul. She would like us to conclude that if Jewishness is not required for eldership, neither should maleness be required.

But even a superficial analysis of the New Testament reveals that the Jews occupied a unique position during Christ’s earthly ministry. Jesus was born to be a “ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6). Jesus was termed “the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25), and He proclaimed, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). He announced a soon-coming kingdom (Mark 1:15) and sent His apostles at first only to the Jews (Matthew 10:6), promising them eventual rulership over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30; cf. Acts 1:6). Considering the Jewishness of Christ’s mission to redeem Israel (Luke 24:21), it is not surprising to find all Jews on the initial list of apostles. It was not cultural pressure but God’s plan to bring salvation through the Jews that led to twelve Jewish apostles.

With the resurrection, Christ’s mission expanded to include Gentiles (Matthew 28:19) “in this one body” (Ephesians 2:16), the church. Gentiles were not only saved, but became elders in the new organizational units of local churches. A Gentile (Luke) wrote two books of the New Testament (Luke and Acts), and several Gentiles such as Titus and Epaphroditus were Paul’s apostolic assistants and coworkers. Thus, Jewish apostles were unique and foundational, but Gentiles rapidly came to assume leadership in the church.

But was maleness, like Jewishness, to be discarded as a requirement for apostle or elder? Was maleness only foundational as well? There is clearly a difference in this case. First, the church did not start as all male and then later become both male and female. Christ’s followers were male and female from the beginning, and both men and women were present at the beginning of the church at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Second, from all we can tell, male leadership was perpetuated by those whom Christ initially taught, trained, and to whom He committed the future leadership of His church. Since Acts continually reminds us of the leading of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the work of the church and its leaders, the assumption is that leadership choices were also made in that manner.

That male leadership is to continue as the norm is borne out almost immediately once the church begins. In Acts 1:15-26, the first and only replacement apostle was selected. Evans asserts that women no doubt met the requirements to be an apostle “as set out in Acts 1:21-22.”<sup>35</sup> She overlooks, however, that one of the very conditions listed is to be a male- . . . it is necessary to choose one of the men [Greek andron] who have been with us . . .” (Acts 1:21, emphasis added).<sup>36</sup>

A further example is not the direct teaching of Jesus, but additionally strongly suggests that male leadership in the church was Jesus’ intention. This comes out of the selection instructions and results in Acts 6, where the first leaders besides the apostles were appointed. Plenty of women were numbered among the believers according to Acts 1:14; 5:1 and 5:14. A problem arose regarding the neglect of certain women (Acts 6:1). The church was told to select seven qualified men (andras, Acts 6:3). If the instruction had been to look for seven “human beings” (anthropous), and then only men had been selected, we might say their choice was cultural or perhaps happenstance. Instead, the choice of men was deliberate.

Therefore, we can conclude that in the choice of the twelve apostles, in the choice of only men to write the New Testament Scriptures, in the other leadership tasks given uniquely to the apostles, in the pattern of male leadership followed by those whom Jesus taught most closely, and even in the twelve names inscribed on the foundations of the heavenly city, Jesus clearly affirmed an abiding role distinction between men and women and an abiding leadership role for men.

But even though clear role distinction is seen in Christ’s choice of the apostles and in the exclusive type of work they were given to perform, no barriers need exist between a believer and the Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of gender. Jesus demonstrated only the highest regard for women, in both His life and teaching. He recognized the intrinsic equality of men and women, and continually showed the worth and dignity of women as persons. Jesus valued their fellowship, prayers, service, financial support, testimony and witness. He honored women, taught women, and ministered to women in thoughtful ways.

As a result, women responded warmly to Jesus’ ministry. Have things changed too drastically today for us to see this same Jesus? Not at all. Modern women can find the same rich fulfillment in serving Christ as did the Marys and Marthas of Judea, or the Joannas and Susannas of Galilee.

## **Endnotes to Chapter Four**

1. For recent discussion of these issues see Richard N. Longenecker, “Authority, Hierarchy and Leadership Patterns in the Bible,” in Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 71.

2. Radical Christian feminists stand apart from evangelicals. When it suits them, they reject Biblical authority based on their subjective experiences which produce a women’s theology of liberation. Elizabeth Fiorenza claims that her first principle of Bible interpretation is “(1) suspicion rather than acceptance of biblical authority,” and in her opinion “without question, the Bible is a male book.” Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work,” in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 130. She “locates revelation not in biblical texts but in the experience of women struggling for liberation from patriarchy. . . .” *Ibid.*, p. 136. Phyllis Trible holds that “A final unchangeable text is neither possible nor desirable,” and believes Fiorenza has established that “only the nonsexist and nonandrocentric traditions of the Bible have revelatory power.” Phyllis Trible, “Postscript: Jottings on the Journey,” in Russell, *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149. “Human experience is both the starting point and the ending point of the

circle of interpretation,” and especially “women’s experience is an interpretative key for feminist theology,” according to Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation,” in Russell, *Ibid.*, p. 111.

3. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, for example, calls herself a “biblical feminist” and lists the following who share her viewpoint: Gilbert Bilezikian, Richard and Joyce Boldrey, Patricia Gundry, Richard and Catherine Kroeger, Kari Malcolm, Aida Spencer, Elaine Storkey, Willard Swartley, and Don Williams. Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), p. 60.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

5. James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 20-78, explains what women’s lives were like in Old and New Testament times; Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 46-57, covers the position of women in rabbinic writings largely current at the time of Christ; and Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women’s Roles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), pp. 24-43, describes women in Old Testament society and in the Graeco-Roman world. Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 10, concludes, “It is fair to say that a low view of women was common, perhaps even predominant before, during and after Jesus’ era.”

6. Donald G. Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?: Beyond Feminism and Patriarchalism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), p. 25, has some helpful discussion highlighting these distinctions.

7. Evans, *Woman in the Bible*, p. 45.

8. 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.

9. Evans, p. 45.

10. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, p. 83.

11. Although opinions vary, the present writer regards John 7:53-8:11 as part of the genuine text of John’s Gospel.

12. Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?* p. 28.

13. Evans, p. 46.

14. Hurley, p. 109.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

16. Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, p. 58, suggest that Jesus’ touch gave her a personal encounter, while “his public recognition brought social and psychological wholeness to this outcast.”

17. Hurley, p. 86.

18. Philip Siddons, *Speaking Out for Women—A Biblical View* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1980), p. 55, calls this “the longest private conversation of Jesus with an individual as presented in any of the Gospels.” If Siddons means the longest conversation time-wise, it would be impossible to prove. But as recorded, Jesus plainly spoke more words to Nicodemus than he did to the Samaritan woman (in both the Greek and English texts). Evans, p. 52, makes a rather large assumption when she claims that “the teaching of John 4 about the nature of the gospel and the nature of God must have come to the disciples through this woman” (italics my own). Jesus certainly talked to His disciples many times about God and His nature. He very naturally might have related his conversation with the woman to John the beloved and His other disciples. They

frequently asked Him for further explanations (Matthew 13:36), which He gave. He even answered such requests from the crowds (John 6:41-47, 52-53, 60-65).

19. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, p. 38.

20. Hull, *Equal to Serve*, p. 115. Mary was sitting with the other disciples in the position of a pupil, i.e., “at the feet of” (cf. Luke 8:35; Acts 22:3). Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, p. 61, points out that Mary was not off to the side or in the back of the room but “was fact [sic] to face (pros is the preposition used in v. 39) with Jesus.”

21. Hull, p. 116.

22. Hurley, p. 89.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58. Evans’s excursus on Mary is on pp. 57-60. Hurley also has a good section dealing with Mary, Man and Woman, pp. 112-114. See in addition A. T. Robertson, *The Mother of Jesus: Her Problems and Her Glory* (New York: Doran, 1925), for a perceptive insight into Mary’s thoughts that treats all relevant passages.

24. Although the KJV, Knox, Phillips, and Moffatt say the women ministered to “him,” almost all other authorities have to “them.” These include ASV, RSV, NASB, NEB, TEV, Williams, Weymouth, and the Catholic NAB, Confraternity, and Jerusalem versions. The UBS3 text includes the reading “them” (autois) with a “B” level of certainty (their second highest of four categories). Although the evidence is divided, Hodges’ and Farstad’s *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 211, also reads this way. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 144, notes that the plural (them) has good support in the Alexandrian, Western, and Caesarean text-types, and that the singular (him), “appears to be a Christocentric correction, due perhaps to Marcion.” If those women ministered to the twelve as well as to Jesus, it would increase their financial outlay considerably.

25. The word translated “ministered” or “served” in Luke 8:3, Matthew 27:56, and Mark 15:41 is from diakoneo, a verb meaning to serve in a general way. It is used of waiting on tables (Luke 22:27), and of service in general (2 Timothy 1:18; 1 Peter 4:10), even of the general ministry of deacons (1 Timothy 3:13). Although the ministering in Luke 8:3 is restricted to finances (as it is in Romans 15:25), each time it is used of these women the tense is the imperfect, indicating continued action over a period of time. Witherington, p. 114, suggests that these women did not “abandon their traditional roles in regard to preparing food, serving, etc. Rather, serving Christ gave these roles new significance and importance, for now they could be used to serve the Master and the family of faith.”

26. Hurley, p. 91. Spencer, p. 55, suggests that these women probably travelled in a group to appear more respectable.

27. Josephus, *Antiquities* iv. 8. 15. A note appended by the editor points out that “the Pentateuch says not a word about the exclusion of women as witnesses in courts of justice. It is very probable, however, that this was the practice of the Jews in the days of Josephus.”

28. Evans, *Ibid.*, p. 50. Raymond E. Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975), p. 692, applies the term “Quasi-apostolic role” only to the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene, each sent by Christ. Evans unadvisedly expands the use of the phrase to include the women at the tomb.

29. Hurley, p. 92. Still, Jesus rebuked the disciples for not believing the women’s report (Mark 16:14; Luke 20:10). Evans, p. 55, asserts that the women showed “a greater perseverance, a greater loyalty and possibly a greater faith than even the twelve apostles.” Thankfully, when the disciples had seen the Lord, they had the same glowing report to give Thomas (John 20:20, 25).

30. Siddons, *Speaking Out for Women*, p. 54. Evans, p. 57, acknowledges the all-male group of apostles, but hedges that “it is not clear what significance this was intended to have for the church.”

31. The Samaritan woman gave a personal testimony (John 4:29, 39) that brought others to see Christ as Messiah.

32. Regarding the suggestion made by some that Romans 16:17 speaks not of a man (Junias), but of a woman, (Junia), who was an apostle, see the discussion in Chapter 11 in this volume, pp. 221-222; also Chapter 2, Question 38.

33. Spencer, p. 45, note 5.

34. Aida Bensaçon Spencer, Review of Samuele Bacchiocchi, “Women in the Church: A Biblical Study of the Role of Women in the Church”, *Trinity Journal* 8:1 (Spring, 1987), p. 100.

35. Evans, p. 50.

36. The word used for men here is *andro-n* from *ane-r*, a word used only of a man, and in contrast to a woman. If just any human being had been meant, whether male or female, the word *anthropos* would have been used. See W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. rev. F. W. Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), pp. 66-67.