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WOMEN DISCIPLES AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

A. BOYD LUTER*

After a lull in interest during much of the 1980s, the subject of discipleship seems to be making something of a comeback in evangelical circles. If nothing else, the publication of Michael J. Wilkins's ambitious, but readable, theology of discipleship, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Footsteps of Jesus*,¹ seems to have represented a significant step in that direction, including some brief, but helpful, discussions of women disciples.

Yet, for all that has been written on discipleship by evangelicals, very little has focused on women as disciples in the NT. If the subject comes up at all, it is usually as a virtual afterthought to treatment of the male disciples, usually the twelve apostles.

By this point in the mid-1990s, having debated the role of women in the church and ministry at length, it is high time to ask a focusing exegetical-theological question: Is there a special kind of discipleship related to women that is evident in the NT?

This article will seek to answer that question by: 1) suggesting several ways that women disciples can be recognized, beyond the obvious discipleship terminology; and 2) doing fresh structural study of the context of each of the Great Commission passages in the gospels and Acts 1. Because of the breadth of the material treatment, this is not intended as an in-depth study, but as a seminal and suggestive overview.

I. DISCIPLESHIP IN OTHER WORDS

The primary factor of confusion in studying NT discipleship as it relates to women is that only one woman is out-and-out called a

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¹Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. A brief summary of this material can also be found in M. J. Wilkins, "Disciples" and "Discipleship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 176-89.

"disciple." That woman is Tabitha (or Dorcas) in Acts 9:36, who is described as a μαθήτρια ("female disciple").

But, is such terminology the only way that a disciple is identified in the NT? At first glance, one might draw that conclusion. The "drought" of terminology is seen in that the focal words μαθητής ("disciple") and μαθητεύω ("make a disciple of") are both quite common in the gospels and Acts, but not found at all in the epistles and Revelation. Because of this yawning, unexpected absence, there has been a tendency to act as if the first five books of the NT are the only ones that really have anything to say about discipleship.²

That is very near-sighted, though, since Christ commanded his followers to "make disciples" until "the end of the age" (Matt 28:19, 20). After all, the rest of the NT is, so to speak, the "beginning of the age." But, it is still necessary to try to come up with some kind of plausible explanation for this troubling absence.

In Acts, "disciples" is essentially interchangeable with "church," "saints," "believers," and other terms (e.g., 8:1 and 9:1; Acts 11:26). These trade-off terms then show up *in force* in the epistles and Revelation. Thus, the *full equivalent* of discipleship, as well as reflection on how to carry out the Great Commission, is indeed present beyond Acts, though expressed other ways than in the gospels.³

Some of the other ways to determine that people are, in fact, being viewed as disciples in the NT when these expected terms don't appear are: 1) the use of the word "follow" (ἀκολουθέω) in relation to Jesus; 2) the expression "with him" (i.e., Jesus, in Luke 8:1-3); and 3) a comparison of the individual's level of commitment to what Christ laid out as "the cost of discipleship" in Luke 14:26-33.

II. CHRIST'S COMMISSION IN (SURPRISING!) CONTEXT

Five passages in the gospels and Acts team up to provide the overall shape of Christ's Commission: Matt 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8; and, traditionally, Mark 16:15ff.⁴ If there is a standout among these five passages, it is Matthew 28, the best known of the five and often called "the Great Commission" in its own right. However, as with any effective team, Christ's command

²See the more in-depth discussions in A. B. Luter, "Discipleship and the Church," *BSac* (1980) 267-73; and Luter, *A New Testament Theology of Discipling* (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary/Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1985).

³For a brief summary of the overall NT usage, see A. B. Luter, "Great Commission," *ABD* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2.1090-91.

⁴Though Mark 16:9-20 is found in the vast majority of the surviving Greek manuscripts, it is not present in several of the oldest manuscripts. Thus, many leading scholars doubt that it is original. For compact wisdom in dealing with such text-critical matters, see D. A. Black's recent *New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

in Matthew meshes together in complete harmony with the other four versions.

Chart One visualizes how these passages complement one another. Each provides its own slant on carrying out the risen Lord's Commission. But, leaving any of the five out impoverishes our understanding of what Jesus Christ called his people to be about until the end of the age (Matt 28:20), to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

CHART ONE: THE GREAT COMMISSION

Feature	Matt 28:19, 20	Luke 24:46-49	Acts 1:8	John 20:20-23	Mark 16:15(?)
Basis of Commission	"All authority" (v. 18)	Fulfillment of OT in death/resurrection	Resurrection appearances	Resurrection appearances	Resurrection appearances
Main Thrust	"Make disciples" (v. 19)	"Proclaim repentance" (v. 47)	"Be witnesses" (v. 8)	Sending (v. 21)	Preach the gospel
Scope	"All nations" (v. 19)	"All nations" (v. 47)	Jerusalem . . . ends of earth	"Any" (v. 23) "As me . . . you" (see John 3:16)	"All the world, all creation"
Procedure	1) "Going" (v. 19) 2) "Baptizing" (v. 20) 3) "Teaching" (v. 20)	Begin (-ning) from Jerusalem	Implied: move out from Jerusalem (v. 8)	Forgive . . . retain sins (v. 23)	Preach (v. 15) Baptize (v. 16)
Function	Disciple-makers (v. 19)	Heralds (v. 47) Witnesses (v. 8)	Witnesses (v. 8)	"Sent" ones (v. 21) "Forgivers" (v. 23)	Heralds
Empowering	"I am with you to the end of the Age" (v. 20)	"Power from on high" (v. 49)	"When Holy Spirit comes upon you" (v. 8)	Holy Spirit (v. 22)	-- ("In my Name")
Duration/Extent	Implied: end of age /all nations (vv. 20, 19)	Implied: all nations (v. 47)	Implied: ends of earth (v. 8)	Implied: any (v. 23)	Implied: world, creation

The presence of women in all of the various passages that lead up to the Commission statements is obvious (Matt 27:56, 61; 28:1-8; Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8; Luke 23:49, 55; 24:1-10; John 19:25-27; 20:1, 11-18; Acts 1:14). But, it is frequently overlooked how closely these contexts tie the women to the Commission statements.

It is vitally important to consider carefully the presence and roles of the women in each of these wider contexts. Also, it will be seen that each context provides an artistic literary portrait of women disciples that goes hand-in-hand with the others.

III. GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES (LIKE) . . .

In a simple, yet profound, strategy, the risen Savior explained what he meant by "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19). The structure of the passage⁵ indicates that the heart of disciple-making is a three-step process: 1) *going* in evangelism (28:19a); 2) *baptizing* the converts (28:19b); and 3) *teaching* the baptized disciples to grow through obedience to the Lord's standards (28:20a).

Sadly, those who have studied and written on disciple-making have often run roughshod over *both* the structure of Matt 28:19-20 and the immediate context. The logic seems to go something like this: "make disciples" must mean trying to duplicate the same process Jesus used with the twelve apostles, as seen in much of the Lord's public ministry in Matthew.

After all, weren't the eleven disciples the ones who originally heard Christ give his Commission (28:16)? And, wouldn't they naturally reflect on their own experience in being trained by the *perfect* discipler?

Such reasoning, however, fails to take into account four realities that are seen in Matthew. 1) When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, the remaining hand-picked eleven disciples all "left him and fled" (Matt 26:56), calling into question the quality of their discipleship. 2) It is the women who are spotlighted as disciples as they continue to "follow" (27:55; ἀκολουθῶ)⁶ Christ to the cross and tomb, along with Joseph of Arimathea, who had "become a disciple" (27:57; μαθητεύω, the same word translated "make disciples" in 28:19). 3) The women at the empty tomb were the first disciples to witness the resurrection of Christ and the ones instructed to inform the apostles (28:5-10). 4) Since there is no other mention of Jesus or

⁵"Make disciples" is the lone command to which the three participles ("going," "baptizing," and "teaching") relate, meaning that they explain how the command is to be worked out in practice (Luter, "Discipleship and the Church," 268-70; "Great Commission," in ABD 2.1000).

⁶D. M. Scholer ("Women," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 882) helpfully explains what was involved in these women disciples following Jesus.

his disciples baptizing earlier in Matthew,⁷ Matthew could not have been referring in his version of the Commission to "make disciples" *exactly the way Jesus did in his previous ministry with the Twelve (which included Judas)*.⁸

When these factors are considered, two far-reaching conclusions emerge. First, the process of disciple-making laid out in Matt 28:19-20 is tailored to the setting after the Resurrection in which the Great Commission must be carried out. Second, since the Commission does not read "make apostles" (i.e., focusing on how the Twelve were trained for their unique roles), the models of the nature and process of discipleship that modern disciples look to certainly should include those disciples whose commitment is more consistent than the apostles'. In the context immediately preceding Christ's climactic command in Matthew 27-28 (and in each of the other gospels, as will be seen), that certainly means the women disciples.

Related points are made by observing the beautiful inverted literary structure⁹ of the portion of this wider passage that bridges from the death of Christ on the cross (Matt 27:50) all the way to the Matthean Commission (28:16-20), which emphasizes the role of the women disciples (see Chart Two). The women are mentioned more often (four times; in italics) than any other character except, of course, Jesus.

⁷The only other mention of baptism in Matthew deals with John the Baptist baptizing Jesus (3:13, 14, 16), which is certainly not identical in meaning to Christian baptism, as is seen clearly in Acts 18:25; 19:3-5.

⁸In other words, when this presumed "training of the Twelve" approach was finally put to the test, the reactions were betrayal, fleeing, and denial, hardly the stuff of exemplary discipleship (Luke 14:25-35).

⁹Inverted, or "chiastic," structures emphasize points in two ways: 1) by parallelism (i.e., "mirroring ideas") in the first and second halves of the structure; and 2) the "point" focused on at the middle of the structure. The present writer has worked in depth with the meaning of such structures in the book of Ruth (A. B. Luter and R. O. Rigsby, "The Chiastic Structure of Ruth 2," *BBR* 3 [1993] 49-58; A. B. Luter and B. C. Davis, *God Behind the Seen: Expositions of the Books of Ruth and Esther* [Expositor's Guides to the Historical Books; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995]; Luter and Rigsby, "An Adjusted Symmetrical Structuring of the Book of Ruth," *JETS*, forthcoming) and Philippians (A. B. Luter and M. V. Lee, "Philippians as Chiasmus: Key to the Structure, Unity and Theme Questions," *NTS* 41 [1995] 89-101).

CHART TWO:
THE MIRRORING STRUCTURE OF MATT 27:50-28:20

A (27:50-53) Crucified Jesus dies, causing effects reflecting the shift from the old to the new covenant, as well as the resurrecting of many Jewish saints¹⁰

B (27:54) Roman centurion and guards speak the truth about the crucified Christ

C (27:55-56) *Women disciples from Galilee who followed and served¹¹ Jesus view the cross (with a painful silence about the Eleven)*

D (27:57-60) Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple who courageously buried Jesus in his personal tomb, rolls a large rock against the entrance

E (27:61) *Women disciples who followed Jesus' body to the tomb in the evening (see 27:57)*

F (27:62-66) Jewish leaders' futile attempt to secure the tomb against the resurrection of Christ (Note how the simple ABB'A' arrangement of πλάνος [27:63]/πλάνη [27:64b] and ἐγείρω [27:63, 64b] serves to bracket the lengths to which the Jews went to keep Jesus' body in the tomb [27:64a])

E' (28:1) *Women disciples return to the tomb at early dawn on Easter*

¹⁰Jesus' earlier debate with the Saducees over the resurrection (Matt 22:23-33) indicates that it was commonly believed by many Jews that bodies would be resurrected at the end time, based scripturally on Dan 12:1-2. Matthew's Olivet Discourse also indicates that the end time would be the point of the climactic preaching of the gospel to "all the nations" (24:14), as well as the time of judgment for "all the nations" (25:32; see Dan 12:2) and the termination point of the Great Commission to "all the nations" (Matt 28:20). Relatedly, it should also be noted that the rendering "saints" is found only here in Matthew, and that its eschatological coloring is almost surely based on Dan 7:18, 21, 22, 25, 27. Further, see D. A. Carson, "Matthew," vol. 8 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 581-82, for a discussion of the seemingly awkward positioning of the mention of the resurrection of the Jewish saints (Matt 27:52-53). If, however, Matt 27:50-28:20 is chiastic, its inclusion at this point is clearly purposeful from a literary standpoint.

¹¹It is quite likely that, through the combination of the usage of "served" (27:55) and the mention of "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:56), Matthew is recalling Jesus' earlier linking of such service and true greatness among his followers (Matt 20:26-28) in reply to the brash request of "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (20:20).

D' (28:2-4) Guards terrified by the angel at the tomb, who rolls away the rock from the entrance

C' (28:5-10) Women disciples see the risen Christ and are sent to inform the Eleven and tell them to meet him in Galilee (see 28:16)

B' (28:11-15) Roman guards bribed to lie about the empty tomb

A' (28:16-20) Resurrected Jesus gives the New Covenant commission to make disciples of all the nations until "the end of the age"¹²

When this literary structure is considered holistically (i.e., as to what it is communicating in an overall sense), it appears that the women were the only disciples present at *both* the crucifixion (Matt 27:55-56) and burial (27:61) of Jesus, as well as the first ones to see him resurrected (28:9-10).

They were, in effect, *commissioned* by the risen Lord to take word of his resurrection to the Eleven (28:10). This adds enormous dignity to their apparent role at the climax of the gospel of Matthew, as consistent, courageous, model disciples who bridge from the Cross to the capstone Commission in the troubling absence of the Eleven.

IV. FEARFUL, BUT PRESENT, DISCIPLES

When we turn our attention to the gospel of Mark, there are more similarities than differences with what has been found in Matthew. But, the differences are important in understanding the role of women disciples. Those differences include one very significant addition (to what Matthew included) and two purposeful deletions, as well as another long-debated possible deletion (or change).

The addition has to do with Mark's description of the women disciples who are viewing the crucifixion. After naming the same three women (Mark 15:40) as in Matt 27:56,¹³ the passage refers to "many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (Mark 15:40). Though not specifically numbered, the strong

¹²If this proposed literary structure of Matt 27:50-28:20 is correct, the "end of the age" (28:20) links the final fulfillment of the Great Commission to the general time period of the resurrection and judgment at the end of the age (27:52-53; see Dan 12:2 and the brief discussion in n. 10 above). In that regard, it may be significant that the book of Daniel concludes with Daniel being told that he would be resurrected "at the end of the days" (Dan 12:13). Certainly, the first gospel's earlier reference to "the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet" (24:15) indicates the author's familiarity with the eschatological content of Daniel.

¹³This assumes that "Salome" (Mark 15:40) is also "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Matt 27:56), the most common evangelical view.

implication here is that there definitely were other women "followers" (i.e., disciples) of Jesus beyond those clearly named in the gospel passages.

The first deletion has to do with any mention of the Jewish leaders or Roman guards, both of whom played prominent roles in Matthew (27:62-66; 28:2-4, 11-15). In their absence, the narrative starting at Mark 15:40 describes *only* those who are disciples of Jesus (though the fact that Joseph of Arimathea¹⁴ is a disciple, clearly stated in Matt 27:57, has to be inferred from Mark 15:43-46). In that section, the *majority* of attention is paid to the female disciples (15:40-41; 15:47-16:9), a truly remarkable literary proportion for that point in history.

The other deletion, which is more subtle, has to do with the repeated mention of fear (16:8; see Matt 28:8), *without* the "great joy" (Matt 28:8) which had energized the women disciples in Matthew. If the shorter ending of Mark at 16:8 (the long-debated deletion) is correct, the women disciples' fearful silence is the troubling "parting word" of the second gospel. Even if the longer concluding section (16:9-20) is accepted, the women's fear fits in with the pattern of fear and unbelief that is part of Mark's unsettling portrait of discipleship. But, when it is remembered that the eleven remaining apostles all fled in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:50) and didn't listen to Mary Magdalene (16:11), but had to be rebuked by Christ for "unbelief and hardness of heart" (16:14), we realize that the portrait of women disciples in Mark is certainly not unfairly critical.

It may also be the case that the narrative in Mark 15-16 has an even more elaborate inverted structure than Matthew 27-28. If that is the case, the women disciples are spotlighted even more, again being mentioned four times around references to other characters. As seen in Chart Three below, they become the dominant characters in view as one moves into the Resurrection account presented by Mark.

CHART THREE: THE INVERTED STRUCTURE OF MARK 15:12-16:8

- A (15:12-15) Pilate fails to release Jesus and has him flogged and crucified
- B (15:16-20) Jesus mockingly paid homage as King of the Jews in the Praetorium
- C (15:21) Rufus forced to carry the cross

¹⁴For a compact discussion by the same writer of what is known about this "eleventh-hour disciple" from all four gospels, see A. B. Luter, "Joseph of Arimathea," in *The Complete Who's Who in the Bible* (ed. P. Gardner; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

- D (15:22-23) The place of crucifixion, where Jesus declines spice drink
- E (15:24) Jesus crucified and clothes divided
- F (15:25-27) Jesus crucified as criminal, but called king
- G (15:29) Crowds insult the crucified Jesus
- H (15:20-32) Jewish leaders and criminals mockingly call Jesus "The king of Israel"
- I (15:33) Darkness over the earth
- J (15:34) Jesus cries out that he's been forsaken by God (Ps 22:1)
- K (15:35) Mistake about Elijah
- L (15:36a) Jesus offered the drink of a common laborer-servant¹⁵
- K' (15:36b) Mistake about Elijah
- J' (15:37) Jesus cries out and dies
- I' (15:38) Veil of Temple torn in two
- H' (15:39) Roman centurion calls Jesus "the Son of God"
- G' (15:40-41) *Group of women disciples view Jesus' crucifixion*
- F' (15:42-45) Jesus buried in rich man's tomb
- E' (15:46a) Jesus' body wrapped in linen and buried
- D' (15:46b-16:1) The place of burial, where *women* came to put spices on Jesus' body

¹⁵Many evangelicals have seen the servanthood of Jesus as one of the key ideas of the second gospel (see Mark 10:45; and, e.g., R. A. Guelich, "Mark, Gospel of Mark," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 518). If that conclusion is legitimate, the center of this structure fits beautifully with that theme.

C' (16:2-3) *Women* voluntarily go to Jesus' tomb

B' (16:4-6) Jesus proclaimed as resurrected by an angel at the tomb

A' (16:7-8) *Women* fail to go tell the disciples and Peter about the resurrection

If this structure is valid, the message of Jesus' resurrection is initially and, climactically, entrusted to the fearful women disciples (Mark 16:7-8). What a heavy responsibility! But, what better role, and at what better time, could Jesus have chosen to underline their significance?

V. WITNESSES WHO ARE IGNORED

There is not just one inverted structure in the vicinity of the Great Commission in Luke, but *two*. And, consistent with what has been seen in Matthew and Mark, both emphasize the role of women as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This double chiasm has a wider double focus. But the twin spotlights are complementary: the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus in Luke 23:26-53 and the response to the resurrection and empty tomb in 23:54-24:49.

By contrast with Matthew and Mark, mention of the women disciples is found just once in the first structure (Luke 23:49), though it is a highly significant inclusion. In the second structure, a lengthy view of the women is seen in 23:55-24:12, then a "centered" remembering of their witness is found in 24:22-24.

Thus, though these female disciples play an important role among the many witnesses to Jesus' death in Luke's first chiasm, it is considerably stronger in the second. Aside from the risen Lord, they are the only positive characters focused on in that part of the narrative of the resurrection. The charts below reflect the key roles of the women disciples in these passages.

Unless the inverted structure of the crucifixion and burial passage is properly understood, it appears, at first glance, that the women in Luke 23:49 are mentioned merely as part of the larger crowd watching Jesus on the cross. Even noting that "accompanied" (NASB) is the Greek word συνακολουθέω, speaking of discipleship, still does not capture the full significance of their role in this context.

However, as seen below in the mirroring structure of Luke 23:26-53, the women disciples are "paired off" with the women of Jerusalem, who also followed (ἀκολουθέω) Jesus (23:27-31) out to Calvary (23:33). Those women were weeping for Jesus (23:28a), but would have reason to weep for themselves in the time ahead

(23:28b-31).¹⁶ On the other hand, the women disciples (23:49) would grieve only until they were the first to find out about Jesus' resurrection (24:1-10).

CHART FOUR:
THE INVERTED STRUCTURE OF LUKE 23:26-53

- A (23:26) Someone else (Simon of Cyrene) carries Jesus' cross
- B (23:27-31) Crowd and *women* of Jerusalem, follow Jesus
- C (23:32-38) Jesus crucified and heckled as crowd watches spectacle
- D (23:39-43) The criminal witnesses to Jesus' innocence
- E (23:44-46) Someone else (the Father) causes apocalyptic effects and receives Jesus' spirit at death
- D' (23:47) The centurion witnesses to Jesus' righteousness
- C' (23:48) Jesus' crucifixion watched as a spectacle by a crowd
- B' (23:49) Acquaintances and *women that followed Jesus from Galilee* with the crucifixion
- A' (23:50-53) Someone else (Joseph of Arimathea) provides Jesus' tomb

Even though the women disciples are only mentioned in one verse in this structure, that inclusion is made doubly significant because of who is not included. Though other friends from Galilee were present (23:49), none of the remaining eleven apostles was anywhere to be found. Thus, to the extent that the disciples of Jesus were represented at all at the Cross, these women were those representative disciples.

Nor did they turn away or distance themselves, even after Jesus died. They followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb (23:55). Then, just as soon as reverence for the Sabbath permitted (23:56-24:1), they returned to the tomb.

¹⁶It is virtually certain that this passage is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 because of the wording of the Olivet Discourse about women in Luke 21:23 (e.g., T. R. Shreiner, "Luke," *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* [ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989] 834-35; and D. L. Bock, "Luke, Gospel of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 501).

But, they didn't expect what they found: an empty grave (24:2-3)! Next, two angels appear (24:4), who tell them of the resurrection (24:5-6a) and remind them Jesus had predicted it (24:6b-7). That means the women disciples were, according to Luke (consistent with Matthew and Mark), the only ones present at the first viewing of the resurrected Jesus.

It also means that they were the logical ones to go immediately and inform the eleven remaining apostles about what had happened (24:8-9). Luke makes clear that a number of other trustworthy female disciples (see Luke 8:1-3) went to give their testimony to the apostles and to "all the rest" (24:9).

But, sadly, neither the apostles (24:10) nor the other disciples (24:22-25) would believe them. Chart Five shows how Luke cleverly underlines the women disciples' role, in stark contrast to the unbelief of the other disciples.

CHART FIVE:
THE INVERTED STRUCTURE OF LUKE 23:54 - 24:49

- A (23:54-24:12) *Women disciples* witnessing Jesus' empty tomb are not believed when they witness to the apostles (except possibly Peter)
- B (24:13-21) Jesus not recognized by two disciples on the Emmaus Road
- C (24:22-24) Witness of the *women disciples* to the empty tomb of Jesus restated by the Emmaus-bound disciples
- B' (24:25-35) Jesus recognized by the two disciples through scriptural explanation and the breaking of the bread
- A' (24:36-49) Jesus, recognized by his physical presence with the apostles, gives the Great Commission to witness to all nations (through God-given power)

In summary, the Synoptic Gospels all focus to a surprising degree on the significant presence of women disciples at the crucifixion and empty tomb of Jesus. The impression is definitely left that they, not the apostles, are the gospel writers' candidates for disciples to be emulated in a crisis. They were present at Jesus' lowest point at the Cross, and they were honored to witness the following ultimate high point, the Resurrection.

VI. BEYOND SEEING TO BELIEVING

Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, no elaborate literary structure has been detected in the gospel of John that calls attention to women disciples. But, that does not mean that women are not present, or even de-emphasized.

Again, they are clearly in evidence at the foot of the cross in John 19:25-27. Again, a woman disciple (Mary Magdalene) is the first follower of Jesus to arrive at the empty tomb (John 20:1). And, John sees fit to give an even longer version of Mary meeting angels, then Jesus himself, at the tomb (20:11-17). In John, this Mary is the carrier of the news of both the tomb (20:2) and the resurrected Lord (20:18) to other disciples.

If there is a literary flourish in this section of John's gospel that spotlights a woman disciple, it is a bracketing effect created by the repetition of the wording "for fear of the Jews" in 19:38 and 20:19 (which is located just before John's version of the Great Commission; 20:21-23). That wording is used elsewhere in John only in 7:13, where it speaks of why *many* Jews would not openly seek Jesus. This observation makes the courage of Mary Magdalene stand out all the more.

The "fear of the Jews" indicates why Joseph of Arimathea had not come forward as a disciple earlier (John 19:38), as well as why the apostles were in hiding behind closed doors (20:19). By contrast, *first* Mary Magdalene, then Simon Peter and the beloved disciple¹⁷ *boldly* went to the tomb of Jesus even as it was becoming broad daylight (20:1-8). Thus, Mary Magdalene is an example of courageous trust for disciples of all time.

In terms of the Great Commission, it is no coincidence that the risen Lord Jesus sends Mary Magdalene to his "brethren" (20:17) just before the apostles receive Christ's command to go out with the message of forgiveness in the power of the Holy Spirit (20:21-23). Mary becomes, in effect, the gospel of John's prototype messenger commissioned by the risen Christ.

VII. PARTNERS IN PRAYER FOR PENTECOST

Our last cameo scene of women disciples in proximity to the Great Commission is found in Acts 1:13-14. There certain female disciples are part of the "prayer meeting" preparing for the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

¹⁷The most common evangelical understanding of the identity of the "beloved disciple" is that it was the apostle John, the author of the fourth gospel, referring to himself in terms of the wonder of Christ's love for him (e.g., the excellent compact discussion of G. M. Burge, "John," *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, 841-42).

There is no elaborate structure here, as in the Synoptic Gospels. But a *simple* mini-structure highlights the role of the women disciples. The most basic kind of chiasm, an ABA' arrangement, is used by Luke to dignify the role of the women in this foundational season of prayer in the Upper Room (1:13-14).

In this passage, the focus is on oneness and the persistence of the prayer being offered in 1:14. The women and Jesus' half-brothers (1:14) are placed on equal footing with Peter, John, and the other apostles (1:13) in this scene.¹⁸ This compact design can be visualized in the following way:

CHART SIX:
PRAYER IN THE UPPER ROOM

A (1:13) The remaining eleven apostles praying in the Upper Room

B (1:14a) The unity and continuous nature of the prayer time

A' (1:14b) The *women* and brothers of Jesus praying in the Upper Room

Such a structure makes excellent sense in light of the echoed wording and ideas *after* Peter's sermon in Acts 2. The infant church is said to be "continually devoting themselves" (2:42) to foundational spiritual growth activities, including prayer (as in 1:14). They are also described as "continuing with one mind" (2:46). Thus, the two ideas in 1:14 appear to have set the agenda for the people of God immediately after Pentecost: "*These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer*" (1:14).

Interestingly, the apostles felt the urgent necessity of returning to this pattern in Acts 6:4: "We will devote ourselves to prayer." Their non-stop busy-ness in trying to take care of all the needy people (4:36-37; 6:1) and to reunite the church in Jerusalem after the tragic Ananias and Sapphira episode (5:1-11) had caused them to depart for some time from their priorities of prayer and God's Word (6:2, 4).

What needs to be understood here is that the pattern for the church seen in Acts 2:42-47 actually started in the upper room *before* Pentecost. In that regard, Acts 1:13-14 can only be treated fairly if it is remembered that women disciples were a key part of that unity in prayer (1:14).

¹⁸It is possible that this prominence is due to the later roles played by James and Jude, Jesus' brothers through Mary, their common parent (Matt 13:55). Both were, traditionally, later writers of Scripture (see the up-to-date discussions in, e.g., D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo, and L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 410-13 and 459-60), and James was the most prominent leader of the

VIII. CONCLUSION:
OVERLOOKED DISCIPLES GET THEIR JUST DUE

Nothing we have said necessarily affects conclusions on the role of women in regard to church leadership—just their significance as disciples of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ The consistent, courageous women disciples that are highlighted in the texts surrounding the Great Commission are positive examples of discipleship. It is high time that they be accorded the recognition they so richly deserve.

By now, it should be sufficiently clear from the exegetical/literary angles discussed that such women as Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Salome, a number of other unnamed women at the Cross (Mark 15:41; Luke 23:49, 55), as well as others like Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:1-3), should all be considered as much full-fledged disciples as the Eleven. Though often painted in somewhat subtle literary hues, their commitment as disciples (Luke 14:26-33) of the Lord Jesus does shine through and should be emulated by growing disciples today.

The overriding point here is that a balanced NT portrait of discipleship must also include a uniquely feminine touch. It is hoped that this perspective proves to be both a significant clarification for further studies in regard to both discipleship and NT women, as well as a comfort and challenge to female disciples today.²⁰

Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9). But, that still does not explain why the women disciples were mentioned, and especially *before* the brothers.

¹⁹Writing from a slightly-adjusted traditionalist position, the present writer hopes that a broader consensus evangelical recognition of the significant roles and models of these NT women disciples might prove to be useful common ground for discussion between the polarized evangelical traditionalist and feminist positions on divisive church leadership issues.

²⁰Some of the material in this article is found in more popular form in "Unexpected Disciples and the Great Commission," chap. 2 of B. Luter and K. McReynolds, *Women as Christ's Disciples: New Testament Models for Modern Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).