

# Women in the Ministry of Jesus

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## Preface by Joseph Tkach

Conservative and liberal commentators are generally agreed on this: Jesus treated women well—despite the male-dominated culture in which he lived. He treated them respectfully, was sensitive to their needs, used them as good examples of faith, and included them in his ministry in several important ways.

Nevertheless, when it came time to name 12 apostles, Jesus included only men. This fact is an important part of the debate about whether women may lead in the church today. The doctrinal team has prepared the paper below to help us see the example set by Jesus Christ.

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Women are prominent in the story of Jesus—he was born of a woman, had numerous interactions with women, and was seen first by women after his resurrection. Although these incidents do not tell us much about women *in leadership*, we will survey the Gospels to see 1) what Jesus taught about women, 2) how he interacted with women, and 3) why the apostles were all men.

### Jesus' teaching about marriage

As far as the Gospels report, Jesus did not teach on male and female *roles*.<sup>1</sup> He never explicitly taught women to submit to men, nor did he explicitly say that they were equal in every way.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz writes, “Jesus gave no explicit teaching on the role of women in the church. In fact, he left no teaching at all concerning women as a class of people.... He treated every woman he met as a person in her own right” (*Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* [InterVarsity, 1995], 71).

<sup>2</sup> “Jesus stopped short of ever making any explicit pronouncements about the equality of men and women (even to the extent that Paul does in Galatians 3:28), to say nothing of attempting to overthrow sociocultural conventions on gender roles.... Jesus cannot fairly be co-opted for modern liberationist or egalitarian agendas.... Neither the Gospels nor the book of Acts can

However, he did teach about marriage. Some religious leaders asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3). The question concerned the interpretation of Deut. 24:1, which says, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce...” Some rabbis thought that a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him in any way; others thought a man could divorce only if the wife did something indecent.

Jesus responded by quoting Genesis, basically saying that God intended marriage to last for life, and people should not break their vows. Moses allowed divorce, even for “indecency,” because the people had hard hearts (Matt. 19:8). Jesus was surprisingly strict: “Anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness<sup>3</sup> and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery” (v. 9 combined with Mark 10:11-12).

In the Jewish world, only men could initiate divorce, and women were at a disadvantage. Jesus was removing this male advantage. Further, he said that *men* could be guilty of adultery if they married another woman—something the laws of Moses did not say. This response dismayed the disciples, and Jesus responded that celibacy was an honorable option for some (v. 12). As Mark 10:12 makes clear, the prohibition on divorce applies equally to women (Roman law allowed women to initiate divorce).

Tom Schreiner writes, “Jesus upheld the dignity of women by speaking out against divorce, which particularly injured women in the ancient world.”<sup>4</sup> James

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prove decisive in answering the question of whether the first generation of Christians in general or Paul in particular reserved any leadership roles for men. For that one must turn to Paul’s writings themselves” (Craig Blomberg, “Neither Hierarchalist Nor Egalitarian: Gender Roles in Paul,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 335-37).

<sup>3</sup> Under Old Testament law, an adulterous wife would have been stoned. 1 Cor. 7 implies that additional exceptions are sometimes appropriate. However, this is not the place to discuss the ethics of divorce and remarriage. Those who want a more detailed discussion of this issue should see two papers on our website. See <http://www.gci.org/ethics/divorce> and <http://www.gci.org/ethics/divorce2>.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001), 185.

Borland notes, “In his treatment of divorce... Jesus clearly regards women not as property but as persons. They have legitimate rights and should be respected.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus also commented on male-female relations in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, “Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). Again, Jesus was saying that *men* could commit adultery; although the law of Moses did not prohibit all extramarital affairs, Jesus said it was adultery to even desire another woman, whether she was married or not. Jewish rabbis were well aware of lust, but they usually blamed the women for being seductive. Jesus blamed the man, and the solution to lust is not to restrict women,<sup>6</sup> but for men to restrict their own thoughts (v. 29).

Although this teaching is stated for a male, as rules usually were, we believe that it also applies to females. That is, a woman who looks lustfully at a man has also committed adultery in the heart, and the best solution is not to segregate the sexes but to control the thoughts.

Last, Jesus mentioned that marriage is not applicable to the age to come (Mark 12:25). This does not explicitly say that males and females will be equal, but that is the probable implication.

## **Women as positive spiritual examples**

“Women were employed by Jesus quite freely as illustrations in His

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<sup>5</sup> James A. Borland, “Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Crossway, 1991), 115.

<sup>6</sup> “The approach most often taken by rabbinic Judaism to sexual temptation seems to have been the reduction to a minimum of any sort of contact between the sexes” (James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Zondervan, 1981], 64). Hurley’s book was an influential scholarly presentation of the conservative position, and has recently been reprinted by Wipf & Stock. Examples of rabbinic teaching:

- “He that talks much with women brings evil upon himself” (mAb. 1.5; cf. Ned. 20a)
- “These are the women that may be put away without giving them their dowry: a wife that transgresses the law of Moses and Jewish custom, or if she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man” (mKet. 7:6).

The social reality was probably that men did not talk with women unless necessary—see the disciples’ surprise to find Jesus talking with a woman (John 4:27). In this discussion, we do not want to portray Judaism as bad or backwards—in its attitude toward women, it was average for its time. Greek authors generally had worse attitudes, Latin authors slightly better.

teaching,” Borland notes.<sup>7</sup> “This is in stark contrast to the rabbis of the day. One looks in vain in their teachings for even one story or sermon illustration that mentions women,” Linda Belleville adds.<sup>8</sup> In many of Jesus’ illustrations, women are presented as positive role models of faith, which men should follow. For example:

- The Queen of the south, who was wiser than the first-century Jews (Matt 12:42)
- The woman mixing yeast into dough (Matt. 13:33), who is presented as an illustration of the way that the kingdom of God works<sup>9</sup>
- Women working when Christ returns, some of who are ready and others are not (Matt. 24:41)
- Ten virgins, of whom five were prepared and five were not (Matt 25:1-13)
- The widow of Zarephath, whom Jesus used as an example of a Gentile that God favored (Luke 4:26)
- The woman who found the coin she had lost (Luke 15:8-10). In this parable the woman plays the role of God, just as the shepherd did in the preceding parable and the father does in the following parable.<sup>10</sup>
- A persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), a model for disciples to imitate in prayer
- A widow who gave everything she had (Luke 21:1-4).

In Luke 11, an anonymous woman called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you” (v. 27). Jesus did not deny that his own mother was blessed, but he said that the real blessing is given to “those who hear the word of God and obey it” (v. 28). A woman’s spiritual worth is based on her response to God, not in performing biological functions. Women are saved by faith, not by bearing children.

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<sup>7</sup> Borland 117.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Baker, 1999), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Some scholars interpret the yeast as a bad thing, like tares in the wheat, but most scholars conclude that the parable of the yeast is intended to portray the growth of the kingdom in good ways.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus cast himself in the role of a female when he compared himself to a mother hen (Matt. 23:37).

“Jesus did two important things” for this woman, Borland writes. “He gave her His undivided attention by listening to her comment, and He mildly corrected her and pointed her toward further spiritual understanding. . . . Jesus does not deny His mother’s place of importance, but goes beyond it to a wider spiritual truth.”<sup>11</sup> “Christ never belittled the role of a mother,” JoAnn Davidson observes, but he “refused to limit a woman’s horizon to nurturing family and cooking.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus made a similar point when people told him that his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him (Matt. 12:47). He replied that the disciples were his real family: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (vv. 49-50). Spiritual response is more important than biological origin. Jesus expanded the response to include “sister,” even though the original comment did not mention sisters; by doing so he implied that women were spiritually on an equal footing with men.

Shortly before Jesus was arrested and killed, a woman<sup>13</sup> anointed him with a large amount of expensive perfume. The disciples grumbled about the expense, but Jesus praised the woman: “She has done a beautiful thing to me. . . . I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Matt. 26:10, 13). What she did is a great illustration for *all* disciples: unrestrained devotion. Jesus said to the woman who anointed him, “Your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50), and the fact that this story is preserved in the Gospels means that her faith is an example to us today.

Similarly, a Canaanite woman was praised for having great faith (Matt. 15:28).<sup>14</sup> As a non-Israelite, she had no claim to any favors from him, but she appealed for grace and mercy. Hurley writes, “He shows respect for the faith of this woman and for her argument. He took women seriously.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Borland, 116.

<sup>12</sup> JoAnn Davidson, “Women in Scripture,” in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (ed. Nancy Vyhmeister; Andrews University Press, 1998), 175.

<sup>13</sup> John 12:3 identifies her as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Luke 7 may report a different anointing.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus’ initial reluctance to help the woman had nothing to do with her sex—it was simply that she was a Gentile. Jesus would have known about her faith from the start, but went through the conversation to help the disciples realize that it was right to heal a Gentile.

<sup>15</sup> Hurley, 85.

## Part 2: Women in the ministry of Jesus

James Hurley writes, “The most striking thing about the role of women in the life and teaching of Jesus is the simple fact that they are there.”<sup>16</sup> Although the gospel texts contain no special sayings repudiating the view of the day about women, their uniform testimony to the presence of women among the followers of Jesus and to his serious teaching of them constitutes a break with tradition which has been described as being ‘without precedent in [then] contemporary Judaism.’”<sup>17</sup>

As Schreiner says, “Jesus treated women with dignity and respect and he elevated them in a world where they were often mistreated.”<sup>18</sup> Hurley writes that Jesus did not perceive women “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>19</sup> Borland’s summary is a good one:

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

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<sup>16</sup> Borland agrees: “Jesus regularly addressed women directly while in public. This was unusual for a man to do” (114).

<sup>17</sup> James Hurley, 82-83, citing W. Forster, *Palestinian Judaism in New Testament Times* (London, 1964), 124. Some example of Jewish views of women:

- “Any iniquity is small compared to a woman’s iniquity... From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die” (Sirach 25:19, 24; 2nd century B.C.).
- “Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace” (Sirach 42:14).
- “The woman is inferior to the man in every way” (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:201).
- “A hundred women are no better than two men” (Talmud, Ber. 45b) Although the Talmud was written well after the New Testament, in this case it is probably in agreement with first-century attitudes.
- “A man is required to say the following three blessings every day: ‘Blessed are you who have not made me a heathen, who have not made me a woman, who has not made me illiterate’ (bMen. 43b; Ber. 7.18).
- “There is no wisdom in woman except with the spindle” (bYom. 66b).

<sup>18</sup> Schreiner, 184.

<sup>19</sup> Hurley, 83.

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).<sup>20</sup>

Sheila Graham writes,

Jesus' honor and respect was...extended to all women—an attitude largely unexpected and unknown in his culture and time. Jesus, unlike the men of his generation and culture, taught that women were equal to men in the sight of God. Women could receive God's forgiveness and grace. Women, as well as men, could be among Christ's personal followers. Women could be full participants in the kingdom of God.... These were revolutionary ideas. Many of his contemporaries, including his disciples, were shocked.<sup>21</sup>

## **Elizabeth**

We begin our brief survey of women in the ministry of Jesus with a woman whose role occurred before Jesus was born. Elizabeth, wife of the priest Zechariah, was noted to be “upright in the sight of God” and fully obedient (Luke 1:6).<sup>22</sup> When Mary visited Elizabeth, “the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” and pronounced a blessing on Mary—words that are now part of Scripture (vv. 41-45).

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<sup>20</sup> Borland, 115.

<sup>21</sup> Sheila Graham, “Jesus and Women,” *The Plain Truth* (July 1994): 15, available on our website at <http://www.gci.org/jesus/women>.

<sup>22</sup> Luke may have stressed this because some people might assume that sin had caused Elizabeth to be barren. She refers to the “disgrace” of being barren in v. 25.

## **Mary**

The mother of Jesus set a marvelous example with her words, “I am the Lord’s servant.... May it be to me as you have said” (v. 38). Mary was also inspired to say a poem of praise that is now part of Scripture (vv. 46-55). She again set a good example when she “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (2:19, 51). She was instrumental in Jesus’ first public miracle (John 2:1-11). She may have been among the “family” who thought that Jesus had lost his sanity (Mark 3:21). At the cross, Jesus assigned John to take care of his mother, and Mary was counted among the disciples after his resurrection (Acts 1:14).

Borland writes, “The woman whom God chose to have the most extensive association with Jesus was His mother, Mary.... 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>

## **Anna**

When Jesus was taken to the temple to be dedicated, an elderly prophetess named Anna “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). Unfortunately, we do not know what she said or how she spread the news.

## **Mary and Martha**

Although the rabbis said that men should not talk with women, Jesus counted women among his friends. “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5). Once when Jesus was visiting Bethany, “a woman named Martha opened her home to him” (Luke 10:38). Since Martha owned a home; she may have been a widow. Her sister Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said” (v. 39). But Martha was busy preparing the meal, and asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her.

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<sup>23</sup> Borland, 118-119.



The rabbis said that women should not be taught the Torah,<sup>24</sup> so Mary was shirking a typically female role in order to do something that was normally restricted to males. But Jesus did not “put her in her place.” Rather, he said that she had chosen the right place at the time. “Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (v. 42). Spiritual growth is more important than domestic duties.<sup>25</sup>

Borland notes, “Jesus did not order [Martha] to stop serving but gently corrected her attitude about Mary.”<sup>26</sup> Graham writes, “Jesus did not feel that women’s work—or men’s work, for that matter—wasn’t important. He was not saying it is wrong to be diligent and careful about our responsibilities. Christ was saying we should get our priorities straight. Women were called to be disciples of Jesus, just as men were, and women were expected to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities, just as men were.”<sup>27</sup>

Borland further notes that Mary set a great example for all of us today:

Women are to learn and apply the Word of God. This is vitally important. But actually, the application is much broader... 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...are more important than other things. There are no role distinctions for learning from Christ.<sup>28</sup>

In that incident, Mary set a better example than Martha did. But Borland notes that Martha should be remembered for another incident as well: “On a later visit of Jesus to Bethany, it was Martha who was taught by Jesus while Mary sat in

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<sup>24</sup> “It is better that the words of the Law should be burned than that they should be given to a woman” (jSot. 3.4; 19a).

“If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery” (bSot. 4.3).

<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that domestic duties should never be done. Jesus himself washed feet and cooked fish. Jesus never assigned (nor does the Bible assign) domestic duties to women only.

<sup>26</sup> Borland, 119.

<sup>27</sup> Graham, 16-17.

<sup>28</sup> Borland, 118.

the house (John 11:20)... 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).”<sup>29</sup>

### **Samaritan woman at the well**

“The conversation with the woman at the well is the longest recorded discussion Jesus had with anyone—and she, a Gentile woman.”<sup>30</sup> Further, the lesson Jesus gave her about living water was just as profound as the lesson he gave Nicodemus—and the woman had a better response. Unlike Nicodemus, she was willing to be associated with Jesus. She told her neighbors about Jesus, and many of them believed in Jesus “because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:28-29, 39).

Davidson observes that this implies something *positive* about the reputation of the woman in the community: “It is unlikely that the men of a town would believe a prostitute’s word about the Messiah or anybody, and go openly with her to see him. Perhaps this woman has not been given due credit for her true social position in Samaria. The narrative seems to indicate that she was a knowledgeable, informed woman. Her discourse with Christ reveals an intelligent familiarity with the foremost theological issues of the day.”<sup>31</sup>

### **A daughter of Abraham**

When Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, a woman who had been crippled for 18 years came in, and Jesus healed her (Luke 13:10-13). The synagogue ruler criticized Jesus, but Jesus defended himself, saying that the woman was “a daughter of Abraham” (v. 16).

Graham writes, “Before his most venomous critics, Jesus publicly showed his concern and high regard for this woman, someone whom others had probably seen for years as she struggled in her affliction to come to the synagogue to

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<sup>29</sup> Borland, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Davidson, 173.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson, 173. Scholars often assume that the woman was immoral. She had five previous husbands, yes, but they may have died or divorced her due to no fault of her own. She was not married to the man she was living with, but the law of Moses did not regulate the sexual behavior of unmarried nonvirgins.

worship God. Someone whom they may well have shunned because she was a woman and because she was disabled.”<sup>32</sup> By using the rare phrase “daughter of Abraham,” Jesus was reminding the people that women were also among the descendants of Abraham and eligible for the blessings.

### **Joanna and Susanna**

Luke tells us that several women who had been healed helped support Jesus “out of their own means” (Luke 8:3). These included “Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others.”<sup>33</sup> Although they were probably involved in meal preparation, Luke indicates that their most significant role was to pay the bills.

Graham writes, “Some of these women—possibly widows—had control of their own finances. It was out of their generosity that Jesus and his disciples were at least partially supported. Although Christ worked with the cultural traditions of the first century, he ignored the limitations that had been placed on women by their culture. Women were free to follow him and to take part in his ministry to the world.”<sup>34</sup>

Belleville further observes, “They are the *only* supporters mentioned. Also, they did not merely write a check to cover the expenses but accompanied Jesus and the Twelve as they traveled from place to place.... Jesus welcomed women among his traveling coterie, allowing them to make the same radical commitment in following him that the Twelve did.... That married women would be traveling with Jesus’ group is striking indeed.”<sup>35</sup> “Jesus expected men and women to mix freely,” Mary Evans writes.<sup>36</sup> The solution to lust was not to segregate women, but for men to control themselves.

Matt. 27:55-56 also mentions that “many women...had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons” (Mark 15:41

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<sup>32</sup> Graham, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Magdalene is also mentioned, but we will discuss her separately.

<sup>34</sup> Graham, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Belleville, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (InterVarsity, 1983), 47.

reports that her name was Salome). Luke 23:27 reports that many women from Jerusalem followed him after his arrest, and he turned to them and taught them, saying that even worse times would come for Jerusalem.

### **A woman with bleeding**

While Jesus was on his way to the home of Jairus, a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years touched him, and was healed (Mark 5:22-29). She was afraid that Jesus would be angry (rabbis normally avoided women, especially unclean ones), but Jesus was not angry. He said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” (v. 34)—addressing her with a term of affection and publicly praising her faith. Similarly, Jesus was not afraid of touching the other unclean daughter, the dead child of Jairus (v. 41).

### **Mary Magdalene**

Luke tells us that Mary of Magdala had seven demons cast out of her (Luke 8:2), but Mary should be better known as the first to see the empty tomb, the first to carry the good news to the disciples. Graham writes:

Mary is almost always mentioned first in a list of the female disciples of Jesus Christ. She may have been one of the leaders of that group of women who followed Jesus from the outset of his ministry in Galilee to his death and afterward. The risen Jesus appeared to her first. It’s ironic that in a time when women could not be legal witnesses, Jesus Christ chose women as the first witnesses of his resurrection.<sup>37</sup>

Although the men fled for their lives, the women faithfully followed Jesus to the cross (Matt. 27:55-56), and Mary sat nearby while Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus’ body in the tomb (v. 61). Mary led the women who came to anoint Jesus early on Sunday morning (Mark 16:2), and an angel told them that Jesus had been raised (v. 6). They then told the news to the 11 disciples (Luke 24:10). Jesus appeared first to Mary (John 20:14), and told her to tell the disciples, which she did (vv. 17-18).

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<sup>37</sup> Graham, 15. Josephus wrote, “From women let no evidence be accepted because of the levity and temerity of their sex” (*Antiquities* 4:219).

Schreiner writes, “Even though the testimony of women was not received by courts...Jesus appeared to women first, showing again their significance and value as human beings.”<sup>38</sup> Borland, another conservative, comments on the significance:

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.... These women led the way in proclaiming the gospel.... The duty and high privilege of witnessing for Christ is still open to every believer, without distinction as to gender.<sup>39</sup>

Some scholars have noted that the women were told to bear witness to the fact that Jesus had risen—and this is one of the criteria for an apostle (Acts 1:22). But there is no evidence that any of these women ever functioned as witnesses of the resurrection in the public preaching of the church. Although their role in the resurrection was an important precedent for women speaking with authority, it was a restricted role for a specific need within the church.

### **Part 3: The all-male apostles**

As the evidence above indicates, scholars are generally agreed that Jesus treated women with respect, as people of the same spiritual significance as men. On this point, scholars who favor women’s ordination are agreed with those who oppose it. There is one significant aspect of Jesus’ ministry on which they do not agree, and that is the implications of the fact that Jesus chose only men to be among the Twelve. For example, James Borland writes that Jesus

demonstrated a clear role distinction between men and women.

Nowhere is this issue seen more clearly than in Jesus’ selection of

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<sup>38</sup> Schreiner, 185-86. However, Evans writes, “It would be a mistake to over-emphasize the point, as it is quite possible that the women received the message first simply because they happen to have been there first” (p. 54).

<sup>39</sup> Borland, 120.

only men for the role of apostle.... When moral issues were at stake, Jesus did not bend to cultural pressure. 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....

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.<sup>40</sup>

Since Jesus was willing to break social customs, and Jewish culture sometimes allowed female leaders, Jesus must have had a good reason to choose only men—and that reason, Borland argues, is because church leaders should all be men. “Even though many women have excellent leadership qualities, God still has clear role distinctions in mind when apostleship and eldership are considered.”<sup>41</sup>

However, egalitarians respond that not only were the apostles all men, they were also all Jewish, and that indicates a cultural limitation that does not apply to church leadership today. Jesus did not pick any Samaritan men to be apostles, either, because of the cultural limitations he worked in.

The Jewishness of the disciples was necessitated by a theological fact: Jesus was sent only to the Jews (Matt. 15:24), and we have good biblical reasons for understanding that to be a temporary limitation. The Bible shows that the church began as all Jewish; it is no surprise that the leaders were all Jewish.

However, Borland points out an important fact: “The church did not start as all male and then later become both male and female. Christ’s followers were both male and female from the beginning,” and yet women were not chosen as leaders. Second, unlike the all-Jewish leadership, “male leadership was perpetuated by those whom Christ initially taught, trained, and to whom He committed the future leadership of His church.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Borland, 120-21.

<sup>41</sup> Borland, 120-21.

<sup>42</sup> Borland, 121. Here he cites Acts 1:21; and 6:3, both of which specify males. We also note that Acts 6:3 calls for males even though the immediate need was for people to minister to women.

## Twelve Jewish men

When Jesus chose only men as apostles, was he reflecting a permanent restriction on leadership within the church, or was it due to a temporary need? Jesus was willing to teach women in public and in private, and women were among his disciples, but he did not include them in the Twelve. There *are* good reasons not to have a Gentile in the Twelve, but why not any women?

Some egalitarians have answered that Jesus was limited by his culture, but as Borland noted, it seems unlikely that Jesus, who broke many religious conventions, was that limited by his culture.

However, Jesus did not challenge *all* the imperfect social customs of his day. He did not attack the Roman government, nor the custom of slavery. Instead, he used slaves in some of his parables without even a hint that such a custom was anything less than what God wanted. Yes, Jesus was willing to challenge culture on certain points, but we cannot assume that he agreed with everything that he let stand. Nevertheless, we must agree that when it came to choosing disciples, Jesus had an opportunity to challenge culture, but did not. He treated women as equals in other respects, but not for being in the Twelve.

Egalitarians often argue that equal worth requires equal access to all roles, but that does not seem to be a valid assumption. The Christian who has the gift of leadership is not more valuable to God than a Christian with the gift of service. One gift is more valuable for certain *functions* of the church than the other gift is, but the persons are of equal value even though the same *roles* are not open to both. The example of Jesus shows that at least in certain situations it is not a sin to discriminate on the basis of gender when choosing church leaders.

Borland summarizes the argument: “We can conclude that in the choice of the twelve 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.”<sup>43</sup>

John Piper and Wayne Grudem write, “We would *not* argue that merely because Jesus chose twelve men to be His authoritative apostles, Jesus must have

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<sup>43</sup> Borland, 122.

avored an eldership of only men in the church. But this argument would be at least as valid as arguing that anything else Jesus did means He would *oppose* an eldership of all men.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, Jesus didn’t directly *talk* about eldership, but what he *did* supports the conservative conclusion. Schreiner writes, “A male apostolate does not prove that women should not serve as leaders, but when combined with the other evidence, it does serve as confirmatory evidence for the complementarian view.”<sup>45</sup>

However, there is another factor to consider: the disciples were not only all Jewish, there were exactly 12. When there were only 11, Peter said that it was necessary to bring the number back to 12 (Acts 1:22). Jesus was forming a new people of God, and the 12 disciples represented the 12 tribes of Israel, and for that reason they had to be 12 men.<sup>46</sup> For the symbolism of this group, it was necessary for Jesus to discriminate against Gentiles and women. One of the discriminating factors is now obsolete, so it is possible for the other to be obsolete, too. The example set by Jesus in this matter is therefore of uncertain significance.

Belleville comments on the biblical symbolism:

Twelve Jewish males...represent the twelve tribes and their patriarchal heads. It is the twelve apostles who will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). The new Jerusalem will have twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve foundations, and on them the names of the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:12, 14). It is important not to make a leap from the twelve apostles to male leadership in the church. The leap, instead, should be from twelve apostles to the [entire] church of Jesus Christ. It is not male leaders who will serve as judges in the future, nor, for that matter, is it female leaders. “Do you not know,” Paul says, “that *the saints* will

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<sup>44</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” 67-68, italics added.

<sup>45</sup> Schreiner, 196.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson, 176, citing Evelyn and Frank Stagg, *Women in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 123. The weakness in this explanation is that the disciples were not one from each tribe, and if they did not accurately represent the 12 patriarchs in genealogy, then it could be argued that they did not have to be accurate in gender, either. But the conclusion is still the same: Since one factor is obsolete, the other may be as well. Whether it is must be discerned from the epistles.



judge the world?... Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Cor. 6:2-3).<sup>47</sup>

Further, the 12 apostles do not set a pattern for future church leadership.<sup>48</sup> After James was killed, there was no effort to bring the number back to 12. We should not assume that the choice of 12 male Jewish apostles constituted a pattern for future church leaders—we know that it did not establish a pattern in its number or its ethnicity, so we should be open to the possibility that it did not establish a pattern in gender, either. We need to see what the church actually taught about leadership, and what women actually did in the early church.

## Summary

In scholarly debates about the ordination of women, scholars on both sides of the question often try to argue that *every* bit of evidence supports their particular view, and in some cases it seems that they try to make particular scriptures say something they do not clearly say.

Instead, it seems better to acknowledge that some aspects of the argument lean one way, and some lean the other, and we hope that this admission allows us to look at the evidence more objectively, allowing each verse or passage to convey its own message. Here we can summarize some of what we have found in this and previous studies:

- In Genesis 1, men and women alike are made in the image of God, thus favoring but not proving the egalitarian view.
- In Genesis 2, conservatives have a reasonable (although not conclusive) argument that the man was created before the woman and therefore may have authority.
- In Genesis 3, man’s dominance over woman is presented as part of the consequence of sin, suggesting that such dominance was not God’s

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<sup>47</sup> Belleville, 149.

<sup>48</sup> “The Twelve did not constitute or provide the model or framework for leadership or authority in the early church, apart from the very earliest days in the Jerusalem church” (David Scholer, “Women,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [ed. Joel Green et al.; InterVarsity, 1992], 886).

original intent.

- In the Old Testament in general, women sometimes shouldered civil leadership roles and sometimes spoke the word of God, which by definition is authoritative. This favors the egalitarian view. However, women were never in the priesthood, supporting the conservative view that God does not allow females to have certain religious roles.
- The example of Jesus challenges the view that women are subordinate, but it does not specifically address gender roles in the church. Conservatives are supported by the fact that Jesus *did* make gender distinctions in selecting only males as apostles, but as conservative scholars admit, this does not conclusively prove their view that women may not serve as elders, for other explanations are possible as to why Jesus chose 12 Jewish men as apostles.

In coming papers, we will turn our attention to what actually happened in the early church, and what the rest of the New Testament says about women in the church.