

THE SPIRITUAL EQUALITY OF WOMEN

Probably the most astonishing and revolutionary feature of Jesus' ministry was his attitude toward women. At a time when man was not supposed to even greet a woman in public, Jesus dared to teach them publicly and personally as in the case of the Samaritan woman. (*John 4:7-42*) And Jesus had the courage to do this in the face of the rabbinical teaching that "It is better that the words of the Law be burned than be delivered to a woman!"

But more than just teaching them, it appears that Jesus was also training women to become preachers and teachers of the good news right alongside the men. We reach this conclusion based on the faithfulness of the women who followed Jesus (*Luke 8:1-3; Luke 23:48-49*) and the numerous accounts of effective women preachers in the book of Acts.

For example, many times, Jesus told his apostles that he would die and be raised on the third day.

“From that time forward Jesus Christ commenced showing his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the older men and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised up.” – *Matthew 16:21*

The women disciples were apparently present at these discourses. But when Jesus was arrested, most of the apostles – all men – lost faith. All scattered, with the exception of Peter, and possibly John (*John 19:26*), and most of the women corp. Even though Peter boldly asserted that he would not stumble in connection with Jesus, within hours of his expression, he denied Jesus three times. (*Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75*) Neither did any one of the apostles come to the grave site, and when they were told that Jesus had been resurrected, they did not believe it.

However, the women disciples were different. They had followed Jesus to Jerusalem and remained close during his trial and execution:

“**There were also women viewing from a distance**, among them Mary Magdalene as well as Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, **who used to accompany him** and minister to him when he was in Galilee, and many other women who had come up together with him to Jerusalem.” – *Mark 15:40-41*

“And all the crowds that were gathered together there for this spectacle, when they beheld the things that occurred, began to return, beating their breasts. Moreover, all those acquainted with him were standing at a distance. **Also, women, who together had followed him from Galilee, were standing beholding these things.**” – *Luke 23:48-49*

These women were different from the general ‘crowds’ that followed Jesus. They were singled out by the gospel writers as a specific group of followers of Jesus.

After the Sabbath celebrations, it was the women who went to the grave site to prepare Jesus' body, and they were the ones who first discovered that Jesus had been resurrected. The women immediately believed, but the men did not:

“On the first day of the week, however, they went very early to the tomb, bearing the spices they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the memorial tomb, and when they entered they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were in perplexity over this, look! two men in flashing clothing stood by them. As the [women] became frightened and kept their faces turned to the ground, the [men] said to them: ‘Why are you looking for the living One among the dead? [He is not here, but has been raised up.] Recall how he spoke to you while he was yet in Galilee, saying that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be impaled and yet on the third day rise.’ **So they called his sayings to mind**, and they returned from the memorial tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. **They were the Magdalene Mary, and Joanna, and Mary the [mother] of James. Also, the rest of the women with them were telling the apostles these things. However, these sayings appeared as nonsense to them and they would not believe the [women].**” – *Luke 24:1-11*

Then, at Pentecost of 33 C.E., within about 10 days of Jesus' ascension to heaven, 120 believers, men and women, were gathered together in an upper room.

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from a mountain called the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem, being a sabbath day's journey away. So, when they had entered, they went up into the upper chamber, where they were staying, Peter as well as John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James [the son] of Alphaeus and Simon the zealous one, and Judas [the son] of James. With one accord all these were persisting in prayer, **together with some women** and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers. Now during these days Peter rose up in the midst of the brothers and said (the crowd of persons was all together **about one hundred and twenty**).” – *Acts 1:12-15*

As they sat there praying, the spirit was poured out on all 120 men and women, equally:

“And tongues as if of fire became visible to them and were distributed about, and one sat upon each one of them, **and they all** became filled with holy spirit and started to speak with different tongues, just as the spirit was granting them to make utterance.” – *Acts 2:3-4*

When a crowd gathered, Peter explained that this is what the prophet Joel prophesied when he said:

“And in the last days,” God says, “I shall pour out some of my spirit upon every sort of flesh, and your sons **and your daughters** will prophesy and your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams; and even upon my men slaves **and upon my women slaves** I will pour out some of my spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” – *Acts 2:17-18*

How was it that the women were equally qualified with the men to teach about Jesus to the crowd that gathered at Pentecost **within ten days of Jesus’ ascension**? Clearly, they had been trained by Jesus along with the apostles and the male disciples!

From this point on, in the brotherhood of the kingdom, woman stood before God on equal ground with man. The women received this special visitation of spirit and shared in the blessings equally with the men believers. No longer was man to monopolize the ministry of religious service. The Pharisee might go on thanking God that he was not born a woman, but among the followers of Jesus, woman has been forever set free from all religious discriminations based on sex. Pentecost obliterated all religious discrimination founded on racial distinction, cultural differences, social caste, or sex prejudice even as Paul wrote:

“You are **all**, in fact, **sons of God** through your faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, **there is neither male nor female**; for you are all one [person] in union with Christ Jesus. Moreover, **if you belong to Christ, you are really Abraham’s seed, heirs with reference to a promise.**” – *Galatians 3:26-29*

Yes, the women were included as the “sons of God” and the “seed of Abraham.” The term “brothers” is just a colloquialism. No wonder these believers would cry out:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” – *2 Corinthians 3:17 (RSV)*

Later, however, the spiritual equality of women was sacrificed on the altar of male ego. Within a few years, some of the male disciples returned to their comfort zone of male domination in religious matters. Even Paul was among them, though in his letter to the Corinthians, he was careful not to attribute his restrictions on women to the Christ:

“Let a woman learn in silence with full submissiveness. **I** do not permit a woman to teach, or to exercise authority over a man, but to be in silence.” – *1 Timothy 2:11-12*

“But to the others I say, **yes, I, not the Lord**: If any brother has an unbelieving wife, and yet she is agreeable to dwelling with him, let him not leave her; and a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and yet he is agreeable to dwelling with her, let her not leave her husband.” – *1 Corinthians 7:12-13*

Paul also made it clear that some of his other directives as to personal conduct were not from Jesus, but sprang from his own opinions:

“Now concerning virgins **I have no command from the Lord**, but **I give my opinion** as one who had mercy shown him by the Lord to be faithful.” – *1 Corinthians 7:25*

Therefore, it cannot be said that a religious association that allows women to teach from the platform or the pulpit is not approved by God. Having said that, we recognize that a religious association has a right to set up administrative rules as to personal conduct and the conduct of their meetings according to their ‘opinion,’ as did Paul, as long as those rules do not harm the association. Jesus indicated that he would not interfere in such matters:

“Truly I say to you men, Whatever things you may bind on earth will be things bound in heaven, and whatever things you may loose on earth will be things loosed in heaven. Again I truly say to you, If two of you on earth agree concerning anything of importance that they should request, it will take place for them due to my Father in heaven. For where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.” – *Matthew 18:18-20*

However, when the rules become oppressive and suppressive, such associations will have the types of problems that result from such discrimination. They will reap what they have sown. (*Galatians 6:7*) The women in such an association can lose their spiritual self-respect and abandon their faith to the direction of men. Men in such an association can lose their spiritual balance and begin to belittle women or throw ‘spiritual bones’ by making patronizing comments about them. They begin to think more of themselves than they should and will be humbled by God as Jesus explained in his illustration of the self-righteous Pharisee:

“But he spoke this illustration also to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and who considered the rest as nothing: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and began to pray these things to himself, “O God, I thank you I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unrighteous, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give the tenth of all things I acquire.” But the tax collector standing at a distance was not willing even to raise his eyes heavenward, but kept beating his breast, saying, “O God, be gracious to me a sinner.” I tell you, This man went down to his home proved more righteous than that man; because **everyone that exalts himself will be humiliated**, but he that humbles himself will be exalted.” – *Luke 18:9-14*

Men who carry on this farce of superiority cause their entire association to lose out on the wealth of spiritual potential that lies suppressed within their women. Children raised in this environment can develop a lack of respect for both men and women, and become entangled in all sorts of misbehavior and vices. How can we expect them to honor God whom they cannot see if they cannot honor men and women whom they can see? (*1 John 4:20*)

But when the wisdom of the Lord permeates a religious association, the combined nature of the power of male and female working together, side by side, generates a spiritual phenomena that surpasses all male-dominated cultures. Many men can testify that their wives are the spiritual fulcrum of the family. Many wives among Jehovah's Witnesses secretly develop their husband's public talks, or at the very least, critique them. Women are invaluable teachers, not only in their home, but also in the public ministry. Because of their innate attunement to the emotional needs of their children, women have a natural ability to perceive spiritual matters in common things. Thus, when a religious association fails to utilize these 'gifts in women,' they are missing out on a valuable asset that would add balance to the association.

We are not here recommending any particular congregational arrangement, but we are suggesting that a more balanced approach would lead to a more balanced spirit in the congregation. But whatever the situation or administrative rules in a religious association, women should know and have full faith that they stand before God in full equality with the men.

Even in our secular culture, women are not accorded the honor due the "feminine vessel." (*1 Peter 3:7*) Though predominately weaker in physical strength, they are more often stronger in social fortitude and intellectual prowess.

We wonder how many men could endure a woman's burden. How many men could care for a home and children, and hold down a full time job in the face of abuse, discrimination and disrespect? How many men have the wisdom and humility to maneuver and endure systemic social humiliation and degradation with their faith in tact?

While many men are fine examples of 'Christ in man,' an examination of 21st century culture reveals that many more men than women run away from their responsibilities in pursuit of selfish pleasure. The inordinate number of single mothers testifies to this fact. And while much can be said about the choices some women make that often leads them into these circumstances, it must be recognized that if more men saddled up to their social responsibilities, fewer women would be alone in this most important work.

The matter of spiritual equality does not rest solely on the men. Women, too, must wake up to their responsibilities. They cannot defer their spirituality to the custody of their menfolk. They must endeavor to become exalted spiritual thinkers. A woman who is content to wait on men to decide how she should worship God is abandoning her spiritual life. For even if the men have led her correctly, she gains no credit in the eyes of the Father. She is still a follower of men.

This is not a move toward feminism – it is a move toward spiritualism. In a civilized society, there are roles each of us must play to allow for the safe and successful encounter with life's vicissitudes. For example, in the family arrangement, the wife may take on a supportive role while her husband goes into the work force. However, these roles may be reversed, or the roles may be shared. Those are matters for the couple to work out for themselves.

The point is that whatever role one chooses to play, a woman's spiritual standing should not be adversely affected by secular responsibilities. She continues to be an honored vessel of whom the Father expects the same things he expects of her male counterparts – personal and whole-souled devotion to Him and service to her brothers and sisters. (*Matthew 22:35-40*) She, too, is a citizen of the Kingdom of the Heavens who will be held accountable for her actions.

The goal of 21st Century Christian life should be as Jesus taught – full spiritual equality between men and women. The equality of gender is truly the show of proof of a maturing religious association dedicated to the advancements of Kingdom of Heaven. Idolizing the old ways of a concluded religious system is what retards spiritual growth. There must be a complete dissolution of the backward and retarded ideas about women. If modern day religion hopes to be a ‘light shining in a (2 *Peter 1:19*) place,’ then both its men and women must become the physical expression of the Christ on earth. We are certain that true equality and true partnership of evenly paired men and women will reign supreme on our planet once man’s selfish need to dominate and rule something or someone is eradicated.

The mandate to ‘be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect’ (*Matthew 5:48*) is a universal obligation which requires men and women to respect each other so that all can ‘be about the Father’s business’ of reconciling mankind to God. (*1 Corinthians 5:18-20*) As Jesus said:

“You are the light of the world. A city cannot be hid when situated upon a mountain. People light a lamp and set it, not under the measuring basket, but upon the lampstand, and it shines upon all those in the house. Likewise **let your light shine before men, that they may see your fine works and give glory to your Father who is in the heavens.” – *Matthew 5:14-16***

The command to ‘shine our light’ is equally applicable to all, whether we be man, woman or child. The command to ‘go and make disciples’ is also equally applicable to all. (*Matthew 28:19-20*) The command to love one another as we love ourselves (*Matthew 23:39*) has no racial, social, national or gender limitation. And the inestimable honor of being joint heirs with Christ (*Romans 8:17*) knows no gender.

He who would deny a woman’s spiritual equality is a man who does not know the authentic Christ. Nearly 2,000 years ago, Christ set a sterling example of what a God-oriented man looks like. Therefore, all who wish to be ambassadors **substituting** for Christ must deal with one another in the same way Christ would if he were physically on earth today. And if a man cannot honor a woman and accord her spiritual equality, he might as well return to the forest like an unreasoning animal. For him, the life and death of Jesus means nothing.

We welcome your comments.

“Elaia Luchnia”

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS: For those of our visitors who do not already know, this ministry is conducted by an evenly yoked pair – a man and a woman.