The Biblical Liberated Woman

Deborah Menken Gill

The Status of Woman in Christ: The Reversal of the Fall

THE IMPACT OF JESUS’ EXAMPLE ON THE STATUS OF WOMAN

In the social and religious context of the ancient Roman culture, Jesus’ treatment of women was revolutionary! Nowhere in the gospels do we see Jesus treating women as inferior beings. Instead, Jesus treated women as equal to men even when it meant contravening social customs to do so. Jesus attacked the prejudices and neutralized their effects.

Wherever the values of heaven were put into practice, His Kingdom was truly established on earth. Effects of the Fall were canceled by the surpassing effects of the Cross; and woman’s status was elevated to God’s ideal—as originally created fully in the image of God, she is finally redeemed fully by the work of Christ.

Note the egalitarian nature of His ministry practice. While Jesus’ contemporaries regarded women as sex objects, He treated them as persons (Luke 7:36-50; 11:27-28; John 8:2-11). His ministry was directed to male and female alike, whether it was in preaching, miraculous providing, healing, deliverance ministry, or raising the dead (Matt. 8:1-15; 9:18-26; 15:21-28).

Though Palestinian social customs strongly disapproved of men conversing with women, Jesus interacted with them personally even when they were strangers or despised people (Matt. 9:18-26; Luke 10:38-42; John 4:7,27; etc.). Against socio-cultural restrictions, Jesus touched a female corpse (in order to raise her from the dead) and He rejected the blood taboo (in order to heal the woman with the issue of blood).


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Jesus taught women (Luke 10:38-42), had female disciples (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1), and commissioned them to testify in His behalf (Matt. 28:10; Luke 8:43-45). Although rabbinic traditions forbade both the teaching of the Hebrew scriptures to women and the acceptance of testimony of women, Jesus did both.

Note the egalitarian style of His teaching manner. Jesus' teaching applies equally to women as to men. He balanced the parables with male and female activities so that both genders would receive the message (Luke 13:19-21; 15:3-10; 18:1-14; Matt. 25:1-30). He frequently coupled illustrations in pairs enabling easy identification for persons of each sex (Matt. 21:31-32; Luke 11:29-32; 24:40-41, etc.). Jesus used feminine imagery in describing Himself and His Father (Luke 13:20-21,34; 15:8-10).²

Jesus addressed mixed groups using complementary discourse (Luke 12:53; 14:26; 18:20,29; 20:50; etc.). Complementary discourse is my term for the repeating of statements twice (modifying the gender each time) in order to make application to each sex.³ Although such was completely out of step with the grammatical norms of His culture, Jesus frequently spoke using the following pairs: "men and women," "husbands and wives," "fathers and mothers," "fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law," "sons and daughters," and "sons-in-law and daughters-in-law."⁴

Note the egalitarian quality of His doctrinal content. There are no instructions in Jesus' theology that apply only to women. He explained that there are no sexual distinctions in eternity. He did not confine women's role to the domestic sphere, but He himself frequently served thus (Luke 10:38-42, cooking, serving, feeding). In all the gospel records, there is no teaching or preaching of subordination for women. The Good News of the Gospel is that there is freedom and equality for all people in Christ's kingdom!

Jesus came to cancel the consequences of sin, to reverse the effects of the Fall, and put right-side-up a world whose values were up-side-down.

WHAT DID JESUS DO FOR WOMEN?

Dr. David M. Scholer, in analyzing the impact of Jesus' example on the status of woman, enumerates five things that Jesus did for women. The discussion that follows derives from his work.⁵
JESUS CHALLENGED THE SEXUAL PUT-DOWN OF WOMAN.

The Divorce Debate. Jesus was asked for what reason a man may divorce his wife. He answered that Moses allowed divorce only because of the hardness of hearts, but that from the beginning it was not so—that God had said that a man and a woman would leave their parents and cleave to each other, that they would become one flesh, and that what God has put together should not be torn asunder.

By quoting Genesis 2:24, Jesus was saying that marriage was a mutual partnership. The text says nothing about superiority—its whole point is that the woman is identical in essence to the man.

The impact of Jesus' statements in the context of this debate was to neutralize the male prerogative of divorce. It is to say, "I will have nothing to do with this abuse by men." Instead, Jesus stressed that there should be equality in the marital state.

The Look of Adultery. Jesus said that if a man looked on a woman and lusted after her in his heart he had already committed adultery. There is no other text in antiquity that places that level of responsibility on a man.

The impact of this statement must have been awesome—Jesus rejected the idea that women are responsible for all sexual sin! Instead, He says that if a man looks with sin in his heart, he has committed adultery.

JESUS REACHED OUT TO WOMEN WHO WERE DESPISED AND REJECTED.

The Woman with the Issue of Blood. Leviticus 15 contains the Jewish laws about uncleanness. About half the chapter (vs. 1-18) has to do with male emissions and about half the chapter (vs. 19-32) has to do with a woman's menstrual cycle. But in the days of Jesus, only the part that dealt with women was discussed—and the rabbis wrote a long book about it! The male rabbis gave all the detailed rules about a woman's menstrual period and during her period a woman was considered unclean.

This woman had been culturally ostracized for 12 years. In the press of the crowd she reached out to touch Jesus, and Jesus blessed her. He accepted her. He said to her that her faith had made her whole.

The Woman Who Anointed Jesus. At another time, Jesus was in the home of Simon, a Pharisee who had Him over for dinner (since Simon believed that Jesus might be the Messiah). A woman came in who was known as a sinner, probably a prostitute, and during the entire dinner that woman kissed, and anointed Jesus' feet. Simon thought, "Now I know He can't be the Messiah. No prophet would let a woman like this touch Him." Yet here again Jesus said, "Woman your faith has saved you."

The Samaritan Woman. This woman was both socially and ethnically despised—she was living in sexual sin and she was a "half-breed Jew"—not to mention the fact that she was female. Yet Jesus took the time to demonstrate that He valued her as a person enough to share with her the water of life.
The Woman Taken in Adultery. Jesus offered this guilty woman love and forgiveness. What did Jesus write in the sand? Scholer suggests that maybe it was the regulation from Deuteronomy, i.e., that both offenders—male and female—are to be stoned.

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt. 21:30). All of these episodes illustrate that Jesus was reaching out to those who were marginal, and one of the largest groups of marginalized people in His day were women.

JESUS INCLUDED WOMEN IN HIS LARGER GROUP OF DISCIPLES.

Though there were no women among Jesus’ twelve disciples, there were women among His followers. The average believer today may think that “disciple” equals one of the twelve apostles, but that is not true. Jesus had a larger band of followers. We read of the 70 He sent out, the 500 who witnessed the ascension, and the 120 who remained in the upper room for the promise (and Acts, in describing that group of followers, specifically says “including the women”). Jesus had a larger group of disciples and among those there were women.

Mary and Martha. In first-century Judaism it was not appropriate for a Jewish male teacher to teach women, but Jesus did. Not only did He teach Mary, but He commended her for her learning. He defended her and said that by sitting at His feet and learning the lessons of faith, she was doing what was most important.

The Samaritan Woman. Jesus taught the Samaritan woman some of the loftiest theological concepts He ever explained, such as “God is spirit and those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” The Samaritan woman is the only person we have record of to whom Jesus made an explicit acknowledgment that He was the Messiah. That is remarkable!

Others Mentioned by Name. Other of Jesus’ followers mentioned in Luke 8:1-3 are “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many others.” These women followed Jesus in Galilee (during His first year of ministry), continued all the way to the Cross, were the first ones at the tomb, and are the ones who appear in Acts 1:14-15 among the 120 who gathered in the Upper Room and were filled with the Spirit. They were not just ‘Jerusalem tag-alongs,” they had been with Jesus all along. They were part of Jesus’ entourage of disciples during the duration of His ministry and continued faithful even after His ascension.

JESUS VALUED DISCIPLESHIP OF WOMEN OVER THEIR BIOLOGICAL FUNCTION.

Twice when Jesus’ mother was mentioned or blessed for being His mother, Jesus said, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice;” and “Blessed rather [than being my biological mother] are those who hear the Word and obey it.”

As lofty and honorable as the roles of wife and mother are, Jesus was asserting that there is a value still higher. He was not denying or dimin-
ishing maternity, He was just saying that discipleship is of even higher value. This is the gospel-version of Paul’s statement that in Christ there is no male or female (Gal. 3:28). In Christ, in the realm of discipleship, in the realm of relating to God, there is a higher value than one’s gender identification and the roles determined thereby. A higher value is obeying God. The highest role is serving God—discipleship surpasses even motherhood.

JESUS INCLUDED WOMEN AMONG THOSE WHO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL.

The first proclaimers of the death and resurrection—which is Paul’s definition of the gospel—were women. It is remarkable that in a culture where women’s testimony was not even accepted in court, the first to proclaim the resurrection were women. And this was not just happenstance—Jesus, himself, commissioned them as His authentic witnesses. This helps us to appreciate the context and power of what Jesus did for women.

Jesus did not appoint any female elders, but He never appointed male elders either. What He did do was call and commission disciples. And within that band of faithful disciples there were both men and women.

Jesus’ model is relevant. It is important! It was the foundation that led the Early Church to understand that the Holy Spirit had come to both men and women in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. And it led to the statement of Paul that in Christ there is no male or female. Jesus treated men and women equally in discipleship and that is the first basis of ministry.

WHAT WAS THE INFLUENCE OF JESUS’ EXAMPLE ON HIS DISCIPLES?

They were so impressed by Jesus’ example that they were faithful to record it as it was even though it was at variance with their own personal social customs.

What was the influence of Jesus’ example on subsequent Church history? The church in its early, original state, followed Jesus’ example, celebrating it as the incarnation of the good news.

The Status of Woman in the Church Today: Biblical Precedents Still Apply

That which was normative for the Early Church must also be normative for us today.

CONTEMPORARY MODELS VALIDATE AND PERPETUATE

God has called and gifted many notable women for the work of His ministry throughout modern history. This is especially true in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles where the significance of Joel’s prophecy is being realized today.

From the early years of the outpouring of the Spirit in America came
the well-known ministries of Maria Woodworth Etter, Aimee Semple McPherson, Mattie Howard, Anna B. Locke, and Marie Burgess Brown; from the more recent past, Kathryn Kuhlman and Roxanne Brandt; and in our day Frances Hunter, Marilyn Hickey, Vickie Jamison, Iverna Tompkins, Dr. Ja Shil Choi, Opal Reddin, Aimee Cortese, Naomi Dowdy, and Jeanne Mayo.

I am so thankful for the openness of our Fellowship to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry! Eyewitnesses have claimed that at our first General Council meeting there were more female ministers in attendance than male.\textsuperscript{13} The Assemblies of God has affirmed the ordination of women ever since its first constitutional statement in 1914 which included an article on the “Eligibility of Women [for Ministry].”

WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

How does our present state of affairs square with our theological position? First, let me share some good news; then, some not so good news; and finally, a hint of hope for the future.

First, the good news. In all the years since 1977\textsuperscript{14} but one (1989) the number of female ministers in the Assemblies of God has risen annually, reflecting a net change of +17, +16, +70, +76, +31, +77, +94, +82, +35, +52, -81 (1989), +48, +45, +50, +68, each year, respectively.\textsuperscript{15} According to the Office of the General Secretary, even in 1977 there were 3,220 ordained and licensed women in the Assemblies of God. We are favorably impressed that 15 percent of the 21,397 ordained, licensed, and specialized licensed Assemblies of God ministers were female.

Yet, sadly we note that, 1,225 of these credentialed women were 65 years or older, 38 percent! Thus, our statistics looked strong but were so only because of the ministering women who served this Fellowship in such great numbers in the past. Already in 1977, however, as these senior adult women were entering their retirement years, we were not seeing the same strong numbers of younger women pursuing the Lord’s call to the ministry to replace them.

In the years since the General Secretary’s Office has kept statistics on female ministers, there has been a steady\textsuperscript{16} increase (except for one year) in the number of female clergy in our Fellowship. Praise the Lord! Yet, it must be noted also that, until four years ago, the percentage of females of our total clergy had been with slight fluctuation decreasing.

Another disturbing trend is that fewer and fewer of our women are following God’s call to ministries central to the work of the gospel. Only 69 percent of our credentialed women are senior pastors. The percentage of credentialed women who progress to full ordination is decreasing. The percentage of female ministers who are not senior pastors, home or foreign missionaries, or are past retirement age is increasing. More and more of our female leaders are limiting (or have been limited in) their church involvement to peripheral activities in the ministry or are choosing secular employment over full-time ministry. We have been loosing ground.
Every figure in bold print on the chart which follows represents a decrease in the ministry of women in the Assemblies of God.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DECLINE OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY IN THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD AND ITS RECENT REVERSAL

In 1979
3,253 (14.4%) of our 22,584 credentialed ministers were females.
1,219 (37.47% of them) were 65 years or older.
2,648 (81.4% of them) were not senior pastors, home or foreign missionaries.
239 (1.06% of our credentialed ministers) were female senior pastors.
49% of our credentialed females were ordained.

In 1982
3,399 (14.2%) of our 23,898 credentialed ministers were females.
1,385 (40.74% of them) were 65 years or older.
2,812 (82.7% of them) were not senior pastors, home or foreign missionaries.
252 (1.05% of our credentialed ministers) were female senior pastors.
48% of our credentialed females were ordained.

In 1987
3,770 (13.83%) of our 27,264 credentialed ministers were females.
1,542 (40.9% of them) were 65 years or older.
3,202 (84.9% of them) were not senior pastors, home or foreign missionaries.
283 (1.04% of our credentialed ministers) were female senior pastors.
42.1% of our credentialed females were ordained.

In 1993
4,722 (15.2%) of our 31,057 credentialed ministers are female.
1,897 (40.2% of them) are 65 years or older.
3,990 (84.5% of them) are not senior pastors, home or foreign missionaries.
330 (1.06% of our credentialed ministers) are female senior pastors.
33.6% of our credentialed females were ordained.

Percentages of female foreign missionaries reveal the same trend.

From 1915 through 1940, 30-43% of our missionaries were single women. In 1993, 6.2% of our missionaries were single women.

Though our ministerial ranks are growing, in our Fellowship as a whole, we have been losing ground in female leadership at an increasing rate.

Now for some good news. Take a careful look at the last year listed, 1993, and you will see a potential positive trend. In a small but significant way, the decline is reversing. The percentage of our clergy which are female has increased to 15.2 percent. In fact, for the last four consecutive years, the percentage of females ministers in the Assemblies of God has risen one-tenth of one percentage point per year. Note the general decline
and its recent reversal of the female percentage of total ministers in the Fellowship from 1977 to the current year for which we have statistics (1993\textsuperscript{24}): 15\%, 14.7\%, 14.4\%, 14.3\%, 14.2\%, 14\%, 13.8\%, 13.9\%, 13.9\%, 13.8\%, 15\%, 14.8\%, 14.9\%, 15\%, 15.1\%, 15.2\%. It is also encouraging to see that the percentage of our female clergy who are in pastoral, home or foreign missions ministry has also increased every year for four years now.

This recent rise represents a faint flicker of hope for our Fellowship. If we will be careful to fan this little flame, perhaps the trend can be strengthened in the future. Since the number of female ministers of retirement age has never been higher than it is today, the challenge to maintain even our current percentages is great. In what ways could our leadership encourage the coming generation?

Women are virtually absent from District and General Council leadership,\textsuperscript{25} One wonders if administrative leadership in our churches is closed to them. (Even on the local level, it is unusual to see women serving as deacons in our assemblies.)

It is rare to hear female preachers in the pulpits of our churches on Sundays, and even less common to see women address mixed audiences at camp meetings or large gatherings of our Fellowship. There are fewer models of valiant women of God visible to our younger women today than ever before in the history of our Movement.

Most unfortunately, many of the women who have felt the call of God and have begun to prepare for ministry are being discouraged by educators, pastors, and officials from pursuing the Lord’s work.

OUR RESPONSE

It is God’s will for our day that we in the Assemblies of God be blessed by the ministry of His prophesying daughters. To the degree that we are convinced of our Pentecostal distinctives—that it is God who divinely calls and supernaturally anoints for ministry—we will welcome the full use of women’s gifts to all levels of ministry in our Fellowship.

To that end, let us affirm and encourage those women called to ministry. Let us not put further restrictions on their leadership. But let us, in light of the biblical basis of women’s ministry, open new and broader doors of opportunity for service.

As we serve in the DECADE OF HARVEST, may we not be guilty of sending away half the reapers God calls. But may we take bold new steps forward to entrust to our daughters the sacred sickle, and, with our sincerest blessings, thrust them out into the whitened fields.

\textsuperscript{1}This article is excerpted from chapters three and five of a manuscript of the same name.\n
\textsuperscript{2}This is the focus of study in my 1979 Honors Thesis for the M.A. in Biblical Languages, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, \textit{Gynecomorphisms in the New Testament}. It is available in both the Cordas C. Burnett Library (of A.G.T.S.) and the Assemblies of God Archives.

\textsuperscript{3}In the first century, in both Greek and Hebrew, mixed groups were addressed as males. Based upon their cultural values, this is the way these two languages constructed their grammar. But Jesus, in spite of the grammatical convention, demonstrated a different model when teaching.

\textsuperscript{4}In “Appendix IX. Jesus’ Rhetoric in the Cultural Milieu,” of \textit{Gynecomorphisms in the
New Testament, I list 45 examples of Jesus' use of complementary or coupled discourse instead of collective masculine address in the Gospels.

For more information regarding the status of women in early Judaism see David M. Scholer's cassette tape series (#C-WI-1) on "The Role and Status of Women in the New Testament," available from The Sanders Christian Foundation (of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary), P.O. Box 2094, South Hamilton, MA 01982-0094.

Actually, the passage in Deut. 24:1-4 (on which the debate is based) is not condoning divorce but recognizes that divorce existed in Israel and lays down a complicated rule that a man cannot remarry his first wife after divorce. It gives formalized procedures for the divorces that already existed.

Josephus had taken that divorce text and rewritten the Old Testament to read that it was all right to divorce one's wife for any reason whatsoever. And among men of his day there are many such reasons. Josephus tells us that he himself had divorced his wife simply because he did not like her.

The closest is one by the Stoic philosopher, Usonius Rufus, which says that a wife should have a right to be angry if her husband had a sexual affair.

From a concordance study of this and similar statements, we see that Jesus made this kind of faith-affirming statement only to marginalized people, those rejected by society.

Although this passage is not found in all ancient Manuscripts it is an accurate description of Jesus' attitude and actions.

Why didn't Jesus have female apostles? We are always in trouble when we argue from silence—basing the argument on the lack of evidence—but since the question is a legitimate one, let us engage the issue nonetheless.

First, the logic of this question infers that since Jesus did not have any women apostles we should not have women ministers today. An analogous application of this argument is that since Jesus did not have a single gentle apostle, we must not accept the ministry of gentiles today either. We can easily see the absurdity of enforcing such a prescription. The fact is that both the gender and ethnicity of Jesus' followers were restricted by the cultural setting. It would have been impossible for Jesus to invite a gentile or a woman into his intimate group. Neither, for example, could have entered the Temple.

Second, who was in Jesus' initial, intimate group is not necessarily the normative model for Christian ministry. Who the apostles were is not determinative of how ministry came to function in the Early Church. The apostles were not the structure of the church. Church government developed on other terms.

Third, there were many gentiles and women in Christian leadership subsequent to the initial twelve apostles. In these many other positions, women served alongside of men.

More pertinent than the absence of women among the Twelve is that fact that Jesus did include women in his larger group of disciples.

For more information see Richard and Catherine Kroeger, "Why Were There No Women Apostles?," Equity, 1982, pp. 10-12.

And after Jesus, the Early Church recognized at least one female as an apostle, i.e., Junia (Rom 16:7).

They were not believed very readily! Granted the social milieu, it is not surprising that the male disciples thought their testimony was an idle tale.

In fact, the first pagan critic whose writing against the Church has survived, i.e., Celsus (AD 175) lists as one of his ten major objections against the Christian church that [he claims] it has a weak foundation—doubly weak, in fact. First, Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and everyone knows that is an impossibility. And second, the story was told by women, and everyone knows that women are incompetent witnesses.

Indeed, as Paul says (1 Cor. 1:18-31), both the message (of the cross) and its God-appointed messengers (those who are low and despised in the world) are a stumbling block and foolishness to those who are perishing. Yet, we who are being saved can see in God's choice of message and messengers both the wisdom and power of God! God's awesome demonstration of absolute authority through suffering and death is meant to demolish our carnal concept of power. And God's wisdom in choosing those marginalized by society to proclaim His most important message is meant to radically transform our social values!

Personal testimony of several residents of Maranatha Village (a retirement facility owned by the General Council of the Assemblies of God), Springfield, MO.

This is the first year statistics regarding the numbers of female ministers in the Assemblies of God were kept.


Slow, but steady.

(Continued on page 32.)