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JESUS' VIEW OF WOMEN

1. *Jesus' View of Women in Evangelical Feminism*

Jesus did not teach explicitly on the subject of women, but his attitudes are detectable indirectly in his teaching and by noting differences with negative Jewish opinions. Jesus evidenced an open attitude toward women, even somewhat scandalous. Breaking with custom, Jesus allowed women disciples (Lk 8:1-3), but maintained unwavering purity in his relations with women. He had theological discussions with women (John 4:1-42). He helped sinful women and women in need without demeaning them (Lk 7:36-50; 13:10-17; Mk 5:25-34). He treated men and women alike regarding their faith and their foibles (Lk 7:1-17). Women are among those who took care of him (Matt 27:55), showed loving gestures (Matt 26:6-13), remained at the cross when others had fled (Lk 23:27-29), were first at the tomb (Matt 28:1-10), were first witnesses of the resurrection (Mk 16:11), and were among those foremost in proclaiming the Christ (Rom 16).¹

Jesus broke down many of the culturally-imposed restrictions regarding contact between males and females and replaced hierarchalism with mutual acceptance.² He was a male, but had no patriarchal axe to grind or a "male ego" to defend.³ "Without sentimentality, condescension, or

undemanding indulgence, he accepted them as persons."⁴ He was a servant to both men and women and stressed mutual respect and service in relationships. True, Jesus did not include women among the twelve, but the logistics of women being in that role were simply impractical and would have scandalized and obscured Jesus' true mission. Nevertheless, Jesus' openness to women, in spite of the prevailing patriarchal culture of that day, was so powerful that even thirty or so years after Jesus' death the Gospels continue to reflect this attitude of reverse patriarchalism.⁵

2. *Jesus' View of Women—A Complementarian View*

Hierarchalists point out that Jesus did not speak to the status of women in Judaism. Consequently, they conclude that Jesus must have approved of the cultural status quo of his time regarding hierarchalism.⁶

Borland,⁷ who to his credit does not disparage evangelical feminists as unregenerate as does Foh, argues that Jesus did indeed place a high value on women in a world that regarded women as second-class citizens. The depersonalizing of women in that world-view, however, was a deviation from God's original intent. For instance, in quoting Gen 1:27 (Matt 19:4), Jesus viewed women as created in the image of God just as men are. Jesus viewed women as genuine persons, not simply as the objects of male desire or as property (Matt 5:28). In his view of divorce, Jesus advocated the equality of men and women (Matt 5:32; 19:9). Jesus served the needs of men and

⁴Ibid., 75.

⁵Ibid., 61. C.F.D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967): 65, says that, in light of first-century patriarchal culture, Jesus' behavior toward women is so extraordinary as to be evidence of Scripture's supernatural authenticity.

⁶Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1980): 251.

⁷James A. Borland, "Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 113-120. See also Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, 82-114.

¹Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987): 41-48.

²See McClelland, "The New Reality in Christ," *Gender Matters*, 62.

³Letha D. Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992): 72.

women alike, whether physical or spiritual. Jesus accorded women dignity by illustrations in his teaching (Matt 12:42), teaching women theological truths (Matt 24:41; Jn 20:17), and having women participate in his life and ministry (Jn 11:20; 12:2-8; Lk 8:3). Women were the initial witnesses to the resurrection (Matt 28:1-10). Further, women often labored with men in the early church (Acts 16:14-15; Rom 16).

However, women were not included among the twelve.⁸ This could not be because Jesus was afraid of scandal, for he criticized Pharisees in public (Mk 1:21-27), ate with sinners (Matt 9:11) and boldly cleansed the temple (Jn 2:14-17). The only reason for selecting an all-male group of twelve was emphasis upon maintaining God-given role distinctions regarding leadership. As leaders (Acts 2:14; 5:12, 18, 40, 42; Gal 1:17) ruling over the "twelve tribes of Israel" (Lk 22:30) and having a special teaching ministry (Jn 14:26), their roles were different from the roles of the women who followed Christ or were served by him. In the search for a replacement in Acts 1:21, it is stipulated that he be a male. Further, in Acts 6 the church was asked to select seven qualified *men* as leaders. Therefore, while Jesus treated women as equal with men and maintained their dignity and worth, the pattern of male leadership in the early church continued the role distinction between men and women and a leadership role for men.⁹

3. Summary and Critique

Not unexpectedly, many similarities exist regarding the view of Jesus across the evangelical spectrum. Jesus did not address directly the status of women, but held a high view of women in a world that often viewed women as second-class. Quoting Gen 1:27, he held both man and woman were created in the image of God. Consequently, he helped both men and women on an equal basis, taught theological truths

⁸Borland, "Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 120-122

⁹House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*, 74-75.

to both men and women, and included both men and women in his ministry. Women are portrayed as the initial witnesses to the resurrection and as having worked alongside men in the early church.

Also, not unexpectedly, there are major differences regarding Jesus' view of women. Evangelical feminists see him as differing with prevalent Jewish hierarchalism and replacing it with mutual respect and acceptance, whereas complementarians see him as approving of that hierarchalism. Whereas complementarians stress the absence of women from the twelve, evangelical feminists argue the logistical impracticality of their inclusion.

Interestingly, the impasse occurs basically regarding egalitarianism and hierarchalism—precisely the two prejudices that have generated polarity throughout the history of the women's issue. Certainly Jesus taught mutual respect of males and females and just as certainly he worked within the social structure of his day. However, it has not been demonstrated from biblical exegesis that Jesus maintained egalitarianism or hierarchalism—both of which must remain presuppositions to exegesis rather than conclusions.

This impasse also requires refocusing of the discussion. Certainly one's understanding of Jesus' view is central to a responsible Christian view of women. However, since Jesus did not address the topic specifically, one must respect that silence and exercise great care before attributing any particular view to him. Questions about the understanding of women by Jesus are proper; however, they are not best addressed by pressing modern agendas onto the text, but by permitting the Gospel narratives to inform the modern question. Serious evangelical scholarship is extant and forthcoming both in exegesis of the Gospels and in Christology. However, it is important to observe that: 1) rigorous exegetical scholarship must be used in learning from the narrative the historical understandings of the writer and the participants, and 2) insights into Jesus' view of women must of necessity be considered in terms of the wider context of Christology—both of which are major

oversights in the current discussion of women among evangelicals. Even then, one must remember that an explicit doctrine of women does not occur in Scripture, nor does Jesus attempt to provide such a doctrine. What Jesus does do is provide clear insights into the ancient intent of God concerning the treatment of "people." A responsible quest for the "mind of Christ," then, is the primary task for the Christian community. One must not circumvent or manipulate this task in study of the "role" of women in the church or any other similar issue. As said above, "women in the church" is not at the heart of the Christian message. The central element in Christianity is the call of God in Christ. That provides the context for all other discussions.

In this connection, several observations are important regarding Jesus' view of women.¹⁰ In his life and teachings, Jesus redefined "power." Rather than use power to control others, Jesus advocated using power to serve, forgive, and encourage others in a context of mutual deference (see Eph 4:15-16). Jesus insisted upon equity for both men and women regarding laws of marriage and divorce. This is exemplary of his understanding of power and is a direct application of that teaching to husband-wife relationships (see Matt 19:1-12; 5:31-32; Mk 10:1-12). In all four Gospels, Jesus refused to allow his male disciples to view women as sex objects. This made possible a mixed group of male and female followers to travel along with him. Later, Paul applies Jesus' view of power as service rather than control to the Corinthian situation. Paul states that the husband belongs to the wife in the very same way that the wife belongs to the husband (1 Cor 7:2-5). The same principle of mutuality holds true when he discusses divorce (7:2-13) and remarriage (7:14-16). Paul specifically applies Jesus' view of power in Eph 5:21, where mutual deference is characteristic of Christ's life and of the Christian life (see

¹⁰See further Gretchen G. Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1987): 113-116; Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983): 44-60; Scott Bartsch, "Jesus, Power, and Gender Roles," *TSF Bulletin* 7 (1984): 2-4

also Phil 2:3-5; Rom 12:10). "Submit" in 5:21 continues as the implied verb in v. 22, making the exhortation to mutual deference applicable to Christian wives. Similarly, mutual deference applies to Christian husbands in 5:25-33a, where there are three exhortations for husbands to love their wives in the same way Christ loved the church. Most would think that power is "over" someone, but Paul's point is that Christ's relationship to the church was *service*. This comparison of a husband's love with Christ's sacrifice in Eph 5 challenged radically the long tradition of male-dominance in existence since Gen 3. It presented men with a new basis for relating to their wives, and wives with a new basis for relating to their husbands—voluntary mutual deference. Nothing is said about decision-making roles, or of unique division of gender roles—only that for Jesus the pre-Fall ideal of human equality should be restored.

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