

A Critique of
Feminist Biblical Interpretation

GENDER ROLES & THE BIBLE: Creation, the Fall, & Redemption

Jack Cottrell, Ph.D.



COLLEGE PRESS
PUBLISHING COMPANY
Joplin, Missouri

II. CHRIST'S ENCOUNTERS WITH WOMEN

Both feminists and non-feminists agree that the way Jesus actually treated women in his encounters with them varied from the prevailing norms of that day to a greater or lesser degree. Both also agree that Jesus' treatment of women is a very important consideration in formulating what is normative for today. Along with these general points of agreement, however, serious differences exist in the ways feminists and non-feminists interpret the gospel records on this subject. How to interpret these records is the subject of this section.

A. The Feminist View

How Jesus treated women is a major point for Christian feminists of both liberal and conservative types. Here is a typical remark:

One of the main thrusts of Jesus' ministry and of the New Testament is the affirmation of the worth of women and their equality with men. Not once is there recorded an incident in Jesus' ministry nor any words of his which indicate that women are second to men in any way. To the contrary, his every relationship with women affirmed their dignity as persons equal with men in the sight of God. Of course, in order to do so Jesus had to break severely with the status quo which denied women such worth.⁴⁵

The way Jesus related to women is seen as all the more striking in view of the negative roles assigned to women in the rabbinic teaching of the time. Women were clearly regarded as inferior. They were not expected to study the Torah, but were expected instead to attend to the affairs of

the home. They were seen as intellectually inferior, having little to offer in the way of stimulating thought or conversation. The rabbinic traditions "banned man from conversing with a woman, . . . proclaimed blessings to those whose children were male and woe to those whose offspring were female, . . . described women as greedy eaters, indolent, jealous, and frivolous." As a result "many first century women were downtrodden, persons with little worth beyond satisfying a man's sexual appetites and bearing his children."⁴⁶

In view of this kind of teaching it seems that Jesus strongly challenged the cultural mores of his time. As Bartchy says, "Jesus' words and deeds radically called in question the traditional gender-roles and sense of male/female identity of His culture."⁴⁷ In general feminists tend to use very extravagant language to describe how Jesus treated women. It was "startlingly new" and "revolutionary," says Evans.⁴⁸ In Atkins' words, "the way Jesus behaved towards women was revolutionary and sometimes shocking," even "bizarre in the extreme."⁴⁹ "In the light of first-century patriarchal culture, Jesus' behavior in regard to women is so extraordinary," say Scanzoni and Hardesty, that one scholar "cites it as evidence of Scripture's supernatural authenticity."⁵⁰ This sentiment is well summed up in the title of Leonard Swidler's article, "Jesus Was a Feminist."⁵¹

Remarks such as these usually have in view both Jesus' teachings about women and his encounters with them. This section deals with the encounters, which feminists regard as especially important. As Jewett says, "It was not so much in what he said as in how he related to women that Jesus was a revolutionary. In this relationship his life style was so remarkable that one can only call it astonishing. He treated women as fully human, equal to men in every respect."⁵² The following are the most-cited examples of this "revolutionary" behavior.

1. *Mary and Martha, Luke 10:38-42*

A favorite example is Jesus' rebuke of Martha and defense of Mary when Martha complained that Mary should be helping in the kitchen rather than sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach (Luke 10:38-42). Here are Jesus words: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (verses 41-42). As feminists see it, Jesus is here rejecting the stereotype concerning women's roles. He is saying that a woman need not be a homemaker; she is free to study theology with the rabbis, the modern equivalent being to enter seminary and prepare for any ministry role she chooses. While Martha was busy "fulfilling the role traditionally assigned to women," Mary "turned upside down the role traditionally assigned to her as a woman"—and Jesus praised her for it.⁵³ He "affirmed the right of female persons to study the theology which had traditionally been closed to them." He "refused to order Mary to play the stereotypical female role."⁵⁴

As Pentz sees it, "He tells Martha in so many words that Mary shouldn't be helping Martha serve: she should be doing theology with Jesus." In other words, Jesus "calls women to develop themselves rather than sacrifice themselves. He calls them to do theology rather than being totally preoccupied with their domestic chores."⁵⁵ Sitting at someone's feet in first-century Judaism, says Spencer, was indicative of "higher level formal education." Thus "Luke is indirectly telling his readers that Mary was taking a position typical of a rabbinic pupil, a position unusual for a woman and moreover usually disapproved." Thus Jesus was allowing Mary to learn as his male students would learn; in so doing he "completely reversed the priorities and the consequences of those priorities in Jewish ancient life." He shows that "a woman's role as homemaker is *not* primary"; she may choose education over homemaking.

From this we learn "Jesus' new principle of encouraging women to seek religious training."⁵⁶

Gretchen Hull sees this "crucial passage" as "the most significant encounter" as far as the feminist agenda is concerned. The story is "revolutionary, because it taught that women should prefer studying theology over a preoccupation with domestic chores." According to Hull, "If Jesus had wished to teach that studying theology is a male prerogative, this would have been the ideal place to do that. If Jesus had wished to teach role restrictions, this would have been the ideal opportunity. . . . Yet Jesus did exactly the opposite!"⁵⁷

2. *The Samaritan Woman, John 4:5-42*

Another example is the encounter with the Samaritan woman recorded in John 4. Besides breaking tradition by even talking to a woman in public, Jesus shattered the stereotypes even further by engaging her in "intricate theological conversation"⁵⁸ and appointing her to function as a preacher. As Mollenkott says, "not only was he speaking to a woman in the open," but "was discussing advanced theology with her!" Also, "Jesus commissioned her as his special messenger to her own city." In so doing he was "deliberately breaking customs which were degrading to the self-concept of women. He was providing object lessons for his disciples—and for us all."⁵⁹

The fact that the woman returned to the city and told what had just happened to her (verses 28-29) is very important for feminists. They see this as divine approval for women to serve as preachers and evangelists. Mickelsen identifies the Samaritan woman as "the first evangelist listed in the Gospels."⁶⁰ This is an example of how Jesus approves of "women functioning as his representatives" as evangelists, says Bartchy.⁶¹ This is the point of Mollenkott's remark above, that Jesus commissioned this woman as his special messenger.

3. *Conversation with Martha, John 11:20-27*

When Jesus came to raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus and Martha talked about resurrection (John 11:20-27). Martha said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 21). Jesus replied, "Your brother shall rise again" (v. 23). Martha said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (v. 24). Then Jesus gave her this most reassuring promise: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (verses 25-26).

Feminists point to this as another example of Jesus' great respect for women's intellectual and spiritual abilities, and how he thus "conversed with them on theological topics."⁶² This one is supposed to be especially significant, since it is Jesus' first teaching on the resurrection. Along with others Bilezikian stresses the fact that a *woman*, Martha, was the "recipient of the most emphatic, the most explicit, and the most comprehensive teaching on the subject of resurrection." In fact she was "the first person in history" to be given an understanding of this "momentous teaching."⁶³ Swidler marvels that Jesus would reveal "the central event, the central message, in the Gospel . . . to a woman."⁶⁴

4. *The Women with Jesus, Luke 8:1-3 and Mark 15:40-41*

Luke 8:1-3 reports that Jesus' traveling company included some women whom he had healed: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and others "which ministered unto him of their substance" (v. 3, KJV). Such women are mentioned again as observers of the cross. Mark 15:40-41 says, "They used to follow Him and minister to Him."

To feminists these women were part of Jesus' "inner circle" and "traveling seminary."⁶⁵ As Spencer describes them, "Jesus had a female group of disciples who, along

with the men, followed him wherever he went to learn from him." Jesus wanted them to learn his teachings so that they could teach others and take leadership positions among his people.⁶⁶ Mollenkott says that this shows how "Jesus flouted the sexual stereotypes of his day, stereotypes which demanded that women must serve rather than learn the word of God. . . . And remembering the customs of his culture, we can recognize how radically shocking to his contemporaries was the fact that Jesus traveled with female as well as male disciples."⁶⁷

Both Mark and Luke say that these women "ministered" unto Jesus; Luke explains that they did this by using their own money to purchase needed supplies. The word for "ministered" is the Greek word *diakoneō* from which comes the word "deacon." Swidler points out this fact and then draws a connection between these women and church deacons. "Indeed apparently the tasks of the deacons in early Christianity were much the same as these women undertook."⁶⁸

5. *The Women at the Tomb, Matthew 28:8-10 and John 20:17-18*

The women who followed Jesus and ministered to him in his life were the first to come to the tomb following his death, in order properly to prepare his body for burial. These included Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1). According to Matthew 28:8-10 and John 20:17-18, Jesus chose to make his first resurrection appearance to these women. When they fell before him and worshiped him, he gave them these instructions: "Go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me" (Matt. 28:10). In a separate order to Mary Magdalene he said, "Go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:17). John says that she came, "announcing to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord,' and

that He had said these things to her" (John 20:18).

Feminists take this episode to be one of the strongest Biblical proofs of the full equality of women in reference to Christian ministry. Especially significant in view of the fact that rabbinic tradition dismissed women as unreliable witnesses, Jesus selects these women to be the first witnesses of his resurrection and the first evangelists of the good news that he is alive. As Scanzoni and Hardesty sum it up, "Women were the first to receive the central fact of the gospel and the first to be instructed to tell it abroad."⁶⁹

For feminists this settles the question of women's ordination to ministry. Mollenkott says that Jesus "very deliberately reserved for Mary the vision of resurrected being and very deliberately entrusted the . . . message to her. Once again, Jesus was creating an object lesson for the disciples concerning the full personhood and ministry of women." Thus he endorsed "female ministry."⁷⁰ Spencer agrees that Jesus' strategy was specifically designed to show that he "wanted women to learn and to testify before others about God's actions on earth. He wanted these women whom he had taught to go on to take authoritative leadership positions themselves. That is why they were chosen to be the first witnesses to the resurrection."⁷¹ The Kroegers compare this with the commissioning of the apostles and suggest the possibility that Mary Magdalene was given apostolic authority. "She becomes the first witness of the Resurrection, a primary requisite for an apostle; and the Risen Lord Himself commands her to proclaim Him. A striking similarity has been noted between Paul's commissioning by the Risen Christ to be an Apostle, and the experience of Mary in the Garden."⁷²

6. *Miscellaneous*

The gospels record many other encounters of Jesus with women, each having special significance for feminists.

GENDER ROLES AND THE BIBLE

When Jesus healed the crippled woman in Luke 13:10-17, he called her "Daughter of Abraham" (v. 16), a title of honor.⁷³ The Canaanite woman who beseeched Jesus on behalf of her daughter (Matt. 15:21-28) is another example of Jesus engaging in "theological conversation" with women. Jesus "talked with her and deliberately sought to bring out her capacity for understanding."⁷⁴ In general, Jesus taught both men and women, healed both men and women, forgave both men and women, and had both men and women as friends. He regarded women as capable of thinking and commended their faith.⁷⁵

For feminists all these encounters of Jesus with women constitute a complete break with patriarchal culture and hierarchical gender relationships, thus setting women free from centuries of male dominion. He is, as Judy Norris says, "Jesus, My Lord, Emancipator of Women."⁷⁶ In his behavior toward women he establishes egalitarianism as the norm for gender roles for all time. "Thus Jesus' life on earth from beginning to end outlines a paradigm for women's place."⁷⁷

B. A Non-Feminist Response

Feminists make some valid and necessary points about Jesus' treatment of women. His example in this area was indeed a good and needed corrective of patriarchal cultures and abuses against women both then and now. We can certainly agree that he treated women as God had intended women to be treated all along. It is obvious that he considered them to have full ontological equality with men, having equal personhood as creatures made in God's image, with the same value and worth in God's eyes. He dealt with them as individuals, as persons, as intellectually and spiritually competent to participate fully in a life of discipleship before God. The rabbinic teaching and all teaching about the inferiority of women are overthrown by Christ's own actions. Insofar as such negative cultural

views were a result of the Fall or the curse, we can say that Jesus was in a sense "reversing the curse" by his own example.

Nevertheless there are some aspects of the feminist interpretation of Jesus' encounters with women with which we must strongly disagree. These are as follows.

1. *Exaggerated Radicalness*

The first point of disagreement relates to the degree to which Jesus' treatment of women was in opposition to the practices current in his day. It seems that it was not as drastic a break with general Jewish culture as it is usually portrayed to be by feminists. The picture commonly drawn is that Jewish women were treated as property or as animals or worse. As Hull puts it, "female life was a throw-away," and women were "considered beneath contempt."⁷⁸ The worse it can be made to sound, the more radical Jesus' example will seem to be.

The facts suggest, however, that such grim language is more indicative of a martyr syndrome than of the actual state of affairs in first-century Judaism. Such descriptions seem to be overly narrow and one-sided, because they assume that the most negative rabbinic teaching about women was the norm for that culture. This cannot be established with certainty, however; and there are indications that it was indeed not the case.

Stephen Clark points out that there are extremes in both directions on this issue. That Jesus was a revolutionary is an extreme, as is the view that Jesus' approach to women differed little if at all from contemporary Jewish customs. Clark defends a moderate view which sees Jesus' approach as new in some ways but not totally revolutionary. "The view that Jesus was not revolutionary in regard to social roles and customs for men-women relations, but that he accorded them a higher spiritual status than Jews who were his contemporaries, accords best with the avail-

able evidence."⁷⁹

It is true that rabbinic writings such as the Talmud and the Midrash contain some very misogynistic sayings about women, and they relegate women to the very lowest of social roles. But this fact must be qualified in three ways. First, the exact date of the origin of such views is not certain, since they appear in written form only in the second century and afterwards. It is possible but not certain that they existed in oral form in the first century. Second, the "woman-hating" sayings appear to be only one strand of rabbinic teaching. Clark says it would be "much too strong to say that misogyny was characteristic of the rabbis. Their writings also provide numerous instances of praise and honor for women."⁸⁰

Third and most important, the rabbinic writings themselves, and the teachings of the Pharisaic scribes who preceded them, were not necessarily descriptive of normative Jewish practices in the first century. Though this was once assumed, says Clark, the Dead Sea Scrolls have led to a quite different perception. "It is much clearer now that Judaism before 70 A.D. was a variegated phenomenon, and that the Pharisees were only one sect among a number, although they were the strongest."⁸¹

In other words, while one can say with some confidence that many of the practices described in the Talmud and Midrash were characteristic of scribe-rabbis in the time of Jesus, one cannot say that all of the practices were characteristic, or even that all scribes held them. Neither can one say that the practices characteristic of the scribes would have been considered normal for most of the Jewish people.⁸²

Thus it is an exaggeration to say that Jesus was a revolutionary who broke all categories and went beyond all the accepted norms of his time in the area of gender roles.⁸³

The gospel records themselves support this view in both negative and positive ways. On the negative side, if Jesus' treatment of women were as revolutionary as feminists

claim, one would expect the gospels to record significant outcries and objections against it from the Pharisees, as is the case with his breaking of their sabbath traditions. But there is an absolute silence in this regard. As Clark says, "The simplest and most striking fact to begin with in examining Jesus' approach to women is the lack of apparent controversy created by it." His enemies objected to his relations with tax collectors and sinners, but not to his relations with women as such. His disciples showed surprise that Jesus was talking with the Samaritan woman in public (John 4:27), but it caused no great stir. In short, says Clark, "the evidence indicates that Jesus' normal behavior with regard to women was not understood to be revolutionary by people in his environment."⁸⁴

The absence of any controversy on this subject in the gospels shows that Scanzoni and Hardesty have absolutely no basis for their extravagant claim that Jesus' actions toward women "upset and appalled his contemporaries, dumbfounded his critics, and flabbergasted his male disciples."⁸⁵

On the positive side, there are indications in the gospels that women were treated with respect and that they enjoyed considerable freedom and equality. For example, the very fact that a number of women traveled with Jesus and supported his work shows "that the cultural status of women was not so low but that such independence was enjoyed to allow this." It also shows that these women controlled enough money to allow them to do this.⁸⁶

For another example, the fact that Jesus conversed with several women on theological topics shows that they were *not* uneducated but already had rather sophisticated understandings of religious matters. The Samaritan woman spoke of the difference between Jewish and Samaritan worship, and she knew about the promised Messiah (John 4:20, 25). Martha already knew about the resurrection on the last day, and she knew about the expected Messiah (John 11:24, 27). When feminists cite Jesus' discussions with these women as evidence "that

women were not to be restricted in their quest for faith in God,⁸⁷ they are overlooking the obvious fact that such women were *already* not restricted, as their expressed knowledge shows. This is also seen from the fact that women were in the large crowds that followed Jesus to hear him teach, without objection and without any special invitation or permission from anyone (cf. Matt. 14:21; 15:38; Luke 11:27). They even came into the synagogues to hear him teach (Luke 13:10-11).

There are other indications from the gospel records that women were respected. Joseph's treatment of Mary even before Jesus was born was unselfish and considerate (Matt. 1:19). A woman named Anna was a fixture at the temple (Luke 2:36). The very fact that Jairus begged Jesus to save his dying daughter belies the notion that "female life was a throwaway" (Luke 8:41-42). A large crowd mourned with the widow of Nain at her son's death (Luke 7:12); the same was true for Mary and Martha when Lazarus died (John 11:19). Jesus' mother joined Joseph in participating fully in Jewish religious ceremonies (Luke 2:22ff.; 2:41). At the wedding feast in Cana she spoke with authority (John 2:5). Even the Samaritan woman, supposedly "beneath contempt," was believed by the men of her city when she reported her encounter with Jesus (John 4:39).

There is no reason to think that these circumstances were unusual, or that they were the result of the supposedly "revolutionary" example of Jesus. They show that the rabbis' chauvinistic opinions were not universally held, and that Jesus' behavior was just the way things were in the circles within which he moved. These positive reports about women, along with the absence of any hint of complaint or controversy concerning Jesus' treatment of them, show that feminists have exaggerated the bleak and dismal lot of women in first-century Judaism. They also show that when feminists speak of Jesus' behavior as shocking, bizarre, startling, astonishing, and revolutionary, their language is extravagant and unwarranted. Boucher concludes, "It may be that the contrast between

the Jews' subordination of women and the Christians' new interest in their equality has been too sharply drawn, indeed, that such a contrast never existed."⁸⁸

2. Feminist Hyperexegesis

Why are feminists so inclined to see an exaggerated radicalness in Jesus' treatment of women? Giving too much weight to the later rabbinic traditions is only part of the explanation. The other reason is that they read much more into the key encounters discussed earlier than could ever possibly be warranted by the texts themselves—a hermeneutical fallacy which may be called "hyperexegesis."⁸⁹ Their desire to enlist Christ's support for the feminist agenda leads them to make inferences that are without basis in the text, and then to make generalizations for all of Christendom based on these unsupported inferences.

For example, it is inferred that the women who followed Jesus and helped to support him were part of his "inner circle" and were being trained for leadership in his "traveling seminary" along with the apostles. But the text is absolutely silent about such a purpose for these women. In fact the text makes a clear distinction between the work of Jesus and the twelve, who were "proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1); and the activity of the women, who "were contributing to their support out of their private means" (Luke 8:3). The text says absolutely nothing about these women as part of Jesus' inner circle; it says nothing about their studying with Jesus or their preaching along with the disciples.

The only description of the activities of these women is that "they ministered to them," i.e., to the needs of both Jesus and the apostles. The word means "to serve, to minister" (cf. Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:41 also). It is the same word used of Peter's mother-in-law, who "waited on Him" after Jesus had healed her (Matt. 8:15); and of Martha, who "was serving" when Jesus came for supper (John 12:2).

That these women ministered to them "out of their private means" indicates that they were using their own money to provide food and supplies so that Jesus and the apostles could concentrate on preaching and teaching.

The work of these women seems to have been on a volunteer basis, since there is no record of Jesus' calling any women for this purpose. The records also imply that their presence with Jesus' group was sporadic and not constant. Exactly when they began is not indicated. Since they were "women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses" (Luke 8:2), they would not have begun this work at or near the beginning of Christ's ministry. They were not present in John 4 when Jesus' disciples had the responsibility of buying food (v. 8). (The only disciples named to this point were Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael—John 1:40-45.) That they were not constantly with Jesus and his disciples is seen from the fact that one of the latter—Judas—was the appointed treasurer for the group even near the end of Jesus' life (John 12:6). Mark 15:41 indicates the limitations of the women's service when he says they followed Jesus and ministered to him "when He was in Galilee."

In view of the actual data it is totally irresponsible to use the example of these women to try to prove that Jesus was flouting alleged stereotypes that "demanded that women must serve rather than learn the word of God." To infer that Jesus was training these women "to go on to take authoritative leadership positions" is completely unfounded.

The same applies to the feminists' handling of the accounts of Jesus' encounter with these same women after his resurrection. Jesus' instructions to them are interpreted as a commission to engage in public preaching and evangelism, "to proclaim Him," to announce the fact of the resurrection and "tell it abroad." Generalizations are then drawn from this inference: Jesus thus endorses "female ministry"; Jesus is preparing women for "authoritative leadership positions."

No one can dispute the fact that being the first human beings to see the risen Christ was a tremendous privilege for these women. And no one can dispute the fact that they were entrusted with considerable responsibility when Jesus instructed them to bear a message back to his disciples. But when we look at the text realistically and objectively, we see a picture far different from that which results from feminist hyperexegesis.

In the first place, Jesus did *not* commission the women to "proclaim Him" or to proclaim the message of the reality of the resurrection "abroad." He did not say, "Go and tell the world that I have risen from the dead." The fact is that he gave them a very specific message to pass along to his "brethren": "Go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me" (Matt. 28:10). He does not even mention the resurrection itself; and the message was to be passed along to the "inner circle," i.e., the eleven disciples, who were the ones he wanted to meet him in Galilee (Matt. 28:16). The specific message entrusted to Mary Magdalene is of a similar nature: "Go to my brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:17). Again, the message does not include anything about the resurrection, and it is to be delivered to the "brethren," his disciples (John 20:18).

What is Jesus asking these women to do? He is asking them to serve as messengers and to deliver a specific message to a specific group of people, period. There is nothing about preaching and evangelism that can legitimately be concluded from this incident. There is nothing of the nature of Jesus' instructions to the healed demoniac, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you" (Mark 5:19). It is more like his instructions to the two messengers sent by John the Baptist, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard" (Luke 7:22). It is like the time he "sent messengers on ahead of Him . . . to make arrangements for Him" (Luke 9:52), or when he sent Peter and John to prepare the

Passover (Luke 22:8), or when he sent messengers with a message for Herod (Luke 13:32).

There were occasions during Jesus' ministry when he sent groups out to preach. He specifically chose the twelve apostles "that He might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14), and he did so: "He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:2; cf. Matt. 10:5; Mark 6:7). No women were included in this group (a point to be discussed later). Jesus also appointed "seventy others,"⁹⁰ and sent them two and two ahead of Him" to announce the coming of the kingdom (Luke 10:1, 9). These are not named or specified as males, but the masculine forms used to describe them in verses 1-2 indicate that they were. If Jesus had wanted to make a point about female evangelists or preachers, these were the ideal opportunities. But he did not.

This is not to degrade the role of the women at the tomb by any means. The message they carried was important, and their task was a responsible one; but to equate this with evangelism and preaching and "female ministry" in general goes far beyond the text itself. It is an example of feminist hyperexegesis.

Similar points may be made about the Samaritan woman in John 4. As noted above, feminists call her "the first evangelist" and assert that "Jesus commissioned her as his special messenger." We can agree that what she did was a kind of evangelism, in the sense that she carried good news back to her people (verses 28-29). But the idea that Jesus commissioned her as an evangelist or special messenger is simply not found in the text. The only thing Jesus told her to do was "Go, call your husband, and come here" (v. 16). In fact, she even disobeyed the intent of this order by invoking a technicality (verses 17-18) and then by reporting her conversation with Jesus not to her "husband" but to the men of the city (v. 28). Thus despite her enthusiasm, she could hardly be called a faithful messenger. An independent and knowledgeable woman? Yes. But the prototype for modern women preachers? Hardly.

Probably the passage most misused by feminists, and the most blatant example of hyperexegesis, is Luke 10:38-42, the report of Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha in their home. To equate what Mary was doing on this isolated occasion with "studying theology," "doing theology," formal religious training, or "higher level formal education" simply boggles the mind. To interpret it like this and then to generalize from this to modern seminary training for ordained ministry can only be called the "hermeneutics of desire."

The feminist approach to this account suffers from two main problems. First, it confuses *lifestyle* with *vocation*. Yes, Jesus defended Mary's choice to sit at his feet and listen to him teach, saying that this is really the only necessary thing in life, the good part of life that cannot be taken away (v. 42). But here he is talking about discipleship as a *lifestyle*, not as a formal vocation. *Every* believer, male and female, is called to "study at Jesus' feet" throughout his or her lifetime, in addition to whatever job or responsibility or bread-winning occupation one may have. What Mary was doing is in general the equivalent to daily Bible study or regular church attendance. More precisely it resembles participation in special seminars or revival meetings or other such programs sponsored by churches today.

These kinds of things do not replace regular responsibilities, either for Mary or for anyone else. After Jesus left her house, Mary would still have to resume her duties in the kitchen or wherever; but her life would be enriched by having heard Jesus teach. In this sense her lifestyle was that of a disciple or learner; what she learned from Jesus would affect everything she did in her everyday life. This one good and necessary thing so well discerned by Mary is thus a *dimension* of life that transcends or underlies everything else we do; indeed, it is the one crucial and enduring dimension. It is the same as Jesus' instruction in Matthew 6:33 to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you." This is not talking

directly about one's choice of occupation but rather about a particular lifestyle that will determine how we approach our occupation and everything else we do.

There is no warrant whatsoever for equating Mary's choice in Luke 10 with modern seminary training or vocational ministry. Jesus did issue a number of calls to what was then equivalent to such training and ministry, but they were always to men. "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men," he said to Peter and Andrew (Matt. 4:19). "Follow Me," he said to Philip (John 1:43). "Follow Me," he said to Matthew (Matt. 9:9). "Follow Me," he said to the rich young ruler and to another disciple (Matt. 8:22; 19:21). But there is nothing whatsoever of this nature in Jesus' relationship with Mary in Luke 10. She was indeed "following Christ" in her lifestyle, which is quite different from following him in vocational Christian service.

This story is "revolutionary," says Hull, "because it taught that women should prefer studying theology over a preoccupation with domestic chores."⁹¹ Such a statement, though, is a completely false and misleading interpretation of Luke 10. In the first place, Jesus is not talking about "studying theology" in any modern sense of the term. In the second place, it offers a false choice between what Mary was doing on the one hand and "domestic chores" on the other hand. Mary was not choosing one to the exclusion of the other; she was simply putting them in the proper perspective on this particular occasion. In the third place, a "preoccupation" with *any* activity, including studying theology, violates the point Jesus makes here. Nothing must be allowed to detract from our personal discipleship to Jesus and our personal devotion to him, whether it be domestic chores, studying theology, or selling insurance. That is the point Jesus is making, and it has nothing to do with the feminist agenda.

The second main problem with the feminist approach to this story is that it ignores the *uniqueness* of the situation. What was the nature of this occasion? This was not just an ordinary visitor in the house of Mary and Martha; this was

the *Son of God himself*, the one whose teaching was the very "words of eternal life" (John 6:68). And Martha was worried and bothered about what to fix him for lunch! That is an understandable concern, and ministering to Jesus' needs in this way was an important service given by a number of women, including Martha (John 12:2). But how often does one have the opportunity to learn from Jesus' very lips? To be sure, Jesus was probably in the home of Mary's family more than any other during the days of his ministry, but that time was still relatively short. How many more occasions like this would there be, before Jesus was no longer with them in person? Mary was simply taking advantage of this unique opportunity while it was available. Indeed, one could rightly say that there was no more important thing on earth that she could have been doing at that moment, given the nature of the circumstances.

To treat this story in Luke as a lesson on the propriety of rabbinical or seminary training for women trivializes the encounter. This was not just some rabbi or some eminent theological professor; this was Jesus himself. This was not just rabbinical training or a doctoral seminar; these were the very words of eternal life. To suggest a rather puny comparison, Mary saw her opportunity the way a devout Catholic in a remote part of the earth would regard a visit from the Pope, i.e., as a once-in-a-lifetime event. There would be plenty of time for cooking and sewing later; but this may well have been an unrepeatable experience, and absolutely nothing was going to take precedence over it.

The error is to think that one can generalize from such an experience by comparing it with particular choices of ordinary life, even choices as important as one's vocation. But there is no such comparison. The uniqueness of the God-man Jesus, and the uniqueness of his mission and purpose on earth, rule out such specific parallels today. The only true comparison, as already noted, is with one's spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ as a dimension that transcends yet permeates all the ordinary choices and

relationships of this life.

3. Conclusion

In this section we have seen that Jesus' encounters with women simply do not support the feminist gospel. Once the exaggerations are toned down and the false inferences and generalizations are excluded, we find nothing in the life and example of Jesus that requires or even resembles egalitarianism. Everything in his treatment of women is fully compatible with the hierarchical view in every way. As Clark has well said, "The fact that he did treat women very well, with love and respect, is by no means incompatible with acceptance of role differences between men and women."⁹²

What positive conclusions can be drawn from Jesus' behavior toward women? Foh says there are two. "From Jesus' actions, we can conclude that women should be taught about the Bible and women should witness to their Lord. Before any other conclusions can be drawn, it is necessary to consider the rest of the New Testament."⁹³

(New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 15.

⁴⁶Eleanor Daniel, *What the Bible Says About Sexual Identity* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1981), pp. 48, 210-211. For documentation from the rabbinic writings see Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, pp. 46-57.

⁴⁷S. Scott Bartchy, "Human Sexuality and Our Identity," *Mission Journal* (November 1983), 17:11.

⁴⁸Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 45.

⁴⁹Atkins, *Split Image*, p. 57.

⁵⁰Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be* (1992), p. 72. They are citing C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1967), p. 65.

⁵¹Leonard Swidler, "Jesus Was a Feminist," *Catholic World* (January 1971), pp. 177-183.

⁵²Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 94. These sentences were italicized in the original.

⁵³Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says About a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 95.

⁵⁴Mollenkott, *Women*, p. 9.

⁵⁵Pentz, "Hour of Birth," p. 4.

⁵⁶Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, pp. 58, 60-61.

⁵⁷Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal To Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1987), pp. 116-117.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁹Mollenkott, *Women*, pp. 4-5. See Pentz, "Hour of Birth," p. 4.

⁶⁰Alvera Mickelsen, "An Egalitarian View: There is Neither Male nor Female in Christ," *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, ed. Bonnidell Clouse and Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), p. 187.

⁶¹S. Scott Bartchy, "Jesus, Power, and Gender Roles," *TSF Bulletin* (January-February 1981), 7:2; and "Human Sexuality and Our Identity," *Mission Journal* (November 1983), p.11.

⁶²Scott E. McClelland, "The New Reality in Christ: Perspectives from Biblical Studies," *Gender Matters: Women's Studies for the Christian Community*, ed. June Steffensen Hagen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 62.

⁶³Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, p. 101.

⁶⁴Swidler, "Jesus Was A Feminist," p. 181.

⁶⁵Hull, *Equal To Serve*, p. 114.

⁶⁶Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁷Mollenkott, *Women*, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁸Swidler, "Jesus Was A Feminist," pp. 180-181.

⁶⁹Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be* (1992), p. 81.

⁷⁰Mollenkott, *Women*, p. 10.

⁷¹Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, p. 62.

⁷²Richard and Catherine Kroeger, "Why Were There No Women Apostles?," *Equity* [no date given], p. 11. (This article is distributed in duplicated form without the date by Christians for Biblical Equality.)

⁷³Evans, *Woman*, p. 46.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁷⁵Daniel, *Sexual Identity*, p. 211.

⁷⁶Judy Norris, "Jesus, My Lord, Emancipator of Women," *Christian Standard* (Aug. 31, 1980), pp. 9-10.

⁷⁷Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be* (1992), p. 81.

⁷⁸Hull, *Equal To Serve*, pp. 114-115.

⁷⁹Clark, *Man*, pp. 242-243; and p. 698, footnote 13.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 239-241, 244. Madeleine Boucher has also challenged the notion that "the idea of woman's religious equality was unknown to Judaism." She cites a number of sayings from rabbinic writings which she believes are parallel in content to Galatians 3:28 ("Some Unexplored Parallels to 1 Cor 11,11-12 and Gal 3,28: The NT on the Role of Women," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* [1969], 31:50-58).

⁸¹Clark, *Man*, p. 243.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 245. See also H. Wayne House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), pp. 71-73.

⁸⁵Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be* (1992), p. 81.

⁸⁶Lewis Foster, "Woman—Where's She Going Today?," part 2 *Christian Standard* (Dec. 18, 1988), p. 9.

⁸⁷McClelland, "The New Reality," p. 62.

⁸⁸Boucher, "Some Unexplored Parallels," p. 55.

⁸⁹This is from the Greek word *hyper*, which means "over, above." In compound English words it connotes excess or exaggeration.

⁹⁰Some manuscripts say seventy-two.

⁹¹Hull, *Equal To Serve*, p. 115.

⁹²Clark, *Man*, p. 248.

⁹³Foh, *Women*, p. 94.

⁹⁴W. Ward Gasque, "The Role of Women in the Church, in Society and in the Home," *Priscilla Papers* (Spring 1988), 2:2.

⁹⁵Mickelsen, "An Egalitarian View," p. 187.

⁹⁶*Ibid.* Hull makes exactly the same point: "In His illustrations He used both men and women as examples" (*Equal To Serve*, p. 114).

⁹⁷Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 48.

⁹⁸Evans, *Woman*, p. 48.

⁹⁹Mollenkott, *Women*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁰Swidler, "Jesus Was A Feminist," p. 182.

¹⁰¹Pentz, "Hour of Birth," p. 4.

¹⁰²Evans, *Woman*, p. 46.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁴Mollenkott, *Women*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵Evans, *Woman*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁶Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), p. 201.

¹⁰⁷Norris, "Jesus, My Lord," p. 9.

¹⁰⁸Clark, *Man*, pp. 247-248.