


A Critique of
Feminist Biblical Interpretation

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

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IV. WHY WERE THERE NO FEMALE APOSTLES?

The final issue to be discussed in this chapter is why Jesus chose no female apostles. This question is especially pertinent in view of the interpretation of Jesus as a feminist reformer. If he were really serious about restoring the alleged ideal of functional equality, this would have been the decisive and conclusive gesture. No further arguments would be necessary, and no objections could be sustained. But he did not choose a woman. At best this leaves the question of female leadership open; at worst it sets a precedent for the church to follow. Feminists know this; and though they are resigned to the fact, they cannot help but think, "If only . . ." At the same time they feel constrained to give reasons for the absence of a woman among the twelve apostles, and to explain why this absence is not relevant to the issue of leadership in the church today.

A. The Feminist Explanation

According to feminists, the reasons why Jesus did not choose a woman apostle are all circumstantial. It was basically a matter of culture. The cultural attitudes of the people would have made it impossible for Jesus to do what he had to do, with women as a part of the group that traveled with him. It also would have been a very difficult situation for the women themselves.

The basic assumption here once again is that women in Jewish culture had such a low status that they were practically *personae non gratae* or social outcasts and would have been totally rejected by the people if Jesus had put them into such a position. This attitude meant that he had to

exercise "divine patience" in his desire to "instill his will about women," says Owen Crouch. "Jewish low-grade views limited Christ's outreach to and use of women. . . . There was no way in which Jesus could have been listened to, much less respected, had he chosen women to be numbered among his apostles. But he did the best he could." Not choosing a woman was just a matter of "practical strategy," since "Jesus had no *moral* objection to women being apostles."¹¹⁴ Charlene Hopman agrees that the answer to the question of why no women were chosen must lie in the fact that Jesus was "yielding for a time to existing social conditions." She asks, "What chance would a woman have had to function in a society so male oriented?"¹¹⁵

Others agree and state this explanation in similar terms. McClelland says, "The logistics of women becoming full-time disciples and traveling with males around Palestine would have been impossible and would have scandalized and obscured Jesus' true mission."¹¹⁶ The only choices were single women and married women, and Dorothy Pape says both were ruled out by circumstances: "To have called a single woman would obviously have led to unsavory suspicions, while most married women were presumably busy taking care of their families."¹¹⁷ Hull sums it up: "Isn't it possible that excluding women from the Twelve was another concession to first-century culture—as well as to decorum?"¹¹⁸

Another argument is commonly offered, not as an explanation of why Jesus did not choose a woman apostle but as an *ad hoc* argument against those who try to make this a precedent for male leadership in the church. If the absence of a woman among the Twelve means there can be no women leaders in the church, they say, then the absence of Gentiles and slaves (cf. Gal. 3:28) means there can be no church leaders from among Gentiles and slaves, either. This argument is voiced by Spencer: "If Jesus' choice of twelve male disciples signifies that females should not be leaders in the church, then, consistently his choice also signifies that Gentiles should not be leaders in the

church."¹¹⁹ If we try to use the "no female apostles" argument to exclude women from church leadership, says Hull, then "logic demands" that we restrict leadership to Jewish males.¹²⁰

These are the basic feminist responses to the fact that Jesus chose no female apostles. First, the status of women in Jewish culture made it expedient not to do so. Second, this does not set a precedent for exclusively male leadership in the church, or we would logically have to limit such leadership to Jews as well.

B. Analysis of the Feminist Arguments

There are a number of weaknesses in the way feminists handle this aspect of Jesus' ministry. The appeal to cultural accommodation as the explanation of why Jesus chose no women is especially vulnerable. Several points relevant to this issue have already been established in other sections of this chapter. One is the fact that God himself chose the culture in which Christ's ministry would take place. The question is whether he would have chosen one in which it would be so difficult to accomplish what feminists regard as one of the main purposes of the incarnation. Such seems highly unlikely in view of the fact that Jesus came in "the fullness of the time" (Gal. 4:4).

Another relevant point is the fact that Jesus did not have to refrain from choosing a woman apostle just to make sure he was listened to and respected, since he was neither listened to nor respected anyway by those who would have objected to such a choice. If he declined to appoint a woman to the Twelve just for this reason, then the strategy was futile and a golden opportunity wasted.

Another point already mentioned in another connection is that the gap between the popular Jewish culture and Jesus' own ideal was not as wide as feminists assume; thus it is likely that a woman in this position would not have caused as great an uproar as they think. Women's social

status was not as low as they depict it, and Christ's teaching and example were not as feministic as they represent it to be. Besides, Israel was no stranger to women leaders, as feminists themselves like to point out. Jesus could have cited Miriam, Huldah, Deborah, Esther, and Anna as precedents. On what basis, then, could the Jewish leaders have complained?

There are several other considerations that completely deflate the "cultural accommodation" argument. Feminists say that Jesus made this concession to his culture so as not to present any unnecessary stumbling block to the acceptance of his message. He was just "yielding for a time to existing social conditions" in order to gain a hearing. We really must wonder, however, if feminists have thought this argument through very carefully in light of the fact that Jesus never seemed to worry about this sort of thing with regard to any other unacceptable cultural practice. He openly challenged one false Jewish tradition after another, such as the man-made Sabbath rules and the rabbis' applications of the clean-unclean distinction. By disregarding such sacrosanct traditions Jesus made enemies right and left, and aroused hostility so intense that it ultimately drove him to the cross. Why, then, should he have felt intimidated by a possible outcry against his choosing a woman apostle? Why should this issue have been any different?¹²¹

What is most interesting is that feminists are so openly inconsistent on this point. On the one hand they delight in picturing Christ as an iconoclast, especially in this very area of the nature and roles of women. They describe his treatment of and teaching about women as shocking, startling, and revolutionary. As Hopman says, Jesus "treated women as equals even though he broke pertinent social mores," which she proceeds to list one after another. But then, on this matter of no women apostles, she says that Jesus must have been "yielding for a time to existing social conditions."¹²² This is clearly a case of trying to have it both ways, and it does not produce a convincing argument.

In view of Jesus' usual defiance of oppressive conventions, it seems clear that if this were the only thing standing in the way of his appointing a woman to the apostleship, and if he had truly wanted to make a strong point in favor of female leadership, he would not have hesitated to make the appointment. Wayne House expresses it well:

If indeed the Lord broke down pseudo-spiritual "fences" the rabbinic teachers had built around valid points of the Law, and if He did so in order to illustrate spiritual truth as well as a correct understanding of Himself, He had a prime opportunity to break a social convention *and* teach the higher law of female leadership in His new order. The question remains, then: Why didn't He do so?¹²³

Another relevant response to the feminist argument from cultural accommodation is the fact that most of the cultural problems assumed to apply to women in the apostleship would also have applied to the company of women who followed Jesus in order to minister to him (Luke 8:1-3), especially if these women had been disciples in the full sense assumed by many feminists. Jesus did permit these women to accompany him, and no record of any problems or complaints exists. McClelland notes that Jesus allowed these women "to follow him as disciples"; but then on the very next page, to explain the lack of women apostles, he says that "women becoming full-time disciples and traveling with males around Palestine would have been impossible and would have scandalized and obscured Jesus' true mission."¹²⁴ It seems that he does not realize that there is a contradiction here.

Pape exhibits the same inconsistency. After using this explanation of no women among the apostles—"To have called a single woman would obviously have led to unsavory suspicions, while most married women were presumably busy taking care of their families"—she then immediately says, "It is remarkable, therefore, that we later do find women traveling in his company."¹²⁵ She does not recognize that this "remarkable" fact, and her own admis-

sion of it, invalidate her explanation of the absence of female apostles. Here are women who obviously did travel with Jesus without scandal, and who were not tied down by family responsibilities. Such would have been potential candidates for apostleship, if Jesus had desired to appoint a woman to this office. But he declined to do so.

Sensing his inconsistency, McClelland does say that "women did follow Jesus in groups"¹²⁶ (referring to the women of Luke 8:1-3), as if this would somehow be different from a group of six female apostles to go along with six male apostles. The Kroegers try to skirt the problem in a similar way. Jesus could allow these women to accompany him, but could not appoint women apostles, they say, since "to have sent them forth alone on a public preaching and healing ministry would have been impossible."¹²⁷ Where they get the idea that apostles were sent out "alone" they do not say. The Bible does not tell us how the apostles traveled. It says the seventy (or seventy-two) went out "two and two" (Luke 10:1), but no similar information is given about the apostles. If there had been women apostles, nothing would have prevented them from going out in "groups" if necessary.

Thus the very existence of the group of women who accompanied Jesus (at least when he was in Galilee) negates the attempt to explain away the absence of female apostles by an appeal to "cultural accommodation."

There is one other point that reveals the inconsistency of feminists' use of this explanation. On the one hand, they say Jesus chose no women apostles because in that culture women would not have been accepted as leaders; on the other hand, they leave no stone unturned in nominating a whole host of women mentioned in the New Testament as leaders in the early church. Are we to assume that the cultural situation had changed so radically that female leaders were acceptable in the church when they were not acceptable during Jesus' ministry just a few years earlier? Speaking of the latter, Hopman asks, "What chance would a woman have had to function in a society so male

oriented?"¹²⁸ Crouch says Jesus could not expect to be listened to or respected if he had women among his apostles.¹²⁹ But social conditions in both the Jewish and the Gentile communities were not radically different by the time the church is supposed to have had so many women leaders. How, then, would *they* have had a chance to function? How could the church be expected to be listened to or respected, with women among its leaders? The point is that if there were women leaders in the church, there is no reason Christ could not have chosen women apostles. But he did not. This raises the question of whether or not there really were so many women "leaders" in the early church, but this is a question that will be dealt with at a later time.

This leads to the final point of response to the way feminists handle this problem, namely, their attempt to negate the significance of the lack of females among the apostles by pointing out that there were no Gentiles among the apostles either. Thus if we use the former as a reason for denying church leadership to females, we should consistently deny church leadership to Gentiles also. There are two reasons why this is a specious argument. First, there is an obvious reason why there were no Gentile apostles, and it has nothing to do with the denial of this role to females. This is the fact that the context of Jesus' ministry was among the Jewish people who had been prepared to receive him by centuries of special revelation and nurture. He did not come to a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles; he came to the Jews. He himself said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24; see Matt. 10:6; John 1:31). As a rule the Jews were the only believers in the true God and the only ones expecting the Messiah; they were the only valid candidates for the role of apostle. Bringing the Gentiles into the kingdom was a part of God's plan all along, but it would not begin until after Pentecost.

Thus the idea that there is a parallel between the lack of women and the lack of Gentiles among the apostles is quite faulty. At that time no Gentiles were ready for such a task, but there were countless Jewish women who were theoreti-

cally ready by virtue of their devout faith in the true God and their expectation of the Messiah. The reason for not choosing from among the latter must be entirely different from the reason for not choosing from among the former. (Whether there were any slaves among the apostles is a moot point. All their backgrounds are not given.)

There is a second reason why the parallel between Gentiles and women is a specious argument. It lies in the assumption that the composition of the twelve apostles is somehow being used as the normative pattern for church leadership. I.e., it is assumed that the *reason* why hierarchicalists do not allow women in roles of authority in the church is that there were no women among the apostles. But this is a false assumption. We are not saying, "Now let's see. We need leaders for the church. How do we decide who is qualified? Well, let's look at the ones Jesus chose for apostles. Only the kinds of people he chose for that office will be allowed to serve as church leaders. Hmmm. It appears that he chose only men. Therefore only men can be church leaders." Now, if this were the logic being used, then the parallel between women and Gentiles would have some merit, at least from the standpoint of pure logic and apart from the theological reasoning noted above. The fact is, however, that this is *not* the way the apostleship and church leadership are connected. The content of the former is not what determines the content of the latter. Rather, the content of both, in that both are limited to males, is determined by a higher principle that transcends them both and applies equally to each. Why were there no female apostles? For the very same reason there should be no female leaders in authoritative positions in the church, namely, because God created the human race in the beginning with the principle of male leadership in mind (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12-13). This was his original purpose. Jesus did not choose female apostles because this would not have been in accord with that original purpose. That purpose has nothing to do with the later, temporary distinction between Jews and Gentiles; but it has everything to do with the

original, permanent distinction between males and females.

In view of the fact that Jesus chose only men as apostles, and in view of the fact that the only valid explanation for this limitation is doctrinal and not cultural, we must again point out how tragically mistaken is this statement by Mickelsen: "We look in vain for anything in the life or teachings of our Lord that point [*sic*] to 'differences in function' for men and women in kingdom work."¹³⁰ Such a statement is clear evidence that feminists see only what they want to see in the life and teachings of Jesus.

V. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have discussed four aspects of the life, example and teachings of Jesus that relate to the issue of gender roles in the context of feminism. Our purpose has been to evaluate in detail how feminists interpret the gospel records concerning Jesus. We have examined two elements in the gospels which they enthusiastically embrace as proofs of egalitarianism, namely, Jesus' encounters with women, and Jesus' teaching about women. We have also examined how feminists handle two elements in the gospels which appear to contradict the egalitarian thesis, namely, Jesus' incarnation as a male, and Jesus' choice of only men as his twelve apostles.

Our overall conclusion is that the feminist interpretations of these four aspects of Christology are simply not true to the data of the gospel records when those data are laid out in a careful, detailed, comprehensive, objective manner. When compared with the facts, the character of feminist exegesis and the conclusions drawn therefrom can only be described with such terms as misleading, careless, incomplete, selective, subjective, exaggerated, and slanted. The life and teachings of our Lord, and the inspired gospel records from which we learn about them, deserve better.