

## The Difference Jesus Makes: Christianity and Women

“Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and forsake them in beds apart, and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely God is high, supreme.” The Qur’an, Surah 4:34

Some people, particularly in the historically short-sighted Western world, think that Christianity has been hard on women, has kept them subservient to men or at least put them in a lower class than men. What they don’t know, or choose to ignore, is the radical liberation that women experienced during and after the ministry of Jesus. What they don’t know, or choose to ignore, is the possibility that women around the western world could be in the same position as Arab women under the Islamic faith are ... still ... in the 21st century.

To gain some perspective on the teaching about women in the New Testament and the roles that women played, both in Jesus’ ministry and in the early church, it is necessary to know the context in which that teaching comes.

In ancient Athens, a woman was not permitted to leave her home unless accompanied by a trustworthy male escort, usually a slave appointed by her husband. When her husband had male guests in the home, she was not allowed to eat with them, but in a separate room called the woman’s quarters. When the lady of the house was out in public, she was not allowed to speak, nor were girls allowed to receive an education. Women were pictured in Greek mythology and philosophy as the source of evil (e.g. Pandora’s Box). The Greek writer Aeschylus has a chorus declare, “Evil of mind are they, and guileful of purpose, with impure hearts.” Aristophanes, in his play *Lysistrata* writes, “For women are a shameless set, the vilest of creatures going.” Men were allowed to divorce for any reason they chose, but a woman was not allowed to divorce her husband. Also, it was expected that men would have more than one wife.

Finally, reflecting back to last week’s topic, female babies were abandoned or killed at a much higher rate than male babies. One Greek scholar wrote that a male child was a mother’s “principle source of prestige and validation,” whereas a female child was “an economic liability, a social burden.” One study of 700 ancient Greek homes showed that only 2% of those homes raised more than one daughter.

In Roman society, the situation was only a little different. Women had more freedoms than the Athenians did, but no more rights. Her husband could divorce her for simply leaving the house without a veil on her face. He had absolute control over her life and any of her possessions. She could not tell the household slaves what to do -- only the husband could do that. According to the twelve tables of Roman law, the husband had supreme, absolute power over his children, even when they had grown up, and

that power extended to his grandchildren. He could order their execution if he so desired and this law was upheld by Caesar Augustus.

Like the women of Greece, Roman women were expected to keep silence in public. A story is told of a group of women who went to the Forum to protest a law which made it illegal for them to wear multicolored robes or to ride in a covered carriage. It was illegal for them to enter the Roman Forum and the statesman and philosopher Cato dealt with their protest by asking, "Could you not have asked your own husbands the same thing at home?"

Women were looked down on, as they had been in Greek culture and were criticized in Roman literature as "domineering and cruel" (Tacitus), "angry" (Seneca) and the satirist Juvenal commented, "There is nothing a woman will not permit herself to do."

One would expect a better result from looking at the Hebrew culture of the time, but improvements are hard to spot, except that in Hebrew religious life, the women were not used sexually. There were no cult prostitutes as there were in Canaanite religion, or in the Greek and Roman religious practices.

The period of the rabbis, now preserved for us in the Talmud and the Midrash, lasted from about 400 B.C. until about 300 A.D. According to these authorities, women were not allowed to speak in public and their testimony was not permitted in court. One rabbinic teaching said that it was shameful to hear a woman's voice in public among men and another taught, "Let the words of the Torah be burned rather than committed to a woman . . . If a man teaches his daughter the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery." Synagogue worship consisted entirely of male voices, including the singing or chanting. That did not change until the late 1700's, and then only in Reformed or liberal synagogues.

Now I hope we can look at the ministry of Jesus with new eyes. Jesus is on His way through Samaria in John 4 and He sends His disciples into the town of Sychar to get some food. While he waits by a well for their return, a woman comes to draw water and Jesus asks her for a drink. The woman is stunned. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. How can you ask me for a drink?" No, that's not how the text reads: "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan *woman*. How can you ask me for a drink?" Jesus crossed major social barriers in order to stir up faith in this woman. And she became the instrument through which the whole town heard that their Messiah had come. Jesus didn't put her down, didn't make her feel second class, didn't ignore her or keep His distance from her; He spoke with her as one human being to another and engaged in conversation with her about subjects that Greeks, Romans and Jews felt women were incapable of understanding.

Then, look at Jesus' relationship with Mary and Martha. In their home, although the culture expected that women would eat in a separate room, Mary and Martha ate and interacted with Jesus. Mary took the role that would be expected of young men, listening at the feet of Jesus as the rabbi taught her. Later, after their brother Lazarus

had died, Jesus taught Martha about who He was and asked her to respond with faith. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" In a public setting, Jesus not only teaches a woman, but invites her to respond in faith, stepping way beyond the socio-religious customs.

Notice that the gospels tell us that there were women who followed Jesus. Mark mentions that "many other women who had come up with Him to Jerusalem were also there." And Luke names several: "The Twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means." (Luke 8:2,3)

And in a society that didn't accept a woman's testimony in court, to whom did Jesus first appear after His resurrection? Mary Magdalene.

In the early decades of the Christian church, its leaders remembered Jesus' example and included women in prominent leadership roles. Paul notes that Apphia, "our sister", was a leader in a house church in Colossae. In Laodicea, Nympha had a church in her house (Col. 4:15). In Ephesus, Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, had a church that met at their house (1 Cor. 16:19). Then there was Phoebe, who is mentioned in Romans 16:1,2 with the title "deacon", a position she held at the church in Cenchreae. There was no word for "deaconess" until late in the fourth century and Paul also refers to her as *prostasis* or "leading officer". Also in Romans 16 is the mention of Junia as someone "outstanding among the apostles." And other women are mentioned as co-workers with Paul, including Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4.

Over the next few centuries, the church gave ground to the culture in terms of its views of women. No longer was the radical Jesus showing the way, but the surrounding Roman and Jewish views seemed to put restrictions on the freedoms that Jesus and the early church had gladly given. But women's role in the growth of the church has not been forgotten. The historian W.E.H. Lecky credits women in what he calls "the great conversion of the Roman Empire," and adds "In the ages of persecution female figures occupy many of the foremost places and ranks of martyrdom." A German historian wrote, "Christendom dare not forget that it was primarily the female sex that for the greater part brought about its rapid growth. It was the evangelistic zeal of women in the early years of the church, and later, which won the weak and the mighty." Why was Christianity so captivating for women and something they would give their lives for? Because it freed them from being second-class, from the tyranny of male-dominated societies, from unfair laws and a degraded position relative to others. It took women from being locked up in their homes to having a mission to the entire world -- and they ran with it.

What has happened through the influence of Christianity around the world in the past

few hundred years?

In the first place, the Roman institution of *patria potestas*, the rule that gave husbands the right of life and death over their wives and children, came to an end in 374, just 61 years after Christianity was legalized.

While pagan Rome continued to see girls married at 12 or 13 years old, Christian women tended to marry several years later . . . AND, they had a choice in the person they would marry. In several parts of the world today it is common for girls to be given in marriage by their fathers to men they haven't chosen -- in Bangladesh, in China and in Mauritania, Africa this still takes place and with girls who haven't even reached their teens.

In all the cultures surrounding the birthplace of the Christian faith, women were veiled in public. This was true in Greek and Roman cultures, and also in Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Hebrew and Chinese. Some of the later church fathers tried to keep veiling for women a part of the Christian service of worship, but the practice died out and women were free to remove the veil.

Jesus always spoke of marriage as being between one man and one woman and it was part of Christian influence through the centuries that polygamy was done away with. Before Utah could join the United States they had to pass an anti-polygamy law. This was the influence of the church, by this time enshrined in a nation's laws.

Last week I mentioned the Hindu custom of burning the widow alongside her dead husband. This took place, not only in India, but in pre-Christian Scandinavia, among the Chinese, the Finns and the Maori of New Zealand. But where the gospel came, this practice has been ended.

Footbinding in China was a cruel custom inflicted on girls to, basically, deform their feet and alter their walk. Lin Yutang has shown that Christian missionaries led the crusade to abolish foot binding, and their efforts were finally rewarded in 1912 with a government ban against it.

When we look back over hundreds of years of history and we see the entrenchment of the culture of 7th century Arabia in the Muslim religion and we see the brutal treatment of women in some pagan African groups and we see an attempted revival in India of the suttee or sati, where the widow of her dead husband is cremated along with him, even while she lives, our world should be thankful for the role that the Christian church has played in the freedoms that women now enjoy in our culture and which don't seem likely to ever be challenged. Jesus' arrival in this world has made things better for women, without a doubt.

But, as good as all this has been, the church has struggled with the kinds of freedoms that women had in the first few centuries of its existence. By the Middle Ages, in a totally male-dominated church hierarchy, women were excluded from the

kinds of leadership roles that they had in the early church. For example, in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, there are a number of pieces of Christian art work, including one showing women celebrating the eucharist or “communion” service. The painting has been altered to make it appear that a man is administering the elements of the communion meal. And beside a mosaic of someone named *Episcopa Theodora*, or “Bishop Theodora”, the ending of the inscription has been changed by dropping the “ra”, making it a man’s name. Men have been very uncomfortable allowing women into leadership roles, particularly in light of some of Paul’s teaching.

Since the Reformation there have been various renewal movements in the church where women have served as evangelists, teachers and church planters. But after renewal, there has always seemed to be a move towards higher education for pastors and a marginalization of women. By the third generation of movements like the Wesleys began or that Dwight Moody began with his evangelistic crusades, the movement had become institutionalized and the freedom for women’s active participation had been dramatically reduced.

The same thing happened with the Sunday School movement. Men initially resisted the idea of women teaching literacy skills to impoverished children, saying things like, “These women will be in the pulpit next.” But, through the relentless efforts of the women themselves to reach out to their communities with this gift of teaching, the Sunday School movement became a big deal in a short time -- so much so, that the men took it over, setting policy and leading organizations such as the American Sunday School Mission, while allowing the women to do the work.

I don’t want to take that out of its historical context -- this occurred at a time when women didn’t have the right to vote in either Canada or the U.S., but it does show that the church had lost its leadership role in this matter, a role that Jesus and the early church had won.

Why was it so hard for men to grant women the freedom to exercise the gifts of the Spirit that the Lord of the church had granted them? They would often stand behind a few verses in the New Testament that restricted how women functioned in the early church. Without using the actual practice of the early church as a filter for interpreting those texts, however, the tendency has been for male scholars to interpret them in a way that restricts women. Let me give one example, or this will become a whole second sermon. In 1 Timothy 2:12 Paul writes, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man. She must be silent.” Wherever that verb “do not permit” is used, either in the Greek version of the Old Testament or anywhere in the New Testament, it describes a temporary ban. In other words, Paul is saying, “I am not currently permitting a woman to teach”. This would fit in Timothy’s situation in Ephesus in which there was a group that twisted the story of Adam and Eve to promote their philosophy of female dominance -- not what a young Timothy needed to give him confidence to lead the church in Ephesus.

I don't think the final word has been written on the texts of the New Testament that have been at the centre of the debates over women in the church, but if we understand our history, we'll know that women have always been on the front lines of every major move in evangelism, in discipleship, in revival, in prayer, in meeting the social needs of the surrounding culture, in missions; basically, in the fulfilment of the Great Commission through the many compassionate actions of the followers of Jesus.

One thing we can be sure of; God has given the gifts of His Spirit to men and women, to Jews and Gentiles, to slaves and free and He has given them so that every person can fulfill his or her calling to build the body of Christ, to serve the Kingdom of heaven, and to show the love of God to the people of every nation, tongue and tribe.