

A Bible Study on Gender

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1. Compare the two accounts of creation (Genesis 1: 26-28 and 2: 7, 15-24). What do they say about the relationship between men, women and their creator God? What does it mean for you to be made in God's image?
2. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". (Galatians 3: 28) What does it mean to be "one in Christ Jesus"? What bearing, if any, does this teaching have on gender issues today?
3. "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work". (Ephesians 4: 16). Consider gender issues in the light of the teaching that all are members of the Body of Christ.
4. How do you feel about women in roles of ministry? Try to analyse the portrayal of women in the Gospel of John, this may help you:

Recently, the issue of "women in ministry" has had a high profile in many churches. There is agreement that women, like men, are called to minister within the church and to the world. The debate focuses on the nature of ministry and the forms of expression appropriate for women.

Those who believe the Bible restricts the public ministry of women appeal to texts such as 1 Timothy 2: 11-12, 14 and 1 Corinthians 14: 34. Those who favour the unrestricted ministry of women counter with Galatians 3: 28, Romans 16: 1-3, 6, 12, Philippians 4: 2-3 and 1 Corinthians 11:

5. Nowhere in John does Jesus explicitly teach about the roles and nature of women. Rather, we are left with an implicit commentary by John, who portrays women as active, innovative ministers of the Kingdom. We are given only indirectly Jesus' attitude toward women, as revealed by his words and actions: the Johannine Jesus affirms them in roles that were unusual and often unacceptable within that culture.

John's story reveals a certain sensitivity and a deep respect for women which is evident in his selection and portrayal of incidents in Jesus' life. The Johannine Jesus is not presented as seeking to modify the feminine role prevalent within Judaism; rather, Jesus seems to ignore it altogether as he calls women to public ministry and affirms them in the face of male opposition.

Although Jesus did not systematically spell out his teaching on women, his manner of treating women demonstrated his personal attitude toward them. The implications of his encounters with women point to the role he expected them to assume as equal partners with men. Some of the greatest conversations ever reported between Jesus and women are found in John's Gospel:

- 1) Jesus has a theological discussion with the Samaritan woman in which he reveals his identity as the long awaited Messiah.
- 2) Jesus has a searching talk with Martha concerning the resurrection.

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- 3) Jesus chooses to send the message of his resurrection to his disciples through Mary Magdalene.

6. Explore these three stories:

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

In the story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus crosses both social and religious barriers (John 4: 4-42). While much attention has been given to this aspect of the story, few have pondered the significance of Jesus conversing with not only a Samaritan, but a Samaritan who was a woman.

Jewish society frowned upon conversation between male and female. This was particularly true of Samaritan women, who were deemed perpetually unclean. The laws of purity declared “the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruates from their cradle”. The Samaritan woman’s surprised reaction to being addressed by Jesus is evident (4: 9). The latter part of the verse is often translated “for Jews have no dealing with Samaritans”. The verb *sugchrontai* alludes to the cultic code that forbade a Jew to eat or drink from the vessel of an unclean person such as a Samaritan, and especially a Samaritan woman whom they considered a perpetual menstruant. The Samaritan woman’s shock is understandable as Jesus requests a drink from her vessel.

When the disciples return, they are shocked to see Jesus and the Samaritan woman in conversation. The Greek does not attribute the disciples’ shock to the fact that Jesus was talking to “the woman” but rather “a woman.” The attitude of Aboth Rabbe Nathan is typical of rabbinic thought when he says; “One does not speak with a woman on the street, not even his own wife, and certainly not with another woman, on account of gossip”.

The Samaritan woman immediately believes in Jesus as Messiah. She leaves her water jar and heads toward the village to give witness to this great revelation. Significance can be attached to the woman leaving her water jar when one considers the call of other disciples which involved leaving fishing boats and tax booths.

The concluding verses tell of the Samaritan woman’s witness to her village (4: 39-42). The importance of her work is reinforced when Jesus says to the disciples, “I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour” (38).

Jesus and Martha of Bethany

The second great conversation Jesus has with a woman is with Martha of Bethany (John 11). While the climactic miracle in this story is the raising of Lazarus, John gives great prominence to Mary and Martha throughout the narrative. Rather than attempt a detailed examination of the entire passage, this study will focus on the way the author portrays Martha.

John introduces the three characters involved in the narrative in verse 1. It is of note that he portrays Lazarus in terms of his relationship to Mary and Martha. It seems likely that in the eyes of the Evangelist, both Martha and Mary were more prominent than Lazarus. The author obviously expects the story of Mary's anointing of Jesus to be familiar to his readers since he refers to it in 11: 2 but has not yet narrated the event itself (cf. 12: 1-8). Jesus names Martha, Mary and Lazarus as objects of Jesus' love (5). The only other individual in John of whom this is said is the Beloved Disciple. Witherington feels that this implies that Mary and Martha as well as Lazarus were disciples of Jesus.¹

Already in verse 3 the narrator encourages us to see Mary and Martha as persons of faith. The message they send to Jesus telling him of Lazarus' illness hints that they believe only Jesus can deal with their drastic situation.² This impression is strengthened when Martha tells Jesus that if he had been there her brother would not have died. Martha's response to Jesus' assurance that her brother will rise again (verse 23) gives evidence of her theological awareness, expressing the belief of Pharisaic Judaism in the resurrection of the dead at the last judgement. It is at this point that Jesus attempts to move Martha from her affirmation of traditional eschatological expectations to a realization that he is the one who fulfils Jewish expectations.

Jesus addresses one of his "I am" sayings to a woman, and Martha responds with a climactic confession of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (27). Her confession is similar to Simon Peter's great confession in Matthew 16: 15-19, which has often been viewed as related to his position of leadership. In fact, this is the closest parallel to Peter's confession found anywhere in the Gospels.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene

The goal and apex of John's Gospel is reached in chapter 20: 1-18. Here we find the ultimate revelation of Jesus' identity as the resurrected Christ, the Son of God.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb of Jesus in the early morning hours. Having discovered the empty tomb, she runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple. After viewing the empty tomb, the Beloved Disciple "believed" (8). This is difficult to reconcile with verse nine: "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead". Paul Minear solves this dilemma by arguing that the belief of the Beloved Disciple was not in the resurrection of Jesus; but rather, that having seen the evidence himself, he finally believed Mary Magdalene's report.³ Since the witness of a woman was not considered credible within that particular cultural context, it is possible that John wanted to highlight the Beloved Disciple's belief in the report of a woman!

¹ B. Witherington, *Revelation: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge University Press, New York: 2003), 109.

² B. Witherington, *Revelation: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge University Press, New York: 2003), 108.

³ P. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (The Westminster Press, Louisville: 2004), 127.

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Upon encountering the resurrected Jesus, Mary is commissioned to tell Jesus' brothers the news of his resurrection. Mary eagerly proclaims the message of the risen Jesus to the disciples, and the disciples believe Mary's testimony. This is consistent with John's portrayal of Jesus' appearance to the disciples in verse 20 where he does not record surprise or shock on their part.

Reflections on women in John

It is through John's portrayal of Jesus relating to women that we gain insight into both Jesus' and the Evangelist's attitude toward women. Rather than assuming that women have similar characteristics and tendencies, and formulating rules designed for women only, Jesus treats them as unique and valuable individuals. Nowhere does he condescend to flatter women, but rather he demands as much from them as from men. Jesus' approach to women is revolutionary considering the cultural norms of his day.

None of the women in John except Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary the wife of Cleopas are described in relationship to men. In fact, John does just the opposite as he defines Lazarus by his relationship to Martha and Mary! Rather than viewing women in terms of their roles of wife, mother and housekeeper as was common within Jewish culture, the Johannine Jesus views them as individuals capable of making important decisions and commitments. Instead of seeing women primarily in terms of their sex or marital status, Jesus views them in terms of their relationship to God.

Unlike men in his culture who avoided the presence of women for fear of being seduced, Jesus associates freely with women. He has close friendships with women not related to him, like Mary and Martha, and even holds an extended private conversation with a Samaritan woman of ill repute. Instead of blaming women for male lust, Jesus implies that it is men's responsibility to discipline their thoughts rather than denying women access to public life.

One of the most radical aspects of Jesus' behaviour towards women is his willingness to teach them. While rabbinical thought considered it inappropriate to involve women in intellectual instruction, Jesus teaches women personally. He assumes that women are capable of learning and understanding the theological truths that he presents to them, and able to engage in theological debate. Jesus is willing to risk public scandal in order to instruct women. John further affirms women in their intellectual capacity as he presents them as valid witnesses of the truth about Jesus. It is through the witness of the Samaritan woman that the people of Sychar are introduced to Jesus. More importantly, it is Mary Magdalene who is entrusted with the truth of Jesus' resurrection and commanded by the risen Jesus to be a witness of that truth to the disciples.

In summary, we observe that women in the Fourth Gospel are presented positively and in intimate relation with Jesus. Kopas points out that there "are enough examples of lack of comprehension of a person's relationship to God among the men who follow to make his

encounters with women all the more amazing”.⁴ Women are portrayed as comprehending the teaching of Jesus and responding enthusiastically and appropriately. They are women who are not afraid to take initiative in their relationship with Jesus, and the Evangelist presents Jesus as affirming these women in their unconventional roles. In fact, Schneiders states that, “if leadership is a function of creative initiation and decisive action, the Johannine women qualify well for the role”.⁵ Jesus pays no heed to the views of women common in his time. Rather, he enters into theological discussion with women, affirms them in their public proclamation of his revelation, values them as close friends and chooses them to be witnesses to the truth of his resurrection.

7. Could the praying be adapted to use inclusive language? What would be the drawbacks/ advantages?
8. How do you feel about the use of male-gendered language (he, him) to refer to God? Is any non-gendered language available?
9. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is envisioned as female. Are you comfortable with this? Why (or why not)?

About the Author

Dima is a Belarusian student who has been participating in many WSCF events. Dima likes preparing Bible studies and workshops.

⁴ J. Kopas, *Seeking the Hidden God*, (Orbis Books, New York: 2005), 202.

⁵ S. Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church*, (Orbis Books, New York: 2011), 39.