

THE CHURCH AND CHAUVINISM

What Does Jesus Think of Women?

Text: Mark 16:1-11

The Woman at the Back

The lights were down too low and she was sitting too far back for me to see who she was. But a few weeks ago, as I began our study of what God has to say about the sexes, she got up and walked out the door. I had begun the message with the assertion of one writer that men are superior to women in their likeness to God. But the woman left before the Bible gave the rest of the story. I hope she left for some other reason, but the sinking feeling remains that maybe she heard in those opening words the same message she'd heard directly or indirectly for years: that she was a second-class person; and, what is worse, that this was the way God says that things are supposed to be.

I can see why someone might get that impression from *society*. We've obviously come a long way in terms of recognizing female leadership in the realm of American politics. But decades after "equal opportunity" became a household phrase, there still remain significant disparities. According to *Harper's Index*, of all the couples where both husband and wife are in the full-time work force, only 20% of the women earn as much as their male spouse. In the year following a divorce, the average man experiences a 43% *increase* in standard of living; the average woman, a 73% *reduction*. The vast majority of people living below the poverty level are female. Women make up more than 50% of the world's population, yet only 12% of the world's lawmakers are female.

The Christian Church hasn't always stood for something different. For centuries and in many Christian denominations to this day, women have been disallowed from holding the office of elder or pastor. Up until quite recently, women have been frequently discouraged from engaging in serious theological study or leading in worship. Even when responsible research has exposed alarming trends in spousal abuse, female poverty, and unfair vocational practices, the Church in many places has remained woefully silent. Certainly not all Christians or all churches have done so. But enough have and for long enough to make us ask: "Why? Why has the Church of Jesus Christ more often been viewed as on the side of chauvinism than as a challenger of it?"

A First Century Woman

Some people think that the primary reason is because Christianity grew out of the belief system of ancient Israel. While no doubt women were loved and revered in many families then as they are today, the overall status of women in first century Palestine certainly left something to be desired. Just imagine, for a moment, that you happened to be a female living at that time. What would be your experience?¹

Well, for one thing, your sense of identity would have been shaped from an early age from the simple experience of family life. You might have puzzled a bit over the fact that when your little sister was born the neighbors and extended family seemed to treat the event with only passing interest; while they seemed overjoyed when along came your little brother. You may have been shocked a bit when you first overheard your father and brothers completing their morning devotions. For these prayers contained the following standard one: "Blessed art thou O Lord that you have not made me a gentile, a slave, or a woman." Why would your male family members not want to be a woman?

I suppose part of the reason is that there was at least some doubt in the most conservative Jewish circles as to whether women really had souls at all. It was for this reason, among others, that you and other women were not given the obligation to pray daily to God as men were. If you knew the Scriptures at all, it would only be on a second-hand basis, for Jewish custom not only did not include females in the study of the Scripture, it prohibited you from handling the Torah — the Law — for fear that you might misinterpret it. There's a good chance that, as you grew up, you would know the local Rabbi; but it is highly doubtful that you would have developed a personal relationship with him. Hebrew convention specifically forbade a holy man from talking with or brushing up against a female in public.

By the time you were a young adult, you would probably no longer question these ways. For, as the book of Sirach plainly said, even "the foolishness of men is better than the wisdom of women." You would likely accept the convention that having more than one spouse was fine for men but not for women. You would know other wives who had been sentenced to utter disgrace and — unless they had a welcoming family of origin — utter poverty, when their husbands became too tired of them. A man in that society could divorce a woman and throw her out on her ear without any spousal support whatsoever, simply by uttering "I divorce thee," three times. If that ever happened to you, surely you could make an appeal in court, couldn't you? Not a chance. A woman's testimony wasn't even considered admissible in a court of law.

Would you want to be a woman in the Palestine of the first century?

Jesus and Women

It was into this world that Jesus of Nazareth came. What he did and said in the face of these cultural norms really bears our examination, because it is from the teaching and behavior of Jesus that a biblically "Christian" view toward women appropriately grows. So let's just look quickly at three dimensions of Christ's attitude toward women as they are revealed through acts of challenge, of celebration, and of commitment.

In the first place, Jesus boldly challenged the abuse of women. Amidst a culture that routinely treated women as inferior possessions, there is no record in any of the

gospels of Jesus ever making a single remark that may be construed as even faintly anti-woman. On the contrary, Jesus actively stood up to those who victimized women. To those who were prone to regarding women as mere sexual objects, Jesus says in Matthew 5:27: **“I tell you that if you even look upon a woman with lust you are as liable to God’s judgment as if you had raped or committed adultery.”**² What do these words have to say to those of us who are in the habit of making sexual jokes, or of fooling around with pornography?

To a group of men we meet in John 8 who were about to stone a woman for her sexual sin, Jesus said to the woman: **“Go and sin no more,”** but also to her self-proclaimed judges: **“Whoever among you who is without sin, cast the first stone.”**³ I wonder what he would say to me and my high school buddies as we talked about what a slut so-and-so was, when all along we were as wanton ourselves. What would Jesus say to any of us guys who jealously propagate one standard for the women in our lives and quite another for ourselves?

To those who thought it fine to simply cast off their wife when she was no longer as pretty or interesting as some younger woman, Jesus warned in Matthew 5:31 of the terrible damage such a cavalier attitude towards covenant caused.⁴ What would Jesus say to the cavalier divorcing instinct or the trophy wife pattern so common to our mid-life crisis culture – mostly in California, of course, not here in God’s country!

First of all, Jesus boldly challenged the abuse of women. Secondly, he actively celebrated women as well. In particular, Jesus celebrated the spiritual excellence of women. I don’t mean Jesus just threw out kudos to anyone simply because they happened to be female. Being female doesn’t automatically accord someone greater spiritual maturity. But amidst a culture that didn’t take women seriously enough to make them students of God’s Law, Jesus saw in Mary and Martha and many other women the kind of spiritual acuity worthy of teaching (**Luke 10:38-42**). He held up as the greatest exemplar of love and humility the woman who poured perfume on his feet (**Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7:37-47**) and washed them with her tears and hair. Jesus held up as one of the **“great”** exemplars of faith a Canaanite woman. (**Matthew 15:21-28**)

We talk a lot about all the great “men of God” who have built the church, and this is good. God blesses us men with enormous responsibility and the privilege of being used by him in phenomenal ways. Nothing we’re saying about women here diminishes in any way the great call of God upon the lives of men. We’ll explore that subject next week. But have you stopped to celebrate lately, to affirm intentionally, the incredible leadership being provided, the extraordinary service that has been rendered, by the women of Christ’s church? Do you think if the Lord of the Universe thought such devotion worthy of comment, you and I might do so too? Before this day is done, let’s each recognize at least one woman we know and speak a Christlike word of

encouragement and appreciation for what she reflects of the wisdom, love, or faithfulness of God.

Jesus challenged the abuse of women. He celebrated the spiritual excellence of women. And yet maybe nothing so eloquently declares what Jesus thinks of women than the commitment he made to them as described in Mark 16. Think on this with me, if you will. Women in Israel were not considered worthy enough to even bear witness to a donkey accident in small claims court. Yet when it came to showing himself after the resurrection; when it came time to entrusting to someone the very first tidings of the most awesome and life-transforming truth ever to be declared upon the earth; who did Jesus Christ choose? Peter? John? James? Bartholomew? Matthew? Andrew? No, Mark 16:9 tells us: **“When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene.”** The text goes on to say: **“She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping.”**

Jesus committed first to a woman the proclamation of the good news. I don't think that was because men weren't competent to the task. They certainly were, as history demonstrates. But I believe that Jesus sought to make clear that women were to be about that business too. This is why half of our elders at Christ Church are women. It's why we have both female and male deacons. It is why we've cherished the ministry of female pastors here and why there are women as well as men leading worship and teaching classes. I know that some people think the Apostle Paul put the kibosh on all that. I'm going to return to that in two weeks. But let me say that like our belief in the Triune God, or in a grace that saves above any human works, the Christian doctrine of the value and ministry of women — while debated still in some places — is another one of those distinctives that separates Christianity from other religions. It is another one of those remarkable viewpoints that allows us to be in our time such wonderful salt and light in the world.

Why has the Church of Jesus Christ more often been viewed as on the side of chauvinism than as a challenger of it? I wish that woman who walked out the back door was here today to hear me answer. It's because some of us, like the disciples who wouldn't believe Mary Magdalene's testimony, or sinners like me, haven't always loved and valued women... haven't always perceived and protected the goodness of all God's creatures... have not employed all the gifts of the Body... have not always longed for the spread of the good news into every corner of Creation — the way Jesus does. But why not from now on?

Let us pray...

Lord, I ask your forgiveness and that of any soul, male or female, which I have wounded with my insensitive words or my insipid silence. We ask your forgiveness and that of any person who has been hurt by the failure of your Church down through the years. Henceforth, make us bold to challenge abuse of your creatures where we see or

hear it. Make us quick to celebrate spiritual excellence wherever we find it. Make us thankful for and attentive to the good news of your kingdom's coming from whoever proclaims it. For this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

¹In his marvelous book, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias gives us a fascinating look into the culture of Palestine at the time that the Christian church was born. Many of my observations about this culture are drawn from Jeremias' work.

²A paraphrase of Matthew 5:27-30.

³A paraphrase of John 8:3-11.

⁴Matthew 5:31-32.