



## The Role of Women in the Church: Christ's Relationship to Women

Some have argued that Jesus was a revolutionary in His attitude to women. Others see Him as merely a product of His day. The truth comes somewhere in the middle. Believing that Jesus is the King and head of His church, it is important for us to consider this subject.

The first point we must notice is that Christ made no direct statements on the place of women in the Christian community or in society at large. He is never directly questioned about His attitude to women or His relationships with them which is surprising if He was as revolutionary in this as some assert. Jewett, for example, comments on John 12:3 where Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair:

*To the 'unliberated' first century Jewess, this last touch would have been especially painful. For a woman to take down her hair in the presence of a man would have been deemed highly immodest. That a woman could feel such freedom in Jesus' presence must have offended and baffled the men who witnessed it.<sup>1</sup>*

However, it is interesting that the only discussion which arose out of the matter concerned the waste of three hundred denarii which could have been given to the poor. Again in Luke 7:36-50, where the woman who had been a "sinner" washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, anoints them with oil and kisses them, Simon, the self-righteous Pharisee, inwardly criticizes Jesus not because the person in contact with Him is a woman but rather because she is a sinner (verse 39).

The only incident Jewett can give to prove that Jesus' relationship with women was so very "offensive to His contemporaries" is Jesus' conversation with the Woman of Samaria (John 4). We are told that the disciples "marvelled that He was peaking with a woman" (verse 27). But Jewett himself concedes that emphasis is upon the fact that she was a Samaritan woman.<sup>2</sup> If Jesus' relation to women was as revolutionary as Jewett asserts, one would have expected more recorded confrontation on this matter between Him and the Jews, just as there was on questions like the Sabbath and washing.

On the other hand those are wrong who regard Jesus as fitting in completely with the Judaistic stereotype of His time in His attitude to women. Although not a revolutionary in this area in the sense that He overthrew the Law, the Old Testament teaching on the relative place of women and men, yet Jesus did not simply accept the status quo either. There had been a considerable deterioration in this area in post-exilic times. The woman was regarded as ontologically inferior to the man. Oepke writes that Judaism involves reaction rather than progress with respect to the Old Testament teaching on women:

*Woman is openly despised. 'Happy is he whose children are males and woe to him whose children are females' (b Qid. 82b). The honourable title 'daughter of Abraham' is rare in Rabbinic literature as compared with the corresponding 'son of Abraham.' Women are greedy, inquisitive, lazy, vain (Gn. r. 45 on 165) and frivolous (b Shab., 33b). 'Ten qab of empty-headedness have come upon the world, nine having been received by women and one by the rest of the world' (b Qid., 49b). Many women, much witchcraft? (Hillel c. 20 B.C. 2, 7)...*

Conversation should not be held with a woman even though she be one's own (b Erub., 53b; Ab., 1, 5). 'May the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to a woman' (j. Sota,

10a, 8). *'The man who teaches his daughter the Torah teaches her extravagance'* (Sota, 3, 4; cf. Sota, 21b) ... Philo says (Op. Mund., 165): *'In us the attitude of men is informed by reason, of women by sensuality.'*<sup>6</sup>

Jesus' attitude was in clear contrast with that of the typical rabbi of his day. His ministry was directed to women as well as men. The gospels related how He healed the woman who had the issue of blood twelve years (Mark 5:24-34), Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39), the Syro-phoenecian woman's daughter (Mark 7:25-30), the woman in the synagogue who was bowed with a spirit of infirmity eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17), etc. We read of how He raised Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43) and the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17). He draws no distinction between the needy man and the needy woman but shows His mercy equally to both.

He rejects the rabbinic tradition of not teaching women the Law. The classic passage to illustrate this is of course Luke 10:38-42. A woman by the name of Martha had received Jesus into her home. While she was preparing the meal her sister Mary, instead of helping her, was seated at Jesus' feet listening to His teaching. Martha complained to Christ that her sister was not helping her to which He replied: *"Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: for Mary hath chosen the good part that will not be taken away from her"* (Luke 10:41-42). Jesus is here rejoicing in the fact that Mary is listening to His words. Martha would be praised more if, instead of being over concerned about the food, etc., she paid more attention to the precious teaching of the Master. He sees it of importance to teach women as well as men. Another example of this is to be found in John 4. Jesus says that to open up the Scriptures to this despised, sinful, Samaritan woman and to lead her to salvation, is His meat, His very food (vv 32, 34).

In His parables Jesus frequently turns to the everyday life of a woman e.g. the parable of the leaven (Matthew 13:33), the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). Luke informs us that as Jesus traveled round on His itinerant ministry that certain women followed Him and spontaneously rendered Him the service of mother and sisters (Luke 8:2, 3). It would seem that these women provided for His material and financial needs. They're maintained with Him to the end. They were present at His crucifixion (Mark 15:40, 41). On the first day of the week, following His death, they were at the sepulchre early in the morning with spices to anoint His body. There they saw a vision of angels and were given a message of hope for the other disciples (Mark 16:1-8). John relates that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord (John 20:11-18). Jesus never uttered a derogatory word concerning women as such. In Luke 21:1-3 He praised a widow's generous giving to the Lord's cause, in Matthew 15:28 He praised the great faith of the Syro-phoenician woman and in John 11:5 we read that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Jesus certainly regarded women as equally the children of God with men. He did not regard them as inferior. Both needed salvation and His mission was to save both. Jesus could have refused to teach women, He could have spurned their company, He could have despised and scorned them as did many of the rabbis of His day, but He did not.

Although Jesus raised the status of women there is no reason to believe with Jewett and others that Jesus taught the relational equality of man and woman i.e., that the man did not have a headship over the woman in the family and church. It is one thing for Jesus 'to teach women the Law' but it is quite another thing for women to become teachers of the Law. It is one thing for women to be objects of Christ's mercy and salvation but it is quite another thing for them to be the heads of their homes and officers ruling in His church. The fact that Jesus brought great changes in the lot of women does not prove that if He were incarnate with us on earth today, He would go as far as the Women's Liberation Movement wishes to go.

It is of some significance that, although Jesus was very close to some females and thought very highly of them and although some females were among His most devoted disciples following Him around and ministering to Him, yet it was an all male apostolate which He appointed. These apostles were to be the first leaders of His church after He ascended. Considering that it was possible for Him to have female ministers who followed Him around there is no reason why he

should not have some female apostles if He so desired. Of course argumentation of this nature is weak. However, to argue that because Christ regarded women as equally the objects of His salvation with men, He would also have appointed them as rulers of His church just as He did men, is an even weaker argument.

From this brief survey of the relevant material from the life of Christ we have found that although Christ did much for the emancipation of women, yet He did nothing to cast doubt upon the creation order of male headship in the family and in worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Jewett, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Albrecht Oepke on *funne Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G.W. Bromiley, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Eerdsmans, 1965), p. 781-782.