THE SALVATION ARMY

Raise Your Voice

GOD'S DESIGN FOR GENDER EQUITY

A Bible study from creation to Jesus, and beyond.

Raise Your Voice

God's Design for Gender Equity

Edited by Ingrid Barratt

A publication of the Gender Equity Committee
The Salvation Army New Zealand Fiji, Tonga & Samoa Territory

Find out more about **Raise Your Voice** at
women.salvationarmy.org.nz

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Raise Your Voice: God's Design for Gender Equity

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For our foremothers

who embraced equality

so we could be

all sons and daughters.

'The waters are rising, but so am I.

I am not going under, but over.'

Catherine Booth

Salvation Army Co-Founder

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Introduction

Raise Your Voice

by **Commissioner Julie Campbell**
Chair, Gender Equity Committee

On behalf of the Territorial Gender Equity Committee, it is my pleasure to commend this Bible study series to you. The goal of the Gender Equity Committee is to see The Salvation Army in New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa continue to be a movement in which God's intention for all people to flourish is realised.

The Salvation Army in New Zealand commenced following a letter to General William Booth from the courageous and bold Miss Arabella Valpy, asking for officers to be sent to New Zealand. She even included a bank draft to assist with the fares. In 1883, George Pollard and Edward Wright arrived, and the mission of The Salvation Army rapidly grew throughout New Zealand.

For almost 140 years, women and men of all ages and cultures have faithfully served the Lord using our gifts and abilities as the body of Christ in The Salvation Army Aotearoa New Zealand. The mission of The Salvation Army has been in Fiji for 50 years, 37 years in Tonga and 5 years in Samoa. We have a vibrant and colourful history.

We have always held a strong belief in the equality of women, and the ability of women to be leaders (although this has not always been realised). Some of us don't know, or are confused by, the reasons behind this belief. But that's about to change!

Raise Your Voice provides a robust Biblical foundation for gender equity. Although this study focuses primarily on women, it is not a women's Bible study. My hope is that women and men will embrace this resource: we all need to be allies in gender equity.

We've used the term 'gender equity' throughout this study. In God's creation story, we are created to be equal and mutually share resources. But... if everyone is given the same or equal resources, it doesn't mean we all have equal outcomes. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances, and allocates the resources and opportunities they need in order to achieve an equal outcome.[1] Equity gives us the building blocks to achieve real equality.

I am grateful to Ingrid and the writers of this series of studies, which highlights, unpacks and clarifies significant passages of scripture. Some of these have been used as 'clobber' verses against women, but many more remind us of God's intention and design for all of us—as we raise our voices together to declare and demonstrate the love and life of Jesus.

In a time when women were not always seen or valued, throughout the Bible we read many inspiring stories of women who were used by God to draw people to his love. I love reading the conversations and encounters Jesus had with women. They clearly demonstrate that the love and salvation of God is for everyone, all are welcome in the kingdom of God and commissioned to share the good news of Jesus.

My own journey as a woman leader has been inspired by the first appearance and instructions of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and the group of faithful women disciples who were last at the cross and first at the tomb.

My own journey as a woman leader has been inspired by the first appearance and instructions of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and the group of faithful women disciples who were last at the cross and first at the tomb: 'Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me"' (Matthew 28:10).

The message of love, hope and life, in all its fullness in Jesus, inspires me to be a faithful and confident disciple of Jesus. This important message was given to the women to go tell the other disciples.

We all have an important part to play in continuing to raise our voices and provide opportunities for everyone to confidently share the transforming love of Jesus.

All of us together—partnering with God to fulfil His mission.

Chapter 1

Why Our Women Lead: The Legacy of Catherine Booth

by **Lt-Colonel Liz Gainsford**

'To deny female ministry [is] to deny the full grace of God and to do irreparable harm to the cause of the kingdom.'

Catherine Booth

Let's start

William and Catherine Booth founded The Salvation Army on 2 July 1865 and from its early days women were involved in all forms of ministry, including preaching—something that was almost always reserved for men in those days. Despite the strongly-held practices and beliefs of their time, Catherine 'believed that women were pre-eminently fitted for leadership in the moral sphere.'[2] William took some convincing on this point, even stating that it was over this topic that Catherine and he had their 'only serious lover's quarrel'3, but eventually he agreed to women in ministry.

Even before marrying William, Catherine wrote this to him in a letter: 'May the Lord, even the just and impartial one, overrule all for the true emancipation of women from the swaddling bands of prejudice, ignorance, and custom, which, almost the world over, have so long debased and wronged her'.[4]

In The Salvation Army, our women lead. This heritage of freedom sits squarely on the shoulders of Catherine Booth—it was her remarkable intellect and sense of calling that made way for women in our mission. It is because of Catherine that the Army largely stands apart within evangelical Christianity in our full inclusion of women as preachers and leaders.

Today, we continue to build on Catherine's legacy as we raise our voices together.

Let's read

Galatians 3:26–29

You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise.

Let's discuss

- What words that jump out at you from this passage? (perhaps you would like to circle them)
- What does it mean to you when it says 'you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise'?
- Why do you think verse 26 says 'you are all God's children'?
- If you were to make a list like verse 28 today, of those who have traditionally been 'in' and those who have been considered 'out', who would you include?

Let's dig deeper

Catherine strongly believed in 'egalitarianism'—the view that all people are created equally and should be given equal rights and opportunities. The Army continues to be 'egalitarian' in its beliefs about gender roles to this day (see sidebar: Two Big Words that Define Christian Women).

But Catherine grew up in a time when most of society, and especially the church, had a patriarchal worldview: the belief that men are born to be in charge, and God ordained men only as leaders and preachers. Large parts of the church still hold on to the belief in patriarchy. These churches call themselves 'complementarian'.

Alyssa Roat in her 2019 article for Christianity.com sums it up like this:

> *Complementarianism and egalitarianism are theological views on the relationship between men and women, especially in marriage and in ministry. Complementarianism stresses that although men and women are equal in personhood, they are created for different roles. Egalitarianism also agrees that men and women are equal in personhood but holds that there are no gender-based limitations on the roles of men and women.*[5]

Catherine was truly a trailblazer in being able to see beyond gender hierarchies in a world that was fully immersed in them. Although she did spend time addressing problematic passages from scripture that were (and continue to be) used as to why women must not lead or preach (like 1 Corinthians 11:4–5 and 1 Timothy 2:12–13), she also spent time highlighting the 'positive witness of the Bible for women in ministry'.[6]

These include the many women mentioned in both the Old and New Testament who prayed, preached and ministered in various ways: women like Deborah, Miriam, Priscilla, Junia and Phoebe.

Catherine spoke about the emphasis and special treatment that Jesus gave to women, specifically his commission to Mary Magdalene in Matthew 28:9–10. Catherine saw that Jesus was intentional in making his first public appearance after the resurrection to a woman, as, 'a woman had been blamed for being the first in transgression, so to set the record straight, as it were, she is the first to know about the atonement for such transgression.'[7]

Catherine liked to speak of Acts 2:16–18 where Peter promised the people that 'your sons and daughters shall prophesy'. This is the fulfilment of Joel 2:28–29, and shows the Holy Spirit does not discriminate, but is for all people: male, female, Jews, Gentiles, slaves or free.

Neither male nor female

The book of Galatians was written by Paul after his first missionary journey around Asia Minor. Upon arriving in Antioch he received a report that the church in Galatia had fallen into 'error' or false teaching. Paul had played a part in establishing the church in Galatia, so had strong relationships with the converts there, which is probably why his tone in the letter is quite strong. Charles Swindoll would go as far to suggest that 'Galatians exhibits Paul at his angriest'.[8] The letter speaks directly into the first really big controversy that plagued the early church: the relationship between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles. This was an important topic for Paul and a great concern for him.

In the lead-up to Galatians 3:28, Paul stresses that 'you are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus' (v26). The fact is that even today not all are equal. When I lived in Tanzania I met Musa. Musa was a young girl who lived in The Salvation Army's Matumaini School for children with disabilities, and then in our girls home, Mbagala. The reason she was taken in by The Salvation Army was because when she was born her father had wanted a son and so he left Musa in a field outside the village that was known to have poisonous snakes in it. He thought that if she was bitten and died then he would no longer have the shame of having a daughter. Musa was bitten by a snake but survived by having her leg amputated. So now, not only was she a girl, but she was also a disabled girl—a double curse in the eyes of her father.

This view of males being more valuable or superior to females was also prevalent during the time Paul was writing to the Galatians. A common Jewish daily prayer of the time said, 'Blessed be God that he did not make me a Gentile; blessed be God that he did not make me ignorant (or a slave); blessed be God that he did not make me a woman' (Tosefta Berakoth 7:18).[9] Paul, in Galatians 3:28, turns this verse on its head. Basically he is saying: everything you have ever known about race, class, and gender is wrong now that you have come into a loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Catherine Booth puts it this way: 'Cast off all bonds of prejudice and custom, and let the love of Christ, which is in you, have free course to run out in all conceivable schemes and methods of labour for the souls of (all).'[10] She believed that matters of racial, status, and sexual distinctions were the result of the fall and a sign of sin. Likewise, the abolition of these distinctions was the great sign of redemption.

In other words, gender inequality is the result of the fall, but dismantling inequalities is a sign of redemption.

Catherine wrote, 'If this passage does not teach that in the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of Christ's kingdom, all differences of nation, caste, and sex are abolished, we should like to know what it does teach!'[11]

Let's discuss

- Are there any roles in the church you believe are only for men, or only for women? What are they and why do you think they are gender specific?
- What has been your experience of women leading in the church?
- What does Galatians 3:28 say to you about gender equity, and how might that change our perspective in today's world?
- Are there subtle ways we may be held back from bringing all of ourselves to Christ's service because of gender expectations?
- Share about a woman who has inspired you within your church and why...

Final thought

'For Catherine the equality of women "was not a mere practical dispute..." that women should be used for ministry because there were not enough men to fill the pulpits or supply the missionary quotas. No, this was a theological matter, at the heart of which was this question: "Are women and men being faithful to the biblical version of the kingdom of God, in which all the gifts, talents, energies, and abilities of all the people, female and male, are used in the service of the church for the sake of that kingdom?" Is the church living out in faithful witness the implications of Galatians 3:28? Catherine understood (this) as a biblical mandate for ministry, not just a salvation promise.'"

Roger J. Green in his book *Catherine Booth: A Biography of the co-founder of The Salvation Army*

Further reading

In 1859, Catherine Booth wrote the pamphlet 'Female Ministry: or Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel'. This became not only a defining moment for The Salvation Army, but for women in ministry. You can find out more and read the pamphlet in this article: 'Equally Called, Equally Appointed and Equally Serving'.

Roger J. Green in his book Catherine Booth provides us with a helpful overview of Catherine's arguments and teaching around women in ministry. It's available at the BCM library!

Two Big Words that Define Christian Women

There are two big words that most of us have never heard of, but that largely define the roles of women in the church: 'egalitarian' and 'complementarian'. You don't have to remember these words—but it's good to know how they have influenced what it means to be a man or woman of faith.

Catherine grew up in a time when most of society, and especially the church, had a patriarchal worldview: the belief that men are born to be in charge, and God ordained men only as leaders and preachers.

It was Christian women like Catherine—and New Zealand Christian leader Kate Sheppard who won the vote for women in Aotearoa—that began to change our assumptions about who was born to lead. Many of our foremothers fought to raise their voices, and changed the way society viewed patriarchy. Today, in theory at least, most people in our culture would say we believe women are equal to men and have just as much right to hold positions of power and authority.

However, large parts of the church still hold on to the belief in patriarchy: that men, by virtue of their gender, are the ones ordained for leadership. In 1988, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood re-branded patriarchy and gave it the name 'complementarianism'[12]—emphasising not the power imbalance between men and women, but that genders are created differently and made to complement each other.

Complementarian churches believe that because men and women are different, they should fulfil different roles: men are created for the public spheres of power, and women are created for the domestic spheres.

However, as N.T. Wright points out, 'I think the word "complementary" is too good and important a word to let that side of the argument have it all to themselves'.[13]

To be egalitarian doesn't mean we have to deny the differences between men and women. But it means we are not defined by those differences. It means women can bring their own unique leadership giftings to the body of Christ. And, equally, men are given permission to express themselves as carers in the domestic world.

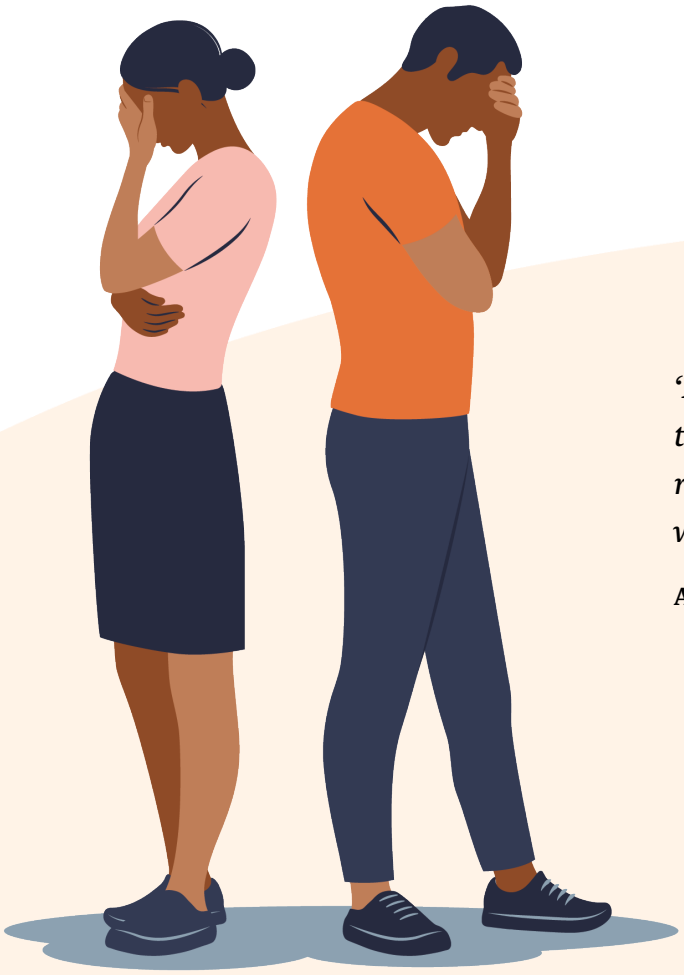
In that way, to be egalitarian, is to be truly fulfilling the complementary nature between genders.

Chapter 2

Naked and Afraid:

Genesis and Gender Equity

by **Major David Noakes**



'If we are looking to [the story of the Fall] as a model for gender relationships, we are looking in the wrong place.'

Anonymous

Let's start

In this second study, we journey back to the very origins of gender equity which, lie in the Book of Beginnings, Genesis. This builds the foundation of the major themes in the Bible: it introduces the social order as God originally intended it. We call this social order the kingdom of God. Having introduced and then lost this kingdom in Genesis, the whole of scripture outlines how God has attempted to, and will, restore it. Gender relationships are a critical part of this restoration process.

There are, however, some important guidelines to keep in mind when we delve into this Book of Beginnings. Genesis is not a science textbook. It seeks to explain the deepest truths of who God is, what his kingdom looks like, and what it means to be human.

These truths are presented to us in narrative or story form. Genesis sets the scene for a huge drama that proceeds through a series of 'acts' or 'chapters', in which Genesis is the first and foundational scene. The story then unfolds until the final scene, in which God and his kingdom are finally restored in the Book of Revelation!

Some Christians view narratives such as Adam and Eve as an actual or literal story. Others see Adam and Eve more metaphorically, or as a rich picture book. Often Christians argue over these two approaches, but the arguments can obscure the truths Genesis is outlining about God and humankind.

We all approach the Bible (and Genesis) with our own particular lenses or glasses. These lenses have been strongly tinted by our culture. This is unavoidable. From the moment we are born our culture strives to tell us who we are, and to define us from its own perspective and the stories which have influenced the culture.

For many centuries we have viewed the Bible (and Genesis) through a patriarchal lense—in other words, through a viewpoint dominated by men. It is only in the past half century that feminist theologians (of which Catherine Booth was a very early forerunner) have begun to view scripture through women's eyes, outside of the world of men. It's very important that we acknowledge this dynamic, and how our ideas about gender influence the way we see the creation story.

Let's read

Read all of Genesis 3, with a special focus on verse 16...

I will make your pregnancy very painful; in pain you will bear children.
You will desire your husband,but he will rule over you. (CEB)

Let's discuss

- What are some of the key truths we learn about God fromGenesis 1–3?
- What are some of the key truths about humankind?
- We said that Genesis is not a science textbook—what do you think that means?

Let's dig deeper

We now turn to look briefly and in broad terms at the scripture we'll be studying in relation to gender equity: Genesis 1–3.

This tells the stories of God's creative work over six days, ending with the seventh day of rest. It then focuses on the formation of the man Adam from dust, a description of the Garden of Eden and restrictions surrounding the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, the creation of Eve, her yielding to temptation and the introduction of human fallenness and its consequences.

It is this portion of scripture that has been used to define gender relationships. Eve is firmly placed at the centre of original disobedience and waywardness. She is the one who sins first and then leads the hapless Adam astray as well. For her, the consequences are severe pain in childbirth and desire for a husband 'who will rule over you'. But there is a problem...

The two creation stories

If this is how Genesis has been viewed and interpreted, especially to bolster the power and position of men, it can come as a surprise to learn that there are actually two creation accounts in Genesis that depict Adam and Eve. The Genesis 2–3 narratives are, in fact, second-in-line within the wider Genesis story.

Let's read Genesis 1:26–31 (CEB):

> *Then God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.'*
>
> *God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.*
>
> *God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the*

ground.' Then God said, 'I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food.' And that's what happened. God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.

In this first creation story, the distinctive statements are made:

- God created humanity
- humans have stewardship and responsibility functions
- humans have been made in God's image
- humans are created male and female
- God blesses them
- humankind is to be fruitful, multiply and will have their needs provided for.

But wait … as if to underline the importance of this story, it is repeated again in Genesis 5:1–2: 'On the day God created humanity, he made them to resemble God and created them male and female. He blessed them and called them humanity on the day they were created.'

This raises some important questions with respect to gender equity. The first creation account describes how God originally intended and pictured his kingdom, or social order. It was based on relationships of equality. There is no hint of inferiority or superiority between the man and the woman, and no attempt to create a pecking order to relationships.

The second account (Chapters 2–3) also describes the advent of Adam, but with Eve arriving later. Significantly, it then describes the introduction of sin and the subsequent inequality of relationships. It describes the fallenness of our relationships because of sin.

Should this, then, be the narrative we look to in guiding our thinking and behaviour around gender relationships?

Male domination has naturally oriented itself to the view that this second narrative is the 'natural order' because it has reinforced and bolstered the status quo. But it's important to recognise that this is a sinful status quo. It describes fallenness, disruption, upset and dissipation. If we are looking to this as a model for gender relationships, we are looking in the wrong place.

Instead, Christians are charged to work for the ushering in of God's kingdom. As Jesus prayed in Matthew 6:10: 'Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven.'

Later in this study, we'll see how Jesus deliberately lifted women up and restored their equality. He wasn't doing this because he was 'a nice guy'. He was ushering in the kingdom of God, as it exists in Heaven, restoring God's original design for male and female, who are equally made in God's image.

This may require new lenses—a new pair of 'glasses'—so we can see God's kingdom vision more clearly. The foundation to our theology and thinking should lie in equality, as imaged by God for his kingdom, and not in the disastrous consequences of disobedience and revolt.

Let's break it down

Let's summarise the two distinctive stories, in which humans are created.

The first creation story: Genesis 1:27–31 presents the intended kingdom and social order through the eyes and lenses of God as God originally foresaw it. This was distinctively:

- the original order
- God's kingdom as God ordained and intended
- a mirror of God's image and nature
- the categories of 'male' and 'female' complete this image
- this original order is 'blessed'
- there exists dignity, mutuality, oneness and unity in this kingdom
- it is God's crowning touch.

The second creation story: Genesis 2–3 presents a radically disrupted and degraded social order. This was distinctively:

- a later and subsequent order
- an order of fallenness and failure.

Look back over Genesis 2–3 and see where these concepts are introduced, in this new and degraded order:

- shame
- hiddenness and secrecy
- deception
- distortion
- lies
- loss of innocence
- disobedience
- subjugation
- dominance
- blaming
- social positions
- gender positions
- irresponsibility.

Which of these two stories should be our focus if we are wanting God's will to be done on Earth as in Heaven?

Made in God's Image: Powerful and Equivalent

Many of us have been taught that woman was created as a 'suitable helper'—but what does this really mean?

When humankind was created, God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... ' (Genesis 1:26, RSV). There is a small but fascinating word used here: us.

This verse is our first hint of the Trinity in Genesis. They create both male and female in their image. God holds both feminine and masculine qualities, and, in return, both male and female reflect the image of God.

Let's move through the creation story to Genesis 2:18 (CEB): 'Then the LORD God said, "It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him"'.

The word 'helper'—or *ezer* in Hebrew—has led many to view women as an assistant or support to the male. The implication has been that she exists to serve the man and is subject to his desires. Yet we find this same word *ezer* elsewhere in the Bible—to describe God. For example, this beautiful line from Deuteronomy 33:26: 'There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you...'

Ezer is used particularly 'to describe God being Israel's help in times of war... It is an empowering presence', says Hannah Thompson from The Junia Project. Would we describe our helper God as subservient to us? No! God is our rescuer, powerful to save. This is the same word used to describe Eve.

Similarly, the word *kenegdo* has been weakened to 'suitable', when in fact the richly layered Hebrew word literally means 'in front of'—in other words, compatible, similar and equivalent to.

So, God created Eve as a powerful rescuer, compatible and equivalent to Adam. Rather than emphasising the difference between men and women, the creation story actually emphasises our similarity and equality, argues Thompson.

How does *ezer kenegdo* reflect the image of God? And how does this influence our view of ourselves?

Re-thinking gender relationships

What are some steps we can take to help us move our thinking towards a more equal view of gender?

1. **Be prepared to examine and change our lenses:** Do we need to change our lenses (or give them a good clean)? The Christian journey is for each of us an ongoing voyage of discovery, with new insights into the kingdom as God ordained and intended. This does not mean we're re-writing God's Word; it means we're willing to examine where we may have not fully understood God's Word—it's the difference between a static mindset and growth mindset. It's a privilege as followers of Christ to be continually growing and seeing new aspects of God we had not seen before. How can the Genesis narratives reveal something new to us about gender and God?

2. **Check our theology and thinking:** Correct thinking and theology means that we're much more likely to behave correctly and ethically. If our thinking or theology is wrong, we're more likely to behave incorrectly and unethically. This being the case, which Genesis narrative have we followed in our relationships?

3. **Recognise our role in society:** Being a Christian means that we belong to another kingdom beyond our physical world. We adhere at times to a different set of values than our wider society. We may be in opposition, neutral to or supportive of the values and priorities of society at large. How could we lead our nation into a greater kingdom view of gender equity?

4. **Get to know the story of the Bible (called 'biblical theology'):** The Bible is a story with key themes, beginning in Genesis. Gender relationships are an integral part of this, as the Bible shows how to have a relationship with God and each other. The Old Testament was dominated by a patriarchal mindset, but in the New Testament we find Jesus, Paul (and John) seeking to raise the status of women. In their letters, Paul and John radically re-interpreted male dominance in their own culture. Was this a new development or were they operating from a much older story throughout the Bible?

5. **Get to know our context (called 'contextual theology'):** This is where things can get complicated! Systematic theology is the body of doctrine and belief passed down through the generations of the Christian church. For Salvationists, this is best summarised in the 11 Doctrines of Faith. But, as society changes—and as God's kingdom works towards justice in the world—there are times when Christians need to ask: 'what does the Bible have to say about that?' This is known as contextual theology: we gain new insights when we read scripture through the different lenses of a social context. What new insights can changing gender roles in our society bring to our reading of scripture?

Let's discuss

- Why are there two creation accounts of Adam and Eve in the Genesis narrative? And what does that tell us about gender relationships?
- What was Adam and Eve's relationship like in the first creation narrative, before 'the fall'?
- Do you agree that the Old Testament is patriarchal—and what does this mean?
- As followers of Jesus, how do we restore gender relationships as God intended them?

Chapter 3

What Was Jesus Doing When He Talked to Women?

The Men Caught in Hypocrisy

by **Major Christina Tyson**

'Much power is exercised by instilling fear in people and keeping them afraid. Fear is one of the most effective weapons in the hands of those who seek to control us.'

Henri Nouwen[14]

Let's start

This New Testament story is one of political intrigue, as a trap is set for Jesus in which a woman is used as means to a desperate end. We are challenged to consider our response whenever women are treated as objects to own or even dispose of, rather than as people created in the image of God and of equal status with men.

Let's read

John 7:53–8:11 (The Inclusive Bible)[15]

After that, everyone went home, and Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives.

At daybreak, he reappeared in the Temple area, and when the people started coming to him, Jesus sat down and began to teach them.

A couple had been caught in the act of adultery, though the scribes and Pharisees brought only the woman, and they made her stand there in front of everyone. 'Teacher,' they said, 'this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the Law of Moses, the punishment for this act is stoning. What do you say about it?' They were posing this question to trap Jesus so that they could charge him with something.

Jesus simply bent down and started tracing on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in their questioning, Jesus straightened up and said to them, 'Let the person who is without sin throw the first stone at her.' Then he bent down again and wrote on the ground.

The audience drifted away one by one, beginning with the elder. This left Jesus alone with the woman, who continued to stand there. Jesus finally straightened up again and said, 'Where did they go? Has no one condemned you?'

'No one, Teacher,' came the reply.

'I don't condemn you either. Go on your way—but from now on, don't sin any more.'

Although this story is typically headlined 'The Woman Caught in Adultery', New Testament scholar N.T. Wright[16] says one of his friends prefers to call it 'The Men Caught in Hypocrisy', because the real villains of the piece are 'angry men' looking to 'to take out their own frustrations on this solo woman'.

We begin by acknowledging questions about this passage's origins. Many of the oldest New Testament manuscripts don't include this story. Others place it as John 7:53 and 8:11, some at the end of John's gospel, and a few in Luke's gospel. In modern Bibles, we typically find this passage italicised and/or with a note signalling its textual challenge.

Despite these complicated manuscript issues, Wright easily accepts this as a 'characteristic story of Jesus', one he believes was shared as 'oral tradition'. However, he suggests that because its moral implications were so shocking, many in the early church worried about what this passage was opening the floodgates to, leading some to have likely removed it.[17]

Kenneth E. Bailey notes that for centuries, traditional Middle Eastern culture understood the honour of the family to be attached to the sexual behaviour of its women, so that in conservative traditional village life women who violated the sexual code were sometimes killed by their families. (Sadly, the same is still true, with so-called 'honour killings' in heavily patriarchal systems today). Bailey explains that in the early centuries of the church—the days of hand-copied manuscripts—a person who wanted their own copy of a manuscript usually hired a professional copyist to carry out this work for them. Although some Christians were 'brave enough to preserve the story even though it violated deeply rooted cultural attitudes', he imagines a scenario in which it would have been easy for the head of a household to take a copy of the Gospel of John to a copyist and say: 'I want a copy of this document. Please leave out the story of this adulterous woman. I don't want my daughters committing adultery and telling me, "Jesus forgave this woman and therefore you should forgive me!"'[18]

Augustine (354–430 AD) is identified as the only writer from the earliest centuries of the church prepared to speculate on why this text was absent from many manuscripts. Church historian Thomas O'Loughlin says, 'Augustine identified this as a text which many would find sensitive, one which went against the grain of his society, and which many Christians would prefer to do without lest it gave their wives ideas or lessened their threats and control.'[19]

O'Loughlin's own observation is that this text 'challenges some very deep-seated fears about the behaviour of their wives, the fear of sexuality without control among women whose sexuality was considered accounted for, and the notion that religion must support the structures of the society.' He concludes that even if not 'excised' from the biblical canon, 'it was excised from the mental canon of the readers—"bad women" were "bad women" no matter what Jesus said or did.'[20]

Let's discuss

- How do you respond to this story, and the experience of the woman in particular?
- What do you think about renaming this story to focus on the men, not the woman?
- How do you feel about the hypothesis that some men may have preferred to exclude this story from the Bible so they could continue to 'threaten and control' women?

Let's dig deeper

This passage fits into the latter part of Jesus' life. His celebrity was on the rise, as was the opposition of his enemies who hatch a plot in which a woman whom they are ready to shame and condemn will be used to trap Jesus. There was no loophole through which this woman could escape judgement, and therefore no loophole for Jesus either.

The passage immediately before this sees Jesus travelling cautiously to the pilgrimage festival of tabernacles, eventually going to the Temple in Jerusalem to teach. Although people are astounded by his knowledge, the crowd is divided over whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. The Pharisees are convinced Jesus is a fraud. They see his teaching in the Temple as undermining their power and position on their patch. Something must be done.

The next day, Jesus is again teaching at the Temple when he is interrupted by a group of scribes and Pharisees. A woman 'caught in the act of adultery' is with them. They ask Jesus what should be done with her, reminding him that the Law of Moses says she must be stoned to death (see Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22).

A powerless pawn

What follows is an 'undoubtedly menacing' conflict, says Dr Merrill C. Tenney.[21] The woman's guilt is without question. Jesus cannot claim to uphold the Jewish Law and hold a different opinion on what should happen to her. Either he sides with her accusers and agrees she should be stoned (showing he is no 'friend of sinners'), or he defends her by refusing to support the death penalty for adultery (showing he is a lawbreaker and discrediting him as a religious teacher).

In truth, no execution would be carried out. Palestine was part of the Roman Empire, and the Romans denied the Jews the right to put anyone to death (John 18:31). Bailey describes the setting of this encounter as one that would certainly have prevented an execution but that also raised the stakes for Jesus. The Temple area was about 35 acres, with a long, covered walkway around three sides. Connected to this walkway on the north side, Herod the Great had strategically built a large military fort, realising civil unrest was likely to begin in the Temple. The first century Jewish historian Josephus says armed soldiers patrolled the walkway, monitoring the crowds for signs of trouble.[22] If Jesus calls for the woman's death, he is sure to be arrested in the chaos that would undoubtedly erupt.

Where is the man?

Jesus' defence of the woman could, of course, start with the question: 'But where is the man?' This question seems obvious to us, but there was plenty of wriggle room for Jewish males in adulterous relationships. Jewish Law grew out of a patriarchal society and defined adultery as

'voluntary sexual intercourse between a married woman, or one engaged by payment of the brideprice, and a man other than her husband'. While adultery by a woman was punishable by the death of both woman and man, infidelity by a married man was not regarded as a crime. This was connected to the economic realities of married life in the biblical period and extending to later Jewish law—a wife was the husband's possession, and therefore adultery was a violation of the husband's exclusive right to her. The wife, as the husband's possession, had no such right.[23]

As unfair as this seems, it is therefore not surprising that the man was not also brought before Jesus. Elijah M. Baloyi, reflecting on this passage with a view to addressing the problem of abuse of women in South Africa, says that 'the Jews regarded a man as a ruler with unquestionable authority. They were not ashamed to leave him out when they brought the woman to Jesus.'[24] The interest of the scribes and Pharisees was not justice, and they were certainly prepared to protect another man at the expense of this woman.

Jesus responds in an extraordinarily clever way to disarm his enemies. After pausing to write or draw in the dust—an action that offers respect to the woman by refusing to gaze upon her distressed and possibly semi-naked state—he asks those who haven't sinned to cast the first stone. Now the dilemma is reversed. Jesus' accusers know the words of Isaiah 53:6, 'We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity [sin] of us all.' Sin is the great leveller. In their humanity, male and female are equal because all are sinners. Which causes these men to confront the uncomfortable truth that they have neither the religious right nor the moral authority to judge this woman.

Humiliated hypocrites

Here is the hypocrisy of these men, which Tenney captures so well: 'The scribes and Pharisees were actuated by malice, and not by a disinterested passion for righteousness. Their main desire was to trap Jesus, not to purge Jerusalem of its moral evils. Had they desired sincerely to abolish the immoralities of the city, they would have begun with themselves. Their whole attitude toward both the woman and Jesus was one of cruelty. She, dishevelled and sullen, was catapulted into the centre of a public assembly, and her sin was shouted for all to hear.'[25]

And so, from eldest to youngest, the woman's accusers slink away. Defeated. Humiliated. Exposed as hypocrites. The woman, previously dehumanised and held captive by fear of men's power over her, is now liberated as equal and free—evident from the respectful and sensitive way Jesus engages with her. While he didn't defend the woman against the accusation of adultery, Jesus stood between her and those misusing their power against her. He knew she received no protection in the patriarchal Jewish religious system, so Jesus found a way to save her.

'Has no one condemn you?'

'No one, Teacher.'

'I don't condemn you either. Go on your way—but from now on, don't sin any more.'

To shake things up even more, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that Jesus ended this conversation at 'neither do I condemn you', with 'go and sin no more' a copyist addition to make a difficult passage more palatable. Whether or not that is the case, a striking lesson from this passage is that when it comes to salvation, Jesus starts with affirmation and inclusion rather than condemnation and exclusion. The sins and shame of our past—or the prejudices of others—do not disqualify us from friendship and life with God today (see John 5:24 and 1 John 1:9).

Not just a 'possession'

Like other women of her time, this woman was essentially 'owned' by the males in her world, particularly her husband if she was married. She was not allowed to speak to men in public because she might seduce them and lead them into sin. She was not entitled to enjoy her own sexuality as a gift from God; her purpose was to give pleasure to her husband. Some speculate this woman was the victim of rape, because she would not have felt safe to say 'no' to the person who demanded intercourse from her. Baloyi says it was 'not common for the Jews to see men as perpetrators of rape or any sexual immorality because men were always viewed as being more pure and free from sexual sin than women'.[26]

This unnamed but representative woman lived in a culture where religious attitudes and rules were shaped by men, often at the expense of woman. Tragically, these were carried over into Christianity where their echoes still influence church and societal norms today. Consider these examples:

- Women continue to be subjugated behind the closed doors of their homes, with misunderstood teaching that they are to 'submit' to their husband used to minimise and excuse emotional, sexual and physical abuse.
- Women continue to be viewed as a temptation to sin, and are therefore expected to show modesty and also to shoulder blame when men transgress moral and legal boundaries.
- Women continue to routinely encounter the violation of sexual harassment.
- Women continue to experience inequality in life opportunities, and often need to defend their right to full participation and fair remuneration in the workplace.

As Christians needing to leave behind the patriarchal influences in our faith and return to the equality we knew before sin entered the world, we are on a similar journey to some within the Jewish faith tradition. Canadian rabbi and author Tzvi Freeman says: '...women continue to get the short end of the stick. Whatever women's emancipation gains on one hand seems to get taken away from the other. There are currently about four million female slaves worldwide... One of the largest sectors of American society living beneath the poverty line is single mothers and their families. Working mothers almost always do more work at home than their working husbands. And when was the last time you heard a man ask someone to accompany him home at night for protection? It goes on and on.'[27]

While he didn't defend the woman against the accusation of adultery, Jesus stood between her and those misusing their power against her. He knew she received no protection in the patriarchal Jewish religious system, so Jesus found a way to save her.

It does go on. Unless we follow Jesus' lead.

Let's discuss

- Have you ever experienced being excluded because you are a woman (within society or the church) or included because you are a man? What was that like?
- How can unequal power structures lead to abuse within the church?
- Jesus challenged the Pharisees unspoken assumptions—how does he change our assumptions about gender today?
- Read Galatians 3:28 again, as we did in chapter 1. This was written by Paul who—as a Pharisee before following Jesus— would have prayed: 'Blessed art thou, O God, for not making me a Gentile, slave, or woman.' What, then, is the significance of his words in Galatians?

Final thought

'The history of humankind can be seen this way: A transition from male to female values, from authority to dialogue, from dominance to persuasion, from control to nurture. But we're not there yet.'

Rabbi Tzvi Freeman[28]

Chapter 4

What Was Jesus Doing When He Talked to Women?
Rethinking Mary and Martha

by **Captain Faye Molan**

'I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.'

Angela Davis

Let's start

Imagine a high-profile celebrity arrives, unannounced, on your doorstep needing to stay overnight. Now, consider having to feed your guest (and their travel buddies) without the convenience of ready-made meals, Uber-Eats, or an extra pair of hands. It's perfectly okay if you feel overwhelmed and slightly put out by this scenario!

Seemingly normal family tensions in this story force us to look beyond our personal biases and towards God's perspective.

This is not a story about 'doing' vs 'being', or 'practical' vs 'contemplative'. It's a story that challenges gender roles and opens up the world of discipleship to women. It's a story about how to be in right relationship with God and with each other.

Let's read

Luke 10:38–42

While Jesus and his disciples were travelling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest.

She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message.

By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So, Martha came to him and said, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me.'

The Lord answered, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.'

'One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her.'

Let's discuss

Born into a culture and era where gender-specific roles defined your relationships and place in society, we're introduced to Martha and Mary of Bethany: sisters engaged in a moment of tension. Jesus is called in to referee.

Imagine you are Jesus. How would you reply to these Martha's queries?

- 'Hey Jesus, my sister Mary isn't helping me in the kitchen, where she belongs. Can you tell her to help me?'
- 'Hey Jesus, my unmarried sister Mary is sitting in a public space among adult males. What should we do about that?'
- 'Hey Jesus, my uneducated sister Mary thinks of herself as one of your students. What do you think about that?'

We often think of Mary and Martha as being about 'being' vs 'doing'. But in order to read it that way, we need to explain away Jesus' gentle critique of Martha. What is Jesus actually challenging in this story?

Let's dig deeper

As we meet Martha in this story, she's annoyed—but not at Jesus. He is, after all, a close family friend, with an open invitation to enjoy her hospitality whenever he was in town.

Martha's irritation is directed at her sister, Mary of Bethany, who is disregarding the required expectations for a Jewish woman. Fuelled by her frustration, Martha interrupts Jesus' private teaching session to essentially ask him, 'Jesus, are you okay with this?'

Martha wanted Jesus to acknowledge how unfair it was that she was doing 'everything' for their visitors while Mary did next to 'nothing.' But, there is a deeper implication here: she is angry that Mary has discarded the women's domain and is assuming a position in the male sphere.

This isn't right! It goes against everything—spoken and unspoken—expected from their culture.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright makes this helpful observation:

> *...obvious to any first-century reader, and to many readers in Turkey, the Middle East and many other parts of the world to this day would be the fact that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet within the male part of the house rather than being kept in the back rooms with the other women. This, I am pretty sure, is what really bothered Martha; no doubt she was cross at being left to do all the work, but the real problem behind that was that Mary had cut clean across one of the most basic social conventions. It is as though, in today's world, you were to invite me to stay in your house and, when it came to bedtime, I were to put up a camp bed in your bedroom. We have our own clear but unstated rules about whose space is which; so did they. And Mary has just flouted them. And Jesus declares that she is right to do so.*[29]

Quite simply, Jesus says, 'My sweet Martha, yes, I am okay with this.' Martha failed to notice Jesus exercising true fairness by creating an opportunity for both sisters to sit with, listen to and learn from him, as equals with their spiritual brothers.

Reflections on Wairaka and my own whakapapa

This reminds me of a story from Māoritanga ... Imagine you're anchored slightly offshore in a dinghy with your mates. Sensing that something isn't quite right, you realise the mooring line has come undone and now you're drifting dangerously seaward. Instinct tells you to row toward the safety of the shoreline—but do you?

Wairaka—a Māori chieftainess and my Ngati Awa ancestor—did exactly that, famously declaring as they paddled: *"Kia Whakatane au i ahau'—I will act the part of a man".*

They survived. Wairaka knew that certain actions (like paddling waka) were reserved for tane (men). However, she understood that the preservation of life superseded cultural boundaries.

What do you think of when you remember your grandma?

My nan (Mum's mum) had a sexist puppy. Or maybe it just didn't like my husband, as it would bark at my husband Steve whenever we stopped by. Nan towed an oxygen tank behind her to provide relief from the effects of emphysema. It rained at her tangi—the Nga Puhi whenua was soggy and so, too, were our grief-filled hearts.

Nanny (Dad's mum) was an influential Māori leader in the establishment of Kohanga Reo and staunch advocate for education. She passed away in Wellington while attending a Waitangi Tribunal hearing for our Ngati Awa uri.

Māori tikanga may appear sexist. This is not so. A mutuality of honour exists between wahine and tane. Yes, some roles are reserved for women and others for men. However, these are in line with protecting lineage and heritage, not capacity or stereotyping.

Neither gender is 'locked' into specific roles if it risks damaging relationships. For example, a koroua did the karanga at Nan's tangi up north as he was the only person there at the time. And, in the Bay of Plenty, both women and men cater and care for our manuhiri at our Tu Teao Marae.

Similarly, in the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus wasn't dishonouring cultural norms, but emphasised the importance of relationship over rules and regulations.

We all exist within culture, and God always works within and honours culture. Yet, the karanga (call) of Jesus is always towards justice and equality for his children.

The art of Jewish hospitality

To fully understand the story of Mary and Martha, we need to understand *hakhnasat orchim*—the art of Jewish hospitality.

Literally meaning 'welcoming guests', *hakhnasat orchim* is a central commandment in Jewish culture. It's 'considered a higher mitzvah [commandment] than prayer,' writes Rabbi Ethan Adler, in 'The Importance of Welcoming Guests'. 'It stands on the same level as welcoming the Shechinah, God's presence, into our homes.'[30]

The main tenant of hakhnasat orchim is being a good host. But, in our story, we see Martha carried away with busyness. I understand where Martha was coming from. Siblings aren't always quick to follow our orders, and Mary is no exception. But no one likes getting told off—especially us first-borns. Unfortunately, telling-tales about her sister to Jesus results in Martha being corrected in front of a captive audience. Ouch!

Again, this story reminds me of my own whānau. My dad, Wayne Moses, would often say, 'You are the head not the tail'. Sounds weird, right? He was quoting Deuteronomy 28:13, when another Moses reminds the Israelite nation that God's blessing upon them would be reflected by their obedience to God.

Dad wanted me to be secure in my identity—and I am. There is no hierarchical order or separation between my faith, ethnicity, gender, spiritual giftings, or ministry.

Our confidence in Jesus will influence how we react to the world we live in.

Mary sits. Martha complains. Jesus corrects. Mary stays seated.

Martha is unaware that not by lingering longer with Jesus, she may have actually been a neglectful host.

Jesus gently questions Martha's priorities. Had she known Jesus was starting his farewell tour before going to the cross, Martha may have been more focused on being present with Jesus, and satisfying both her and her guests' real appetite.

Society presents busyness as preferable. In Luke 10:38–42, however, Jesus challenges this idea, noting instead that Martha is 'worried and distracted by many things.' He then goes further and defends Mary's decision to choose the 'one thing necessary.'

Perhaps, we could learn how to become better hosts to Jesus, welcoming in the presence of God.

But the climax of this story is not that Martha was 'put in her place'. Nor is the story about busyness. It's about who Jesus welcomes into his presence.

In the presence of Jesus

Have you heard the term 'androcentric'? It's 'the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing a masculine point of view at the centre of one's world view, culture, and history', and by default marginalising feminine characteristics.

Even today, we live in an androcentric world. You would be correct in assuming that androcentrism is not a biblical principle. Yet, sadly, androcentric beliefs and practices have infiltrated many parts of our society, including the Christian church—even our beloved Army.

God's high regard for his creation includes women—an outlook woven throughout the biblical narrative. The gospels alone are filled with frequent retellings of Jesus' honourable interactions with women.

Jesus was not just a nice guy being nice to women. He was challenging gender inequity. He was usurping power structures that put men in the centre, and was making space for women as equal disciples.

Jewish women were primarily encouraged to bear, rear, and care for her household. Yet, Mary—a single woman—was publicly occupying a culturally-considered male domain.

Jesus affirmed Mary's right to sit at his feet, which N.T. Wright explains is significant:

> *...to sit at the teacher's feet is a way of saying you are being a student, picking up the teacher's wisdom and learning; and in that very practical world you wouldn't do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself ... That, no doubt, is part at least of the reason why we find so many women in positions of leadership, initiative and responsibility in the early church.*

On three separate occasions Mary is found at Jesus' feet: in Luke 10:38 to learn, John 11:32 to grieve and John 12:3 to anoint him. She trusted Jesus would not shame, harm or dismiss her.

Here, Jesus affirms his acceptance of Mary as a trainee teacher, inviting her to take up space in the male domain. And in his gentle rebuke, he extended the invitation for Martha to also take her place at his feet.

Jesus helps us unlearn cultural norms that diminish us. And Mary teaches us to be Christ-centric, despite the cost to our personal comfort. Perhaps we could imitate Mary's example—her sole (and soul) attention was Jesus.

Here are some practical ways we can allow the story of Mary and Martha to change us:

- address ingrained gender stereotypes, being aware of 'hidden' androcentric influences in our Army contexts
- lay aside certain cultural practices for the benefit of building equitable relationships for both women and men
- create space for women to sit with God without prejudice or pressure to perform
- promote Jesus' equitable treatment of women
- respond with Jesus-compassion when someone holds a differing opinion to ours
- encourage each other to be secure in our gender and cultural identities
- give opportunities for modern-day Mary to participate in all spheres of life and leadership without threat or regret
- advocate for justice on behalf of vulnerable women—whose voices are silenced, drowned out or misheard, especially in areas of education, access to services, opportunities for employment, and non-domestic pursuits.

As Proverbs 31:8–9 says:

Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.

Let's discuss

- How does our identity, understanding of people and Mary's character mould our response to gender inequity?
- Imagine being Martha in this story... how would you feel being corrected by Jesus? How might he challenge your perspective?
- How is Jesus creating space for women in this story?
- Who are the 'Marys' in our own culture? How are we making space for them?
- How does your own heritage or whakapapa shape your ideas about gender roles or equity?
- How can this story influence our own perceptions of gender roles?
- What are some ways the church or wider culture can be andocrentric?
- What is a Christ-centred response to an andocentric worldview?

Final thought

Imagine a society where each of our members expected, experienced, and exhibited fair and equal treatment, regardless of their gender. In a world saturated with injustice, prejudice, and assumptions, Jesus calls us to love and live differently.

Equity is not aspirational; it's a prerequisite for kingdom living—Jesus shows us how it's done. Equality does not mean that to raise someone up
I must lower myself. What if we were to look at every person as if they were Jesus-in-flesh, would it illicit a different response from us?

We're created for community and families are one expression of this. God's original design for families is that 'all its members (women, men, girls and boys) feel safe and connected to one another.' This is yet to be fully realised. Some of our siblings—related by birth, spiritual whakapapa or otherwise—are still thought of, referred to, or classed as 'less than.'

Were we to ask, 'Jesus, are you okay with this?' we may not like his reply.

Chapter 5

Was Paul a Sexist?

A Radical Remix of the Household Codes

by **Ingrid Barratt**

'A wife is lower than a slave, for a slave at least can be freed.'

St. Thomas of Aquinas

Let's start

Paul had visited the small band of Christians living in Ephesus once before, and he had caused a riot! Ephesus was a wealthy town, occupied by the Romans. It was dedicated to the goddess Artemis. When Paul came along saying there was one God, and telling the strange story of Jesus Christ, it outraged the locals and threatened their livelihoods, since many made a living from selling idols of Artemis.

A silversmith named Demetrius called a meeting: '[Paul] says that gods made by human hands aren't really gods' he exclaimed (Acts 19:27).

Once they heard this, they were beside themselves with anger and began to shout, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' The riot went on for two hours and Paul had to flee the city.

Now Paul is writing a letter to the Ephesians from a Roman prison, describing how Christians should live their lives in order to reflect the love of Christ.

'Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God,' Paul says in Ephesians 5:2.

This hints at the wider theme of the letter—what it means to live a life of integrity and sacrifice modelled to us through Jesus. Paul is continuing what Jesus had began on Earth: honouring the culture he lived in while subverting societal power structures.

Let's read

Ephesians 5:21–33

Submit to each other out of respect for Christ. For example, wives should submit to their husbands as if to the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife like Christ is head of the church, that is, the saviour of the body. So wives submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Christ. As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this to make her holy by washing her in a bath of water with the word. He did this to present himself with a splendid church, one without any sort of stain or wrinkle on her clothes, but rather one that is holy and blameless. That's how husbands ought to love their wives—in the same way as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds it and takes care of it just like Christ does for the church because we are parts of his body … as for you individually, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and wives should respect their husbands.

Let's discuss

- How much of this passage speaks to wives, and how much speaks to husbands? What is the emphasis of this passage?
- What would have been new, subversive or even shocking in how Paul describes the relationship between husbands and wives?
- What verse sums up the theme of this passage?

Let's dig deeper

When I was a young woman, I started to step into my teaching ministry, despite being born and bred in a church where women were not able to preach or lead. I was asked to share at the night service of my church—this was 'allowed' because it wasn't the 'real' Sunday morning service (ironically, this was just one of many extra-biblical rules that had to be enforced to supposedly follow what 'the Bible says very clearly').

I was seeing a guy from my church at the time, and asked him if he was coming to hear me speak. His response was: 'I don't want to be preached at by you'. I just shrugged my shoulders, 'okay'.

Looking back, what bothers me is not so much his response (because that belongs to him), but mine. I accepted it as normal that men aren't interested in women who lead. Men want to be in charge. I knew this because I had been absorbed in a church culture that defined male–female relationships in terms of authority and submission—based on these few verses in Ephesians.

If there is a term that is utterly misused by Christians, it's that 'scripture is very clear...' We are not untainted vessels with a pure understanding of a 2000-year-old text, written in a different language, and in a completely foreign culture. When we refuse to see scripture within its context and culture, we may create injustices today. And that is exactly what has happened with this passage.

The household codes of Rome

Here, Paul addresses not only wives and husbands, but slaves and children. He is riffing off the 'household codes' ingrained in Roman society. They were as well-known and accepted as road rules are to us today.

Romans believed that societal order was maintained through strict hierarchies, beginning with the family. *Pater familias*—or the oldest free male—had supreme authority over

everyone in his household. This included slaves, women and children, who were considered the male's possessions.

According to historians, early Roman laws 'made women subject to the power of their husbands and gave husbands the power to execute their wives under socially condoned circumstances'. Records show that a man beat his wife to death for drinking too much wine, and he was considered an 'excellent example'[31].

These household codes had been formalised by Aristotle, who wrote to men about how they should manage their possessions. He was mainly concerned with slaves—but mentions women and children toward the end of *Politics*.[32] Aristotle actually acknowledged concerns that 'slavery is a violation of nature'. But for him the answer was simple: 'some should rule and others be ruled … from the hour of birth, some are marked out for subjection, and others for rule'.

Men were born to rule, while slaves and women were born to be ruled over. It was that simple.

A radical remix

Paul reflects these codes in his letter to the Ephesians, but creates what Rachel Held Evans calls a 'radical Christian remix'.[33]

Aristotle wrote to, and was only interested in, men who had authority. But here, Paul directly addresses those who are 'ruled over': women, children and slaves.[34] This in itself is a radical act that acknowledges them as fully human, reflecting the image of God. If you had always been spoken about as a possession, imagine how it would feel to be spoken to as a person.

To understand what Paul was really saying, we need to ask: what does Paul say that is old, and what does he say that is new? What is the same as widely-held cultural patterns and what is different—perhaps startlingly different?[35]

Paul begins his own version of the household codes with an alarming statement: 'Submit to each other out of respect for Christ'.

What was new and shocking and radical about this passage was not that women should submit to their husbands. That was simply stating how things were. Like, give way at intersections when driving.

The radical new kingdom vision was that men were to treat wives as more than possessions. In fact, they were to consider their wives, to be kind to and cherish their wives—they were to love their wives. And even more shocking, they were to build a mutual relationship together.

But even this is missing the point. The real emphasis of this passage is not on men and women at all. Paul's point is that our relationships are made to reflect the sacrificial love of Jesus in our own lives.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Imagine being a man growing up in the world of *pater familias* and hearing these words for the first time. Give myself up for her? Men were the supreme authority and society revolved around their needs. But here, Paul is laying the foundations for men to let go of their privilege and status, and for women, slaves and children to be lifted up.

In fact, this was a lived reality for Paul. His life came crashing down when he had a life-changing revelation of Jesus, and he gave up his supreme status as both an educated Roman male and Jewish pharisee. But that's how deeply a revelation of Jesus transforms us. We are no longer the centre. We are simply 'little Christs', recognising the spark of Christ in others.

So, rather than placing men at the 'sovereign centre', Paul places Jesus in the centre. Far from being a sexist, Paul made himself less in order to lift others up—a new way of being that was modelled to us by Christ.

'It is a model that, rather than reinforcing hierarchal relationships, should point us in the opposite direction—to radical humility and servanthood of Jesus,' says Held Evans.

What is submission?

Up until the third century, women in the early church were in the vast majority. But in 313AD, Christianity was legalised and accepted by Rome. For the first time, men began to outnumber women in the church—Roman men, with a Roman worldview. Scholars argue that it was during this transition that the status of women began to diminish in the church.[36]

Men were the supreme authority and society revolved around their needs. But here, Paul is laying the foundations for men to let go of their privilege and status, and for women, slaves and children to be lifted up.

The belief that men, by virtue of their birth, hold authority—and that women are born to be in submission to them—has more in common with Aristotle's teachings than Jesus' kingdom. But Christianity has since sanctified the household hierarchy. And Paul did indeed tell women to submit to their husbands, so are we just trying to gloss over this by seeing the passage as a 'radical remix'?

The Greek word used for 'submission' is *hypotasso*. 'First and foremost it means to behave

in a responsible manner, to show respect and common courtesy,' writes Michele Guinness. It can also mean 'to unite one person with another' or 'to remain in another's sphere of influence'.[37]

What it does not mean, Guinness argues, is that a husband should make the decisions, or rule over his wife. In fact, that would contradict Paul's overarching theme of 'submit to one another'. Whereas *hypotasso* seems in harmony with this wider theme of united and mutual influence.

Another difficult word that comes to us courtesy of the Roman world view is the concept of 'headship'. When we think of 'headship' we tend to think of a Roman-style hierarchy that looks like a ladder—with the most important at the top, and everyone else lower down the rungs.

But Guinness—a Christian theologian who was brought up in the Jewish faith—says that a Jewish understanding is much more interconnected, and looks more like a circle. The word 'headship' is *kephale*, which means 'source'—as in, the source of life, or of a river. In this image, God is the source of man, man is the source of woman, and woman's source connects back to God. There is no beginning or end to this relationship. It is a circle, not a ladder.[38]

Tea or riots?

The teachings of Paul can be summarised as a vision of what the

No longer slaves

One of the problems with this passage in Ephesians 5:21–33 is that we have a tendency to bring two opposite interpretations to the same text. Many in the church see Paul's instructions to wives as set in stone, but at the same time see his instructions to slaves as pointing towards change.

If we are to take scripture seriously, we have to be consistent in our interpretation—otherwise we are doing the very thing 'liberals' get accused of: handpicking bits of scripture to suit us.

Just as Paul addressed women, he addresses slaves—as human beings with agency, not as possessions: 'Serve your owners enthusiastically, as though you were serving the Lord.' (5:7)

And to masters, he says: 'As for masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Stop threatening them, because you know that both you and your slaves have a master in heaven.' (5:9)

What is new and startling here? Paul tells slaves to serve their owners well. But it's what he says to masters that's shocking: treat your slaves you as you expect to be treated. More importantly, he turns upside down the concept of male as master, by asserting that God is master of all. Paul is again de-centering men, and putting God in the centre of all our relationships.

Throughout Ephesians, Paul is making a way for Christians to change how we treat each other and we how we uphold the imago dei in all humans.

We often see this passage as the beginning of the end of slavery.

So, why do we not see it as the beginning of the end of patriarchy?

world will look like when people of faith transform it. 'God, through the gospel, puts people right so that through them he can put the world right,' says N.T. Wright[39]—this is what a new creation looks like.

Yet, Wright also quotes a bishop who said, 'Everywhere St. Paul went there was a riot; everywhere I go they serve tea!'

It's a failing of our Christian culture that we have become gatekeepers of the status quo. Our faith is meant to be a dynamic story that changes the world around us.

Jesus ushered in a new way of being—a new kingdom—when he challenged male privilege and called women as disciples. Paul took up the mantle by creating a path that allows us to transcend our culture, even as we live within it.

And Jesus himself said, 'you will do even greater things than this' (John 14:12). Could this include going even further in lifting up and honouring women?

We get to run with the vision passed down to us from Jesus, as we join a great cloud of witnesses before and beyond. Scripture is very clear (yep, I said it!). Through Jesus, we will see God's kingdom come, captives set free, the oppressed given a voice and justice rolling through the Earth.

Let's discuss

- Imagine yourself in the room when Paul's letter is read out for the first time. Who are you? What does this passage mean to you?
- How is the kingdom of Jesus being birthed, as Paul describes new ways to live within our relationships?
- What does mutual submission/*hypotasso* in your relationships look like?
- Think about the ways in which you have power and privilege— what would it look like to extend 'mutual submission' to those with less power?

Final thought

'Perhaps we could push beyond these legalistic gender roles if we spent less time worrying about "acting like men" and "acting like women," and more time acting like Jesus.'

Rachel Held Evans

Chapter 6

Raise Your Voice

… or Keep Silent?

by **Major Ian Gainsford**

'It is odd when the Holy Spirit says your daughters shall prophesy, and we say they shall not.'

Nikolaus Zinzendorf

Let's start

Here's one of the great, unspoken truths about Bible study: it's difficult. Which is not to say that the Bible is always hard to follow, but rather that the process of trying to learn what a good interpretation looks like is
far harder than we sometimes suppose. To start with, the idea that there is way, and only one way, to understand any passage of scripture is to fail before we begin.

As an illustration of this, let's begin looking at one of a difficult passage in the New Testament, which has been used to keep women silent for centuries—but, is this the best way to read this scripture?

Let's read

1 Timothy 2:11–15 (NIV)

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Let's discuss

- What do you think the 'plain meaning' of this passage is?
- For what possible reason could the writer want to say that women should not be permitted to teach or assume authority over a man?
- Why might The Salvation Army have reached the conclusion that women have an equal part to play in teaching and leadership within the church, if this 'plain meaning' suggests otherwise?

Let's dig deeper

When we begin to take a deeper look at this passage, we quickly realise that the 'plain meaning' passage might actually be deceiving—in fact, we see this in almost the first word:

Instead of the word 'woman', The Common English Bible uses the word 'wife'. So it reads: 'A wife should learn quietly …' Instantly, we can see that we are dealing with a difference in translation choice—which is to say, a difference in interpretation.

We are often inclined to look for the 'plain meaning' of the text without acknowledging that the text we read is itself the result of choices of interpretation—into a language and a culture that didn't exist at the time the words were written.

As N.T. Wright says, 'this passage far and away above all others… has been the sheet-anchor for those who want to deny women a place in the ordained ministry of the church'[40]. So at the very least, when we look at a passage like this one, we owe it to God and to ourselves to read it carefully.

What was going on at Ephesus?

The letter of 1 Timothy is a pastoral letter written from Paul to Timothy, who was assigned

to care for the church in Ephesus in Paul's absence. It is concerned with false teaching, and the rhythms of life within the growing Ephesian church—and both of these concerns shed light on the passage we are considering.

It's often said that context is a key part of good interpretations of scripture: What has led up to the verses being read? What follows? What can we learn from the historical context within which it was written? As much as anything else, these and other questions help us understand what interpretations are not so good.

In this case, we can go back earlier in Timothy 2, to verses 8–10, and see that there is an instruction for men to pray 'without anger or disputing', and for women to 'dress modestly … not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls'.

It's helpful to know that this is written at a time when public discourse between men was in fact often characterised by loud debate and disagreement; and that Paul's hope was that Christian life and prayer would be marked by something better.

It's also helpful to know that this was a time in which women were often expected to conform to a stereotype of fussing over their 'look'. Paul is not really commenting on lifting up holy hands and dressing down; he's encouraging people to free themselves from social conformity for the sake of contributing to the community of faith, and to the society in which they live—that the adornment we should be looking for is that of 'good deeds'.[41]

A place for women to learn

When we turn to verse 11, then, it requires us to ask: 'what is this being written in response to?' Just as Paul's comments about how we dress are not intended to say there's no place for dressing up from time to time, is it possible that this is not saying that all women for all time must stay silent and not teach?

Let me suggest one immediate reason why this interpretation—which, again, has been used for centuries to keep women from leadership roles within the family of God on Earth—is unlikely. Verse 11 begins, 'A woman should learn'. This itself is remarkable: women, who were often regarded as second-class citizens at best, should be actively involved in learning about the Gospel. And in a letter written to address false teaching, we can conclude that this learning was especially important to combat the false ideas that had been leading the Ephesian Christians astray, and disrupting their worship—learning in which the student submits to the teacher.

Artemis worship and the new converts

At the same time, it was being written when Timothy was most likely in Ephesus, which was home to a great temple dedicated to Artemis. This was a place led by women priests,

who ruled the show and 'kept men in their place'.[42] In light of this, the word chosen by Paul that is translated here as 'assume authority over a man' actually has the sense of being bossy, or asserting control or domination. It's almost as though Paul is saying 'women mustn't be set up to be domineering, or to rule over men the same way that men have always ruled over women'.

In fact, the recent *Passion* Bible translation makes the context in Ephesus explicit. Its translation of 1 Timothy 2:11 is: 'Let the women who are new converts be willing to learn with all submission to their leaders'. This brings yet another nuance into how we interpret this difficult passage!

'The only cultural context of worship was that women were the leaders,' explains *The Passion* translation. Instead, Paul is saying that these new converts should 'take a respectful posture of a disciple in this new way of worshipping the true God'.[43] Here, it is not so much about whether you are a man or woman, but about how to respectfully mature into your new faith.

But what about Adam and Eve?

Paul appears to give a rock-solid rationale for prohibiting women from speaking by invoking Eve's first sin, but this also needs to be understood within its wider context. Theologian Marg Mowczko argues that this passage was actually aimed at one particular husband and wife — the clue is that Paul switches from using 'men' and 'women' earlier in the passage, to the more specific 'man' and 'woman' in these verses only.

Mowczko believes that Paul uses the story of Adam and Eve, not as a reason for women to be silent, but as a correction: 'in order to guide Timothy about how to correct a corrupt version of the creation story.'[44]

This is consistent with Paul correcting the Artemis-worldview that only women should be in charge. Again, Paul seems to be guiding us back to the concept of mutuality in relationship, which has been his theme in many other scriptures.

Even if this is simply a theory from Mowczko, what is not up for debate is that 'Paul did not seem to consider the ministries of his female coworkers a problem. Paul makes no mention of restrictions regarding the ministries of Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Nympha, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis and others. Rather, he offers warm commendations and greetings. And in his general teaching on ministry … Paul gives no hint that some of these ministries are only for men.'[45]

Tips for interpreting scripture

There are often two equal errors that can be made with some of these difficult passages of scripture. One is to say that all we need to do is take the plain meaning of scripture and

apply it—but this sometimes fails to understand the role of translation and context in how we read scripture. The other is to explain difficult passages away as only applying it in a particular place and time—that the instructions are cultural rather than theological. Sometimes this is true—but sometimes it fails to wrestle with a deeper point being made by the author. John Stott, a moderately conservative evangelical voice, clearly identifies the risks of both unthinking 'literalism', and ungrounded 'liberalism'.[46]

The Salvation Army's theology has often leaned into what is known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (don't worry, we don't need to remember this name!). Simply put, this is the idea that what we believe relies on four sources: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. This recognises that there is simply no way to read scripture without being influenced to some degree by the faith tradition we have learned in, our lived experiences, and our capacity to think things through.

In this chapter, we've begun to uncover what's under the surface of our scripture readings. Now, let's also look at:

Our tradition: What does our tradition tell us? Co-founder of The Salvation Army Catherine Booth wrote in 1859 that the 'mistaken and unjustifiable application of the passage, "Let your women keep silence in the churches" has resulted in more loss to the church, evil to the world, and dishonour to God, than any of the errors we have already referred to.'[47]

William and Catherine Booth insisted from a very early point that any role in public ministry and any position of leadership could be performed by women as well as men; and in doing so were entirely consistent with a tradition that ran through Methodist practices, and the Holiness Movement of which the Army was a part. The release of women into public ministry and leadership was an indispensable aspect of stewarding the gifts, talents and abilities granted by God to both women and men—and to suppress or deny female ministry was therefore both to deny the grace of God, and do harm to the cause of God's kingdom.[48]

Our experience: Again, Catherine speaks to this: 'the word and the Spirit cannot contradict each other'[49]—in other words, if the Spirit equips women for ministry, which clearly was the case, the scriptures cannot be read in such a way as to forbid their ministry. A re-evaluation of biblical interpretation had to be made. As the 18th century protestant figure Nikolaus Zinzendorf put it, 'It is odd when the Holy Spirit says your daughters shall prophesy, and we say they shall not.'[50]

Our reason: Reason might help us understand that virtually the only way to demand the silence of women and keep them from leadership roles in the church, is if we read the English translation of this passage at face value, without any regard for the original language or original context. This may be an easy way to interpret the Bible—and it may be in keeping

with the practices of many churches—but it is not a solution that takes the Bible seriously enough to actually scratch beneath the surface.

First, this letter was written in a context within which the women priests of Artemis were demanding obedience as a function of religious practice. Second, we need to set this alongside other writings from Paul which clearly talk about the submission of believers to one another. For instance, Philippians 2:3–4 tells us, 'Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.'

In Colossians 3, we have a number of instructions: wives, submit to your husbands; husbands, love your wives. Taken in the context of the verses before this, the clear impression built up throughout this chapter is one of mutuality. This is not about submission meaning one thing and love another, but of building each another up—being with one another and for one another. It would be very strange, then, for Paul to mean something entirely different when it comes to his message to Timothy.

The Salvation Army has long since decided that this cannot mean that women are not to lead or that they must stay silent. So how do we apply all this today?[51]

Let's discuss

- What do you think the 'plain meaning' of this passage is?
- For what possible reason could the writer want to say that women should not be permitted to teach or assume authority over a man?
- Why might The Salvation Army have reached the conclusion that women have an equal part to play in teaching and leadership within the church, if this 'plain meaning' suggests otherwise?

Final thought

'One of the leading principles upon which the Army is based is the right of women to have the right to an equal share with men in the work of publishing salvation to the world … Women must be treated as equal with men in all the intellectual and social relationships in life.'

Orders and Regulations for Staff Officers of The Salvation Army in the United Kingdom[52]

Chapter 7

Clothed and Confident: Our Hope Today

by **Ingrid Barratt and Captain Missy Ditchburn**

'The dignity with which Christ treated women in the Gospels is fiercely beautiful and it was not conditional upon their understanding their place.'

Beth Moore

CONTENT NOTE: This chapter deals with sexual abuse, please take care as you read this.

Let's start

The wonderful Mary of Bethany makes another pivotal appearance in the story of Jesus. We have seen her before, as she dared to enter the male space and take her place as a disciple of Jesus and trainee-teacher.

Now, days before Jesus prepares to go to the cross, she again braves the male domain, with a prophetic act that shows her devotion and gratitude.

At least, this is the version we read in John. The story of 'the woman who anoints Jesus with oil' is so significant it appears in all four gospels (the accounts that tell of the life of Jesus). Each version has variations and emphasises different themes—and Luke's version appears to be different all together.

People have debated for centuries about whether the gospels are telling different versions of one story, or whether there are actually two or three separate women who anointed Jesus. What we do know is that in each gospel, the author emphasises different themes. So, perhaps the deeper question here is: what is the meaning behind each of these versions? What are the authors trying to say? We've chosen three excerpts, covering the main themes.

Let's read

John 12:1–8
Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus ... then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, 'This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

Then Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it.'

Mark 14:1–9 | Key verse: 3
During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head.

Luke 7:36–47 | Key verses: 36–38, 44–47

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table. Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them. When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner…

Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little.'

Let's discuss:

If you want to, fill out this table and compare the three accounts:

	John 12:1–8	Mark 14:1–9	Luke 7:36–47
Where did it happen?			
Who was the woman?			
What happened?			
How did the others respond?			
How did Jesus respond?			
What happens next?			

- What do you think the different themes might be that the authors are trying to convey?
- What are the striking differences between the woman in this story, and the men?

Let's dig deeper

Women as prophets and priests

John's story is the only one to name the woman as Mary of Bethany. The timing is full of prophetic significance: we have just seen a grief-struck Mary run to Jesus, after her brother Lazarus dies. We have seen how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead—foreshadowing his own death and resurrection. And we have seen how Martha proclaimed: 'I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son' (John 11:27)—another woman, bearing witness to Jesus as Christ.

It is now Passover, just days until Jesus would be put to death. Mary once again bursts onto the scene. Again, she flouts social rules as the only woman in a room full of men. She greets Jesus with reckless emotion; with extravagant devotion. 'In a culture in which a woman's touch was often forbidden, Mary dares to cradle the feet of Jesus in her hands... Later Jesus would imitate Mary by washing the feet of the Twelve, telling them to do the same,' writes Rachel Held Evans.[53]

And there is an even deeper meaning, which Jesus immediately recognises: Mary is the prophet who announces Jesus' coming death and burial. As always, Jesus sees her for who she really is: a teacher, a prophet, a disciple.

Mary anoints Jesus' feet. But in Mark's version, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head. Throughout his gospel, Mark was focused on showing that Jesus was the Messiah, foretold by the Jewish prophets. God's chosen king was signified by the prophet anointing his head with oil. The implication here is clear: this woman is anointing Jesus as King of the Jews.

Again, it's significant that a woman is chosen as prophet and priest.

She who loves

There's something really special about this story: it speaks not just to the mind, but to the heart. The woman anoints Jesus with perfume worth a year's wages, she weeps and washes Jesus' feet with her tears, she lets down her hair and dries his feet with it. The power of this scene is in its raw emotion, humility and vulnerability. We see a woman expressing a very feminine form of devotion.

This stands in stark contrast to Judas, who begrudges the woman's generosity. And to Simon the Pharisee, whose distain for her permeates through the story. But Jesus sees the men for what they are: thinly veiled expressions of pride and power. To everyone's shock, he denounces the male leaders and affirms the woman's devotion, with this stunning statement: 'I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her' (Mark 14:9).

‘The tension between women and men stands out as a vital component of the anointing stories,’ says J. Lyle Story. ‘The positive life-giving action by the women in these stories stand in stark contrast with the hideous, life-taking and aggressive posture of the male religious authorities who plot Jesus’ death.’[54]

Even today, ‘feminine’ qualities such as emotion and empathy are often considered less trustworthy than ‘masculine’ qualities like rationalism and physical strength.[55] Yet, as he so often did, Jesus turns our expectations upside down. In affirming this act of devotion, Jesus affirms feminine expression as valid, powerful, worthy and holding its own authority.

When we leave this scene, the air is thick with what would happen next: the woman’s bold act becomes a prophecy on which the story of Jesus will turn. Meanwhile, days later, Judas will betray Jesus.

A woman, a sinner

Luke’s telling of this story is very different to the others, introducing many new elements. But his theme is underlined as he introduces her: a woman from the city, a sinner. I wonder what sin comes to mind? For those who have been around a church context for some time, it’s likely that the sin you are thinking of is prostitution. Her acts of devotion towards Jesus have been scandalised and sexualised.

Church tradition has taught us that the letting down of hair and kissing Jesus’ feet indicated a woman of ‘loose’ morals and sexual prowess. In fact, nowhere in the Bible does it say that the woman’s sin was sexual.

In fact, a respectable unmarried women could wear her hair down. But, more importantly, the letting down of hair was a powerful symbol of grief. The early church would not have seen this act as sexually provocative, but as expressions of grief, gratitude and petition.[56] They would have wondered: ‘Why is she grieving and why does she show her grief in this way?’ Or, ‘what kind of act of grateful devotion is this?’[57]

To add insult to injury, Pope Gregory, in 591AD, managed to conflate Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the ‘sinner’ in this story, so they became one woman who he labelled ‘a prostitute’. So for centuries, the two Marys—beloved disciples of Jesus—have been wrongfully demeaned as sexually sinful.[58]

The sexualising of this sin in Luke says a lot more about how we view women, than it says about the woman in this story. The tendency towards seeing women first and foremost as sexual is all around us. Every day, our feeds are filled with sexualised images of women. The #MeToo phenomenon, with over 32 million tweets, brought to light the ways women have been abused and used as sexual objects.

In 2017, the #ChurchToo movement followed. Again, thousands of women raised their voices to bring to light the sexual abuse they experienced. These are just a couple of examples, from countless tweets:

The sexualising of this sin in Luke says a lot more about how we view women, than it says about the woman in this story.

> *'[At youth group] I shared that I had been raped and felt shame about not being pure. [My leader] responded by asking if I had repented of my role in what happened.'*

> *'I was 11. I went to the restroom. I was followed by the youth pastor. He grabbed my arm. I was lucky enough to fight him off and escape. I just wonder how many girls weren't so lucky.'*

> *'I CANNOT COUNT the number of times I've heard guys in church PUBLICLY admit to molestation, harassment, assault, etc, only to be praised for their bravery & honesty. No consequences. The church's legacy of protecting abusers is sickening.'*[59]

Every one of these tweets tells a disturbing and heartbreaking story of the way the Bible has been used against women. At its extreme, the 'submission' narrative (see chapter 6) has been used to silence women in the face of abuse, rather than raise their voices in holy protest. It has viewed women as lesser, and therefore objects to be used. At the same time, it has blamed women as temptresses, while upholding the lie that men 'can't help themselves'. This diminishes both men and women.

Thank God, that is not the end of the story.

Where is our hope?

If Luke wasn't describing sexual sin, what was he trying to say? Throughout the book of Luke, he emphasises the radical inclusiveness of the kingdom of Jesus: 'he is concerned with showing how Jesus welcomed in Gentiles [non-Jews], women, the poor and the outcast … acceptance of the marginalised is central for Luke'.[60]

Here, the fact that the woman is unnamed further emphasises her complete lack of status—she is a 'nobody'. That she is described as a sinner, completes her marginalisation and powerlessness. She does not belong.

In contrast, Simon the Pharisee is named. He embodies power, status and the religious establishment. He cannot get over the woman's audacity at gate-crashing his respectable dinner party. But instead of condemning the 'sinful' woman, he condemns the 'moral' Pharisee. He accepts her anointing, her tears and her loosened hair as pure and true acts of love. While Simon can only sit back and sneer, this woman is fully committed to her

loving action, and Jesus recognises that this 'sinner' loves greatly. As Jesus prepares to make his way to the cross, he makes his mission clear: the first will be last, and the last will be first (Matthew 20:16). Women, outsiders, sinners, the nameless, the vulnerable, the untouchable—they hold a place of honour at Jesus' banqueting table.

Lyle compares this anointing with wider themes in Jesus' story, where he chooses to honour women: 'In a similar way, women were the first to receive and were entrusted with the wonderful witness of the resurrection. None of the eleven disciples was the first to the tomb. These women met the criteria of apostleship, even though a woman's witness was not accepted in the legal courts.'[61]

Women were welcomed at Jesus' table, as disciples, priests and prophets. No longer naked and afraid, the women of Jesus were clothed and confident.

This is our hope. There is much work still to do, but we can change our story. If we choose to side with oppression, we will be condemned like Simon the Pharisee. But if we honour each other as equals at the table of Jesus, we have learned what it means to love greatly. Brothers and sisters, let's raise our voices.

Let's discuss

- Imagine that the line from Luke reads: 'a man from the city, a sinner'. What assumption would we make if the 'sinner' was a male? What does this tell us about the way we view men and women?
- Can you think of ways 'feminine' qualities have been given different value to 'masculine' qualities (at work, home, church or culture)? How can this story help expand these assumptions?
- How did you feel reading the tweets from the #ChurchToo Movement? If you feel able, share any stories where your gender has impacted your experiences of church.
- As men and women, how can we 'raise our voices' for gender equity? How can we do better?

Final thought

Ka mua, ka muri | Walking backwards into the future.

We must know where we have been in the past, to know where we should go in the future.

Endnotes

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22 Bailey (2008), p233.

23 *Issues in Jewish Ethics: Adultery*, Jewish Virtual Library, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/adultery-2

24 Baloyi, E.N. (2010), 'A re-reading of John 8:1-11 from a pastoral liberative perspective on South African women', HTS Teologiese Stidues/Theological Studies 66(2), available at http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/838, This offers the following suggestions for how Jesus' response provides a model for pastoral assistance to female victims of abuse: 1) He listened to the allegations; 2) He transformed a legal quibble into a human issue; 3) He called both men and women into responsibility and accountability.

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41 Ibid.

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46 Stott, John. (1996) *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Leicester: IVP), p. 78.

47 Booth, Catherine., (1859). *Female Ministry* (London: Salvation Army, 1859; reprinted by New York: SA Supplies Printing and Publishing Dept, 1975), p.20.

48 As summarised by Roger Green, referenced in 'Women in Ministry—Treading New Paths Into the Future', a paper presented in March 1998 to The Salvation Army's International Conference of Leaders in Melbourne by Commissioner Kay Rader, International President of Women's Ministries.

49 Ibid, p.19.

50 Shade, JoAnn., (2007). *Seasons: A Woman's Calling to Ministry (London: Salvation Books)*, p.65.

51 I am aware that we have not addressed verses 14–15 of our passage. The same process would apply: is Paul really blaming women for the presence of sin in the world? Does he mean that women's purpose is to give birth; that it is this function that 'saves' women? Or that we are all saved through the birth of Jesus from a woman, as some scholars suggest? Suffice it to say that we are again left with the question of whether to read an English translation at a surface level, or to look deeper—and space prevents further inquiry in this study.

52 *Orders and Regulations for Staff Officers of The Salvation Army in the United kingdom* (1895), London: Salvation Army, 1895, p.16-17

53 Held Evans, Rachel., (2012, April 5) 'Women of the Passion Part 1: The Woman at Bethany Anoints Jesus', Rachel Held Evans rachelheldevans.com

54 Story, J. Lyle., (2009) 'Female and Male in the Four Anointing Stories', Priscilla Papers, 23(4). cbeinternational.org/resource/female-and-male-four-annointing-stories/

55 When we talk about 'masculine' and 'feminine', we're talking about the way culture categorises certain qualities, which we perceive as belonging to men and women in general. However, we're not talking about individual men and women (since we are each unique, diverse, and don't fit neatly into categories).

56 Cosgrove, Charles H. (2005) 'A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the "Sinful Woman" in Luke 7:36-50', Journal of Biblical Literature, 124, 4, p. 688.

57 Ibid.

58 Jansen, Katherine Ludwig. (2001). *The making of the Magdalen: preaching and popular devotion in the later Middle Ages.* (Princeton University Press. Cited from Wikipedia.

59 Quackenbush, Casey. (2017, November 22) 'The Religious Community Is Speaking Out Against Sexual Violence With #ChurchToo', Time, time.com/5034546/me-too-church-too-sexual-abuse/

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'If she have the necessary gifts and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many, to urge and encourage her.'

Catherine Booth