

The Liberation of Women

The Roman and Jewish cultures of Jesus' time were dominated by men, and women had very little power and even fewer rights. Consider the following insights about Roman women, gleaned in part from Jo-Ann Shelton's *As the Romans Did*, and from *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* by Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant. Unlike many contemporaries of their day, Roman women of the first century could own their own property and manage their own finances, but they could not vote or hold political office. They might have influence as the dutiful wife of a wealthy Roman with social standing, or by engineering political careers for their sons, but they were not allowed to wield power directly. Women were under the authority of their father until they married, at which point that authority transferred to their husband. Roman women did not receive the same level of education as men, and only a handful of documents written by Roman women have survived into modernity. However, women were considered important transmitters of Roman culture in preparing children for participation in society. Unlike some other cultures of the day, Roman women were not sequestered away from men or public view; they were expected to participate in religious

festivals, and there is even evidence that female gladiators competed in Rome.

In Jewish culture, women likewise passed from the authority of their father to their husband, but had far fewer rights, freedoms or privileges. Under Levitical law, they were considered little more than slaves, and according to the Mishnah (a record of the oral traditions that would have pervaded Judea in the time of Jesus), women could be “obtained by intercourse, money or writ” (*Qidd.* 1.1). They could not hold positions of power in a synagogue, could not be disciples of a rabbi, did not receive religious education, and were not expected to participate in religious festivals (*Qidd.* 1.7). They did not have the right to divorce, and a woman’s testimony in court was considered less reliable than a man’s – if it was allowed at all (*Ned.* 11.10). Not only were women considered impure during menstruation, but they could not ask for sex, and they could be stoned to death for committing adultery – a fate seemingly exclusive to women and not men. Women were, in effect, spiritually, socially and sexually oppressed to a much greater degree than their Roman counterparts. In both Roman and Jewish culture, however, it is not too strong a statement to claim that women were, at best, second-class citizens.

One other item of note regarding first century women is that, according to Roman census statistics of the time, there seem to have been far fewer of them than men. Among Romans, this may have been the result of the practice of *exposure*, where newborn children were placed before the *pater familias*, the male head of the household, who then either accepted them into the family by lifting them into his arms, or rejected them by leaving them lying on the ground. And, of course, because they were less desirable due to expensive dowries and their inability to increase the family’s social status, rejected children were most often girls. Any child who was rejected in this way was frequently left outside to die.

Sadly, we can see many of the attitudes and practices of both of these ancient cultures carried forward into modern times – not just in exceptional cases, but in vast populations around the globe. Consider rural China, where female newborns may be abandoned because they cannot provide in the same way for the family – that is, in socioeconomic terms they are considered less valuable. This is not a religious doctrine,

but a cultural standard. In many other cultures, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the forced marriage of young girls to older men has been common for centuries. In fact, we can use this practice as a litmus test for the level of female oppression throughout a given culture – for where young girls are treated as reproductive chattel, they do not escape the mindset of enslavement when they become adult women. In these same cultures, we also find other heinous practices such as female genital mutilation, bride abduction and a high incidence of rape and brutality against women. And although such fear, hatred and prejudice towards female human beings may be sustained by the ultraconservative doctrines of various religions, in reality we find such propensities are first and foremost deeply rooted in cultural traditions. Like a cycle of emotional and physical abuse that is passed from one generation to the next, the oppression of women is a symptom of longstanding and profound cultural failure. Even when religious institutions reinforce these patterns out of conformance to dominant cultural memes, we often can find little or no justification for them in the primary spiritual source materials of the faith traditions themselves. To better understand the extent of suffering women must bear around the globe, I recommend consulting websites like www.vday.org, www.unwomen.org, and www.womankind.org.uk. In particular, take a moment to view the statistics available on these sites regarding human rights violations against women.

A particularly potent example of the oppression of women are Arab societies where strict Shari'a law is observed, its practice paralleling Jewish Levitical law in the belittling and contemptuous strictures regarding women. Here, too, that oppression is often a perpetuation of cultural attitudes masquerading as religion to justify themselves. Wael Hallaq's book, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*, gives a detailed account of how Shari'a evolved out of pre-Islamic Arab customs, concretizing into a formal legal system long after the Prophet Muhammad's death. Along these lines, there is the example of traditional clothing meant to conceal feminine features (see: hijab; jilbāb, burqa, abaya, etc.), which is a mainly cultural invention, but which has come to represent religious obedience among some Muslims. As I understand it, the Qur'an does convey moderate instructions regarding women's clothing – such as covering private parts (sura 24:31) and covering the body in such a way as to discourage harassment in public

(sura 33:59). But within this venerated text, there are no commands to hide every hint of sexuality in order to avoid the wrath of religious leaders or prevent violent reactions from male family members. And even where the Qur'an and the later Hadith Qudsi might condemn sexual impropriety for men and women alike – and very harshly so – it is mainly women who suffer “honor killings” and other extreme punishments, thus belying purely religious justifications for these judgments. Just as within Christianity and Judaism, it is cultural conservatism – bolstered by dogmatic religious legalism that evolved after those religions were institutionalized – that perpetuates fear, hate, prejudice and violence; and in such cases it is women who suffer the most.

This sort of discrimination, objectification and indeed alienation of the feminine is present in some form nearly everywhere. Even in the most progressive cultures of the world, women are still a minority in positions of power and privilege, and still struggle to earn wages equal to a man's. This is true in the U.S., where we still see a staggering level of rape and domestic violence towards women, rampant sexism in workplaces, the military and on college campuses, wage inequality, and other indications that America still has a very long way to go to embrace equal value of the sexes. Take a moment to view the evidence gathered at www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html to appreciate the depth and breadth of this problem. It is also easy to forget that women did not have the right to vote in the U.S. until 1920, some fifty years after freed male slaves were given the same right.

So when we add all these populations and chauvinistic attitudes together across vast swaths of time and geography, we discover there to be hundreds of millions of human beings around the globe from the past and in the present who have been and are being oppressed and devalued solely because of their gender. We could even presume that this marginalized population includes the vast majority of women alive today. With what we know of ancient times, we can surmise that it was the same or worse in first century Judea. So, against such a backdrop of extreme prejudice, how does the New Testament portray Jesus' response to women in his day, and how might this inform what Christians can do to respond to this injustice and inequality in modern times? Here are

some accounts to consider, this time from the International Standard Version (ISV):

So Jesus went with him. A huge crowd kept following him and jostling him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from chronic bleeding for twelve years. Although she had endured a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all of her money, she had not been helped at all but rather grew worse. Since she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his robe, because she had been saying, "If I can just touch his robe, I will get well." Her bleeding stopped at once, and she felt in her body that she was healed from her illness. Immediately Jesus became aware that power had gone out of him. So he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples asked him, "You see the crowd jostling you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But he kept looking around to see the woman who had done this. So the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came forward fearfully, fell down trembling in front of him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed from your illness."

Mark 5:24-34

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. So he went to the Pharisee's home and took his place at the table. There was a woman who was a notorious sinner in that city. When she learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's home, she took an alabaster jar of perfume and knelt at his feet behind him. She was crying and began to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Then she kissed his feet over and over again, anointing them constantly with the perfume. Now the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw this and said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who is touching him and what kind of woman she is. She's a sinner!" Jesus said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "say it." "Two men were in debt to a moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50. When they couldn't pay it back, he generously canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one who had the larger debt canceled." Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly." Then, turning to the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You didn't give me any water for my feet, but this woman has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You didn't give me a kiss, but this woman, from the moment I came in, has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn't anoint my head with oil, but this

woman has anointed my feet with perfume. So I'm telling you that her sins, as many as they are, have been forgiven, and that's why she has shown such great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little." Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven!"

Luke 7:36-48

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink," since his disciples had gone off into town to buy food. The Samaritan woman asked him, "How can you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" Because Jews do not have anything to do with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Please give me a drink,' you would have been the one to ask him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. Where are you going to get this living water? You're not greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it, along with his sons and his flocks, are you?" Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks this water will become thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water that I will give him will never become thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become a well of water for him, springing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I won't get thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." He said to her, "Go and call your husband, and come back here." The woman answered him, "I don't have a husband." Jesus said to her, "You are quite right in saying, 'I don't have a husband,' because you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet! Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain. But you Jews say that the place where people should worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Believe me, dear lady, the hour is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You don't know what you're worshiping. We Jews know what we're worshiping, because salvation comes from the Jews. Yet the time is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. Indeed, the Father is looking for people like that to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming, who is being called 'Christ'. When that person comes, he will explain everything." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." At this point his disciples arrived, and they were amazed that he was talking to a woman. Yet no one said, "What do you want from her?" or, "Why are you talking to her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to town. She told people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done! Could he

possibly be the Messiah?" The people left the town and started on their way to him.

John 4:7-30

Jesus, however, went to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak he appeared again in the temple, and all the people came to him. So he sat down and began to teach them. But the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery. After setting her before them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women to death. What do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have a charge against him. But Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the person among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Then he bent down again and continued writing on the ground. When they heard this, they went away one by one, beginning with the oldest, and he was left alone with the woman standing there. Then Jesus stood up and said to her, "Dear lady, where are your accusers? Hasn't anyone condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "I don't condemn you, either. Go home, and from now on do not sin any more."

John 8:1-11

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the woman who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was the one who was ill. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness is not meant to end in death. It is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was for two more days. After this he said to the disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you to death, and you are going back there again?" Jesus replied, "There are twelve hours in the day, aren't there? If anyone walks during the day he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks at night he stumbles, because the light is not in him." These were the things he said. Then after this he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am leaving to wake him up." So the disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will get well." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was speaking about resting or sleeping. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let's go to him." Then

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too, so that we may die with him!" When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. As soon as Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, he will give it to you." Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The person who believes in me, even though he dies, will live. Indeed, everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe that?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world." When she had said this, she went away and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you!" As soon as Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet arrived at the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with her, consoling her in the house, saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she had gone to the tomb to cry there. As soon as Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell down at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her crying, and the Jews who had come with her crying, he was greatly troubled in spirit and deeply moved. He asked, "Where have you put him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus burst into tears.

John 11:1-35

Before reading further, please take some time to consider the previous excerpts of scripture as a whole. Meditate on them. Pray about them. Discuss them with others who can keep an open mind. Try to enact some of the principles that apply to your situation. Intuit your way to a conclusion, feeling the rightness of your convictions from a place of neutrality. Then compare what you have concluded with the following thoughts.

As framed by the context of his times, Jesus' attitudes and actions towards women in these stories are for me beyond radical. To begin with, the chronically bleeding woman was almost certainly hemorrhaging from her uterus. Although a different Greek term is used in Matthew's account than in Mark's and Luke's, they all refer to a "flow of blood" (ῥύσις τοῦ αἵματος) that is used euphemistically in the Bible to represent menstruation (see Leviticus 15 and 20:18 of the Septuagint). Under Levitical law, this condition would have made the woman ritually unclean. In fact, she would have remained unclean for seven days even after the flow ceased. This meant that, among other things, she would not be allowed entry to the temple, and could not atone for her sins – ever. It is no small wonder, then, that the woman in this account was terrified of revealing her intentions to Jesus and the crowd. And for Jesus to praise her faith, not rebuke her in any way for touching him, and bless her with peace and relief from her suffering not only amplifies the quality of his compassion, but annihilates the negative Levitical dogma of the time regarding menstruation and its shameful stigma in Jewish culture. From the perspective of the people of that day, Jesus was acting as if the female reproductive cycle was a normal and natural thing – something many modern cultures still seem to struggle with.

We then see that Jesus' liberating attitude towards women extended beyond the acceptance of their physiology. When he allowed the "sinful woman" to anoint him with perfume in the Pharisee's house, and then praised her for the act and forgave her sins, his actions flew in the face of contemporary Jewish attitudes. Adding insult to injury, Jesus asserted that the woman's love proved more important in God's eyes than the actions of a Pharisee – a fastidious observer of Jewish religious laws. Imagine the shock of such a statement. It would be like elevating the social status of a poor, uneducated slave laborer above a wealthy, aristocratic powerbroker with a PhD. What is also interesting about this account is that Jesus described how any person's love would be proportionate to the forgiveness they received. But this woman lavished her tearful affections on Jesus *without having received any forgiveness first*. What might this mean? Why would she do this? Taken with the other accounts in the New Testament texts, I think this is a clear indication that word had spread among the people that Jesus' accepting and compassionate mindset towards women strongly contradicted the cultural values of his time.

One of the most significant accounts in the New Testament of Jesus' honoring the feminine is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. As the text describes, relations between Judeans and Samaritans were fairly alienated at the time. Yet this woman was not only a Samaritan, she was also an adulteress living with her lover. How does Jesus react to this? He offers her living water, the salvation of God, and the opportunity to be the first to share the message of salvation with her community. And, as if that weren't enough, according to John's account this Samaritan alien, this sinner, this random woman whom Jesus' own disciples are surprised to see him conversing with, is also the first person in John's account to whom Jesus confirms he is the Messiah! This must have been stunning to the people of Jesus' day, and a clear confirmation that this particular Messiah esteemed women greatly. If we imagine the voice from the burning bush delivering Yahweh's commandments to, say, a Canaanite prostitute instead of Moses, I think we can begin to appreciate the depth and impact of Jesus' actions at the well.

And then we come to one of the best known passages in the New Testament, where Jesus forgives the adulteress who is about to be stoned. By encouraging introspection about the mistakes they themselves have made, Jesus uses the consciences of the woman's accusers to derail their self-righteous wrath. But I think it is even more significant that Jesus forgives the woman outright. She herself does not demonstrate contrition or repentance. She does not pass some religious test of righteousness or demonstrate the depth of her love for God. In this account, Jesus dismisses the whole situation while scribbling in the dirt. As we see in many other stories throughout the New Testament, religious legalism simply had no place in the kingdom of God. And, quite apparently from the sum of these passages, women had just as important a place in that kingdom as any man.

But for me, the most impressive of all New Testament stories involving women is Lazarus' death and resurrection. If we read this carefully, all sorts of eye-opening insights percolate to the foreground. First, we learn that Jesus changed his travel plans in response to a letter from Mary and Martha. Then we learn that he had a special affection for these two sisters and their brother, an affection we only find elsewhere in reference to the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in the Gospel of John. Then we see Martha alternately rebuking and debating with Jesus regarding her

brother's death, and Jesus patiently and lovingly answering her. Then, according to Martha, Jesus requests that Mary come to him. And after that? One of only two places in the New Testament where Jesus weeps openly is here, in response to Mary's grief. Remember that this is the Mary whom Jesus praised for her devoted attention (Luke 10), and the Mary whom Jesus defended when she anointed him with expensive perfumed, saying "I tell you truly, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in all the world, what this woman has done will be told in memory of her." (Mark 14:9). Lazarus' death is of course a pivotal event in Jesus' life, for, according to John, it is after Jesus' resurrecting Lazarus that a plot is hatched to take Jesus' life. But for me it is Jesus' interactions with the women he loved that make this pivotal in a feminist sense. Taken altogether, it is impossible to overlook the pronounced love and respect Jesus holds for these female disciples, and indeed the unique place they hold in his heart and in his life according to these accounts.

There are many other examples of similar sentiments. Jesus performed many miracles on women and lauded their faith (Matthew 9:34 & 15:21-28; Luke 8:1-3 & 13:10-13). He included women in his parables (Matthew 13:33 & 25:1-13). According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, Jesus first appeared to women following his resurrection, and it was women who then announced the miracle to his male disciples. It was Mary Magdalene whom the Gospels credit with this first encounter; she was the first to physically touch Jesus when he reappeared, and first to speak with him and bear his words back to the other disciples. The inescapable conclusion here is that Jesus valued women much more highly than the cultures of first century Judea and Rome. Again and again he rebukes men – even his own disciples – who are critical of the love, faith and worshipful actions of women. To claim that Jesus intended to aggressively liberate women is an understatement. And to fully follow Jesus' example today would mean releasing women from centuries of oppression into an equal and venerated status.

Now, for anyone who has studied the history of the Christian religion, or familiarized themselves with contemporary Christian doctrines about a number of women's issues, one question rapidly becomes insistent: *what the heck happened to this radically liberating attitude?* Whether during centuries of the Roman Catholic tradition, or the puritanical restrictions of early America, or the actions and attitudes of modern day

evangelicals, Christian women have most often not been treated with the equality, privilege and esteem that Jesus exemplified. In part, I believe this is the result of the principle I've already alluded to: that religion tends to conform to culture rather than changing it in fundamental ways. So, for example, the propagation of Christianity across a rigidly patriarchal Roman civilization did not change that society as much as conform to it. But this is not the only reason.

One argument I have heard is that the spirit of Jesus' emancipation of women did not propagate throughout Christendom because the Apostle Paul did not always embrace this spirit in his writing. We will examine some of the passages that have inspired that conclusion in a moment; but first I'd like to offer you Romans 16:1-16 (ISV):

Now I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant in the church at Cenchreae. Welcome her in the Lord as is appropriate for saints, and provide her with anything she may need from you, for she has assisted many people, including me. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me for the Messiah Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life. I am thankful to them, and so are all the churches among the gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my dear friend Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to the Messiah in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my fellow Jews who are in prison with me and are prominent among the apostles. They belonged to the Messiah before I did. Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in the Messiah, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, who has been approved by the Messiah. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the family of Narcissus, who belong to the Lord. Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked hard for the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, who has toiled diligently for the Lord. Greet Rufus, the one chosen by the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of the Messiah greet you.

Of particular note here is that many of the women Paul praises and honors here clearly had prominent positions in the early Church. Among them is Prisca (Priscilla), who together with her husband Aquila travelled with Paul during his missionary journeys (see Acts 18), and

whom Paul viewed as a “coworker” (συνεργός) in Christ. As we can see in the following account, this reference to Priscilla as an associate, a fellow laborer in Christ, is supported by other evidence in scripture as well (ISV):

Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos arrived in Ephesus. He was a native of Alexandria, an eloquent man, and well versed in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the Lord's way, and with spiritual fervor he kept speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only about John's baptism. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him home and explained God's way to him more accurately.

Acts 18:24-26

It is also interesting to note that in all but one of the instances in the New Testament where Priscilla and Aquila are named together, Priscilla's name precedes her husband's. And then we have Junias (Junia), whom Paul claims is “prominent among the apostles.” Whether her notability (επίσημος) was in being an apostle herself or in how she was viewed by other apostles – in the Greek it is unclear – it still places Junias in a highly esteemed position according to Paul's estimation. It is also interesting that Paul elevates her even more by reminding his readers that she became a believer in Christ before he did. And of course there is Phoebe, whom Paul commends to the Church in Rome with specific instructions for her honored reception, naming her a “servant” (διάκονος) in her own congregation. This term, sometimes translated “deacon” and sometimes “minister,” was utilized by Paul to describe a pivotal role of service in the early Church. In addition to these three, in this brief greeting Paul names no less than seven other women whose contributions to the Church he felt were praiseworthy.

This is not an isolated instance, of course. Similar accolades and status attributions for women can be found in Phillipians 4:2-3 and 1 Corinthians 1:11. But then, as we examine Paul's other references to sisters in Christ, a dichotomy begins to intrude on the writing attributed to him. Let's take a look at some of those contrasts (ISV):

A man should not cover his head, because he exists as God's image and glory. But the woman is man's glory. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; and man was not created for woman, but woman for man. This is why a woman should have authority over

her own head: because of the angels. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man of woman. For as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. But everything comes from God. Decide for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Nature itself teaches you neither that it is disgraceful for a man to have long hair nor that hair is a woman's glory, for hair is given as a substitute for coverings.

1 Corinthians 11:7-15

As in all the churches of the saints, the women must keep silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak out, but must place themselves in submission, as the oral law also says. If they want to learn anything, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is inappropriate for a woman to speak out in church.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

For all of you are God's children through faith in the Messiah Jesus. Indeed, all of you who were baptized into the Messiah have clothed yourselves with the Messiah. Because all of you are one in the Messiah Jesus, a person is no longer a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a male or a female.

Galatians 3:26-28

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of his wife as the Messiah is the head of the church. It is he who is the Savior of the body. Indeed, just as the church is submissive to the Messiah, so wives must be submissive to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself for it, so that he might make it holy by cleansing it, washing it with water and the word, and might present the church to himself in all its glory, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, but holy and without fault. In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself. For no one has ever hated his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, as the Messiah does the church.

Ephesians 5:22-29

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is appropriate for those who belong to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

Colossians 3:18-19

Remember that Paul differentiates between what he considers to be his own advice, and what he believes to be from holy spirit or “in the lord.” In 1 Corinthians 11, when he speaks with the inspiration of the spirit, he admits that men and women are equal in the eyes of God; but when he reverts to his own observations and logic, or defers to Levitical law, women are placed in a different category – a subordinate category – to men. We see this tension repeated in the other passages as well: on the one hand there is no difference between males and females in Christ, but on the other women should submit to their husbands. Women are praised as ministers, teachers and coworkers in Christ, but then are told they should remain silent at church and learn from their husbands at home. And so on. Perhaps this tension was simply a result of the patriarchal influence of the times – the enveloping sexism of the surrounding culture. Perhaps it was the vestigial conditioning of Paul’s Pharisaic training (Acts 23:6, Philippians 3:5). Perhaps, as scholars like Gordon Fee suggest regarding 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, certain contradictions are actually the result of textual interpolation; that is, additions incorporated into the text long after Paul’s death. But when we take the lion’s share of the New Testament into account, Paul’s vacillation does indeed seem to reflect a tug-of-war between what holy spirit guided Paul to perceive and relate, and old habits of thought that lingered into his spiritual renewal.

Then, most unfortunately, in 1 Timothy we discover even more abrasive and condescending attitudes towards women. Over the centuries, and despite the wealth of scripture that contradicts it, this epistle has become the guiding dark for oppressing women in the Church (ISV):

A woman must learn quietly and submissively. Moreover, I do not allow a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man. Instead, she is to be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived. It was the woman who was deceived and became a lawbreaker. However, women will be saved by having children, if they continue to have faith, love, and holiness, along with good judgment.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

Rather than taking up the cause of women’s emancipation that Jesus so carefully demonstrated, this Pastoral Epistle rather violently extinguishes it. Where Jesus empowers women to preach his message, testify to his resurrection, be relieved of tainted conceptions of their own

bodies, physically worship his person and be freed from the judgments of Levitical law, 1 Timothy revives legalistic constraints, declaring that women should never have authority over men, should keep their mouths shut, should be perceived as spiritually inferior, and should pursue their salvation through childbearing – a vitriolic concentration of attitudes, proscriptions and prescriptions unique to 1 Timothy. Compared with the rest of the New Testament, this seems to be truly regressive instruction. And when such hateful prejudice is then combined selectively with Paul’s apparent vacillation and similar proscriptions elsewhere, the denigration of women within the Church becomes that much easier to sustain.

And the result? As of this writing, many U.S. denominations still resist allowing women prominent roles in the Church. In most fundamentalist denominations, women are still encouraged to submit to their husbands without question – just as a literal interpretation of selective epistles might promote. Even in the more mainstream evangelical churches I attended for many years, chauvinistic attitudes, disparagement of a woman’s importance in spiritual matters, emotional and physical abuse of women and girls, and a generally dismissive attitude regarding any female contributions to society beyond childbearing and family responsibilities were common. Friends and acquaintances who were raised Roman Catholic also report to me that, in their experience of that denomination in the U.S., women were treated as second-class citizens in almost every respect. Those I know who have attended Free Methodist, Mormon, Lutheran, Southern Baptist and many other congregations for most of their lives report much the same. In fact, only a relatively small fraction of Christendom in the U.S. – communities of Quakers, Anglicans and Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, etc. – have openly embraced the spiritual equality of women that Jesus promoted, allowing women greater leadership in those congregations.

Despite the strong evidence in favor of the equality and importance of women found in the New Testament – and especially in the example Jesus provides – a majority of Christian denominations still “conserve” the view that women are somehow relegated to a lower or different status than men in the Church and society. Yet we can’t blame Paul or the Pastoral Epistles for all of this; no matter how much weight we give those authors, they simply don’t trump the words and deeds attributed

to Jesus. So once again we return to individual behaviors and religious institutions conforming to surrounding culture. The Christianity found in the United States is the product of centuries of male-dominated social hierarchies. In largest part I think we have the Angles, Saxons and Romans to thank for our individual and collective chauvinism; the vestiges of Levitical law carried forward in Judeo-Christian dogma are just icing on a well-baked cake of tribal inheritance.

But let's take a look at some of the other New Testament evidence that supports a championing of feminist issues. In addition to Jesus' example in the Gospels, we find many powerful contradictions to the misogyny of 1 Timothy and the other Pastoral Epistles, and to the waffling, incomplete understanding and possible interpolation in some of Paul's epistles. Perhaps the most persuasive examples are instances where women receive the gift of Divine prophecy (ISV):

Now Anna, a prophetess, was also there. She was a descendant of Phaniel from the tribe of Asher. She was very old, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow for 84 years. She never left the temple, but continued to worship there night and day with times of fasting and prayer. Just then she came forward and began to thank God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:36-38

The next day we left and came to Caesarea. We went to the home of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who could prophesy.

Acts 21:8-9

Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head dishonors his head, and every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, which is the same as having her head shaved.

1 Corinthians 11:4-5

So we have clear evidence that women not only were prophets but were expected to prophesy. And what is the purpose of prophecy? According to Paul, to edify the Church in a public way:

Pursue love, but earnestly desire spiritual gifts – and especially that you may prophesy. For someone speaking in another language doesn't speak to men, but to God; for in the spirit he speaks mysteries that no one understands. But the one who prophesies speaks to men for edification, encouragement, and consolation. The one speaking in another language edifies himself, but the one prophesying before the assembly edifies them. I want all of you to speak in other languages, but even more that you may prophesy. For the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in other languages – unless he interprets, so that the assembly may be edified.

1 Corinthians 14:1-5

So how could it be that women were to remain “silent and submissive” if they had the gift of prophecy? Wasn't it their responsibility to contribute to the edification of the assembly? Isn't that in fact what Paul exhorted believers to do? And isn't there ample evidence in scripture that women in fact performed this vital function in the early Church? In this light, the condemnation and restrictions regarding women in 1 Timothy – and echoed in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 – really make no sense at all. So why are there such as strongly worded contradictions in the Pastoral Epistles? For now, I'll simply offer that I think they represent grievous errors on the part of the writer; however, in the chapter *Beyond the New Testament* we will explore in greater detail why 1 Timothy and the other Pastoral Epistles may have gone so astray.

In other writings of the early Church, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, we encounter a powerful, supernatural woman who imparts Divine wisdom to the shepherd in visions. In the *Gospel of Mary*, we learn of Jesus' teachings from the first person account of a woman, and witness a female disciple's special relationship with Christ that imbues her with spiritual leadership. In the *Gospel of Thomas* we encounter female disciples asking Jesus questions in the same manner as the male disciples. In Elaine Pagel's book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, she describes how the writing of Valentinian Christian Gnostics in the second century showed that women were treated as equals, allowing them to be prophets, teachers, healers and evangelists within that community. And although these other early writings were not included in the New Testament canon we have today, they certainly reinforce Jesus' liberating sentiments toward the daughters of his kingdom. All-in-all, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, at its inception, Christianity offered women a striking and empowering departure from the oppression of

male-dominated cultures. But once prevailing culture took root in more institutionalized versions of Christianity, one of the most sweeping and progressive ideas Christ advocated was, for the most part, quickly forgotten.