



Women and Discipleship in the New Testament

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All references to discipleship in the NT apply to women unless the text explicitly says so to the contrary. For instance, Jesus call to take up the cross and follow him daily in Mk. 8:34 is addressed to both men and women. There is no gender preference. So too, the beatitudes are addressed to man and women (Mt. 5:3-11). The exhortation 'Let them who have ear, listen' is made equally to men and women (cf. Mk. 4:9). The reference to those who hear the word of God and bear fruit thirty sixty and hundred fold, also include women (cf. Mk. 4:20). So too, Jesus' teaching on what defiles a person in Mk. 7:14, is directed to men and women alike.

It is a fallacy based on ignorance to argue that the NT portrays women in negative light. True, Magdalene is presented as a woman who had been possessed by seven demons, but she was allowed to follow Jesus and accompany him on his missionary travels (cf. Lk. 8:2), unlike the male demoniac who lived amongst the tombs; he was denied the request to follow Jesus and was asked to return home (cf. Mk. 5:18-19). On the other hand, it is the woman Mary, the sister of Lazarus (cf. Lk. 10:42), who is portrayed as the icon of discipleship. Furthermore, the "fiat" of Mary the mother of Jesus remains unparalleled (cf. Lk. 1:38). We argue that women in the NT serve as role models for women of today, and for everyone who sincerely seek to be a disciple. Women in the NT demonstrate to everyone what it means to be a disciple. On the one hand, the woman caught in adultery is offered back her life as well as the opportunity of eternal life (cf. Jn. 8:11). We also maintain that the woman's accusers were men (cf. Jn. 8:9), whose names were written into the dust by Jesus in a sign of condemnation (cf. Jer. 17:13). Indubitably, the woman Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a model *par excellence* of faith. Women such as Mary Magdalene signify the successfulness of Jesus' mission in calling sinners to repentance (cf. Mk. 2:17). This does not mean that sinners were only women or that men were not found amongst sinners. We argue that the polemic of Mt. 23:13 against the scribes and Pharisees, is against men who were morally blind. It is also a woman who is portrayed as understanding what God was doing in Jesus' life (cf. Jn. 12:7; also refer Mt. 26:7; Mk. 14:3; Lk. 7:37; Jn. 12:3).

We maintain that the terms 'apostle' (cf. Mt. 10:2; Mk. 6:30; Lk. 6:13; 9:10; 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10) and 'disciple' (cf. Mt. 10:24, 25, 42; 27:57; Lk. 6:40; 14:26, 27, 33; Jn. 9:28; 18:15, 16; 19:26, 27, 38; 20:2, 3, 4, 8; 21:7, 20, 23, 24) are used interchangeably (cf. Mt. 10:1; 11:1; 20:17; 26:20; 26:35, 40; Mk. 8:33; Jn. 21:2) in the NT., although there remains a distinction between the two terms (cf. Lk. 6:13). Only Lk. 6:13 specifies that the Twelve were distinct from the disciples. Mk. 3:14-15 specifies the function of the Twelve; they were chosen to be with Jesus, and to be sent out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons. Lk. 9:1 specifies that Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, whom he sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. In the NT the 'apostles' are the

same group referred to by the synonym 'Twelve.' Their names indicate that they were males (cf. Mt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:14-19; Lk. 6:13-16). Yet in both the gospel of Mark and the gospel of John, it is women who are portrayed standing near the cross (cf. Mk. 15:40; Jn. 19:25). It is to a woman that the goodnews of the resurrection was first announced (cf. Lk. 23:55- 27:7; Jn. 20:1, 18). It is also women who inform the apostles about the resurrection (cf. Lk. 24:10). Women are the first evangelizers!

Amongst the host of unnamed disciples, it is a woman who has been singled out for special attention. This is the woman who is characterized as having touched Jesus (cf. Mk. 5:27-29; 30) in the midst of the crowd that was pressing against him (cf. Mk. 5:31-32). The woman in the crowd is defiled by bleeding and touches Jesus who is rushing to heal the 12 year old child 'untainted' as yet my menstruation (cf. Lev. 12:2). The comparison between both females is implied by the reference to the twelve years of age of the 'undefiled' one as compared with the twelve years of ailment of the 'defiled' one. Both are healed by Jesus and given back the chance to live a wholesome life again.

Finally, we reflect on the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman (cf. Mk. 7:24-39). That she does not condemn or criticize Jesus for refusing to give the children's food for the 'dogs' amplifies her unshakeable faith in Jesus, and in God's plan. One does well to remember that 'dogs' were considered unclean animals, and used here by Jesus to illustrate the urgency of his mission. The Syrophoenician woman accepts God's designs by acknowledging that even dogs are entitled to scraps that fall from the table. The woman totally surrenders to God's plan.

Conclusion

The stories that survive about women in the NT come to us through the eyes and hands of men – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, Jude, and James. The documents in reference are inerrant in that they have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, but are nevertheless incomplete in so far as it mirrors the role of women disciples in the NT. The NT was not designed to demonstrate the role of women but to testify to the good news of Jesus. Yet, the parable of the five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins (cf. Mt. 25:1-13), as well as the parable of the lost coin, reflect the importance of female discipleship (cf. Lk. 15:8-9).