

Jesus' Association with Women

One of the most remarkable features of Jesus' ministry was his relationship with women. Rigid boundaries between men and women marked the world in which he lived. Conventional wisdom is typically male-dominated patriarchy. Produced and written by men, it is taught by men to men and reflects a male point of view. So it was in the cultures surrounding the Jewish social world and within Judaism itself. Although there are positive statements about women in both the Old Testament and postbiblical Judaism, the dominant attitude reflected in the teaching of the sage was negative. A good wife was much appreciated, but women as a group were not thought well of. The synagogue prayer recited at each service included the words, "Blessed are thou, O Lord, who has not made me a woman." In a synagogue women typically were required to sit in a separate section and were not counted in the quorum of ten people needed to hold a prayer meeting. They did not teach the Torah, and as a general rule were not even to be taught the Torah. Men and women were rigidly separated in public life. Women were not talk to men outside of their families. Similarly, a respectable Jewish men (and especially a religious teacher) was not to talk much with women because women were regarded as inferior and therefore, women were excluded from both the religious and public life of social world. Against this background, Jesus' own behavior was extraordinary. ¹

Mary and Martha:

When Martha complained that she was doing all the work, Jesus endorsed Mary's behavior. In a first-century Jewish social context, it was a radical point. Jesus treated women and men as equally capable (and worthy) of dealing with sacred matters. When women were viewed as both dangerous and inferior, the practice of Jesus was startling. ²

The radically transformed attitude toward women continued in the early church for the first several decades, according to both Acts and the letters of Paul, where women in many of his churches were prominent enough to be greeted by name. Paul's own position was consistent with the radicalism of the Jesus' movement: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, *there is neither male nor female*; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ³

The radical attitude of the Jesus movement toward women was already modified within the church before the New Testament was even completed. One of the later New Testament documents repeats the patriarchal view of the dominant culture: women are to be submissive and modest, are *not* to be teachers of men, and are even held responsible for bringing sin into the world. Cultural attitude from the Jewish and broader Mediterranean world had begun to cloud the vision generated by the Spirit. Such attitude have been part of the church and Western culture ever since. Yet when one sees the rejection of patriarchy by Jesus and his earliest followers and the clear historical evidence that patriarchy reentered the tradition at a later date, representing a "fall" from the radicalism of the early movement, it is almost

¹ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 133-134

² Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 134

³ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 135.

incomprehensible that many within the church continue to teach the subordination of women. The Jesus' movement as a counterculture stands in contrast to later Christian tradition even as it stood out in its own social world.⁴

“Good News to the Poor”

According to Luke, the opening words of Jesus' public ministry announced “good news to the poor.” In the passage which begins with the words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus continued, “He has anointed me to preach *good news to the poor.*” Luke has simply, “Blessed are you poor,” and “Blessed are you that hunger now,” and makes clear that he has the economically poor in mind by contrasting them explicitly to the materially wealthy: “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. At the very least, Jesus challenged the connection between righteousness and prosperity made by conventional wisdom, with its corollary that the poor had not lived right and thus were “unworthy” children of Abraham. Moreover, because the standards of culture are internalized even in those who fail to meet those standards, the poor would have seen *themselves* as “unworthy” children of Abraham. By accepting “the poor,” Jesus as one in touch with the Spirit of God would have enabled the poor to see themselves differently.⁵

According to Luke, Jesus used language associated with the Jubilee year to announce his “good news to the poor.” His mission was “to proclaim release to the captive,” “to set at liberty those who are oppressed,” and “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,” all phrases tied to the Jubilee year, one of the most radical pieces of social legislation in the Old Testament. According to it, every fifty years the land was to be redistributed to the poor – that is, to those who had lost their land since the last Jubilee. The intention of the Jubilee was to prevent the growth of a landless class in Israel, though it was so radical that it was rarely observed. The Jubilee year was indeed good news for the poor, in effect the periodic elimination of the category of “poor.”⁶

However one understands Jesus' relationship to the Jubilee, it is apparent that he was concerned about the economically poor and that he had harsh words for the rich. He urged followers to give to beggars, to lend without expecting repayment, and to give alms without expecting reward. He spoke of the impossibility of serving both God and mammon, and warned against laying up treasures on earth. The “Jerusalem church,” composed of Jesus' immediate followers and early converts, apparently practiced a form of common ownership.⁷

[Jesus is good news to us] because he is an epiphany of God. Jesus was a “disclosure:” or “revelation” of God. He did not revealed God only his teaching but in his very way of being. The epiphany was *Jesus* – his “person” as well as his message. As such, he was an “image of God. What he was like therefore discloses what God is like.⁸

⁴ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 135.

⁵ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 135-136.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 136.

⁷ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 137.

⁸ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 191.

In traditional language, Jesus a revelation of the love of God. He was the love of God incarnate. His life thus provides particular content to what the love of God is like. The particular quality of that love is seen in the compassion which we see in the historical Jesus. It is the compassion which moved him to touch lepers, to heal on the Sabbath, to see in the ostracized members of the human community “children of God,” and to risk his life for the sake of saving his people.⁹ There is a social dimension as well as an individual dimension to the compassion of God as we see in Jesus. For him, the divine compassion included grief and anger about the blindness, injustice, and idolatry that caused human suffering. It included warnings of judgment as a threat and deterrent. As an image of God, Jesus mirrors the care of God for what happens to humans in the world of history itself. The life of culture matters to God.¹⁰

Jesus is also a model for the Christian life with the image of discipleship. To be a disciple meant “to follow after.” whoever would be my disciple, Jesus said, “Let him *follow me*.” To be a follower of Jesus means to take seriously what he took seriously, to be *like him* in some sense. It is what St. Paul meant when he said, “Be imitators of Christ.”¹¹

It has three core elements. First, its *source* is a “birth” in the Spirit. The birth involves that “dying to self” of which Jesus spoke and which he himself experienced: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Bonhoeffer’s epigram caught its meaning: “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.” The death leads to a new life, a rebirth out of the world of conventional wisdom and the preoccupation with the self and its securities which it sustains, to a new way of being. Being “born of the Spirit” creates a radically new identity, one longer conferred by culture.

The second core element of life in the Spirit is its dominant *quality*: compassion which is both a feeling and a way of being. One *feels* compassion *is* compassionate. Not simply a feeling of benevolent goodwill, it is a tenderness and “embracingness” which make empathy possible – a *feeling with* others and a capacity to be *moved* by their situation. As a feeling, it becomes a motive for deeds. As a way of being, it is a persistent trait or quality of character, a “virtue,” to use an old-fashioned word. One is to “be compassionate.”

Compassion is a grace, not an achievement. Its constancy does not ultimately depend upon an effort of will, but upon the relationship to the Spirit which we see in Jesus; empty of self, one can be filled with the Spirit of God the compassionate one. It is the primary “fruit of the Spirit.”¹²

⁹ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 192.

¹⁰ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 192. COMPASSION: According to Marcus Borg, in Hebrew (as well as in Aramaic), the word usually translated as “compassion” is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means “womb.” In the Hebrew Bible, *compassion* is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling. Sometimes it is very specifically linked to its association with *womb*: a woman feels compassion for the child of her own womb; a man feels compassion for his brother, who comes from the same womb. in terms of feeling, *compassion* means “to feel with,” as even the etymology of the English word suggests: “*Passion*” comes from the Latin word that means “to feel,” and the prefix “*com*” means “with.” **Compassion** thus means feeling the feeling of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something. But compassion is quite different from mercy. In English, *mercy* and *merciful* most commonly imply a superior in relationship to a subordinate, and also a situation of wrongdoing: One is merciful toward somebody to whom one has the right (or power) to act otherwise. *Compassion* suggests something else. Some scholar (William Blake) suggests that *mercy* wears a human face, and *compassion* a human heart (Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 47.

¹¹ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 193.

The third core element of life in the Spirit is a dialectical *relationship to culture*. As the movement to a life grounded in the Spirit of God, it is a movement away from the many securities offered by culture, whether goods, status, identity, nation, success, or righteousness. The vision of life lived and taught by Jesus means, as it did for the first disciples, leaving the “home” of conventional wisdom, whether religious or secular.¹³

Life in the Spirit creates a new community, an alternative community or alternative culture. The new life produced a new social reality, initially the “movement” and then the “church.” Church means a community which has been “called out.” In the Jewish world in which it was born and in the Roman world in which it lived, it stood out sharply as an alternative community with an alternative vision and values.¹⁴

The dominant values of contemporary American life – affluence, achievement, appearance, power, competition, consumption, individualism – are vastly different from anything recognizably Christian. As individuals and as a culture, with our securities and values centered in “this world,” in “the finite,” our existence has become massively idolatrous. We live in modern Babylon. To a large extent, Babylon also lives within the church, so thoroughly has it been infected with the “spirit of this age.” Modern cultures functions as a rival lord in our lives, conferring values and identity and demanding obedience, all in conformity to its vision of reality. Church must know that its Lord is different from the lord of the culture, its loyalties and values very different from the dominant consciousness of our culture. Its life must be grounded not in the world but *in God*.¹⁵

Jesus saw God as caring about what happened to human beings in history and he saw culture as something to be transformed, not simply rejected or legitimated.¹⁶

Jesus calls us to leave the life of conventional wisdom, whether secular or religious, American or Christian. He is an “undomesticated Jesus” who challenges all systems of conventional wisdom.¹⁷ It threatens our comfort within contemporary culture. The historical Jesus, with his call to a counter-

¹² Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 193.

¹³ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 194.

WISDOM is one of the most important concept for an understanding of what the New Testament says about Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus was a teacher of wisdom. On the other hand, the New Testament also presents Jesus as the incarnation of divine wisdom. Basically, wisdom concerns how to life. Central to it is the notion of a way or a path, indeed two ways or paths; the wise way and the foolish way (Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995) ,69). There are two types of wisdom and two types of sages. The most common type of wisdom is **conventional wisdom**; it teachers are conventional sages. This is the mainstream wisdom of a culture, “what everybody knows,” a culture’s understandings about what is real and how to live. The second type is a **subversive** (과괴분자) and **alternative wisdom**. This wisdom questions and undermines conventional wisdom and speaks of another way, another path. It teachers are subversive sages, and they include some of the most famous figures of religious history. The wisdom of subversive sages is the wisdom of “the road less traveled.” And **so it was with Jesus**: his wisdom spoke of “the narrow way,” which led to life, and the subverted the “broad way” followed by the many, which led to destruction. Jesus spoke of subversive and alternative wisdom Jesus used aphorisms and parables in order to speak his subversive wisdom (*Meeting Jesus Again* 70).

¹⁴ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 194.

¹⁵ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 195.

¹⁶ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 196.

¹⁷ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 199.

community with a counter-consciousness challenges the central value of contemporary American culture. Our quest for fulfillment seeks satisfaction through greater achievement, consumption, and enjoyment; our security rests in nuclear weapons; and our blindness and idolatry are visible in our stated willingness to blow up the world, in need be, to preserve our way of life. We as Christians are called to become the church in a culture whose values are largely alien to the Christian message, to be once again the church of the catacombs.¹⁸

¹⁸ Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 200.