

Jesus' Association with Women

One of the most remarkable features of Jesus' ministry was his relationship with women. Challenging the conventional wisdom of his time, it continues to challenge the conventional wisdom of much of the church. Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 133

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 incomprehensible that many within the church continue to teach the subordination of women. The Jesus' movement as a

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.

counterculture stands in contrast to later Christian tradition even as it stood out in its own social world.⁴

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