

Gender and Discipleship



“Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’ ”
(Luke 1:38, NRSV).

Women Disciples: Emergency Use Only?

Sabbath
January 26

INTRODUCTION

Judges 4; 5; Romans 16

Some say God uses women only when no men are around. Others believe women aren't meant to be disciples. Thankfully, people with such opinions didn't form a consultation committee for Jesus' birth, or the result could have been something like this:

"The committee has decided a man is eminently more suited for this job. A woman simply wouldn't have the right theological training required. Sure, Mary's a virgin, but does she know the Torah well enough to repeat it backward under water? No. We'll elect George to do it. He has a sensible-looking beard." Flippancy aside, *discipleship* is defined as "anyone who follows Christ" (*The Macquarie Dictionary*).

The word *disciple* does tend to bring to mind 12 men who toured the countryside with Jesus and who continued His work following His ascension. But it extends far beyond that to cover anyone of any gender, age, race, social status, or educational level who follows Jesus.

This includes women, who were last to leave Jesus' tomb before sundown and first to see Jesus after His resurrection.

Jesus didn't make explicit statements about the roles of men and women. He spent a lot of time with women. He valued them and their work, treating them the same as men—all in a society where Pharisees thanked God that they hadn't been born female.*

Being a disciple can lead women anywhere, from being a judge like Deborah, to Phoebe, the deaconess and minister commended by Paul in Romans 16, and to Dr. Ella Simmons, General Conference vice president.

If you're following God's leading and feel compelled to do His work, don't let anyone hold you back, regardless of your gender. God has a reason for making you a disciple. That reason might not see you doing anything out of the ordinary, but there's nothing better than doing what He wants.

**God has a reason for making
you a disciple.**

*MyJewishLearning.com. Liturgical Texts. Retrieved October 27, 2006 from http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/liturgical_texts/Overview_Jewish_Prayer_Book/

Sunday
January 27

Transformative Women

LOGOS

Mark 5:24–34; Luke 1:26–38; John 4:4–30

If you hang out in the pews a bit, you might notice something. There are more people making decisions than being disciples. Deciding to *be* a Christian is a piece of cake compared to *becoming* Christlike. Making the decision can take just a moment, but *becoming* like Jesus is a life-long journey of transformation.

Our world is one in which position, influence, prestige, and power are highly valued. Perhaps that is why there are more decision makers than disciples. Two core qualities Jesus modeled—humility and submission—are perceived as weakness in a patriarchal or male-dominated culture. However, a key part of transformation is the willingness to experience brokenness: Humility + Submission + Brokenness = Transformative Power.

For proof that this math works, we only have to listen to the stories of some New Testament women. It's no accident that these stories feature the gender with the lowest social status in the ancient world and still in some cultures today. Most likely, they were acutely aware of their supposed limitations. But that didn't stop God from using them as a transformative power in their world.

**Then, out of the blue, an
angel walks in. . . .**

**Young + Unmarried +
Woman = Mother of Jesus Christ, God's Son (Luke 1:26–38)**

Imagine this: You're engaged to be married. A good girl from a nice religious home, you have not indulged in premarital sex. Then, out of the blue, an angel walks in and announces that you've been chosen to give birth to the leader of a revolutionary regime. Not just any regime, mind you, but the kingdom of God!

What would you have said?

Mary asked, "How can this happen? I'm not married." The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you. For this reason the baby will be holy and will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, NCV). Submitting her reputation to a greater purpose, Mary responded, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say!" (Luke 1:38, NCV).

Let's look at the math again: Young + Unmarried + Woman = Mother of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Mary's humility and submission gave birth to the "greatest story ever told."

Sick + Broken + Woman = Healed and Restored (Mark 5:24–34)

Imagine this: You've been bleeding for 12 years. You suffer constantly from fatigue, and you've spent all of your money hoping for a cure. Then you hear about a traveling healer. Deciding you've got nothing left to lose, you head out in search of a healing touch.

There are so many people crowded around Him that it takes all your energy just to get within arm's reach. In desperation you reach out.

Suddenly, the Healer whirls around and asks who touched Him. Everyone is looking right at you. They realize you are the bleeding woman, the unclean one, and they recoil. But then the Healer says, "Dear woman, you are made well because you believed. Go in peace; be healed of your disease" (Mark 5:34, NCV).

Let's look at the math again: Sick + Broken + Woman = Healed and Restored. This woman was humble enough to admit through her faith that one touch would heal. Many witnessed the power of her belief and thus came to faith themselves.

Thirsty + Promiscuous + Woman = Conduit for the Messiah's Message (John 4:4–30)

Imagine this: It's the hottest part of the day, and you've snuck out to the well for some water. You're hoping no one else will be out there in this heat. Unfortunately, there is a Man sitting there. As you approach, He asks for a drink of water.

The Samaritan woman was shocked that a Jew spoke to her. Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans. When she questioned Him on it, the Stranger said something cryptic about having water that would quench her thirst forever. He somehow knew all about her failed relationships, yet was still quite happy to talk with her. He then announced that He was the Messiah! She rushed back to the village to tell others what she had found.

Let's look at the math again: Thirsty + Promiscuous + Woman = Conduit for the Messiah's Message. Broken relationships were restored when this woman forgot her social stigma and carried the message of the Messiah to her village.

While these stories focus on women, a life transformed is just that—regardless of your gender.

REACT

1. Did Jesus disciple women differently from the way He disciplined men? Explain your answer.
2. Why should gender never be an issue when discussing discipleship?
3. What weakness might be your strength if submitted to God's transformative power?

Monday
January 28

Jesus Reaching Women

TESTIMONY

Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42

“Jesus knows the burden of every mother’s heart. He who had a mother that struggled with poverty and privation sympathizes with every mother in her labors. He who made a long journey in order to relieve the anxious heart of a Canaanite woman will do as much for the mothers of today. He who gave back to the widow of Nain her only son, and who in His agony upon the cross remembered His own mother, is touched today by the mother’s sorrow.”¹

It was often women who reached out to Jesus in the deepest, most meaningful ways. “The fragrant gift which Mary had thought to lavish upon the dead body of the Saviour she poured upon His living form. . . . The women who bore spices to the tomb found their errand in vain, for He had risen. But Mary, pouring out her love upon the Saviour while He was conscious of her devotion, was anointing Him for the burial. And as He went down into the darkness of His great trial, He carried with Him the memory of that deed, an earnest of the love that would be His from

His redeemed ones forever.”²

“The women repeat the words again and again.”

The first to declare His resurrection, women rushed to share the good news, “He is risen, He is risen! The women repeat the words again and again. No need now for the

anointing spices. The Saviour is living, and not dead. They remember now that when speaking of His death He said that He would rise again. What a day is this to the world! Quickly the women departed from the sepulcher ‘with fear and great joy; and did run to bring His disciples word.’¹”³

REACT

1. Why do you think women played an integral role in Jesus’ ministry?
2. What does Jesus reaching out to women say about Him in today’s context?

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 512.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 560.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 789.

Discipleship Through the Ages

EVIDENCE

Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42

There were many occasions when the women in Jesus' life were willing to listen to the teachings of the Master. The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42) is a shining example of Christ's loving acknowledgment of Mary's willingness to sit and listen. And He expresses His disappointment that Martha is not more like Mary in her keen interest in His wisdom.

Christ was always surrounded by His followers, of which there were at least a handful of women (Luke 8:1–3). Christ was happy to have women with Him as He traveled. Following His ascension, there were a number of women in the small assembly awaiting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14).

These women were just as willing to travel and preach as the men. A young girl answered the door when Peter was released by God from prison (Acts 12:13, 14). A husband and wife team—Ananias and Sapphira—was struck down for not giving what they had offered to the Lord (Acts 5:1–11). It was a kind-hearted woman named Tabitha who gave of herself to help the poor. Upon news of her death, Peter was sent for and raised her from the dead (Acts 9:36–42).

Christ was happy to have women with Him as He traveled.

There are also many prominent women through the history of our church who have shaped and changed the way we worship. The most prominent of these is Ellen White. Her ministry and many of her visions have shaped what we believe and the way we worship.

There have been a great many female disciples in history, women who strove to develop Christ's character with the help of the Holy Spirit. Part of this character involves pointing others to this way of living: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19, 20, NIV). It is a genderless call—all are invited to participate.

REACT

1. What are some ways we can become better disciples in our church?
2. Can you think of other examples of Christ interacting with female disciples during His time on earth?

Sitting at the Feet of Jesus

HOW-TO

Phil. 4:9

Martha worked hard during the day and into the evening. “I don’t have time for all this sitting about and chatting, why doesn’t Mary help me?”

“Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:41, 42, NIV).

Mary was captivated by Jesus and the great things He had to tell her. She chose to put Him first and soak up every precious word He uttered. Mary understood how important it was to be grounded in Him and His teaching. Her faith is evident and points to a large part of discipleship.

Other women throughout the Bible also have shown their faith and dedication. Mary, the mother of Jesus, showed faith when she accepted what the angel told her (Luke 1:26–38). The woman who touched Jesus’ cloak showed great faith and courage to step outside her comfort zone (Mark 5:25–34), as did the widow who put her last coins into the temple treasury (Mark 12:41–44). Faith and a willingness to express and share it is something that makes a person a disciple of Christ.

“I don’t have time for all this sitting about and chatting. . . .”

So how can we build and share our faith to be effective disciples?

1. Incorporate prayer into daily activities. Pray when you wake up and before you sleep, in the car on the way to work, during breaks, or as you exercise.

2. Make time to study the Bible. Find a quiet place in your home or at a local park, and devote at least half an hour, twice a week or more, to delve into Scripture. Learn texts from the Bible and think about a different one each time you open the fridge or enter a certain room.

3. Fellowship. Spend some quality time with other Christians. Pray and study together. Encourage each other.

4. Be witnesses. Share your faith with others when opportunities arise; be courteous, practice hospitality, and treat people with respect.

REACT

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in effective discipleship?

Incorruptible Beauty

OPINION

Prov. 31:30

Have you ever spent time with a woman who isn't trying to be beautiful, but who is reflecting godly beauty from the inside out? This genuine beauty can come only from God, and I would guess that such a woman has been sitting at the feet of Jesus, as His disciple.

Women must be humble and teachable disciples before they disciple others. You may say that the women of Jesus' day had an advantage because they were taught by Him in person. But Jesus said, "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7, NKJV).

Does this mean women today can be disciples as much, if not more, than the women we studied this week? To love God is to love and disciple those around us, pointing them to Jesus. We can do this only if we ourselves have been in His presence in unbroken relationship through daily surrender and openness to His will. This allows His love to be carried to a world craving genuine, beautiful, Christlike love.

What if we dedicated more of our time to reading the Word and searching our hearts to see what items we need to give up that are not in line with God's love? How many more women disciples would there be? How much more could God's love rid us of our selfishness and fill us instead with His agapé love?

What amazing things God can do through a woman of faith who doesn't justify herself or depend on herself, but who "being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in [her] will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6, NKJV). In and of ourselves, we cannot do a thing: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17, NKJV). When we realize this and rest in God, we become effective disciples. That's when He allows His glory to accomplish great things through us.

As another ancient wise man put it, "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised" (Prov. 31:30, NKJV).

To love God is to love and
disciple those around us. . . .

REACT

1. How can one learn to be a "woman [or man] at rest"?
2. Is women's spirituality different from that of men? If so, how?

Friday
February 1

Who Can Be a Disciple?

EXPLORATION

Luke 1:38

CONCLUDE

Anyone who follows Jesus is His disciple, regardless of gender, age, race, or social status. There is controversy in our church about what role women should fill. In the Bible, we see many stories of women who ministered to Jesus and to whom Jesus ministered—women who were His followers, His disciples.

A woman of faith who spends time with God and prayerfully seeks to carry out His will for her life will find a ministry that best serves the community she lives in and best glorifies God. He will accomplish great things through any person who desires to serve Him.

CONSIDER

- Forming a focus group to come up with ideas about how to involve more women or more people from other groups who may feel left out in ministry.
- Writing an article about a person who became involved in ministry in spite of opposition due to gender.
- Asking yourself if your gender or age or social status (or any other part of your unique circumstances) is keeping you from fulfilling God's plan for you in ministry.
- Role-playing in a group how you could respond to someone who has a problem with women in ministry.
- Re-reading Mary's song in Luke 1:47–55 and finding or writing a melody that matches her words.
- Discussing the actions of women in the Bible who ministered to others.

CONNECT

Morris L. Venden, *How Jesus Treated People*, "How Jesus Treated Women," pp. 72–77; C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World*, "Leading Ladies," pp. 184–193.