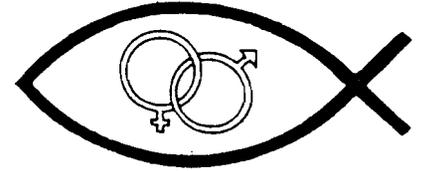


# Priscilla Papers



*"Priscilla and Aquilla instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord"*

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## JESUS CALLS MEN AND WOMEN TO FOLLOW HIM

by Evelyn Bence

I walk into the small suburban house, not quite knowing what the next hour will hold. My church-sponsored home group is going to be led through a guided meditation.

I've been told the group leader will "walk" us through a familiar story line, Jesus calling the twelve, and each of us will visualize herself as one of the disciples. By envisioning ourselves in the middle of this Gospel scene, we'll give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to address us personally.

Though I intend to observe more than participate, I follow each of the leader's instructions. From head to foot I relax tensed muscles. I breathe deeply to the count of ten. For 30 seconds I silently and slowly repeat "You are the light of the world" inhaling on the first four syllables, exhaling on the last three.

Finally, I'm centered in and our leader sets the stage: "You are in a boat, fishing. A man is walking on the beach. First He stops and talks to one person, who follows Him."

The director pauses after each sentence, giving us time to fill in our own details. My mind is thoroughly occupied with details of the setting, particularly of clothing. *Am I wearing jeans or first-century robes? And what about Jesus' clothes?*

*Jeans all around, I decide. If Jesus is talking to me, then Jesus is a 1986 beach-walker and I am a 1986 fish-catcher.*

Andrew, then Peter, in my mind, leave their work and follow the stranger. Then He approaches me, staring at the fishing nets that need to be hauled in.

I look at Him. He has stopped and is giving me His undivided attention. But before He says a word I — reserved though I am — hurl at him a barrage of words. They seem to rise from the back of my mind's uninvented storage bins.

"Wait a minute!" I protest. "I'm not strong enough to pull in these nets. And besides, you've got it all wrong. You're supposed to call the *men*, and we women are supposed to follow."

He doesn't say a word at first, but stares at me more intensely than before, as if His eyes are beaming a silent message: "Listen to yourself. Do you know what you're saying?"

Somewhat embarrassed by my outburst, I play back what I have just heard myself say. And I cringe. I'm an independent, professional, whole woman. I don't really believe God thinks I'm supposed to tag along behind while someone else gets the real call.

Finally, Jesus speaks. "Do you think I'm the light of only half of the world? ... I came to break down the walls, not to build them higher."

The director of the meditation interrupts my thoughts, announcing it is time for all of us to come back from the fishing boats to the small, white-walled living room in which we are sitting. I open my eyes, suddenly frightened by the intensity of the emotions that have surfaced.

Where had they been hiding? Why had they bubbled up now? Why hadn't the story progressed far enough for Jesus to ask me to follow Him or for me to answer? Though I have said yes to His call on numerous previous occasions, why now can't I allow His call a personal hearing?

I've never heard a sermon on Jesus saying, "Follow me," that was addressed to men only. Yet, my analysis of the meditation is that I've apparently heard a few too many messages in the Church that have, intentionally or not, excluded me.

There is an assumption on the part of many church leaders, I've been told, that we women are capable of making the necessary distinctions. We should know when "brothers" is supposed to include *sisters*, when "son" is supposed to mean *or daughter*, when "he" is supposed to mean *she*. But because I'm sometimes included and sometimes not, I get confused, at least subconsciously.

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Formerly the managing editor of "Today's Christian Woman," Evelyn Bence is a free-lance writer and editor whose latest book is *Mary's Journal* (Zondervan 1992). Her article first appeared in "Good News," May/June 1986, and is reprinted by permission.

# A MEDITATION

David Robert Black

I'm more painfully aware of the problem than are some women, less aware than others. Some find it nearly impossible to make the mental transition, for example, from "brother" to *sister*. These women are so defined by their gender that they cannot think, "Yes, I know that the pastor just called us all brethren. But he really included me, even though he didn't actually say so."

Other women, it seems, translate "he" into *she* without much thought or struggle. They are able to sing "Rise Up O Men of God" as if *they*, in their dresses, were setting out to battle.

I, somewhere near the middle between these two extremes, can *usually* translate male nouns and pronouns into female equivalents. But not without conscious effort and often a twinge of pain, or maybe resentment that the task is required of me. But then again, I sometimes get into trouble because sometimes I'm not supposed to make the switch — the speaker really intends his "he" to be *he*.

To me, a solution to the problem doesn't seem outside the realm of possibility. For now, I would be content merely with some *effort* toward a solution. Replacing "he" with "he or she" or with "person," even occasionally, would be progress and a hopeful sign.

Six years ago I sat near the back of the church I regularly attended, listening to the Sunday School superintendent. He was giving a motivational challenge to the young students assembled for opening exercises. Pounding his right fist into his left palm, he exclaimed with great conviction, "You've got to grow up to be strong men of God!"

Inwardly I flinched. I wasn't aware that I'd made my pain visible. Furthermore, I had not verbalized to anyone in the congregation my frustrations with the church's attitude toward women. But to me there was no mistaking what happened next.

As soon as the words had left his mouth, the superintendent looked straight at me. The expression on my face, I suppose, must have been similar to the look on Jesus' when he stared at me, the fish-catcher who insisted she was not really wanted as a disciple. For the superintendent paused, as if to listen to himself. Then with only slightly less conviction, he continued, "And you've got to grow up to be strong *women* of God."

I smiled. If he'd corrected himself once, there was hope — he could learn to make such inclusiveness a habit.

As we begin each new day, not knowing what we'll experience, we trust in God's great love. Whether the day be good or ill, whether it be happy or heart-breaking, God's love will surround and sustain our lives. That's the promise in the new Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (USA):

"Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still" (lines 49-51).

"For a long time," the Lord remarks, "I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." God is like a woman in travail, proclaims the prophet, painfully thrashing about and destroying all that imprisons Israel and keeps her in exile, then wonderfully giving birth to a great miracle: the return home (Isaiah 42:14-17).

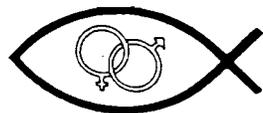
All this time, though, Israel is lamenting, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." Not so! "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast," God asks, "and have no compassion on the child she has borne?" It's most unlikely! Tragically, however, it does happen. Nevertheless, says the Lord, "though she may forget, I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:14-15).

In fact, not only is Israel not forgotten, but God is doing something wonderful and new! So many will come home that Israel will wonder, "Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up?" It seems to be implied that God gives birth to them, that God raises them. And so it is. These sons and daughters are brought by and include the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:19-23).

It's from the prophet Isaiah, then, that we take the comparison: "Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, God is faithful still." The description is, therefore, fully biblical. It is a picture of powerful emotion and comfort.

I grew up in the Christian & Missionary Alliance, a denomination established by Presbyterian pastor A.B. Simpson. He spoke of the Holy Spirit as the "One who meets all the heart's longing for motherhood."

"As our heavenly Mother," Simpson preached, "the Comforter assumes our nurture, training, teaching, and the whole direction of our life." Working with "consid-



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