BY THE TIME JESUS CAME INTO GALILEE PREACHING and healing, the Israelites had been in exile over six hundred years. Jeremiah had promised that it would only be seventy years. Seventy years away from the land. Seventy years without the temple. Seventy years to contemplate their sins and bemoan their losses. Seventy years to reconnect with their God. And they had gotten back to the land. They had rebuilt the temple. They made sacrifices. They celebrated holidays once again. But it wasn’t what they expected. The glorious prophecies of Isaiah concerning the return from exile seemed to mock their present reality. It seemed to many people in Israel that the exile had been extended from seventy to nearly seven hundred years. Some Jews had begun to wonder if it would ever end!

Others continued to look for Isaiah’s “shoot from the stump of Jesse,” who would possess the “Spirit of the Lord” like the prophets of old. They longed for this “shoot” to judge the poor righteously like Isaiah had promised, to strike the earth (or perhaps more particularly the Gentiles) with “the rod of his mouth.” When this happened, Isaiah told them, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” But Jesus did not usher in the sort of kingdom the Israelites were expecting.

Much of this hope, I believe, came from the book of Isaiah. In fact, I would suggest that Isaiah was Jesus’ ministry manual. I think he understood his mission in Isaiah’s terms. At several crucial points in the gospel narratives Jesus uses Isaiah to explain his mission, to set it in the prophetic context. Jesus’ eating and drinking with “tax collectors and sinners” anticipated the great messianic banquet in Isaiah 25 when death itself will be destroyed. “On this mountain the Lord himself will make for all people a feast of rich foods, a feast of well-aged wines. . . . Then the Lord will wipe away every tear from their faces.” Jesus’ healing ministry could be seen against the backdrop of Isaiah 35 when God saved the exiles and returned them through a newly flourishing desert to their own land: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” According to Luke, the text of Jesus’ first sermon was drawn from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” But perhaps especially important, Jesus’ suffering and redeeming death is anticipated in the suffering and death of the servant in Isaiah 52 and 53. “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole.” Jesus framed his ministry with the words of Isaiah.

But Isaiah was not the only important book. In one sense, Jesus’ ministry was rooted in the entire Old Testament. According to Old Testament scholar Donald Gowan, one of its most significant themes is the death and resurrection of Israel. With the exile, Israel in a sense died. The prophets show how this death occurred and how a resurrection will be made possible. Consider the powerful images of Ezekiel 37: the valley of dry bones. God tells the prophet, “these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are
cut off completely.’” God says, Not so! The dry, dead bones of Israel will live. There will be a resurrection. So the spirit-breath of God rattles the bones back together, enfleshes them, and raises up a mighty army. Israel is resurrected. This is the hope of the prophets, indeed of the entire Old Testament.

Jesus, I believe, in his life and ministry re-enacts and anticipates this “death” of the exile and re-enacts and anticipates the “resurrection” of the return. He says the exile is over. The banquet has begun. The wholeness of the kingdom has already arrived for the blind, the lame, and the speechless. And in his death, Israel dies; in his resurrection, Israel is reborn—but in reality something more than Israel. His death and resurrection would usher in the kingdom not just for Israel, but for everyone—Jews and Gentiles alike. All would die and rise with him. As Paul would put it later, “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:21, 22).

How could the kingdom of “Jesse’s branch” be for more than just Israel? For Isaiah, the kingdom of God was more than just a victory for Israel. It was more than just the vindication of the righteous in Israel. For Isaiah, the arrival of the kingdom meant the old divisions, the old restrictions, the old borders were going to be eliminated. Isaiah, I believe, saw in the kingdom the reversal of the restrictive holiness code of Leviticus—the code that set boundaries around people, places, times, and objects; the laws that set priestly restrictions and defined what was clean and unclean.

In Isaiah 56, God speaks through the prophet and tells the Gentiles and the eunuchs that both would have access to God. Deuteronomy declared that Gentiles and eunuchs and other severely damaged human beings had no or very limited access to God. But Isaiah says, in effect, when the exile is over, that is all over. And in fact, there is even more.

For Isaiah, another significant division was about to cease. There would no longer be a difference between priest and people. “You shall all be called priests of the Lord; you shall all be named ministers of our God” (Isaiah 61:6). This was God’s original intent. In Exodus 19, he declared to all Israel: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Jesus developed these ideas even further in his ministry of teaching and healing.

For Christians, of course, this is one of the new things God was doing through the church. Peter writes to the church in Asia Minor, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” And in the book of Revelation we are told over and over that God has made us “a kingdom of priests.” At the end of the book, we are told that all those who are raised to new life “will be priests of God and of Christ.” In the kingdom of God, all God’s people are priests!

But there was more to the contribution of Israel’s prophets. Not only were all God’s people to be priests with access to God, with the right to lead the praises of God, but also in the kingdom, all God’s people would possess the Spirit! No longer would the Spirit be limited to kings, to prophets, to priests, but God’s Spirit would be for everyone. God declared through the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days will I pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28). Peter, in his sermon in Acts 2, argued that this was fulfilled at Pentecost with the fall of the Spirit on the men and women of the infant church. But it was not just Joel. Jeremiah and Ezekiel had essentially promised the same thing. According to Ezekiel, God declared, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you . . . . I will put my Spirit within you” (Ezekiel 36:26,27). In the kingdom of God, neither the charismatic or priestly functions are limited to one class of people. All God’s people are priests! All God’s people have the Spirit!

Jesus’ ministry, then, begins with all this as a background. In the kingdom he was proclaiming, all would be holy and all would have access to God—even Gentiles, even the unclean, even the damaged, even the least, the lost, the losers. Jesus came to proclaim a kingdom fashioned after the prophecy of Isaiah. But his notion of the kingdom was immediately resisted, immediately attacked. Why? Because Jesus and his opponents had major differences on the matter of holiness. For the Pharisees and other Jews, holiness was about separation, but for Jesus holiness was about access. For his opponents, holiness was fragile. For Jesus holiness was powerful. Jesus wanted to unify what they wanted to keep separate.

The destruction of the temple in 587 BC was a terrible shock to Israel. The subsequent exile brought their whole
nation to the brink of annihilation. As they went about rebuilding their corporate life after the return from the exile, setting boundaries became critically important. Gentiles had shown themselves dangerous, destructive. To preserve their integrity, Israelites had to keep away from them. Nehemiah had even insisted that the Israelites send their foreign wives and children away when he was governor of the post-exilic community. But how could you avoid them when the Gentiles were in control of things? What could you do when you had to see them in the marketplace, the law court, in the fields and farms? And it would just get worse.

As devastating as the exile was, perhaps an even more severe shock occurred when the Greek King Antiochus Epiphanes had essentially tried to destroy the Jews in the second century BC by integrating them into his kingdom socially and religiously as well as politically. He had taken over the temple of God, installed his own puppet high priest, offered pigs on the holy altar, and tried to prevent the circumcision of Jewish boys and the practice of the Jewish law. This had resulted in the Maccabean revolt that had given the Jews their freedom for a century. But now they were back under the thumb of Gentiles—this time Rome. Once more they were longing to be set free; once more they were looking for their messiah, waiting for the kingdom.

The perhaps understandable religious response to all this threat was to erect ever-higher barriers between the people and the world around them; they tried even harder to stay clean, keep holy, and avoid contamination. The Pharisees and other Jews were convinced that the way to the kingdom was the route of separation, of rigorous exclusion of all who were incapable of keeping themselves pure. They thought holiness was fragile and needed to be protected. Like soft fruit, it was easily bruised. Those with questionable standards of holiness were roundly condemned as “sinners” and despised for their compromise. They were seen as a threat to holiness.

Somewhat later than the time of Christ, a chart of relative holiness was worked out. Holiness was ranked from the least holy to the most holy. Scholar Jerome Neyrey calls it a “holiness map.” With regard to places, the land of Israel as a whole was less holy than the walled cities, which were less holy than Jerusalem. The temple mount was less holy than the court of the Gentiles, the court of women more holy than the court of the Gentiles, the court of Israel more holy than the court of women, the courts of priests more holy than the court of Israel, the holy place more holy than the court of priests, and the holy of holies the most holy place of all.

People were also ranked according to holiness. At the bottom of the heap were eunuchs (the least holy), followed by illegitimate children, temple slaves, freed slaves, Gentile converts, Israelite women, Israelite men, Levites, priests. The holiest places had to be protected, of course, from the least holy people. Eunuchs couldn’t enter the temple at all. Gentiles could only go to the court of the Gentiles. Israelite women could only go as far as the court of women. Israelite men only as far as the court of Israel. Only priests could enter the holy place. And only the high priest could enter the most holy place and then only once a year. Holiness was fragile. Holiness had to be protected.

Jesus then came like a thunderclap, like the proverbial bull into this ecclesiastical china shop. He said holiness was not fragile; it was powerful. He said holiness was not about separation, but about access. He said holiness was not for the select few who kept their skirts clean, but for anyone—most especially those whose compromises were profound and obvious. He insisted that all God’s people were holy, not just the priests, not just the Pharisees, and not just the men!

Jesus violated all the rules about holiness of times, people, and places. He ate the wrong things at the wrong times and touched the wrong people. He healed a demon-possessed man on the Sabbath. He touched a leper. He had dinner with the lowest of the low—tax collectors. According to Mark 7, he even declared “all foods clean,” in effect overthrowing the whole system of taboo that had given shape to Israel. He tossed the tables of the money-changers out of the court of the Gentiles because they limited what little access the Gentiles had to the God of Israel. Jesus threatened the settled views of the religious powers—that-were with his declaration that with his arrival and the arrival of the kingdom all bets were off. Something new was set loose in the world. Holiness was not about separation, but access; and it was not fragile, but powerful.

Mark 5 is a key passage. Here Jesus deals with the most extreme cases to show that the old barriers are down and that access is possible for anyone and everyone. It is as if the gospel writer was playing a game of “can you top this?” Mark 5 entails three impossible cases. The first case is a demon-possessed Gentile living in a cemetery surrounded by pigs. For a Jew you couldn’t get much worse. He was spiritually unclean, ritually unclean, racially unclean, and probably physically unclean! The evil powers in him are

“Whatever local and particular restrictions Paul may have implied in some of his writings, his work everywhere assumes that women have gifts, possess the Spirit, and exercise those gifts freely alongside their male colleagues in the community.”
“Jesus came to proclaim a kingdom fashioned after the prophecy of Isaiah. But his notion of the kingdom was immediately resisted, immediately attacked. Why? Because Jesus and his opponents had major differences on the matter of holiness. For the Pharisees and other Jews, holiness was about separation, but for Jesus holiness was about access.”

like an army, and no human agency has been able to do a thing about him. Jesus heals him with a word and sends him back to his community to bear witness to what God had done for him. Jesus’ holiness and power were not threatened by the uncleanness of this man. Rather it became a healing and restoring force. Jesus’ holiness restored the man’s sanity and life. No barrier to holiness can stand in the way of what Jesus brings.

The next two stories belong together. Jesus is approached by a synagogue official whose little daughter is gravely ill. He is implored to come and heal her. On the way a desperate woman touches Jesus. This woman has been bleeding for twelve years. Physicians have been able to do nothing. Like the demon-possessed man in the cemetery, she is a hopeless case. Also like that man, she is a defiling presence. According to the book of Leviticus, a woman in her condition was unclean as long as the condition persisted. Any object she touched was defiled. Any room she entered was defiled. Any person she touched was defiled. Her condition in effect cut her off from the social, religious, and familial life of her community. In her own way, she was as desperate and isolated as a leper or as the demoniac cutting himself with stones in the cemetery.

Furthermore, she took a considerable risk trying to get to Jesus in the crowd. Were she found out, the crowd would doubtless be enraged that she had risked their ritual purity by pressing through to Jesus. But when she touches Jesus, he isn’t defiled—she is healed. The old holiness patterns are once more shattered. Holiness is not fragile: it is strong, powerful, and healing.

The final case is the synagogue official’s young daughter. Before Jesus can get to her, she dies. So far as the law was concerned, a dead body was the most unclean thing of all. The rabbis considered a dead body the source of all impurity. But Jesus is no more afraid of this dead body than he was of the bleeding woman in the crowd, or the raging demoniac among the pigs. He touches her, raises her to life, and returns her to her parents. Once more, holiness is not fragile—it is powerful. Once more even the least, the lost, and the losers have access to the healing power of God. The old barriers are removed.

Perhaps this is most dramatically illustrated by Mark 15:38. At the death of Jesus, the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom. What does this suggest? No longer is access to God limited. No longer is one place, one person, or one thing more holy than the other. The old system that put a fence around holiness and tried to protect it is destroyed by Jesus’ death and resurrection. In a few weeks, the Holy Spirit infused believers, fulfilling the promise of Joel. All God’s people are priests! All God’s people have the Spirit! All God’s people are holy!

Jesus, then, came to declare that access to God was possible for all. With his death and resurrection, the life of the kingdom arrived and showed its power in the new community he formed to live out his teachings: the church. While the kingdom in its fullness is not here yet, the church is the community of the kingdom, even now. The church is the place where the kingdom is anticipated. It is, as someone once put it, the sacrament of the kingdom. In the church, kingdom air is breathed, kingdom life is experienced, and kingdom values are demonstrated. The church is the place where All God’s people are priests! All God’s people have the Spirit! All God’s people are holy!

The rest of the New Testament shows the church struggling with this dizzying new set of possibilities. Paul, for example, worried about the Galatians who wanted to replace the glorious freedom of the kingdom with the passé restrictions of the law. This would in effect restore the barriers Jesus had broken down with his death and resurrection. Grown-up sons and daughters, Paul argues, don’t need to act like little kids. Having left the restrictions of the holiness code with its barriers and boundaries, it would be disastrous, even heretical, for them to go back. The old laws about persons, places, times, and foods had been suspended. They could eat anything at anytime with anyone they wanted. “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” When writing “in Christ” here, I would suggest Paul means “in the kingdom.” In Christ, something entirely new had arrived. As he told the Corinthians, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.” His message was completely consistent with the message of Jesus.

Paul also insisted that the Spirit was given to all and that spiritual gifts were given to all. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jew or Greek, slave or free—and are all made to drink of the one Spirit.” It is clear that Paul understood these gifts to be given to both men and
women. According to 1 Corinthians 11, women prayed and prophesied in the Pauline church. Prophecy, you remember, Paul considered perhaps the most important gift of all: “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1). Once more Paul is clearly following Jesus. *All God’s people are priests! All God’s people are holy!*

All this suggests to me that any restriction on any of God’s people, male or female, is contrary to the kingdom ideal and a violation of the express intent of Jesus. Making such distinctions is no longer valid in the new creation. Women should not be restricted in any way in their service of God. This is contrary to the witness of Jesus, of Paul, and of the entire New Testament.

So what about those so-called “hard passages,” the passages that seem to limit women? Those passages must be read in light of the intentions of Jesus and the presence of the kingdom of God in the church. They cannot be understood to contradict the clear expectation of Jesus that the barriers would be removed and that all God’s people would have the Spirit, be holy, and be priests. Secondly, whatever local and particular restrictions Paul may have implied in some of his writings, his work everywhere assumes that women have gifts, possess the Spirit, and exercise those gifts freely alongside their male colleagues in the community. In fact, he makes reference to several women who were leaders of house churches, roughly equivalent to pastors today. It seems clear that Priscilla (also, it seems, the main teacher of Apollos) was the leader of a house church along with her husband Aquila. Nympha in Colossians 4, Lydia in Acts 16, Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4 are also sited as examples of leaders of early Christian congregations. Phoebe is called a deacon in Romans 16 and is assumed to act as a leading representative of her church.

The only problem text really is 1 Timothy 2:11-12, and I would suggest we misread it. Sometimes we read texts according to our historic assumptions and not according to their cultural context and linguistic reality. Our theological assumptions can get in the way of a correct reading. For example, for years when members of the pre-Reformation church heard the word “repentance” they thought of “penance” and the process of confessing to a priest and receiving absolution. We hear the word quite differently today. An alternative reading to a historically accepted one is not necessarily wrong because it seems novel.

Linda Belleville suggests 1 Timothy 2:12 should be translated “I do not permit a woman to teach a man in a domineering way but to have a quiet spirit.” She suggests in the situation of the emerging church in Ephesus there were perhaps problems with certain women there who assumed superiority to men. 1 Timothy 2:12 is not a general statement for all time, but a warning against the abuse of freedom in a particular setting. To take it as a passage limiting the ministry of women is to violate the express intent of our Lord that the old barriers be removed and that every-one have access to the gifts and graces of the kingdom.

The church stands before the world representing the life of the kingdom—anticipating the life of the kingdom. In this kingdom, Jesus declared holiness was not about separation, but about access. In this kingdom, Jesus declared the least, the lost, and the losers are invited to the party. In this kingdom the restrictions regarding people, places, times, and objects are removed. In this kingdom, this peaceable kingdom of Isaiah, *All God’s people are priests! All God’s people have the Spirit! All God’s people are holy!*

Why, Paul wondered and I wonder, would we want to go back to the old pattern of restriction and barrier, of slavery and fear?

The evangelical church has struggled with the question of women in ministry long enough. It is time to put the questions and doubts behind us and follow Jesus’ kingdom path. The time is past for any Christian church to refuse to consider a woman pastor. The time is past for women to remain on the margins of leadership in our institutional life. It is time for all the gifts and graces of the Spirit to be used because: *All God’s people are priests! All God’s people have the Spirit! All God’s people are holy!* The challenge of mission is too large to marginalize anyone. The veil to the to the holy of holies is open to all. Let us not set that curtain up again.

---

**Bibliography**


---

**Notes**

1. Painting by Marc Frans titled “The Lamb” is displayed in the Museum Boymans-van-Beuningen, Rotterdam.