

A MAN FOR ALL PEOPLE

Brynn Harrington

Many women have felt that the patriarchal overtones of Scripture exclude them from participating in God's divine work: only men are to be the leaders, preachers, and teachers. They find the masculinity of Jesus limiting instead of liberating because they cannot relate to his male identity. Some go so far as to assert that Jesus's maleness is proof that only men can take up those mantles.¹ If Jesus as a man was the perfect human, how can women ever hope to measure up?

The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas puts this approach into blaringly oppressive terms:

Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven." (114)

Thankfully, canonized Scripture disagrees with this attitude and says something entirely different. This was not the design of the garden of Eden or of the new kingdom of God. We should no longer be living under the old discord of hierarchical humanity. Instead, we must claim the new call to live to the fullest of our humanity, embrace the diversity of gifts in God's kingdom, and liberate others to do the same.



This is a huge task. Where do we begin? Let's look to Jesus.

THE PARTICULARITY—AND UNIVERSALITY—OF JESUS'S PERSONHOOD

Who was this man? Jesus's human identity as a Jewish man served an important purpose for women and men alike, rectifying age-old wrongs between them. Contrary to what so many assume, when Scripture is read against the backdrop of the patriarchal context in which it was written, the actions of Jesus as a man elevate the marginalized and show us how to resist patriarchy and prejudice in our own lives.

Our understanding of God is purely human and limited. The only way that we can know God is through God's action and revelation to the world, which God generously demonstrates for us in ways that we can fathom. We would never have been able to conceive of a healthy, genderless human and therefore, when God was incarnate in Christ, God had a sex. God also had a sense of individuality and personality. It was possible for other people to know God, relate with God, and talk with God.

We are reminded of Exodus: As a Hebrew, Moses would never have been able to get an audience with the Egyptian Pharaoh had he not

been raised as an Egyptian prince. Likewise, for Jesus to transform the old traditions and fulfill the laws of Israel, he had to become a part of those traditions. Jesus came with a specific voice that people would listen to, a voice that would give him the authority he would need in that culture. As a Jewish man, Jesus became the role model for a new social code and for right relationships between men and women, social classes, and ethnic groups.

If Jesus had come as a woman, a Gentile, a leper, or any other group segregated from the Jews during that time, he would have been quickly dismissed and the message would have been lost. Because the people of the Ancient Near East commonly associated women, in particular, with sexuality and temptation,² God's decision to send a son instead of a daughter was a practical one. Simply put, Jesus challenged his culture and elevated the oppressed to new extremes more effectively than if he had been born any other way.

While he was a fully human man, it was his perfect obedience to God that was the source of all human righteousness. Romans 5:19 states that "just as through the disobedience of the one man [*anthropou*: human being] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [*henos*, the one], the many

will be made righteous." For this purpose, it did not matter that Jesus was male; his sex had nothing to do with obedience or disobedience to God, and a female Christ would have accomplished the same salvific purposes. The importance here is that Jesus was 100 percent fully human who was 100 percent obedient to God.

JESUS CHALLENGES THE CULTURAL STATUS QUO FOR WOMEN—AND MEN

This male Rabbi treated women differently than they had ever been treated before. There were many who remain unnamed in Scripture, such as the woman with the hemorrhage (Matt. 9:8–16) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–26). The fact that women were often identified merely by their ethnicity, husband's name, or occupation suggests that they were marginalized. Still, Jesus sought them out, referred to them by name, allowed them to speak when they were silenced by others, and looked on them with compassion.

He called the widow the greatest contributor to the public offering (Mark 12:41–44). The parable of the woman with the single lost coin is paralleled by the parable of the man with the single lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7; Luke 15:8–10). Similar comparisons are found throughout

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Jesus's teachings and later in Paul's (Matt. 13:49, 25:1–10; Luke 18:2–8; Acts 2:17–21; 1 Cor. 7; 2 Tim. 1:5). Here, Scripture shows a new attitude of love for all people.

Jesus not only acknowledged women, he also loved them. He called them sisters, mothers, daughters, disciples, and friends. Mary and Martha were intimate friends with Jesus who neglected household duties to walk and talk with him (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:5, 17–37). The woman at Bethany was invited to anoint him with her hair and her tears (Matt. 26:6–13). Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord (Matt. 28:1–10). Jesus respected femininity and even described himself as a mother hen who longed to gather Jerusalem under her wings (Matt. 23:37).

Jesus's maleness speaks to men as well. Some men do not feel that they fit the traditional male role; men, along with women, have experienced segregation, prejudice, and injustice based on appearance, ethnicity, social class, and countless other categories humans use to separate and limit each other.

At the same time, Jesus did not always fall under the category of a typical Jewish male role model: According to Scripture, he remained single and childfree, performed miracles on the Sabbath, rejoiced on fast days, forgave sins, cast out demons, commanded prayer for enemies, promoted love over law, illustrated servanthood as the highest form of leadership, and

publicly spoke to women caught in adultery, sex workers, and single, Gentile, and menstruating women (Matt. 5:38–48; 9:6, 14–15; 15:21–28; Mark 3:1–6, 20–29; Luke 7:48; John 8:3; 13:34).

Truly, Jesus was a unique man in his day. He served instead of bullied. His power came through love instead of force. His actions as a man were catalysts for liberation. Through this, we see that if Jesus had not risked his reputation and behaved as typical men in his culture did, he would not have been radical for them, or for us, at all.

OUR ONENESS IN CHRIST JESUS

To be consistent with the claim that Jesus's particular biology contributed to his perfection, we must also conclude that only Middle Eastern Jews born of virgins can hope to meet the standard—and so far, there's only been one of those. None of us are inherently worthy to represent Christ.

Scripturally, women do not have any right to preach the gospel and neither do men. Any service we offer to God was first a gift from the One who forgave our sins, broke the curse, and enabled our offering (2 Tim. 2:2; 3:16–17). All people are blessed to share an identity as forgiven human beings whose call is ultimately to do as Christ does: love boundlessly. Philippians 2:2 says, “Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, and being one in spirit and purpose.”

We can rest assured that God does not skimp on gifts or limit capability according to human standards (1 Cor. 7:17–34; 12:8–10, 28–30; Eph. 4:7–11). Even in a world that categorizes and marginalizes according to sex, skin color, and body type, the Lord never does. God “does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the

outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

Likewise, Galatians 3:28 reminds us that “there is no longer male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse makes it clear that, in following Jesus, we too are asked to abandon our biases. His death broke the division between men and women just as it united Jews and Gentiles. It provided the means for the prejudice and injustice of a fallen, broken, and sinful world to be redeemed and transformed. Under this redemption, we must seek to progress toward a balanced and diversity-loving Church of believers who are all equally free of the curse and unreservedly offered God's grace.

Editor's Note: This article has been adapted and updated from the original, published March 5, 2006, under the name Brynn Camery-Hoggatt.

Notes

1. Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018).
2. Kenneth Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).



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