

What Does Jesus Say About Women?

Frances Willard was one of the most prominent women of the 19th century. As president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, she devoted much of her adult life to promoting the prohibition of liquor in the United States. She was also a powerful proponent of suffrage for women and women in ministry. The article below is reprinted from her book on the latter subject titled *Woman in the Pulpit*, published in 1889.

Most clergy and laypeople alike would agree that Christ, not the apostle Paul, is the source of all churchly authority and power. So what do we find Jesus saying about women? How did He deal with them?

In the presence of the multitude, He drew from Martha the same testimony He required of His apostles, and she publicly replied, almost in Peter's very words, "Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world" (John 11:27, KJV). He declared His commission to the woman at the well of Samaria, with an emphasis and a particularity hardly equalled in any of His public addresses, and the testimony she gave to her fellow Samaritans bore much fruit. What pastor would not rejoice to hear what the converts said to the woman: "Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (4:42).

Some object that Jesus did not call any women to be apostles. True, He did not designate women as His followers; they came without a call. No utterance of His marks women as ineligible for any position in the church He came to found; rather, His gracious words and deeds, His impartation of His purposes and plans to women, His stern reproofs to men who did them wrong,

His chosen companionships, and the tenor of His whole life and teaching, all point out precisely the opposite conclusion.

Indeed, Luke explicitly declares that "He went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with Him, and certain women," among whom were "Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto Him of their substance" (Luke 8:1-3, emphasis added).

What a spectacle that must have been for the scribes and Pharisees, whom Jesus called hypocrites! What loss of caste came to those fearless women, who, breaking away from the customs of society and traditions of religion, dared to follow the greatest of iconoclasts from city to village with a persistence nothing less than outrageous to the conservatives of that day!

Only Christ's commission is authoritative. To whom did He give it after His resurrection, when the new dispensation was ushered in?

If we are to accept specific statements as conclusive of a question involving half the human race, let us take our stand on our Lord's final words and deeds. Luke 24:33-34 states that the two disciples to whom Christ appeared on the way to Emmaus "returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon." Be it understood that women were among "them that were with them."

While they were thus assembled and talking of the wonderful experience of that day, Jesus appeared again, saying, "Peace be unto you." In John 20:19-23, we have an account of this appearance of Christ to His disciples, for it says explicitly (after stating that Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord): "Then the same day at Jesus and

stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

These are the words He spoke to the 11 and "them that were with them." He then "opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures" and declared that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem," and declared, "ye are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you, but tarry ye in Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high. And He led them out as far as to Bethany, and He lifted up His hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:48-52, emphasis added).

In reading this account, does any reasonable person suppose that Jesus' mother and the other Marys were not there? Or the great company of women who had ministered to Him?

But we are not left in doubt. Turn to Acts 1:12-14: "Then returned they unto when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren" (emphasis added).

The account goes on: "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (2:1-4, emphasis added).

Then Peter said: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet

Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall on My servants and on My handmaidens I will pour out in those days of My Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (vv. 16-18, emphasis added). Paul proves that prophesying may be considered preaching when he says, "But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification and exhortation, and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:3).

The time has come when men in high places within the church of Christ who seek to shut women out of the pastorate cannot do so with impunity. Today they are taking on themselves a responsibility in the presence of which they ought to tremble.

To an earnest, intelligent and devout element among their brethren they seem to be absolutely frustrating the grace of God. They cannot fail to see how many ministers neither draw men to the gospel feast nor go out into the highways and hedges seeking them. They cannot fail to see that, although the novelty of women's speaking has worn off, the people rally to hear them as to hear no others, save the most celebrated men of the pulpit and platform; and that it is especially true that the common people hear them gladly.

The plea urged by some theologians that woman is born to one vocation, and one alone, is negatived by her magnificent success as a teacher, a philanthropist, and a physician, by which means she takes the part of foster-mother to myriads of children orphaned or worse than motherless. Their fear that incompetent women may become pastors and preachers should be put to flight by the survival of the church in spite of centuries of the grossest incompetency of men set apart by the laying-on of hands. Their anxiety lest too many women should crowd in is met by the method of choosing a pastor, in which both clergy and people must unite to attest the fitness and acceptability of every candidate.

Some men say it will disrupt the home. They might as well talk

of driving back the tides of the sea. The mother-heart will never change.

Woman enters the arena of literature, art, business; becomes a teacher, a physician, a philanthropist; but she is a woman first of all, and cannot deny herself. In all these great vocations she has still been "true to the kindred points of heaven and home"; and everybody knows that, beyond almost any other, the minister is one who lives at home. The firesides of the people are his weekday sanctuary, the pulpit is near his own door, and its publicity is so guarded by the people's reverence and sympathy as to make it of all others the place least inharmonious with woman's character and work.

When will blind eyes be opened to see the immeasurable losses the church sustains by not claiming for her altars these loyal, earnest-hearted daughters, who, rather than fighting the system, are going into other lines of work or taking their commission from the evangelistic department of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union? Or are they willing that women should go to the lowly and forgotten, but not to the affluent and powerful? Are they willing that women should baptize and administer the sacrament in India, but not at the elegant altars of Christendom?

The National Woman's Christian Temperance Union has departments of evangelistic work, of Bible readings, of gospel work for railroad employees, soldiers, sailors and lumbermen; of prison, jail and police-station work. Each of these departments is managed by a woman called a national superintendent, who has an assistant in nearly every state and territory, and she, in turn, in every local union.

These make an aggregate of several thousands of women who are regularly studying and expounding God's Word to the multitude and who are engaged in church evangelism. Nearly all this "great host" who now "publish the glad tidings" are quite beyond the watch-care of the church, not because they wish to

be so, but because she who has warmed them into life and nurtured them into activity is afraid of her own gentle, earnest-hearted daughters.

The spectacle is both anomalous and pitiful. It ought not to continue. Let the church call in these banished ones and correlate their sanctified activities with her own mighty work, giving them the same official recognition it gives to men, and they will gladly take their places under her supervision.

The time is hastening, the world grows smaller; we can compass it a thousand-fold more readily than could any previous age able to go around the globe more quickly and comfortably than in any previous age.

Women can do this just as easily as men. Then, let us send them forth full-panoplied; let us sound in their ears the command to take authority, given by the church's highest tribunal, that untrammelled and free they may lift up the standard of Christ's cross on every shore, and fulfill the wonderful and blessed prophecy in Psalm 68:11: "The Lord giveth the word. The women that publish the tidings are a great host" (ASV).

Read a companion devotional.

Frances Willard (1839-1898) was a well-known lecturer, writer and educator. She became president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union in 1879.