

Princesses or Pirates

Description

Discipleship and active/passive gender distinctions in the Gospels

default watermark

Are you a princess or a pirate? Earlier this year I was touring a children's play centre in Tasmania when one of my colleagues asked me this very penetrating question â€“ well Megan, are you a princess or a pirate?

What a choice! If I were a child having my birthday party at this church-run venue, would I choose the beautiful, pink and silver princess room, taking for myself as party girl the glamorous and exalted role of the princess wearing her tiara, or would I choose a party on the pirate ship, playing the part of the cut-throat and adventurous Blue Beard, with my parrot on my shoulder, and wielding my swashbuckling sword?

To complicate matters, my choice was extended beyond just parties, because in the play area were two giant posters, listing affirming adjectives for boys and girls. **He isâ€¦** the first poster declared, **courageous, strong, and honoured. She isâ€¦ precious, beautiful, and loved.**

Did that "she" describe me? On the one hand I certainly hoped so â€“ as a person in Christ I know I am precious in God's sight and loved beyond my imagination. And yet, something didn't sit right, and not just with my all-girls private school education, I hoped. There seemed to be something amiss in the way that the boys were being encouraged in the name of Jesus to value their active, outward looking traits, and yet the girlsâ€¦ well, the girls were given more passive, inward-looking attributes to embrace. Beauty. Status. Value.

And so I asked myself, from what we read in the four Gospels, are these the posters that Jesus would present to boys and girls to affirm and challenge them as members of the new community? And if I was to examine the Scriptural witness of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Joh, would I find that the way Jesus interacted with men and women with regards to discipleship strengthened or challenged the active and passive categories we often use to define the feminine and the masculine?

Recent Complementarian Definitions Of Gender

Now of course it was all in fun, but what I observed at this kids' party venue reflects a major stream of thought concerning appropriate gender definitions for Christians. Consistent best-sellers "Wild at Heart" by John Eldredge and "Captivating" by Eldredge and his wife Stasi, portray this "Pirate or Princess" dichotomy unambiguously. To use these in detail as a basis for exploring gender teaching in the Gospels would have a 'straw man' edge to it, but it is important for us to be aware of their assertions, even if simply because they are so popular. Eldredge's works have sold in the millions since their publication in 2001 and 2005, shaping Evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic Christians alike.

Put simply, Eldredge's thesis is this: that each man longs for three things: a battle to fight, an adventure to live and a beauty to rescue, and his deepest existential question is, *"Do I have what it takes*?"[1] Each woman longs to be romanced, to have an adventure to share, and finally, to have a beauty to unveil. Her questions are threefold: *Do you see me? Do I have a beauty all my own?* and, following the title of the book, *Am I captivating*?[2]

You can't help but notice the active and passive contrasts, and, indeed, we are meant to. Christian men are warriors, or pirates if you like, but Christian women are princesses, longing most of all to be affirmed as enchanting, attractive, captivating to the men in their life, which includes God. To be a new creation man is to be empowered to be truly active and to be a new creation woman is to be affirmed as truly beautiful, which, although the language is not used, sends the message that Jesus provides women with an internal transformation in terms of self-worth but omits an accompanying external activation in terms of participation in the gospel commission.

default watermark

Now, most careful readers will recognise that the Eldredges' derive their vision of male and female more from classic Hollywood fairytales than from Holy Scripture, and that in both books, a Biblical theology of sin and the work of Christ on the cross is noteworthy in its absence. However, if we delve into more academic or Biblical "Complementarian" works on gender definitions, this active and passive division remains.

For example, in the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Piper and Grudem define masculinity and femininity as follows:

> *At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's different relationships.*[3]
>
> *At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's differing relationships.*[4]

These statements are much more thought-through and carefully worded than the pink and blue, pirate or princess, statements of the more popular gender writing. Their language is nuanced and they seek to confer Biblically-based dignity on both sexes, rather than worldly self-esteem. However, the careful language itself shows up the tendency to define gender in the active and passive once again: in contrast to the man, the woman has a *disposition* rather than a *responsibility*. Disposition is about one's internal nature, temperament or outlook on life. Responsibility, on the other hand, is about

fulfilling a task or duty and being held accountable for one's attitudes and actions. In the list of her functions, a woman is to be a receiver rather than an initiator at every level, in a sense extending sexual biology into the entirety of her nature. Woman seeks out and creates nothing in itself â€“ she is responsible only for her responses, if you like, rather than her actions.

Furthermore, in this type of literature, Jesus is often seen to be the exemplar of the masculine, rather than of the human. Mark Dever writes, "Masculinity is to lead, not desert; to provide for, not take from; to protect, not kill. Jesus perfectly exemplifies this."[5] Other influential leaders go further, arguing for Jesus as the model for warrior masculinity, painting him as the ultimate fighter with "callused hands and big biceps."[6]

And yet we do need to ask ourselves whether these passive versus active, receiving versus initiating, pirate versus princess distinctions are truly borne out in the breadth of the Scriptural witness about men and women, particularly as we see Jesus reforming the people of God.

This morning we will examine the gospels, to see whether Jesus' expectations of his male and female disciples really support such a distinction.

MEN AND WOMEN AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS

default watermark

It is important, as we begin, to show rather than assume that both women and men *were* included amongst the disciples of Jesus, not just amongst the crowds of those who interacted with him. It might seem obvious, but it's worth reminding ourselves from the Scriptures that this was in fact so.

- No one would argue that women weren't involved in the life of Jesus â€“ we meet them, named and unnamed, in all four of the gospel accounts. By name we meet Mary, his Mother, Elizabeth, Anna, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, Mary the Mother of Clopas, Joanna, Susanna, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Salome. Richard Bauckham makes the point that amongst the followers of Jesus who are named for us in the gospels, nine are women and 24 are men. Bauckham also goes on to wonder aloud if this reflects the relative numbers of men and women in positions of influence in the early Christian communities.[7]

But were both men and women understood to be full disciples by Jesus and the Gospel writers?

Certainly the word that is used most often when Jesus calls men to discipleship â€“ *akoloutheo* â€“ "Follow me!" is also used to describe the women who were present at the cross in **Luke 23:49**
But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

But we have more than this on which to include women in Jesus' circle of disciples, just one step removed from the Twelve. In Chapter 9 of Luke's gospel we see such a private gathering of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee. The text tells us that the disciples come to Jesus when he is praying in private, and he teaches them centre of his Messianic role: that he must be handed over to sinners â€“ elders, chief priests and teachers of the law â€“ and then must be killed and on the third day raised to life. Were women present at this private gathering? We have often assumed not. And yet later in Luke, in chapter 24, we find strong evidence that they were there. At the empty tomb, an angel speaks to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and others, saying to them in v.5, **"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning**

from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. The women at the tomb were admonished by the angel because they had forgotten the words that Jesus had taught them previously concerning this very moment. They had been there in private in Galilee, in chapter 9, they were included in the inner circle of disciples.

If this seems more inference than evidence, then the shape of the Gospels themselves, most particularly John and Luke, demonstrate to us a clear balance between men and women in roles of discipleship in the new community. Margaret Beirne has shown that in John's gospel, the evangelist has carefully structured his material around male and female pairings, providing literary evidence of a genuine discipleship of equals in the new community.[8] She identifies six pairs: the mother of Jesus and the royal official as catalysts of the first and second of Jesus' signs in John; Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, both questioning and misunderstanding, but recipients of a powerful revelation concerning the identity of Jesus â€“ as Saviour and Messiah; the man born blind and Martha of Bethany â€“ the only characters to be asked directly by Jesus: "Do you believe?" and who then encounter Jesus as "the twin symbols of the Prologue â€“ light and life."[9] The fourth pairing is that of Mary of Bethany and Judas, in chapter 14, where Mary's costly devotion is contrasted to powerfully with Judas' selfish corruption. The fifth pair, present at the cross, are Mary the Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, whose "mature faith enables them to witness the true meaning of this climactic event", and, Beirne concludes, "their commissioning as the nucleus of the new family of disciples constitutes a climax to the literary pattern of gender pairs, and demonstrates in a vivid visual image, the partnership of women and men who share in and continue the mission of Jesus "to draw all to himself."[10]

default watermark

The final pairing are Mary Magdalene and Thomas, both transformed by an encounter with the risen Christ into disciples with a genuine resurrection faith. This woman and man challenge all readers, men and women alike, to respond to the risen Lord Jesus in faith and receive the blessing of life in his name (John 20:29, 31).

MEN AND WOMEN AS RESPONSIBLE MORAL AGENTS

If both men and women followed Jesus as disciples and were known to have done so by the early church, we can then ask the question â€“ did Jesus communicate any expectation that their discipleship ought to work itself out in different ways appropriate to their gender, perhaps in more passive or active, receiving, initiating terms?

We can begin by affirming that both men and women were held equally responsible and accountable for their sin. Although the passage in John chapter 8 is somewhat uncertain in its provenance, it provides us with a wonderful example of Jesus both affirming a woman as loved by God but moving her on into responsible discipleship. The story is no doubt etched in our memories, as this woman caught in adultery is dragged into the public square, to be stoned for her sin. In his response to the crowd, recorded for us in John 8 v.7 **"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"** Jesus effectively equalises all people, both men and women, as sinners before God, each one worthy of God's condemnation because of their disobedience, but also as responsible agents needing to live a life of active obedience to God: **And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."**

Now, no one, Complementarian or otherwise, is arguing that women are not responsible for their sin before God, and don't need the gracious death of Christ on their behalf. However, I don't think it's

unfair to say that a danger of some active versus passive definitions of masculine and feminine is that they can bleed over into this area of discipleship to move women away from seeing themselves as accountable disciples of Jesus, encouraging them to see their husband or father as the one who will be held responsible for their spiritual health. And yet the gospels tell us that each person is equally accountable for their own spiritual state before God, and the primary responsibilities for women and men are to come to Jesus, learn from him, and live a life of repentance and obedience in response.

The story in Luke Chapter 10 about Martha and Mary of Bethany is perhaps the most powerful illustrations of the equal responsibility of women and men to learn the things of God. Let's read the entire passage from Luke 10, verses 38 to 42

Luke 10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

default watermark

At first glance we are tempted to see that Jesus' commendation of Mary is based around the fact that she didn't let the things of the world distract her from Jesus. We pejoratively entitle women we know who always seem to be busy, busy, busy, especially in attending to the things of the home, as "Marthas", driven and distracted. I've been called that myself, actually, when I was running around organising a ministry team dinner, and I can tell you, it stung! But the story speaks to far more than a "worker vs. contemplative" debate. Consider the position into which Mary had put herself: she had left the back part of the house, which research into the first century has shown to have been the feminine sphere in the home, and she had entered the sphere usually dominated by the men, without a domestic reason for doing so. More than that, she had stopped and sat down at the feet of Jesus, in the classic pose of the male rabbinical student, presuming to learn from this teacher of the Torah of God.

The quote that we often trot out when thinking about gender understanding in the first century, is that of the Jewish man's daily prayer: "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who did not make me a woman" But we need to know that at its best, this statement was not about misogyny, but rather it was about the privilege and joy of knowing God's word. A man who loved the Law of the Lord was so grateful that he had the privilege of access to the Torah and its instruction that he would pray this prayer because he would not have had such access were he a woman, a Gentile or a slave. And here, Mary is given that privileged, joyful access. She turned her feminine role in the people of God upside down â€“ and Jesus said that her choice was the right one, and that in the new community of God's people, it would not be taken away from her. Now all disciples, male or female, would have the privilege and responsibility of learning and knowing God's word.

THE PRIORITY OF THE PASSIVE IN DISCIPLESHIP AND SERVICE IN LEADERSHIP

But there is an unexpected flipside to Jesus' commendation of Mary of Bethany that bears on our topic for today: that of the commendation of a passive rather than active priority in discipleship. Mary becomes a model for all disciples, male and female, as she learns from Jesus at his feet, sitting quietly and in submission, in a role far more "passive" than that urged upon the wild-at-heart man. And yet her

passive stance is the better part.

This priority of the passive before the active when it comes to approaching God is consistently taught in the gospels. Jesus expects all people, women and men alike, to enter the kingdom as receivers, rather than initiators, to follow the one called The Way, The Truth and The Life and live as recipients of his grace, rather than follow our own lead and earn our own way into God's favour â€“ a task doomed to failure at every point.

The Twelve Apostles are examples of what not to do in this regard at so many points, being often so keen for action that they fail to reflect on Jesus' words and so misunderstand his mission.[11] You can sense Jesus' frustration at their haste and muscular reactions: Peter cutting off Malchus' ear, the brothers Zebedee wanting to call down fire to consume the Samaritan town, the disciples turning away the children brought to him. Peter is told that his best intentions to be a warrior for Jesus will fail â€“ and yet he will be restored by the grace of Jesus to become a feeder of lambs.[12]

Matthew 18 to 20 are three very powerful chapters concerning the shape of both discipleship and leadership that Jesus is looking for in the new community. The challenge to Traditionalist masculine traits in the material is quite stark. Three times in chapter 18 and 19 Jesus refers to children, in their helplessness and dependence, as exemplary members of the kingdom. Interspersed between these vignettes is teaching that radically calls Christians to give up their sense of what is fair and right â€“ and let mercy and forgiveness take priority, in their relationships with others, and their expectations of God. Castration, whether literal or metaphorical, is held up as valuable for kingdom work. Those who have every appearance of bearing God's stamp of approval in worldly sense, here the rich and powerful, are said to be unable to enter the kingdom on these terms. The first are promised to become last and the last promised to become first.

default watermark

The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee asks that they might occupy the positions of authority and leadership in the coming kingdom â€“ and Jesus answers with a promise of suffering. Reading from Matthew 20, verse 24, we learn Jesus' ultimate definition of leadership: **Matt. 20:24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."**

Finally, this block of three chapters end with a powerful embodied parable: two blind men who could not protect, lead, or provide for anyone, including themselves, but could only sit passive and receptive, had their lives turned around when they called out for Jesus help â€“ they put their trust in him and they received their sight and followed him. Every Christian is called to receive and enter the kingdom as a child, weak and dependable and receptive, and these qualities are to be maintained even as one grows in discipleship. Furthermore, as my colleague Matthew Williams helpfully noted, when Jesus sets about empowering broken men and women alike it is always attended by a responsibility to turn their newly gained power into service.[13]

DISCIPLESHIP TRANSCENDING TRADITIONALIST GENDER ROLES

If our previously separated active and passive qualities in discipleship are beginning to blur together, perhaps it is time to ask whether Jesus makes any challenge to the importance of adherence to

traditional male and female roles in the new community of disciples. Let's begin with Luke 11, 27-28: **Luke 11:27 While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" 28 But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"**

An unnamed woman is impressed by Jesus' teaching and expresses herself in a maternally formulated idiom â€“ "O to be the mother of such a son as you!" The primary point of Jesus' response is clearly, as Nolland puts it, that "to be impressed is not enough. What counts is committed response to the message that Jesus brings. The point is not to be impressed but to be changed."[14]

Discipleship involves the re-ordering of human values, which includes the challenging of a woman's honour being found in her status wife and mother. Despite this woman's words even fulfilling Mary's own prophesy in Luke 1:48 that she would be called blessed, her statement is still countered by Jesus radical call to discipleship. The blessing available to all women who hear and obey Jesus relativises any blessing of mothering: even the blessedness of Jesus' own mother must be grounded in her hearing of the word of God and obeying it.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12 and Luke 14 strengthen this point. **Matt. 12:47 Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." 48 But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."**

default watermark

And in **Luke 14:26 "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.**

Each of these passages speaks to the radical nature of discipleship and calls men and women to reorder their values as they actively and sacrificially pursue a relationship of obedience and love with Jesus. All previous sources of worth and honour which the world offers to women or men are to be forsaken â€“ it is obedience to the Father through following Jesus Christ, which provides true worth, true identity, true blessedness. Each must actively turn away from idols and submit to the Lordship of Christ in repentance and faith.

But Jesus' teaching here also contains a challenge to the, often unspoken, culture in some churches where women's discipleship derives much of its content from marriage and motherhood, and where women are commended for their assumption of these roles above all others. But in the new community, we must say that marriage and parenthood are secondary to the importance of being rightly related to God through Jesus Christ and following him as his disciple.

Particularly confronting in this regard is Jesus' teaching concerning gender in the new creation, where the primacy of communion with God, in some sense that I confess I don't fully understand, eclipses marriage and gender even further. Jesus teaches in Mark 12:25 in his interaction with the Sadducees, that when men and women will be raised from the dead, **"they [will] neither marry nor [will they be] given in marriage, but [will be] like angels in heaven."** In the new heavens and the new earth, marriage is a relationship that only needs expression in the marriage of Christ and his bride, the men and women who make up the church. To be sure, in this creation marriage is still a good gift, to be enjoyed with absolute faithfulness, but the impending future that Jesus reveals here relativisesmarriage in anticipation of the fullness of relationship to come between Himself and His bride.

MALE AND FEMALE DISCIPLES IN ACTIVE GOSPEL MINISTRY

Finally, in the gospel we find that Jesus not only invites men and women to an equal discipleship, and considers them responsible for their sin and accountable to their response to him, receiving his word and kingdom as submissive students and children, but we also find that Jesus judges both men and women able pass on the theological truth taught to them.

Aside from the Twelve, whom I haven't used as examples today because I think their role is beyond that of just an inner circle of male disciples, being rather typological and theological as the new tribe leaders and prophets of the people of God, it is the 70 or 72 disciples who are the first to be commissioned to proclaim the kingdom and to actively minister in the authority of Jesus. Now we certainly cannot say for sure whether any women were numbered among this group, but we ought not to consider it impossible as many have done on societal grounds, thinking that women would not be able to travel and minister in this way. Women clearly had enough freedom to be travelling away from their homes to be with Jesus in general, as we see in Luke chapter 8, verses 1-3: **Luke 8:1 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2 as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.**

default watermark

The grammar here in the Greek indicates that it was both the women and the twelve who were travelling with Jesus through the cities and villages.[15] The women are then described in the NRSV as providing for the group out of their own resources â€“ a wonderfully active ministry initiated by these women after they received Jesus' healing. Another accurate translation of this verse would be that they were *ministering* to Jesus and the Twelve continually â€“ some manuscripts even have ministering to him â€“ from the possessions that belonged to them. The word for providing is the word from which we get our term deacon or minister. These women were actively serving Jesus and the Twelve with their own resources, which seem to have been substantial. We don't know much about them, except that they had been healed by Jesus and that one of them at least, Joanna, was a person of some means, being married to an epitropos or overseer of Herod's property. They may have been travelling together, she may have been widowed, or she may have simply been travelling away from the home to take up this role of making sure the ministry of Jesus was financed and supplied in every way. We don't know whether Joanna and Chuza went out among the 72, but if they did, Joanna would have been well apprenticed as she observed her master proclaiming the good news wherever he went.

Perhaps we've entered the realm of supposition here, but if we turn to John chapter 4 we can have no

doubts that here is a woman who proclaimed, apparently in public, the message of that Jesus was the Messiah: **John 4:28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"** John concludes the story in verse 39 by saying, **John 4:39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."**

And of course, we know that this is not the only woman in John's gospel to be released to proclaim the good news. At the empty tomb of Jesus, Mary Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden, and, having reached out to him, Jesus says to her, in **John 20:17 "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.** Mary, and in the other gospel narratives, the women with her, are commissioned by Jesus or his representative angels to pass on the message of the resurrection within the community of faith. It has been said by Piper and Grudem that *"It simply does not follow to say that since women ministered to Jesus and learned from Jesus and ran to tell the disciples that Jesus was risen, this must mean that Jesus opposed the loving headship of husbands or the limitation of eldership to spiritual men."*[16] I agree â€“ we cannot draw our conclusions about husbands or elders from this text. But we can say that ministering to Jesus and his church, and running to tell others that Jesus is risen is a pretty great description of active gospel ministry â€“ and that women have been released and commissioned by Jesus to live out their discipleship in this way.

default watermark

Jesus entrusted these women with the most profound theological truths that Christians hold â€“ that Jesus is the Messiah and that He is the risen Lord – and he expected them to share it with others. This is an important teaching that will help us interpret other parts of the New Testament in its canonical sense. The fact is that some have concluded that women are prohibited from teaching because " *they are less likely to draw a line on doctrinal non-negotiables, and thus deception and false teaching will more easily enter the church. This is not to say that women are intellectually deficient or inferior to men… their kinder and gentler nature inhibits them from excluding people for doctrinal error."*[17]

You know, the thing is, I do see a lot of myself in what Tom Schreiner says about women pastors not wanting to exclude people for doctrinal error. I don't see it in lots of women, but I do see it in me, so perhaps it says less about my gender and more about my psychological brokenness and need to please, I don't know. But I don't find it easy to say the hard word to people â€“ I want to include, I want to speak positively, present a positive vision rather than telling people off. But to draw a conclusion that this means that I won't do it is wrong. Because of the transforming power of God in my life, I am enabled to transcend my personal limitations â€“ whether they come from gender or personality â€“ and to push through them to say the hard things, because the love of Christ compels me and the Holy Spirit empowers me. Sometimes it nearly kills me, but I do it. These women would have had every reason not to tell, knowing that they were not considered reliable witnesses â€“ in Luke's gospel the disciples considered them speaking idle words – but they did it anyway. I imagine other preachers find it hard not to preach out of unrighteous anger or perhaps some are tempted to cut people out of fellowship without giving them the opportunity for repentance. But I'm sure that they too seek the power of the risen Jesus to help them minister to his people and proclaim the gospel to the world in the right way, and they do it, whether they like it or not. Because just like Mary Magdalene, or Joanna or the woman at the well, disciples know that truth is for telling and God's people are for loving, and with the

Spirit's help we won't let our old natures get in the way of that.

PRINCESSES AND PIRATES?

Well finally, as we close, I want to speak of princesses and pirates once again.

One of my favourite authors has long been Dorothy Sayers. She was a great mystery writer, and her novels are wonderful for a Monday off after a big Sunday, because they're don't take too much brain power, but they're still stimulating enough to keep you from fretting about last night's sermon. And so imagine my joy when I discovered that Sayers was also a Christian, who was intellectually and robustly orthodox on the truths of the Scripture and a champion of the dignity and capacity of women.

One of her most powerful essays was written in 1938 and is called "Are Women Human?" As she studied the gospels, Sayers noted that the women she met there "*had never known a man like Jesusâ€"there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about women's nature.*"[18]

default watermark

When we examine the gospels, we do indeed see that Sayers' words are true. It is remarkable that in not a single case is a woman "denigrated, reproached, humiliated" or, as Bilezikian notes, "cast into one of the lewd stereotypes of the day."[19] Not just in the positive nature of the material, but even in the *amount* concerning women in the gospels, I think its true to say the Gospels, especially Luke and John, functioned with a kind of first century "affirmative action" with regards to women â€" not to the point that women could never be seen in a darker light as sinful, as we've seen, but so that each new reader experiencing the life of Jesus in the Gospel narratives would also have their view of women powerfully shaped in the direction of dignity and equality.

Two stories demonstrate this to us in no uncertain terms: the interaction of Jesus with the woman suffering from haemorrhages in Mark 5, and the women healed on the Sabbath in Luke 13. These are women met by Jesus when they are at their most sub-human if you like – in pain, crippled, excluded and unclean. Not only did Jesus recognise their need and act upon it where others had not, but in both cases he also recognised and conferred upon them a status of dignity as full members of the covenant family by calling them daughter, restoring to them a relationship with the God of Abraham, the King of the Universe.

So I do want to say that popular literature's encouragement of Christian women in their internal sense of self-worth and identity as precious, whole and affirmed by God in Christ is right and good. If the amount of money spent on cosmetics, diets and the prevalence of eating and body image disorders in our own country is any indication, then clearly, addressing the good news to women in princess language, as daughters of the King, is speaking the gospel into a felt need, and I don't wonder at all at the popularity and success of books and conferences with this focus.

But let us not confine ourselves to exhorting or defining men and women who are disciples of Jesus in either active or passive terms, as princesses *or* pirates. It's not true to the witness of the gospels and it leaves each side a lesser, and indeed, a disobedient disciple.

Instead, let's embrace both roles, the princess and the pirate, in their best senses: the new idenitity, dignity and restored relationship with the King that comes from being in Christ. The quiet receptiveness of the rabbinical student, glorying in the Master. The thoughtful initiative taking of the resource provider. The servant-hearted, servant-shaped leader. And the active, passionate, empowered ministry of the evangelist, revelation sharer and error opposer. Let's let the Gospels vision of a genuine discipleship of equals shape our understanding of the rest of the canon's teaching on women and men in the life of the church. And lets enjoy working together, women and men, in the new family business of quietly learning from Jesus and excitedly running to tell the gospel in the church and to the world in the power of the risen Lord.

---

1 John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart,* Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2001

2 John Eldredge & Stasi Eldredge, *Captivating,* Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2005

3 *John Piper & Wayne Grudem (eds). Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Crossway Books, Illinois, 1991 p. 35*

4 *ibid p. 36*

default watermark

5 http://www.cbmw.org/Blog/Posts/Mark-Dever-on-the-Importance-of-Gender-Roles-Part-I-Creation

6 Brandon O'Brien, "A Jesus for Real Men"*, Christianity Today* online newsletter, April 2008 http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/april/27.48.html

7 Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2002, p. xxi

8 Margaret Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel â€“ a genuine discipleship of equals,* Sheffield Press, London, 2003 Pp.219-223

9 i *bid* p.222

10 *ibid*

11 With thanks to Matt Williams for this helpful insight.

12 Mark 14/John 18, Luke 9, Mark 10, Matthew 26

13 Matthew Williams in personal correspondence with the author, August 2008

14 John Nolland *Luke 9:21-18:34, Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Books, Dallas, 1993 p.649

15 Bauckham

[16] Piper and Grudem, *op cit*, p.68

[17] *Tom Schreiner [apologies for no reference at time of print]*

[18] Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human?* Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005 p.68

[19] Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles,* 2nd Ed. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1985 p.82

Date Created
28.07.2008
Author
cappleby

default watermark