

## Kenmore Baptist Church Message Outline: LOGOS, 20/5/10 (TW+BW+DB)<sup>1</sup>

# JESUS: A WOMAN'S FRIEND OR FOE?

## *Shifting Scenes, A Stagnant Church, and the Centre of It All*

If Jesus' central message was the Kingdom of God, then where's the Queen? And if God is our Father, then what happened to mum? Any system where males dominate and women are subordinate stinks in our society's nostrils. Patriarchy is a four letter word. Times have certainly changed, even from fifty years ago.

Nowadays, there is hardly a place where women can't lead. So, where can sexist men go to feel secure? Ask the average non-Christian, and they may reply: *church*. Christianity seems incredibly sexist, theologically, historically, and culturally.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly this is a complicated issue and the church has a lot to answer for. If Christ's light is to be received, we have to open some intellectual shutters so that 21<sup>st</sup> century women can see the glory of God. But what to address?

Christianity stands or falls on Christ, and all future developments must be judged by the trajectory he set. The real question, then? *Is Jesus a woman's friend or foe?*

## *Jesus' View of Women: Anti or Pro?*

Jewish and Roman cultures in Jesus' day were entirely patriarchal. Yet, take the time to read the four Gospels (stories of Jesus' life), and a different picture emerges:

### **#1: Jesus saw women differently**

Jesus was counter-cultural in his respect for, affirmation of, and sensitivity toward women. Unlike the teachers of his day, Jesus truly **valued** women.

- John 4:7-9, 39 >> Jesus makes an unprecedented move to embrace the outcast
  - John 12:2-3 >> Rabbi's wouldn't even talk to, or touch, their *wives* in public.
- Jesus embraced social humiliation to champion a woman seen as worthless

### **#2: Jesus used parables based on women to teach**

Traditionally, parables were told with males as the central, virtuous character. Jesus, however, featured numerous women in his teaching—always as equals, always in a positive light, and often as the more virtuous character in the story.

- Luke 18:1-8 >> The woman and an unfair judge
- Luke 15:8-10 >> God represented by the woman searching for a lost coin
- Luke 20:27-36 >> Men and women entirely equal at the resurrection
- Luke 21:1-4 >> An impoverished but generous woman is praised over rich men

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<sup>1</sup> *Want a Small Group Guide for this talk, with activities, discussion questions, further reading, and full notes?* Check out <http://logos.kbc.org.au/blog/> and follow the *resources* tab to '**JESUS + WOMEN**'.

<sup>2</sup> Follow the above link to view KBC's position on "Women and Men in the Ministry of the Church." The bottom line: KBC centres on **Galatians 3:28** and **Joel 2:28-29**. In Christ we are all equal. If you're empowered by the Spirit, regardless of gender, we want you to use your gifts for the benefit of all.

### **#3: Jesus had female disciples and sponsors**

Jesus had women as part of his ministry—entirely radical in his day. Beyond Jesus' inner group of 12 disciples (paralleling Jacob's twelve sons, reconstituting Israel), Jesus had an even larger crew of about 120 disciples that travelled, ate, and learned with Jesus just like the twelve. This larger body of disciples featured many women.

- Luke 8:1-3 >> Luke makes the point of recording each woman by name
- Luke 10:38 >> Perhaps the most powerful statement of them all, this verse shows how counter-cultural Jesus was. While Martha was stressing about serving food, Mary is chilling and soaking up Jesus. Mary was called away from the kitchen to learn from the Rabbi, expected to pass on what she received

### **#4: Women were instrumental in his ministry**

In a patriarchal culture, religious figures would only seek men to be witnesses of their greatest accomplishments. Yet, in the crucifixion and resurrection—the driving force of Jesus' mission—Jesus chose a different way that relied upon women.

- **Crucifixion:** Matthew 27:55-56, 61; John 19:25-27 >> Besides John, the twelve flee, while many women—all named—are there from the cross to the tomb. Jesus made such an impact in the lives of these women that they were there with him to the end by choice
- **Resurrection:** Matthew 28:1, 8 >> Note that women were not considered citizens, and their testimony did not count in the Judaic court of the time. Yet, Jesus chose women to bear the greatest news of all, the first evangelists!

Dorothy Sayers sums up Jesus' attitude to women:

*"Perhaps it was no wonder that women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man. There never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made sick jokes about them ... who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out this 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 unself-conscious. Nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' or inferior about woman's nature."*

## **How Have Jesus' Followers Fared?**

### **A Problematic Past**

Christians have often failed to follow the trajectory Christ set. We mustn't white-wash the dark-patches staining church history, where we denied the dignity and honour women deserved. Jesus' radical example exposes hypocritical conservatism.

*And yet.* Are these failures a fair summary of the church's story? What about the *unchampioned history* of how Jesus' followers *have* liberated women? What about the incredible lives of women who have in turn become agents of liberation? That's what I want to share with you—*the history you've never heard*. Let's journey across the globe to see how Jesus' followers have freed women of all ages and cultures.

### ***An Unchampioned History***

- We begin our journey in *Rome, 400AD*. Depravity capital! Christians such as Augustine fight in public courts to challenge the mistreatment of women. This bishop establishes women's rights and a freedom movement changing culture.
- Head south east to *20<sup>th</sup> Century Afghanistan*. Women cover their entire bodies, lack basic rights common to all men (education and the right to speak in public), and are invisible to the law. Christians enter this Islamic culture and invited women to be a part of the church, offering education and dignity. Women soon outnumber men in the church, as they discover greater status and protection, alongside freedom to speak their mind and remove the veil.
- *Present day Sudan*. The most barbaric form of abuse continues unabated—female circumcision. Mutilated, women often die from this cruel practice. Yet, this is no longer so in many African nations. As the result of the tireless efforts of an early group of Christian missionaries fighting for women's freedom from physical violence, this ritual has been outlawed in all countries where Christianity has become the majority religion.
- *India, 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. The Hindi practice of *Suttee* requires that widows are customarily buried or burned alive to honour their deceased husband. William Carey lived and worked in India as a missionary, fighting for the rights of these powerless widows. In 1829 his efforts, in the name of Christ, culminated with the outlawing of suttee, preventing the mass murder of thousands of women.
- *China, 1912*. After millennia of female foot binding—all in service of tradition and sex appeal to men—the practice is legally banned as the result of a 12 year campaign by a committed group of Christian missionaries.

### ***Freed to Free Others***

- Catherine Booth, Aimee Macpherson, Susan B. Anthony, and Mother Theresa—just four stories of women freed by Christ to become agents of liberation.
- Locally, consider Bronwen Healey—a prostitute whose life Jesus turned around. Now she heads up *Hope Foundation* ([www.hopefoundation.org.au](http://www.hopefoundation.org.au)). This is what it looks like when freedom flowers, and Jesus' followers truly are a friend to women. Bronwen's life is a sign of how one day the whole world will be when Jesus' Kingdom embraces everything.

## Setting the Record Straight: Jesus Saves and Liberates Women, and So Should We

Jesus is a woman's friend, and it's no coincidence that, today, women are most free in cultures built upon Christ's life. He came to set the captives free, and in many ways feminism borrows on biblical capital (Luke 4:18-19).

Yet the record of Jesus' followers is patchy. For all the good they've done, it's clear that Christians are still sinful people saved by grace. When it comes to nondiscrimination, we are far less radical than our Lord. For this, *we are sorry*. Jesus calls us to be agents of reconciliation who build bridges to a loving God. And this God, who we call 'Father', transcends all masculine metaphors, embracing us as a mother does her children (Psalm 131:1-2; Isaiah 49:15; 66:11-12; Luke 13:34).

God's mission is to liberate all humanity without distinction—male *and* female. So, in whatever ways feminist movements *have* truly liberated women from oppression, Christians should applaud these efforts and be provoked in their God-given mission: we're called to partner with lovers of peace, and live toward *shalom*. At the same time, though, out of love, we need to challenge definitions of freedom that don't deliver what they promise.

The promise of 'freedom' in the form of financial and sexual independence is shallow. Self-salvation is costly, and indeed impossible. Patriarchy oppressed women, but so too do our modern, individual idols and impossible ideals. Our real problem is not self-actualization, but sin. We're broken, and in turn we break. Yet Jesus modeled the way of interdependence: mutual submission in love (Philippians 2:5-11; John 13:1-17). Jesus' love is the form in which we are truly free. Jesus is the true Saviour. He offers the intimacy we crave, the empowerment we seek, and the freedom we all desire. And if this is the person God has chosen to save us all, then let's not be sexist and reject Jesus just because He is a man.

*Who is Jesus Christ for us, today? He is a liberator of women. So who will we be for Jesus Christ, today? How, then, shall we live? We can shelter the battered, counsel the broken, protect the exposed, adopt the unwanted, and fund freedom for the enslaved. If we have the will, there is no limit to the ways we can radically follow our Lord in loving, and liberating, women. Yet, following Ephesians 5:21-33, it begins when men humbly submit to God and lovingly serve women alongside Jesus.*

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways have you seen the status of women change in our society?
2. In your experience, how well has the church served, loved, and liberated women?
3. Look back over the key stories of Jesus relating with women. Which speaks to you most powerfully? How would you describe Jesus' attitude to women?
4. Over church history, what has been the biggest failure and the greatest success in following the trajectory Jesus set in Luke 4:18-19 to "free the captives"?
5. What would it take for women to truly be free, today? How will you respond to Jesus' offer as Saviour of the world? How will you participate in His mission?