

How women helped spread Christianity in the first and second century

[abstract] The New Testament Gospels acknowledge that women were among Jesus' earliest followers in the first and second century. Using the New Testament as the sources, this study explores the ways in which women played an important part in the spread of Christianity in the first and second century.

Keywords: Christianity; first century Christians; second century Christians;
women ; New Testament

Female believers in Christianity

Stark (1995) states that in the early Christian churches, there were many more women compared to the pagan world. The great numbers of female believers is the result of the favourable Christian view of women, demonstrated in their “condemnation of divorce, incest, marital infidelity, and polygamy”. The New Testament states that (Ephesians 5:33) the husband is supposed to sacrificially “love his wife as himself”. Divorce is condemned in verse 32, it says that “let not the husband put away his wife”. So, the husband should love his wife just like Christ loved the Church. Jesus safeguards the rights of women, especially in His teachings on marriage (Matthew 5:27-32; 19:3-9). Just like the marriage supper, this Christian teaching is liberating for women the man must love, protect, and honour his wife in the same manner Christ demonstrated to His bride(Revelation 19:7-9).

Stark further reinforces that the Christian teachings were the reasons for the great number of female believers. He also mentions the views of Sandison (1967) that “Christianity rejected the double standard which gave pagan men so much sexual license” and “Christian men were urged to remain virgins until marriage (Fox 1987). Chadwick (1967: 59) claims that Christianity "regarded unchastity in a husband as no

less serious a breach of loyalty and trust than unfaithfulness in a wife." On top of the list, Starks goes on to cite that even the great Greek physician Galen was prompted to remark on Christianity's "restraint in cohabitation"(Benko 1986:142). As in 1 Corinthians 7:1 "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" , " Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband". The evidence of that Christianity prized female chastity is clear.

Stark further states other reasons like widowed Christian widows also enjoyed the freedom of whether to re-marry, unlike pagan widows. 1 Timothy 5:1 says "Honour widows who are really widows". Also, the condemnation of infanticide and abortion (Luke 1:15) in Christianity that led to the congregation in Rome to have been "predominately female", with the status of women elevated as compared to the pagans. Stark article further reinforces the notion that the status of women was "accorded higher" than "elsewhere in the classical world". He attributed that to a number of reasons and showed that women were vital in the New Testament that facilitated the spread of Christianity.

Women bringing spouses to faith

With more number to women believers in the church, they contributed in several ways in leading other people to Christ. In Thessalonica, women became Christians (Acts 17:1-4). Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. Henry Chadwick noted that "Christianity seems to have been especially successful among women (56); Peter Brown (1988:151) mentioned that "women were prominent" among upper-class Christians and that "such women could influence their husbands to protect the church." And the example of Marcia, the concubine of the Emperor Commodus was cited, just like Queen Esther (the King was not a Christian, but Esther, with her status as Queen, managed

to save her people) in the New Testament. It was noted that during that time, women of higher social status often brought their spouses or admirers to the Christian faith. Peter tells wives in the New Testament that they should accept the authority of their husbands so that their unbelieving husbands might be won over (1 Pet 3:1-2) by their conduct because they observe their chaste conduct accompanied by fear.

Harnack (1908:2:79) noted that many mixed marriages were reported and that in virtually all cases "the husband was a pagan, while the wife was a Christian" .Peter Brown (1988:154) wrote of Christian women as a "gateway" into pagan families" For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife," (I Corinthians 7: 14) (b) substantial conversion via marriages to pagans.

It is evident that married women who were Christians helped bring their spouses to the faith. And unmarried women also brought their admirers to the faith thus helped in the spread of Christianity.

Women as Role models of Christians

There are numerous examples in the New Testament that highlights the faith of women,. ---Mary Mary's obedience and trust in the Lord has made God choose her to be the mother of Jesus. Mary claimed that she is "the servant of the Lord," (Luke 1:34) despite the possible shame and humiliation she might face.

Elizabeth, the wife Zechariah, was noted to be "righteous before God", and "living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). When Mary visited Elizabeth, "the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 41-44).

While Jesus was on his way to cure Jairus' daughter, a woman who had been haemorrhaging for twelve years touched Jesus' cloak. She was afraid when Jesus asked who touched him, thinking that Jesus was enraged. But he called her 'daughter' praising her faith and the woman was healed (Mark 5:22-29)

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek) who made clothes for the widows. She was a woman “devoted to good works and acts of charity”. (Acts 9:36-43) She then became ill and died. When Peter raised her up, it became known throughout the whole of Joppa, and many of them believed in Jesus thereafter. Dorcas was a great testimony to many through her faith and character and she is of the many women who exhibit Godly behaviour and are considered role models of the Christian faith.

Significance of the first Witness (a Women)

It is noteworthy that after Jesus was resurrected, he revealed himself to women first, and told the women to relay his orders to the others (Matt. 28:8-10). The risen Jesus appeared to Mary first and it was ironic that considering the status of women in those days they could not have been able to be legitimate witnesses. Jesus Christ chose women as the first witnesses of his resurrection. This shows that women were significant in the Christian faith.

A woman's faith

When Thomas saw Jesus arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane he was cowering in fear and he fled for his life. In fact, not just him, but all the Apostles “deserted him and fled. (Mark 14:50). Thomas watched from a distance as they spiked his Master to a cross on the Roman killing grounds of Golgotha and did not dare to have any association with Jesus, out of fear and cowardice.

Mary, on the other hand, with great courage and faith, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark”, “came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb”(John 20:1) ’ She was the one who “ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple”, and told them what she discovered, ‘they have

taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him' (John 20:2) .

Mary, as compared to one of the great Apostles, the “Doubting Thomas” was unafraid to believe the resurrected Jesus. However, even when Thomas saw the resurrected Jesus, he was in disbelief and said ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe’ (John 20:25).

Jesus had to show him and tell him explicitly “Do not doubt but believe’ (John 20:27) for him to believe. In fact, all the disciples ” did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (John 20:9). What disappointment when Jesus said to Thomas, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’ Thomas, the sceptic and the Doubter needed ample proofs as contrary to the simple faith of Mary, who did not need any concrete proofs or for she really lives by Jesus’ teaching to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5.7) as she went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’, telling them “ that he had said these things to her” (John 20:18)

New Roles of Women-- Women Disciples

Early Christianity has liberated women in that they were offered new roles and equal status in the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus treated women as equally important in the plan of God as were men completely counter-cultural.

Women played vital roles in the early church. They were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer”(Acts 1:14). They followed Jesus with the multitudes (Matthew 14:21), and Jesus featured women and used things associated with them in His parables and illustrations (Matthew 13:33; 25:1-13; Luke 13: 18-21; 15: 8-10; 18: 1-5). In the New Testament the birth and infancy narratives note a remarkable number

of women. Jesus spoke to women (John 4) and taught them individually and privately (Luke 10: 38-42). A company of women often travelled with Him (Luke 8: 1-3), and He often spoke highly of women (Matthew 9:20-22; Luke 21: 1-4).

Jesus Christ stressed that women were just as capable to grow in Christ as men. It is shown in Luke's account of Christ's visit to the home of Martha and Mary, in Bethany, a village about 2 miles from Jerusalem. Mary understood that seeking Jesus was more crucial than mundane chores. Matthew 6:33 instructs Christians to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" instead of worrying about superficial issues like "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" (Matthew 6:31).

Jesus not only had male disciples but he also had female disciples, for in the Kingdom of God, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28).

Significance of the Evangelism and Edification (women)

Unlike most Jewish rabbis, Jesus was impartial to women. Martha believes that Jesus was "the Messiah--the Son of God, the one coming into the world". (John 11:27). Women are often gifted in the areas of evangelism and edification and they were often recognised by Jesus. Besides Mary, mentioned above, there were also many women with great faith. Peter's mother-in-law was lying in bed with a fever (Matthew 8:14-15) Jesus touched her hand, and the fever left her. She then "got up and began to serve him" in gratitude, without any hesitance.

Women Teachers

Women are important figures when it comes to edifications just like in 2 Timothy 1:5 where grandmothers and mothers teach young children (as Lois and

Eunice taught Timothy). And, older women teach younger women that they “so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children” (Titus 2:4).

Prophetess

Philip the evangelist, “had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:8-9), and one of them was Anna. When Jesus was a child and taken to the temple, the elderly prophetess Anna ‘never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day’ (Luke 2:38). She also “began to praise God and to speak about the child” to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

Paul clearly states: "For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (1Cor 14:31). Although for Anna, there was no clear ongoing prophetic ministry just like the prophet Isaiah, she was committed to faithful worship and was a commendable woman of the time.

Another noteworthy instance was the Samaritan woman. Despite the wrath of the Jewish leader, Jesus healed a Samaritan woman on the Sabbath. Jesus recognised her faith and told her "'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'" (Luke 8:48)The healed woman immediately stood up straight and began praising God (Luke 13:10-13), without any reservations. Jesus also called her a “daughter of Abraham”.

When Jesus the Samaritan woman about living water (John 4:10) said to Jesus, she replied, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’, as she understood the profound lesson. She also declared, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us’.

Her response was far more apt than many who were taught by Jesus. One example was the Pharisee named Nicodemus (John 3.1), a leader of the Jews, who even asked Jesus ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ (John 3.4). It showed that he failed to understand what Jesus was trying to teach him.

Eventually the Samaritan woman went and told her townspeople about the Messiah. She was effective in testifying about Jesus and was instrumental in leading many people to Christ as “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39).

There are many examples of women in the New Testament who served Jesus wholeheartedly. Luke tells us that that “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them^{*} out of their resources” (Luke 8:22-23).

Lydia – (Acts 16:15) who provided much needed hospitality. Priscilla, who with her husband provided a place for Paul to stay during his ministry at Corinth (Acts 18:1-4). At Ephesus (Acts 18:24-26), when Apollo “had been instructed in the Way of the Lord”, and “spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John”, Priscilla and Aquila “took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. Aquila and Prisca also hosted a church at Ephesus in their home (1 Co 16:19) and hosted a church at Rome in their home (Ro 16:3-5). Paul commended them (Romans 16:3-4) that they worked with him “in Christ Jesus” and who even “risked their necks” for Paul’s life. Euodia and Syntyche were also commended as they “struggled beside” Paul “in the work of the gospel” (Phil. 4:3).

Many people were saved, through the evangelistic efforts of godly women who knew what it meant to really worship God. In the church at Rome, the service of Phoebe, a helper of Paul and many others (Ro 16:1-2), Paul also commended "Mary, " who has worked very hard- (Romans 16:6); the twin sisters, Tryphena and Tryphosa who were "workers in the Lord" (Romans 16:12).

The faith of a widow in the New Testament is also a great edification to many Christians (Mark 12:41-44). While many rich people put in large sums into the treasury, "a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny".(v42).Jesus then told his disciples to learn from this widow and he said, ' Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.' It is more admirable for the widow than the rich even though she only put in a little money.

Stark (1994) states that a very significant proportion of martyrs (in the Roman persecutions) were women. This led to Bonnie Bowman Thurston (1989) too suggest that they also must have been regarded by the Romans as holding some sort of official standing. The New Testament does not list specifically the ranks of different individual women but we are clear that when Saul persecuted the Christians, he did not spare the women, "dragging off both men and women "(Acts 8:3). No doubt, women were effective evangelizers at that time.

Identification of Individuals who served

Just like the widow mentioned, there were numerous believers who were faithful and served with great conviction, but they were not named specifically. And, regarding the female travellers who travelled with Jesus and many others, the New Testament does not specify the exact number and their names. But Luke records the

names of a prominent few, and mentions there were “many others” Richard (1991) wrote about the different possible identities of Salome and that she might be one of the women (Jesus’ disciples) who witnessed Jesus’ resurrection. In the Christian context, perhaps, it is not as vital to pinpoint all individuals who serve the Lord as men are not to exalt themselves with self-conceited pride. Even Paul the great apostle does not exalt himself in his service to the Lord and reminds people of Jesus Christ all the time as the “name that is above every name” declare the good news (Philippians 2:9).

Jesus’ teaching about rewards

Salome made requests to Jesus for her sons, James and John, to have special positions in his Kingdom (Matthew 20:20-24) —“declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom”. She failed to understand Jesus’ teaching about rewards to the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30). Salome’s motive was to get Jesus to give her sons honour and glamour in return for worship.

Obviously Salome wanted to grasp top positions for her sons. But, rewards are not granted as favours. And, authority is not given for self-importance, and selfish ambition. Jesus has taught the disciples and everyone leadership in new perspective—instead of using people, leaders are supposed to be servants of others.

Christians will all “stand before the judgement seat of God” (Romans 14:10). While Christians have received their gift of Salvation when they are saved, at the “bema” seat of Christ, they will further receive their respective rewards, ie crowns (diadema). For example, there will be several crowns like the Soul-Winner's Crown (1 Thessalonians 2:19) in obedience of God’s Great Commission; the Crown Of Righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8) the Crown Of Glory (1 Peter 5:4) and the

Incorruptible Crown (1 Corinthians 9:25); The Crown Of Life (James 1:12) and so on. Rewards in heaven can be taken away by esteeming the opinions of the world and adhering to earthly treasures.

Crowns: Responsibilities---Authority in Heaven

There are many crowns (stephanos) mentioned in the New Testament .The crowns indicate that they are leaders, in recognition of their service. God's rewards also include some form of responsibility and authority, just like the where parable of the talents, where the “trustworthy slave” who “will be in charge of many things (Matthew 25:21- 23) in God’s kingdom. Moreover, Jesus also said," To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered— even as I also received authority from my Father “(Revelation 2:26-28), just like the Parable of the Ten Pounds in Luke when the Lord rewards the servant, a faithful steward of his money, saying, “Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.” (Luke 19:17)

Women “Leaders” in the Old Testament and Women in the New Testament

In the Old Testament, Miriam, Aaron’s sister, was a prophetess. It was evident that other women followed her as “all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing” (Exodus 15:20). There was also Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) and Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) who were also prophetesses. Most pertinent of all is Deborah whom “ the Israelites came up to her for judgement(Judges 4:4-5). In other words, she was a judge.

In spite of his revolutionary treatment of women, Jesus did not choose women as apostles nor did He commission them to ‘hold high positions in the church’. In David’s (1997) discussion of the patterns of leadership in earliest Christianity, he points out that Campbell (1994) claim of the “leaders” whose houses the congregation

met were in fact "the equivalent of elders in all but name" and that "Campbell argues that the term 'elder' was essentially " a title of honour, not of office, a title that is imprecise, collective, and representative, and rooted in the ancient family or household"(pg326). So the "primary locus of power and authority" ultimately lies in the twelve apostles.

The 12 Apostles were 12 Jewish males who may represent the twelve tribes (Jacob had twelve sons, symbolising the 12 tribes of Israel). It is the twelve apostles who will "eat and drink" at the Lord's table in his Kingdom, and they will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30).

The new Jerusalem will have "a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites" (Revelation 21:12). "And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:14).

Conclusion: Different roles for Men and Women

Elevating women to the roles of men for women's status does not necessarily bring about higher status of women in the church context. It is not ontological subordination in the church, but subordination in role and function. The man and the woman in the church complement each other with their different callings.

In Matthew 23:11, it says "The greatest among you will be your servant". The human definition of a leader often associates with pride, fame, prestige. In God's eyes, the definition of leadership is equivalent to that being a servant, who can serve earnestly.

"Subordination is entirely different from subjection or inferiority" (Steph, 2011)(pg109) as Sharon James says, writing in "The Apologetics Study Bible".

Women subordination is explained through using the example of the Trinity, that submission does not mean inferiority. The three persons of the Trinity, are equally God, but have different roles to play. In the same way, men and women can have different roles and still be equal in value. The focus is not on whether men had more important roles than women. The main message and focus is on Christ.

Regardless of whether the women in the New Testament assumed great authority or not, they had important roles in their lives and it was through every one of them, whom God used, who contributed to the spread of Christianity. Paul commended those women who have “struggled beside” him “in the work of the gospel”. Many of them were not specifically named, or given clear authority over people. Nevertheless, they helped spread Christianity and just as the apostle Paul reminded them, their names “are in the book of life” (Phil. 4:2-3).

(4168 words)

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