

RECLAIMING THE RADICAL STORY

by KENT BROWER and C. JEANNE SERRÃO

A sinful culture often squeezes the church into its mold through resistance to women called to proclaim the gospel. Discover why Nazarenes believe in and support God's calling upon women and men.

WHY DOES the Church of the Nazarene ordain women? This question is posed by some from outside the denomination and sometimes arises from within. Even when not expressed, uncertainty about, if not hostility toward, women in ordained ministries can be a subtle issue affecting church boards and other leaders. This hampers or prevents the ministry of those women called by God to proclaim the gospel.

Why this resistance? For almost two millennia, many have allowed the surrounding sinful culture to squeeze the church into its mold, bolstered by use of a few biblical proof texts. In succumbing to sinful culture, they have ignored the breathtaking story of God's redemption that comes to supreme expression in Jesus. But if we were to remember that we are called to be God's holy people, personally transformed by the Holy Spirit and modeling together the life of God and His holiness in the world, would resistance cease? We think so.

We ordain women because we believe this is the only way in which we can respond faithfully to the work of the Spirit in all the people of God. The New Testament says very little about ordination, but talks much about the gifting for ministry that comes from God and the recognition and setting apart of people for special ministry and leadership by the Church. Were we to refuse to acknowledge God's call of our sisters as well as our brothers, we would set our face against the radical story of God's deliverance of humankind.

This story is not new. It starts from creation, reaches its full revelation in Christ, is the content and mission of God's holy people now, and is the goal of all things. The good news, the gospel, is that God in Christ is reconciling His alienated people to God and to each other. God has entrusted this ministry of reconciliation to His transformed people.

In Genesis, God creates and the entire created order, inanimate and animate, is pronounced good. Finally, God creates humankind ('adam'), [with gender differentiation as male ('ish') and female ('ishshah)], in

the image and likeness of God and charges them both with responsibility for God's creation (Genesis 1:26-28, 5:1-2). God declares that everything is *very good* (Genesis 1:31).

His creation is working in peace and harmony, just the way God intended. The human creatures reflect the being and life of their triune Creator—a bond of love.

The second chapter of Genesis gives a stunningly beautiful picture of the way things work when everything in the garden is according to God's creative purposes. Relationships are harmonious and the garden is fruitful. The animals are in a close relationship with the man who is fashioned by God from the same dust. And the companionship of the man and the woman—the one-fleshness—is symbolized by the creation of woman from the rib of man (Genesis 2:21-24). The woman is the 'ezer (helper) of the man.

"Helper" when referring to a person in the Old Testament always refers to God, except for the reference here and one reference to David. It is not understood as an expression of submission. Rather she is an equal partner who serves God *with* the man.

But things go wrong, badly. Disobedience mars the relationship between God and those created in His image and likeness. In Genesis 3:1-7, the scriptures tell us that the man and the woman sin together: First, the serpent uses the plural "you." Second, the man was with her when they ate the fruit. Finally, after they ate, *both* their eyes were opened.

The story in Genesis 3:8-10, picturing the marred relationship between God and His creatures, is one of the most moving in Scripture. The disastrous result is that all relationships within the created order have been distorted: God with humans, humans with humans, and humans with created order.

Humans are now rebels against God. Human relationships are distorted by distrust and power. Humans have a parasitic rather than symbiotic relationship with creation. The domination and subordination statements of judgement in Genesis 3:14-19 are descriptive of broken relationships which are the result of sin and not part of God's creation plan. Humans cannot extract themselves from this morass of personal and sinful culture.

With Jesus' coming, the cultural pattern of the world organized in sinful rebellion against God is challenged at every point. Jesus gathers around himself a new people, transformed by the presence of the Holy One of God and called to be the vanguard of God's redemptive work in the world.

This new people of God are to live as a redeemed community of those who are personally reconciled to God. The barriers of sinful human culture do not belong in this new people. Rather, in their own God-centered community, they are to model the way God intended people to live.

That's the story in a nutshell. So, how does Jesus go about His mission? First, He calls disciples, fishers in Galilee, neither descendents of David nor Pharisees. The Pharisees protect God's holiness by erecting and maintaining boundaries. But Jesus is different. He calls people to himself. From those who

respond He names twelve apostles—circumcised, Jewish, male apostles. (Some note that Jesus only called males to be the apostles and therefore, men are to be the leaders. To our knowledge, no group insists that all ordained leaders also be circumcised and Jewish.) The Twelve are symbolic and representative of the whole, restored, holy people of God.

In fact, Jesus invites all who would come after Him to take up their crosses and follow.

Those around Jesus, then, are on His mission and proclaiming the Good News. They are a new kingdom of priests and a holy nation, transformed by the very presence of Jesus. They are holy, but only and always in relation to Him. Thus boundaries are broken as the unclean are transformed and empowered for mission. Those excluded are now included. The only criterion is identity with Jesus and His mission. Significantly, even family ties are relativized. The family of Jesus are those who do the will of God.

The Gospels are clear: at point after point, Jesus challenges social and religious convention. His treatment of women fits this pattern exactly.

Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman at noon, who then proclaims the good news to all the people in her village. He speaks warmly to a woman with a gynecological disorder who has knowingly touched Him and risked making Jesus impure. Indeed, her voice is heard in the story—the perspective is hers.

We know of eight women by name who join His itinerant mission and several of them support His mission. He also teaches women—another breach of convention. Mary, the sister of Martha, is the paradigm of loving God with all the heart. He raises a dead girl to life and heals the daughter of a Gentile woman. He accepts the gratitude and love of a notorious woman who has been forgiven. He tells men that the solution to lust is a changed heart, not removing women from public view.

In each of these cases, Jesus steps outside of society's norms and conventions because a new era has dawned.

In fact, women hold a surprising prominence in the life and ministry of Jesus. Women feature in Jesus' genealogy. The voices of Elizabeth and especially Mary are at the center of the birth stories of John and Jesus. At the cross, the women who had followed Jesus and ministered to Him in Galilee are those who stay to the end, witness His gruesome death, and care for His body. On Easter morning, women are the first witnesses to the empty tomb. According to John, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen one. Thus, they feature unexpectedly and prominently in the story of Jesus from beginning to end.

Taken as a whole, the place of women in the story of Jesus is countercultural at point after point. Jesus liberates and empowers women in the face of a society that marginalized

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and excluded. The old barriers just do not apply in the new people of God.

The implications of Jesus' words and actions affect the development of the early Church. The story of Pentecost clearly indicates that women were among the 120 disciples who were in the upper room waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15). Peter's sermon at Pentecost quotes the prophet Joel, emphasizing God's gender inclusiveness in receiving the Spirit and proclaiming the Word:

**I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
... Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).**

Luke notes that more and more men and women believed and were added to the Church (Acts 5:14). Women and men were persecuted by Saul and dragged off to prison (Acts 8:3, 22:4). Many prominent women are mentioned in Acts, including Timothy's mother and grandmother, Lydia in Philippi, Philip's four daughters with the gift of prophecy, as well as Priscilla, who along with her husband, taught Apollos—who later became an important teacher in the Church (Acts 18:2, 18, 26).

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles and great missionary of the early Church, summarized his understanding of restored human relationships in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Some say that this only refers to spiritual access to God, but these three contrasts reflect the basic social divisions of the first century.

The conflict of Peter and Paul (Galatians 2:11-14) indicates that "neither Jew nor Greek" had social implications. Paul asked Philemon to treat his runaway slave, Onesimus, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 15-17). Paul did not abolish slavery. But his gospel sowed the seeds of its destruction. How tragic it is that it took the church almost 1,800 years to acknowledge that slave ownership was a social division that was incompatible with the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, counter to first century Jewish and pagan culture, Paul confirms that the sexual relationship between husband and wife is a matter of mutual respect and rights. In 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, while describing proper worship, Paul declares the interdependence of men and women and allows the local church to decide what type of dress would best express the restored relationship between women and men. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 implies that both men and women are praying and prophesying in the church services. These confirm that Galatians 3:28 has social as well as spiritual implications.

Paul mentions twelve women coworkers by name in his letters. Three are leaders of house churches: Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), and Apphia

(Philemon 2). Lydia, who welcomed Paul to her house in Philippi, could be added to this list as the house church would have continued, most likely, in her house (Acts 16).

In Romans 16 Paul names four women who worked "very hard" in the Lord: Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis. In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul mentions Euodia and Syntyche as fellow workers and those who "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel along with Clement." Phoebe is designated in Romans 16:1-2 as a *diakonon* (deacon or servant) of the church in Cenchrea. In 1 Timothy 4:6, the NIV translates this same word as "minister" of Christ Jesus. Although there is little evidence in the New Testament that the early Church ordained people in the same way we do today, this "may designate her generically as a member of a special leadership group within the church."¹

The last name has an interesting history, which shows how the later Church got caught up in the sinful mold of the world. In Romans 16:7, Paul calls Andronicus and Junias "outstanding among the apostles" who were in Christ, before Paul. The gender of Junias (Junia in New Revised Standard Version and Today's New International Version) cannot be determined from the Greek. However, there is no evidence that this name existed as a man's name in the first century, while there is much evidence that it existed as a woman's name. In the fourth century, Church father John Chrysostom understood the reference to be to a woman.² Later church leaders could not accept that a woman could be called an apostle, let alone an outstanding apostle, and today many translations and commentaries reflect that bias.

Many Christian groups today continue conforming to the sinful world with its dysfunctional relationships. Unclear and culturally bound passages in Paul have been used as proof texts against the recognition of the call of God on women to leadership roles in the Church. In the September/October issue of *Holiness Today*, we will address the interpretation of specific passages that have been most detrimental to the ministry of God-called women. **HT**

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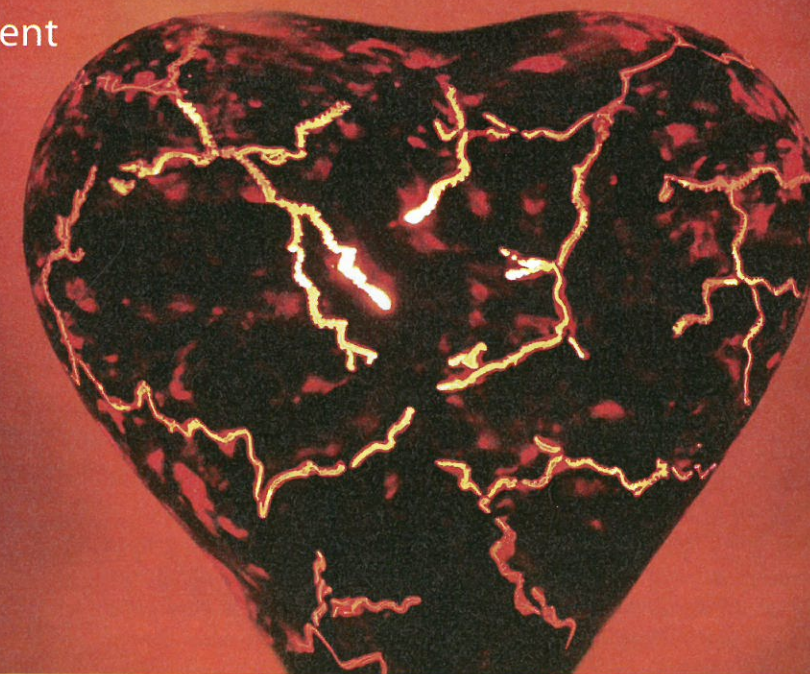
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1. Greathouse, William M. and George Lyons. *Romans 9-16*. New Beacon Bible Commentary: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2008. p. 265. See also Cranfield, p. 781.
2. Cranfield, C.E. B. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. II, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979. p. 788.

Q & A

TURN FROM WICKEDNESS AND LIVE

Does the Old Testament really contradict the New Testament? A biblical scholar provides the answer.



Q Please explain why the God of the Old and New Testaments seems to be a contradiction.

YOU ARE NOT the first to ask this question. In the second century it so disturbed Marcion, he deleted the entire Old Testament and most of the New from his Bible. Thomas

Jefferson cut-and-pasted the Gospels to build a Jesus more to his liking.

But the "contradictions" between the two testaments are more apparent than real, impelling us to read with discernment, seeing the whole.

In the righteous creation of the good and loving God, life could not be otherwise—rejecting God and good cannot lead to God and good.

Reading only the parts, we commonly see a God of law and wrath in the Old Testament, and contrast Him with a Jesus of grace and love in the New Testament. Reading more fully, it becomes obvious the Old Testament actually contains more passages of God's love—expressed first for Israel, but ultimately for all humans—than the New does. This is partly because the Old Testament is so much longer than the New, but that does not negate the love of God, who said in the *Old* Testament, "I take no pleasure in the

death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

This brings us to the nub of the matter. Passages of judgment are warnings to turn from wickedness, and live. Wickedness, defined most simply as rejecting God, leads to destruction. The wicked *experience* this as wrath, just as a burning log would experience the fire as wrath, if it could feel. In the righteous creation of the good and loving God, life could not be otherwise—rejecting God and good cannot lead to God and good. But *both* Testaments emphasize, when we read both comprehensively, that God is good and desires passionately that all should live.—jc

jc—Joseph Coleson is professor of Old Testament at Nazarene Theological Seminary.

READERS' QUESTIONS

In each issue, a forum of pastors, laity, theologians, and church leaders respond to your questions on subjects such as doctrine, theology, Christian living, and the church. Send your questions to *Holiness Today*, Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center, 17001 Prairie Star Parkway, Lenexa, KS 66220; E-mail: holinessstoday@nazarene.org. The editor regrets that all questions cannot be printed, acknowledged, or answered.