

# how did Jesus develop women as leaders?

In New Testament times the teacher/learner method of intentional discipling was a widely recognized method of teaching, and Jesus used it to train the future leaders of his church. In a growing body of literature on Christian leadership, it is common to read about how Jesus developed leaders, as a model for developing leaders today. For example, according to the model based on Mark 3:13-19, used in *Growing Leaders* by James Lawrence (and also used in the CPAS *Growing Leaders* course), Jesus chose the twelve disciples, appointed them to be with him, and appointed them to go out for him (identify/ invest/ entrust). Another model is based on Luke 5:1-11, where one can see how Jesus selected twelve people and trained them for future leadership.

But what of women? If in the early churches we see women emerging into leadership alongside men – women such as Lydia (Acts 16:14, 40), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), Priscilla (Acts 18:18; Rom. 16:3-5; 2 Tim. 4:19), Junia, 'outstanding among the apostles' (Rom. 16:7), and Nympha (Col. 4:15), plus many others known from early church documents – is it possible to see how some women were also identified, invested in and entrusted with leadership responsibility also? I believe it is. In the Gospels we can see how Jesus, while choosing twelve men as his disciples, also began to develop women, changing inherited patterns and beginning to restore to the church and the world the partnership of men and women which was lost at the Fall.

## The twelve and the women

Jesus appointed twelve men as his disciples. This is sometimes used as a reason why women should not be in particular forms of ministry and leadership, but it is more often seen as an inevitable concession to the culture of the day: the ministry of women apostles would have been unacceptable when the testimony of a woman was disregarded in a court of law. The choice of twelve men was also a symbolic act: twelve male apostles, reminiscent of the ancient patriarchs, was an eschatological sign denoting that Jesus was reconstituting the ancient people of God.

However, while the twelve clearly have a special place, it is also clear that they were not intended to be unique in ministry, first because the nature of ministry had changed, and second because Jesus also chose and sent out others. Among this number, and like the twelve men, close to Jesus, were a number of women followers, whose pattern of discipleship and potential leadership closely mirrors that of the men. The fact that women were followers at all, in a culture where few women were literate or had any formal education, is in contrast to the accepted practices of the day (women were discouraged in rabbinic laws from leaving their homes). By highlighting findings from recent scholarship on the Gospels, it is possible to argue that Jesus developed women as leaders by encouraging them to follow him in preparation for when they in turn would lead others.

Luke 8:1-3 is one key passage. Here we see that a number of women accompanied Jesus, along with the twelve (who are listed in 6:12-19). In his study of named women in the Gospels, *Gospel Women*, Richard Bauckham, cites a definition of this 'summary statement': it indicates that the circumstances described happened 'repeatedly within an indefinite period of time'. In other words, while this is one small reference, it indicates that women regularly accompanied Jesus in this way.

Bauckham also challenges the NRSV translation, and argues that the Greek text makes it clear that both the twelve *and* the women 'were with' Jesus, rather than the women being something of an afterthought: he suggests that the text should read 'There were with him the twelve and

some women who...'. Here Luke is singling out two groups among the larger body of disciples, the twelve and the women. The fact that the women provided for him is not the key point: the point is that they were 'with' Jesus. This is the essence of discipleship: to accompany Jesus and to witness his ministry, and both men and women seem to be seen as equals in discipleship. At this point in the Gospel narrative, neither men nor women are actively participating in Jesus' ministry, but both are being prepared to do so.

Throughout the Gospels there are two groups of disciples – those who left their homes and families literally to follow Jesus, and others who listened to Jesus as he came to them. Luke reminds his readers here that women were among those who literally followed Jesus as well as among those who flocked to hear his teaching. Bauckham makes it clear that these women were not being assigned a gender-specific role, such as women ordinarily played in a family situation. They must have been unusual women to have had independent means, and the text does not imply that none of the male disciples provided materially in this way, but only that a number of women did provide support for Jesus and his disciples. The twelve have made similar sacrifices in giving up home and family to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11). For aristocratic women such as Joanna, it must also have been costly to follow, in that it would have appeared scandalous that women attached themselves to a group such as Jesus and his largely non-elite followers. Thus the discipleship of women is conceived as radically as for men – perhaps even more radically.

It is also interesting that there are differences between Luke and Mark/Matthew in the way discipleship is conceived: Luke characteristically envisages a larger group of disciples. While Luke also makes reference to 'the twelve', Bauckham notes that these are all in material that derives from Mark, with the exception of Luke 8:1-3 and two post-resurrection appearances. As we read, for example, the story of the road to Emmaus and Jesus' appearances to Cleopas and another disciple (Luke 24:13,18,33,36), we become aware that 'discipleship' is not confined to the twelve.

All the Synoptic Gospels speak of women accompanying Jesus in his travelling ministry (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49). They are there at the cross (Luke 23:27,49) and the tomb (Luke 23:49), which must have taken some courage. They witnessed the resurrection (Luke 24:1-11). In John's Gospel, women are given places as exemplary disciples and full-fledged apostles, which some have argued is evidence for women's leadership in the Johannine community. Mary Magdalene is the premier example.

In Luke 9 we read how the twelve are sent out; Jesus gave them 'power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill' (9:1-2). This is one of relatively few occasions in the Gospels where we see the twelve actually involved in ministry (9:6). In chapter 10, we read how seventy-two others are sent out, and it seems highly likely that women are included among these, given the emphasis Jesus places on the women who followed Jesus, and that there are hints in the New Testament of husband and wife missionary teams (Priscilla and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia in Romans 16:3 and 7) and of pairs of women (Tryphena and Tryphosa in Romans 16:12). Thus women, while not being chosen in the same way as the twelve, were certainly 'with' Jesus, invested in, and then entrusted with ministry.

Thus, some scholars suggest, the differences between the groups of men and of women followers of Jesus were not as great as might at first appear. The women were 'with' him throughout his ministry, observing him, and being prepared for the time when, after the resurrection, they in turn would be commissioned for ministry.

## **Women at the rabbi's feet**

Jesus welcomed many different women as learners: Mary of Bethany, the woman at the well, the

Canaanite woman, and others who are not named. Mary sat at Jesus' feet, which was the normal attitude of someone who was a disciple and who would subsequently be a teacher. Jesus clearly affirms a woman's right to be a disciple and not to be solely concerned with what might be thought 'women's' domestic work. And Jesus rebukes her sister Mary for her failure to 'listen', in her anxiety to attend to the normal domestic duties which would be expected of women (Luke 10:41-2). While the contrast between Martha and Mary is sometimes used to explore active and reflective lifestyles, it is hard to find anything more counter-cultural than Mary's behaviour in terms of what women were expected to be and do.

John's account of the death of Lazarus (John 11:17-44) also repays close attention. The centre of the story is not Lazarus, but the conversations Jesus has with Martha and Mary, especially the former. Her confession of faith reveals that she has indeed learnt at Jesus' feet, and she makes a clear declaration of faith (11:27), similar to that of Peter. Mary (11:32) exhibits the same faith and forthrightness.

In John 12:1-8 we read how Mary anoints Jesus' feet – which interestingly anticipates the foot washing in chapter 13. The interrelation between these two passages shows how Mary models service and discipleship, and participation in Jesus' suffering and death. In her study of gender in Luke-Acts, *The Double Message*, Turid Seim explores the pattern of servant leadership that Jesus modelled and taught. She notes that in Luke the women exhibit a Christ-like pattern of service, in contrast to the Pharisees and other groups of leaders (whom Jesus criticises), and to those disciples who in their leadership seem motivated by a desire for position (Mark 9:34/Luke 9:46; Mark 10:35-37). Seim also suggests that Luke 8:1-3 is one place where this 'leadership is service' theme is summed up, and that the stress on women's sacrificial leadership helps to redefine the function of leadership exercised by men, giving them an 'exemplary significance'.

Two other passages in Luke make it clear that discipleship (and potentially ministry) belongs to women as well as to men. On one occasion, when Jesus is told that his mother and brothers have come to see him, he replies: 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice' (Luke 8:19-21). This is what Jesus encouraged Mary to do—to listen and to put into practice. A few chapters later, when a woman calls out to Jesus, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you', Jesus replies: 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (11:27-28). This tells us, first, that there were women in the crowd, and also that, as Ruth Edwards puts it, 'Jesus was not prepared to affirm the primary role of biological motherhood, either for Mary, his own mother, or for any other woman'. A woman is to be fulfilled not primarily through her role as a wife and mother, but through following Jesus. The blessing is for men *and women* who are obedient to God's will.

## **Apostle to the apostles**

Finally, Jesus' appearance and commissioning of Mary Magdalene, after his resurrection, has been much discussed. Mary has suffered in popular thinking, through her confusion with other Marys and the mistaken assumption that she was a prostitute. But among the followers of Jesus, Mary's name occurs more often than most of the twelve apostles. Of the women who knew Jesus, only Mary his mother is mentioned more times than the Magdalene. All four Gospel writers identify her as one of Jesus' most devout followers, and she appears in nine different lists of women, in all but one with her name heading the list.

When Mary recognized the resurrected Jesus, she cried out, 'Rabbouni', which means 'my teacher' (John 20:16). This, and the fact that she was one of the women travelling with Jesus, and thus alongside him to learn, suggests that she was indeed a disciple of Jesus, learning from him in order that she should in turn be a teacher and leader.

For the first disciples, being a follower of Jesus was much more than being the follower of any

other rabbi. The future of the Christian faith depended on Jesus' students and how they succeeded in passing on what they learned from him, by teaching what he taught them and by loving one another as he loved them. It seems that women were included in this, and this can hardly have been unintentional on Jesus' part when for him to associate with women at all, let alone allow them in his travelling group, would have invited adverse comment.

The high point of the story has to be in the garden, where Jesus commissions Mary with the task of telling the good news of the resurrection to his brothers, the eleven apostles. No wonder she has been called the 'apostle to the apostles', and if the qualification of an apostle is to have been with Jesus and witnessed the resurrection, then she (and other women) qualified, even if their position was not formalized in the process of replacing Judas (Acts 2:21-22).

Having seen such a high-profile woman in the Gospels, it is somewhat frustrating that we do not see her again in the rest of the New Testament—hence, perhaps, the amount of speculation there has been about her story. But we may gain further insight into Mary as a leader in the *Gospel of Mary*, a piece of writing that came to light around the turn of the twentieth century. While we cannot give it the same status as the canonical Gospels, it does point to Mary having a clear leadership role in the early church. This leadership was, however, disputed by some of the other disciples, primarily Andrew and Peter, the latter opposing her ministry partly because 'her leadership lowers his gender status'. Thankfully, modern scholarship (as opposed to sensationalism) has recaptured the New Testament picture of Mary Magdalene as prominent disciple, which was so long eclipsed by Mary Magdalene the reformed prostitute.

Carolyn Custis James suggests that culturally it would have been acceptable for the apostles to marginalize the female followers of Jesus after he returned to the Father. But it was not acceptable to Jesus. He had elevated women by including them as disciples and at his resurrection he affirmed their ministry as messengers. The Gospel writers were dependent on the testimony of women such as Mary his mother as well as Mary Magdalene for reconstructing the narrative of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Mary his mother, and 'the women' were there after the resurrection, devoted to prayer and waiting for the future to unfold (Acts 1:14). And when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, everything changed. The prophecy of Joel, that God would pour out his Spirit on *all* his people, was fulfilled:

Your sons and your daughters will prophesy,  
Your young men will see visions,  
Your old men will dream dreams,  
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)

Women as well as men were equipped by God's Spirit for all that he would call them to do.

From these examples, we can see that Jesus inaugurated a new way, a new attitude to women, recognizing that what mattered was their response to God rather than the roles which society dictated for them. As he invested in the twelve male disciples, so he also invested in those women who chose to follow him throughout his ministry. And when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, God's new society was established, and women as well as men were empowered. (We are now more aware than we used to be of the cultural background in which the early Church came to birth, where in Greek and Roman society women were used to having a role in religious leadership, so that in some contexts it was not so hard for women to step into leadership in churches as they were established in homes, and for their leadership to be accepted. In the first churches, old distinctions of race, class and gender were abolished; qualification for service depended (with a few cultural concessions) no longer on gender and societal position but on gifting, and those women who had been 'with' Jesus, were able, until restrictions were made, to serve alongside men.)

## References/ Further Reading

- Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (T&T Clark, 2002).
- Ruth B Edwards, *The Case for Women's Ministry* (SPCK, 1989).
- Carolyn Custis James, *Lost Women of the Bible* (Zondervan, 2005).
- K L King, 'Prophetic Power and Women's Authority: The Case of the Gospel of Mary', in *Women Priests and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* ed B M Kienzle and P J Walker (University of California Press, 1998)
- C Clark Kroeger and M J Evans (ed), *IVP Women's Bible Commentary* (Intervarsity Press, 2002).
- James Lawrence, *Growing Leaders* (CPAS/BRF, 2004)
- Turid K Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (T & T Clark, 1994)
- Aída Besançon Spencer, 'Jesus' Treatment of Women in the Gospels' in RW Pierce and RM Groothuis (eds) *Discovering Biblical Equality* (IVP, 2005).
- Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (BRF/CPAS, 2008).
- Tom Wright, 'The Biblical Basis for Women's Service in the Church', paper given in 2004, available on the Fulcrum website, and in *Priscilla Papers*, 20.4, pp 5-10.

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2011