
Was Jesus a Feminist?

An International Student Café Debate

By Kristee Boyd

Prior to our current lockdown situation, some of our young adults had the idea of holding a debate on the topic: *Was Jesus a Feminist?* We were not able to have this debate face-to-face as planned, so we decided to hold it over WhatsApp, which is an online messaging application through which we can have a group 'chat.'

For those of you who don't know our young adults, I can tell you that they are a smart, well-read group of individuals, who know their Bibles very well! There were some strong opinions on both sides of the debate, as well as questions that remained unanswered at the end of it. Please find below a summary of our debate...

Biblical verses/passages raised for consideration throughout the debate:

Genesis 1: 26-27	The wedding at Cana
Matthew 5	The woman at the well
Luke 6	Mary and Martha
Luke 8: 1-2	At the cross
John 20: 11-18	Mary in the garden
1 Timothy 2: 12	The woman caught in adultery
Galatians 3: 28	
Ephesians 3: 28	
1 Corinthians 14: 34	

Defining the term 'Feminism'

Our moderator pointed out that the term 'feminism' would not have existed in Jesus' time, so Jesus would not have called Himself a 'feminist.' Therefore, for the purposes of the debate, it was important to define the term. We used a definition by Cheri Kramerae:

"Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings."

In simplest terms, the debate was about whether Jesus viewed women as having equal worth to men.

From the outset, there was one point that was agreed upon by all: God created man and woman in His image and everyone is of equal value in the eyes of God, regardless of gender. However, from here, viewpoints differed significantly.

For (Jesus was a feminist)

Those who view Jesus as a feminist argued that Jesus was doing away with the hierarchical structure of the time and in His new world, all had been saved through him. Jesus was reversing Eve's mistake so as to realign with God's divine plan, whereby all men and women were created equally in His own image. In the era and cultural context into which Jesus was born, women were not allowed to testify in court and the word of a woman was weighted as having less validity than that of a man. Women were not allowed to become rabbis or to take positions of leadership. Jesus brought about what God had intended in the first place, raising the status of women to match that of their male counterparts.

By way of demonstration, it was pointed out that Jesus directly taught both men and women, which was unusual at the time. Women were referred to by name, along with Jesus' disciples. In the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus dismissed traditional gender roles in favour of the women sitting and learning at his feet, which was incidentally also how young hopefuls trained to become rabbis at the time. Jesus also trusted women to testify when He rose again and directed Mary to go and tell the others what she had seen. He revealed Himself to women and later scolded the disciples for not believing them.

In relation to Biblical verses around women being denied permission to speak in church, the 'for' side argued that it was because women were uneducated at the time. If they repeatedly asked questions in church it added to the chaotic atmosphere, therefore they were told to ask their husbands at home as a mere practicality.

Against (Jesus was not a feminist)

Those who do not view Jesus as a feminist argued that God did indeed create men and women to be equal in terms of value but He allocated them different, complimentary roles according to differing strengths and weaknesses. It was pointed out that to be equal does not necessarily mean to have the same rights, responsibilities or natures as each other. The Bible was said to clearly distinguish between the sexes.

The against side also contended that Israel was already revolutionary in its treatment of women as being equal to men before Jesus came along. Jesus followed the plan (equality of men and women) that God had intended in the first place, therefore He didn't change anything.

They also argued that the Bible explicitly bans women from teaching. Men are to be the head of the family. Women are to have long hair. Men and women are to compliment each other. If two things compliment each other then the individual things serve different purposes which are equally important.

When Jesus scolded his disciples, it was for not believing the *message* that He had risen, it was not to do with the women who brought the message or the *validity* of their testimony.

Equality of the sexes was not a part of Jesus' message or his reasoning for taking human form amongst us, therefore we could not call Him a feminist.

Questioning:

There were some interesting questions raised during the debate, which caused some heated discussion...

* Can the Bible be read as 100% accurate, or do we allow for cultural perceptions and biases, translation errors and so forth?

* Is there a valid argument to be made that the Bible, as a text, has contributed significantly to the subjugation of women throughout the ages?

* Jesus was God's son but He became one of us – did that mean that he took on human prejudices as well or was He human merely in form but still perfect in spirit?

Towards the end of the debate, the questioning spiralled off topic somewhat into consciousness, Quantum theory, Darwinism and so forth – I think there is scope for all kinds of debates in this group's future! I will say that the debate ended in love, affirmations of friendship and an agreement that both sides maintain equal respect for women.

Thanks so much to those of you who participated in this controversial discussion. Hopefully it will spark some contemplation on this topic for the readers of *News and Views* as well!