

MARY-ELSIE WOLFE

BECOMING

HIS STORY

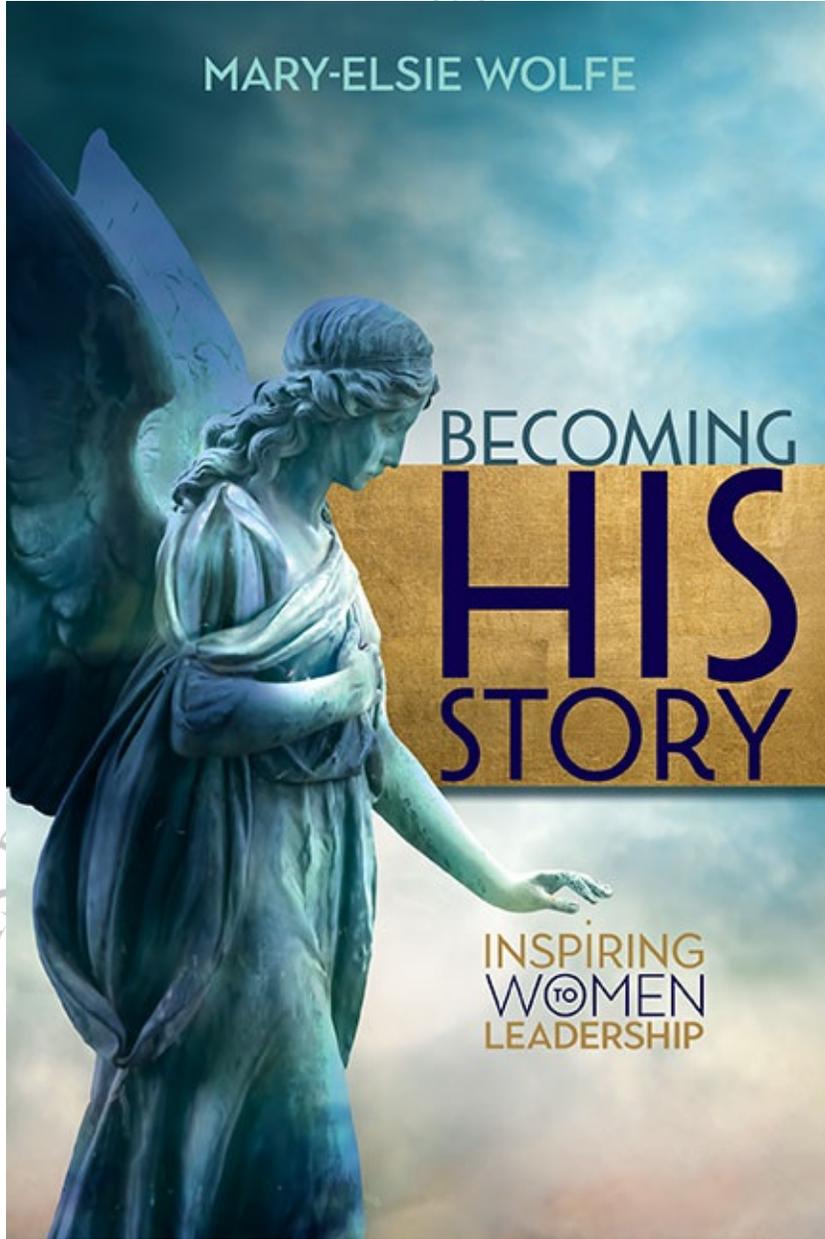
INSPIRING
WOMEN
LEADERSHIP



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How do we draw the reality of women's experience in the history of the church in a way that doesn't simply reproduce its lines but reads between them and redraws them for the future? Mary-Elsie Wolfe shows how in this thin book, thick and rich with insights about the past, outlines of the present, and outfittings for the future.

—Leonard Sweet

**Best-selling author, professor (Drew University, George Fox University),
and chief contributor to sermons.com**

Mary-Elsie Wolfe weaves together a tapestry of everyday personal experiences, scholarly sources and devotional thoughts in this book about significant "moments" that women experienced with Jesus in the Gospel of John. She's not interested in debating the usual Pauline passages on the role of women in Christian communities; instead she invites the reader to watch, listen to and reflect on some very telling experiences and the underlying message that Jesus was giving about the place of women in his Kingdom.

—Bishop Keith Elford

**Bishop of The Free Methodist Church in Canada (1997 to 2017),
executive committee member of the Free Methodist World Conference**

Mary-Elsie Wolfe draws us into the stories of women in the New Testament who have fully embraced their calling and illustrates the lessons learned through her own life experiences. The invitation is to see with new eyes how Jesus and the early Church broke with cultural norms to include women and then to look beyond the restrictions of our own culture in order to participate in what God is birthing in the church today.

—Lynn Smith

**Former VP of Student Development/Dean of Students, Tyndale University College
and Seminary; author of Gender or Giftedness and Mentoring: Leaving a Legacy;
founding member of NextLEVEL Leadership**

Think of Christianity as a set of doctrines to believe or rules to observe? Then this book is for you. Wolfe makes clear, Christ is not out to make us dutiful servants but to win our hearts with his all-embracing love. Having Christ formed in us is what our souls hunger for. Mary-Elsie makes clear that no matter who we are, "our season of life is no barrier to having Christ formed in us."

—Elisabeth Natividad

Lead Pastor, Grace Methodist Church

This is the best book I have read on the topic of leadership from the perspective of a coaching relationship. As a professional executive leadership coach, I find Mary-Elsie's treatment of leadership refreshing as well as motivational. She deals with women and men in leadership in a fair and balanced way. Her thoughts about followership are quite insightful for both genders. If you want to learn more about leadership, become renewed in your leadership or have questions about women in leadership, this is a must-read book.

—Patrick Lattore, PhD

**President of PAL~Leadership (an executive coaching company),
former associate provost and faculty member teaching leadership
at Fuller Theological Seminary**

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DEDICATION

TO ELIZABETH, ABBY, ELIANA AND AMY—MY BEAUTIFUL NIECES AND DAUGHTERS. May your lives be a tapestry of grace, beauty and the fruit of the Spirit, leading others to better places, propelled by the love of God, with full engagement of the gifts and talents that you offer the world! And to Alex, Patrick, Fletcher, Braden and Gregory, may you foster a world that enjoys the freedom of all people and sees your dreams through God's lens of hope. To all of you, dream big—in partnership with the God who is so much bigger!

CONTENTS

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[SECTION ONE](#)

TO LEARN FROM JESUS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

MY STORY

[CHAPTER 2](#)

WORLDVIEW AND CULTURAL LENS

[CHAPTER 3](#)

THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN

[CHAPTER 4](#)

THE WOMEN IN JOHN:

JESUS ASPIRES TO GREAT THINGS FOR WOMEN

CHAPTER 5

CONTEXT AND HISTORY

CHAPTER 6

MARY MODELS DISCIPLESHIP 101

CHAPTER 7

A FEMALE APOSTLE IS THE FIRST EVANGELIST

CHAPTER 8

MARTHA: CONVICTING FAITH LEADS TO A DEMONSTRATION
OF THE POWER OF GOD

CHAPTER 9

MARY (SISTER OF MARTHA AND LAZARUS):

DEMONSTRATES COSTLY FOLLOWERSHIP AND PASSIONATE FAITH
THROUGH HER LOVE AND DEVOTION TO JESUS

CHAPTER 10

WOMEN AT THE CROSS:

RESOLUTELY LOYAL AND UNWAVERING UNTIL THE END;
FIRST TO HEAR OF MISSION COMPLETION

CHAPTER 11:

MARY OF BETHANY: THE UNRELENTING LEADER

SECTION TWO

TO LIVE LIKE JESUS

CHAPTER 12

WOMEN LEAD THE WAY, ENLARGING OUR VIEW BY FOLLOWING

CHAPTER 13

WOMEN LEADING IN THE CHURCH MOVE US CLOSER TO THE FULLNESS
OF GOD'S COMPLETED WORK

CHAPTER 14

THE PROMINENCE OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

SECTION THREE

TO LEAD LIKE JESUS

CHAPTER 15

JESUS DEFINES LEADERSHIP:
LEADERSHIP THEORY DRAWS FROM JESUS

CHAPTER 16

THE LOVE OF GOD IS THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

CHAPTER 17

GIVING POWER AWAY IN ORDER TO FOSTER AND REALIZE VISION

CHAPTER 18

DISCERNING THE BIRTH OF NEW VISION FOR THE CHURCH:
A CAUSE TO RECOMMIT TO WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

CHAPTER 19

LEADERS FOLLOW JESUS, THEN INVEST IN THE MAKING OF OTHER LEADERS

CHAPTER 20

LEARNING FROM JESUS, LIVING LIKE JESUS, LEADING LIKE JESUS:
BECOMING THE BEST STORY EVER

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COPIOUS THANKS TO MY FAMILY, EXTENDED FAMILY AND FRIENDS WHO HAVE through the years encouraged me to finish this project! To my mom, dad, siblings and daughters for cheering me on in life and loving me. Special thanks to Kathleen Fletcher for your constructive feedback and hours of proofreading. Thanks to Marina Hofman Willard for guiding this process with dedication and patience—especially with footnotes—and for your pointed comments that very much improved the end product. Thanks to my husband, Grant, for walking this journey with me and encouraging my dreams. Mostly, thanks to Jesus, who leads my way, infuses in me undying hope and models for me what love looks like!

PREFACE

WHAT IF THERE WAS SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN? WHAT IF WE ARE participating in changes that will someday define this period as a new era? Some would say we live in such a time. Certainly, church as we know it in the Western world is changing. I say Western world because many parts of Christendom around the world are flourishing, but change could certainly be reflected in the church worldwide.

Many Christian leaders are reassessing how Jesus understood church, how the early worshipers congregated, how we arrived at the forms of church we now attend. As leaders, men and women, we want to rise up to that challenge and discern what God is doing among us. In some traditions, some circles and some theological camps, women aren't always encouraged to fully participate. This book seeks to inspire women to fully engage in that call—and to inspire men to challenge the women in their lives to rise up to meet God's mission.

God could more expediently enflame a bush, give repeated Damascus-road experiences, or keep fleece dry amidst the dew. Instead, he chooses to share the journey in partnership with us. Even with our many foibles and imperfections and our inability to fully listen or understand, God patiently guides us along in his mission. As *our* hearts grow to understand more fully *his* heart, we also share in his joy. The Psalmist glimpses the fullness of this joy, reminding us that a single day in God's presence is better than a thousand elsewhere (Psalm 84:10). God calls us to a lifetime of such days in his joyful presence. Every day we have the opportunity to experience God's deep call and presence in new ways. As the people of God, we embark on that journey. We allow God's Spirit to work in us. We learn from Jesus. We live more like Jesus. We lead like Jesus. All as his Spirit indwells ours. As we allow God's story to *live* in our story, we are in a sense *becoming his story*. Jesus says, "remain in me, and I will remain in you" (John 15:4). The more we do, the more we have opportunity to live in the abundance to which God calls us (John 10:10).

That is not to say that we don't routinely face challenges in our daily life— anxieties about family and friends, health challenges, financial irregularities, physical or natural tragedies, and even the minutia of daily routine and

rituals. But how we invite God into those challenges can encourage us to a deeper understanding and revelation of his love. Furthermore, it can rewrite our story as one of transformation, inspiration, and adventure—as God’s story increasingly becomes part of ours.

In the 1980s teen-slacker classic *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, the title character makes a profound statement: “Life moves pretty fast. [If] you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” As the rock group the Rolling Stones found out since popularizing the song *Time Is on Our Side* 40 years ago, life moves quickly. I’m not sure most of us grasp life’s speed until we are well into our 30s. I recall a conversation with my paternal grandmother when I was about 11—words that meant very little to me then. “You won’t understand this now,” she said, “but life is much shorter than you think.” Not that I’ve reached the age when she transferred this wisdom, but I *get* it. I’m now convinced that time moves more quickly every year that I live.

But take comfort. If you live in partnership with the living God, he promises to satisfy you “with good as long as you live,” even renewing your youth (Psalm 103:5 NRSV). That means that even if you feel that you have wasted time and it’s just too late, with God there is always hope. As long as he keeps us on this earth, we are invited to this privileged partnership. We are invited to allow his story to grow into ours.

If you feel that you are someone who has wasted time, consider St. Augustine. For over 30 years, he overtly resisted God’s grace, while his praying mother anticipated his eventual divine encounter. Today, he is considered one of the most-noted theological influences of Western theology among our Christian Fathers and Mothers. The apostle Paul was personally responsible for persecuting Christians and supported the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1). Paul admitted as much in his letter to the Galatians, saying that he was “violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it” (Gal. 1:13 NRSV). One might think that with his past, he would constantly be feeling regret and remorse, but his words to the Philippians are promising for all of us: “*forgetting* what lies behind and *straining* forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13 NRSV, emphasis added).

What must have thrilled Paul even more was that his education, background, and life experiences all seemed to have moulded together so that his new life in Jesus became beautiful pottery. God used Paul’s abilities and experiences for his greater purposes. Paul lived in full

partnership with God. We are invited to do the same. Wherever you are in your journey of faith, in your season of life, or in living out God's call, it is my hope that reading *Becoming His Story* will be a journey of inspiration.

This book will be divided into three sections: To Learn from Jesus; To Live Like Jesus; To Lead Like Jesus. Section 1 is about call and inspiration: to learn from Jesus. The discussion is guided by the Gospel of John, as in it, more so than the other Gospels, we are invited to observe how Jesus interacts with women.¹ One writer says, "Jesus' approach to women was in such contrast to that of his culture that we can assume a deliberate modeling of a new way of relating to women."²

We are challenged to consider our formative, environmental, and cultural biases that hinder our full view when reading about the time of Jesus. In these stories, women were called personally by Jesus. How these women responded and interacted with Jesus gives us great insight into what Jesus aspires to for women. These portraits of Jesus and women offer deep theological significance.

The culture at Christ's time was influenced by Roman, Greek, Qumranic, and ancient Jewish thinking. Each of these groups held distinct yet somewhat similar perspectives on women, adapting to new opportunities for female leadership differently. But as Jesus meets these women in John, he seems determined not to be limited by cultural norms.

Because of the boldness of Jesus' mother Mary, we witness Jesus' first miracle and learn about discipleship. Thanks to an unknown Samaritan woman, we get a preview of Jesus' mission and then her personal commissioning to share about whom she encountered. In Martha, we have a powerful profession of faith articulating the identity of Jesus, followed by actions that convey her convictions about Jesus. When Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus anoints the feet of Jesus with perfume, we learn about costly followership. With the women at the cross in the final hours of Jesus' death, we learn about being resolutely loyal and unwavering until the very end. We also see God including those who were within that close range in his declaration of the completion of his mission. From that we learn how abiding with Jesus entitles us to have firsthand communication about his work in the world.

And finally, thanks to the example of Mary of Bethany at the tomb, we have the example of an unrelenting leader, the one who receives the first communication after the resurrection because of her relentless pursuit of

Christ.

Section 2 begins with women who led in how to follow Jesus. In Romans 16, we see that women are in leadership positions alongside of Paul. We see examples in Acts 21 of women teaching and prophesying.

The early church that took form after the resurrection of Jesus existed between the “the already and the not yet.” Victory over death had been accomplished, but the full consummation of that victory was still to come. But living toward that consummation seemed natural.

Men and women are equally called to serve as leaders. Unfortunately, church history and society have not always reflected that. Still today, in some denominational traditions, women are faced with obstacles to leadership. For new generations of women, who anticipate the world as their oyster, it seems odd and inconsistent to discover that cultural traditions or misperceptions will limit their opportunities within the church as part of the priesthood of believers. This results in competent, gifted women withholding their areas of giftedness in view of a perceived but misaligned obedience to Scripture. Or, talented, capable women might disregard Christianity altogether as the misconceptions in some churches taint their perceptions of following Jesus. Other women might have been raised in traditions that have excluded them from their true calling in the church.

Section 3 is about leading like Jesus. Jesus defines leadership. Much of leadership theory seems to draw from Jesus. The difference with Christian leadership is that it begins with our love for God—which is in fact the foundational premise for Christian leaders. Following the example of Jesus, leaders give power away as they discern vision and then see it realized. The same observational, prayerful discernment is necessary for the church to participate in what God is doing in the world. If we are in fact in a time of transition as a Christian movement, recommitting women to leadership will better position us to receive the full potential of God’s blessing for the church. Jesus invites followership to replicate his investment in others and multiply leadership. Leaders follow Jesus and then invest in the making of other leaders.

Regardless of your personal history, this book is for you. May you be inspired toward greater male/female leadership! As you learn, live and lead, experience how you can increasingly allow God’s story to live in yours —*becoming his story.*

[1](#) For a more exhaustive study on women in the Bible, see Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

[2](#) Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen, "Jesus and Women in the Gospel of John," *Direction* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 53.

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SECTION ONE

TO LEARN FROM JESUS

Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son.

(2 John 9)

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CHAPTER 1

MY STORY

AS A FAIRLY NEW BELIEVER I WOULD SAY, “I JUST WANT TO FOLLOW JESUS.” ONE morning while jogging, I reflected aloud to a friend on an upcoming course paper that I was assigned. As each step carried the weight of my stride, I verbally scrolled through my options of possible topics, pausing when I got to the role of women in the Gospel of John. My friend interjected, “I think that’s what you should do!”

I reflected on this. I sensed that my life had and would continue to have calls of leadership, but for whatever reason, I resisted. It would have been irresponsible of me not to acknowledge that I was “surrounded by...a cloud of witnesses” who could give me insight via my research into the subject (Heb. 12:1 NRSV).

Until that point, I had no need to research the topic. I was raised Roman Catholic, where the ordination of women certainly wasn’t an option. In addition, I was influenced by conservative Protestant teaching. I even recall my reaction when, at a cross-denominational Bible study in downtown Ottawa, I met a woman who announced that she had just quit her job and enrolled in seminary in Toronto. The voice in my head said, *Why would a woman go to seminary?*

A few weeks after this encounter, my employer announced a restructuring of its Ottawa office. It seemed like a perfect moment to seize; within weeks, I too was on my way to Tyndale Seminary (then Ontario Theological Seminary).

Well into earning my degree, I remained content to study about God, his relationship with his world and his plan for keeping relationship with us. Here I was in seminary, seeking to delve into God’s Word as it pertained to me and my relationship with God and yet disregarding my gender—even at the same time as the issue of gender was sometimes a hot issue in the church and at seminary. By God’s very gentle prodding, I realized I needed to look honestly at how Jesus interacted with women. I did so, on my knees, with tears of humility, before the God I follow. Thus began an intentional review of women in the Gospel of John, leading me to deepen

my journey to *Becoming His Story*.

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CHAPTER 2

WORLDVIEW AND CULTURAL LENS

JESUS SAID,

“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16–17 NASB)

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future.” (John 16:13)

It would seem that any study on which we embark benefits by our recognition that we have formative, environmental, and cultural biases that might hinder our view. We are guided closer to truth when we start recognizing that our preconceived notions can hinder our ability to see clearly. Once we identify what those notions might be, we are better able to avoid looking for those details that only confirm our existing understanding. The goal is not to filter out that which may give clarity, even if it opposes our way of understanding. Certainly with political views, in cultural studies, and in personal relationships, it is a challenge to allow ourselves to be enlightened by new information that starts from an opposing or different view than ours. Our lens can be limited.

That is also the case when looking at the Bible. Imposing our cultural or formative or generational view on what we read can hinder our view. Therefore, we need to be stretched to step ourselves, as much as possible, into the biblical context and worldview in which we are reading. New Testament scholars, historians, and archaeologists help us do that. I look at the Gospel of John from that context.

Of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), the Gospel of John

stands alone in many ways. It was written later—near the end of the first century. The other three evangelists wrote somewhere between AD 30 and 70.

Particular to the beloved disciple, as John describes himself, is what he highlights about how Jesus interacts with women.³ John breathes fresh spiritual depth about how Jesus interacts with women.

Whether you have never read the Gospel of John or have read it over many times, I invite you to read it with fresh eyes. Listen to what the Holy Spirit may be telling you as you imagine yourself hearing and watching Jesus. I challenge you to consider whatever preconceptions might hinder you from doing that and omit whatever filters will keep you from seeing clearly. It is challenging, but doable.

Let me share a personal story. I remember as a newlywed booking our first flight to Regina. My husband, Grant, and I had planned on visiting his mom for a week. He was in the midst of trying to meet a deadline, and I had been busily consumed with finishing work assignments before our departure. With our luggage in hand, we walked through the express ticket booth, pressing *enter* at cue for our destination. We got on the plane in comfort, feeling all was well with the world!

As our plane began to descend, the captain's voice interrupted my movie, giving me the temperature for Saskatoon! "Saskatoon?" I smiled to myself. "He must be someone from Ontario mixing up the two major cities in Saskatchewan." We were on our way to Regina, not Saskatoon. As we deplaned and walked toward the arrivals lounge, my husband, who had lived in both Regina and Saskatoon, commented, "They must be making renovations to the Regina airport. This is quite nice." We walked a bit farther before he added, this time with a tone of suspicion and almost accusation, "This airport looks distinctly like the Saskatoon airport!" Suddenly, he stopped at one of the advertisement posters encased in glass and said very soberly, "We are in Saskatoon!" I paused with concern, feeling pretty stupid since I was the one who had booked the tickets!

We had indeed landed in Saskatoon—not Regina! But until that very moment, we were reading all the circumstances around us through the eyes of our preconceived notions. I *thought* that I had booked our tickets for Regina and had no reason to think otherwise. While many signs could have revealed the truth about our destination, I was blinded by my preconceptions. Truth was veiled and distorted. Even though everything

around me indicated we were not in the Saskatoon airport, I was oblivious —blind to what was right in front of me. Unless we are aware of what blinds our view, we will miss the full benefit of a particular experience or insight.

Let the Holy Spirit, who leads you into all truth, help you become aware of any preconceived notions that may prevent you from seeing from God's eyes. Whether you are a man or woman seeking to inspire others, or for that matter to be inspired yourself, take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth. Invite the Holy Spirit into your story.

³ While some scholars have suggested that the book was authored by disciples of John, I follow the traditional view of its author being John.

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CHAPTER 3

THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN

“DID YOU WASH YOUR HANDS?”

“Yes, Mom,” she said with a slight hesitation in her voice.

“You did?” I inquired.

“Yes, Mom, I did.” This time, a little emphatic.

Mentally calculating the time that would be required to actually go the bathroom, turn on the tap, pump the soap dispenser, turn off the water, and reach over for a hand towel, I asked again, “Are you sure you washed your hands with soap?”

“Yes, Mom, I did!” She stepped back, clearly defining her personal space far away from mine.

“Here, let me smell them,” I persisted. She opened her craft-filled hands, marked with the evidence of glue-flaked fingertips, sheepishly waiting for me to smell her hands. As I paused and looked into her eyes, I said with encouragement, “Maybe you should wash them again.”

It’s difficult in a world of quasi-truth to believe that truth actually exists. In fact, the task of discerning truth can be daunting in the midst of opinion pieces, news articles, and the views of different spokespeople with agendas. But Jesus claims truth, even when our culture denies it. In our current world, circumstances and situations can determine the heart of most matters.

I recall hearing an interview with legendary ’70s–’80s artist Lionel Ritchie. The interviewer asked him to explain what he meant by the lyrics of his song “My Heart Is Aching Just for You.” He stated that it was written for all of us—for himself. He recalled how, when he was a child, right and wrong were black and white. He added, “In our current age, everything is circumstantial and grey...and everyone now uses God for their own purposes.”

Lionel Ritchie may not have realized that he was actually stating simply what philosophers have been observing for years. People who write about the change of eras say that the era in which we currently live (commonly

called postmodern—the time that follows the modern era) characterizes truth as fabrication. In other words, people are free to believe in whatever *truth* they deem fits their situation and circumstance. We ask them, “How is it working for you?” If it is working, then we accept it as *their* personal truth.

The problem with this conclusion is that Jesus claims truth in the Gospel of John, even referring to himself as *being* the truth. It is in fact a book of God’s truth. Believers in God are invited to meet the source of truth in John. Through John’s message, we see women of different generations invited by Jesus personally to see his arms outstretched with a welcoming presence to meet their call. Angela Ravin-Anderson writes,

Because Jesus provided no explicit teaching with regard to the roles of women in ministry, his position on the topic can best be ascertained by observing his actions and listening to his words as he interacts with the women in his world.⁴

It is like Jesus is saying that although there might be baggage from misunderstandings, misguided teaching, false assumptions, or even excuses in the name of obedience, “You should open your eyes to see how I interacted with women while here on earth.”

I remember a very academically gifted man in seminary discussing the issue of God’s call to women. While we agreed on many issues, he concluded that, still, women should not be given positions of leadership in the church; nor should they teach men. I believe that an honest look at Jesus disputes that claim.

I fear that any Christian church still not operating in light of Jesus’ actions toward women will miss out.

Some of us are in our bubbles, oblivious to the fact that Christian women around the world face inadequate teaching on this issue. Cultures and church contexts read into their own bias that Jesus called 12 *male* disciples. Therefore, only men should be called as leaders.

Church history reveals differently. It was commonly understood in the 18th and 19th centuries that the early church was egalitarian and only “supplanted to hierarchical leadership in the second century.”⁵ Some would call it even a truism that Pauline churches and some parts of the Jesus movement in Galilee were egalitarian.⁶

But while some researchers and academics have come to these conclusions, this insight isn't always translated into common knowledge. This is one reason why I wrote this book.

Some churches, even in the Western world, retain a bias against women. Very recently I sat in a church as a visitor where the chair of the pastoral search committee got up and emphatically, and repeatedly, talked about finding a godly *man* to hold the position of pastor in that church.

Where we show favour to one gender over another, thereby impeding a call of Jesus, we will be held accountable.

We will be held accountable for how that impediment has prevented us from more fully experiencing God's kingdom here on earth—more fully being part of his story. Jesus prayed for God's kingdom to come!

⁴ Angela Ravin-Anderson, "They Had Followed Him from Galilee: The Female Disciples," *Priscilla Papers* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2014).

⁵ Mary Ann Beavis, "Christian Origins, Egalitarianism, and Utopia," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 2 (2007): 37.

⁶ Beavis, "Christian Origins, Egalitarianism, and Utopia," 36.

CHAPTER 4

THE WOMEN IN JOHN:

JESUS ASPIRES TO GREAT THINGS FOR WOMEN

WOMEN IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN ARE MAIN CHARACTERS IN SCENES THAT CARRY deep theological significance. How these women responded and interacted with Jesus gives us great insight into what Jesus aspires to for women.

The Gospels can best be described as portraits of Jesus. In featuring the Gospel of John, we are seeing a portrait. Karen Thiessen writes,

We are left with an implicit commentary by John, who portrays women as active, innovative ministers of the kingdom...the Johannine Jesus affirms them in roles that were unusual and often unacceptable within that culture. Jesus' approach to women was in such contrast to that of his culture that we can assume a deliberate modeling of a new way of relating to women.⁷

That's what we understand from the Gospel of John. But still, well-respected pastors and theologians can think otherwise.

I remember meeting such a pastor and later conveying this encounter to my fiancé. I happened to mention that this pastor didn't believe women should be in ministry—especially in the pulpit.

With honest and refreshing inquisitiveness, and perhaps a sense of mischief, as if God were using the moment to confirm that Grant was the man for me, my fiancé replied, "Doesn't he read the Bible?"

I believe that the Bible makes the call and ministry of women very clear. But I also believe that we—all men and women—are to serve in humility. That is, never should it be about holding power or position over the other. Still today, there are teachers and commentaries that seem to be saying something like God made men first; therefore women can't lead men. Jesus never fought for power. In fact, it was by being humbled that Christ was exalted. Serving Jesus is not a battle for authority or one-upmanship but rather a humble attitude of servanthood.

Furthermore, it is not a right for people to claim their own calling—especially when it comes to the ministry of God’s Word. A person’s call to ministry shouldn’t be about pushing an agenda, because everyone has equal access to God’s call. It is a privilege granted by God himself. The church simply recognizes and affirms this divine call.

We have an invitation in the Gospel of John. We are invited to see women as key players dancing in theological discourse with the master of teachers himself—Jesus. In the Gospel of John, women are reflective, responsive, and even commissioned by Jesus himself to teach others. Their actions are decisive. Their reflections are challenging. Their witness reflects on their calling, and there is a singleness of purpose in their response to Jesus.

Men and women today continue to be called to acquaint themselves with Jesus. Still, Jesus calls women individually and uniquely to use their gifts and passions for great purposes. Even now, God is calling men and women around the world to convey their experiences from their own faith journey for the encouragement of others. Jesus is calling all of us as he did Martha, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany—as we explore through this book. He has called people throughout Christian history to respond to him according to his call. And like these other women through history, abiding with him in his call will bring us significance and meaning unlike anything else. It will bring us into his story.

[7](#) Thiessen, “Jesus and Women,” 53.

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