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Schneiders’ “Women in the Fourth Gospel”

Throughout Schneiders’ passage on the role of women in the church, she discusses common pitfalls in interpreting the gospel of John, how the fourth gospel generally depicts women, and three passages which highlight parallels between apostolic events and events that happened to the women. One of the most common pitfalls in interpretation is not recognizing that the gospel of John is “normative of Christian life” (94). Women in the fourth gospel all have in common an individualistic character, often act unconventionally, and have a good relationship with Jesus.

Prefacing the passage with her purpose, Schneiders states that even though modern society has recognized that men and women are equal, many people in the church want to make sure that they aren’t just echo chambers of society’s ever-changing standards. Schneiders puts it bluntly: “the church is not simply a voluntary society” (94). However, Schneiders points out that way one uses the scriptures to address the question of women’s role is crucial to getting a Biblically sound conclusion. The fourth gospel is “normative of Christian life,” meaning that the fourth gospel would sometimes include events, such as the patriarchy, that happened but that were not condoned. One example the author gives of this is slavery mentioned by Paul that is not considered today by the church as acceptable. Furthermore, Schneiders points out that there is no specifically defined role for women in the gospel of John. According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the New Testament did not provide any information on whether a woman could be ordained.

Then, Schneiders describes three observations of woman characters in the fourth gospel. First, women never go against Jesus’ teachings and always are in good terms with him. One example of this is Martha, who, even though she might not have understood why Jesus would not raise Lazarus from the dead as soon as she would have liked, accepted that Jesus came to save people not just from their physical ailments but also from eternal death; even though believers will experience physical death, they will experience eternal life afterwards. In addition, women seem to be more unique and individualistic than their male counterparts. Martha demonstrates this in asking Jesus what was on most believers’ minds: why do believers die if Jesus can save them? Representing the community shows how Martha is independent and doesn’t merely “go with the flow.” Lastly, women in the fourth gospel act unconventionally and do more than one would think they would do in a strong patriarchy. According to Schneiders, “Martha running the public aspects of funeral and mourning” would be considered a task for a man only.

According to these three observations, Schneiders concludes that women are independent from men with their relation to Jesus, have diverse roles in the church, and can make decisions and can lead on their own. Throughout the gospel of John, women talk to Jesus directly, not through a man who represents her. In the case of Martha, she talked to Jesus when she struggled to understand why Jesus would not save believers from physical death. Second, women have no one role in the church. Each woman glorified Jesus in her own way. For the Samaritan woman, Jesus was glorified by her testimony and bearing witness. In contrast, Martha was not as much of an evangelist as she was a community leader. Lastly, women are independent and are shown to act on their own accord. In the case of Mary and Martha, they were the ones to ask Jesus for help on their own. In summary, Schneiders points out that women can act independently, cannot be fit into one role in the church, and can have a relationship with Jesus without men.

One of the most interesting ideas presented by Schneiders is the parallel between the three accounts of women in the fourth gospel and events that defined the apostles’ lives. For the Samaritan woman, her spreading the news of who Jesus was and being his witness makes her, according to Schneiders, a “woman apostle.” For Martha and Mary, Martha’s representation of the Christian community in questioning Jesus mirrors Peter’s representation of the community in Matthew’s gospel. For Mary Magdalene, she was the first one to see Jesus resurrected, and since the twelve apostles were ranked by the order in which they saw Jesus resurrected, one could argue, Mary deserves the role of an Apostle. Although it is not clear what exactly Schneiders defines as an apostle and whether that definition coincides with what I assume the role means, I am nevertheless surprised that there is a strong argument that women can be apostles in the church.

The main reason I find the connection to apostleship surprising is because growing up, I have never encountered many women in the church who hold high positions. In fact, my church does believe that women are not to be preachers. For there to be an argument that there were women in Jesus’ time that for all we know might have held as high a position as one of the twelve apostles goes against everything I have known so far. Though there is a strong argument for suggesting that maybe some women were apostles, I believe that most of the Bible does not support that specific role being granted. However, I do think that the evidence can be used in support of women taking on all the roles of the church today, and in a way whether a woman was an apostle doesn’t really matter in our modern times. Assuming by apostle Schneiders meant one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, I believe we no longer have apostles in our church today, since their purpose was merely to help the church emerge from its infancy in the first century. Consequently, I believe that the evidence used in support of woman being like apostles can be applied to the proposal that women in the church can take up a variety of any roles in the church. Even if they are not apostles, they have the most, if not all, of the qualifications according to Schneiders. We should treat them accordingly, and we should let them fill the roles that they are lead to by Jesus.

Another point made by Schneiders that I thought was very interesting, and at first unbelievable, is that the female characters in the fourth gospel seem more complex, better, and more individualistic than their male counterparts. For example, the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus as Schneiders points out are opposites in an ironic way. Stereotypically, the Samaritan woman would be considered inferior to the pharisee whose entire job consisted of studying and applying the word of God. Following the stereotypes, Nicodemus should have understood Jesus and what he meant by being born again, and the Samaritan woman should have not understood Jesus, much less talk to him because he was a Jew and she was a woman. Usually, I tend to think the Bible reflects the patriarchy because of the culture it was written in. Surprisingly, the gospel of John, while it did show signs of a patriarchy existing, portrayed the woman who broke through the patriarchy in a positive light, which I consider a delightful surprise for me.

In addition to these very intriguing perspectives on the fourth gospel of John that I would have never seen myself, I believe what I like best about this passage is that Schneiders does not elevate the argument for equal gender roles above the importance of Jesus Christ. In each example of how woman was portrayed, Schneiders did not merely focus on what each passage suggested about woman, but also about how these women served and interacted with Jesus and how their stories contributed to the glorification of Jesus. In other words, I found myself learning about women as well as Jesus.