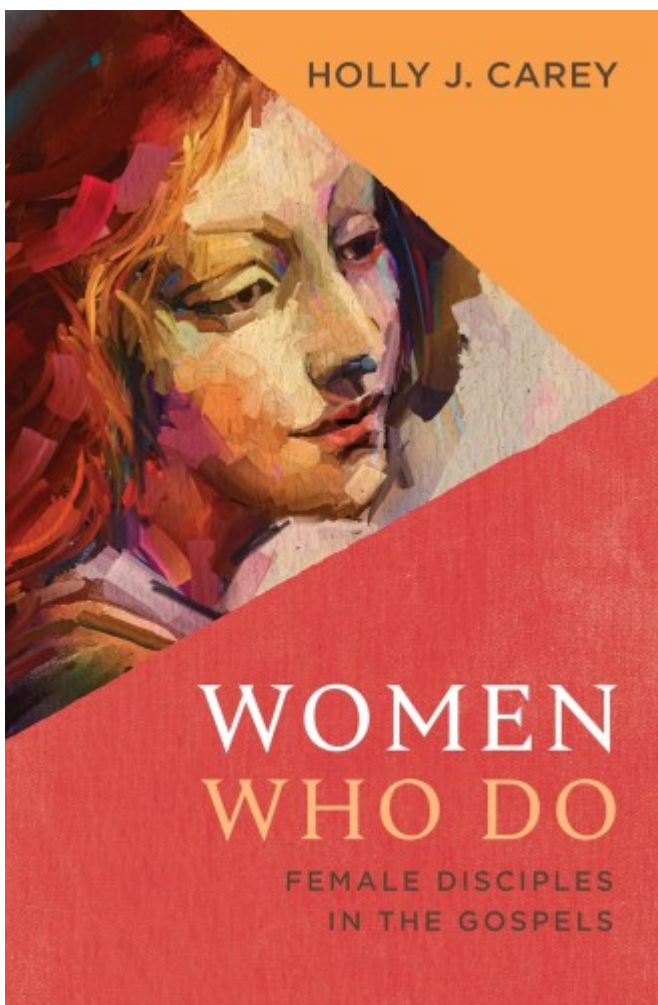


Overshadowed by the Twelve

Holly Carey turns up the brightness on the most faithful disciples in the gospels: the women.

by [Nijay K. Gupta](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue

In Review



Women Who Do

Female Disciples in the Gospels

By Holly J. Carey

Whenever I set up a new TV, part of the process involves calibrating the screen's brightness. If the screen is too dark, I'll miss out on things that are visible but hard to see. Turning up the brightness brings clarity and depth to the picture, revealing things that might otherwise have escaped my notice.

That is a lot like my experience reading Holly Carey's new book. I grew up being taught that the gospels, with their focus on Jesus and the original 12 disciples, were essentially stories about men (with a few demons and angels in the mix). I've changed my mind since then, but I've still wondered why Jesus in the gospels calls men to be his disciples and not women. Thankfully, *Women Who Do* has opened my eyes to see women everywhere in the gospels. They believe in Jesus, serve Jesus, obey Jesus, and share about Jesus with others. All the while, the infamous Twelve often appear to be confused, worried, absent, and even dismissive of Jesus.

It's true that the four evangelists don't explicitly refer to any women as disciples (in Greek, *mathētēs*). It's also true that the Twelve are all men. And yet, Carey points out that Jesus' circle of students is much larger than 12. She proves this quite handily by pointing to the end of Matthew's Gospel, where it mentions that Joseph of Arimathea is also a disciple of Jesus (27:57). Also? I'd never noticed that little word (*kai*) before. It implies that there's a previously mentioned group of disciples in which Joseph should be included. And who does Matthew name in the verses just prior to this one? The women who show up to the crucifixion (27:55-56). Joseph is being included as a disciple of Jesus along with these women.

Women Who Do turns up the brightness on the gospels, so we can see their many women more vividly. Carey goes through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, chapter by chapter, as well as the book of Acts. She shows that each gospel handles the presence, lives, faith, and action of women differently while testifying to women who believe, serve, and obey Jesus—the core elements of discipleship.

Carey's work is filled with literary, cultural, and historical insights. For example, in her chapter on Luke, she not only observes how the third evangelist names several women who follow Jesus (such as Mary, Joanna, and Susanna in 8:1-3) but also debunks the notion that women following a male leader would have been

scandalous in early Judaism. She mentions that women were mentioned as involved in the revolutions or communities of several Jewish groups around the same time, including the Essenes and the Bar Kokhba rebellion. *Women Who Do* is a relatively brief book, but it is delightfully thorough.

Many scholars have addressed the seeming absence of women disciples in the book of Acts, and Carey handles this challenge delicately. While she agrees that Acts does not showcase women leaders, she argues that it contains more than most scholars recognize. It is significant, she points out, that Pentecost occurs not in a temple (where men tend to be in charge) but rather in a house, “a sphere of society where women had the highest measure of responsibility” and power. Carey also underscores the importance of Tabitha, who is explicitly called a disciple (*mathētria*) in Acts 9:36. Her death is felt strongly in Joppa, and her subsequent miraculous revival at the hands of Peter leads to widespread conversion in the city.

In the book’s chapter on John, Carey again asserts that focusing solely on Jesus and the male Twelve obscures key characters and episodes that demonstrate faithful discipleship and spiritual perception. She gives extensive space to the Passion narrative scenes involving Mary Magdalene. When Mary recognizes the risen Lord, she calls him “Rabbouni,” an indication that she relates to him primarily as a student (i.e., disciple) relates to a teacher (20:16) And when she is sent out by Jesus to proclaim his resurrection, Carey observes, Mary knows precisely where the men are hiding (20:19). Carey contrasts the fear and timidity of the men with Mary’s commitment, not only to find Jesus (“Tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away,” 20:15) but also to go as she is instructed after greeting the risen Jesus.

Carey’s carefully researched and attractively written book is not just a collection of helpful information; it implicitly trains readers to see everything that is in scripture—and everyone. *Women Who Do* often sent me back to the gospels and Acts to see if all these fascinating insights were really there and somehow I had missed them. Yes, they were there; yes, I had missed them; and I am very grateful for this book’s illuminating purpose.