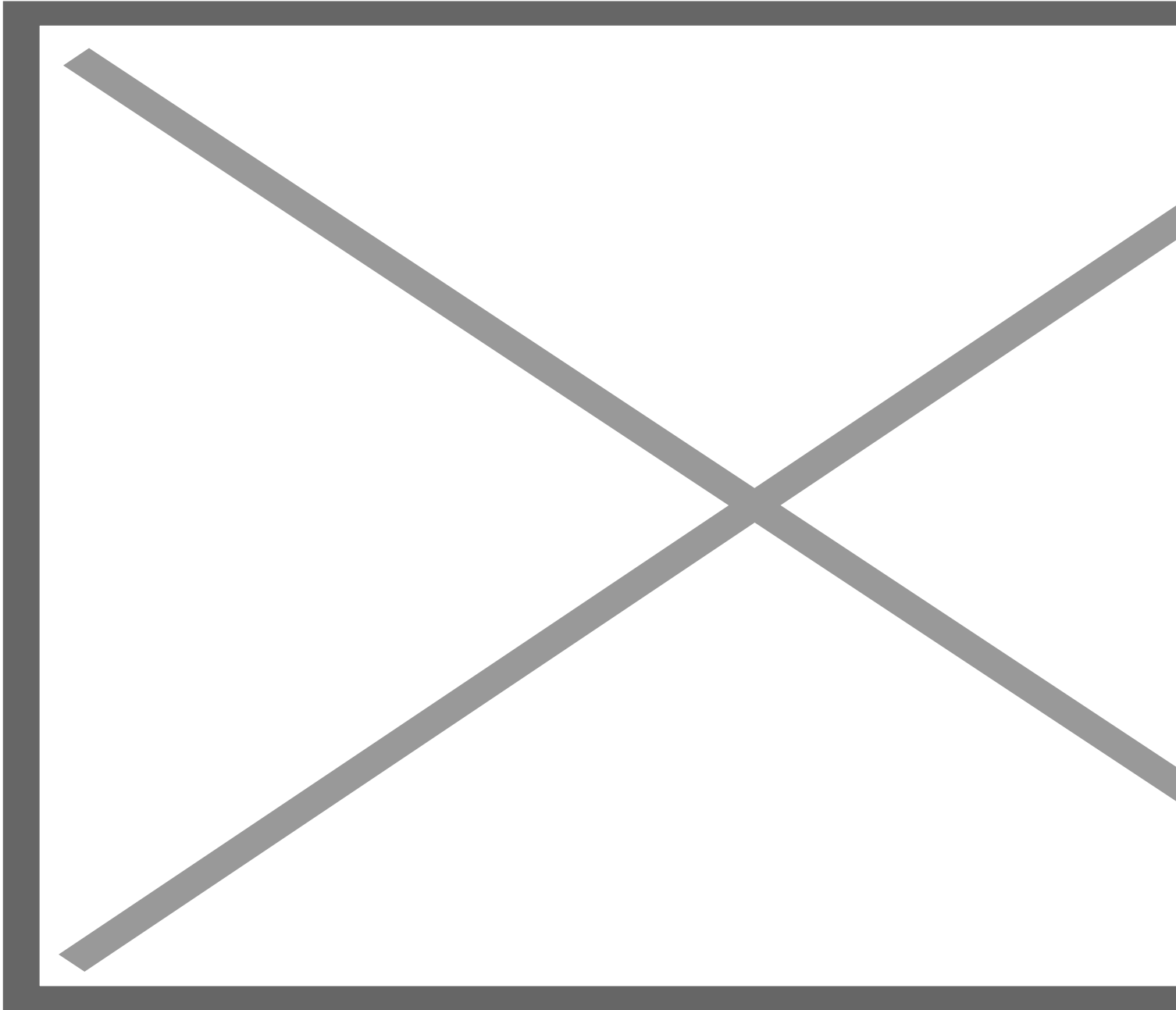


Gospel women versus the theobros

The Gospel of Mark does not ask whether women are capable of faith. It asks whether anyone is prepared to hear and believe their testimony.

by [Jennifer Kaalund](#)
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Century illustration (Source: “The Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman,” by painters of the Rembrandt School)

Influential pastor Douglas Wilson, co-founder of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, [wants to repeal the Nineteenth Amendment](#)—he does not want women to vote. Wilson is described as a major figure in a movement termed “masculinism” or “Christian patriarchy,” which actively opposes feminist advances and reasserts male dominance in both public and private life. Journalist Helen Lewis observes that Wilson’s brand of patriarchy “is religious, influenced by the notion of male ‘headship’ of the family and Saint Paul’s belief that godly women should be quiet.”

Wilson and those in his movement often refer to their beliefs as *biblical* and *traditional*. They teach about “biblical” womanhood and “traditional” gender roles in the home. But what do people—whether patriarchal firebrands like Wilson or our own clergy, legislators, colleagues, and neighbors—actually mean when they say that something is traditional? Whose tradition are they referring to? For that matter, what does it mean for an idea to be biblical in this context?

When these terms are invoked, we should pause and examine contexts, meanings, and underlying motives.

The biblical context is a good place to start. The earliest gospels challenge the notion of a “womanhood” that is quiet, compliant, and domestic and a “manhood” that is dominant, assertive, and emotionless. The Gospel of Mark presents quite a different picture. Mark describes women whose faith is disruptive. Again and again they approach Jesus not with timid deference but with holy audacity. In doing so they offer us a witness, particularly to what faith can look like when life circumstances are turbulent and difficult.

As we know, not all witnesses are deemed credible. Whose testimony is believed and whose is dismissed or ignored? Whose stories are remembered and whose are neglected?

Mark’s Gospel offers several testimonies that illustrate what it looks like to follow Christ. The hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5 seeks out Jesus and, without asking for permission, reaches out from amid her suffering and touches him. She could then remain silent when Jesus asks who touched him. Instead, she is compelled to speak, to offer her testimony, to bear witness to her own healing. At that time and place, it would have been seen as inappropriate for a bleeding woman to touch a man. Her testimony, then, is given through transgression.

In Mark 7, a Syrophoenician woman seeks the healing of her daughter. Jesus dismisses her. She is persistent in her bold plea and argues her case. She does not settle for “No.” She does not yield even when she is insulted, and she does not back down when she is ignored. She not only secures her daughter’s healing, but she plays a role in Jesus’ ministry—which he had understood to be limited to “children of Israel”—expanding to be more inclusive. This happens because one woman stands firmly in her faith.

Then there is the woman in Bethany in Mark 14 who anoints Jesus in preparation for his death and burial. Her prophetic actions are misunderstood, but she does not allow the disciples’ murmuring and complaining to deter her from the task she is determined to accomplish. The complainers emphasize the price of the oil in order to portray her as wasteful and incapable of sound judgment or prudent decision-making. Yet, this misunderstanding speaks more to the disciples’ own inability to properly understand Jesus and his ministry. Her testimony is established through her actions; no words are necessary. Jesus declares: “Truly, I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told.”

These women do not wait to be authorized. They act, speak, and insist—and in doing so, they are credible witnesses and offer bold examples for us to follow.

Another illustrative group of women in Mark’s Gospel are those at the cross and tomb who witness the horrific death of Jesus. They remain when others flee. They *see* what others do not. They are the first witnesses of the

empty tomb, but as the text explains, “They said nothing to anyone.” This haunting line may be Mark’s original ending, but it is not the end. Their silence is not a failure of their witness. It is a particular kind of witness. To sit with knowledge and not be able to share it, to have to wait for the right moment, is a kind of disrupted testimony. Such moments require patience and faithful stewardship. Were they afraid to speak because they assumed they would not be believed? Did imperial violence render them speechless? They remind us that presence is a form of witness, even when one’s testimony is not fully spoken.

In Mark, women are present. They are witnesses, bold and at times seemingly fearless. Their testimony disrupts expectations about who is authorized to speak and who is to be believed. In their cultural contexts, each woman crosses boundaries and risks public shame. Each one acts or speaks without invitation. And in each case, Jesus commends their faith.

How do we choose to remember these women (if at all)? Are they sentimental figures, exceptional in their behavior, or do we consider them to be theological agents with bold, disruptive faith? What if audacity—not quiet compliance—is one of the central virtues the gospels commend? What if boldness is one of the clearest signs of trust in Christ? What does our misreading of these women reveal about *us*? The Gospel of Mark does not ask whether women are capable of faith. It asks whether anyone is prepared to hear and believe their testimony.

Revelation 12:11 reminds us that, indeed, testimonies are powerful. “But they have conquered him (the accuser) by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.” To speak is never a neutral act. Words carry weight. They establish what is real and true. But the simple act of speaking does not constitute a meaningful testimony; there is also the question of whether our speech is *recognized* as truth. The women in this ancient text were present, decisive, and significant. They still have a vital role to play in our faith formation. Their bold witness is what our contemporary, tumultuous time calls for.

Any arbiter of justice must consider and examine all witnesses and testimonies, not only those that align with one’s own perspective. There are moments when we are quiet observers of our lives, of the world, of an event; this is one aspect of witnessing. Then there is the active form of testifying: seeing clearly and speaking truthfully. There are times we are called to be bold and audacious. This is one of those times. Audre Lorde reminds us that “our silence will not protect us.” Silence will not protect us from those who warp tradition and scripture to fit their corrupt purposes. Thankfully we can all be bold truth-tellers and sanctified witnesses.