

## JESUS' INCLUSIVE MINISTRY AS A COUNTER-CULTURAL NARRATIVE FOR PASTORAL WORK IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the inclusive nature of Jesus's ministry, a model for effective pastoral ministry that remains profoundly relevant in our contemporary society. In the first-century Palestinian society, marked by rigid social hierarchies and exclusionary practices, Jesus challenged established norms by embracing marginalized groups, including women, people experiencing poverty, and those considered ritually unclean. His compassionate acts of forgiveness, healing, charity, and teachings demonstrate a radical inclusivity that transcends social and religious boundaries. Through a hermeneutical-critical reading of some biblical passages, this study explores how Jesus's interactions, such as his engagement with the Syrophenician woman and the woman with a haemorrhage, exemplify his commitment to restoring dignity to the downtrodden. Ultimately, this work argues that pastors today are called to emulate Jesus's inclusive ministry by advocating for the voiceless, challenging oppressive structures, and fostering communities of love and acceptance, thereby embodying the Gospel's essence in a divided world.

**Keywords:** Jesus, inclusivity, pastoral ministry, pastors

### **Introduction**

Today's world is filled with wars, conflicts, and divisions, occasioned by the inability to manage effectively the challenges of difference and otherness. Some people are uncomfortable in the company of others simply because they see them as less fortunate or privileged than they. In the work market, businesses and workplaces, discrimination abounds, many are bruised and are suffering because of their gender, race, colour, or creed. Unjust social, political, and cultural structures and ideologies seem largely fossilized and unchallenged, thereby increasing the pain and agony of people experiencing poverty and people in need. Jesus came into the world to reveal God to man and man to himself so that we may be rescued from those sinful situations and experience total salvation. He proclaimed that he had come to bring the Good news to the poor, freedom to captives, and joy to the sorrowful (Lk 4:18). In the course of his mission, he also suffered oppression, persecution, and was even killed by those for whose salvation he became man. The offence he committed was following the path of truth and righteousness.

As ministers of the Word and the sacraments, pastors of souls have the abiding duty to draw men and women into greater intimacy with the inscrutable mystery of Christ's redemption. Acting "in the person of Christ the Head" (Catholic Church, 1965, no. 2), pastors mediate God's saving grace for souls hankering for total healing and salvation. Just as Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead for the redemption of the *whole* human race without exception, so is a pastor expected to undertake selfless sacrifices to convey the good news of salvation to all without discrimination between rich and poor, men and women, young and old, saints and sinners, coloured and white. By his ministry, Jesus practically commits himself to constructing bridges across the strata of society and working for a more inclusive community. The Church is commissioned to continue this as she marches towards the *eschaton*. This entails avoidance of all condescending attitudes, identifying with the lives and conditions of people, and bringing into the fold all those the society rejects and abandons.

The paper investigates how Jesus executed this inclusive ministry in the first-century Palestinian society strongly tied to patriarchal moorings and where all forms of social stratifications and discriminations abounded. It challenges the Church and its pastors today to look unto Jesus Christ for inspiration and

encouragement, not limited by the discriminatory arrangements within society but to go beyond them to offer God's liberating message.

### **Jewish In-growth/Out-Group Syndrome Vs Jesus' Vision of Inclusive Kingdom**

In the first-century Palestinian society, where Jesus lived and worked with his disciples, people were divided into the pure and the impure, the good and the evil, the accepted and the castoffs. This involved marginalization of the so-called impure, the evil, and the castoffs in the cultic practices of the Temple, in sexual and table associations, and the general social life of the society. The Gentiles were also categorized as unholy in contrast to the Jews, who were considered the holy people of God (Ruether, 2012). Within the Jerusalem Temple, three major courts existed: the court of the Gentiles, the court of women, and the court of the Israelites. The court of the Gentiles was where everyone could enter, Jews and Gentiles alike. No non-Jew could advance beyond this point. It was considered the least holy of the three. The court of women (the court of prayer) was the area beyond which no woman could go. Even here, women stayed separate from men. This court was considered to be holier than the court of the Gentiles. Then comes the holiest and innermost of the courts: the court of the Israelites. Only Jewish men could enter there. Within it were the court of priests, the holy of holies, the holy place, and the altar for burnt offerings (Garrad, 2000; Barnes, 1972; Neyrey, 1986).

It could, therefore, be argued: "that the outer limit of the division between holiness and unholy was the division between Jew and Gentile, Israel and the 'nations,' while the inner and most intimate division between the holy and the unholy divided male from female" (Ruether, 2012, pp. 14-15). Looking at this with a modern sensibility and better understanding of human relationships in today's society, one can easily assert that the Jerusalem Temple facilitated, in some sense, the institutionalization of racism and sexism in Jewish culture and society.

Jesus perceived these as barriers to his effort to yoke together a new people of God where everyone was welcome. In Luke's Gospel, his mission is presented at the onset as one the main thrust of which was to show people that the mercy of God is no respecter of segregation, for he came to set free the poor, the imprisoned, the marginalized, and all those held down by discrimination and prejudice (Lk 4:18). The majority of these, Fiorenza (1995) notes, were poor women labouring under the patriarchal, exploitative system of the time and children dependent on their mothers. The Gospel narratives present Jesus as one whose concrete actions effectively brought relief and liberation to the downtrodden. He restored them to their dignity as God's beloved children (Mk 2:15; Lk 15:2b; 7:34; Mt 11:19; 21:31). Through his words and actions, Jesus showed people how love, peace, and reconciliation promoted God's will for humanity. Instead of understanding religious devotion in terms of the struggle to respect the traditional boundaries between the pure and the impure, the holy and unholy, the insiders and the outsiders, Jesus demonstrated to his followers that God's love never had favourites. He taught them that the supposed castoffs, unholy and impure, were entirely God's children, just like everyone else. He also beckoned on his followers to show the same kind of love without boundaries – "a benevolent love," as Hans Küng (2011) describes it, which does not exclude one's enemies.

Jesus' message to the Jews was that the present already contained evidence of God's expected future kingdom (Lk 17:21). This inevitably implied forming a new inclusive community through the forgiveness of God. This community would be a lovely and welcoming home for all; those previously marginalized in the old order would secure a place. This all-embracing nature of God's reign is what is conveyed by the parable of the kingdom of God (Mt 13:31-33; Mk 4:30-32; Lk 13:18-21), where the kingdom is compared to a mustard seed, which, though very tiny when the farmer sows it, grows later into a big shrub, such that birds of every kind find shelter in its branches. It portrays the kingdom of God as one characterized by conspicuous magnificence (after having grown from an almost invisible entity), universality, and all-encompassing conviviality (Viviano, 2000). Little wonder the Gospel accounts of Jesus never make him appear to have rejected anyone who wanted to be his disciple simply on account of the person's race, colour, sex, or social condition. His invitation was rather extended to all men and women, public sinners and the so-called righteous, Jews as well as Gentiles.

Jesus ate and dined not only with those the society considered pure or holy but also with those perceived as public sinners among the Jews (Mk 2:15). He was able to criticize the Pharisaic purity rules as they concerned table associations. He considered the laws as mere outward regulations that ignored a much deeper conversion of the heart and holiness of life (Mk 7:1-23). For him, such restrictive outward laws should be subordinate to the love of one's neighbour, who could either be a Jew or a non-Jew (Lk 10:30-37). The tax collectors and sinners longed to be with him (Lk 15:1). He boldly told the chief priests and the elders that those considered public sinners – tax collectors and prostitutes – were already entering the kingdom of God ahead of them (Mt 21:32). This attitude of his did not earn him anything close to popularity among the Jewish religious authorities, but such appellations as “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Lk 7:34; cf. Lk 15:1-2), considered opprobrious in the eyes of the people. In this connection, Küng (2011, p.3) observes: “To the annoyance of the pious and the orthodox, he also invited into this kingdom those of other religious beliefs (Samaritans), those who were politically compromised (tax collectors), those who had failed morally (adulterers), and those who were exploited sexually (prostitutes).

It was through this newly-formed, all-inclusive, and egalitarian community that Jesus is shown to have presented, within the Jewish socio-religious framework, an alternative understanding of oneness and a way of life different from that offered by the cultic stipulations and androcentric structures of Judaism. While avoiding any claim to total rejection of the symbolic significance of the Temple and the Torah as regards the election of Israel by God, Jesus, nonetheless, remained critical of them. He presented a new understanding of them such that the people themselves became the centre of the manifestation of God. In the new order, the Torah and the Temple no longer served as the primary standards for measuring daily life. Instead, they were evaluated based on how far they could advance human wholeness and the dignity of everyone as a creature of God (Fiorenza, 1995). In other words, they became valued as long as they promoted the realization of the new community of love that he had inaugurated. So long as they neglected the human person, their validity remained questionable.

### **Jesus and the Phallogocentric Jewish Ideology**

The Jewish society of Jesus' time, just like many societies of today, was one in which women were accorded less respect and dignity relative to men. Jewish women were generally considered inferior to men, and they avoided as much as possible collaborating with men in public. Shuaibu (2018) asserts that their identity largely depended on men's: their fathers' identity as children and their husbands' as wives. As Küng remarks, to retain their prestige in society, husbands were not expected to engage in extensive talks with their wives, let alone those of others. Such unjust social relations did not go unspotted by Jesus. His vision and mission of forming discipleship based on equal regard and dignity challenged them. This can be found in many Gospel stories and miracles.

Particularly noteworthy is the Gospel account of Jesus' healing of the daughter of a Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30); a healing that happened in the *gentile* region of Tyre and Sidon. Mark presents Jesus' dialogue with the woman in such a way that Jesus seems to have suggested that the Gentiles were not included as beneficiaries of his saving mission. In the woman's response, she countered such exclusive thinking and pointed out how the non-Jews could also be part of God's saving plan. Harrington (2000) states, “Mark's Gentile-Christians readers would have taken this story as an explanation of their presence in the people of God.” The woman's daughter received healing at her entreaty and because of her faith. The healing episode is very outstanding because it portrays Jesus as having surmounted a double-wall division that kept the lady away from fully belonging to the ritually pure Jewish community – her femaleness and her non-Jewish origin (Fiorenza, 1995).

The story about the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage (Lk 8:40-48; Mt 9:20, Mk 5:25-34) is also telling, especially given her peculiar condition. Shuaibu (2018) describes the woman's situation within the Jewish society of the day in these words, “**it was a tragedy to be a woman in the Jewish culture.** It was a double tragedy to be a sick, Jewish woman. Worse still, however, was being a sick and bleeding Jewish woman.” Jewish women were considered ritually impure on account of both their regular menstruation (cf. Lev 15:19-24) and irregular discharge beyond the menstrual period (cf. Lev

15:25-30). Under Jewish law, women were excluded from the assembly as long as the blood flow lasted. Besides, nothing came into contact with them during the period without getting defiled. All avoided them. If they inadvertently touched a man, he needed to be ritually purified to participate once more in the Temple worship. Therefore, given the woman's situation and society's perception of her, her action could not be any less described than as daring. According to Abogunrin (1998), for this woman to leave her home was considered highly perilous. Furthermore, her act of touching anyone, especially an unrelated man, was seen as both deeply scandalous and strictly prohibited. Her situation was even of greater concern given that "she had spent all that she had" (Lk 8:48; Mk 5:26), moving from one physician to the other without getting any better. Besides, she had been in this condition for twelve years. Having lasted this long, she would have probably been socially dead in the eyes of the people.

This may be difficult for the modern mind to comprehend, especially given today's understanding of male and female sexuality. Nevertheless, for the Jews of the time, it was a very important ritual regulation aimed at maintaining the sanctity of the Temple. There could be no doubt that it was the woman's recognition of Jesus' inclusiveness, his concern for neglected people like her, and his power to change her condition and offer her a better social status that gave her the mettle to push her way through the crowd (most likely touching many men and women in the process) to touch Jesus' cloak and be healed. Jesus' reaction shows he neither minded her supposed ritual impurity nor her contravention of the purity laws and its implication within the Jewish socio-religious sensibility. His major concern was that she be made wholesome again. Jesus responded with compassion and love, calling her "Daughter." The story highlights Jesus' willingness to interact with those at the margins of society, including women and those whom illness rendered impure (Carey, 2021). The woman's humanity, much more than mere ritual and cultic regulations of the Temple, was given a pride of place.

Indeed, contrary to the official Jewish social standard, in the Gospels, women are depicted as very conspicuously active in the public life of Jesus from its humble beginnings in the manger at Nazareth to its 'shameful' end on the cross. His mother, Mary, is portrayed as one whose humility and obedience to God's will were pivotal to Jesus' birth and early life (Lk 1:26-38). At the foot of the cross, when almost everyone, including the twelve apostles, one of whom was his betrayer, seemed to have deserted Jesus, many women are reported to have stayed behind (Mt 27:55-56; Mk 15:40-41; Lk 24:49). They were also the first witnesses to the resurrection of Christ and the first to announce this message to the apostles and other disciples (Mk 16:1-11; Mt 28:1-10; Lk 23:56b-24, 11; Jn 20:11-18). Witherington (1979) has this to say concerning the women disciples of Jesus (cf. Lk 8:1-3) who travelled with him:

It was not uncommon for women to support rabbis and their disciples... However, for her to leave home and travel with a rabbi was not only unheard of, it was scandalous. Even more scandalous was the fact that women, both respectable and not, were among Jesus' traveling companions."

This, he argues, was intended so that women would also be well prepared to bear effective witnesses to him both before and, more importantly, after his death and resurrection.

Martin (1994) sees the inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry as also reflected in the way the evangelists placed some of the Gospel stories and parables (many a time, consecutively) such that they could be arranged into male-female pairs. Examples of such male-female pairs of parables include the parable of the persistent *widow* and the remorseful *tax collector* used to teach some lessons on prayer (Lk 18:1-14); parables comparing the kingdom of God to a *farmer* planting a mustard seed, and a *woman* mixing yeast with flour (Mt 13:31-33; Lk 13:18-21); parable of a *shepherd's* lost sheep and that of a *woman's* lost coin (Lk 15:3-10). Some examples of healing stories containing such male-female pairs include: the healing of the son of the *widow* of Nain and the *centurion's* servant (Lk 7:1-17); the Sabbath healing of a *woman* bent double and a *man* suffering from dropsy (Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-5); the healing of the centurion's *servant* (Mt 8:5-13) and the healing of a Canaanite *woman* (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30), which are the only two instances in the Gospels where Jesus healed from afar. One can also add the healing of the Canaanite *woman* and the deaf *man* with a speech impediment (Mk 7:24-37).



It is important to note that some Gospel stories, as Martin points out (1994), which contain a contrast between the two sexes, even appear to privilege the female. An example is the story in Luke's Gospel that contrasts a repentant woman, who received Jesus' commendations for generously anointing and kissing his feet, with the attitude of the Pharisee, Simon, who had invited Jesus for a meal in his house, and who seemed to have shown less love and concern (Lk 7:36-50). In Matthew and Mark (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9), where a similar story is told, the woman's action, which Jesus hailed as heroic, was contrasted with the complaint of the other disciples present, whose action Jesus never wasted time to correct. In Jn 12:1-8, the woman is given the name Mary, and her generous love contrasts with Judas' complaint about the wastage of the ointment, which he argued could have been sold to help people experiencing poverty. In this instance, John comments that Judas was saying this "not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contents" (Jn 12, 6). By privileging the woman in these instances, the evangelists present Jesus as giving voice to the hitherto voiceless. His appraisal of the woman's action is remarkable because such may have ordinarily merited nothing more than condemnation from the patriarchal order. It shows the inclusiveness of Jesus and his new community such that some actions of those regarded as sinners and ritually impure were commended.

In sum, the Scriptures present Jesus as one who abhors discrimination of any kind. He came from a humble background and could associate freely with all kinds of people across the strata of Jewish society. He has broken down their religious and socio-cultural divisions in the process. The marginalized are portrayed as having found a comfortable companion in him. Fiorenza has argued that, although Jesus is not depicted in the Gospels as having drafted any explicit policy for a critical challenge of, and change in, the Jewish exploitative structure of the time, he, nevertheless, brought about their implicit subversion through his call for unbounded love and oneness of all as well as his attitude to women and the poor. In her own words:

Jesus's traditions show his stance on behalf of people experiencing poverty and his concern for women, but they do not explicitly 'articulate' a strategy for 'structural change.' Jesus' proclamation does not address critically the structures of oppression. It implicitly subverts them by envisioning a different future and different human relationships... Jesus and his movement set free those who are dehumanized and in bondage to evil powers, thus implicitly subverting economic or patriarchal-androcentric structures, even though the people involved in this process might not have thought in terms of social structures.

### **Pastors and the Ministry of Inclusion**

Jesus' life and ministry remain a challenge to pastors of souls today as they proclaim the Gospel in a divided world full of hate and oppression. Pastors should be friends at the service of the flock of God. In societies torn apart by political and social tensions, they should play the role of reconcilers and be a rallying point for the deprived members of society. They need to note that it is always easy for the mighty and those at the high economic echelon of society to think they can easily sway them to their side because they feel they have the resources to do so. To yield to such manipulative allurements entails being unfaithful to their identity and commitment at ordination to the mission Jesus commissioned them to perform. Only by defending the weak and the vulnerable can they be true disciples of Jesus who is committed to their welfare.

The reality is that many communities today have life-denying cultural and social practices that are oppressive to the defenceless members of society. One can mention some widowhood rituals, inheritance and succession customs, marriage and funeral practices in Nigeria. Those worst hit are usually women and people with low incomes. They need special regard from pastors, just as Jesus cared for such people in the Jewish society of his day. They need empowerment from them because Jesus' inclusive mission is not just about welcoming the marginalized but also about empowering them to take action and claim their healing (Carey, 2021). Sometimes, the demands are too strenuous and

challenging. However, with their knees before Jesus and their full acknowledgment that he who called them to the ministry promised to be with them till the end of time, pastors should not be deterred in their resolve to be like their master. Indeed, reference to Jesus can never be exaggerated if we want to end the denigration of people and affirm the common humanity shared by all as creatures of God. Pastors need to place him before them daily and ask themselves such questions as: Do the poor find a worthy companion, friend, and advocate in me? Do my actions or inactions contribute to worsening the condition of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the less privileged?

### Conclusion

This analysis of Jesus' inclusive ministry in first-century Palestinian society reveals a radical departure from the prevailing social stratification and discrimination norms. Jesus's actions and teachings challenged the rigid boundaries of purity, gender, and social status, advocating for a community where all, regardless of their background, were welcomed and valued. This inclusive vision, rooted in God's boundless love, extended to the marginalized, the poor, and those deemed impure, dismantling the "in-group/out-group" syndrome prevalent in Jewish society. The paper highlights how Jesus' interactions with women, public sinners, and Gentiles demonstrated a commitment to restoring their dignity and empowering them within the community. Finally, the article calls upon contemporary pastors to emulate Jesus' example by actively challenging oppressive structures, advocating for the vulnerable, and fostering a community that reflects God's inclusive love, thereby continuing the work of building bridges and offering salvation to all. The Gospel cannot be effectively proclaimed unless practical steps are taken to make our communities welcoming, lovable, and hospitable to all without discrimination. Jesus did not bring salvation to humanity through condemnation but by his unbounded benevolent love. This is what all Christians are called to do, more so pastors, who are chosen from among the people and given the task of leading them to the mercy of God and eternal salvation.

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