

The Theology of Gender - 4. Woman in the New Creation. The Early Church (Sofia Matzarioti-Kostara)

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The destiny of humanity changed radically after Christ's Incarnation, and a living model of human behavior was initiated by the second Adam, the perfect Man, who is Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Christ's teaching did not come as a secular revolution. This is what His contemporary Jews did not understand. On the contrary, salvation in Christ came to this world in a silent but powerful way: internally through patience, love, sacrifice, and humility. Although Christ's teaching introduced a revolutionary model of life where equality, justice, love, and mutual sacrifice are the motives of human behavior, Christ's Incarnation did not aim for liberation from any social injustice, but liberation from death and corruption. However, people are still dying and this world is more corrupt than ever. The oxymoron can only be understood on a higher level beyond this present world: in God's Kingdom.



Procession of the Holy Virgins and Martyrs. Mosaic, Ravenna, 7th Century

Jesus' life and deeds present His sympathy and respect for women and especially for the most neglected women in Judaic society: the adulteress (Jn 8:1-11), the woman that anointed His feet with myrrh (Jn 12:1-8, Mt 26:6-13, Mk 14:3-9), the

hemorrhaging woman (Mt 9:20-22, Mk 5:25-34, Lk 8:43-48), and the Canaanite woman whose daughter was demon-possessed (Mt 15:21-28, Mk 7:24-30). Jesus also praises the poor widowed woman and appreciates her gift. He distinguishes Himself from the Judaic tradition according to which women should not have redress to the Law and the Scriptures (Lk 10:38-42). In the above instance, Christ did not indulge in Martha's criticism of her sister Mary, although Martha was in accordance with the social understanding of a woman's obligations in the house.

Although Christ honored women, there are no women mentioned among the Twelve, despite the fact that the Gospels often refer to a group of women who follow Christ on His journeys and help him in many practical ways.[\[1\]](#) We should not forget that the myrrh-bearing women demonstrate a dynamic behavior that was not only an indication of their strong faith, but also a sign of their close relationship with Christ. They were the first evangelists, since they were asked by Christ to preach the "good news" to the apostles after His resurrection.[\[2\]](#) These women were considered members of the group of the apostles as stated by Luke (Lk 24:22) and were present at the great events of Christ's redemptive work: His Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost.

In the Gospels and the book of Acts, we learn that the traditional model of woman accepted by society also prevailed in the life of the first Church. Those who were leaders and took the most responsibilities were men. On the other hand, when women transcended their traditional roles, they were respected by the apostles and the community in general. They were often then given higher positions as co-workers and assistants. Priscilla[\[3\]](#), Lydia[\[4\]](#), and Tabitha[\[5\]](#) were highly appreciated for their work of evangelization and charity. The fact that they were already away from their homes practicing a profession and living far from Jerusalem, a very traditional city, might be parameters to this differentiation of the norm.[\[6\]](#)

St. Paul in his epistles mentions many women as co-workers in his work of evangelization with high esteem among the Christians.[\[7\]](#) He refers to them with special love and respect, and does not make any distinction between them and the men that he also mentions. St. Paul also for the first time refers to a woman deacon [\[8\]](#) and describes the qualifications for this task[\[9\]](#). In his writings, we also find the information that women were not forbidden to perform work according to the special charisma given them by the Holy Spirit. Thus, there were women prophesying[\[10\]](#) such as the four daughters of the deacon Philip, who are also mentioned as prophets[\[11\]](#) in the book of Acts.

In other instances, St. Paul is very strict with women and adopts the traditional

model for women accepted by society. He has been accused of introducing a theology of discrimination against women into the Christian Church. Although he states that “ *there is neither male nor female*”[\[12\]](#), it is true that in some instances, (especially in 1 Co 11) St. Paul’s language is harsh and gives the impression that he considers women to be in second place to man.

In order to approach this difficult issue and to really understand St. Paul’s theology, one has to consider all the parameters: time, place, and grace. St. Paul’s letters are addressed to specific communities of the faithful, yet they convey the eternal truth of Christ to all generations. The prohibitions for a woman not to pray or prophesize without her head covered[\[13\]](#), nor to speak in the Church[\[14\]](#), and to be subjugated (*ὑποτασσόμενη*) to her husband[\[15\]](#) (with exception of the sexual relationship between the couple)[\[16\]](#), certainly reflect practices and speculations of the time of the Apostle.

In a similar situation, St. Paul addresses the issue of slaves in the early Church. He does not encourage slaves to rebel against their masters, but on the contrary, he advises them to respect and love their masters “*so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.*”[\[17\]](#) The fact that in the early Church slaves were respected as equal members of the community and equal citizens of the Kingdom of God does not leave any doubt about the condemnation of slavery as an institution contrary to the Christian ethos. However, the priority for St. Paul is salvation in the given environment so that everyone should be saved[\[18\]](#).

In light of the above interpretation, the prohibitions for women should not be seen as contradicting Christian teaching, but as reflecting the pastoral care of St. Paul to his flock for the salvation of all. He is not inconsistent when on the one hand, he gives advice to the women who prophesize[\[19\]](#) and on the other hand, does not allow women to speak in the Church. The explanation is that in the second case he refers to married women who disrupt the ecclesiastical gathering with immature behavior and have insufficient knowledge on issues of faith[\[20\]](#). To those women he gives advice to be silent and ask of their husbands at home, as the men have more knowledge of Scripture.

St. Paul also connects the covering of the head with the hair style of women[\[21\]](#) at that time and with the custom common among the Christian communities. The language that sounds harsh to the ears of modern women was the expression of the ethos of that society with one more pastoral parameter. St. Paul was concerned about the influence of pagan religion among Christians. The equality and respect that Christian women enjoyed in the new faith, contrary to the traditional Judaic model, gave such freedom to women that there was a danger of falling into the

other extreme, pagan liberality. St. Paul stresses the fact that woman was created by God from the side of Adam, who was created first, as a complete opposite to the notion of idolatrous religion which taught female fertility was the principal creative authority in the world.[\[22\]](#)

The Christian teaching which is the most scandalous to the feminist movement is St. Paul's call to women to be submissive (*ὑποτασσόμεναι*) to their husbands. He has been accused of creating a theology of genders that is responsible for woman's deprivation in the Church. However, to make a fair judgment, it is necessary to examine impartially his overall writings so that the redemptive message of his theology will enlighten and reveal to us the true way of salvation.

[\[1\]](#) Lk 8:1-3.

[\[2\]](#) Lk 24:9-11, Mt 28:9-10, Jn 20:17.

[\[3\]](#) Ac 18:1-3, 18-19, 24-26.

[\[4\]](#) Ac 16:14, 40.

[\[5\]](#) Ac 9:36.

[\[6\]](#) M. Lariou-Drettaki, *Η Γυναίκα στην Καινή Διαθήκη*, (Αθήνα, 2005), 47.

[\[7\]](#) Rm 16:3-7, 1 Co 1:11, Ph 1: 2, Ph 4:2-3.

[\[8\]](#) Rm 16:1-2.

[\[9\]](#) 1 Tm 3:2-11.

[\[10\]](#) 1 Co 11:5.

[\[11\]](#) Ac 21:8-9.

[\[12\]](#) «οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ», Gal 3:28.

[\[13\]](#) 1 Co 11: 3.

[\[14\]](#) 1 Co 14: 34, 1 Ti 2:11-12.

[\[15\]](#) Col 3: 18, Eph 5: 22,33, Tts 2:3-5.

[\[16\]](#) 1 Co 7: 1-5.

[17] «ἵνα μή τό ὄνομα τοῦ Θεοῦ καί ἡ διδασκαλία βλασφημῇται», 1Τι 6:1.

[18] «τοῖς πᾶσι γέγονα τά πάντα, ἵνα πάντως τινάς σώσω» 1 Co 9:19-22, «ἀπρόσκοπτοι γίνεσθε καί Ἰουδαίοις καί Ἑλλήσι καί τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ, καθώς καὶ γώ πάντα πᾶσιν ἀρέσκω, μή ζητῶν τό ἑμαυτοῦ συμφέρον, ἀλλά τό τῶν πολλῶν, ἵνα σωθῶσι» 1 Co 10:23-33.

[19] The prophets in the early Church also had the task of teaching in the ecclesiastical gathering (1 Co 14:1-25).

[20] See more in Lariou-Drettaki, *Η Γυναίκα στην Καινή Διαθήκη*, 74-76.

[21] 1 Co 11: 13-15.

[22] See more in Lariou-Drettaki, *Η Γυναίκα στην Καινή Διαθήκη*, 88-91.