

## WOMEN, STATUS OF

### I. Status of Women to N.T. Times

A. In Greek Culture. Although Greek women were accorded somewhat higher respect than women of other ancient pagan societies, they were placed almost on the same level with slaves and were under the control of their husbands by custom and by law. Plato, whose views were exceptional, affirmed the equality of the sexes and the community of wives (The Republic v. v. 455-466). The honor of wives was jealously guarded though most of their time was spent in confinement at home. Demosthenes' summary is brutally frank: "Hetairai we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the ordinary requirements of the body, wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households" (Theomneustus and Apollodorus Against Neaera 122). Only in Macedonia at the time of Christ did a minority of Greek women enjoy a greater measure of freedom.

B. In Roman Society. A woman enjoyed greater practical, though not legal, freedom. She shared her husband's life and was at liberty to appear with him in public. With this partial emancipation came increased moral laxity including more frequent divorce. (Seneca De Beneficiis iii xvi 2). Stoicism tended to elevate the position of women and sought to inculcate a high ethical standard; on the other hand, Roman religions often incorporated shameful vices which greatly degraded their position.

C. In Judaism. The status of women in Judaism is a paradox which can only be solved by recognizing the distinction made between her proper and improper spheres of service. In the home her position was one of dignity and responsibility (Prov. 31). Children were the special charge of the mother (Exod. 20:12; 21:15; Lev. 19:3). Though she took part in religious activities (Deut. 12:12, 18; 14:26; 16:11, 14), "the majority of women were entirely dependent on man, and became in religious matters a sort of appendix to their husbands, who by their good actions insured salvation also for them" (S. Schechter, Studies in Judaism, London: Adam & Charles Black, I, 388). Men dominated the public scene. The general principle which applied to the status of women in Judaism was, "The King's daughter within the palace is all glorious (Psalm xiv.14), but not outside of it" (Schechter, I, 391).

### II. Status of Women in N.T. Christianity

A. The Teaching of Christ. Jesus taught women and received their ministrations and financial support (Luke 8:3; 10:38-42; 23:56; John 4). In His parables He frequently included references to women's everyday life (Matt. 13:33; Luke 15:8 ff.). He opened the privileges of

religious faith equally to women as well as men. We must conclude that as regards spiritual privilege Jesus considered the two sexes equal. But as regards spiritual activity He recognized a difference. What Christ did not say about women is as important as what He did say. It is significant that no woman was chosen to be among the twelve disciples. The Lord's Supper was instituted in the presence of men only. The apostolic commissions of John 20:19-23 and Matthew 28:16-20 were given to men only (though the Spirit fell on women as well as men on the day of Pentecost). Concerning the status of women "Jesus is not the radical reformer who proclaims laws and seeks to enforce a transformation of relationships. He is the Saviour who gives Himself especially to the lowly and oppressed and calls all without distinction to the freedom of the kingdom of God" (TWNT, I 784).

B. The Founding of the Church. Women were among the first believers after Pentecost and the objects of persecution after the first scattering of Christians (Acts 5:14; 8:3). Mary the mother of John Mark apparently donated her house as a meeting place in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), and some suggest that Euodia and Synthyche acted as hostesses for house churches in Philippi (A. Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, London: Williams & Norgate, II. 64). When the Christian message went first into Europe the first converts were women (Lydia at Philippi, honorable women at Thessalonica and Berea, and Damaris at Athens, Acts 16:14; 17:4, 12, 34). At Corinth Priscilla and Phoebe were active in the work of the church though the exact nature of their activities is unclear (Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1-3). Though women played an important role it was not a leading one, for missionary work, the writing of the N.T. and the leadership of the churches were entrusted to men.

C. The Teaching of the Epistles. The difficult passage in I Corinthians 11:2-16 seems to teach the concept of the subordination (though not inferiority) of women especially as it relates to public ministry in the churches. Further, I Corinthians 14:34 and I Timothy 2:12-15 apparently restrict women from teaching in the assembly. These regulations are given as an expression of true Christian doctrine—principally the doctrine of the subordination of women to men in the original order of creation. Though this public spiritual activity is restricted, the equality of spiritual privilege is clearly asserted (Gal. 3:28).

Widows were cared for by the church from the very first (Acts 6:1) and were the first group to be honored in any way as a group (I Tim. 5:3,9). Younger widows were advised to remarry, and no preference was given to celibacy. The activities of women were primarily connected with the home (I Tim. 5:14; Tit. 2:4-5).

Two passages in the epistles are used to support the existence of the office of deaconess (I Tim. 3:11; Rom. 16:1-2), but neither passage furnishes clear evidence. It seems more likely that the women referred to in the former are the wives of deacons who accompanied them in their ministrations especially in the homes of widows and others, and Phoebe's being designated a diakonon (servant) of the church scarcely implies an official order (in that case one would expect a feminine article or the word diakonissa). Deaconesses are not unequivocally attested as a recognized order until the third century, and the order probably arose out of the order of widows.

### III. Status of Women in Contemporary Times

A. Women's Ordination. The ordination of women to full clerical activities is now practiced by major denominations. The arguments for this are based on the equality of spiritual privilege granted women in the N.T. and the examples of women who were active in the life of the N.T. church as cited above. The N.T. teachings on subordination and silence in the assembly argue against ordination. A distinction may be made between prophecy given to men and women in the N.T. in which the person acted simply as God's mouth without conveying any message of his or her own, and teaching and governing in which the individual does use subjective judgment and from which activities women are excluded.

B. Women's Liberation. The second half of the twentieth century has seen increased activity among women's liberation movements in and outside the church. In areas where activity relieves oppression (e.g., suffrage, equal pay) it is helpful. If the goals of such movements run counter to God's established order, this is wrong (e.g., removing children from parents to communal centers). When a woman tries to usurp the place and responsibilities given to a man (and vice versa), there will be a disruption in that order. For the believer true liberation comes through obedience to the Truth of God and renouncing one's rights in the service of others (John 17:17; Rom. 15:1-3; Gal. 5:13).

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