

# Women in the Early Church

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The apostolic age is the period from Pentecost to the end of the first century, or the period covered by the New Testament except for the gospels. During this period women had an important part in the founding of the church—a phase of their activity which is often overlooked. I suppose that in their thinking about this subject many Christians never get past certain passages in Paul which deal with the status of women, and consequently they miss seeing the large place women occupied in the early missionary activity of the church. Harnack rightly says that “no one who reads the New Testament . . . can fail to notice that in the apostolic and subapostolic age women played an important role in the propaganda of Christianity and throughout the Christian communities” (*Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, 1908, II, p. 64). Yet some do fail to notice this.

Immediately after Christ’s ascension women gathered with the apostles and disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem. They were not there to cook for the men but to pray with them, and there is certainly no reason to believe that they were not included in the group who prayed for Judas’ successor. Nothing could be more unlikely than that Mary and the other women were asked to withdraw at that point in the proceed-

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ings. The group probably included those women who ministered to Jesus, and there is no reason to exclude them from the number of 120 disciples.

In the very first weeks of the history of the Church there were not many women converts, but that condition did not last long. After the death of Ananias and Sapphira “believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women,” and by the time of the first scattering women were mentioned as particular objects of the persecution. All of this gives some indication of their increasing number. One of these early Jerusalem converts, Mary the mother of John Mark, donated her house as a meeting place for part of the church in that city. Indeed, it must have been an important meeting place, because Peter made his way there almost automatically after his release from prison. Some authorities believe that the upper room was in her house.

When the Gospel reached Samaria, again the record mentions the women who believed it and who were baptized along with the men. Why is it not true, too, that they were among those upon whom the apostles laid hands and who received the gift of the Holy Spirit? When the Christian message went into Europe, women again were prominent in the record. The first European convert was a woman named Lydia, “a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira.” Because she is mentioned as head of her household she was probably a widow, and evidently she was a wealthy one. Shortly after her conversion another woman, a demon-possessed

slave, also believed the message—an illustration of how the Gospel is able to reach all classes. It is not at all unlikely that among the women who gathered with Lydia at the *Proseuche* and who were converted in the early days of the mission in Philippi were Euodia and Syntyche. Lightfoot suggests that at the time of the writing of the Philippian letter they were deaconesses in that church (*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 1896, p. 55), while Harnack (*op. cit.*, II, p. 67) and Vincent (*Philippians*, 1897, p. 130) both suggest that two congregations met in their respective houses. Whatever was their position in the Philippian church, they held a place of honor and usefulness—perhaps even in evangelistic work—since they are said to have wrestled together with Paul in the Gospel.

Both in Thessalonica and Berea there were honorable women among those who believed. "Honorable women" likely means wives of leading citizens of the community who were probably reached with the Gospel simply because the social position of women was higher and more free in Macedonia than in most parts of the civilized world. In Athens one woman, Damaris, is mentioned among the few converts whom Paul had in that city. She was probably one of the *hetairai* since no Greek woman of respectable position would have been present in St. Paul's audience on Mars' hill.

It is, however, in the story of the work at Corinth that one of the most interesting women of the period is introduced. Priscilla is mentioned along with her husband six times in the New Testament, and in four of these instances her name stands first. Although there can be little doubt that she was a woman of culture and education, her precedence is due primarily to "her greater fervency of spirit or ability of character" (R. J. Knowling, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1900, II, p. 384.) Her ability to instruct the cultured Greek Apollos is probably only one of the many ways in which she served the church. One would like very much to know exactly in what ways she ministered or was active in the church in her house, for she could hardly be excluded from the ranks of a teacher, though whether she exercised a public teaching ministry is an unanswerable question.

One of the most startling evidences of the prominence of women is found in the last chapter of the epistle to the Romans where eight women are named among the 26 persons specifically mentioned in that chapter. The question is, however, what kind of work did they do? Priscilla in verse three is called a helper, *sunergos*, of Paul. Probably the term is to be understood as signifying the help she gave the church by furnishing a meeting place for the local group and whatever private instruction she gave as in the case of Apollos. Admittedly it would be difficult to prove that the "helping" did not include public teaching and even

possibly missionary work. And yet, if this were the case one is surprised not to find mention of it elsewhere in the New Testament.

Mary, mentioned in verse six, evidently performed a personal ministry for Paul like that of the women who ministered to Christ during his life. The problem of verse seven is determining the correct gender of the name Junia which appears in the accusative form Iounian. It might be from Iounias (masculine) or from Iounia (feminine). Some are afraid to see this as a feminine form because that might mean that a woman was "of note among the apostles." However, the phrase "of note among the apostles," *episemoi en tois apostolois*, may mean, it is true, "distinguished as apostles" or, equally accurately, "well-known to the apostles." Thus before one could say that Junia was a female apostle he would have to prove a feminine nominative from the ambiguous accusative and establish that *episemoi* meant "of note" and not merely "well-known." Though Junia is undoubtedly a woman, she was not an apostle. One other woman stands out in this list, and she is the mother of Rufus mentioned in verse 13. Paul calls her "his mother," which probably means "that this matron—whoever she may have been—had at some time shown him motherly kindness, which he had requited with filial affection" (Alice Gardner, "St. Paul and Women," *The Ministry of Women*, SPCK, 1919, p. 43). The import of this passage is well stated by Knowling:

St. Paul has sometimes been accused of a want of due respect towards women. This last chapter of his Epistle to the Romans is sufficient in itself to refute such a charge. From the beginning to the end, the writer chooses with the most apt consideration the title and the merit which belongs to each member of the household of God, and recognizes the special work which a woman, and often only a woman, can do in the church (*The Testimony of St. Paul to Christ* [1905], p. 466).

Thus in the early propagation of the Christian message women played an important role. The number of times specific women are mentioned in the accounts of the founding of various churches is in itself a striking evidence of this fact.

But, it must be added, to say that women played a leading role is another matter. The Incarnation was in a man; the apostles were all men; the chief missionary activity was done by men; the writing of the New Testament was the work of men; and, in general, the leadership of the churches was entrusted to men. Nevertheless, a prominence and dignity which women did not have either in Judaism or in the heathen world was theirs in the early propagation and expansion of Christianity, the historical record of which would be immeasurably poorer without this prominence secondary though it was.

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