

## The Centrality of Women Missionaries in the Early Church: An Argument from Four Examples

Jacob Bullock

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8207-5759

Summer Institute of Linguistics

### Abstract

The first five hundred years of the Christian Church were a time of both exciting growth and constant persecution. A foundation was built that endures to this day. During this time many women had profound roles as teachers, witnesses, leaders, and nurtures of the church as well as those who gave their lives in witness to their love of their Lord. They did this often counter-culturally and against great odds. This paper will argue that far from being marginal Christian witnesses women missionaries in the early church were nurturers of the Church, teachers of the faith, and faithful to their Lord to the death. In validation of this argument, this paper will discuss the life and works of four of these early Christian Witnesses the Apostle Peter's wife, Priscilla, Perpetua, and Felicitatis.

Keywords: early church; missionary; Priscilla; Perpetua; Felicitatis; Christian martyrs

## 1. Introduction: Women in the Society of the Roman Period

Women in the church in the Roman period were fighting a cultural uphill battle. Women in Roman society were seen as little more than property. (Mason, 2008) They had no real political or social power. Their greatest role within Roman life was that of motherhood as they produced and raised children. Moya Mason a Roman scholar states, "Women were expected to have as many babies as they could because they were never sure how many of the children would reach maturity. Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, gave birth to twelve offspring, but only two boys and one girl survived." Often women would die from successive strings of pregnancies beginning soon after their marriage. One inscription on the tomb of a woman named Veturia is a good example of this life as it reads, "She was married at eleven, gave birth to six children, and died at twenty-seven."

Not only did women have little choice in whether or not to have children they had no control over their own children's survival. It was the father's choice whether or not to allow a child to live or expose it on a hillside or in a river. Many female infants were exposed because of their inability to carry on the family name and they required a dowry at the time of their marriage. Indeed, in Pandora's *Daughters*, Eva Cantarella states,

The earliest power that the father could exercise over a *filias familias* was that of exposure. At birth, in a highly symbolic rite, newborns -- male and female -- were deposited at the feet of the father. He -- without explanation or justification -- either recognized the child as his by picking it up, or withheld his recognition by leaving it where it was. The recognized child became a member of the family; the unrecognized child was abandoned to the river or left to die by starvation. (Cantarella 1986)

An example of the attitude of the day is found in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. A letter from a husband away from his wife at the time of their child's birth is simple in its instructions. A baby boy is to be kept while "if it is a girl, expose it." These practices greatly reduced the female population within Roman society that laws were passed by the emperor Augustus in 18 B.C.E and 9 C.E. penalizing celibacy and rewarding the keeping of children. However, these laws had little ultimate effect on the population problems.

Aside from bearing children a woman's primary role was that of educating them. Women were given a certain amount of education as they were expected to be their children's first teachers in the culture and arts of the Roman Empire. Their ultimate goal was seen to prepare their sons for the task and privileged of Roman citizenship.

Women in Jewish Society had equivalent roles. Women were not seen by men to be first-class citizens. And ancient Jewish prayer states, "I thank the Lord I am not a gentile, a slave nor a woman." Women were seen primarily as bearers of children and keepers of households. A Jewish woman was often judged on how many children she had born her husband and the barren were looked down upon as being cursed by God. However, the Jews did not practice infanticide as the Romans did and valued the number of children in a family. Women often received no formal education and did not study the Torah for themselves.

Motherhood was seen as a woman's highest goal and honor.

## 2. Woman's roles in the Early Christian church

We find that the first-century church was very counter-cultural in the status and roles it allowed to women. Women were seen as equals in Christ this is shown by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28. Women were coworkers with men and enjoyed roles as evangelists, teachers, prophetesses, deaconesses, and active members of the church body. Unlike Jewish society, women were allowed to learn along with men for their sake. Women in the early church had greater status within their families as well. Christian men were to treat their wives with respect and deference. Jesus himself was a good example of a right attitude towards women. He listened to them with a heart of love and compassion.

## 3. Four Female Witnesses of the Early Church

### *3.1 Peter's Wife*

The first Women missionary I would like to talk about is the wife of the Apostle Peter. We do not know the name of this remarkable woman as Scripture does not record it. Tradition states that her name was "Perpetua" yet this tradition arose much later than recorded Scripture. (Reagan, 2008) What we know about Peter's wife is that she was from Galilee and that she lived in Capharnaum. ("St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles" 2008) We know that she was the wife of a fisherman, which was a profitable trade, and that her husband owned his boat. We know that she had the example of a mother who knew how to be a servant. We see in Matthew 8:14-15 that as soon as Jesus has healed her of a fever she immediately got up and served them.

Perhaps her most challenging task in life was that of being married to the apostle Peter. She was able to love and manage a husband who often said what he thought and had an impetuous and pugnacious nature. She was able to manage the household while Peter was following Christ during His ministry and indeed after Christ's resurrection she no doubt followed her husband to Jerusalem and helped found the fledgling church. During this period we know she had to endure the persecution that surrounded the church and the imprisonment of her husband. We also know that she traveled with Peter on his missionary Journeys and shared with him the hardships and dangers of the road as well as the challenge of keeping a house on the road. Peter's wife may have been his model and example for the statements we find her husband writing in in his first epistle. They are as follows, "

Wives, in the same way, be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, <sup>2</sup>when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. <sup>3</sup>Your beauty should not come from outward adornments, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. <sup>4</sup>Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. <sup>5</sup>For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope

in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. (ESV)

Tradition states that she died a martyr in Rome with her husband. ("St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles" 2008)

### *3.2 Priscilla*

Priscilla was an important figure in the formation of the first-century church. Her name was "Priscia", "Priscilla" being a familiar form of her name. She was married to a man named Aquila and they were both Jewish Christians. (Cross and Livingstone 2005) Priscilla was originally from Corinth but her husband Aquila was from Pontus on the coast of the Black Sea. Both of them were employed in the trade of tent-making which we know they later taught to the Apostle Paul when they worked with him. We don't know much about her early life except she was very learned in the Scriptures and she and her husband both were converted to Christianity sometime before meeting the Apostle Paul. Our knowledge of Priscilla's life begins with her and her husband being expelled from Rome in 49 C.E. when Emperor Claudius because of an uprising expelled all the Jews from the city. We know after this they traveled to Priscilla's hometown of Corinth and engaged in their trade. Here they met the Apostle Paul and helped him found the Corinthian Church. Priscilla and her husband have Paul stay with them for eighteen months while they were establishing the church. During this time we know that persecution took place by the Jews and no doubt Priscilla and her husband were victims of it. After this Priscilla and her husband, Aquila accompanied Paul on his trip to Syria but ended up staying at Ephesus at Paul's request. While they were ministering to the church at Ephesus they met a man named Apollos in 54 C.E. Apollos was preaching in the Synagogue about the message of John the Baptist and the coming of Messiah. So Priscilla and her husband took him aside and taught him of Christ. Scripture records that as a result of this mentorship Apollos went on to be a great evangelist and is mentioned as a leader of the church in several epistles.

After the death of Emperor Claudius in C.E. 54 Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome. They did not stay there long however and we know that they returned to Ephesus in 57 C.E. and worked with Paul once again. Not much is known about Priscilla's life after this. Tradition states that her husband was made a bishop of the church in Asia Minor and she and her husband were killed while ministering to Pagans. (Cross and Livingstone 2005)

### *3.3 Felicitatis and Perpetua*

In the year C.E. 202, the Roman Emperor Severus ordered a persecution of the Christians within the Roman empire. (Butler, 1864) In 203 this persecution reached the city of Carthage on the coast of Africa. In this persecution, two young women were apprehended Perpetua and her slave Felicitatis. They along with several members of their small church were imprisoned including Revocatus another of Perpetua's slaves and their fellow Christian Saturninus. The teacher and shepherd of this group Saturus who was Saturninus' brother

turned himself into the guard and was imprisoned along with them as he could not bear to see them imprisoned and himself a free man.

Perpetua was twenty-two years old and married to a very upstanding citizen of the city of Carthage. She had just given birth and was nursing when she was imprisoned. Her mother and her brothers were follower's of Christ but her father was not. Felicitatis was of similar age to Perpetua and was seven months pregnant when she was imprisoned.

Perpetua was able to record an account of their imprisonment and the hardships they received as well as the encouragement. I have attached a copy of this account to my paper as Appendix A. A heart-wrenching aspect of the account is the desperate pleas of Perpetua's father who is the only of her family who did not understand her steadfastness to her faith. Her father tries much time to persuade her to renounce her faith using her child as a means of getting her to change her mind. In her own words, she states, “

We were in the hands of our persecutors, when my father, out of the affection he bore me, made new efforts to shake my resolution. I said to him: 'Can that vessel, which you see, change its name?' He said: 'No.' I replied: 'Nor can I call myself any other than I am, that is to say, a Christian.' At that word my father in a rage fell upon me, as if he would have pulled my eyes out, and beat me: but went away in confusion, seeing me invincible.”

However, Perpetua will not be swayed and fears only for her child's welfare while in prison. Some of the local Christians smuggled the child to her and she was able to nurse and care for it until her execution. She and her companions were executed at a festival in honor of the Geta who has just been made Caesar. They were beaten and set upon by wild animals. However, before this, they had the chance to witness the crowds and Caesar as well as their jailers. Perpetua herself had to allow the Gladiator to slay her as he was unable on his own. Of this martyrdom, we know that their jailer whose name was Pudens was converted and when on to be a witness and martyr himself.

#### 4. Conclusion

As we have seen in the brief biographies that we have examined women had an important and influential role on Christian mission during the Roman period. Their contributions were both inspirational and long-lasting. They were nurturers of the church, teachers of the faith, and faithful to their Lord to the death. Their example will live on and inspire women and men both to follow in their footsteps and be servants of the Lord.



## Bibliography

- Butler, Rev. Alban. *Vol. I of The Lives or the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints* "Felicitus & Perpetua." D. & J. Sadlier, & Company, 1864.
- Cantarella, Eva. 1986. *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Translated by Maureen B. Fant. Copyright 1987 edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone, eds. 2005. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd Revised edition. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- "St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles." 2008. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.  
<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11744a.htm>.
- The Holy Bible: The English Standard Version. Crossway Publishers, 2006
- Mason, Moya K. Ancient Roman Women: A Look at their Lives.  
[http://www.moyak.com/researcher/resume/papers/roman\\_women.html](http://www.moyak.com/researcher/resume/papers/roman_women.html)
- Reagen, Pastor David F. "Peter's Wife" *Learn the Bible*.  
[http://www.learnthebible.org/q\\_a\\_peter%27s\\_wife.htm](http://www.learnthebible.org/q_a_peter%27s_wife.htm) (Accessed April 3,2008).