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Kindalee Pfremmer DeLong
kdelong@pepperdine.edu

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Woman and Culture in the New Testament World

Social Values Related to Paul's Teaching in 1 Corinthians

by Kindalee Pfremmer DeLong

Whenever the church approaches the question of gender roles, the word "culture" quickly surfaces as a tool for understanding scripture. This tool, however, is not a simple one. Rather, the word "culture" encompasses an extremely complex and often unstated set of values and mores. It seems that we often have difficulty understanding our own culture, let alone another from long ago. Nevertheless, the duet of culture and timeless truth ring throughout scripture, and the church constantly strains to hear the distinct sounds of each voice. While we may bid farewell to the "holy kiss" or women's headcoverings, we must continue to proclaim without wavering Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection until he comes. Thus, in the pursuit of truth, it serves the church well to discover as much as possible about the social values and mores of the New Testament world. In the case of women's roles, historians have unearthed much about Paul's culture that illuminates his teaching in such passages as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34-36. Study reveals a culture which valued an unyielding social structure requiring a particular mode of behavior for women. This behavior could vary depending on the setting, whether public or private. Interestingly, it appears that religion represented a "private" setting, within which women had greater freedom of expression. Yet this freedom seemed to remain tempered with a concern for proper behavior, as reflected by Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians.

Women in An Ordered World

A cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic city, Corinth of Paul's day was an important seaport for the Roman Empire. Despite a reputation for rebelliousness and immorality, the citizens of Corinth found themselves subject to Roman law and societal structures. The members of the Corinthian churches—both Jewish and Gentile—lived their lives in the context of the rigidly ordered world of first-century Greco-Roman culture. This world placed tremendous importance on order and classification; there was a "place for everyone and everyone in his place."¹ A person's "place" was pre-determined by age, gender, level of freedom (slave, freed, freeborn), and citizenship, and required a certain behavior in keeping with one's position.

Societal order centered on the family, which was envisioned as a microcosm of the state. Within the family household, a person was husband, wife, child, other relative, worker or slave. The *pater familias*, the father or oldest brother, ruled the family and held ultimate authority over all its members under Roman law. He enforced societal expectations within the family and could punish, at his discretion, disobedient family members with death (although such an extreme was probably rare).

Whereas male children grew up to rule their own households, slaves could be freed, and workers might move on, women came under the guardian-

ship of a male relative their entire lives.² When a woman married, her guardianship might be transferred from her father/brother to her husband—but not necessarily. Roman marriages allowed for both possibilities. In either case, Roman law mandated that every woman remain in the custody of a male, who then made decisions regarding her marriage and was required to co-sign any legal transactions in which she might be involved. In addition, a woman generally adopted the religion of her *pater familias*.

The behavior of a woman could bring either honor or shame upon her family. The terms “honor” and “shame” in the Greco-Roman world encompassed social values that served to uphold the social order. Honor, a male concern, was a claim to worth which was publicly acknowledged. Shame, the opposite of honor, was the same claim publicly denied and repudiated. In other words, a man was brought to shame when his claim to honor was rejected by his peers—when he lost worth in their eyes. In contrast to American culture, however, an acceptable claim to honor was never made with the intention of “climbing the ladder” of the first-century world. In fact, honorable behavior included obedience, faithfulness and loyalty to tradition; individuals simply did not seek more for themselves than had been duly allotted them in life.³ Rather, within their “place” in society, they performed “honorably.” Thus, honorable acts might be defined very differently for a master and a slave, or for a man and woman. (We may find evidence of this social perspective in 1 Corinthians when Paul advises individuals to remain in the condition in which they were called.)

In addition, honor in the first century was a family affair. People inherited honor from their ancestors and were expected to maintain it. A man did so through public claims—bold speech, boasting, exaggeration—and heroic acts. A woman, in contrast, maintained the honor of her *pater familias* by remaining private, reserved, and pure. A prized possession of her husband or father, she was expected to maintain a decorous demeanor that reflected well upon her male guardian. Thus, a bold, public claim for honor by a man was considered admirable; the same claim by a woman would have brought shame upon her *pater familias*.⁴

Women in Public and Private

Greco-Roman people characterized honorable and dishonorable behavior for women according to the setting—that is, public or private. A private setting was defined as the presence of one’s own family or closest circle of friends. One was in public when in the presence of associates or strangers.⁵ For the most part, the public sphere was male; the pri-

vate, female.⁶ In private, a woman could hold tremendous responsibility, such as that of managing a busy and complex household—supervising children, slaves and employees. Venturing beyond this private world, however, required her utmost discretion and caution. For if she sought to enter the public realm, she risked bringing shame upon her family.

One way in which a woman entered the forbidden public realm was by “speaking” and, according to some ancient authors, “learning.” Plutarch illustrated well the connection between speech and the public arena when he wrote:

Theano [the wife of Pythagoras], in putting her cloak about her exposed her arm. Somebody exclaimed, “A lovely arm.” “But not for the public,” said she. Not only the arm of the virtuous woman, but her speech as well, ought to be not for the public, and she ought to be modest and guarded about saying anything in the hearing of outsiders, since it is an exposure of herself; for in her talk can be seen her feelings, character, and disposition.⁷

Here, a woman was to guard her speech in public. In fact, the rare women who dared to engage in public speech were censured for inappropriate behavior. A woman of the first century, Maesia Sentia, successfully defended herself through oration against an unknown charge. However, the writer Valerius Maximus described her as “androgynous.” He seemed to mean that because she had entered the male sphere by speaking in public, her gender had become confused. Similarly, Hortensia delivered a speech in 42 B.C. on behalf of the women of the city of Rome. Though the crowd praised her oratory skill, Roman officials were outraged that she had spoken publicly when “men were silent.”⁸

In a speech by Livy, an “unnamed speaker” likewise argued that society was experiencing trouble with women precisely because the *pater familias* had not been exercising his authority. Instead, women were out in public, speaking with other women’s husbands and stirring up trouble. Could they not have asked their husbands the same thing at home, he asked. Thus, the speaker revealed the fear underlying Roman objection to women’s public oration:

They want freedom, nay license (if we are to speak the truth) in all things . . . As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors.⁹

Women’s public speaking threatened the structures of the household upon which the society was built.

Christian women in Corinth (and elsewhere) operated within the church as if it were a private setting.

Learning and debate were also considered masculine traits and undesirable in women. Juvenal, writing in the latter part of the first century, argued that it was “exasperating” for a woman to discuss Virgil and Homer at the dinner table. He then connected an interest in learning with an attempt to enter the sphere of education and eloquence reserved for men. Such a wife, he argued, might as well begin to cross-dress and worship and bathe with men. The philosopher finally concluded:

Wives shouldn't try to be public speakers; they shouldn't use rhetorical devices; they shouldn't read all the classics—there ought to be some things women don't understand . . . If she has to correct somebody, let her correct her girlfriends and leave her husband alone.¹⁰

We find echoes of these various attitudes toward women's speech and learning in 1 Corinthians. At 11:2-16, Paul taught that women who spoke in prayer or prophecy were to be careful to look like women (with long hair and/or heads covered) rather than men. Similarly, at 14:34-35, he connected women's speech with dishonor and directed women to ask questions of their husbands at home. Interestingly, in this same passage, Paul like Juvenal related women's speech to learning: “If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.” Unlike Juvenal, Paul encouraged men and women to talk “at the dinner table,” so to speak. Yet, Paul nevertheless argued that women's speech related to their learning in church brought dishonor in some way.

Women in Religion

For both pagan and Jewish women, religion generally served to uphold the rigid expectations for women of Greco-Roman society. Roman religion encompassed both political religion, which served the interests of the state, and domestic religion, which was practiced at home. In Roman political religion—especially in cults devoted to issues of fertility and childbirth—women played an active role, but one in keeping with their assigned duties as wives and mothers. In Roman domestic religion, the *pater*

familias sacrificed to household gods on behalf of the family. Little is known about what role women played.¹¹ But both domestic and political religion appear to have reinforced the family hierarchy.

Jewish belief and culture also intertwined religion with social hierarchy. Authors such as Josephus and the rabbis (writing in the second century and later) related women's submission to Jewish Law; God had explicitly given authority to men. A godly Jewish woman was to appear as little as possible in public, cover her head, and take no public role in the synagogue. One rabbi summarized it this way:

What [is a transgression of] the law of Moses and the Jews? . . . If she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or talks to everyone . . .¹²

Women who violated the “law” were subject to divorce without compensation.

On the other hand, women sometimes found greater freedom in connection with Eastern religions and “religious associations”—both pagan and Jewish. Religious involvement thus provided some women the opportunity for more public roles. Eastern religions offered these opportunities in abundance.¹³ One example, the oriental cult of Isis, gained great popularity among women during the Hellenistic era. Although Isis embodied wifely devotion and maternal care, she also was thought to have made the power of women equal to that of men. In worship of Isis, women prophets loosened their hair and showed great emotion, from weeping to exultation. In addition, worshippers of all classes were accepted at all levels of participation. Ross Kraemer, in a study of Isis worship, concludes that the cult “sanctioned increased autonomy and authority for women at an explicit level not seen before (or after) in the religions of the Greco-Roman world.”¹⁴ Isis worship thus flew in the face of the conventional norms of Roman society and met with governmental resistance and biting criticism from traditional philosophers, as did other Eastern cults practicing similar equality. When Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 directed women's attention to their heads, he surely would have been aware of these ecstatic Eastern cults known for their female prophets with wild, loosed hair, and he perhaps sought to distinguish Christian freedom from this less reputable form of freedom.

A number of wealthy women also found increased autonomy and power in pagan religious associations (*collegia*) and Hellenistic synagogues (which were modeled on *collegia*).¹⁵ By taking advantage of the Greco-Roman system of benefaction,¹⁶

women benefactors of pagan *collegia* provided funds in exchange for honor, prestige, power and privilege. In the role of benefactor, these women made offerings, organized communal meals, managed finances, oversaw internal order and performed acts of administration. Perhaps more surprisingly, there is evidence that this model was adopted by certain Hellenistic synagogues; wealthy women benefactors occasionally served as synagogue presidents, elders and “founders”—despite the rabbis’ condemnation of public roles for women.¹⁷ In these capacities they would have taught, invited members to preach, managed finances, maintained community relations, administered worship services and overseen communal decision-making. This trend of female leadership appeared to be limited to synagogues in Asia Minor. It has been theorized that the large percentage of Greek converts—for whom the participation of women in religious life would have been familiar from the model of the pagan religious association—created this phenomenon of synagogue “mothers.”¹⁸

Given the Greco-Roman requirement that women remain in the private sphere, it is not surprising to find that Roman law targeted the non-conformist Eastern religions. How can we explain, however, the acceptance of women benefactors of religious associations and Hellenistic synagogues? Some have suggested that this trend resulted simply from a weakening of the family hierarchy in the years leading to the first century. Women were gaining increased legal rights and opportunities for self-determination.¹⁹ For example, marriages in which women remained under the guardianship of their fathers or brothers and consequently enjoyed more freedom had become the most popular form of Roman marriage in the first century.²⁰ There is even some evidence that the guardianship system was losing hold by the first century.²¹ Nevertheless, first century-society hardly welcomed women into the public sphere.

Ross Kraemer has pointed out another possibility: The acceptance of women benefactors—in both religious and civic settings—became legitimized primarily through the “privatization” of these institutions. The religious association became like an extended family; female benefactors were then termed “mothers.” Kraemer has summarized:

Women’s religious office was acceptable in the Greco-Roman world precisely to the extent that it legitimized and conformed to expectations about women’s roles generally. [Their leadership] was perceived as an extension of their domestic cultic responsibilities—the extrusion of the private into the public—still a woman’s realm.²²

In other words, when religion became a private affair, women could take a bolder role without creating a scandal.²³

The Corinthian Church in an Ordered World

The New Testament portrays churches which fostered surprisingly bold behavior by women. The earliest churches, which met in households, were modeled more upon the religious association than the patriarchal family.²⁴ Yet like pagan religious associations and Jewish synagogues, the group obviously thought of itself as a family. The familial designation may have made a significant difference to women by “privatizing” the church. If the church were considered private, then women could actively participate and lead in a manner which would have been unacceptable in a more public setting. Indeed, Christian women in Corinth (and elsewhere) operated within the church as if it were a private setting. For example, respectable women generally did not dine in public. However, they shared regularly in the Lord’s Supper and communal meals (1 Cor 11:17-34). Similarly, Paul called Phoebe the *prostatis* (probably “benefactor”) of the church of Cenchreae, the port of Corinth (Rom 16:1). In addition, women prayed and prophesied (1 Cor 11:2-16) and engaged in some kind of speech related to learning (1 Cor 14:34-35). Considering all the early churches portrayed in the New Testament, one could summarize that, within the early Christian movement, “women were among the most prominent missionaries and leaders.”²⁵

Nevertheless, the tension between public and private remained for women in the earliest churches, as evidenced by such elements in 1 Corinthians as Paul’s emphasis on honor and shame in both instances in which he dealt with women’s behavior specifically (1 Cor 11:2-26 and 14:33a-35). In addition, his interest in “outsiders” and “unbelievers” in chapter fourteen may indicate that the Christian assembly became at certain times in some sense public. Thus, Christian women’s bold service in the private circle of the church became tempered with a concern for social propriety in order not to bring shame upon their “family.”

... and Today

When approaching scripture we must remember that the culture of the first century was far different from that of modern America—not just in mores related to behavior, but in deeply rooted, conceptions of space, honor and the nature of human beings. Writers of scripture sometimes rejected these values by reason of theology; most often, how-

ever, they lived their faith within the context of their world. When Paul limited women's behavior, we must ask whether he did so to accommodate culture. Living in a culture in which a woman's public behavior no longer brings shame to her family, we must also ask whether accommodations to a very different culture remain central as we strive to live out our faith in God today.

Kindy Pfremmer DeLong holds a Master of Divinity degree from Pepperdine University and is a member of the Conejo Church of Christ, Thousand Oaks, California.

Questions for Discussion

1. What were the social values that characterized the world of the New Testament? What are the social values that characterize our own culture?

2. Why was the distinction between "public" and "private" so important in the first century? How should this distinction affect the way we read the New Testament passages about women?

3. Do you think there still exists a distinction between the public and private spheres? Why or why not? Do you think such a distinction impedes increased participation and leadership for women in the churches?

4. Do you think it is important to understand the cultural backgrounds of the Bible? Why or why not? How would you respond to this statement: "We cannot understand the Bible until we understand the cultural worlds which gave it birth, and until we recognize the cultural world which we ourselves bring to the text?"

Notes

¹John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, **Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook** (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) 51.

²Pilch, 151-55. There were rare exceptions, such as wealthy women without

³*Ibid.*, 47-49 and 95-104.

⁴Bruce J. Malina, **Windows on the World of Jesus: Time Travel to Ancient Judea** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 34.

⁵*Ibid.*, 107.

⁶Interestingly, defining public and private according to gender in American society began to change only during the last century or so. Today, although the distinction between public and private for women has broken down in the wider society, it lingers in church discussions of "women's roles." People often discuss the "public assembly" versus a more private devotional or class situation, assigning gender roles differently depending on the setting.

⁷Plutarch, **Moralia** 31.

⁸Pilch, 176.

⁹Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, **In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins** (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 231-2.

¹⁰Pilch, 172.

¹¹Ross S. Kraemer, **Her Share of the Blessings**

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 50-4.

¹²Peter Tomson, **Paul and the Jewish Law** (Van Gorcum: Fortress, 1990) 132-3.

¹³Kraemer, 74-9; Pilch, 217-223.

¹⁴Kraemer, 77.

¹⁵Schüssler Fiorenza, 89-90; Pilch, 125-6.

¹⁶A common feature of Greco-Roman society, benefactors—male and (less often) female—essentially "adopted" a person or group (clients), providing funds and material help in exchange for honor, praise, and status. The benefactor was sometimes called "father" or "mother;" the clients, "children." Pilch, 37.

¹⁷It has been theorized that the increasing power of women in some synagogues in fact brought about the rabbis' strongly stated restrictions on women.

¹⁸Kraemer, 118-121.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 126-130.

²⁰Sarah Pomeroy, **Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves** (New York: Schocken Books, 1975) 155.

²¹*Ibid.*, 151.

²²Kraemer, 89.

²³Wealth, of course, played a significant role in creating opportunities for women, since a benefactor by definition possessed economic power.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 141-2; Schüssler Fiorenza, 175-184.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 133.