

Saint Paul Thanks the Women

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



During recent decades, some feminist Bible scholars insisted that Saint Paul had changed Christianity from something good for women to something very bad.

These feminist scholars said that Jesus Christ brought a brand new teaching to the world: that men and women are truly equal, especially in the sight of God. But Saint Paul, they said, had used his vast influence and powers of persuasion to change that teaching. He believed and taught that women are inferior to men, as they had always been.

Most scholars now agree that Paul did not put women down in his thought and writing, and on July 15th we read a passage that shows his respect for women. Paul's Letter to the Romans 16: 1-16 is a series of his greetings to people he had met and worked with. He is grateful to all these people, considers them as co-laborers in the field, and thanks the Lord for their presence in his life. Ten of them are women.

We know little about several of them, but about others there is information. The first one named is Phoebe, and Paul indicates that she has been important in his ministry as a deaconess and "a helper of many and of myself as well." Phoebe may have been able to help Paul and others financially, but she also had a prominent position as a community leader. In the prayers of the Orthodox Church for the ordination of a female deacon, Phoebe is named as an example of a woman who dedicates herself to God's service.

Prisca, sometimes called Priscilla, appears in this passage and in five other places in the New Testament. As a Jew, she did not have an easy life. Expelled from Rome as all Jews were by the emperor Claudius, she went with her husband Aquila to Corinth, where they met Paul. Her life was not one of leisure or ease. Like Paul, she and Aquila were tentmakers, a craft that required both rough labor and skill. But their marriage must have been strong, for she and Aquila are always mentioned together. She also had an excellent education in Scripture, and with her husband became a teacher and missionary.

Paul refers to two women who may have been sisters, Tryphosa and Tryphaena, as "workers in the Lord." Though we don't know what they did, the term he applies to them is one of praise and special recognition. Another woman, Persis, is described with even stronger words as having

"worked hard in the Lord." Paul obviously must have considered Persis to be a close companion, but he takes care to be courteous in the way he speaks about her. He refers to some of the men he is greeting as "my beloved" but he calls Persis "the beloved" so as not to suggest an inappropriately intimate relationship.

Troparion - Tone 3

Enlightened by grace
And taught the Faith by the chosen vessel of Christ,
You were found worthy of the diaconate;
And you carried Paul's words to Rome.
O Deaconess Phoebe, pray to Christ God that his Spirit may enlighten our souls!

These verses give us few details about the women, and some are mentioned but unnamed. But they were precious to Paul, as he knew they were to the Lord they all served.