

# NO SUCH THING AS A “NEW TESTAMENT” WOMAN

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## WHAT MAKES UP AN IDENTITY?

Identity is more complicated than just gender. There are a number of factors that make up a person's identity.

## ACTIVITY #1: YOUR IDENTITY

On the next page create a definition of your identity. Questions to consider:

- » Names / Nicknames – what does each represent?
- » Likes/Dislikes
- » Desires, Hopes, Dreams
- » Skills, Gifts, Talents
- » Character Traits (MBTI?)
- » Formative Experiences
  - Good
  - Bad
- » Key relationships
  - Good
  - Bad
- » Relational networks / social groups
- » Family background
  - “Traditional” family?
  - Divorced parents?
  - Siblings?
  - How happy was your upbringing?
  - Which parent are you more like?
  - Family conflict?
- » Cultural background
  - Indigenous?
  - Migrant? From where? Why did you come?
  - Descendant of migrants? From where? Why did they come?
- » Denomination / Theological sympathies
- » Class – working, middle or upper?
- » Education
  - Schooling – where? Results? Social groups?
  - Exclusion? Bullying?
  - Higher Ed? Vocational Training?
- » Geography
  - Where do you live?
  - Where do you work?
  - What other places are defining of who you are?
- » Responsibilities / regular tasks
- » Roles within various groups
- » Hobbies
- » Key values
- » Resources
  - Financial
  - Other Assets
- » Influence
- » Physical traits
- » Well-developed / Under-developed aspects of your life
- » Hurts
- » Disappointments

Now add your gender to the picture.... As a single attribute, how significant is it in the broader picture?

Circle any attributes on your picture that you think are part of who you are *only because* of your gender.

Asterisk any attributes that are part of who you are *partially because* of your gender.

I AM



## WHAT IS GENDER?

There are two things we are generally talking about when we talk about “gender”:

- » The *physical attributes* of being labelled male or female
- » The *cultural role* we adopt to act as male or female<sup>1</sup>

“Gender role is a different order of phenomenon than sex. The relevant terms are not ‘male’ and ‘female,’ which are sex terms, but ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’”<sup>2</sup>

There are any number of characteristics which may be labelled as masculine or feminine. Each culture defines where those characteristics sit along a continuum that defines masculinity and femininity<sup>3</sup>.

Children born in different parts of the world take on different assumptions about what is a “masculine” trait and what is a “feminine” trait.

For example, in Japan masculinity is defined as “internal strength” as opposed to physical strength as in Western nations. “masculinity in America relies upon being heterosexual, in a position of power, dominance or authority and believing that there is a categorical difference between men and women in terms of biology and behaviour”<sup>4</sup>.

“Margaret Mead’s study of the Mungdugumor and Tchambuli tribes of Papua New Guinea stand in stark contrast to the femininity previously emphasised. The Mungdugumor tribe showed both males and females as aggressive and powerful, typically masculine traits to the Western world... The Tchambuli tribe, in contrast, reversed the Western gender roles completely, resulting in the males being more submissive and females acting more aggressive”<sup>5</sup>.

## IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

These cultural differences between how different women’s lives are defined by the society they lived

in is also apparent in the New Testament. There is no single “New Testament” woman we can look to as a model. The women in the New Testament were all individuals, in different contexts. Just as each of our identities is more complicated than the single identifier of “male” or “female”, so the women in the NT were defined by multiple factors.

## JEWISH WOMEN

Jesus of course was born into a heavily patriarchal society. Jewish men thanked the Lord every day that they were not born as women. There were discussions in Jesus’ day as to whether you could only divorce your wife for infidelity or if any reason (such as that she had burnt your dinner) was ok. This was a culture that compensated the father of a girl who was raped because he wouldn’t be able to marry her off, neglecting what the girl’s needs might have been.

The family was the Jewish woman’s exclusive sphere of influence in the first century. Jewish women were under the power of their father or husband. Jewish girls had no right to their own possessions, everything belonged to their father. She could not refuse a marriage arranged by her father. On the positive side, Jewish mothers were to be accorded the same honour as fathers .

## GREEK WOMEN

With the acceptance of Gentiles, a number of different cultural assumptions about gender roles came into the church. It was into this multicultural context, with differing views and issues that the New Testament speaks.

Greek women also functioned within a patriarchal framework. However each city-state worked differently, being a woman in Athens, Sparta or Corinth meant different things.

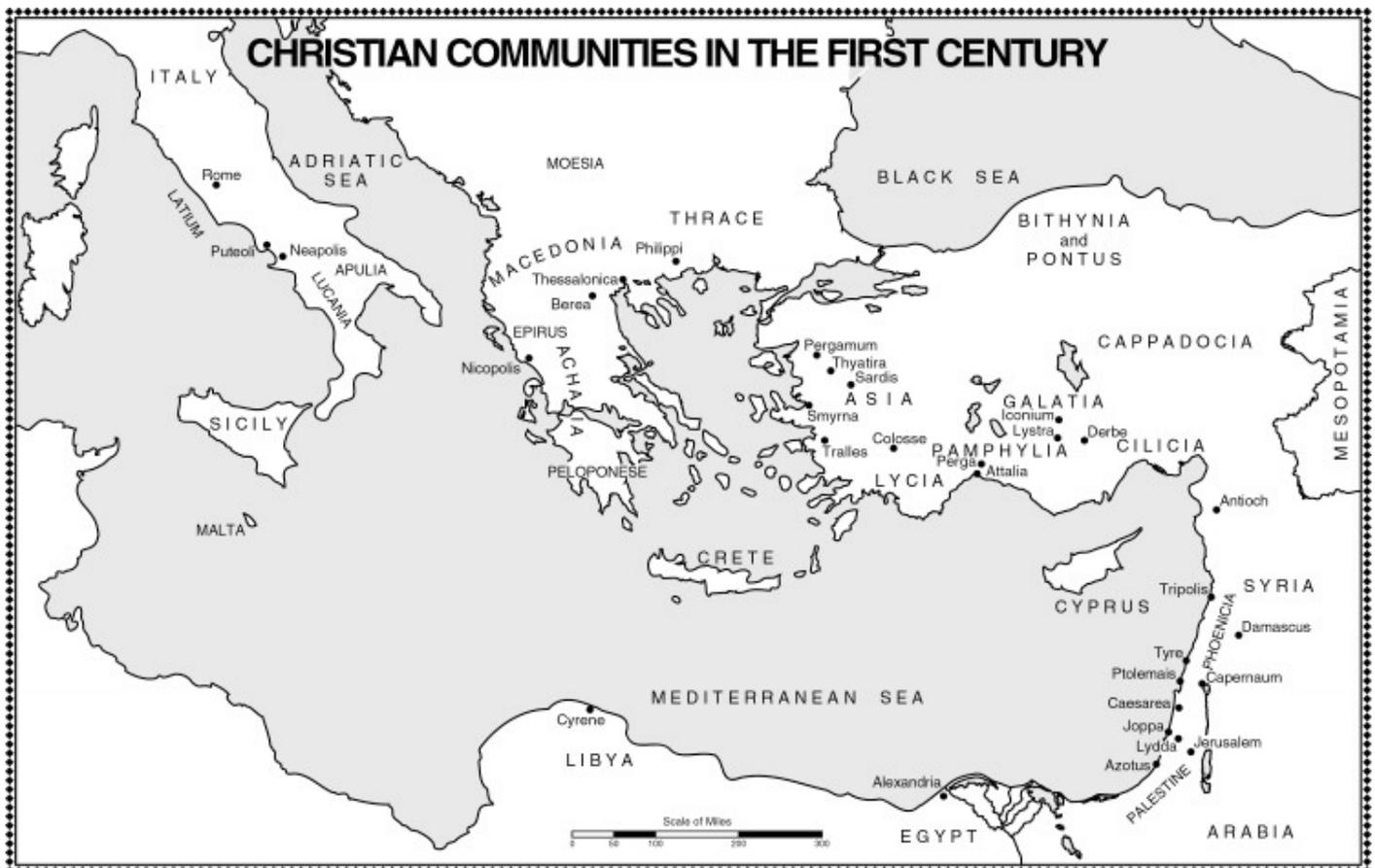
1 Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, *Contextualising Gender in Early Christian Discourse* (London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2009), p.4.

2 Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Masculine Feminine or Human: An Overview of the Sociology of the Gender Roles*, (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1978), p. 3.

3 *ibid.*, 7.

4 <http://thefeministagenda.wordpress.com/2012/10/02/masculinity-and-femininity-across-culture-and-time/>

5 *ibid.*



In **Athens**, three classes of women were treated differently (but their roles still all centred around male “needs”):

- » *Citizens* - their role was to produce heirs, shut away from other men to ensure chastity.
- » *Concubines* - provided men with opportunities for sex without producing legitimate heirs
- » *Companions* - provided company and friendship (sexual and otherwise). Often educated.

**Spartan** women had more freedom than Athenian women. They had more civil and property rights than Jewish women. Their role was to produce strong sons, so they were taught to be strong, brave and resolute so their sons would be similar in character.

The women of **Macedonia** and **Asia Minor** had more status, freedom and respect than their Jewish or Greek counterparts. Some were given inheritable civic rights to honour them. In **Thessalonica**, women served as officials, and could evidently earn money. Public monuments were erected to distinguished women.

Macedonian women also ruled as queens (e.g. Arsinoe II in Egypt and Eurydice and Olympias in Macedonia). These women were educated and able, often corresponding with prominent persons such as Strato the physicist. Practically speaking poorer women mostly continued in traditional roles. Women in Asia Minor had similar freedoms to the Macedonians.

## ROMAN WOMEN

Roman men had the power of life and death over his children and wife. Women were either under the control of their fathers, brothers, husbands or guardian/tutor. By 27 B.C. when Augustus became Emperor, the role of the guardian had lost importance. Both sexes could easily divorce the other.

Women of the Patrician class were obliged to be married, except Vestal Virgins and women over fifty. Women could initiate marriages, but could not refuse a marriage unless they could prove the man morally unfit (unlikely they would do this at 12-13 years old).

Roman matrons were well educated, even in poorer families both sexes were educated. A girl's education ended when she got married. Boys went on to study philosophy and rhetoric for another three to four years before marrying.

Roman women were not allowed to vote or hold public office. However they were still influential in politics.

Most freed-women in Rome "were shop-keepers, artisans, or domestics, while some were known to be physicians, commercial entrepreneurs, brick makers, and perhaps even owners of brick-making or ship-building operations"<sup>6</sup>. They appeared to have some financial security, however some women chose to remain slaves of mistresses who treated them well, provided for their education and paid them if they worked hard.

## CASE STUDIES

### MARY & MARTHA

Jesus challenged the Jewish gender roles by encouraging women to be disciples. In Luke 10:38-42, Mary neglects helping Martha in the kitchen in order to sit at Jesus' feet. Both Jesus and Mary in this scene adopt non-traditional gender roles within their context, rabbis just didn't come into women's homes to teach them. In this scene Jesus subordinates a woman's traditional role to the primary role of being a disciple<sup>7</sup>.

### MARY MAGDALENE

Mary Magdalene was the first witness of the resurrection and the first one "sent" to testify to the resurrection (which is the traditional definition of an apostle). The earliest manuscripts of John's gospel end in chapter 20 with Mary's witness to the twelve. John's gospel presents Mary Magdalene, not Peter as the model for discipleship.

Chapter 21 appears to have been added later, making Peter the key witness of the resurrection, and commissioning him to be shepherd of the flock. This has obscured Mary Magdalene's status as the first witness of the resurrection and as John's model of faithful discipleship<sup>8</sup>.

### PRISCILLA

Priscilla and her husband Aquila, we are told in Acts 18, "explained to [Apollos] the way of God more adequately" (verse 26). Priscilla and Aquila also travelled with Paul and founded house churches<sup>9</sup>.

### PHOEBE

Paul refers to another woman, Phoebe as sister and *diakonos* in Romans 16:2, using the same word that he uses to describe his own ministry and that of Apollos . Paul refers to Timothy in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 in the same way, as "brother" and "deacon". This characterises Phoebe, like Timothy, as a co-worker of Paul's. In fact, Paul addresses a number of women as co-workers: Priscilla, Junia, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis, who "had established the faith of the Christian community through their work of teaching and exhortation"<sup>10</sup>. Paul also calls Phoebe his "patron" acknowledging Phoebe's generosity and support.



6 Witherington, 22.

7 Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, 1990), 100.

8 Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 33-34.

9 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History" in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (London, UK: SPCK, 1990), 63.

10 Torjesen, 33.

## JUNIA

Paul calls Junia and her husband Andronicus “foremost amongst the apostles” (Rom. 16:7). John Chrysostom in the fourth century used Junia as an example for the women of Constantinople. Some translators cannot believe that a woman could be an apostle so add an “s” to Junia’s name to make it masculine. However there was no reasoned argument for Junia being masculine until the 1990s.

## LYDIA

In the early church we have ample evidence of women in the church leadership, including as diakonos, apostolos, presbyteros and episcopos. While the church met in homes, women were allowed positions of leadership.

Women came into clerical roles by showing themselves to be adept managers of their households, which was the same way that secular offices were filled .

Lydia of Philippi is an example of a household manager who held a significant position in her church. Lydia was one of the first to respond to the gospel in Philippi . When Lydia was converted her household, which would have included family members, domestic slaves, and slaves working in her purple fabric business, were baptised with her . She would have exerted influence over a large group of clients and friends . She was able to give Paul a place to live for some time while he was in Philippi. Lydia’s household was the start of the church at Philippi.

As the church institutionalised and moved from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of the state, pressure was applied to remove women from positions of authority within the church. It is during this period that men first started using the argument that Jesus only appointed male apostles as a basis for not ordaining women. Female church-leaders were seen as usurping men’s prerogatives, in which public office was a matter of male honour.



## ACTIVITY #2: WIDOWS

### 1 TIMOTHY 5:1-20 (TNIV)

<sup>1</sup>Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, <sup>2</sup>older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

<sup>3</sup>Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. <sup>4</sup>But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. <sup>5</sup>The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. <sup>6</sup>But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. <sup>7</sup>Give the people these instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. <sup>8</sup>Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

<sup>9</sup>No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, <sup>10</sup>and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord’s people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

<sup>11</sup>As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. <sup>12</sup>Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. <sup>13</sup>Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to. <sup>14</sup>So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. <sup>15</sup>Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.

<sup>16</sup>If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

<sup>17</sup>The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. <sup>18</sup>For Scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and "Workers deserve their wages." <sup>19</sup>Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup>But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning.

**KITTEL, G., FRIEDRICH, G., & BROMLEY, G. W. (1995). THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (1316). GRAND RAPIDS, MI: W.B. EERDMANS.**

"In later orders there are to be only three church widows in a congregation. Some references group them with the bishops, presbyters, and deacons; others not. Ignatius Smyrneans 13. 1 mentions virgins who are called widows, perhaps because there are not enough real widows. Women deacons, or deaconesses, have some precedence over widows because they have functions of supervision and direction, but they are often selected from among virgins or widows. We thus read of widows who are deaconesses, although even later the two groups are not identical. The tasks of widows include prayer, caring for the sick, visiting prisoners, showing hospitality to traveling preachers, and teaching women catechumens and Christian girls. Because of their work in the church they are highly honoured, have a special place at worship on the left behind the presbyters (as deacons are on the right behind the bishop), receive communion after the deacons and before subdeacons, etc. Yet by the end of the early period the order disappears. It perhaps finds a new form in the monastic orders for women, for nuns take up many of the duties that widows originally discharge".

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## PASSAGE OUTLINE

- A. v 1-2 Treatment of Older/Younger Men and Women (**presbyteros/ras**)
  - B. v 3 Care/honour (**tima**) for widows in need
    - C. v 4 Families to care for their own widows
      - D. v 5 Characteristics of true widow
      - E. v 6 Characteristics of widow living for pleasure
    - C. v 7-8 Families to care for their own widows
      - D. v 9-10 Care for true widows
      - E. v 11-15 Care for younger widows
    - C. v 16 Women to care for widows in their care
  - B. v 17-18 Elders (**presbyteroi**) due double honour (**diplēs timēs**)
- A. v 19-20 Dealing with accusations against elders (**presbyterou**)

## WRIGHT, N. T. (2003). PAUL FOR EVERYONE: THE PASTORAL LETTERS. LONDON: SPCK.

“The early church did its best to live as a kind of extended family... People often assume that the remarkable life of the Jerusalem church as described in Acts (e.g. 2.43-47) was a kind of early experiment that didn’t really work and so wasn’t repeated. Certainly we don’t find Paul telling people that they should sell their property and pool their resources. But what we do find, in various places, is the command to care for one another. This doesn’t just mean thinking kind thoughts and saying comforting words. It means providing material and financial support for those in need.

In particular, in a world without any form of state-organised social welfare, the church from the very beginning took upon itself the task of caring for those with nobody to look after them and no means of supporting themselves. This meant, in particular, widows. In the ancient world, women whose husbands had died faced total destitution. Often, when someone became a Christian, their own family would disown them, so that any support from relatives would be cut off. The church faced the task of living as an alternative family, and had come to terms with the resulting tensions and difficulties, as well as the possibilities of joyful shared life and mutual support.

This is why, in the present passage and the next one, Paul goes into considerable detail on the rules for enrolling and supporting widows...

...the problem of how to help widows includes the problem of who is really to count as a widow. In a community where many entire households had become Christians, there was no point in enrolling a widow for church support when she still had children or grandchildren able to help...

Paul insists in verses 9-10 that widows enrolled on the church’s support list must be above a certain age, and must have shown by a lifetime of family and community service that they are bona fide recipients of the church’s generosity...

verses 17-18 [declare] to a Christian community that was composed most likely, of poor people - that elders who give good leadership, or who work hard at preaching and teaching, should be paid double. (Some translations say ‘double honour’, but the word most naturally refers in this passage to money, not social respect.)...”

*{Wright then goes into a discussion about how clergy today are underpaid, and that the laity have allowed themselves to believe it’s ok for the clergy to scrape by, forcing clergy-wives into work so their families keep their heads above water.}*

### QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT...

Have a look at the passage outline paying attention to the structure of the text and the Greek words in bold, and then compare the two commentaries...

1. What is the difference between what is **expected of** and **given to** a “True Widow” and an “Elder”?
2. What are the cultural assumptions behind each commentary?
3. Who benefits from these two possible interpretations?
4. Which interpretation are you more inclined to accept? Or do you have an alternate interpretation?
5. What cultural assumptions are you aware of that you are bringing to the text that would shape your understanding?
6. What personal agenda do you have in reading the text? How much does this influence which interpretation you want to accept?