



Reflection #3: Paul, Women and Community

In the autumn of 46 AD, Paul with Silas and Timothy set out from Antioch headed for Troas. They had just crossed the river Sangarios into Galatia when Paul became gravely ill. Galatia was populated by Celts who had come from the Pyrenees in the 3rd century BC. They were tall, blond people and were viewed as unpredictable simpletons, generous, volatile but without stamina and somewhat gullible.

Paul spent two years in the town of Pessinus where he was treated well and was nursed back to health (Gal. 4:13-15). As he worked, he spoke to the Galatians about Jesus and together with Silas and Timothy, gained many converts. They noted that the Galatians' supreme deity was the earth goddess Cybele and observed that women generally held considerable esteem. This experience expanded Paul's notion of "community" and reinforced his recognition of Christian women as full equals (Gal. 3:28).

In the summer of 48, at Troas, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling for help (Acts 16:9). The trio then sailed to Neapolis and walked to Philippi. Here they found some Jewish and Greek women gathered for prayer near the river outside the city gate and soon made a convert - Lydia - a wealthy business woman in the purple dye trade (Acts 16:13-15). Her spacious house became Paul's base in Philippi and two women, Euodia and Syntyche became Paul's co-workers and later, heads of house-churches. So energetic were they in spreading the gospel, that Paul used the verb "athletic" to describe their activities. Within a year, Philippi became a favorite community for Paul as it came closest to Paul's ideal of what a church should be. It is interesting to note that Philippi became the only community from which Paul would accept money in the years ahead.

When Paul arrived in Corinth in 51, he met Prisca and Aquila who became life-long friends of his, preparing the way for him to preach in Ephesus (Acts 18:18) and then in Rome (Rom. 16:3). Another woman who was a benefactor of Paul was Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) who he describes as a "deacon." At the end of his letter to the Romans he sends greetings to no fewer than nine women in Rome - a city he had never visited!

The passages about women keeping silent in church (1Cor.14:34) and wives being subject to their husbands (Eph. 5:21-33) are considered to be post-Pauline interpolations. Although Paul was shaped by a patriarchal culture, his desire to be like Christ led him to the conviction that in a truly Christian community women and men are equal in dignity, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free (Gal. 3:28).

Read: Phil: 1:3-11; Phil. 2:15-16; Gal. 3:28; Gal. 4:19; Rom. 16:1-16.

1. From which non-Christians or non-Catholics have I learned valuable lessons?
2. Which women have deepened and enriched my spiritual journey?
3. How have women contributed to my growth in understanding the meaning of "community"?