

New Testament (For the MacMillan Encyclopedia on Sex and Gender)

Deirdre Good

We may regard sex in the ancient world as a biological identity. Gender is a "social construct" indicating the ways men and women are taught values and behaviors appropriate to gender roles and social expectations. To practice *sophrosune*, for example, means self-control for men and discretion and even silence for women. The gender ideology of public and private implies leadership roles in the public sphere for men, while women's domain is the household. But we cannot push this division too far: the ancient household is also a public space regardless of size or economy.

To access gender relations, we may compare women and men's social experiences. These are filtered through texts that both construct and interact with experience. "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission," writes the author of I Timothy 2:12 imitating Paul. "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve." But the injunction tells us more about the writer than about the social position of women in early Christian movements. The focus in the text is on the problem of "women," and by means of such texts we can see the ideological uses of interpretation to authorize and sustain certain relationships of domination, and the way that a male author in a position of power uses gender categories at a certain time and place to support women's subordination.

The ideal of restricted women's behavior in public space is relevant to understanding the contradiction within Paul's first letter to Corinth on the proper role of women in worship and the harshness of the prohibition of women teachers in 1 Timothy 2:11–12. While Paul expects women to take an active role in worship in prophetic speech (1 Cor 11:5), he also demands women's silence in the assembly at 1 Cor 14:34–35:

The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

In this context, we see Paul as orator adopting a role as head of household preserving order in the Christian community through personal authority. This is best seen in the fiat of 11:16: If any man will not be ruled in this question, this is not our way of doing things, and it is not done in the churches of God. Through ordering and gendering of the household Paul exercises control over the community, placing special emphasis on particular hairstyles and veiling practices. It is also part of Paul's promotion of an ordered, moderate, upright community that reflects the "glory" of both Paul and God.

Thus, female conduct at Corinth or anywhere else is incidental to the main argument establishing Paul's domination and power over those constructed as in need of control. Of course, the ecclesial body benefits from stability. Yet, the predominant cultural value-system out of which Paul is operating and which he inscribes on the Corinthian body, and indeed seeks to promote as the basis for his own identity for the audience, has to be seen from a (Greco-Roman) male perspective. Paul is trying to control women who prophesy. In the ancient world prophesying is anarchic and non gender-specific. Paul intends to

counter chaos with an ordered and structured Christian community, in which women “know their place.” The argument starts with control of his own body (1 Corinthians 7), which is the starting point for domination of others (1 Corinthians 11). The female body in turn becomes the cultural and rhetorical battleground for the maintenance of custom in Paul. In so ordering the Corinthian “household” Paul realizes stability of an ordered empire. Seen in this light, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 becomes a powerful statement about Paul’s status as head of household and maintainer of Corinthian order. The household is the projection of Paul’s ability to control, order, and dominate, and it becomes the model for the author of I Timothy.

Some have proposed that the injunction of I Timothy is an interpolation on the basis of concerns about female modesty in public space. I Tim 3:5 describes an overseer (bishop) as husband of one wife and manager of the household arguing “For if a man has not the art of ruling his house, how will he take care of the church of God?” I prefer to leave the text as a witness to a reading of Paul’s exclusion of women from the emerging leadership role of monarchical bishop, and to rhetoric of shame attempting to ensure women’s silence in public arenas.

Such understandings of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians echo in analyses of his letter to the Romans and its condemnation of same-sex relations between men and men and women and women. Bernadette Brooten concentrates on same-sex relations between women in the ancient world and shows that “throughout Western history we find the male creators of culture and of ideology wavering between assuming that sexual relations between women do not exist at all -- indeed cannot exist -- and imagining that if they do, then the women must be capable of penetration” (p. 190). As for that notion, “this focus on penetration as the principal sexual image led to a simplistic view of female erotic behavior and a complex view of the erotic choices of free men” (p. 49). In the Roman imperial era the phenomenon of female same-sex love received increased attention and (before long) broad societal recognition. But whence the hostility? In ancient Mediterranean concepts of sexuality, “active and passive define what it means to be masculine/feminine” (p. 125; cf. 157 n. 43). If a female plays the penetrating (i.e. active) part, she transgresses those fundamental categories acting “contrary to nature.” But this is also the case if a woman allows herself to be penetrated by another woman. The logic is skewed, but Brooten argues that just goes to show “female homoeroticism did not fit neatly into ancient understandings of sexual relationships as essentially asymmetrical” (p. 76). Only Christians wanted homoerotic women to die and burn in hell. Paul condemns sexual relations between women as ‘unnatural’ because he shares the widely held cultural view that women are passive by nature and therefore should remain passive in sexual relations” (p. 216).

It is important to know that before the author of I Timothy wrote, women such as Phoebe are patrons in a community of Roman believers (Romans 16:1-2) and that there were apostles before Paul such as Junia (Romans 16:7). Lydia is a God-fearer and wealthy householder who believed and was baptized by Paul with her whole household. She is patron to both house-church and traveling apostle (Acts 16:11–15).

Recent study of John's gospel demonstrates how the author seeks to eradicate sex by envisaging generation of new members of the Johannine community from God not through conception and birth (John 1:12-13). In chapter one, Jesus exists as God's Word. In chapter three, Nicodemus explores what being born anew (or from above) means. To be born from above or born anew does not mean entering into the mother's womb a second time (3:4). As Jesus explains to a mystified Nicodemus, it means being born of water and the Spirit. If John's gospel describes human generation in a nonbiological way, one can see why Jesus' parents and his family of origin are absent from the gospel. To be sure, Jesus has a mother but he never addresses her as such. Except at Cana, neither of them makes claims on the other as family members or those in the same household might be expected to do; and even at Cana, the claim is not framed in terms of family obligation. Jesus' words in 2:4, "Woman, what have I to do with you?" distance himself from his earthly mother and cause more distress to interpreters than to his mother. Moreover, Jesus distances women from men: to the Samaritan woman he says, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'" (4:17-18); to the woman taken in adultery he says, "No one has condemned you, neither do I..." although the law condemns both the man and the woman (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). Similarly, in John's gospel, parents separate or differentiate themselves from their children: the parents of the man born blind say, "Ask him, he is of age!" (John 9:23).

At the crucifixion scene, Jesus consigns the Beloved Disciple to replace him as son to his mother (John 19:25-6). Affiliation is not through birth; Jesus' mother is now mother or guardian to the prototypical disciple in whatever community exists after Jesus' death. From the cross, in a last will and testament, Jesus himself affiliates a new son to his mother. He creates a mother-son bond through his last words. The new son takes his new mother into his realm (or house) and in so doing sustains the bond. Jesus creates through words a new family of his disciples, namely, brothers, sisters and friends that he loves, the most prominent of whom becomes son to his mother. The Beloved Disciple is thus (re)born child of God not by desire, by man, or the will of the flesh. Evaluation of descriptions of women and men in non-traditional egalitarian gender roles in John's gospel is underway.

Bibliography

M.B. Skinner, Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture (Oxford 2005).

Bernadette Brooten, Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Deirdre Good, Jesus' Family Values (Church Publishing: New York, forthcoming October 2005).

Alison Jasper, The Shining Garment of the Text: Gendered Readings of John's Prologue by JSNTSup 165 (Sheffield 1998).

Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, "Unveiling Paul: Gendering Ethos in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16" *Lectio Difficilor* 2, 2004.

Seim, Turid Karlsen, "Descent and Divine Paternity in the Gospel of John: Does the Mother Matter?" *New Testament Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 361-375.