

## ***WOMEN EVANGELISTS IN THE EARLY CHURCH***

By Kathryn Riss

Although the epistles do not specifically name women evangelists, many New Testament women did this work. The prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38) was the very first person to proclaim Jesus as Israel's promised Redeemer. Luke tells us that she lived in perpetual widowhood in the Jerusalem Temple, and that after she saw the infant Jesus at His dedication, she "gave thanks likewise to the Lord and spoke of him to all those who looked for redemption in Israel." (Lk 2:38) The woman of Samaria brought her entire city to Christ by her testimony (John 4:28-42). She told the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Isn't this the Messiah?" (v. 29) Verse 39 tells us, "Many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the woman's word, who testified, 'He told me everything I ever did.'" This woman not only testified of her own experience, she also urged the townspeople to meet Jesus for themselves. They did so; and as a result, "Many more believed because of His own word, and said to the woman, 'Now we believe, not because of your word, because we have heard Him ourselves and know that this is indeed the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.'" (v. 42) This is evangelism at its most successful--bringing about the conversion of a city as people come to a first-hand experience of personal faith in Jesus Christ.

After His resurrection triumph, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary Salome and other women with them and personally directed them to proclaim His resurrection to the rest of the disciples. Significantly, all four of the gospels record this. The women's commission was a double one, as angels also appeared to them with the same message and directive. Every person who has ever heard the Good News that Jesus was risen from the dead early on Easter Sunday morning heard it from the testimony of women! Yet, sadly, the testimony of the women was not believed at first. Jesus had to appear personally to the men, whom He "upbraided for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he was risen." (Mk. 16:14) Jesus regarded the women's message to the men as His own message to them according to Matthew 28:7c, where He says, "Lo, I have told you," and so they later regarded it, according to verse 16. Jesus rebuked the men, "O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and enter into His glory?" (Lk.24:25-26)

Note that Peter and John were both at the tomb of Jesus early that Resurrection morning, but He did not appear to them then. Rather, the Lord waited for Mary Magdalene to reveal Himself alive to one who would believe. He could have appeared to these men and sent them to preach first, had He chosen. But their hearts were not right, so on this occasion, He preferred to show Himself to Mary and the other women. "The eyes of the Lord search to and fro throughout the whole earth to show Himself mighty on behalf of the one whose heart is perfect toward Him." (II Chron. 16:9) God does not judge by outward appearance but looks on the heart.

Jesus' Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20, Mk. 16:15) to preach the Gospel and make disciples throughout the world was given to the entire church, both male and female. Luke 24:33-53 shows that the Commission and opening of their minds to understand the Scriptures were given to the whole company of believers, not only the Eleven. It was for the purpose of evangelism that Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to empower the whole company of believers who were waiting as directed in the upper room at Jerusalem. The book of Acts testifies that at Pentecost, God's power was given both to men and to women for the purpose of bringing unbelievers to salvation (Acts 1:14-15, 2:1-4 and 14-21). At a later time, Acts 4:31 tells us that "the Holy Spirit fell on them all, and they all spoke the Word of God with boldness." This was not limited to just men. After Pentecost, the saints gathered, preached and healed publicly in Solomon's Portico, an area behind the eastern side of the Jerusalem Temple that was open to Gentiles and women (Acts 5:12-14).

As we have seen from our study of prophets, Biblical prophecy is not limited to foretelling future events, but consists mainly of proclaiming the praises of God and calling people to repentance and faith in Him. This is what the Spirit-filled men and women did together that first Pentecost, and that is what Spirit-filled Christians, both men and women, should be doing still.

St. Paul names several women as his "fellow-workers" in the Gospel (Romans 16:3,9,12). *The Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Greek Lexicon* defines this word (*sunergos*) as "those who helped (Paul) in spreading the Gospel." (p. 795) Paul used this term not only for Timothy (Romans 16:21), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Clement (Phil. 4:3), Philemon (1), Mark and Luke (Philemon 24), but also for Priscilla (Romans 16:3), Euodia and Synthyche (Phil. 4:2-3). Other women Paul commends for their "labor in the Lord" are Mary, Persis, Tryphena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:6 and 12).

What happened to the Spirit-filled evangelists, both men and women, after the New Testament witness ends? The last verse of Mark's gospel says, "and they went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following." (Mk. 16:20)

Prisca and Aquilla accompanied St. Luke, according to the *Teaching of the Apostles*, an ancient Syriac document which is "part of a volume of fragments, of which the age is certainly not later than the beginning of the fifth century," according to its translator and editor, A. Cleveland Coxe. This manuscript states, "Luke, moreover, the evangelist had such diligence that he wrote the exploits of the Acts of the Apostles and the ordinances and laws of

the ministry of their priesthood [probably the *Apostolic Constitutions*], and whither each one of them went. By his diligence, I say, did Luke write these things, and more than these, and he placed them in the hand of Priscilla and Aquilus, his disciples; and they accompanied him up to the day of his death, just as Timothy and Erastus of Lystra and Menaues, the first disciples of the apostles, accompanied Paul. . . " (*The Teaching of the Apostles*, A. Cleveland Coxe, ed., *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, New York: The Christian Literature Company, p. 672) This would, according to the same document, have included "Byzantium and all the country of Thrace and of the parts about it as far as the Great River (Danube) the boundary which separates from the barbarians." (p. 671) The text also states, "The other remaining companions of the apostles, moreover, went to the distant countries of the barbarians; and they made disciples from place to place and passed on; and there they ministered by their preaching and there occurred their departure out of this world, their disciples after them going on down to the present day." (p.



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Another Syriac fragment in this collection, "*The Teaching of Addaeus the Apostle*," who healed and converted King Abgar of Edessa in Armenia, tells us about his co-workers in the successful evangelistic campaign in that region. "Moreover, as regards the entire state of the men and the women, they were chaste and circumspect and holy and pure . . . in circumspect watchfulness touching the ministry, in their sympathy toward the poor, in their visitations to the sick; for their footsteps were fraught with praise from those who saw them. . . by reason of their dignified aspect, their truthful words, their frankness of speech arising from their noble nature, which was neither subservient through covetousness nor in bondage under the fear of blame . . . And in consequence of these things their bearing was fearless as they published their teaching to all men. for whatsoever they said to others and enjoined on them, they themselves exhibited in practice in their own persons; and the hearers, who saw that their actions went along with their words, without much persuasion became their disciples, and confessed the King Christ, praising God for having turned them towards Him." (op. cit. p. 664)

A very interesting but highly romanticized account of a woman evangelist is given in the New Testament apocryphal book *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which circulated widely in the second half of the second century and afterwards. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 1049, "Its great popularity in the early church is shown by its existence not only in the original Greek, but also in five separate Latin translations as well as Syriac, Armenian, Slavonic and Arabic." This book relates the story of a young noblewoman, Thecla (or Thekla) who heard Paul preaching on chastity and prayer at the house church of Onesiphorus in Iconium. Deciding to dedicate her life as a Christian virgin, she refused to marry her betrothed husband. As a result, Paul was brought to trial and beaten, while Thecla was condemned to be burned to death, but was miraculously saved from the fire by a violent rain storm. Thecla disguised herself as a man and, finding Paul, who had been praying for her safety, she followed him to Antioch. There, an official, Alexander, tried to sexually assault her, and in defending herself, she pulled off his crown and tore his robe. The Roman governor then condemned her to be thrown to wild beasts.

Requesting protection until her execution, Thecla was taken in by Queen Tryphaena, who became attached to her after dreaming that her deceased daughter encouraged her to receive Thecla in her place. Thecla's faith and courage in the arena, and the fact that the wild animals did not harm her, brought about the sympathy and conversion of many women who witnessed them, who protested that her sentence was iniquitous. On the last day of Thecla's trials, when preparations were being made to have her torn to pieces by bulls, Queen Tryphaena fainted. At this, Alexander himself petitioned the governor to release her, as the queen was related to the Emperor, whose ire would be aroused should any harm befall her. Thecla then told the governor, "I indeed am a servant of the living God, and . . . I have believed in the Son of God, in whom he is well pleased, wherefore not one of the beasts has touched me. For He alone is the way of salvation and the basis of immortal life, for He is a refuge to the tempest-tossed, a solace to the afflicted, a shelter to the despairing, and once for all, whoever shall not believe in Him shall not live forever." (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*, A. Cleveland Coxe, ed. *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1886 p. 491) After this, the governor stated to the crowd, "I release to you the God-fearing Thecla, the servant of God," and the women shouted aloud and with one mouth returned thanks to God, saying, "There is one God, the God of Thecla," so that the foundations of the theater were shaken by their voice." (Ibid)

Receiving Paul's commission to "Go and teach the Word of God," Thecla retired to a mountain cave where she lived 72 years as an ascetic. One version of the "*Acta*" states, "And she was there many years . . . and some well-born women, having learned about the virgin Thecla, went to her and learned the oracles of God. And many of

them bade adieu to the world and lived an ascetic life with her. And a good report was spread everywhere concerning her, and cures were done by her. All the city, therefore, and country round, having known this, brought their sick to the mountain, and before they came near the door they were speedily released from whatever disease they were afflicted by, and the unclean spirits went out shrieking, and all received their own in health, glorifying God, who had given such grace to the virgin Thecla." (ibid p. 492) This accounts for the widespread veneration of St. Thecla by women followers, which continued for several centuries.

There are a number of fanciful myths included about Thecla in this work, and its author, a presbyter, was defrocked for exaggerating his account of her life. But a germ of historical truth lies at the center of the myths. Thecla seems to have been well-known, both in her own time and later in church history. A number of the church fathers mention her, and Gregorius names her among other martyrs and witnesses who faced "fire and sword, beasts and tyrants." Gregory Nazianzen wrote of a church "council which sat first at Seleucia, the city of the holy and illustrious virgin Thekla.. ." (Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 1995:Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers vol. 7 p. 275).

The 19th century archaeologist and scholar Sir William Ramsay did a thorough and careful study of the various manuscripts of the *Acta*, comparing them with historical facts known from coins, inscriptions, secular manuscripts and other sources. He found that Queen Tryphaena, whose fainting in the arena saved Thecla's life, was a historical person who lived during the mid-first century. Coins with her bust, name and title show that she was the queen regent of Pontus when her young son became king. She was first cousin once removed to the Roman emperor Claudius, who reigned from AD 41-54. Thus, the *Acta*'s account that Alexander had Thecla freed in fear that the queen's distress could become serious enough to arouse the wrath of the Emperor was quite true. Ramsay found that Queen Tryphaena's words, the details of Thecla's public trial and punishment in the arena for the sacrilege of assaulting the high priest and president of the exhibition at Antioch, and the presence of a Roman governor at that occasion, are all true to the customs and history of that period. Ramsay concludes, "It is not possible to account for this accuracy in details by the supposition that it is a skilful archaeological forgery . . . The tale must be founded on fact, and committed to writing by some person not far removed from the events . . . No other hypothesis seems consistent with the fidelity to a transitory and soon-forgotten epoch of history. We must hold that the tale is, at least in part, historical, that Thekla was a real person, and that she was brought into relations with the greatest figures of the Galatic province about AD 50- viz., Paul, Queen Tryphaena, and the Roman governor." (W. M. Ramsay, M.A., *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1893, p. 388).



Ramsay acknowledges that the true story of Thecla was later embellished by the mid-2nd century presbyter who wrote the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and then again in the late 3rd or 4th century to satisfy the desire of Thecla's venerated for a more romantic martyrology and to increase the role of Paul. He bases this view both on internal evidence and the statement of Tertullian (on Baptism 17) that the work was constructed by augmenting older material (Ramsay, op cit p. 415, 422).

Even more interesting for our subject is the gradual expunging from later manuscripts of the *Acta* of accounts of Thecla's having baptized her converts and other elements which show the high status and freedom of activity of this Christian woman leader. Ramsay writes, "Moreover, there remain even in the mutilated and re-written tale some traces of a view of women's rights and position, which is thoroughly characteristic of the [ancient] Asian social system, and thoroughly opposed to the ideas favoured by the Church." (op. cit. p. 415) Ramsay also shows how this opposition to the prominence of women in the original texts of the Bible resulted in the expunging of Damaris from Acts 17:33 in the *Codex Bezae*. (op. cit. p. 159-162). He writes, ". . . various developments of religious feeling, which arose in Asia Minor, . . . were characterized by prominent position and influence of women. In opposition to these provincial types, the Universal and Catholic type of Christianity became confirmed in its dislike of the prominence and public ministration of women. The dislike became abhorrence, and there is every probability that the dislike is as old as the first century, and was intensified to abhorrence before the middle of the second century. Under the influence of this feeling the changes in Acts 17:12 and 34 arose in Catholic circles in Asia Minor." (op cit p. 162) This was part of a concerted and continued effort of church leaders to diminish the history and public ministry of Christian women, an effort which has continued to the present day. One can only wonder how many other passages of New Testament Scripture may likewise have been altered along such lines during this early period in the development of the canon.

After her release, Thecla remained eight days with queen Tryphaena, "having instructed her in the word of God, so that most even of the maid-servants believed. And there was great joy in that house." (Acta, op. cit., p. 491) She then returned to Iconium, witnessed to her mother, and departed to a cave in Seleucia, Syrian Antioch, where she lived as an ascetic for 72 years. Thecla founded a convent there, where a large church was dedicated to her. She made many converts, and her followers became very numerous. Ramsey states, "Nicetas of Paphlagonia mentions that Thekla baptised in Isauria, but that this was a special privilege reserved to her alone among women." (Ramsey, Op. cit., p. 375) Basil wrote a life of Thecla in which he "describes miraculous cures she performed, some of which he witnessed." according to Edith Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith*, p. 312. Evidently, some of these cures occurred after Thecla's death, as Basil lived during the 4th century. Ramsey states, "In subsequent history, the worship of Thekla as a saint became established widely in Asia Minor; first of all in the southern parts, and especially in Seleucia of Isauria." (op. cit. p. 426) Her grave is said to be in Rome about 2-3 stadia from that of St. Paul. A church dedicated to her is located in that city on the Via Ostiense. Thecla's commemoration feast was held on September 24th.

Like many women soul-winners in the early and medieval church, Thecla's evangelism took place in the contexts of her witness under persecution and her example, teaching and healing ministry as a monastic. While the public lives of Christian women were usually very limited due to their social status, their evangelistic zeal and gifts were not. Respectable women in the Roman Empire did not go out in public unattended, but sought to serve God at home. There, God used many for His glory in bringing family members and other women (and sometimes men), often in large numbers, to faith and dedicated service to Jesus Christ. The Word and Spirit are not bound by human customs and restrictions, but continue to operate within and despite them.

Like Thecla, many women founded convents or turned their homes into refuges for the worship of God where many visitors found new life in Christ. Among these were Macrina, sister and spiritual teacher of Basil the Great and Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa and who founded a monastery at Pontus; Marcella, who with Paula and Eustacia assisted Jerome's manuscript work and who founded her Church of the Household as a center for study, charity and prayer; and Paula, who built monasteries, a chapel and a hospice near Bethlehem. Others, like Sts. Helena, mother of Constantine; Nonna, who converted her husband, Gregory the Elder, later bishop for 45 years, and sons Gregory and Caesarius who likewise became bishops; Monica, who prayed fervently for her son St. Augustine's conversion for over 30 years; and Anthusa, mother of John Chrysostom, changed the course of history by bringing about the conversions of their male relatives. Some of these men ruled nations and brought religious freedom and the spread of Christianity to their domains, while others became major figures in church history. Whether in public or in private, women's evangelistic gifts have been used by God to bring many to Him.