

Androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians and its implications for South African women today

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Abstract

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The focus of this article is the use of androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians. The questions asked in this regard are: does the author of 1 Thessalonians use sexist-exclusive language, thus gender-specific language or does he use gender-inclusive language as used within a patriarchal culture? And what are the implications of this situation for South African women today? In order to answer these questions, the background of ancient authors' use of androcentric language is given as seen from a socio-historical point of view. Then the use of androcentric language by the author of 1 Thessalonians is evaluated. Against this background and in the light of this evaluation, the implications of this kind of language in 1 Thessalonians for contemporary South African women are discussed. It is found that Paul's use of androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians is possibly a result of the prescriptions of the roles of a patriarchal culture and that the church needs to reconsider its prescriptions of the roles of women in the church. The question to be answered is whether the church prescribes the roles of women in church because of a Biblical view of women or because of its negligence to let God's Word speak to women in societies. In the light of a changed attitude towards women in our modern society, translators of the New Testament need to consider a fresh interpretation and translation of 1 Thessalonians (and the rest of the New Testament) in which women are addressed and considered to be an active part of God's church.

1. Introduction

The focus of this article is the use of androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians. The author of 1 Thessalonians addresses his readers in 1:4 as “brothers, loved by God” (ἄδελφοί, ἀγαπητοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ) and repeats this form of address in 2:1, 2:14, 2:17, 3:7, 4:1, 5:1, 5:4, 5:12, 5:14, 5:25 when he calls them “brothers” (ἄδελφοί). In 5:5 he calls them “sons of light” (υἱοὶ τοῦ φωτός). In 2:4 he uses the word ἄνθρωποι in this case translated in various translations as “people”, when he says “we do not speak to please people, but God (ὡς ἀνθρώπους, ἀλλὰ ὡς θεόν) ...

ἄνθρωποι ἀλλὰ ὡς θεόν. The same applies for 2:6 when the author writes that he is not looking for praise from “people” (ἄνθρωποι) ...

ἄνθρωποι. 2:13 when he refers to “the word of people” (ἡ λέξις τῶν ἀνθρώπων) – “you received it not as the Word of people”, and 4:8 (ὁ ἀρνούμενος τὸν ἀνθρώπον ἀρνούμενος τὸν θεόν) – “he who rejects this, does not reject man, but God”).

In 4:10 the author writes ἡμεῖς πάντες ἀδελφούς (we are all brothers), in 5:26 ἡμεῖς πάντες ἀδελφούς (we are all brothers), in 5:27 ἡμεῖς πάντες ἀδελφούς (we are all brothers) “greet all the people”, in 5:27 ἡμεῖς πάντες ἀδελφούς (we are all brothers) “I charge you before the Lord to have the letter read to all people”, and in 4:6 ἡμεῖς πάντες ἀδελφούς (we are all brothers) (“that you do not take advantage of your brother”).

It is clear from these examples that women are not formally addressed in this letter. The following questions thus come to the fore: does the author of 1 Thessalonians use sexist-exclusive language, thus gender-specific language or does he use gender-inclusive language as used within a patriarchal culture? And what are the implications of this situation for South African women today?

In order to answer these questions, the background of ancient authors' use of androcentric language will be given at the outset and in reconstructing this background a socio-historical point of view will be applied. Then the use of androcentric language by the author of 1 Thessalonians will be evaluated. Against this background and in the light of this evaluation, the implications for contemporary South African women will be discussed.

2. The background of the use of androcentric language

The background of the author's use of androcentric language is important and should be kept in mind. According to the Acts' account in 17:4, there were "prominent women" in Thessalonica, leading Greek women, listening to Paul in the Jewish synagogue. Although one cannot consider this narrative in Acts to be the history of Paul's work in Thessalonica, and although the Acts' account is not without certain difficulties when compared to the data in the two Thessalonian letters, one is still confronted by the question: if Paul specifically converted women in the Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica, why did he neglect to address these women in his letters? More detail about women specifically in Thessalonica is, however, hard to find.

It is assumed that home and household were regarded as the traditional place of classical Greek women (see e.g. Ferguson, 1987:57). Women's roles were to bear legitimate children. Furthermore they did not appear in public but remained in "women's quarters". In only one instance could Greek women act independently of male authority, namely in the absence of their husbands (see Ferguson, 1987:58). Stambaugh and Balch (1986:111) add that women were expected to be modest and unobtrusive and to lead uneventful and unexciting lives. Their marriages were arranged and they remained under the authority of men for the rest of their lives. In short, ancient women lived in a patriarchal society. The hierarchical pattern of family life, in which the male was always superior to the female, was deeply entrenched in law and custom (Meeks, 1983:23).

For some women, however, these traditional roles were too confining (Meeks, 1983:24), and in practice there were opportunities for some women to break through this pattern (Meeks, 1983:23). Meeks (1983:23) is of the opinion that a great many women crossed categories in order to better their lives. In Corinth there were women who headed households, who ran businesses, who traveled, who became converts to cults without the consent of their husbands (see 1 Corinthians 7:13). Women thus in certain cases took the same roles as men did. Women joined clubs like

men, were active in commerce and manufacture and were even active in religious matters (Meeks, 1983:24).

Torjesen (1995:6) says that women's authority in the domain of the household was well established and that their administrative, economic, and disciplinary tasks in that role were an excellent preparation for church office. Torjesen (1995:5) is of the opinion that in early Christian house churches women were prominent as leaders. Meeks (1983:71) refers in this regard to Paul's fellow workers as evangelists and teachers and Torjesen (1995:20) discusses the prominent role of especially Priscilla in the early Christian movement. One can thus agree with Meeks (1983:71) who says that both in terms of their position in the larger society and in terms of their participation in the Christian communities, a number of women shifted the normal expectations of female roles.

But as Christianity became the state religion, women were marginalized and scapegoated (Torjesen, 1995:6). With regard to women's roles in the early Christian church, Gryson (1976:109) writes that from the beginnings of Christianity, women assumed an important role and enjoyed a place of choice in the Christian community, but there is no evidence that women exercised leadership roles in the early church. The question is: why did ancient women disappear from the frontline of the early church? It seems as if early Christian women as women were part of a submerged group, and as Christians, they were part of an emergent group that was not yet recognized by the dominant patriarchal society and culture (see Schussler Fiorenza, 1983:84).

I do not want to get involved in a dispute on the role of women in ancient societies or the early church (for more information see e.g. Morris, 1973; Smith, 1978; Irvin, 1980; Brooten, 1982; Meeks, 1983). However, if it is true that ancient women played important and acknowledged roles in their societies, and even in the Christian church, it is important for this study to determine how the author of 1 Thessalonians, with his use of androcentric language, defines women's roles. One also has to determine whether he defines women's social or religious status.

Seeing that the author of 1 Thessalonians addresses his readers as a leader of a "religious institution", called the "church" and even addresses them as the "church of Thessalonica" (see 1 Thessalonians 1:1), one can say that the "world" that he sketches in his letter is definitely not his interpretation of his social world, but rather his interpretation of the world of a religious group within the broader social world. When he thus prescribes and exhorts the roles of the readers, he defines their religious status as children of God. And when the author falls into the pit of not

addressing women in his letter, I do not think he is describing women's roles in society. What he does by implication is to communicate to his readers his view of women's roles in the church.

The question to be answered here is: how did the author of 1 Thessalonians present the "church" of God to his readers? Did he include women? From the many sources on the background of the role of ancient women in society and in the church, it has become clear that public places were traditionally the sole prerogatives of males, and that private spaces such as the household were regarded as the proper sphere for women's activities (see e.g. Torjesen, 1995:12). It seems logical to say that the "proper" roles of ancient women were defined according to whether the activities were household or public activities. If women have disappeared from literature on the history of the early church, it could be because of the assumption that church (not house church) activities were public activities. Men were thus family representatives in church when it came to discussions, opinions, and leadership. Within the patriarchal culture then, the author of 1 Thessalonians seems to use gender-inclusive language to address the Thessalonian church. Women were possibly included in the author's address, with the assumption that the men would inform and teach the women at home. Whatever women's status in ancient societies was, this letter communicates that the moment women would move over to the early Christian movement, they would be relegated to powerless fringe groups – always walking behind the men, being included by implication in the letter only because they belong to some men in society. The author of 1 Thessalonians thus remains within the patriarchal culture and affirms the opinion that the roles to be played in the early Christian church were restricted by gender.

3. An evaluation of the author's use of language

I am of the opinion that the androcentric language used in 1 Thessalonians could have had a potential to create questions in ancient women's (and men's) minds about justice, God's love, and women's future in God's Kingdom. This letter might have been to the service of sexism. The author's use of androcentric language in a context where God is supposed to remove all injustice, and especially when compared to Jesus's reaction to the social conventions of his day, might have brought doubt about the ethics of this spokesman of God.

How ethical is the author's use of language in 1 Thessalonians? Does he possibly use language to promote an unaccepted value in society? Smith (1995:103-106) evaluates the text of 1 Thessalonians and discusses the plusses and minuses of the ideological framework of this ancient text in

the light of the current sensibilities shaped by the geopolitical shifts and changing intellectual paradigms. And according to him, this text of 1 Thessalonians is problematic for our times, because of the patriarchal nature of the consolatory genre which the author employs. The author constructs stability and maturity in “androcentric terms”. Within this tradition, men were idealized. Weakness, grieving and lack of self-control, against which men are warned, were regarded to be the attributes of women.

The nature of the kind of language used in 1 Thessalonians is predominantly androcentric. In 2:7 we find the metaphor of the “nursing mother” in which the author explains the character of his and his colleagues’ gentleness. He says they acted like a nursing mother who lovingly cherishes her own children (♦☺☘ ℳ ḗ ḡ ≡ ■ ◆ □ □ ↗ □ ≡ ☘ □ ḡ ♦ ● □ ṡ ḡ ◆ ḡ ṡ ℳ ☺ ḡ ◆ ◆ ṡ II ☘ ◆ ℳ ♦ & ■ ḡ). With this metaphor the author uses feminine language to describe his gentleness and protective concern. This one case of feminine language is not, however, used to address or explicitly include women.

The overwhelming androcentric nature of the language used in this letter automatically forces the readers to become “male”. The question to be answered in this article is whether the androcentric language could promote social values such as the repression of women in ancient times. If so, the use of androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians can definitely be regarded as unethical.

One has to keep in mind, however, that a judgement of the ethics of the author’s use of androcentric language may not be influenced by one’s own modern ideas of an unaccepted value such as the repression of women. One has to determine inter alia:

- whether women’s limited movements in ancient times were considered by the ancient societies to be a form of repression of women; and
- whether the repression of women was an unaccepted practice in ancient societies – accepted by male and female.

When one studies literature on the roles of ancient women, one hardly finds any information about rebellious women – women fighting against the authority and domination of men. The story of Thecla in the Acts of Paul and Thecla (see Lipsius, 1972:235-272 for the text) and the comedy *ḗ ḡ & & ● ṡ ◆ ḡ ḡ ḡ ◆ ḡ ḡ* written by Aristophanes, seem to be the only narration of rebellious women. Does this mean that women’s limited movements in ancient societies were never questioned? Was the

repression of women really so acceptable to all ancient people, to all ancient women?

One has to keep in mind that one hardly finds any written reports about women's contributions to ancient societies. Torjesen (1995:10) refers to the "hidden history" of women's leadership as proven by ancient mosaics, paintings, statuary, dedicatory inscriptions, and funerary epitaphs. She is of the opinion that male writers muted women's contributions by the way they communicated and structured these narratives in written form (Torjesen, 1995:13). New Testament writers generally mentioned women leaders only as a passing-by fact while hurrying on to address more pressing concerns (Torjesen, 1995:13). Schussler Fiorenza (1983:108) states that texts and historical sources (used to interpret the role of ancient women) are only reflective of the experience, opinion, or control of male writers, and not of women's historical reality and experience. And this makes sense to me. One has to keep in mind, Schussler Fiorenza (1983:49) says, that since early Christian communities and authors lived in a predominantly patriarchal world and participated in its mentality, it is likely that authors' use of language was conditioned by the androcentric tradition. These androcentric texts and documents should not, however, be considered to mirror historical reality, to report historical facts, or to tell us how circumstances actually were. Shussler Fiorenza (1983:60) is of the opinion that these texts are "early Christian sources ... argumentations ... and selections rooted in a patriarchal culture". Ancient history was thus written by men and what we read from these sources, cannot be considered to be the history of ancient women. One thus has to be cautious to consider androcentric texts and documents to mirror the historical reality of women's experience of male domination. This leads one to say that because history was written by men, it is possible that the names of women (and even men) who rebelled against male domination would not survive the writing of the history in the language and literary conventions of the patriarchal society. The possibility that the repression of ancient women was not such an accepted practice in ancient societies and also in the early church, can thus not be ignored.

Seeing that there was a group of ancient women who transcended the pattern of patriarchal culture, this pattern was probably not positively experienced by all ancient women. It could be that the role of women in ancient societies was an emotional issue in those days, but that it was kept outside of court and literary circles. The situation could have aroused conflict and anger in the domain where women lived and worked, but it never became a dispute in public where women were not allowed.

Although 1 Thessalonians cannot be considered to be prescriptive with regard to the role of women, it is at least descriptive. The fact, however, remains that the author of 1 Thessalonians creates a world through the text of 1 Thessalonians in which the place of women is not explicitly mentioned. The author of 1 Thessalonians does not describe women's social status in society, but rather their religious status. Thus he does not prescribe an ideal situation in society, but rather describes a situation in the early church through the text. How does the author of 1 Thessalonians then describe the role of women in the early church? He describes women, per implication, as people not addressed at all in the sphere of the church, or included in androcentric language used. This letter reflects those segments of the church which have undergone this patriarchalization process. By not referring to women in this letter, the author of 1 Thessalonians very clearly relegates women to powerless fringe groups.

Stambaugh and Balch (1986:104) and Torjesen (1995:6) refer to Jesus's unconventional social relationships. Torjesen writes about Jesus who challenged the social conventions of his day: He addressed women as equals, bestowed honour and recognition to children, championed the poor and the outcast, ate and mingled with people across all class and gender lines, and attacked the social bonds that held together the patriarchal family (Torjesen, 1995:4). One has to ask: Why did the author of 1 Thessalonians not challenge the social conventions of his day? Why did he keep on neglecting to address women? Why did he not include all people across the gender lines? Why did he not attack the social bonds that held together the patriarchal family?

Is the kind of language the author uses in 1 Thessalonians an expression of his opinion founded on patriarchal prejudice? Was it rabbinic conservatism? I would say that there is a possibility that the author of 1 Thessalonians was careful not to raise a struggle by using including language within domains where women were not included. His argument could be that he wants to focus on other issues and that he would rather do it in a peaceful context. Within the patriarchal culture the author of 1 Thessalonians seems to use gender-inclusive language to address the Thessalonian church – and women were possibly included in the author's address. If this hypothesis is acceptable, this would imply that women were only limited in 1 Thessalonians because of the prescriptions of a patriarchal culture in an ancient society.

Would this mean that in modern societies the church will have to rethink its prescriptions of the roles of women in the church? In the next section the implications of this situation for contemporary South African women will be discussed.

4. Implications for South African women today

In theory, women in South Africa are no longer restricted by gender with regard to their roles in society. It is stated in the Constitution (chapter 2, article 9, paragraph 3) that the state may not discriminate against anyone on the grounds of gender. In practice, however, society is slow in its process to develop in this regard. Women are, however, restricted by gender with regard to their roles in the Christian church – in some churches only in practice, in other churches also in theory. The question is whether one can consider the view of the church on this issue to be a Biblical view. One cannot escape the further question whether the church restricts women's roles in church today, not because of a Biblical view of women, but because of our negligence to let the Word of God speak to women in our societies.

In the light of the argument of this article and in light of the most acceptable hypothesis and explanation for Paul's use of androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians, we should reconsider women's roles in the church. If the ancient patriarchal culture guided Paul's use of gender-inclusive language in 1 Thessalonians, the present changed attitude towards women in societies must have an influence on our interpretations of Paul's view of women's roles in the church. I consider the startingpoint to be a fresh interpretation and translation of 1 Thessalonians (and the rest of the New Testament) in which women are addressed and considered to be an active part of God's church. If this is not done, it would mean that the Christian church in South Africa is a mere spectator while modern women are disempowered by an ancient system. And this situation is inexcusable. The Christian church has a responsibility to partake in the dialogue on this issue.

5. Conclusion

In this article it was indicated that women are not formally addressed in 1 Thessalonians and that androcentric language is used. The issue highlighted was whether the author of 1 Thessalonians uses sexist-exclusive language – thus gender-specific language or gender-inclusive language in a patriarchal culture. The following conclusions were made:

- The author seems to use androcentric language in 1 Thessalonians possibly as a result of the prescriptions of a patriarchal culture.
- In the light of a changed attitude towards women in our modern society, translators and interpreters of the New Testament need to consider a fresh interpretation and translation of 1 Thessalonians (and

the rest of the new Testament) in which women are addressed and considered to be an active part of God's church.

The church further needs to reconsider its prescriptions of the roles of women in the church.

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Key concepts:

1 Thessalonians
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Kernbegrippe:

1 Thessalonisense
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