

# STEREOTYPES: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE GOSPEL CONSIDERING THE SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS STEREOTYPES OF SERBIAN WOMEN

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## **ABSTRACT: Stereotypes: an Opportunity for the Gospel Considering the Secular and Religious Stereotypes of Serbian Women.**

Stereotypes are often considered unmentionable. However, the Apostle Paul uses stereotypes to instruct Titus on the culture and people to whom he was to minister. Understanding the stereotypes of a particular ethos is useful for Christians as they convey the gospel to that people group. A survey of the “ideal woman” was conducted in Serbia. Leading secular stereotypes focused on appearance, behavior, and domesticity. Religious ideals differed positively in appearance and ministry, but negatively in education and submission. The church has contributed, both actively and passively, to these stereotypical views. The Serbian culture has been actively shaped by its historical relationship with the Orthodox church. Currently, Serbian churches are generally passive as they do not see the need for speaking publicly on women’s issues. Change must occur before the church have a genuine impact allowing the gospel to break the false perceptions of stereotypes. Theological schools have the opportunity to train the next generation of ministry leaders to impact the societal and religious views regarding women. However, Christian women cannot solely rely on the church or pastor to correct stereotypes. Instead, they can use current stereotypes as an opportunity to minister and encourage other women, ultimately directing them to Jesus Christ, the One who has the power to break stereotypes.

**Keywords:** *women, identity, stereotypes, secular, religious, roles, beauty, theology, public theology, theological education, Serbia, Balkans.*

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## Introduction

“One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ This saying is true.”<sup>1</sup> Stereotypes have been used for thousands of years to describe differing groups of people. While surely the Apostle Paul understood that not every single Cretan was a liar, the generalization still had an underlying truth. Paul also realized that in order for Titus to oversee the local churches, time must be taken to recognize the branded culture and the reasons behind its labels. Christians, wisely considering stereotypes of the local people, can structure ministries based on cultural identity and preach biblical truth sensitively applicable to the culture’s point of view. Stereotypes, providing both positive and negative assumptions, apply to all groups of people including women. To best minister and share the truth with women, it is beneficial to consider the stereotypes that define them, meet these feminine expectations where they are, and change faulty perspectives with the light of the gospel.

As an evangelical missionary living in a different culture, it was personally important to understand society’s portrayal of womanhood which could provide a contextual model for how to minister effectively. Therefore, an opportunity to interview local Serbian women was organized and the results were revealing. An anonymous online survey was posted and promoted through emails, social media, and referrals. Thirty responses were received from women living in northern Serbia, ranging in age from early 20s to late 60s and in various stages of life (single, married, divorced, and widowed). Seventeen claimed to be regular church attenders (Orthodox or evangelical), eight identified as non-religious and did not attend church at all, and the remainder went occasionally. The focus of the research was to discover the Serbian women’s perception of how females are stereotypically portrayed in their culture as “the ideal woman” and also their typecast of “the religious woman” (how women who value religion or go to church are viewed). The participants described stereotypes in the following categories: societal roles (dos and don’ts), behavior, attitude, appearance, employment, talents/skills, and how they are viewed by men.<sup>2</sup> The goal was to

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1 Titus 1:12-13. Paul is instructing Titus, whom Paul left in Crete (vs. 5), about the culture that he was ministering in. All Scripture citations in this work are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001) unless otherwise noted.

2 Quotes used throughout this report that are not referenced are direct answers from the anonymous survey. These statements are made by women on how their culture per-

distinguish the difference and impact the church and the gospel had on the religious women worldview versus the expectation from secular society. The objective was to discover the answer to these questions: Does the religious stereotype portray women in a more respected role than secular society? Does the religious stereotype accurately reflect the Bible's teaching on women? and Are Christians in Serbia making the gospel attractive for women and thereby influencing society? As a follow up to the female responses, local evangelical pastors were interviewed to determine if their church currently addresses and views women in such a way that it creates a desire for secular women to become religious. The result of survey and informal interviews demonstrated the necessity of biblical theology and the commitment of active interaction as a means of enhancing the status of women.

### **Stereotype of the Secular Serbian Woman**

While society continues to advance in freedoms, equality, and globalization, the 2017-2020 World Value Survey reveals the last few years have brought about changes in cultural values and beliefs which have affected political, sexual, economic, and religious behavior.<sup>3</sup> As technology and human rights movements have advanced in society, one would expect today's Serbian woman to be modern, confident, and independent. After all, the current Serbian prime minister is a woman who proudly holds the title of the first openly gay person to govern in that position.<sup>4</sup> However, even with gender equality making strides, Wendy Bracewell notes that after the dissolution of communism, Serbia has returned "to the 'traditional values' of patriarchal society, in which women's role lies primarily in the private sphere of domesticity and motherhood."<sup>5</sup> According to the women sur-

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ceives them. Please note that some quotes may seem grammatically incorrect, due to the desire to stay as close to the original language as possible.

3 Kristen Ringdal, "Gender Roles in Southeastern Europe," in *Gender (In)equality and Gender Politics in Southeastern Europe: A Question of Justice*, ed. Christine Hassenstab and Sabrina Ramet (Hampshire, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 321. Specific data on the seventy-nine countries which participated in the world value study may be found at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

4 "Serbia to have first gay prime minister as Ana Brnabic is chosen," BBC News, June 16, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40297480>.

5 Wendy Bracewell, "Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 19, no. 1/2 (1996): 25, Accessed April 11, 2021, doi: 10.1016/0277-5395(95)00061-5.

veyed, the stereotype of the ideal Serbian woman portrays those traditional roots and is still defined by physical appearance, meek behavior, and familial dependence.

The summary of the perfect Serbian woman is that her life revolves around pleasing others. The manner in which a woman behaves, thinks, and speaks reflects the expectations of society. However, the leading response to the survey question, "Generally describe a Serbian woman," emphasized the way a woman physically appears. Overwhelmingly the answers iterated: "She should be sexy and provocative." "Beauty is the priority for a young lady." "She must be lean and fit, with groomed hair, long polished nails, and 'strong' makeup." Some answers suggested extreme measures, such as "A pair of plastic surgeries is not a waste, because a woman must look so that someone wants to have sex with her at any moment." Not surprisingly, many Serbian women have become successful at this art. James Maverick, one of many travel bloggers, reports common findings about Serbian women: "Tall, dark and sexy. Those were my first impressions of Serbian women after I landed in Belgrade's Tesla International Airport."<sup>6</sup> The expectation for sex starts at a young age. A neighboring twelve-year-old girl on our street listed her occupation on Facebook as "Playboy model." Sexiness is not restricted to how one looks but includes how one acts and dresses. Regarding attire, many of the surveyed women state that clothes should be modern and neat yet revealing. A trip to the mall shows displays of see-through shirts with colorful bras underneath and jeans sizes ranging from skinny to super skinny. A woman in her appearance, clothes, and makeup must be "always beautifully arranged" and "perfect in every sense." She is "an object for watching" and an "object of male attention, lust and conquest." During the summer months, teenage girls walked around the neighborhood in bikinis hoping to talk to boys. The pressure of sexual attractiveness pervades the ideal. As another travel dating website writes, "If women were wild animals... it's safe to say Serbian girls would be almost on top of the food chain. The simplest way to describe Balkan (and Serbian) girls in a very generalistic [*sic*] way would be **hot and fiery**."<sup>7</sup>

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6 James Maverick, "Serbian Women: What They Don't Tell You," *Maverick Traveler* (blog), October 15, 2018, <https://mavericktraveler.com/serbian-women/>.

7 Eastern European Travel, "Serbian Women: The Secrets You Gotta Know," *Eastern European Travel* (blog), n.d., <https://easterneuropeantravel.com/serbian-women/>. Accessed January 2021. Emphasis was bolded on the website.

While physical appearance was ranked as most important, other crucial aspects of model femininity are behavior and societal roles. The Serbian girl is taught from childhood that she must be good – “a good girl, a good student, a good sister, a good wife, and a good mother.” Good is defined by being obedient, meek, clean, and above all, quiet. “She does not talk, does not think, and does not make her own opinion.” Young girls accept the fact that boys are held to a different standard. Boys are expected to treat others rudely and roughly, since that is just how boys behave, but girls should be compliant and “invisible.” Even if they have a positive self-image, they succumb to this worldview, as stated by one survey participant: “I am the best and the strongest, but I do not talk and I do not expose myself.”

This lifelong training produces the epitome of a woman’s purpose – to be “a worthy wife” and mother who “must not oppose a husband.” In stereotypical beliefs, independence is not the paradigm. Only five of the participants surveyed mentioned that a woman could be more than a wife, but the common sentiment of the majority is “perfect is the woman who has accomplished the role of a mother, and if she has a successful career, then she has bad traits with her.” An egalitarian desire to pursue a lifestyle apart from the home is deemed selfish and described as a “moral revolution”, as dr. Milan Vojnović asserts, “It is no wonder then that women as a rule do not wish to bear children, since in their rush to satisfy modish and narcissistic ambitions they disregard motherhood.”<sup>8</sup> Gordana Matković, former Labor and Social Care Minister, also referred to such hedonistic women as egotistic.<sup>9</sup> These shameful, negative declarations highlight where honor is found. The female’s purpose is to care for a husband and family.

Research reported in 2010 by the World Trade Press summarizes that “traditional Serbian society has always considered women subordinate to men and confined them to performing domestic chores and rearing chil-

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8 Milan Vojnović, *Preporod srpskog namda*. (Belgrade: Mimico, 1993), 29, as cited in Wendy Bracewell, “Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19, no. 1/2 (1996): 27, Accessed April 11, 2021, doi: 10.1016/0277-5395(95)00061-5.

9 Stasa Zajović, “Childbearing and War,” *Zene u crnom beograd*, August 12-16, 2002, Accessed April 8, 2021. <http://zeneucrnom.org/en/23-aktivnosti/feminizam/1569-childbearing-and-war>. Quoting the minister from 1994, “Our people do not want to bear children, because the paragon of happiness for them is having a car or a cottage. That is egotistic”.

dren.”<sup>10</sup> Girls raised in urban areas have better opportunities for education and employment, where those in rural areas are still “frequently forced to marry at an early age.”<sup>11</sup> This coincides with the stereotypes women must be married and it is their duty to make the marriage a happy one. This felicity in marriage is secured by the bearing of children. Masa Sukovic explains:

According to the traditional culture of the Serbs, a woman is required to fulfill the roles of daughter, sister, wife/lover, and most importantly, mother. To become a mother means to reach the highest and impervious status in the traditional culture. Even if she is denied her rights when it comes to her other roles, in the role of a mother a Serbian woman is, at least normatively, the most respected. When she becomes a mother, the woman reaches the optimum status in her traditional community, and first of all, she manages to preserve her marriage. That is to say, only with giving birth to her own children, especially sons, a woman insures permanence of her marriage, which for her, more than for her husband, means security.<sup>12</sup>

The ideal of motherhood extends beyond personal desire to raise a family; it constitutes a nationalistic responsibility, as Bracewell summarizes, “If they are to be proper Serbs, women must take their duties as wives and mothers more seriously.”<sup>13</sup> Sabrina Ramet agrees and shares in her in-depth research of Balkan women, “The Serbs and Montenegrins have a saying that a perfect family has three sons – one for the Church (God), one for the army (state), and one for the parents (progeny)...the implications are clear, women must produce sons in order to be good mothers.”<sup>14</sup> Serbian women who struggle with infertility often bear a negative social stigma.<sup>15</sup>

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10 World Trade Press, *Serbia Women in Culture, Business & Travel: A Profile of Serb Women in the Fabric of Society*, (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2010), 1.

11 Ibid.

12 Masa Sukovic, “Hysterectomies and Gender Identity Among Serbian Women” (master’s thesis, Texas A&M University, 2007), 35-36. Accessed March 27, 2021. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/147133329.pdf>.

13 Bracewell, 28.

14 Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 201.

15 World Trade Press, 2.

The expectations for the model Serbian woman focus on her sexy appearance, her hidden reserved spirit, and her ability to have and serve her family. According to women casually questioned after the survey was completed, these traits have defined women in the Balkans for generations. If modern societal advances have not influenced change on these stereotypes, will the power of the gospel produce life and culture changing results?

### **Stereotype of the Religious Serbian Woman**

Serbian women are more active in participating in religious activities; “they visit places of worship more frequently, celebrate religious holidays more often, fast significantly more than men, pray and read religious literature with much greater frequency.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the second part of the survey was to list the model qualities of the typical religious woman. The intent was to discover the differing ideals between secular women and those associated with church and faith. While there were many resemblances, stereotypes of women of faith had unique distinctions.

As appearance was the most described category in defining secular expectations, the form and dress proved to be the strongest difference between secular and religious women. Contrasting the societal expectations to be sexy, women of the church are known for moderate and elegant clothes. Their bodies are covered with stylish, but not too modern clothes. Appropriateness is described as covering “over the shoulder and knees and closed shoes.” Devout women dress in a “simple, decent look” without much make-up or jewelry. They wear skirts and are “usually judged if wearing pants, jeans, or anything else besides a dress/skirt.”<sup>17</sup> *Pravoslavljje*, an Orthodox newspaper “advises ‘Christ-loving mothers and sisters’ to harmonize their whole lives, as well as their dressing style, with the complete moral law of the Eastern Orthodox Church and not to succumb to

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16 Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and Radmila Radić, “Women in the Serbian Orthodox Church: Historical Overview and Contemporary Situation,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 39, no. 6 (November 2019): 2, Accessed March 26, 2021, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol39/iss6/2>.

17 Interestingly, this particular observation was made by a church attending woman in her twenties. This was her idea of a church stereotype. However, personal experience and observation notes that most women in evangelical churches wear pants.

modern fashions.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, church attending women are removed from the pressure to dress for the specific purpose of sexually attracting men.

According to the survey, the stereotyped role and purpose of religious women are in many ways similar to secular women – she should be a wife and mother. The exception lies with the Christian woman ministering to more people than just her immediate family. The religious woman is known for voluntarily supporting the local church (cleaning, maintenance), providing hospitality to others (sick, poor, and needy), involved with various ministries (youth, prayer groups), and promoting the arts (music, art, decoration, worship). In the church sector, women are not just confined to a life inside a home serving one man. Ministries, such as the Women’s Christian Movement which was formed in Belgrade in 1920, has allowed women to minister publicly by caring for those in need and instituting orphanages and shelters.<sup>19</sup> Religious women are expected and encouraged to make the world a better place through their feminine gifts and talents.

While outward appearance and roles are easily distinguishable, the inner workings of thoughts and feelings include subtle contrasts. Regarding intelligence and education, both the secular and religious women are expected to be well-taught and conversant. Interestingly, for women of faith, this does not directly apply to theological education. According to an older religious woman, it is detrimental to the young woman to be educated on a higher level in theology because the man must be the spiritual leader of the family. If a woman knows too much about the Bible, she places herself at risk in never finding a husband. Because some men in religious circles typically think they already know what the Bible teaches, these men are not apt to develop themselves spiritually and may feel threatened by theologically educated woman. Such a man would be shamed and embarrassed to be with a woman who knew more than he does. Instead of being challenged to further his own theological understanding, he will look for a simpler woman. Therefore, to make a good match, a woman should remain ignorant except on the passages that teach her how to be a good wife. An informal poll of women currently enrolled at a local theological school produced corresponding results. They share the same trepidation that they will not be can-

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18 Sveti Knez Lazar, 3/2 (14/15), Prizren, 1996; *Pravoslavlje*, 703/4, July 1, 1996. Cited in Milovanović, 22.

19 Archives of Yugoslavia, Ministry of the Interior Affairs of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 14-61-179-186. Cited in Milovanović, 21.

didates for marriage because they are attending the Bible school. However, these female students expressed that they continue to learn because their desire for God is more important than finding a husband.

One surprising distinction from the survey highlighted negative feelings felt from the religious women toward men. The secular answers, those results gathered from women claiming not to be religious or having little to no church attendance, expressed the necessity for women to simply cope with male dominance. However, answers from those claiming to be religious or who attend church regularly revealed deeper feelings of oppression. There are two different words to describe submission in the Serbian language. *Pokornost* means voluntary obedience and a willingness to follow. *Potčinjenost* is involuntary obedience in a more serious connotation, such as a soldier under a ruthless commander, a slave under an oppressive master, or an abused wife under a dictatorial husband. Interestingly, when the behavior of women was discussed, the majority of those who used the negative verb (*potčinjenost*) to describe the way that men treat them were women that regularly attended Protestant and Orthodox churches. The clearest summary demonstrating this negative feeling expressed: "Woman is in constant fear and does not allow herself to clearly state how she feels and what she thinks, because [the phrase] 'She is silent and suffering' is a distorted motto of the Orthodox Church." This perspective raises great concern to investigate how the church contributes to these feelings.

The distinctions between the secular and religious stereotypes contained positive and negative differences. Stereotypically, religious women are less concerned about sexual appearance and are open to use their gifts to serve more than their immediate family, yet they also are limited by their theological intelligence and feelings of oppressive submission. Attention must now be turned to church's responsibility to alter and amend faulty stereotypes.

## Current Church Response

All people live in condemnation. They are judged by everyone on their status, their looks, their abilities. Women keenly feel bound by the condemnation which reminds them of their inability to live up to the societal standards of stereotypical expectations. Ramet states that these stereotypes of women reinforce the patriarchal system enhancing the culture of male dominance and "any objection to these rules leads to public condemnation,

suspicion, and ridicule.”<sup>20</sup> However, in Scripture there is hope. Romans 8:1 explains that in Christ there is no longer any condemnation. In Christ, both men and women are free to be who He has created them to be. They no longer need to be burdened by the world’s assessment of their worth, value, or role. Carolyn Custis James challenges the church to awake from its slumber and engage because of the “crying need for the church to speak with potency and purpose into the lives of young girls who are drowning in enticing messages that tell them their value resides in the shape of their bodies, their sexual attractiveness to guys, and their wardrobe, popularity, and other fleeting allures.”<sup>21</sup> The question must be asked if the local church objects to and speaks out against stereotypes that are in direct contrast to biblical standards. Can women find solace and peace in the local church, or do they receive continued condemnation and ridicule?

Much of the secular Serbian worldview originated within the church. This is due to the interwoven national religious state. To be Serbian is to be Orthodox. In her research of women in the Serbian Orthodox Church, Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović explains,

In Serbia, a symbiosis between Orthodox Christianity and traditional culture has generated a specific national Orthodox religion. Đoko Slijepčević points out that the Church in Serbia accepted, legalized, and protected a patriarchal social system with its rigidly defined generational hierarchy based on the principle of the voluntarily subjugation of the young to the elderly. This system included the domination of men over women, a strict gender division of roles in the Church, in the family and in larger society, and the economic dependence of women on men. Within this system, a woman was perceived as an inferior being and the scope of female activities was limited to the household and the family.<sup>22</sup>

The church’s view of the “ideal woman” has not changed much over the years. Theologians maintain the woman’s role is to bear children and care for the home. In this way, she is also a good patriot to her country. Statements have been made by Orthodox Patriarch leaders which emphasize the importance of women’s roles towards nationalistic duties above

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20 Ramet, 201-2.

21 Carolyn Custis James, *Half the Church: Recapturing God’s Global Vision for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 103.

22 Milovanović, 4.

spiritual concerns. As Masa Sukovic reports, "In his address to the women of Serbia, the Patriarch [Pavle] further claimed that this goal could be achieved if women were aware of the fact that by not bearing (more) children they are committing a threefold sin: towards themselves (as Serbian women), towards the Serbian nation as a whole, and, naturally, towards God himself."<sup>23</sup>

Historically, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been "oriented towards traditionalism and rituals seem to be more significant than ecclesiality and personal faith."<sup>24</sup> Traditions, such as denying holy communion to women that are menstruating, mothers labeled unclean after childbirth, and male-only led liturgies, tend to keep Serbian women at a distance. As they cannot participate fully in religious actions, as men are freely allowed, the message of inferiority remains. This has caused some women to leave the church. Equally, the church is doing little to draw women to actively join. If a woman's life is not valued more within the church community, there is little to motivate her seek out Christianity.

The Serbian evangelical movement does not base its foundations on traditions and history, but rather on the Scriptures. To discover the impact of the Word of God on congregants, several Serbian evangelical pastors were interviewed on what their church teaches regarding topics personally touching the lives of their female members.<sup>25</sup> Some leaders spoke about women positively from the pulpit, and few encouraged women to actively participate in the worship service, but the majority saw no purpose in addressing "gender issues." The matter was further pursued by asking if pastors would specifically preach about female characters represented in the Scriptures, like Esther, Ruth, or Mary. One pastor thoughtfully responded, "You mean passages like Proverbs 31? No one has ever preached from that." He admitted that sermons are always focused on mankind, not aimed at specific groups of people or genders.<sup>26</sup> Another pastor, who acknowledged that he also does not preach sermons with a direct application for women, claimed that in general Serbian evangelical churches have "never preached

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23 Sukovic, 52.

24 Milovanović, 2.

25 These Serbian pastors agreed to interview in transparency and confidentiality. Their identity, location, and churches will remain anonymous.

26 At least two other pastors also confirmed that discussing any practical matter relating towards a specific group is not done in this country.

a sermon about women's roles or on men's response toward women." According to some pastors and confirmed by survey results, the only mention of gender specific applications in sermons is negative, focusing on what women cannot do instead of positive godly traits.

The problem with feminine topics is not the lack of voice; it is the fear of possible results. One pastor shared his belief that any preaching about women's issues by a male pastor could cause bigger problems. Another pastor confirmed this assessment, stating that opening the pulpit to specifically preaching on women's issues would eventually lead to women taking over the church. While this is a slippery slope fallacy, it is one that is truly believed. Preaching messages that are geared towards women or the issues they face would cause women to take a more active interest in the church. The assumption of a greater, active interest would result in women demanding to lead, thus disrupting the biblical view of male headship.

Consequently, a consensus has developed which suggests that any teaching about the roles of women should take place at ladies' conferences.<sup>27</sup> This is loosely based on Titus 2 where the older women are to train the younger women. However, a forfeit of responsibility occurs as this teaching is done outside the care and direction of the local church. Pastors admitted that they have no authority over a women's conference, such as which speaker or what topic, and that they have no desire to assert that authority. One pastor related that he had been disappointed with the choice of keynote speaker for one such event. He suggested that women of his church should not attend, but they went anyway to fellowship with the other women. He did not follow up with them on what was taught.

The church, both Orthodox and evangelical, have not actively excelled in ministering to women, nor have they broken down the negative stereotypes. It is not surprising that the differences in stereotypes remain on the outward, surface level, nor is it surprising that some religious women harbor inward resentment and discouragement. The gospel of Christ has the power to break through negative stereotypes. How can the church have a positive effect on women?

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27 One pastor conceded that only a small percentage of the women in Serbia can attend women's conferences since they are not available in every region. While traveling to attend would be difficult or impossible for many women, he still believed it was the proper place for preaching about feminine topics.

## Need for Theological Education

The lack of the gospel's power in the current church and the disregard of preaching the entire Word of God is astounding. However, this problem has been occurring across cultures for generations. Rebecca Groothuis, an emerging Christian feminist of her time, expressed a similar frustration with the western church "...many evangelicals – especially women, outraged that all other areas of society are more considerate of them as human than is the church – vent their spleen on male leaders of the church, reject this judgment that condemns women to second-class status, and sad to say, often turn away from both the church and the Bible."<sup>28</sup> This must sound an alarm to wake up the church, creating a marked difference between secular and religious stereotypes. Christian stereotypes should draw unbelievers to Christ. Too often, the church is not living as a light in the darkness, but blending in and mimicking the secular cultural trends, completely ignoring the disparity, or, at worst, misrepresenting what the Bible teaches. All these responses make Christianity distasteful.

Christian leaders must seize the responsibility of taking religious convictions and moral character outside the walls of the church and apologetically discoursing with the culture for the betterment of society at large. According to public theologian Hak Soon Lee, "major religious traditions, when properly interpreted, provide valuable spiritual and moral guidance for the common life."<sup>29</sup> Emilie Townes, a Christian social ethicist, passionately asserts that the religious community must represent and connect with the public to affect a change for the greater good of society. The need for this connection is "increasingly imperative...because we live in an increasingly polarized world in which religion matters as beliefs and practices and is a key element in identity formation and meaning making and sometimes nation-building for people."<sup>30</sup> It is true that society does not need to claim

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28 Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), vii.

29 Hak Joon Lee, "Public Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, Cambridge Companions to Religion (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 51.

30 Emilie M. Townes, "2008 Presidential Address Scholarship and Activism: Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77,

and embrace the Christian worldview to benefit from the truths expressed in the Bible. God's truths apply to all His creation, whether they believe in Him or not. However, when the church correctly treats and reveres women according to *biblical* principles and mandates, and publicly proclaim that their attitudes and behaviors are based on *Scriptural* foundations (not just traditional ideals), this should be a drawing factor for society to want to understand and embrace the gospel message. Is the church willing to become more public on the biblical stance on women in order to become that key element for the formation of female identity?

The Scriptures teach that Christians should “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”<sup>31</sup> Herein lies proof for the necessity of understanding theology. As believers are given a new mind to discover what is right, they must develop discernment and learn what the Bible instructs for godly living. The way to change the stereotypical perceptions is first for the church to understand what the Scriptures teach and then to communicate and live out that truth actively and publicly. Only then can the church have a genuine impact.

Consider the stereotype of beauty. Sadly, the church's response has promoted religious stereotypes which are skewed, either by taking passages of the Bible too literally and missing the intent of the text or by ignoring major passages of Scripture entirely. For example, the church will use passages to speak against a “worldly beauty,” such as 1 Peter 3 where women are instructed not to braid hair, wear gold jewelry, or inappropriate clothes, and 2 Kings 9 where women, who wear makeup, are compared to wicked Jezebel who brazenly “painted her eyes.”<sup>32</sup> Instead, the church's teaching should center on a beauty which is fundamentally characterized by adorning the heart with imperishable beauty which is very precious in God's sight.<sup>33</sup>

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no. 1 (March 2009): 11-12, accessed March 23, 2021. <https://sci-hub.do/10.1093/jaarel/lfp006>.

31 Romans 12:2.

32 2 Kings 9:30 mentions Jezebel adorning herself, but this action had nothing to do with her wicked deeds as clearly laid out in previous chapters. Her application of makeup was more a statement about her frame of mind and motivation rather than an instruction or command to women about the evils of beauty treatments.

33 Ironically, this application is also found in 1 Peter 3:1-6. The bias or objective of the

What then does the Bible say about beauty? Proverbs 31:30 teaches, "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Therefore, a woman must make her relationship with the Lord the priority over beauty. God has made women lovely and has given them the gifts and abilities to make the world more attractive. Nancy Wolgemuth, founder of the True Woman movement, explains, "Nowhere does the Scripture condemn physical beauty or suggest that the outward appearance does not matter. What is condemned is taking pride in God-given beauty, giving excess attention to physical beauty, or tending to physical matters while neglecting matters of the heart."<sup>34</sup> The stereotype of the Christian woman should not be an absence of adornment or how their necks and knees are covered up; rather, women should be taught that their beauty should radiate from their godly natures. Christian women prioritize inward beauty while maintaining their elegant appearance. The desired result would then be a Christian stereotype, so drastically different from the secular view, that women would be drawn to discover the freedom and beauty of the gospel message and become recast as stereotypical women of faith.

Priests and pastors must prioritize ministering to all their congregation. They cannot remain in neutral generality, assuming that women and men will naturally and equally apply biblical truths not preached. However, it is also wrong to assume that church leaders naturally understand how to minister to those under their care. Spiritual leaders need training too. As the Apostle Paul mentored Titus, not only in doctrine but also in cultural understanding, theological schools offer the opportunity to holistically train ministry workers.

An interview was then made with three pastoral students enrolled at the Baptist Theological School in Novi Sad, Serbia. All three had been recently ordained and were in their first year of ministering in local churches. They were asked the following questions: First, what was their view on the distinctiveness of women? Second, have they, in their limited time, preached on topics that spoke to women or related to women? Their answers were completely different from the previous research. These student

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leader determines if the passage will focus on the external, legalistic rules or the internal changing of the heart.

34 Nancy Leigh DeMoss Wolgemuth, *Lies Women Believe and the Truth That Sets Them Free*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006), 80.

pastors had a high respect for women, expressed the value for women to receive a theological education, and desired to protect the women in their congregations from abusive behavior. One pastor explained that he was starting a series of messages about women in the Bible. Another went into detail about messages preached from Ephesians on what biblical submission should look like for women (and he emphasized that more time had to be spent on instructing the men how to really love their wives as Christ loves the church). When asked why their answers differed from their contemporaries, they all expressed that it was due to the learning they received at the theological school. The classes that were the most influential were hermeneutics and expositional preaching. In hermeneutics, they learned how to study the Bible based on what God the author wanted to say, rather than using Scriptures as a means to provide proof texts for their own opinions. In the expositional preaching course, they learned how each biblical passage is important and connected with the rest of Scripture; thus, one cannot take verses out of context or ignore other sections. The students admitted the common form of preaching in Serbia consists of topical sermons often chosen at random or even thought up the night before. However, when they were challenged to systematically go through a whole book of the Bible and apply hermeneutical principles to each verse, their perspective changed. One student pastor expressed, "How can a pastor not preach about women if he is systematically preaching through the text? The Bible has much to say about women and to women."

Theological training can be a useful tool for priests and pastors. However, theology is not just the responsibility of the leaders, but of the whole church body, especially for its female members. Christian women cannot passively wait for the leaders in the church to change society; it must begin with them. Women, as individuals, must first be responsible for their own relationship with God. Carolyn Custis James also shares her testimony of the importance of personally knowing God. "For me the turning point came when I realized that my poor theology, my superficial and inaccurate understanding of God, was making things worse instead of bringing the comfort and hope I needed...a growing understanding of God gives our faith something solid to cling to when life becomes chaotic and nothing seems to make sense."<sup>35</sup> As women develop their knowledge and love of

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35 Carolyn Custis James, *When Life and Beliefs Collide*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 23-24.

God, they will become conformed to divine expectations instead of worldly stereotypes. Once this barrier is crossed, they can serve and help others.

## Conclusion

“Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ This saying is true.” Titus benefitted from understanding the culture around him. Even today, understanding stereotypes allows Christians to discover optimal ways to minister easily within cultural expectations. For example, because women in religious circles are viewed as serving the community, an opportunity is provided for these women to reach out to others. One survey responder rightly concluded, “The Balkan culture of women’s treatment is one of the worst in Europe. Christian communities are often better environments for women... I think where church has a visible advantage is providing a community for women.” In the secular workplace or society, women are forced to look out for their own interests; no one will promote them or help them. Female peers are quick to degrade each other in the hopes that they will become more attractive and important. The church however is different. Women in the church realize how difficult it is to live in Serbian society. Therefore, they look for the opportunity to help and encourage other women, whether it is to give advice to a struggling mother or to support another’s skill by buying her products. Women in the church are quick to sympathize and promote each other. This is how Balkan churches can set themselves apart from society at large. In this loving community, the Christian women have something the secular women desire.

This advantage can be a powerful witnessing opportunity, not only in Serbia, but in the global church. Elders and leaders of the church, while encouraging women to use their gifts and talents in culturally appropriate ways, should encourage the female members that the love and acceptance they show towards others is one of the greatest evangelistic tools at their disposal. Women of the church need to be radically different from women in society, not just in their physical appearance, but as they portray the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

In Serbia and throughout the world, women are not simply beautiful objects to be looked at nor created for men’s comfort. They are not to be “invisible” or “silent when suffering.” The Bible teaches that women were created for the same reason men were – to bring God glory and enjoy

Him forever.<sup>36</sup> Women need to believe that their hope cannot be found in religious stereotypes or the church, but in Jesus Christ alone. He is the One who “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”<sup>37</sup>

When individual women believe and know the Scriptures, then the current stereotypes will no longer hold power over their lives. When Christian women break those stereotypes, then the reputation of the church will improve. When the respected church takes a greater stand in communicating the truth, then the change of cultural stereotypes can occur. Imagine if the Apostle Paul visited Serbia today and proclaimed, “One of Serbia’s own prophets has said it: ‘Balkan women are always respected, hospitable, and epitomize Christ.’ This saying is true.” May biblical women and gospel preaching churches lead the way in developing and promoting a God glorifying stereotype of women.

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36 *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, (Edinburgh: General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1648). Question 1. accessed August 21, 2017, [http://www.reformed.org/documents/wlc\\_w\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wlc_w_proofs/) Also, Rom 11:36 and Ps 73:24-28.

37 Psalms 147:3.

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