

## St Paul and Women: Was the Apostle a Misogynist or a Feminist?<sup>1</sup>

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### What of 1 Timothy?

When St Paul is accused of misogyny, as he not infrequently is, the first text usually quoted is 1 Tim 2:9-15, which certainly puts women down in a big way: "A woman [or, wife] should learn in silence with all submissiveness. I do not allow a woman [or, wife] to teach or to have authority over [or, dictate to] a man [or, her husband], but to keep quiet. For Adam was created first and then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed. She shall be saved through [the] childbearing, if they continue in faith, love and holiness, with modesty." The outlook of the whole letter is very hierarchical. Most scholars think, rightly in my view, that Paul is not the author: the vocabulary is non-Pauline (Pauline preoccupations such as grace, justification, the Cross, incorporation into Christ, are absent, while non-Pauline terms such as piety are common). Probably the letter comes from the end of the century, at a time when the church had become much more institutional and patriarchal than it was in Paul's day.

### Patriarchalism in Paul

Admittedly there is a fair amount of inherited patriarchalism about the real Paul. He teaches that God is the "head" of Christ, Christ of male human beings, and the latter of womankind; just as a man is "the image and the [reflection of the] glory" of God, so is a woman "the [reflection of the] glory" of her husband (1 Cor 11:3,7). Wives must be subject to their husbands (Col 3:18). Women need to cover their heads during public worship (1 Cor 11:4-16). The covering of their heads by women, or the binding up of their hair, was common practice in the world of Paul's day; in his hometown of Tarsus, they had to cover both head and face. Dio Chrysostom, AD 40-c120, praised the modesty of the women of Tarsus because when they walked in public no one could see any part of their face or of their whole body. If Paul's own mother had to wear what resembles a burkah, one can understand why women who wore no head covering distressed him! If D.B.Martin is correct, behind the idea of the need for women to cover their heads lie ancient beliefs about physiology that today seem very weird. Anyway, in demanding a head covering, Paul was not being particularly rigorous for his times. But although he accepted the superiority of the male sex, Paul was at pains to emphasize the interdependence and reciprocity of the sexes, at least for Christians: "in the Lord, there is neither woman apart from a man nor a man apart from a woman" (1 Cor 11:11); "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ: there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female. You are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28).

### Paul and Celibacy

One striking feature of Paul's teaching about women is his preference for the single state. In 1 Cor 7, he teaches that marriage is the norm but celibacy even better. *Agamoi* [widowers, probably] and widows are advised to stay as they are, "like myself" (7:8) (Paul may himself have been a widower); cf 7:39-40. Single people are urged to remain as they are, though it is not wrong of them to marry (7:25-35). Similar advice is given in 7:36-38 to a man with a *parthenos* (unmarried daughter? fiancée? spiritual wife<sup>2</sup>): if he/she is *hyperakmos* (highly sexed? advanced in years?) marriage in such a case is quite all right, but a decision not to marry would be even better. How did Paul come by his preference for celibacy? Mainstream Judaism taught that a man has a duty to marry; only fringe Jewish groups (the Essenes and the Therapeutae) had any time for celibacy, and there is no good evidence that Paul was under their influence. One reason that Paul gives for his preference is that it avoids "distraction" (1 Cor 7:35), which is the ground that Epictetus the Stoic philosopher later gave for saying that select individuals (military leaders, philosophers, spiritual leaders...) were better off unmarried. Another Stoic, Hierocles, also spoke of special circumstances that favoured celibacy. The Stoics in general argued for marriage, and for large families, against the Cynics who opposed marriage (though not necessarily sexual activity), and Paul here, as elsewhere, seems to have been well aware of contemporary philosophical ideas; he can in this instance be seen as anticipating the compromise position on marriage and celibacy to be taken up at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century AD by Epictetus and Hierocles.<sup>3</sup>

### Paul the Pastor

1 Cor 7:2 seems to say that one of the purposes of marriage (though not the only one) is to avoid fornication. This sounds rather negative. He does not say, however, because of fornication, but because of *acts* of fornication (*tas porneias*, plural). It has been plausibly suggested that the liberated Christian women of Corinth were renouncing marriage, or sex within marriage, and their men folk, in desperation, were resorting to prostitutes. For this reason Paul emphasizes that marriage must be the norm. This points up the need to interpret Paul, and other scriptural writers, in context. Paul did not pen a theological treatise on marriage, or any other subject; he was writing as a pastor dealing with pressing problems. In 1 Cor 7:10-15, having said that the ban on divorce comes from Jesus himself ("I

command—no, not I but the Lord”) Paul says that a Christian spouse may nevertheless part from his/her unbelieving partner if necessary (and remarry? This is probably implied)<sup>4</sup>: “Paul considered Jesus’ prohibition of divorce, not as a binding precept, but as a significant directive whose relevance to a particular situation had to be evaluated by the pastor responsible for the community.”<sup>5</sup> (Similarly In 9:14-15, having said that Jesus commanded that those who proclaim the Gospel should live from the Gospel [i.e. be supported by one’s fellow Christians], Paul defends his own practice of doing the opposite, namely of earning his own living. His reasons will include “the desire not to become dependent upon a few relatively wealthy patrons in the Corinthian church [and] the concern neither to burden nor to alienate the weak...fundamentally Paul’s pattern of conduct in this matter is Christologically grounded and motivated.”<sup>6</sup>)

### **Stay as You Are!**

Paul’s guiding principle in 1 Cor 7 is to stay as one is (7:26). Just as a slave should be content with his situation—likewise a circumcised or uncircumcised man (7:21-24)—so should the married and the unmarried. If you have been widowed, do not remarry, unless you are finding continence too difficult (7:8-9, 39-40). If you are married, do not attempt sexual abstinence (except perhaps temporarily, if you wish, by mutual consent): in marriage there is no mine and thine (7:10). If you married before you became a Christian, continue as you are unless your spouse is a non-believer and will not have it: your faith already sanctifies your children and spouse (7:12-16). If you have not married yet, best stay single: this will enable you to concentrate single-mindedly on the Lord’s affairs (7:32-35), and to contract marriage when the Lord’s Parousia with the cosmic distress that will precede it is fairly near is to court affliction (7:26,28,29). If you have a *parthenos* (unmarried daughter; fiancée; spiritual wife), and you think that something must be done because of her/your sexual urges/age, you are free to marry her (off), though it is better if you do not (7:36-38). All, though, whether married or not, must practise an inner detachment (7:29-31).

### **Paul a Man ahead of his Time**

In a number of respects Paul’s thinking is surprisingly enlightened for his times. In 1 Cor 7:5 he says that spouses should not “defraud each other” by withholding conjugal rights. They may temporarily abstain for a while for purposes of prayer, but only by mutual consent. There are precedents for this advice, e.g. in the *Testament of Naphthali* 8:8, but in this example, as in others, the wife is given no say in the matter, whereas Paul stands up for women’s rights; it must be a joint decision. Furthermore, although, as we have seen, in 1 Cor 11 Paul has a bit of a hang-up about women covering their heads, the really surprising thing is that he takes it for granted that women should pray aloud and prophesy in the Christian assembly.<sup>7</sup>

### **Paul and the Ministry of Women**

Although I have argued that Paul believed in a degree of subordination of women to men, I am inclined to believe that he gave them a considerable role in Christian ministry. As we have seen, he takes it for granted in 1 Corinthians that women should pray and prophesy in public. The reason why in Phil. 4:2 he is concerned about the dispute between Evodia and Syntyche is perhaps because they were Church leaders, and their dispute would have repercussions for the Church as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Paul says of them that they, along with Clement and other *co-workers* [*synergountes*, 4:3], have struggled along with himself in the interests of the Gospel. The word *co-worker* [*synergos*] is used of leaders at 1 Cor 16:16 and *labourer* [*kopiyn*] at 1 Cor 16:16 and 1 Thess 5:12. *Co-worker* is applied in Rom 16:3 to Prisca; and Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis are commended for *working* and *labouring* hard in the Lord. (Rom. 16:6,12). Prisc(ill)a is often mentioned before her husband, Aquila (Rom 16:3, 2 Tim 4:19, Acts 18:18,26), which may indicate that “she was the more dominant of the two” (Dunn [1998] 587). The “apostle” Junia/Julia commended in Rom 16:7 will probably have been a woman. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor further thinks it likely that if Phoebe was “patron” [*prostatis*] of the Church of Cencreae, one of the ports of Corinth (Rom. 16:1-2), this will mean that she will “probably [have] opened her house to the Christians of Cencreae for their liturgical assemblies, and as host may have presided at the eucharist.” In Col 4:15, greetings are sent to “Nympha and the church in her house”; she may have been the leader of that church, not just its hostess. Murphy-O’Connor concludes that “in the framework of Paul’s theology all ministries were open to women.”<sup>9</sup> This perhaps goes beyond the evidence, but it could be right.

### **Conclusion**

Misogynist or feminist? Paul was sufficiently a child of his age for him to believe in the subordination of women to men. He therefore required them to cover their heads, because he thought that public decency and the vulnerability of women to malign forces—the need too, perhaps, to preserve the distinction between the sexes<sup>10</sup>—dictated it. I find, however, no evidence of any antipathy to women. Perhaps surprisingly for a man of his time and background, he seems to have encouraged women to serve in the church in many ways—prophesying, praying aloud, organizing, and perhaps even presiding liturgically. Do we here see gospel values trumping inherited hierarchical thinking? He advised single and widowed Christians not to marry, partly justifying this on the same grounds that some Hellenistic philosophers promoted celibacy (the avoidance of “distraction”). Another reason that he gave, however, is the belief

in an imminent Parousia, preceded by a cosmic upheaval. Had Paul known that the Parousia was at least two millennia away, he might well have taken up a different position on this matter.<sup>11</sup> He could, at any rate, scarcely criticize us today for adapting and modifying his counsels since as we have seen he himself, for good pastoral reasons, took up a nuanced attitude to the teachings attributed to Christ on divorce and remuneration of ministers of the Gospel, treating them as guidelines rather than as binding rulings that had always to be followed to the letter.

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Notes

1 Among the principal works in English bearing on this topic are: B.Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman*. Homebush, NSW, 1988; W.Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy. The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*. Cambridge, 1995; F.G.Downing, "A Cynic Preparation for Paul's Gospel", *NTS* 42 (1996) 454-462; J.D.G.Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*. Edinburgh, 1995; D.Horrell, "'The Lord Commanded...But I Have Not Used...'", *Exegetical and Hermeneutical Reflections on 1 Cor 9.14-15*", *NTS* 43 (1997) 587-603; D.B.Martin, *The Corinthian Body*. New Haven, 1995; J.Moiser, "A Reassessment of Paul's View of Marriage with Reference to 1 Cor. 7", *JSNT* 18 (1983) 103-122, J.Murphy-O'Connor, "The Divorced Woman in 1 Cor 7:10-11", *JBL* 100 (1981) 601-606, "Interpolations in 1 Corinthians", *CBQ* 48 (1986) 81-94, "St Paul, Promoter of the Ministry of Women", *Priests and People* 6 (1992) 307-311, *Paul a Critical Life*. Oxford, 1996.

2 Platonic marriages are attested from the second century, but not in the first.

3 See Deming 81-87.

4 This is the so-called Pauline Privilege.

5 Murphy-O'Connor [1981] 606.

6 Horrell 599-600.

7 In 1 Cor 14:34-35 we have the command that women should observe silence in the churches, which is difficult to reconcile with what we read in ch11. This text is probably a gloss, by a "male chauvinist" (Murphy-O'Connor [1986] 94), under the influence of the Deutero-Pauline 1 Tim 2:11-12 ("Let a woman learn in silence"). There is some textual evidence for this. The appeal to the Law ("as also the Law says", v34b) is unPauline. Where Paul does invoke the Pentateuch, as in 1 Cor 9:9 and 14:21, it is his practice to quote the biblical text. But he never uses the Pentateuch prescriptively. The text in 1Tim goes on to refer to the Adam and Eve story (2:13), so this may be the origin of the reference to the Law here.

8 Murphy-O'Connor [1992] 310.

9 Murphy-O'Connor [1992] 310.

10 In this instance, in resistance to Cynic influences.

11 On others too. Had his attachment to his "Stay as you are" rule wavered in these circumstances, he might well, we may suppose, have re-thought his view on slavery.