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The Role of Women in the Church: The Pauline Perspective

John E. Toews

The question of the role of women in the church is one of the most significant issues facing the church today. The storm center in New Testament interpretation is the Apostle Paul. He is claimed by many but also maligned by many. The debate about the meaning of his words raises large questions for the church, especially questions of biblical authority and interpretation, and also questions of church and family order.

The purpose of this essay is to propose a perspective for the interpretation of Paul's words concerning the place of women in the church, and to test that perspective in the problematic texts. The texts dealing with the place of women in the home are not considered here. This study is limited to questions of church order, but the equally important issue of family order also needs attention if one is to grasp the larger picture of Paul's understanding of the nature and role of women.

A General Perspective

The starting point for interpreting the Pauline texts regarding the role of women in the church is Paul's over-arching theology of the church. The purpose of God's saving activity in Jesus is, for Paul, the creation of a renewed community of God's people, the eschatological people of God. Within this eschatological community all distinctions of race, sex and religious history are removed and transcended. The barriers which separate people in the old age are abolished. All disciples are equal before God and each other. The needs of the new community are met on the basis of the discernment of the gifts within the community.

In other words, the theological context for understanding Paul's teachings about the role of women in the church is his conviction that the new age has begun: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17); "The

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law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). From this base Paul’s attack upon the civilization of the old age is total and devastating. All people, whether Jews or Gentiles, live under the domination of sin and death. “This world” in all its varied manifestations is distorted and subject to death.

But, positively, Paul believes the future world has already broken into the present and manifests itself amidst the ruin of the old age. It is the new creation which reveals a conjunction with the pre-Fall creation and a complete disjunction from the old world. It is a community of people freed from the curse of history begun in Genesis 3. This means that for Paul the community under Christ and in the Spirit cannot be compared with the old world; it does not live out of its values nor is it bound to its mores, laws or societal roles.

The source of this new reality is, of course, Jesus Christ. God’s act in Christ serves to condemn this world and to justify the sinful (Rom. 4). For Paul this means that the old world is destroyed; the repressive basis of its existence has been superseded by grace. In the new age every person in the eschatological community stands free and equal before the gracious God: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Paul knows that there will continue to be distinctions among people, since people are different and have different gifts (I Cor. 12). But he consistently rejects any value judgments made on the basis of distinctions.

The Pauline Texts

With those introductory comments let us turn now to examine the specific Pauline texts dealing with the role of women in the church. We proceed chronologically from the earliest text.

GALATIANS 3:27-28

The context of this passage is Christian liberty. Paul is combating a view of Christianity in Galatia which claimed circumcision, and thus obedience to the law, as necessary for salvation. Paul counters with the claim that salvation rests upon the reception of justification and the Spirit through faith/baptism. Christian liberty pertains to all who are baptized into union with Christ and has a direct and transforming effect on their social relationships. It nullifies the barriers between Greek/Jew, slave/free, male/female in Christ. Paul clearly intends these three pairs to be treated in parallel. His meaning must be located in that which is common to all three, namely, that they denote the three deepest divisions of the ancient world. Such divisions Paul says, can have no place in the thought and practice of those who are united with Christ. Paul asserts here as he does in Colossians 3:9-11 and I Corinthians 12:12f.

that baptism into Christ has a profound societal leveling quality. The very event of initiation into the Christian community destroys the barriers between groups out of which the old world had lived. Any value judgments based on the distinctions in human society are nullified by baptism. Within the eschatological community male and female are equal. The distinction of male and female continues to exist—Paul does not wish to eliminate the sexual identity of male and female—but the value judgment which subjugates one to the other is judged as inappropriate to the new community living in the new age.

Paul's Greetings to Women Fellow Workers

Paul does not only theorize. He implements his theology of equality in the life of his churches. The evidence is found in his greetings to women fellow workers in the church. Here we need only cite the passages where Paul mentions or greets women who have been associated with him in ministry. According to Philippians 4:2f. women are fellow workers and have labored and struggled with Paul in his work. Among the persons mentioned in Romans 16, six are women, and they are all said to have participated in the building up of the Christian communities. Phoebe, whom Paul commends to the recipients of the letter, is both a *diakonos*, a minister, and a *prostatis*, a helper. The word *diakonos* here is in the masculine; it is the same word Paul uses to describe himself and Apollos in I Corinthians 3:5, Tychicus in Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7, and Timothy in I Timothy 4:6. It seems clear that Phoebe is a minister in the church in Cenchreae. Because her title is in the masculine there seems no linguistic or theological grounds to distinguish between her and other male “ministers.” She is to be honored and helped by the Romans. Apparently they will have no problems welcoming her. Furthermore, she has a ministry recognized for its fruit; “she has been a helper of many.” This is evidence of God’s call and blessing on her.

Two other references in Romans 16 deserve note. The first concerns the greeting to Prisca and Aquila in vv. 3-5. This couple played a major role in Paul’s ministry (see I Cor. 16:19; Acts 18:2; 18:18). It is significant that Paul names Prisca first and describes both her and Aquila as “fellow workers.” The word “co-workers” is a term of equality used elsewhere by Paul of himself and Apollos (I Cor. 3:9), and Euodia, Syntyche and Clement (Phil. 4:2-3). The second intriguing text is the greeting to Andronicus and Junias as apostles (v. 7). It is unclear in Greek whether Junias is masculine or feminine; the spelling is the same in Greek. The translation, “they are men of note,” already represents a translation bias because the Greek literally reads “they are of note”; the word “men” is not in the text. A final decision cannot be made on the basis of the text. Some early church fathers, however, interpreted the greeting as a reference to a husband-wife team. Chrysostom thought it

significant that a woman was “counted worthy of the appellation of apostle.”

The evidence seems undeniable that women worked alongside men in the Pauline churches. Nothing in the text suggests that their work was of a subordinate character.

So far Paul appears to view women as equals with men in the church, and yet we have viewed him differently for so long. Why? The passages in I Corinthians 7, 11, 14 and I Timothy 2 have come in the way of accepting the stance of the passages so far examined. Let us look at them briefly.

I CORINTHIANS 7

Here Paul turns to problems about marriage raised by some of the Corinthians. He is compelled to deal with the specific issue of sexuality, but Paul broadens the horizon to include the total spectrum of male/female relationships. A careful reading of the chapter shows that in almost every instance Paul addresses himself explicitly to both men and women in order to show that each sex has the same freedom and the same responsibility. On all the issues dealt with woman and man are accountable in equal ways. Paul goes out of his way to demonstrate the equality of women in all these situations. For example, it is doubtful whether Christian sexual ethic has been better or more succinctly phrased than in vv. 3-4: “To the woman the man should give what is due her; likewise the wife should give the same to the husband. The wife does not hold the rights to her body; her husband does. Likewise also, the man does not hold the rights to his body; the wife does.” It would have been easy, and in keeping with the times, had Paul stopped with the judgment that the woman’s body belonged to the man. But he doesn’t, and thus he takes a position that is still far from full acceptance in 20th century society. I Corinthians 7 is in complete consonance with Paul’s theological stance of full equality in the church.

Paul does have a reason for preferring the single state for the believer, according to vv. 28 and 32-35. The Christian married person is inevitably divided in loyalties. He/she care for “the Lord” but also for his/her spouse. Paul’s preference for the single state arises neither out of a sense of the inferiority of women nor out of a moral judgment on sexuality. Instead it is a function of his vision that the upbuilding of the church be the decisive reality to which the believer commit himself or herself.

I CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

This is a text with many textual and interpretive difficulties, but these need not detain us here. The main pattern of thought is clear. Women are free to participate in public worship under the proper circumstances, namely, with the proper dress.

Let me outline briefly Paul's argument. The head of every man is Christ, says Paul, and the head of a woman is her husband, just as the head of Christ is God. Headship in the Greek denotes either lordship or origin. That origin is meant here seems clear from vv. 8ff. Paul does not say that man is lord of the woman; he says that he is the origin of her being. Man made in God's image is designed to honor his Creator, and this he does in public worship by allowing his uncovered head to be the symbol of Christ, his Head. Woman, though also made in God's image (according to Gen. 1) is derivative from man (see Gen. 2) and her function is to honor her husband. If she were to appear in worship with head uncovered, the beauty of her appearance would be an honor to her husband when she ought to be concerned with glorifying God alone. It must be remembered that the "head covering" in that society meant the covering of the top half of the body. To appear in public without that dress was an act of impropriety, to say the least. Such an appearance would disrupt a worship service, and such misplaced "honor" would rebound to the shame of the woman's husband. Only by covering her head could a woman be free to pray or prophesy to the glory of God alone.

Paul here calls for a differentiation in male/female appearance at worship service because first century Corinth was caught in a sexual identity crisis. Sex reversal or exchange of sex-roles was an important practice in the religions of Corinth. This sex reversal took the form of assuming the garb of the opposite sex, or some other break with customary dress, during religious observances. Paul speaks out against such blurring of sexual differentiations. It is good to be a man, and it is good to be a woman. Both need each other, and both should dress so as to sharpen rather than blur their sexual identities.

Equally significant, the veil indicated the claims of husband and home. Corinth was a major center for the cult of Dionysus. This cult encouraged women to discard their veils for religious rituals. Other elements of the ritual included drunkenness, pagan feasting, madness and promiscuity. All of these practices, it should be noted, are addressed by Paul in I Corinthians, and most of them in his discussion of proper church order in chapter 11-14. Paul makes the point that the veil and properly combed hair indicate the propriety of husband and home in contrast to these pagan practices. Christian worship does not offer temporary release from the marriage bond. Rather, it is precisely in worship that the Christian retains his/her sexual identity and commits himself/herself publicly to the spouse. It is important for Paul to make the case to recent converts out of paganism that in the Christian church, where the incorporation of both sexes into the same worship service on equal terms was something of an innovation, neither man nor woman was independent of the other. Both worship God equally as sexual beings, but both must be appropriately attired and groomed.

The passage, thus, does not suggest the subordination of women to men. Paul obviously believes in a difference of function between the sexes. But nothing must be allowed to detract from his unambiguous statement that “in Christ’s fellowship woman is as essential to man as man to woman” (v. 11). She is as free as the man to participate in church worship, praying or prophesying, provided she wears a head covering. In the new eschatological community women are freed to do what they could not do in the old world, participate in public worship on an equal basis with men. Man and woman in mutual dependence stand as equals before God.

I CORINTHIANS 14:33b-36

This passage presents us with an apparent contradiction of what we have just said on the basis of I Corinthians 11. In chapter 11 Paul says women may speak in public assembly if appropriately attired, but in chapter 14 women are ordered to be silent—not to speak—in church. What do we do now? There are several approaches to the problem.

One approach argues that 14:33b-36 is a non-Pauline interpolation. But since the manuscript evidence only concerns placement and not omission these verses are treated as Pauline. The second approach seeks to harmonize the two chapters as follows. Both texts speak to married women, not single, and both concern order in public worship services. Chapter 11 legitimizes speaking in worship with proper attire. Chapter 14, in contrast, prohibits married women from asking questions in the worship service: “if there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home” (v. 35a). The reason for this prohibition reflects contemporary educational practice. Except for girls from rich families, who could afford private tutors to educate their daughters, girls were not educated in Jewish or Roman society. They learned by asking their parents and brothers. What Paul is saying in chapter 14 then is that women not versed in Christian truth should not interrupt the worship service to ask questions which their husbands could teach them. In other words, women may pray and prophesy as equals in church worship, but they should not use their equality as an occasion for denying others the opportunity for worship by interrupting the service with questions.

A third approach argues that the prohibition concerns the discernment of or discussion about the prophetic word. In other words, vv. 33b-36 belong to the discussion about prophetic speech and testing in vv. 26ff. The context makes it clear that the silence stands in contrast to asking questions, not to prophesying. Women were permitted to prophesy, but were restricted from the discussions which followed. Women were excluded from the “testing” sessions since this would put them in the role of judging men, possibly their own husbands. Verse 34 indicated a circumstance involving arguments between husband and wife.

Because of the textual problems associated with this text, we should be very cautious in using it to build a theology of the woman's role in the church. At the very least, it cannot be made the center of our interpretation. If we retain it as a genuine Pauline statement, as I think we should, it can be read only as an exhortation to proper order in public worship for married women. The third approach is preferable, I suggest, because it reads these verses in their textual and theological context. This interpretation is strengthened by two other pieces of evidence from the text. Most commentators are agreed that the verb "subordinate" in v. 34 is a middle form which denotes the voluntary submission of women to their husbands. Paul, having made the case for the equality and interdependence of men and women in chapter 11, here exhorts the voluntary submission of wives to their husbands. Verse 35 reinforces this reading by the specific identity given the husband, "their own husbands." Women are not encouraged to submit to any or all men, but specifically to their "own husbands."

Paul's exhortation for the silence of women in the church, then, is a limited one. It applies only to married women whose husbands were present in the church, and only to the "testing" process of the prophetic word. Paul accomplishes two things by this word. First, he reduces the chaos which threatens to engulf the public assemblies of the church of Corinth. And, second, he again strengthens the family unit in the context of concern for the public life of the church. He gives the family something substantive to discuss at home. Such an exhortation itself is innovative since ancient men were frequently commanded to discuss only matters of domesticity with their wives. In contrast, Paul suggests husbands and wives together should "discern" the prophetic word at home.

I TIMOTHY 2:8-15

If I Corinthians 11 and 14 are reconcilable, what about the problem of I Timothy 2 where the author commands women to be silent and not to teach in the church? That certainly represents a contradiction within Paul, does it not? So convinced are many scholars of such a contradiction that they reject Pauline authorship of I Timothy along with II Timothy and Titus (the Pastoral Letters). But, that argument resolves nothing because the Pastoral Letters are part of the Christian canon. The argument has merit only if one accepts a Lutheran understanding of the canon in which the genuine Pauline letters represent a canon within the canon, and that all other New Testament writings are inferior and less normative than the Pauline center. Not only is such an approach circular in reasoning, but inconsistent with an Anabaptist/Mennonite concern to take the entire New Testament seriously as a faithful guide to Christian discipleship. So, whether Pauline or non-Pauline (I believe Pauline), the words of I Timothy 2 must be faced head on and dealt with.

Let me try by making several observations. First, the prohibition against teaching in this passage concerns only married women, not all women. I say this because (1) the writer bases his argument on the sequence of the creation of husband and wife in Genesis 2 and the relationship of husband and wife in the story of the fall in Genesis 3; (2) the reference to "salvation through child-bearing" (v. 15) can only refer to married women; and (3) the author uses the plural (v. 15) when he says "if they (husband and wife) continue in faith and love and holiness and modesty."

Second, the writer's use of Genesis 2 and 3 regarding the order of creation is similar to Paul's use in I Corinthians 11. In both passages the order of creation is used to rule out any participation in the life of the church which violates the integrity and meaning of the marriage relationship. Why, we must ask, does Paul prohibit woman from teaching to maintain the marriage relationship? Two basic approaches have been proposed over the years. Both approaches understand Paul's words as a limited restriction caused by the emergence of specific problems in the churches of Ephesus. The first interpretation suggests the church/marriage problems at Ephesus are the effects of liberation. The first steps into freedom in most liberation movements are inordinate; they betray the insecurity of the new position by self-assertiveness. Paul's words are designed to control liberation or equality gone astray. What we have then in Paul is a dialectic. Liberation/equality for oppressed contexts (Galatians and Corinthians), submission and silence for unbalanced liberation contexts (Pastoral Letters). Paul is the man of moderation; he gives a word for the extremes. This view makes for good theory, but there is little in the text to support it.

The second approach proposes that the church/marriage problems at Ephesus are a function of false teaching. The exhortation that married women not teach is bracketed by instructions to keep silent and related to the Greek words *oude authentein andros*, "nor dominate a man" or "not sexually seduce a man." The word *authentein* occurs only here in the New Testament, and, therefore, is somewhat ambiguous in meaning. It is usually translated as "domineer" or "have authority over," and then suggests one kind of false teaching which developed in the early church. This teaching gave women prominence in the church at the price of disrupting their marriages. Women not only taught in the church, but left their husbands, indulged in costly attire and practiced immorality. All of these practices are issues with which the Pastoral Letters deal, suggesting that the background to the exhortation in I Timothy 2 is this kind of false teaching. Somehow, in the process of teaching, women were lording it over their husbands in the church. Paul writes to state that this does not belong in the church.

An alternative meaning of *authentein* denotes "to thrust oneself

forward sexually.” In fact, the verb form is normally used by the classical writers, the Septuagint (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 12:6) and many church fathers to describe women who make sexual advances to men. To this linguistic fact must be added the awareness that most women teachers in the Greco-Roman world were also courtesans. They made it evident in the course of their teaching that they were available for sexual liaisons following the lecture. Against this backdrop Paul’s words prohibit licentious teachings and practices. This interpretation also relates to the immediate context in I Timothy and the general context of the Pastoral Letters. Women are instructed to dress modestly and with propriety, surely a necessity in a city which boasted thousands of prostitutes. Civil law in Ephesus permitted only prostitutes the kind of dress Paul here forbids. We also know from II Timothy 3:6ff., II Peter 2:1ff., and Revelation 2:20 that false teachings involving immoral behavior were a real problem for the church in the last third of the century. Women converts who had learned to link teaching and prostitution or worship and prostitution as in the shrine of Diana are now taught to keep silent. Married women are not to teach in the church because the church operates according to the ethics of a different kingdom. Not insignificantly, John Chrysostom, one of the great 4th century teachers of the church, understood this text as prohibiting the linkage of teaching and prostitution. “Imitate not the courtesans,” he asserts in his commentary on this passage.

The two interpretations which read this text against the background of false teaching thus read Paul’s teaching as a limited restriction on women. He prohibits only teaching, not the exercise of other gifts (e.g., prophecy), because of its linkage with a domineering attitude or sexual promiscuity. Furthermore, he restricts the woman’s role in the church only at the point where it threatens to disrupt the marriage relationship. If that is a correct exposition of this passage, it can hardly be made to prohibit women in general from participation and leadership in the life of the church.

Conclusion

What are we to make of this brief study of Paul’s teachings regarding the role of women in the church? I want to suggest several things.

First, as indicated at the outset, Paul teaches that in the new eschatological community of God’s people all believers have been reconciled with God and each other. All stand equal before God without distinction of race or sex. Paul affirms the equality of men and women of faith before God both in terms of privilege and gifts of the Spirit. All disciples of Christ and thus all members of the new eschatological community are empowered by the Spirit and given gifts

of the Spirit. Nowhere in Paul, or elsewhere in the New Testament for that matter, is the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit restricted on the basis of sex.

Second, the Pauline injunctions concerning the role of women in the church do not deal either with the exercise of gifts or with the question of office in the church (asking questions in I Cor. 14 and teaching in I Tim. 2 are not offices). Instead, the issue is a linkage of ministry and decorum which disrupts worship and the marriage. Furthermore, in each case the focus of concern is the married woman, not women in general.

Third, in applying these Pauline teachings to our time I would suggest several things: (a) Women should be encouraged and feel free to exercise the gifts God has given them to build the church. The church should acknowledge that God has given gifts to all, and discern the gifts in its midst irrespective of sex. Women should function in the church in the joyful knowledge that they are fully reconciled and equal as believers in Christ and as members of his body. (b) The church should prophetically oppose as unbiblical any espousal of women's liberation within the church which disrupts the marriage relationship (Paul would say the same of male liberation movements, I am sure.).

A doctrine or a truth has power only to the extent that it is modeled in a life style which is in harmony with it. Paul, and the rest of the New Testament, proclaim that male and female are reconciled and gifted in Christ, they are one and equal in Christ. It is now time for that truth to be modeled in the church if the church is to be the true eschatological people of God.

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Because the first draft of this article was prepared as a lecture during the 1973-74 school year, it is virtually impossible to reflect accurately my indebtedness to various writers. Therefore, I decided not to use footnotes. Listed below is some of the more significant literature I have read over the years in thinking about the role of women in the church.

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