

THREE PAULINE PASSAGES ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN  
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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## THREE PAULINE PASSAGES ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The task of this paper is to appraise three Pauline passages which deal with the role of women in the Christian church. I will proceed by (1) reviewing several principles of interpretation; (2) noting some characteristics about Paul the author; (3) examining from the historical perspective the relevant passages in 1 Cor. 11, 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2; and (4) suggesting some guidelines which arise out of the Pauline materials.

Interpretation of any passages presupposes certain assumptions which the exegete brings to the text consciously or unconsciously. Such presuppositions will unquestionably influence the interpretation of a given text. Seventh-day Adventists subscribe to the basic assumption that in Scripture we deal with supernaturally superintended materials given in a culturally conditioned context.

It is important to remember that Scripture may be read at different levels. We may address a biblical text by reading it in the most literal fashion, taking the words as they stand without recourse to time and place of origin. Secondly, we may read a passage and seek to understand it in its larger historical and cultural context. Such an approach requires an understanding of the biblical teaching as well as discernment of the historical situation which the biblical passages address. Thirdly, an exegete may pass rather rapidly beyond the words of Scripture and the specific situations which they address in an attempt to deduce the principles which he recognises are given by the total thrust of the word of God.

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A variety of papers discussing the topic before us can be relegated to one or another of the above-mentioned categories of hermeneutics. Some will find fault with any approach except that which addresses itself only to the literal words of Paul. Others disparage the narrow limits of this first approach and dedicate themselves with enthusiasm to an understanding of the text by reconstructing the alleged historical and cultural background of a given passage. In this group are several interpreters who abdicate any attempt to discover the relevance of the biblical passages for any future situation in the church. Accordingly, the messages of the Bible were penned only for past circumstances with no, or very little, relevance for the future. The third group of exegetes emphasises the need to deduce the underlying principles of the total word of God in order to discover thought patterns which are unlimited by the historical past and may assist in correcting "culturally conditioned" biblical pronouncements.

It is obvious that an understanding of Scripture as God's word clothed in human language and given in a culture of a certain period of human history implies the necessity to study both the literal words and the conditions in and for which they were given. It is equally clear to this writer that if Scripture is to speak to us today an exegete must be sensitive to both the words found in the Bible and their meaning. Indeed, he will constantly maintain a dialogue between words and meanings.

Before turning to the passages under consideration it would be well to briefly focus on their author. In this paper I assume that Paul is responsible for all three passages, though I recognise that other commentators would dispute this presupposition. Paul, like most great leaders, was a complex person. He was cosmopolitan, multi-lingual, manually dextrous, profound academic, generous

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yet impatient, possessing an intimate knowledge of both the Old Testament, Judaism and Hellenism, and obsessed by the ideal that every human being should be found in Christ. For this Jew of the Pharisaic party, the Messiah had come and all the world had to know. As a multi-lingual cosmopolitan he moved with considerable ease both among Jews and Gentiles be they of Greek, Roman or other origins. In Jesus Paul had recognised the new Moses. The Sermon on the Mount had become the Magna Charta of the new kingdom of Israel. The words of the Old Testament were given a new, deeper, and extended significance in the life and words of the Messiah. While Jesus was no revolutionary, His life and teachings gave new meaning and broke down the contemporary customary barriers between Jews and Gentiles (e.g. Mark 7:26); masters and servants (e.g. Matt. 20:26-28; 23:11; John 13:12-16); and males and females (e.g. John 4:9). Whereas it appears that rabbis of the first century A.D. generally despised Gentiles, enjoyed status, and did not speak in public to a wife, daughter, or sister, let alone another woman, Jesus instigated a new respect for mankind regardless of race, status or sex. The ideology exemplified by the new Messiah like leaven began to permeate the society and effect slowly yet inexorably a spiritual and social change.

The first major storm which descended upon the newly-formed apostolic community was over the relevance of circumcision. This was more than merely a debate over a method of salvation. Circumcision in the Old Testament had become the badge of every son of Abraham and as such distinguished him from both Gentiles and women. (This is not denied by the fact that some nations of antiquity also practised circumcision).

The resolutions agreed to by the early church on the issue of circumcision facilitated the missionary advance among Gentile groups. More than that, it

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promoted a new standing for women in the Christian community. No longer were they part of the covenant by proxy. As circumcision ceased to have its ancient significance the visible distinction between Israelite men and women and between Israelites and Gentiles was erased. Baptism became the door of the new covenant society and as such functioned as a great equaliser affording to all a unique and intimate relationship with God not known heretofore. The old barriers had been broken down and a new individual identity with the Messiah both in His death and resurrection had been made possible.

It is no wonder that in a letter directed to a community in Asia Minor plagued by uncertainty over circumcision and other ritual mores Paul met head on the exclusivism of his ancestral religion expressed by the well known Jewish prayer:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who hast not made me a heathen.  
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who hast not made me a bondman.  
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who hast not made me a woman.

Paul's words "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) countered this Jewish prayer step by step and became the touchstone of the Christian faith.

Paul's concept of oneness, however, should not be confused by modern readers with the concept of equality. His words express clearly a unity between people whether equal or unequal which had been unheard of heretofore. It is well for us to remember that the concept of equality as understood today does not appear to have existed in New Testament times and was unknown even in the days of Jefferson's Bill of Rights which speaks of equality for all men while tolerating slavery.



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Thus while Paul recognises oneness in Christ and clearly denounces the distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, it is noteworthy that he never called for the abolition of slavery. The apostle challenged masters to be humane to their slaves and called upon the slaves to serve their masters well (Col. 3:22-4:1; Eph. 6:5-9). He reminded both masters and slaves that their common Master was the God of heaven and "there is no partiality with Him." Paul actually encouraged the enslaved brethren to remain in whichever state each had been called (1 Cor. 7:20-24). It would seem that for cultural and social reasons Paul did not abolish the institution of slavery but was merely set on removing the worst of the conditions inherent in the slave-master relationship. This evidence indicates that, though Paul was responsible for the beginning of a reform, already inchoate in the life and teachings of Jesus, he constantly respected his own Jewish tradition and the culture of his day.

Like Jesus, Paul associated freely with women. Among Paul's fellow workers in ministry and evangelistic outreach were women as well as men. He graciously accepted the aid given him by Phoebe who according to New Testament research is described as a wealthy benefactress (prostatis) of the apostle and deaconess of the church in Cenchreae, the eastern seaport of Corinth (Rom. 16:1,2). The apostle commended Euodia and Syntyche as women who contended at his side in the cause of the gospel along with the rest of his fellow workers (Phil. 4:2,3). Luke tells us that Priscilla, whom Paul greets with her husband Aquila as his fellow workers in Christ, had instructed the mighty Alexandrian apologist Apollos (Acts 18:26). Furthermore, if Iounian in Rom. 16:7 be read as Junia, Paul even refers to a woman as a notable apostle. On his last journey to Palestine recorded in the book of Acts, the apostle stayed in the house of Philip the evangelist who had been one of the seven ordained deacons. Accord-

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ing to Acts 21:8-10 Philip had four unmarried daughters who were blessed by the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:8-10). It is obvious therefore, that Paul felt comfortable in the company of women who assisted him in the mission of the church.

The notion of women who enjoyed the gift of prophecy is also reflected in 1 Cor. 11:5. Here Paul refers to "any woman who prays or prophesies." This passage is part of what has become known as the first letter to the Corinthian church. Like other biblical books it speaks to specific concerns which either troubled Paul or his readers and was not merely an abstract dissertation on self evident truths.

According to 1 Corinthians Paul had been apprised of problems in the small Christian community at Corinth by members of the house of Chloe and a letter which the Corinthians had sent to him. The Pauline exhortations in this epistle have become the basis for the reconstructions of the problems which apparently plagued this church. Accordingly, we recognise that the Corinthian church suffered from internal divisions (ch. 1-4); immorality unequalled even among their pagan neighbours (5:1ff.); and legal suits among fellow believers (6:1ff.). The Corinthians also entertained questions about marriage (7:1ff.); food offered to idols (8:1ff.); spiritual gifts (12:1ff.); and collections for the saints (16:1ff.).

Several of Paul's admonitions reveal that Christians in Corinth were exercising their newly-gained freedom in Christ at the expense of their weaker fellow church members (8:9,11). Paul was deeply concerned that the liberty of the gospel not deteriorate to licence. Hence he quoted what was presumably a catch phrase among these gospel enthusiasts, "Everything is permissible" (10:23) and cautioned "but not everything is beneficial." Again he repeated their

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slogan and reminded them "but not everything is constructive." The apostle then added "nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others . . . . for I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (10:23,24,33; 11:1). The apostle reminded the Corinthians that he had made himself a "slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (9:19,22).

It is evident from these remarks that not everything was well in the church at Corinth. The excitement which the gospel had generated in the minds of some Christians led to their abandoning of the bounds of propriety. Thus in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 Paul contends with males and females about their decorum when praying and prophesying in the church. It is clear that the apostle was not so much concerned about their spontaneous contributions in prayers and prophecies as he was about their dispensing with the cultural norms of their society.

He had to counsel both men and women engaged in prayer and prophecy to do so while respecting the accepted societal standards. It would appear in this passage that men were growing their hair long while women were either cutting their hair or wearing their hair in a long or dishevelled state. Though the Greek doesn't mention the word "veil" the passage appears to indicate that their hair hung loose or was dishevelled. Others suggest that the Corinthian women had removed their head covering or hair clasps. Whatever the problem was it is clear that the apostle insists that both Christian men and women should not abandon the accepted hairstyles of the day which were clearly defined by both Jewish and Greco-Roman society. He asks his readers "Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?" (v. 13). Obviously the commonly-accepted standard of propriety disallowed the practices in which both the Corinthian men and women were engaging.

The context may indicate that the Christians at Corinth had taken the



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Pauline maxim "There is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus" too far and sought to expunge the differences which existed between the sexes. If our reconstruction is appropriate then Paul is here reprimanding the young Christians and saying to them "This is not what I meant when I spoke of oneness in Christ! Don't throw away the natural markers of sexuality! You have made an unacceptable and unnatural deduction of the principle of the unity in Christ."

It is noteworthy that for purposes of justification Paul refers to both nature and the scriptural creation account (vv. 7-15). While some of Paul's reasons are unintelligible to me (e.g. v. 10) it is clear that the apostle refers back to the creation account in the Old Testament Scriptures and deduces from the creation narrative an order of priority in which women are preceded by men and men by Christ and Christ by God. He then asks them to stay by the teachings of the sacred word. Yet, it is surprising that Paul goes on to add a significant qualifier in verse 12. His argument could be paraphrased in the following way: "Woman was made from man therefore man is first in the order of primacy. However, in the Lord, both men and women depend on each other for as woman was made from man so man is now born of woman."

In sum, Paul appears to resist a religious enthusiasm among Corinthian believers which was probably elicited by the new standing of men and women in Christ. This presumed excitement led some of them to abandon the standards of propriety. He felt it to be his duty to correct such abuses in conformity with the accepted customs and standards of contemporary society. He would tolerate no opposition for he was most anxious to preserve the good name of Christ and His church. Hence his admonition "If anyone wants to be contentious

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about this, we have no other practice--nor do the churches of God" (v. 16).

A little further on in the same epistle, Paul once again returns to the role of women in church. The Pauline admonition is found in the context of a discussion of spiritual gifts, particularly the exercise of the gifts of prophecy and tongues (ch. 12-14). The apostle was most anxious that proper order be preserved in the church for "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33). Again he counsels "All things should be done decently and in order" (v. 40).

Paul's injunction reads "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." (14:34,35). A literal reading of this passage clearly conveys the notion that women should be silent in the church and be subordinate.

Once we have recognised this, however, several questions present themselves. Why did Paul write that women should keep silence in the churches when he had just informed them that women prayed and prophesied in public (11:5)? What did he mean when he used the word "to speak" (lalein)? What relationship is there between the word "to speak" and the enquiries which they were to direct to their husbands at home? Why did the apostle state that it was disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church? The larger context of this passage reveals that Paul had just endeavoured to enjoin order on the Corinthian worship services, especially in relation to the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. His repeated expressions about order reveal that he was deeply concerned about the lack of it. Obviously not everything was done in a fitting and orderly way in the church at Corinth.

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The use of the Greek word translated "to speak" has generated considerable discussion and it appears that its meaning ranges all the way from "to speak" to "to babble." Possibly, the etymology of this word is not as helpful as is the context in which it occurs. Several New Testament scholars believe that verse 35 illustrates what is meant by the speaking referred to in verse 34. Paul appears to be saying "Don't ask your questions and interrupt the church services. Rather, ask your husbands later at home!"

Commentators on this passage point out that unless Paul is here contradicting his earlier statement that women in Corinth did pray and prophesy in public he is now forbidding women to disrupt the church services by their continuous questions. It is this lack of decorum which was contrary not only to the word of God but brought disrepute upon the church just as their abandoning of cultural norms had brought disgrace upon the community of Christ in the context of 1 Cor. 11. While this reconstruction by New Testament scholars does not resolve all the questions raised by this passage, it presumes consistency in Paul's instructions and certainly fits the context which describes the spiritual excitement and arrogance, factionalism and lack of order in the Corinthian church.

The third passage under consideration is found in 1 Tim. 2:11-15. These verses are found in an epistle which Paul wrote at the end of his life to the pastor of Ephesus. The purpose of the letter was to reflect on ministerial responsibilities and the need for church order and administration. The young Christians were plagued by heretics one of whose tenets included advocacy of ascetic practices (1 Tim. 4:2,3). Paul's desire to preserve the good name of the church and its members punctuates the letter at regular intervals (3:7,14,15; 5:7).

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1 Tim. 2:11-15 is found in a more immediate context of admonitions on matters of prayer and worship. It is obvious that Paul was concerned not only with prayer and order in worship but the good name of the church in the community and society. It is for this reason that he ordered prayers to be offered for rulers and authorities. He exhorted men to pray without anger and quarelling. In this way the apostle sought to ensure the good public reputation of the church at Ephesus. Next, Paul advised women to dress with modesty and propriety. Again his concern was about decorum among Christian women. The apostle also enjoined silence and submission for women and prohibited them to teach and exercise authority over men. Here Paul's desire for good behaviour in the church is evident once again. Finally, he reminded the Christian women of Ephesus that their first responsibility was to the home thus revealing his interest for propriety in family life.

Paul's words read: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety" (2:11-15). Consistent with 1 Cor. 14:34 women should be silent and submissive (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3,7-10; Eph. 5:22). Paul permits no woman to teach or have authority over men. The word translated "to have authority" occurs only here in the New Testament. It is translated by lexicographers as "to domineer," "usurp authority," "to lord it over," "to be autocratic," and "to act on one's own authority." In some sense, then, these wives usurped authority over their husbands.

The words of Paul, at least on the surface, appear once more to be

unequivocal. Yet the Pauline injunctions contain several puzzling elements. Given our understanding of first century A.D. conditions Paul's admonition that women should learn in silence with all submissiveness appears somewhat out of place. Equally strange are the words "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" when one remembers that generally a Jewish woman was confined to silence in the gallery of the synagogue and was not even allowed to teach her youngest children. Similarly, Greek women for the most part were confined to their quarters, not even appearing at meals nor going to the public assemblies.

Given these anomalies commentators have suggested that it would be too narrow a hermeneutic to merely read the words of Paul while neglecting to pay attention to the larger intent of Paul's admonitions. We have already noted that women were found among Paul's associates in the outreach of the gospel and that he allowed prophecy and prayer of females in public providing they subscribed to accepted norms of decency and propriety. Hence it would be strange for him to forbid this practice at this stage. It would be unusual to assume that Paul now forbids that which he had earlier allowed, particularly in light of the fact that his admonitions address irregularities which ordinarily would not be perpetrated by a first century Jewish or Hellenistic woman.

Could it be that once again women were breaking out of their traditional role models? Did they assume that as Christians they could disregard the mores of their society be it in matters of adornment, demeanour in the church or in matters of family life? Were they teaching and usurping authority while neglecting their duties at home? Quite clearly Paul was concerned about the reproach this kind of behaviour brought upon the church of Christ. It is for this