

Paul's Views on Gender Equality

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Introduction

“I would have given the church my head, my heart, my hands. She would not have them. She did not know what to do with them. She told me to go back and crochet in my mother's drawing room, or marry and look well at the head of my husband's table”. These are the desperate and distressed words from Florence Nightingale, one of the world's greatest women personalities, who relentlessly served the wounded soldiers during the Crimean War (1853–1856) that was fought between the imperial Russia on the one side and the alliance of France, the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire on the other and thus acquired the name “The Lady with the Lamp”. The words of Florence Nightingale would speak volumes about the bitterness and the ill treatment meted out to a faithful Christian woman in her readiness to serve the Church in its need. One cannot simply set aside the statement like this as baseless and unfounded. One cannot pooh-pooh the fact that the involvement of women in the ministries of the Church is seen all along with suspicion both in the western as well as eastern Churches. But at the same time a careful reading of the New Testament passages reveals that from the time of Jesus the women participation in the different ministries of the Church is well founded and the Christian women have contributed very much to the growth of the early Christianity.

Who is Responsible for the Gender Discrimination in the Church Today?

Many of the Feminists and the Liberals blame the writings of Paul for the gender inequalities found in many of the Christian Churches

today. A few passages in the Pauline letters do have instructions that the women should restrain themselves from their involvement in the ministries of the Church (1Cor 14:34-35; Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18; 1Tim 2:11-15; Titus 2:4-5), besides containing disgraceful words regarding women (1Cor 11:3-10). Now based on such passages, can we simply say that Paul was a gender biased person? Can we claim that Paul was an obstacle for the gender equality in the early Churches? Can we direct our fingers only towards Paul for the unequal status of the women in the Catholic Church today? Is it justified to call Paul as an unmitigated misogynist? In this essay let us examine in a detailed way the passages that would support the view that the early Pauline Churches indeed propagated gender equality. We also further examine those contentious passages that stand against Paul and the gender equality in the early Pauline Churches.

The Status of Women during the Time of Jesus

Before beginning the study on the gender equality in the Pauline passages it is important to have an idea of the status of the women during the time of Jesus. The words of the Greek Philosopher Demothesenes written in 340 BCE expose the kind of roles the society had fixed to the women during the Greco-Roman period. The words read as following: "Keep mistresses for the sake of pleasure, concubines for daily care of our person, wives to bear legitimate children and be faithful guardians of households". The Jewish women of Jesus time did not have better roles than what is suggested by this above mentioned Greek thinker. The Jewish culture was patriarchal in nature. The women were powerless, inferior and subordinated beings first to their fathers and then to their husbands. The Jewish rabbinic law allowed women neither to read nor to study the scripture (Torah). Even if there is a need of one person in determining the number required for a quorum to form a congregation, the women in the Jewish community were not at all mattered. The women were separated from men in the synagogues. Even for petty reasons the women could be divorced and their witnesses were not accepted in the court of Jewish law.

The attitude of the Jews in the time of Jesus towards the women was well reflected in the daily prayers of the Jewish men which included a threefold thanksgiving: praising God for having not created him a gentile; a woman and an ignorant man. Even a cruel father would not dare to say to his child in his anger such words like that of Eliezer, one of the Rabbis of the first century A.D., which he uttered in connection with the women reading the Torah: "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman ... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness".

The women were treated as second class citizens also in the Temple at Jerusalem. They were to stay in one of the outer portions, called the women's court that was five steps lower than the court of men. Philo, one of the first century Jewish thinkers and a contemporary of Jesus, witnesses that the Jewish women were not allowed to leave their households except for the purpose of going to the synagogues and the girls were not to cross the area that separated the male and female apartments of the house. The Jewish people also thought that the birth of a boy brings peace from heaven and the female child brings nothing.

Jesus' Attitude towards Women

Jesus' attitude towards women was cordial and friendly. He had very good relationship with them. If we compare him with the men of his time he was exemplary in understanding the problems that women faced in the society. His preaching was common both to men and women. He started his mission with an egalitarian view of gender relations. It would be difficult to find even a single instance in his life that would point to gender discrimination in his mission.

Women along with men were called equally to hear the word of God and to participate in the Kingdom of God.¹ Gospel of Luke tells us that "the twelve" along with some of the women, namely, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others went along with Jesus in his public ministry proclaiming the good news to the people in the cities and the villages (Lk 8:1-4). Jesus travelling with the women during his

public ministry is not to be seen as a routine affair since the women were not allowed to speak to men in public.

For the sake of women, he was even seen breaking the age old Jewish customs and traditions which the Jews thought to be holy. He ignored the Jewish custom of ritual purity when he cured the woman who suffered from haemorrhage for 12 years (Mk 5:25-34). When he initiated the dialogue with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, he knew well that he would become doubly unclean in accordance with the Jewish laws of purity since he not only went against the Jewish customs by speaking with a woman, but also he threw away the Jewish traditions by engaging a woman of foreign origin (Jn 4:5-10; also ref. Mt 15:21-28).

Jesus also taught Mary who sat at his feet and listened to him, in spite of knowing well that the Jewish Rabbinic laws have forbidden a Rabbi to do so. According to the rabbinical tradition the feet of a Rabbi is customarily occupied by his male disciples. Martha complaining to Jesus against her sister Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus is a clear example of what often happens even today in our society. When the male domination in the family circle is challenged by some of the female members of the family today it is mostly women who first raise their voice in support of such domination (Lk 10:38-42).

Again the concern of Jesus for the widows is not to be taken lightly. If the condition of the women in the Jewish society was lamentable, then the situation of the widows was still worse and pitiable. But Jesus went out of his ways to help the widows (Lk 7:11-17; 4:26). He spoke for their justice (Lk 18:1-8; 20:47), gave them prominence (Lk 2:36-38) and praised the widow for her offering (Lk 21:1-4). His view on divorce was yet another important milestone in his mission to advocate the gender equality. Jesus in his teaching denounced the sole right of men to divorce their wives. His stand was to deny both husband and wife the right to divorce one another and thus he treated both husband and wife equally (Mk 10:11-12).

The women played greater roles in the life and mission of Jesus than what is ordinarily expected of them during the time of Jesus. The Gospels picture Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the Mother of James and Joses, Salome and the other women disciples accompanying Jesus in his journey to Calvary. They were the ones who faithfully stood at the foot of the cross (Mt 27:55-56; Lk 23:49; Jn 19:25-27). They also took part at his burial (Mt 27:61). Jesus chose them as witnesses to his resurrection (Jn 20:11-18; Lk 24:1-12; Mt 28:1-10). Since the proclamation of resurrection depended mainly on the testimony of the women at the tomb of Jesus we can rightly say that the call to discipleship is equal, both to men and women. Besides, the resurrected Lord appearing first to women is also regarded as the strongest proof for affirming the historicity of the resurrection accounts.

Jesus' calling every one in the society to be his disciples without any distinction is well reflected at the pouring of the spirit of prophecy upon both male and female disciples on the Pentecost day (Acts 2:17). Jesus vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women in the midst of a very male-dominated society. Leon Morris² correctly observes when he points out that the enemies of Jesus were only men and the gospels do not record even a single woman as enemy of Jesus.

The Place of Women in the Early Churches

The death of Jesus did not hinder the disciples to backtrack the example of their master regarding the equal status to be given to men and women in the early Church. After the ascension of Jesus the women including Mary, the mother of Jesus, were also found among the disciples of Jesus in the upper room who devoted themselves in constant prayers (Acts 1:12-14). The Acts of the Apostles by citing the quotation from the prophet Joel establishes that on the Pentecost day the Holy Spirit descended on both men and women. Prophet Joel prophesied that God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh, the sons and the daughters would prophecy and he would pour out His Spirit even upon the slaves, both men and women (Acts 2:17-18). Acts of

the Apostles also names a woman from Joppa as a disciple who was raised to life by Peter (Acts 9:36). The Greek word used here to mean "disciple" is "μαθητια" in its feminine form. Its masculine form is used in the gospels to refer the 12 apostles. This is an evidence to prove the equality of men and women in the early Church.

Acts of the Apostles also reports of Apollos from Alexandria being instructed by the couple, Priscilla and Aquila, in the Way of the Lord (Acts 18:24-26). The NIV translation of this passage from Acts 18:26 states that the couple taught Apollos in their home. In that case it was not only men but also women engaged in the teaching ministry during the time of early Church. The women were also doing the ministry of prophecy in the early Church. Acts reports on four daughters of Philip doing such ministry (Acts 21:9). This reveals to us that like men there were also women disciples, women teachers, and women prophets who were very much active in the early Church. The Didache, that contains the teachings of the Apostles, speaks of the prophets being the usual leaders of Eucharistic celebrations³, which were mostly held in the homes of prominent women. The artwork found in the catacombs indicates the active leadership of women in the early Church and also in the celebration of the Eucharist. The fourth century church historian Eusebius quotes a letter written by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, to Victor, bishop of Rome between 189-198 AD, which indicates the active leadership of the women in the Asian Churches.⁴

Paul an Advocate of Gender Equality

Looking through the pages of the gospels we are able to state that Jesus, the architect of the Kingdom of God, never had the discriminative attitude towards women during his ministry. The picture that we get from the Acts of the Apostles is also not a different one. But the images of women that we find in the writings of Paul are complex. Viewing from one angle, we meet a fearless disciple in Paul who is able to proclaim boldly that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free person, male nor female, for all of us are one in Christ

Jesus (Gal 3:28). From another angle, we meet an autocratic leader in him who instructed women to be silent in the churches, prohibited them from talking during the service and advised them to be subordinate to their husbands at home (1Cor 14:34-35).

In spite of such complex nature of the letters of Paul, every one would agree that the letters of Paul are the earliest Christian documents that are available to us as the historical proof to authenticate the gender equality in the leadership of men and women in the early Church. Paul as an Apostle who involved himself fully in the gentile mission was able to recognize and to appreciate the leadership of women wherever he travelled (Romans 16:1-16). He had a number of women as his co-workers in his mission to Minor Asia, Macedonia and Greece. Among the 29 names that are introduced in the 16th chapter of the letter to the Romans, Paul lists ten women and would individually thank them for their noble services in leading and guiding the Christians of their respective home churches. Phoebe, a deacon^s of the Church at Cenchreae and Prisca, the fellow worker of Paul in his mission at Achaia and Minor Asia, were prominent in the list. Phoebe is the only woman specifically named a deacon in the New Testament. Paul refers also to Andronicus, a male, and Junia, a female, as "prominent among the apostles" (Rom 16:7).

Paul also refers to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as his loyal companions who have "struggled with him in the work of the gospel" (Phil 4:2). In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul also refers to "Chloe's People". Paul cites Chloe as his main source of information in learning the difficulties and problems which the Corinthian Church had to face (1Cor 1:11). It could be possible that Chloe led a house church like so many women in the early Church during the time of Paul. Another woman who plays an important role in the Church founded by Paul is Lydia, the first Christian convert from Europe (Acts 16:11-15,40). A wealthy woman from Philippi opened her heart to listen to the words of Paul and later accommodated Paul and Silas in her house. It could be that the house of Lydia then became the nerve

centre for the Christians in Philippi to gather. That is the reason why Paul and Silas went immediately to Lydia's house after they were released from prison. If we enumerate all the names of individuals mentioned in the letters of Paul, who have associated themselves actively in the mission work of Paul, the total number of persons listed could be about 40 and among them 16 were women. If so many women were collaborating with Paul in his mission activity then naming Paul as an anti-women could be nothing but a false and meaningless propaganda.

Galatians 3:27-28

The principal reference in the letters of Paul that points to Paul's stand on gender equality is Gal 3:27-28. This particular reference reveals clearly the mind of Paul as far as his attitude towards the women is concerned. Paul touched here not merely the question of the equal status of women in the Christian communities, but he dreamt of equality of men and women in the Greco-Roman society as well. The statement "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female" must certainly be a shocking proclamation to the rulers of the Roman empire who kept the people of Minor Asia, Greece, Macedonia, Syria and Palestine under their draconian rule. Minor Asia during the time of Paul was also the nerve centre for the slave trade. But Paul boldly proclaimed that through the Baptism in Christ one would be able to throw away all forms of bondages, oppression or repression. In that case, a slave is hereafter no more a slave but a free person. A woman is no more subordinate to man, but she has equal status with man. There will be no more existence of racial differences between nations. According to Paul the faith in Christ dissolves the racial, social and gender discrimination. For him the humanity is going to be united in the name of Jesus.

This also brought a new awareness in the Christian communities. The Pauline Church included slaves and former slaves, freed men and women of Greek and Jewish background. The Pauline baptismal creed guaranteed the new gentile converts who were mainly men and

women slaves that all the inequalities between these different stratified social groups had been dissolved in Christ. The Women became equal with men and they were able to teach and preach in local assemblies, lead local churches, and travel as evangelists, as is evident from his references in his epistles to women engaging in these roles.

1 Corinthians 7:10

Another Pauline passage which gives emphasis to gender equality is 1 Cor 7:10. Here Paul like Jesus (Mk 10:11,12) treats men and women equally regarding matters of marriage and divorce.⁶ In the Greco-Roman culture marriages were easily dissolved. There was no significant religious custom that was followed during the marriage ceremonies in the Greco-Roman society. In the gentile society to make and to break the marriages were not all difficult. In the case of the Jewish community there was chance for divorce, but the prerogative was with the husband and not with the wife. As far as Paul is concerned marriage is a permanent covenantal relationship between husband and wife on the basis of the Genesis account of the creation (Gen 2:24; Rom 7:2-3). No partner has the right to break such covenant. It binds both equally. Based on the creation account Paul strongly objected against the husband divorcing the wife in spite of the Mosaic Law allowing the husband to divorce his wife if she was proven unfaithful or indecent (Deut 24:1, Mal 2:16). Could Paul who fought strongly for the cause of women in the early Church of his time be called a misogynist and named as an enemy of women?

Even the teaching of Paul regarding circumcision could be seen from Paul's point of view of social and racial equality (Rom 2:25-29; Gal 5:2-12). Circumcision separated the brethren as Jews and gentiles. It paved the way for divisions and discrimination among the believers as circumcised and uncircumcised, Jews and gentiles, and men and women. It was used by the Jews as a filter for the entry of other cultures into Jewish culture. In a way when the Jewish practice of circumcision was forced on the gentile believers it became another form of oppression and slavery on the gentiles who were already

under the yoke of the Roman rule. Paul might have also seen the Jewish practice of circumcision as a tool of domination of Jewish Christians over the gentiles. That is why he strongly condemned and rejected such a practice. Since Paul stood for such a noble principle in his life, he was able to call Onesimus, the slave, as his own child (Philem 10). He took his case to Philemon, the rich Christian from Colossae, and advised him to treat Onesimus no more as a slave, but as his beloved brother (Philem 16).

Paul loosing his temper when he heard the divisions within the Corinthian Church also confirms his interest in the social equity of the society. He did not want his Churches to be divided on the basis of gender inequality, racial discrimination and social inequity (1Cor 1:10-17). The important motive of Paul in his life was to teach Christ as the unifying force of all the cultures, races, nations, and genders.

Understanding of the Pauline Passages of Gender Inequality

We have already cited the passages in the letters of Paul that promote the female inferiority and gender inequality. The passages are the following:

- **1 Corinthians 11:3-10:** “I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife”, “any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.”

- **1 Corinthians 14:33-35:** “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate.”

- **Ephesians 5:22-24:** “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.”

- **Colossians 3:18:** “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”

• **1 Timothy 2:11-15:** "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve."

• **Titus 2: 4-5:** "...so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited."

Till recent times, the biblical scholars believed and universally accepted that it was Apostle Paul who wrote all the thirteen letters of the Pauline Corpus. But the modern scholarships on the writings of Paul have given us a different thinking. Many of the writings that were attributed to Paul are in fact written by anonymous authors, often long after the death of Paul.⁷ In this case only the following letters are accepted genuinely as the writings of Paul: they are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.

The **Ephesians** is supposed to have written ca 95 AD, i.e., about 30 years after the death of Paul. **The Colossians contains the polemics against** the Gnostic thought that was not the concern of the church until the early second century AD. That is why the authorship of Colossians has been challenged by many scholars in the recent years. **The second letter to Thessalonians** was probably written ca 75 to 90 AD, at least one decade after Paul's death. The first and the second letters to **Timothy and the letter to Titus** could have been written sometime during the first half of the second century - perhaps ca 130 AD.

Except the citations from Corinthians, all other passages that strongly indicate the gender inequality come from those letters for which the authorship of historical Paul is recently questioned. Even in the case of the references from the first letter to Corinthians (1Cor 11:3-10; 14:43-45) the scholars doubt the authenticity of those passages. In 1Cor 11:5, Paul accepts principally the practice of women speaking and prophesying in the worship. He only demands that the women

should do it with the heads covered to show their submission to men. But the passage in 1Cor 14: 33b-35 denies to the women completely the right to speak. Both the passages from 1 Corinthians speak just the opposite. The scholars believe that such contradiction was possible because of the post-Pauline interpolation. In such case 1Cor 14: 33b-35 need not be part of the original text.⁸

Again the advice of Paul to the women to keep silence in the assembly does not go along with the mind of Paul. Paul rather encouraged the women such as Prisca, Phoebe and Junia to function as Church leaders and apostles and they were allowed to speak in public. Since the mind of Paul, we know for certain, is to protect the gender equality in the first century Christianity, can we say that all those passages in the Pauline letters that indicate the gender inequality are the post-Pauline interpolations?

It is possible that after the death of Paul the Pauline community was split on the teaching of the role of women in the Church. One group remained faithful to the teaching of Paul and continued to hold the view that in Christ every human being is equal. This probably could have led them to reject marital relationship and to look forward to the Kingdom of God in which there would be no more marriages taking place (Lk 20:35). They probably began to lead an ascetic life and encouraged celibacy and virginity in the evangelical ministry of the word of God. The celibate option for women continued and was later institutionalized in women's monasticism. "The Acts of Paul and Thecla"⁹ is one such writing of this Pauline community that narrates the story of a woman converted by Paul who after disowning her man, put on the men's clothing and traveled as an evangelist. She was later persecuted by both her family and the state and finally protected by God without any harm. At the end of the story Thecla was visited by Paul and he commissioned her to preach in her hometown.

Another group of Pauline Christians rejected the new freedom of women to renounce marriage and to engage themselves in the evangelical ministry. It is their voice that is reflected in all the Pauline

passages of gender inequality that we have mentioned earlier. Such texts later received by the historical Church as the normative one, disallowed women to do the ministry in the assemblies and restricted their movements only within the family circles. Thus the prime duties of women were considered as looking after the household and bearing children.

Conclusion

So far we have argued that it is not justified to blame Paul the Apostle for the gender inequality found in his letters. Paul like his master Jesus respected women. He encouraged them in their evangelical ministry. No writer in the first century AD would have spoken for the cause of the women as Paul has done. Paul, an apostle of the gentiles could also be called as an apostle of gender equality. In spite of this if we find gender discriminating passages in the Pauline Corpus, Paul is not to be blamed for that. The post-Pauline community is to be held responsible either through interpolation or through Pseudo-Pauline writings.

(Footnotes)

1 R. Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1965, pg. 132-136.

2 Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, pg.150.

3 "But permit the prophets to offer thanksgiving as much as they desire", Did 10:15. English Text of Didache in: *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Texts with short Introductions and English Translations* by J.B. Lightfoot, edited and completed by J.R. Harmer, Macmillan & Co., London, 1898.

4 "For in Asia, also, mighty luminaries have fallen asleep, which shall rise again at the last day, at the appearance of our Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall gather again all the saints. Philip, one of the twelve apostles who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters. Another of his daughters, who lived in the Holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus. Moreover, John, that rested on the bosom of our Lord, who was a priest that bore the sacerdotal plate, and martyr and teacher, he also rests at Ephesus." The "mighty luminaries" who "lived in the Holy Spirit" and whom Polycrates and Eusebius mentioned could be the "elect lady" (2 Jn 1) and her "elect sister" (2 Jn 13). *Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History*, book III, chapter. xxxi tr. by Christian Frederick Cruse, Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Book House, 1955, pg 116.

- 5 The Greek word used here is *διακονον*. Acts of the Apostles speaks of seven such deacons (*διακονειν*) chosen for the purpose of serving at the table (Acts 6:1-6).
- 6 Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1979, pg 39-43.
- 7 The Introductions to the Pauline Letters give the details of scholarships regarding the authorship and date of the books in the Pauline Corpus.
- 8 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., "The First Letter of the Corinthians", in: *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J, and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., TPI, Bangalore, 2002, pg 811-812.
9. "Acts of Paul and Thecla", in: Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, Vol. 13, Michael Glazier, Inc., Wilmington, 1983, pg. 78-88.