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Can You Imagine Paul Telling Priscilla Not To Teach?

by S. Scott Bartchy

Anyone who calls attention to the fact that impressive women were among the many leaders of the Christians in the first century is likely to be accused of caving in to the feminist spirit of the times. I can honestly say that my own pilgrimage on the issues of the leadership of women in the church and of partnership in marriage was motivated and guided primarily by the biblical texts themselves. To be sure, certain trends in our culture may have made it easier for me to see what is already plain in the texts. On the other hand, traditional readings of the New Testament and wide-spread church practice frequently made it more difficult for me to acknowledge freely and state boldly what was becoming so obvious to me from the Greek text of the New Testament documents. In the end, neither positive nor negative cultural factors in the twentieth century have become the decisive determinants of the views to which I was pushed as I sought to consider *all* the relevant texts in the New Testament documents. Indeed, along the way it became clear to me that *any* satisfactory discussion of the roles of women in the early Christian communities had to make sense of *all* the texts dealing with the subject—and that most writers and speakers on this issue simply failed to do so as they presented those passages that supported whatever position they had already reached.

Backing Into the Subject

One might say that I backed into this subject, for I began my serious exegesis of the relevant pas-

sages with 1 Corinthians 7 while writing a dissertation on Paul's famous and perplexing words to enslaved Christians in 7:20-22.¹ Among the conclusions that I drew from my research were two judgments that led me from the study of ancient slavery to an investigation of the roles of Christian women in the early Christian movement:

1) The primary subject of 1 Corinthians 7 is the controversial relation between Christian men and women which Paul discusses in the context of answering questions from the Corinthians about the appropriate influence of spirituality on sexuality; in this context Paul's advice to Christians in slavery functioned as a non-controversial illustration of one of his major points in the chapter;

2) Paul's use of slavery and circumcision in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 to elucidate his argument regarding men and women in Christ was suggested by his prior linking of the pairs slave/free, male/female, and Jew/Greek in the traditional baptismal teaching presented in Galatians 3:28.

Putting these two insights together, I found myself asking whether Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 could help us understand more clearly what he intended his readers to conclude from being taught that Christian baptism resulted in there being "no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Many writers I had read asserted that in Galatians 3:28 Paul intended to stress the equal access of men and women to God and salvation through Christ, but by no means did Paul

conclude that baptism should result in any changes in the everyday social relations between Christian men and women or between Christian slave-owners and their slaves. (Apparently these writers avoided asking themselves if Paul expected the social relations between Jews and Gentiles to change as the result of their Christian baptism, as many texts, such as Galatians 2:11-14, make clear he surely did.)

Every Relevant Text

I was then challenged to find and consider every relevant text in the New Testament by an invitation in 1975 from the spouses of students in Emmanuel School of Religion Johnson City, Tennessee to teach an evening course on women in the early church. Along with the New Testament we were reading together the newly published book by Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, **All We're Meant to Be** (now in its third edition), and were being both provoked and confused.² How could apparently contradictory sentences all be part of the New Testament? And the confusion was not caused simply by different authors writing to different groups of Christians. Within Paul's first letter to the Corinthians itself there seemed to be contradiction: in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Paul commanded women to be silent in the gatherings of the church; in 1 Corinthians 11:5, however, Paul takes for granted that Christian women in Corinth are praying and prophesying—his concern here is not their speaking in the assembly of Christians but their appearance while doing that speaking.

In those days I recorded my research on 4" x 6" note cards, making a separate card for every relevant New Testament text. The stack of cards was higher than I anticipated, giving me plenty to do as I shuffled them in the hope of discerning some similarities of content or context that could point to a hermeneutical insight, perhaps even a breakthrough. One evening after class, I decided to spread out all the cards on my living room floor to reflect once again on the apparent contradictions. Suddenly it hit me that a number of the texts presented women in leadership activities without any comment, positive or negative. Using this feature as a sorting criterion I began to stack these cards. To my surprise the stack contained substantially more than half of those on the floor. I next looked for texts that would have encouraged Christian women to function as leaders; there were more than I anticipated. Then I looked for texts that discouraged women from leading among Christians; there were far fewer than I had expected—especially in light of the emphasis placed on these texts in so many of the churches known to me.

My First Attempt

In my first attempt to categorize these three stacks I used the term "descriptive" for those texts in which women in leadership roles were presented without comment, as if such behavior had become an "everyday affair." Among such texts were Acts 18:26 and Romans 16:1. According to Acts, Priscilla (mentioned first) and Aquila took aside the eloquent and learned Apollos of Alexandria "and explained the Way of God to him more accurately"; and in Romans Paul commends Phoebe, whom he identifies as a minister (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae.

The second largest stack I designated "normative," because I reasoned that they presented the teaching which led to the behavior that was regarded as normal for the women in the "descriptive" texts (and to the men's acceptance of that behavior). In this stack were such texts as Acts 2:17-18 and 1 Corinthians 7:4-5, as well as the famous passage in Galatians 3:28. According to Acts, the Spirit of God now inspires both women and men to prophesy; and in 1 Corinthians Paul rejects traditional male domination in marriage in favor of mutual subordination and agreement (*symph nos*).

The smallest stack I called "problematic," because what these texts seemed to have in common was a larger context in which specific pastoral problems were being addressed. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14 the women in question were the third group in Corinth—the others were the prophets and the tongue-speakers—whom Paul directed to "sit down and be quiet." And the famous text in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man," is part of a letter that was written to give wide-ranging instruction about how to respond to the activities and influence of "false teachers" (see 1 Tim 1:3-7).

After I published these findings in 1978, I quickly learned that in some circles my three categories created more heat than light.³ As one respondent put it: "You may think that Galatians 3:28 and a few other passages are 'normative,' but I think the entire New Testament is normative and thus must reject your reasoning." Another wrote: "1 Tim 2:12 may be 'problematic' for this young scholar, but it is certainly not a problem for me or for most of the Christians in church history. Bartchy regards as a problem the texts he doesn't like personally." Such responses made it obvious that I still had some work to do. At least no one seemed to have trouble with the category "descriptive," even though it was not clear that this group of texts was being taken as seriously by others as I thought examples from the New Testament should be regarded. The fact that these descriptions

were not in the form of direct commands seemed to make them less interesting or less authoritative for some Bible readers.

Back to the Drawing Board

In any case, it became plain to me that I had

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to take my categories “back to the drawing board.” After many opportunities to discuss these matters with both friendly and hostile audiences, I landed upon terminology that seems less open to misunderstanding, namely, instructive, descriptive and corrective. And by no means is the content of each category determined in some arbitrary or culturally biased way. The logic is simple and runs like this: Those passages listed in the “instructive” grouping are those which led to the non-controversial behavior of women presented in the “descriptive” texts. Those passages listed in the “corrective” category are texts that would have prohibited the activities of women that are displayed in the “descriptive” texts, if these “corrective” texts had been understood to be valid for all Christian women in all circumstances. If these texts had been regarded as normative for all women in early Christianity, we would have read about Phoebe, Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche, Junia and others only in negative terms, if at all. In other words, can you imagine Paul telling Priscilla or Phoebe that it would be inappropriate in principle for her to teach a man? Luke would have to answer “no,” since he presents Priscilla’s teaching of the eloquent and learned Apollos immediately after a description of Paul’s spending substantial time with her and Aquila

in Corinth. And Paul would also have to answer “no” in light of the many women he mentions in general leadership roles, that is, as leaders of both men and women.

The “Descriptive” Texts

Since I am urging that the “descriptive” texts are the decisive ones for sorting out the others, it is time to take a closer look at them:

1. *Phoebe, minister* (diakonos—the term Paul uses for himself and Apollos in 1 Corinthians 3:5) in the congregation in Cenchreae, Corinth’s eastern port, and a patron (prostatis) of many, including Paul himself. According to tradition, she was the bearer of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome and thus the first to be asked to comment on the meaning of his profound arguments (Rom 16:1-2).⁴

2. *Prisca (Priscilla), teacher of the already well-educated Apollos from the intellectually sophisticated Jewish quarter in Alexandria.* According to Luke, she and her husband Aquila had just been taking some advanced studies from Paul in Corinth when they very soon were given a challenging opportunity to use what they had learned to teach the eloquent Apollos (Acts 18:1-28).

3. *Junia, whom Paul calls an apostle, the same designation he uses for himself; indeed, with Andronicus her husband (or perhaps her brother) Paul calls her “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7).* What a wonderful and courageous leader she must have been. The centuries-long effort to keep this woman hidden by regarding her as a man, including mistranslating the inclusive Greek term for “relatives” as “kinsmen,” has recently been decisively exposed as a patriarchal distortion of the original text.⁵

4. *Euodia and Syntyche, important leaders among the Christians in Philippi.* Paul counts these women among his “co-workers”—they had “struggled beside [him] in the work of the gospel” (Phil 4:2-3).

5. *Nympha, leader of the church that met in her house in Colossae (Col 4:15).*

6. *The women who received the Spirit’s gift of prophecy on the great Day of Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:17-18).* If none of the women among the 120 disciples gathered on that Pentecost had been prophesying, Luke’s quotation of the Joel prophecy (rather than some other OT text about the renewal of prophecy) on the lips of Peter would have been largely irrelevant, since the Spirit’s work in both men and women is mentioned twice by Joel in this passage. Indeed, in Peter’s speech Joel’s words are expanded in verse 18 to stress the prophesying by both male and female “slaves” of God.

7. *The four, unfortunately unnamed, prophesying daughters of Philip the Evangelist, whom Paul visited in Caesarea (Acts 21:8-9).* In light of the events he reports in Acts 2, Luke apparently took the existence of such female Christian prophets for granted; he mentions them without comment.

8. *The women among the prophets in Corinth (1 Cor 11:5; 14:29-32).*

9. *Mary Magdalene—along with Joanna [Luke] and Mary [Luke, Matthew] the mother of James—who has been called the “apostle to the apostles” because she was the first to tell those men the good news that God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby confirming the fact that Jesus had been right about God after all!*

As an historian of the early Christians, I must say that the description of these women in leadership roles in the New Testament documents is more impressive evidence for what actually was practiced in general by these Christians than are the texts from the “instructive” and the “corrective” categories as such. For the “instructive” texts might well have articulated a vision that was never fulfilled, and the “corrective” texts cannot account for the behavior of the women in the descriptive ones. That is, if you look at the New Testament through the lens of 1 Timothy 2, you will never see Prisca (Priscilla) or Phoebe or Junia, which proves that this text along with 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 must be regarded as an extraordinary and particular exhortation rather than an indicator of general “New Testament practice.”⁶

Maturing in the Spirit

The evidence thus pushes me to conclude that in Christian congregations during the first century, Christians were encouraged to be more interested in who was maturing in the Spirit and thus was competent to lead than they were in the gender of the person doing the leading. Paul clearly anticipated that the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22)—would grow in every Christian, male and female. And none of the gifts of the Spirit Paul lists in an ad hoc fashion in 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12, including that of apostleship (see Junia), was limited to male Christians. Paul asserts: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). All of this meant that the Christians were developing a culture counter to that of the Roman Empire, which was characterized by fixed gender roles that encouraged male dominance, female artifice, and a growing addiction to violence.

Indeed, for me, one of the major factors in

opening my mind and heart to the substantial evidence of women’s leadership presented in the “descriptive” texts was my growing awareness that both Jesus and Paul had challenged men to renounce their traditional, patriarchal privileges and to re-invent their lives and modify their behavior according to the self-sacrificing model of Jesus himself. The weight of all this information finally resulted in a so-called paradigm shift in my understanding of the relations between Christian men and women. For example, it became clear to me that just making some room for women to lead alongside men who were leading in typical male style would not have been (and is not now) an appropriate response either to the instructive and descriptive texts or to Jesus’ call for his disciples to lead by serving. Here the passage in Mark 10:35-45 became decisive for my own repentance regarding leadership and uses of power. This text stands at the core of Mark’s grasp of both who Jesus is and how his followers are to follow him: by using their power not for their own sakes, but for the sakes of others.

In this spirit Paul urged his readers to seek to outdo each other in showing each other honor (Rom 12:9) and to cultivate in themselves the same self-giving way of thinking that had characterized Jesus (Phil 2:4-5). Being filled with the Spirit leads naturally to Christians subordinating themselves to each other “in awe of Christ” (Eph 5:18, 21). Thus it has become clear to me that, for husbands in particular, this involves treating their wives with behavior that imitates Christ’s love and self-sacrifice. I became convinced that the famous text in Ephesians 5 was originally intended not to reinforce the idea that men as males are ordained to “be in charge,” but rather to undermine traditional, patriarchal dominance by encouraging Christian husbands to use their power as Jesus used his.⁷

Other Observations and Conclusions

This paradigm shift has opened my eyes to other observations and conclusions that have become important to me. Here space permits me to mention only a few.

1. The primary relationship between Christian men and women taught by Paul was that of being “brothers and sisters in Christ”—whether as partners in marriage or as partners in the church. This view of personal relationships is rooted in oral tradition from the historical Jesus, such as that preserved in Mark 3:35: “Looking at those who sat around him, he said: ‘Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (see Mark 10:29-31 and Luke 11:27-28).

2. Paul used “brother/sister” language to define the primary relationships between Christian men and the women in non-sexual terms (while not rejecting the goodness of sexuality—see 1 Corinthians 7:3-5; 11:2-12). As “brothers” and “sisters” these Christians were no longer to be defined by traditional gender expectations. Specifically, this meant that a woman’s dignity was no longer to be derived from her imbeddedness in her husband’s honor or from the bearing and nurturing of children (boys preferred), but rather was to be found first of all in her relation to God and the use of her gifts (*charismata*) for the building up (*oikodom*) of God’s community (see 1 Cor 12-14). And it meant that a man’s dignity was not to be found in his marrying and becoming a father, but in his likewise using his gifts for the sake of strengthening the “brother/sister” character of the church as an alternative to the patriarchal family.

Can there any longer be any question about whether there were everyday, this-worldly ramifications of the claim that in Christ there is “no male and female”? In spite of the fact that most Christians gradually caved in to the stubbornly dominant patriarchal culture around them, any authentic recovery of the vitality and soul-healing qualities of the first Christian generations will feature the anti-patriarchal, gender-neutral and radically inclusive values and practice of Jesus of Nazareth and his ambassador Paul of Tarsus. And all Christians will rejoice in the Priscillas, the Phobes and the Junias of our era and pray to have daughters and nieces like them.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What are the three categories the author uses to distinguish the types of New Testament passages dealing with women? How would you define each category?
2. Why does the author find the ‘descriptive’ texts to be a more compelling picture than the ‘instructive’ and ‘corrective’ texts of what women did in the early church? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with the author that Paul is suggesting a “brother/sister” family model for the church, as opposed to a patriarchal family model? What are the implications of this change? Which model best describes your church experience?
4. The author clearly indicates that his position on women’s role in the first-century church is the result of a long process of study, prayer and, at times, frustration. He insists his position doesn’t represent a “caving in to the feminist spirit of the times.” What does his personal experience teach you? Has your pilgrimage regarding gender been similar to, or different from, his experience?

Notes

¹See S. Scott Bartchy, **MALLON CHRESAI: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21** (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1973; reprint 1985).

²See now Letha D. Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, **All We’re Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today**, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

³S. Scott Bartchy, “Power, Submission, and Sexual Identity among the Early Christians,” in **Essays on New Testament Christianity: a Festschrift in Honor of Dean E. Walker**, ed. C. Robert Wetzel (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1978) 50-80. Subsequently published also in German and Spanish.

⁴See J. D. G. Dunn, **Word Biblical Commentary 38B: Romans 9-16** (Dallas: Word Books, 1988) 886-90. Dunn observes that the assumption since the twelfth century that Junia was the name of a male, since the person is designated an apostle, is “a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity.”

⁵See Bernadette Brooten, “Junia . . . Outstanding among the Apostles (Romans 16:7)” in **Women Priests**, eds. L. and A. Swidler (New York: Paulist, 1977) 141-144. Professor Brooten spent eighteen months researching Greek and Latin names in the Roman Empire and found that Junia was a name always given to females.

⁶The best brief treatment of 1 Timothy 2 known to me is by David Scholer: “1 Timothy 2:9-15 & the Place of Women in the Church’s Ministry,” in **Women, Authority & the Bible**, ed. A. Mickelsen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 193-219. For a context-oriented analysis of both 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 see also Bartchy, “Power, Submission . . .,” 68-74.

⁷For an extensive analysis of Ephesians 5 in both historical and contemporary contexts see S. Scott Bartchy, “Issues of Power and a Theology of the Family,” **Mission Journal** 21 (1987) 1:3-15, 2:3-11, 3:9-11.