



Perspectives on Paul— New and Not So New

My first taste of a “new perspective” on Paul came as a shock. “George,” said my grandmother to my father, “Paul said lots of funny things.” This happened something like sixty years ago, when my father (a pastor)—basing his argument on Paul’s admonition that women should keep silent in church (1 Cor 14:34)—was berating his mother for her advocacy of women’s voices in the congregation.

Grandma Gaiser was an enigma. In many ways she retained always the Victorian attitudes of her British upbringing (already out of place amid the sea of Germans who made up the rest of the family). When we visited her home as kids, for example (and curiously, this was always in my mind “going to Grandma’s house,” already indicating something of the strength of her personality), we were forbidden to take off our shoes in the living room, because “somebody might come.” At the same time, she remained always the feisty young red-haired girl that my grandfather encountered in her father’s Cleveland neighborhood store, quickly deciding that this was the girl he would marry, though she was at the time only twelve. (Grandpa Gaiser was then twenty and had already begun his career on the railroad.)

I knew then that she was a dedicated member and supporter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, but only later did it dawn on me that the WCTU’s interests went far beyond the use and abuse of alcohol. Especially under its second president, Frances Willard (1879–1898), the organization became a major influence for women’s suffrage and other aspects of social reform, including women’s economic and religious rights, prison reforms, education reforms, and labor reforms.¹ Frances Willard was an early feminist, and so was my grandmother (much to my surprise and much to the chagrin of my father). The WCTU’s marches on saloons were not fostered merely by an aversion to alcohol itself but to the social problems and abuse of women encouraged by male drunkenness. Grandma Gaiser’s regular attendance at the WCTU meetings in her local congregation not only helped shape her ideas about the place of women in church and society, but also no doubt strengthened her ability to confront her son—who could quote to her chapter and verse from the Bible in English, German, Hebrew, and Greek—about the proper interpretation of Paul.

¹For more on Frances Willard and her concerns, see <http://www.franceswillardhouse.org>.

“Paul said lots of funny things,” said Grandma—inelegant, perhaps, yet a necessary critique of a too-literal application of Paul’s ethical demands. Grandma Gaiser would never have contested Paul’s (or her son’s) clear proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the moral and ethical implications were for her a different matter. Martin Luther might have agreed with her. As we learn from Gary Simpson’s article in this issue, Luther argued sharply against a literal application of the laws of Moses—observing that it was necessary to consider when and to whom these were addressed before deciding whether or not they were applicable to the church of his day. One might say the same things about the “laws” promulgated by Paul—whether laws about women or about other social concerns. The issue for Luther would not have been solved simply by saying that such laws were “in the Bible” but by determining whether or not they were consonant with God’s natural law (and thus not bound to a particular time and culture—as were, say, the ritual laws of the Old Testament).

Now, to be sure, many have argued and will continue to argue that a subservient role for women *is* in accord with natural law, and they will use passages of Scripture to support the point. But, as we all know, that view has now been brought into serious question—and most likely answered in the negative for most readers of this journal. And arguments supporting a new understanding of the role of women come not merely from the culture (though those are not out of place) but also from new readings of Scripture. Critics will argue that present “liberal” reformers read Scripture through the eyes of modern culture, but certainly earlier “conservative” readings—even those in the Bible itself—were similarly conditioned by the culture of their age, just as present “conservative” readings continue to be. Social questions will not finally be solved by biblicistic citations of Scripture but by more difficult and more productive conversations about what God is up to in the world. As Simpson notes, Luther fully supported such open conversation, observing that, even after the fall of Adam, God did not “take away this majesty of [human] reason, but rather confirmed it.”²

So, add this to the list of things I learned from my grandmother. Living in Christian freedom will mean, among other things, living in conversation with all responsible voices of reason in this complex world, learning to determine together what might be God-pleasing responses to present complex social questions. Such a stance will never provide the absolute certainty afforded the literalists, but it will be more interesting, more fun, and, one hopes, more productive of living together with others in harmony.

F.J.G.

²Martin Luther, *The Disputation Concerning Man* (1536), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 137.