



Paul and Real Women

SANDRA HACK POLASKI

Why do women so dislike Paul? Not that they're alone, of course; Paul has also been accused of being the father of anti-Semitism, of corrupting the pure religion of Jesus, of creating fundamentalism, and so forth. But get a group of women in church together—loyal, faithful women who have engaged in Bible study for years—and chances are that a number of them will admit to harboring a secret dislike, sometimes bordering on repugnance, for the Pharisee from Tarsus. And when women, in particular, express objections to the Christian faith, it is usually a text attributed to Paul to which they point. So what's the problem with Paul?

Women who have little use for Paul sometimes have the impression that the apostle has little use for women. It may be surprising, then, to realize that there are a number of women mentioned in Paul's letters, and that he often speaks of them in positive terms. Readers of the New Testament may tend to think of Paul as a "Lone Ranger," founding churches, then traveling on and writing letters back to them. When we think of his associates, we generally think of Timothy, and perhaps of Silas and Barnabas (if we're considering the book of Acts). A close look at Paul's letters, however, reveals that he does indeed rely on the work of many coworkers to participate with him in spreading the gospel, and that many of these are women.¹

¹A more scholarly treatment of Paul's references to women appears in Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letters of Paul," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross S. Kraemer and

When Paul speaks of "real" women—that is, those named coworkers in the churches—his language is accepting and thankful. General arguments about "males" and "females" are often seen by women today as more problematic, but in that case, too, the promise of "no longer male and female" remains good news for women and for all people.

The women in the churches he addresses seem to be important members of those churches, and he speaks of them with respect and positive regard.

THE WOMEN IN PAUL'S CHURCHES

Let us start from the end, as it were, with the shortest of Paul's letters, and the last in canonical order. The salutation of the letter to Philemon addresses three people: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus, in that order, and the church in "your" (plural) house (Plmn 1–2). Apphia, the one female name, is identified simply as "the sister." She is usually taken to be the wife of either Philemon or Archippus, and this may well be the case. Still, it seems significant that she is mentioned. Does she have an important part in the decision-making about Onesimus's treatment, and is this why she is specifically addressed? Perhaps, but it would be expected that the male head of household would have sole responsibility for such decisions. Quite possibly, she is an important enough leader in the church, which may meet in her house, that she needs to be addressed along with the male leaders. In any case, in a letter about economic and religious matters, in a society in which both the economic and the religious decision makers were typically expected to be male, Apphia's presence in this salutation is unexpected, and so notable. Next we light on Phil 4:2–3:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

This text is part of the "exhortation" section of this letter, in which Paul gives various small pieces of advice, generally of a practical nature. Philippians focuses a great deal on Paul himself and the way in which he strives to be an example of Christ. It's interesting, then, that he names other people, and that these are the names of two women. We know nothing else about them other than what we learn here; but notice what do we learn here. They are identified as coworkers, those who have worked alongside Paul in the work of the gospel (the Greek uses the prefix *syn-*, "together," twice: *synēthlēsan*, "struggle alongside," and *synergōn*, "coworkers"). They are apparently currently important enough in the Philippian congregation that a dispute between them disrupts the congregation as a whole; an unnamed friend of Paul is asked to mediate. It seems clear, then, that these two women are important proclaimers of the gospel and church leaders, and Paul seems to have nothing against their leadership, in either of these roles. Rather, he seems most concerned about the threat to their leadership posed by the (unspecified) dispute between them.

In the Corinthian correspondence, we see in 1 Cor 16:19 a mention of Prisca (aka Priscilla), along with Aquila and the church in their house. Paul mentions this

Mary R. D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 199–220, to which my own thinking about the women in Paul's letters is deeply indebted.

apparently important evangelizing couple more than once, and we'll treat Prisca in greater detail below. We also find, in 1 Cor 1:11, a passing reference to "Chloe's people," who have brought a report to Paul. Who are Chloe's "people"? The Greek is succinct, and literally might be translated "the of-Chloe-ones" (*tōn Chloēs*). They may be slaves, or they may be businesspeople of some sort who are under Chloe's patronage. Whoever they are, they travel on behalf of the church—or at least the faction of the church to which Chloe belongs—to communicate with Paul. It is most likely unusual in the Roman Empire for a woman to be named as head of household, so that the members of that household are said to be hers, but apparently Chloe was an unusual woman in her day. Not only that, but this particular head of household is also involved enough in the church that she has her slaves or retainers doing the church's business.

ROMANS 16: A TREASURE TROVE OF WOMEN LEADERS

All of these references to women in Paul's letters focus our attention on the presence of women leaders in Paul's churches. However, the real find, so far as women in Paul's circle are concerned, is in Rom 16, where Paul greets a number of people, including many women. Moreover, it is notable that more of the women in this list are described as to their service of the gospel than the men.

what it meant at this point in the church's history to be a "deacon" is not entirely clear, but it is almost certainly an indication of leadership, not simply a "servant" as the KJV, NASB, and NIV translate

The first, and perhaps most interesting, woman named is Phoebe, who is said to be a "deacon" (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae (across the isthmus from Corinth) and a "benefactor" or "patron" (*prostatis*) of many, including Paul (Rom 16:1–2). It is often speculated that this commendation Paul issues for her means that she is the bearer of the letter, and the commendation is meant to secure hospitality for her among the letter's recipients. If so, she is likely a woman traveling on her own business. This conjecture is supported by the fact that she is described as a benefactor, which means she has wealth to bestow on Paul and other early Christian missionaries. What it meant at this point in the church's history to be a "deacon" is not entirely clear, but it is almost certainly an indication of leadership, not simply a "servant" as the KJV, NASB, and NIV translate.

Next, in v. 3, we see a mention of Prisca and Aquila; her name is listed before her husband's, perhaps suggesting either that she is of higher social status or that she is the better-known church leader. Paul says that they are his "coworkers" (the *syn-* prefix again) and that they have "risked their necks" for his life. Clearly, Paul has reason to be grateful for this missionary couple. And not only is he thankful for them, he says, but so also are all the churches of the Gentiles, which suggests that

this couple have been important traveling evangelists. Finally he again mentions the “church in their house,” which the couple likely supply with leadership as well as meeting space.

In v. 6 we find a reference to “Mary.” Do we know this Mary from elsewhere, or is this yet another New Testament woman called by this very common first-century name? In any case, we know that she “has worked very hard among you.”

Another couple appears in v. 7, Andronicus and Junia. Here, we have the very notable case of a woman being identified as an apostle. This couple, too, has been at risk of life and limb, having been imprisoned for the gospel along with Paul. He identifies them as having been “in Christ before I was”; they must have been very early converts to Christianity. Interestingly, in a number of English translations of this text, the female name “Junia” in this text is read as “Junias,” a male name, even though there is no other indication that the name Junias existed as a male name in the first century. Or, as in the KJV, it is read as “Junia” but assumed to be male—all because this person is identified as an “apostle,” and translators assumed that someone called an apostle could not possibly be a woman.

The rest of the women in this chapter are mentioned more briefly. In v. 12, Tryphena and Tryphosa are described as “workers in the Lord.” In the next verse, Persis is identified as having “worked hard in the Lord” and is called “beloved.” Rufus’s mother, in v. 13, is said by Paul to be “a mother to me also.” Paul also includes in his greetings Julia and the sister of Nereus in v. 15.

What is remarkable about all of these greetings or references to women in Paul’s letters is how unremarkable they are. There is not the slightest hint of tension between Paul and these women, whom he quite routinely identifies in various ways as leaders in the church, as well as valued colleagues of his.

THE PROBLEM WITH PAUL

How, then, do we get the impression that Paul does not value women’s leadership? It is easy to get the impression from Paul’s letters that he is a solo worker, that he doesn’t need anyone else, either male or female, to do the work that God has given him. When we read the letters closely we recognize that this is a false impression; yet, it is undeniably a fact that Paul has a very elevated view of his calling and his uniqueness in carrying out that calling. Paul understands God to have chosen him, apart from any merit of his own, although Paul understands the value of his own résumé and doesn’t shirk from reciting the list of his own accomplishments. It is this factor in Paul’s personality that likely made him successful as a proclaimer of the gospel to the Gentiles—after all, who else would have taken on such a daunting task? Still, Paul’s sometimes overbearing personality may leave readers with the impression that he is a loner or even an egotist.

Too, we need to recognize that Paul was a man of his time, and that time was the first-century C.E. Paul understood the world in many ways differently than we do. He likely thought that the “stuff” that human beings are made of is fundamen-

tally different in men and in women. It is doubtful that he could have imagined a society in which slavery did not exist. He took for granted social structures that we strongly challenge or reject.

Paul was a man of his time. He understood the world in many ways differently than we do. He took for granted social structures that we strongly challenge or reject.

But Paul also understood that God had intervened in that world, in a decisive way, in sending Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. This unprecedented divine act meant that everything in the world was at least potentially different. Paul rarely uses the language of “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17 is the best example), but it is likely that this phrase captures Paul’s understanding of what God has done in Christ. There is a new creation, which means that everything’s up for change; but this new creation is set up by the same God who established creation in the first place. Newness, then, is not simply chaos and destruction. Rather, it is God’s new ordering of the good previously created order.

What Paul is trying to do in his theologizing, then, is to work out what all of this means, and particularly what it means for the communities in Christ that he has founded and nurtured. In many ways the church today is still at work on that same project. In some aspects, nearly two thousand years of church history have given us ways of seeing more clearly than Paul could in his first-century context. In other ways, though, we are still trying to grasp the insights Paul already articulated so long ago.

PAUL’S ADVICE TO MEN AND WOMEN

Perhaps, then, Paul has greater respect for the real women who were members and leaders in his churches than we have usually given him credit for. A few Pauline texts, though, continue to be problematic. We will focus on three texts that appear in 1 Cor 7, 11, and 14.

It is in chapter 7 of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians where he first talks about women and men specifically as male and female. It seems, here, that Paul disparages marriage, leaving women (and men, too, but particularly women) with the choice between truly serving God and marrying and having a family. A few points are important to note. First, the statement that opens this chapter, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman,” is taken by most scholars today to be the Corinthians’ statement and not Paul’s own. Paul does, in fact, think that chastity is a good thing. He practices it himself, and argues that he is thus able to serve God with fewer distractions. Only later in the chapter, though, do we discover why Paul is particularly concerned with undistracted service to God. Paul speaks in v. 26 of the “impending crisis”: he apparently expected the return of the Lord and the end

of this age to come soon. In such a case, the world as we now know it would be over before Christians had time to raise families, and with so little time to evangelize, Paul wanted as many believers as possible to devote their energies to spreading the gospel.

However, Paul recognizes that celibacy is not a gift given to everyone, and so he also affirms mutual sexual fulfillment within marriage. The mutuality is noteworthy; the husband is said to have authority over the wife's body, but the wife is said to have authority over her husband's body as well. Moreover, Paul seems to recognize sexual intimacy as an end in itself, not simply as the means of procreation. Paul goes on to talk about the various possible marital states—married, divorced, widowed, not-yet-married—with reference to both men and women; again, his advice is tempered by his concern for the shortness of time, and the resulting counsel to “remain as you are” (7:26) unless to do so would be to court sin. This text has been much misunderstood, and when we understand Paul's context and his biases it is much less negative toward women than it has typically been taken to be.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN WORSHIP

The other two 1 Corinthians texts focus on women's leadership in worship. In 1 Cor 11:2–16, Paul addresses, of all things, women's hairstyles. This is what was apparently happening: some of the Corinthian women, when they participated in worship leadership, were letting loose their long hair and letting it flow down; probably, in their view, in a demonstration of their freedom in Christ.² Paul actually talks about head coverings, but practically no one in Corinthian society, either male or female, routinely wore any sort of head covering; as Paul makes clear later in the passage, he understands long hair to be a woman's head covering, so it's fairly certain that he's talking about hairstyles, not hats.³ Customarily, Corinthian women had long hair; it was also culturally accepted practice that they wore it up and confined. In Corinthian society, a prostitute wore her hair down in order to “advertise” to potential customers, and priestesses in the worship of gods like Dionysus let their hair down as part of frenzied, ecstatic worship practices.

For Paul, who is after all culturally a product of his time, seeing someone leading in Christian worship looking like this was likely repulsive at a visceral level, and Paul responds with a gut reaction. His argument is not particularly logical. First, he tries to argue from the shame that would ensue if a woman had short hair; then he makes an order-of-creation argument based on a rather strained reading of Genesis; then he puts that hierarchical order in counterpoint with a vision of mutual interdependence (vv. 11–12); then he argues that women's hair is naturally long and men's naturally short, a point of view perhaps persuasive to his first read-

²A detailed and intriguing study is Antoinette C. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

³Editor's note: Robert Allard in the following article in this issue follows the more traditional interpretation that Paul speaks here of veils.

ers, but baffling to us. Paul's last comment is almost dismissive—essentially, “we don't do it that way!”—suggesting that the logic of the argument is not strong, even to Paul himself.

However, despite the difficulty of interpreting everything Paul says here, it is important to note what we can say with confidence: Paul endorses women's freedom to pray and prophesy in the assembly. He is concerned with *how* they do it, but he is not restricting participation. Rather, he seeks ways to enable women to perform these activities with dignity, avoiding distractions for people whose cultural sensibilities were formed by the ancient Mediterranean world. How we do what we do in worship matters, Paul claims, and individual freedom should not override respect for etiquette and consideration for the cultural sensibilities of the congregation. Paul affirms women's participation in worship, even in the proclamation of the word (prophesying); this may be controversial, and Paul urges that the women not provoke criticism by making themselves physically distracting.

In 1 Cor 14:33b–36, Paul again returns to the matter of women's worship leadership, in something of an aside to the discussion of speaking in tongues. The fit of this passage into its context is awkward; if this section were missing, the rest of the text would flow without noticeable break, and, indeed, some commentators have argued that this piece is an interpolation, added later by a scribe copying a very early manuscript of 1 Corinthians. However we choose to read it, we must recognize that, on the face of it, this passage directly contradicts what Paul says in chapter 11, where he is at pains to make sure that women are accepted into the worship leadership.

however we choose to read it, we must recognize that, on the face of it, this passage directly contradicts what Paul says in chapter 11, where he is at pains to make sure that women are accepted into the worship leadership

What should we say about this tension in the text? Is Paul simply self-contradictory? Or is the Pauline tradition so at odds with itself that we cannot interpret it clearly? A likely explanation, if these are indeed Paul's own words, is that there was a particular group of women in the congregation who were disrupting the worship services. We cannot know the exact scenario, but it is easy to imagine. They might, for example, be women who are new to the community, perhaps newly married to believing spouses, who are asking questions at every turn, so that the progress of the service is constantly interrupted. These, Paul says, should keep silent, while understanding that the women who are participating in leadership should continue to do so.

Other possibilities exist for the presence of this passage. It may be that Paul is quoting the Corinthians' position in vv. 33b–35, as we saw earlier in 7:1. Or, it may be that Paul distinguished between married women, who should keep silent in the

presence of other men, and single women who were free to speak; but claiming this view from the text is an argument from silence. In any case, our reading of this text must take place in the context of the whole of 1 Corinthians, particularly what is said about women's leadership in chapter 11.

PAUL, WOMEN, CHRIST, AND FREEDOM

Finally, we need to pay attention to something else that Paul says very directly about women, and in a very different vein from what we've looked at thus far:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

What we see here is a revolutionary abolition of boundaries. The order of society, the very order of creation itself, is reconfigured here through baptism into Christ.

This text, which Paul likely heard first as a baptismal liturgy, has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship, including much feminist thought.⁴ It is unnecessary here to reiterate the many valid points that have been made. The important question to consider is this: How central to Paul's thinking is this statement? Is it a "throwaway line" that he quotes just for its reference to "Jew and Greek," so that he doesn't really mean all that it represents? Or does this express the way Paul thinks about what God has done in Christ?

A decision about the centrality of this particular text in Paul's letters is likely to have a great deal of influence on determining whether Paul is liberating to women, or not. Given the way Paul responds to the leadership of real women in his beloved churches, though, surely he deserves the benefit of the doubt. This quotation is no throwaway; rather, it points toward the new reality that Paul perceives God to be about in this "new creation," even though it cannot be completely expressed, either in Paul's day or our own. It remains, for us as for Paul, a goal toward which to strive. That is, indeed, good news for women. ⊕

SANDRA HACK POLASKI lives in Richmond, Virginia, and teaches at Union-PSCE. She is the author of several books, including *A Feminist Introduction to Paul* (Chalice, 2005).

⁴An early instance, still exemplary, is Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).