

West Branch Friends Meeting  
February 5, 2017  
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Who is Paul, Exactly? Part II

I remember my high school years in church, when I wasn't always convinced that everything I had been taught in Sunday School and Church was true. But I also remember one of the elderly members of Indianola Friends giving me a small paperback book of the letters of Paul. I faithfully read that little paperback every night after getting in bed, and many of the passages became very familiar to me.

The ones that struck me as rather confusing were the passages that stated that women were to cover their heads and not speak in church, and the verses that said the man was the head of the house and the woman was to be submissive. Of course I knew we didn't wear hats to church anymore, but I don't suppose I ever questioned those other two admonitions.

Since this is part two of the messages on who Paul was, exactly, just a brief summary of the important parts of last week's understanding. First, it is recognized by thorough historical research done by highly respected theologians, that not all the books attributed to Paul were actually written or transcribed by him. Some letters were not written from the same historical time frame, and neither were they composed in Paul's letter-writing style. This is probably the most crucial thing to keep in mind when examining the New Testament letters attributed to Paul. Often, when a highly regarded church leader was no longer living, other men would write under the leader's name, assuming a letter would be more affective coming from a former missionary like Paul. This may be the exact reason why there is doubt of the authenticity of several of the New Testament letters.

Secondly, the New Testament letters must be examined in the light of the historical context within which they were written to get the true meaning of the messages.

And last, we must consider Paul to be a Jewish Christ mystic – a person with periods of deep connections with God, often involving light, and crucial in understanding Paul's theology.

In the book of Philemon we had Paul writing to Philemon to rather emphatically encourage him to free Onesimus, a runaway slave who had sought refuge with Paul. This countered some of the teachings in some of the New Testament letters most likely not written by Paul himself, but by someone writing using Paul's name and thus having a difference of opinion on the slave issue.

So today I'd like us to keep these things in mind as we explore Paul's teachings on marriage and women in the church, again using the highly respected research work of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

I did a search on the Internet for sermons on women in ministry and the role of men and women in marriage, and was fascinated by some of what I found. I know there are pastors who use the Internet to get parts or all of their messages from messages previously created and delivered by other pastors; and although that's not my style, it's kind of fun – and sometimes frightening – to read some of what pastors are putting out there from their pulpits (and, in all honesty, they might be saying the same thing about me : )! One article that was particularly interesting to me was a debate between two Southern Baptist ministers who were commenting on whether or not women should be allowed to preach in church. One pastor said no, never, it's forbidden in scripture and that's the end of the discussion. The other pastor said, well, yes, women could speak from the pulpit, BUT only if their messages were not dealing with anything too heavy. The other requirement was to turn in a copy of the message ahead of time so a presumed male elder could approve it. Any major topic, however, was to be left to the men – the REAL preachers.

Looks like there would be no place for someone like me in either of their churches. And, of course, it was the writings attributed to Paul that were used as rationale for their decisions about women speaking in church.

So remembering our three things to keep in mind about Paul and his letters, let's look at some of the scriptures used to support these opinions and what I'd like to offer as an alternative way to view Paul and his teachings on gender.

First, let's consider some of the passages on marriage from the books we are nearly 100% certain were written or transcribed by Paul. We know from I Corinthians 7:7 that Paul was not married. In fact, he conveys his thoughts that it would be better if no one were married; partly due to his conviction that Jesus was returning within his lifetime and it would be better to be single when that happened. But listen to the equality he gives to husbands and wives in the following verses from I Corinthians 7:3-5a:

**<sup>3</sup> The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. <sup>5</sup> Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer."**

Throughout all of chapter 7 Paul deliberately strains his syntax to make certain that any obligations of the wife were balanced by that of the husband and vice versa. It is always about mutual and reciprocal rights and duties. Paul states in several verses that he is celibate and wishes all could be like him. Since Paul was a Jew, and it was considered a sin if a Jewish man were not married by the age of 20, it's quite possible he had been married before. But then he goes on to talk about divorce because he may have been afraid that some who read his letters would take his

words about his preference for celibacy to mean s/he should divorce his/her spouse in order to spend more time on spiritual matters. But even in his verses about divorce, there is equality in his message:

**Verses 10 and 11:**

***“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. <sup>11</sup> But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”***

And again, we have to remember the historical context of these verses. Sexual immorality and divorce were common occurrences in Corinth: divorce was typically a husband deciding he didn't wish to be married any more, and he would proceed to write that statement on a piece of paper, handing it to his wife, and leaving. But Paul stresses equality and tells his followers that it's not Godly on the part of either spouse to just decide they don't want to be married that person any more. Unfortunately, these verses have been used by some churches to insist a spouse must remain married to an abuser, or a child molester, or a mentally ill person. I don't believe this was Paul's intention at all.

Then there is equality in the church. In I Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul discusses an often misused idea about proper custom attire for worship. During **this** time and place in history, women were expected to wear a head covering and men to have short hair. Looking around, I don't see any of us women wearing a head covering, but I do see most of you men would have been in compliance in Paul's day. I also think about most of the artists' renditions of Jesus that have him wearing long hair, so I'm not sure what that means!

I do know there are denominations today that still require women to have a head covering of some type during worship (and in some cases, whenever they are out in public) and the Amish have the **Honest Amish Beard** website with a variety of products for the Amish male beard (as required by their religion). So let's look at another of Paul's comments regarding the mutuality of men and women, this time from the eleventh chapter of I Corinthians, verses 11 and 12.

***“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”***

First, Paul reminds his readers that in the Genesis creation account, the man came first, but also, from that point on, men come from women – mutuality. Then Paul tells them what is proper in their worship services – for that historical time period.

***Verse 4 “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head – it is just as though her head were shaved.”***

Again – Paul doesn't just mention head attire for women; he stresses proper attire for both men and women. During that time period, a married woman wore a veil to indicate she was not available to other men. For her to remove the veil would be to dishonor her husband.

So a married woman honors the cultural expectations of that time period by keeping her head covered. It is also clear that **both** men and women were praying and prophesying in worship services. That equality is taken for granted by Paul – female and male are equal in the communal Christian assembly just as in the private Christian family.

And as a final argument that women were very much a part of the early Christian movement, you can read the greetings Paul sends out in the final chapter of Romans to those in ministry with him, and notice it's almost equally divided between men and women. For Paul, women as well as men, were called by God to be apostles of Christ. So why do we have the verses in Ephesians and Colossians (letters not believed to have been penned by Paul, which seem to contradict these equality passages)?

It's important to look at Roman attitudes of the time toward "paterfamilias" translated as father of the household. Paul's attitudes toward husband and wife equality would be considered far too liberal in the Roman Empire because they would require mutual obligations. It would also mean Paul's equal treatment of wives, children, and slaves would indicate they could be addressed directly and not through their husbands, fathers, or masters, as was the societal expectation. So the writers of the passages in Ephesians and Colossians would need their messages to be de-radicalized back into the Roman gender hierarchy of wives, children, and slaves being submissive.

What is also interesting to me is the fact that although Ephesians and Colossians were probably written by other authors in Paul's name (as was common in that time period), at least the authors of those two letters didn't totally abandon Paul's thoughts on equality after saying wives should be subject to their husbands with these verses in Ephesians 5:

***"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church," and "Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies."***

There are still troubling verses in I Corinthians, a genuine letter from Paul, that seem to contradict some of his other verses in I Corinthians on mutuality of husband and wife. These are found in three and a half verses in chapter 14, vs. 33b-36. Again, we read that women should be silent in the church. Scholars, who have researched and studied Paul's letters to determine authenticity in respect to the historical aspect of the writings, believe certain units within the seven original letters may have been inserted at a later date.

To substantiate the claim that these verses forbidding women to speak in church were added later, the texts before and after the added verses have to fit together, and then the added text has to contradict other authentic texts from Paul's other writings. And these criteria are present in the disputed verses. I won't go into all the specific criteria indicating they were most likely added later, but even the New Revised Standard Version puts these three and a half verses in a separate paragraph, and in parenthesis.

And finally, the admonition that women are never permitted to speak in worship found in the verses of I Timothy, are anti-Paul; probably written by a much later author in response to something going on with the women in the church that was disrupting worship and needed to be dealt with.

So what difference does this all make for us today? When I consider those of you here with me each week, I don't see husbands demanding submissive wives; what I see is mutual respect, mutual decision-making, caring, supporting, and loving spouses. What troubles me more than anything are the many pastors and churches who have given husbands the authority to make demands on their wives, to insist wives remain in marriages where abuse is common under the guise of demanding submissiveness, and where the husband makes life-changing decisions for both his wife and family without so much as a mention to his wife.

A few years ago the book "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" was a popular topic of conversation with the idea that men and women are different and it takes some understanding to appreciate where the other spouse is coming from. I would add that not only are personalities different in men and women, but there is a broad spectrum in both men's and women's personalities. And to make a marriage work, there has to be a good deal of give and take and mutual respect from both. And I'm pretty sure the bottom line even back in Paul's day, is that love is the key to a mutual relationship. Think on these verses that Paul penned from I Corinthians 13 – a commonly read wedding scripture.

***"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."***

As a final thought on Paul, I have come to believe he is one of the most misunderstood New Testament writers. Without a deeper understanding of the societal norms of Paul's time and the culture within which he is writing, we cannot

always take his words and apply them at face value to our churches today. I choose to believe that Paul felt the presence of God so fully that nothing short of inclusion of all, and mutual love for one another would ever be acceptable to him.

And I'm proud of our Quaker heritage that has always stressed the equality of men and women, and encouraged women in ministry. It's all about mutual respect and mutual love; and I thank each of you spouses who have modeled that for me.