

## **The Feminist Movement (8) God's Word or Paul's Opinion**

A young lady told me, "The apostle Paul seems to hate women." Many feminists see Paul as one who teaches the inferiority of the female and thus excludes them from leadership positions in the church. His teaching on headship has led to the entrenchment of male chauvinism in the institutional church, they say. Sometimes we read or hear these remarks, "Oh, this is the opinion of Paul, a crusty old bachelor; a man reflecting his own rabbinical background. His head was stuffed with ideas about women, which were current back then. His society treated a woman as an ignoramus, a plaything, and a slave."

For the feminists Paul's teaching on women is crucial. How do we interpret the commonly used Pauline texts 1 Corinthians 11:5-10; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Timothy 2:9-15? Feminists claim that few responsible contemporary theologians use those Pauline statements as a current guide for the role of women in the church or world. This means, of course, if you disagree you are irresponsible! Even evangelical feminists don't always have a great respect for Paul's view of women. One argued that as a "man socialized in a very chauvinistic society, naturally Paul would believe in the inferiority of women." Virginia Mollenkott said that surely Paul and others' "specific comments about women in local first century congregations" could not reasonably be confused with "God's term for all places and times."

### **A Measuring Rod**

What is our standard for faith and practice? It appears that reason decides what is true or not. The divine inspiration of apostolic writings is either questioned or totally rejected. New Testament scholar, Richard N. Longenecker, wrote that he often hears statements such as these: "One has to be pretty naive to accept at face value, at what the New Testament writers say about their motives"; or, "New Testament documents tell us more about the authors who wrote them than they do about the events they purport to relate"; or "No one can claim to be a scholar who accepts the New Testament's account of the resurrection"; or, "I don't mind singing the Apostles' Creed, but I hesitate to say it." Many influential theologians and critics to day insert extra-biblical meaning into almost every article of the creed. But if you cannot believe it as worded why not be honest and remain silent?

We live in an age of great skepticism. Even in evangelical circles a skepticism regarding the true value of what appears in the New Testament is more prevalent than most evangelicals dare to admit. Our own CRC headship debate makes you wonder where we are at. How can Classis Grand Rapids East overture Synod to allow classes, for a five-year period, to grant "qualified women" the right to exhort (preach) in our churches? A committee is supposed to evaluate the experiences of those churches who ordain women as elders and/or preachers and report to Synod 1996. Within five years the CRC must discover which way the wind is blowing. But not every wind that blows is of the Holy Spirit. Since when does a church decide a course of action on the basis of

experimentation? What happened to careful biblical exegesis, submission to the authority of Scripture, and our common adherence to the confessions? All this shows that the women in office debate is not a gender issue. At heart it focuses on the nature and authority of Scripture.

Is the biblical message time-bound? Is Paul's view of headship, marriage and the government of the church culturally conditioned? In his controversial book on the subject, P.K. Jewett argues that Paul's teaching regarding the subordination of woman to man represents the thinking of Paul as conditioned by a Jewish environment in which the inferiority of women was accepted, and that we ought to regard this view as a hangover from the past and not be governed by it. In other words, we must distinguish between the attitude of the apostle Paul the Christian and the attitude of Paul the Jewish rabbi. And we should choose the former and not the latter. Mollenkott judges the apostle Paul from the same perspective. She writes,

For Bible-believers the problem is that the apostle Paul seems to contradict his own teachings and behavior concerning women, apparently because of inner conflicts between the rabbinical training he had received and the liberating insights of the gospel.

She contends that Paul contradicts himself. In some of his teachings he is unfaithful to the spirit of Christ. She says,

Each of these Pauline contrasts reinforces the impressions that according to his rabbinical training Paul believed in female subordination but that according to his Christian vision he believed that the gospel conferred full equality on all believers.

But Jewett and Mollenkott don't do justice to Paul. They assess Scripture by the standards of their own North American culture. In his essay *Culture and the New Testament*, I. Howard Marshall points this out.

The cynic may be tempted to observe that the view of man and woman held by Jewett is not unlike that found in modern western culture with its emphasis on the emancipation of woman, and he may go on to wonder whether Jewett has been led to identify as central in the biblical revelation that element which is most congenial to modern western society, in other words, is Jewett simply interpreting the Bible from his own (time-bound) cultural setting and discarding what does not fit in with it?

As soon as we accept time-boundness as a valid principle, we put God at the mercy of human culture. We become manipulators of His message. Biblical standards and statements are either permanently true or permanently false. There is no in between. Who decides what is time-bound? On what basis? From which cultural perspective? Historic Christianity has honored the Bible as normative – for all time and for every culture. The Holy Spirit used the language and the vocabulary of the social environment

of the times in which the human writers of the sacred Scriptures lived and worked. It is high time that we listen anew to what God has once-for-all said in Scripture and once-for-all revealed in Jesus Christ. For the church today there is nothing more vital than the recovery of the authority and the truthfulness of Scripture and its application to all dimensions of life.

### **Fully Inspired?**

If Paul's teaching is considered time-bound and even contradictory to the spirit of Christ, then the Scriptures are no longer considered as fully inspired. Paul did not give his own opinions. God communicated His will to Paul. Revelation provides information to later generations. God's Word is conveyed in intelligible human speech, and its truth is valid for every culture in every age. Paul regarded himself as nothing more or less than the mouthpiece of God. "We received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is from God; that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth" (1 Cor. 2:12, 13). And again: "For we are not as the many, corrupting the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:17). Paul is certain that his knowledge of God is not of human origin. His apostleship, he declares, is "not from men, neither through man". (Gal. 1:1) The apostle presents his commands as bearing divine authority. "For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus". (1Thes. 4:2) Paul has seen and conversed with the risen Lord. He received his instructions from Him and passed on His instructions to the Church. (1Thes. 4:2; 2Thes. 2:15; 3:14) Peter refers to Paul's letters as scripture. (2 Pet. 7:16) The early church received the apostle's writings alongside the Old Testament as no less authoritative. We may not like this; it may not be our modern view, conditioned by 20th century secularism and positivism; but if Paul's epistles are God's infallible Word, we have no choice but to submit ourselves to them.

Paul never considered his teachings as optional. The modern-day feminists are wrong in their attempt to distinguish between the teachings of Paul the apostle and the teachings of Paul the rabbi. There is only one Paul. And if the feminists let Paul speak to them, they will discover that his view of women was different from the mores of his times. Carl F. Henry points out,

Paul . . . stressed the dignity of women and their equality with men, and emphasized reciprocal responsibilities of husbands and wives. At a time when women were condemned to menial tasks, and intellectual pursuits were reserved for upper class males alone, it is remarkable that the Apostle-in the very passage in which he excludes women from teaching in public church assemblies, stipulates that they are to 'learn in silence,' that is, they are to be taught" (1 Tim. 2:11; cf. 1 Cor. 14:35). In a society in which women were not learners, Paul's emphasis on the education of Gentile female believers is noteworthy.

When we let feminism, or any other "ism," determine the nature and content of scriptural teaching, the authority of the Christian faith is undermined. As soon as reason is on the

throne, God's Word takes second place or even less. The European theologian Emil Brunner once remarked, quite rightly, that the fate of the Bible is the fate Western civilization. We should pay heed to his warning!

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