ABSTRACT:
Within Paul’s letters, there is a wealth of theological and ministerial material with a variety of implications and interpretations—what Paul seems to say about the position of women in the Church is the object of much debate. This piece highlights the ways in which Paul displays an openness to greater involvement of women in the Christian movement and a breaking of traditional female gender roles, yet simultaneously upholds rigid boundaries of marked gender distinction, thus mirroring a current stance of the Church today.

Paul and Gender
Early Reception and Modern Implications

by Phoebe Carstens

Much has been said about Paul and his understandings of gender. Largely influenced by the content of the Pastoral Epistles, some would argue that Paul was a chauvinist, a hater and trampler of women, a champion of male supremacy—especially male religious supremacy. Others might argue that Paul was simply a product of his time: a man from a patriarchal society whose views reflected that patriarchy and thus are inevitably caught up in antiquated ideas about gender and gender equality. Still others, like scholar Robin Scroggs, proclaim the opposite; that in fact, Paul is “the only certain and consistent spokesman for the
liberation and equality of women in the New Testament.”¹ What can be said about Paul’s approach to gender, then, cannot be simple nor captured in a few brief pages. Yet, Paul’s letters reveal certain attitudes and preoccupations that hold particular weight for us in the present time, when issues of gender are increasingly prevalent in ecclesial, global, and national conversations.

In an analysis of the letter to the Galatians, the first letter to the Corinthians, and the apocryphal text the Acts of Paul and Thecla, we can see both some of Paul’s principal ideas about gender as well as some community responses which demonstrate the complexity of Paul’s approach to gender. Importantly, Paul argues against the complete subordination of women and seems to uphold some level of seeking greater equality across power divides, gender included. Paul also encourages some degree of breaking traditional gender roles for women. However, Paul does not take this to the extreme. He argues in favor of symbols of gender distinction and critiques the level of gender-bending present in the Corinthian community. Although some people, women particularly, took Paul’s writings as a nudge towards greater freedom, the reactions of others skewed heavily in the other direction, displayed clearly in the generation and prioritization of the Pastoral Epistles. This latter reception is the reception that has largely been solidified in our tradition and continues to be in tension with movements for greater gender equality and liberation.

Before turning to the texts at hand, it is fitting for a discussion of Paul and gender to first acknowledge some of the most explicit treatment of gender in the letters traditionally attributed to Paul: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. These letters, considered by most scholars to have been forged by someone claiming the authority of Paul, contain admonitions for women to be silent and submissive. They deny women any position of teaching and authority and proclaim that women will be saved only by bearing children. Given the scholarly consensus around the authorship of these letters, they will not be treated here as representing Paul’s own

thoughts about gender. Instead, this analysis will focus on the letter to
the Galatians, the first letter to the Corinthians, and the Acts of Paul
and Thecla to highlight the tension between greater freedom and rigid
boundaries for women present in Paul’s writing and teaching.

Perhaps one of the most provocative statements about gender in the
Pauline letters is present in a genuine letter, Galatians 3:27-28. These
verses, nestled within a letter focused primarily on Gentile inclusion, are
a baptismal creed: “There is no Jew or Greek; there is no slave or free;
there is no male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Stephen
J. Patterson argues that Paul’s inclusion of this creed indicates that he and
other early Christians were concerned with overcoming “false distinctions
that have no basis in reality,” namely, race, class, and gender.\(^2\) Baptism
and the new community to which baptism initiates a person are avenues
in which areas of division, like gender, are to be overcome. “In baptism,”
Patterson says, the early Christians “were committed to giving up old
identities,” which included identities as male and female, for the sake of
a new, common identity as children of God.\(^3\) Scholar Beate Wehn notes
that Paul’s inclusion of this creed could be viewed as “propaganda [that] is
made on behalf of equality” and an “appeal to break through patriarchal
societal structures.”\(^4\) Of course, the real weight of such a statement
depends on its reception, which, as we will later see, varied in the early
Pauline churches. Yet it is significant to note that Paul included this creed
in his letter at all. Though Patterson argues that Paul did not passionately
advocate for a literal enaction of the words of the creed, Paul did put forth
the creed as a model of community and evidently deemed its equalizing
sentiment significant enough to include in his letter. Paul believed that his
larger message ought to include this creed which was “about overcoming
the distinctions that commonly underwrite the human tendency to
denigrate the other,” which named the patriarchal power structure that
divides men and women as something to be overcome.\(^5\) Thus, to some

---


\(^3\) Patterson, 29.

\(^4\) Beate Wehn, “‘Blessed Are the Bodies of Those Who Are Virgins’: Reflections on the Image

\(^5\) Patterson, 158.
degree, Paul recognized that the social imbalance of power based on gender was something to be rejected.

However, some scholars note that the simple inclusion of this creed ought not to be heralded as a gender-equalizing success. Jeremy Punt notes that Paul, though he includes the creed in his letter, “provided neither a sustained challenge nor any fuller, theological rationale that would challenge” the patriarchal system. 6 The inclusion of the creed, Punt argues, should not “be read as indication of a direct opposition to the hierarchies of the day and their exclusionary mechanisms.” 7 To be sure, just as Paul declared “no slave or free” yet offered no meaningful challenge to the system of slavery, the Pauline corpus as a whole does not suggest that Paul actively sought to eradicate the patriarchy or critically challenge the patriarchal system within which he worked. Paul was far more focused on overcoming the distinction of Gentile and Jew, so while he may have nominally recognized other imbalances in society, we cannot say that he effectively championed the cause of gender equality (or, for that matter, the end to slavery). As many might remark in situations of gender inequality today: recognition of the problem is important, but it is not enough.

As Punt notes, Paul’s letters do not offer a sustained challenge to the patriarchal system. At the same time, they do reveal certain instances of Paul deferring and preaching to women that run counter to the norms of his time. The most obvious example of this is the notable involvement of women in Paul’s mission. According to Wayne A. Meeks, “the role of women in the Pauline movement is much greater and much more nearly equal to that of men than in contemporary Judaism.” 8 During the advent of Christianity, the position of women in the Greco-Roman world and in Judaism was one in which women were gradually experiencing a small degree of growing freedom but in a very limited sense. “The hierarchical pattern of the family, in which the male was always superior

---

7 Punt, 146.
to the female...was deeply entrenched in law and custom,” according to Meeks.9 Although women experienced some degree of mobility in terms of the possibility of being club members, patronesses, and so forth, their role in society was largely limited to that of wife and mother. Yet, “there are a number of signs that in the Pauline school women could enjoy a functional equality in leadership roles that would have been unusual in Greco-Roman society as a whole and quite astonishing in comparison with contemporary Judaism.”10 Thus, the Pauline mission was somehow a location for greater social involvement for women. Numerous women are named throughout Paul’s letters as figures of influence and significance. Phoebe is named in the letter to the Romans as both a deacon and a patron. Paul also names Prisca, Mary, and Junia, among others. The sheer number of influential women named by Paul suggests that “women were obviously involved in the leadership of the Jesus movement before Paul joined it. It was part of what he signed on to, and he embraced it thoroughly.”11 Paul not only witnesses the gradual increase in women’s autonomy and power but also actively endorses it by citing several women as figures of authority and leadership. Hence, while Paul did not go out of his way to usher in a new era of “no male and female,” he did cooperate with and support greater social mobility for women.

But there is something even more radical at play than Paul’s acceptance and endorsement of women being present and active in the community. Paul also actively endorses the breaking of certain gender roles, thus further developing a liberative position for women in the early Christian communities. Whether viewed negatively (i.e., female as evil) or neutrally, a woman’s proper role was to serve as a wife to a husband, who could safely channel or resist desire through sexual relations with her, and as mother to children. Contrary to this, Paul preaches celibacy: “To the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.” According to Patterson, celibacy for ancient women meant “to live a life free of the sexual demands of a man, free from the perils of

---

9 Meeks, Urban Christians, 23.
11 Patterson, 145-146.
childbirth, free to pursue other passions.” It was not simply to refrain from sexual relations; it was to reject what it meant to be ‘a woman’ in the eyes of society. For a woman to shirk the role of wife and mother, the only roles allowed and assigned to her by the society, “was a tremendous provocation in the eyes of the Roman-Hellenistic milieu, something that called into question the entire ordering of relations between the sexes.”

The destabilizing and fear-inducing effect of Paul’s preaching on virginity and marriage can be seen in the Acts of Paul and Thecla. In this apocryphal work, a young virgin, Thecla, is so captivated by Paul’s preaching that she rejects marriage and multiple sexual advances by various men, to the horror and anger of her family and community. So horrified by what Paul is teaching in this regard, they declare, “this man will overturn the city.” They accuse Paul of making virgins averse to marriage, which is so destructive to the status quo that Paul is taken captive and Thecla condemned to death (unsuccessfully). The roles of perpetual virgins and ‘widows’ in the early Christian community represented new avenues for women, new roles completely averse to what society largely held as a woman’s only purpose or definition. These new roles were not only tolerated but encouraged by Paul, and they were undeniably freeing for women, who were subsequently “freed from the hierarchical dominance of either father or husband, freed from the demands of childbearing and rearing, freed even from pressing economic concerns.” Despite the destabilizing effect, Paul actively encouraged this gender-transgressive activity. Of course, Paul did not preach or insist that all should reject their role as husband/wife and father/mother, though he did lament that not all could be celibate like him. Paul recognized that all have a distinct role, and he insisted that all should stick to that role, remaining as they are. The point of great interest is that Paul actively encouraged gendered behavior (for women, namely) that transgressed their given societal role. In this, we begin to see an attitude regarding

---

12 Patterson, 130.
13 Wehn, 154.
gender that is far more disruptive to the patriarchal status quo than Paul simply recognizing the issue of gender-based power imbalances and cooperating with a growth in social mobility for women: Paul encouraged ways of enacting womanhood that diverged from the limited, accepted roles of his time.

It is crucial to note, however, that Paul does this only in a narrow sense. The limits of Paul’s gender-expansive preaching can be seen clearly in the first letter to the Corinthians. While Meeks interestingly notes that “Paul presupposes and approves in the Corinthian congregation an equivalence of role and a mutuality of relationship between the sexes in matters of marriages, divorce, and charismatic leadership of the church to a degree that is virtually unparalleled in Jewish or pagan society of the time,” he also very specifically does not approve of the breaking of gender roles happening in the Corinthian community.16

1 Cor 11:2-16 is an obscure passage and the subject of much study, with the core issue being that some people in Corinth are worshiping in a way that Paul feels it is necessary to condemn, with gender being a key factor. Seemingly, women are preaching and praying with short hair while men do so with long hair. It is notable that “Paul nowhere denies women the right to engage in charismatic leadership of worship. Furthermore, he does not advocate functionally inferior roles for women.”17 Paul is not denying women an active role based on what is fit or unfit for women to do. Rather, what Paul is concerned with are the symbols which differentiate male and female— in this case, their hair. According to Branson L. Parler, in the ancient world, hair was an important marker of sexual difference. It was not just a matter of custom but rather seen as a part of nature: for a man to have long hair or a woman short hair was for those individuals to be rejecting their fundamental nature.18 “Certain communally gendered differences [that were] marked on, by, and through [individual’s] bodies” were seen as critical in the differentiation of male and female, a

distinction inherently tied to creation. The basis of community for Paul is the creation of male and female as marked in Genesis.

For some, perhaps the community at Corinth, belief in the myth of the primordial androgyne taken in conjunction with the baptismal creed declaring “no male and female” produced attempts to enact gender-bending or perhaps gender-blending, such as men and women praying together while rejecting or obscuring physical markers of gender distinction, like hair length. For Paul, who viewed the distinction of male and female as involved in the original order of the cosmos, this is a major problem. As Meeks puts it, “the differentiation of male and female could become an important symbol for the fundamental order of the world, while any modification of the role differences could become a potent symbol of social criticism or even of total rejection of the existing order.”

Although Paul recognized and called for relative equality of men and women in the community, he still “insist[ed] on the preservation of the symbols of the present, differentiated order,” on the marked differences of male and female for the purposes of maintaining order in the present age.

The symbols of gender distinction and the order they represented were so important to Paul that their preservation took precedence over movements towards gender equality, if those movements led to the loss of marked differentiation between genders. In response to the “egalitarian enthusiasm” of some of the early Christians, Paul called for restraint, which subsequently took the form of admonishing and limiting female involvement, even if that was not the original intent. This shows up again in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, where Thecla enthusiastically follows Paul against all odds and, after having already escaped death once, declares, “I will cut my hair off and I shall follow you wherever you go.” Though Paul has no issue with her leaving her family and her betrothal to live a life of preaching and teaching, here he draws the line. She should not cut her hair, Paul says, because “times are evil and you are beautiful.” Thus

23 The Acts of Paul and Thecla, 300.
here, too, we can see the tension in which Paul encourages freedom from certain restrictive gender roles for women while simultaneously calling for the upholding of physical markers of gender difference.

The interplay of gender roles, performance, and differentiation is one that continues to be a matter of debate today, particularly in the Church, reinforcing the idea that we cannot easily define or describe the way that Paul’s approach to gender is received in the communities that learn from him. Some of the contemporary responses to Paul’s attitudes towards gender have already been made evident. Some communities, like the Corinthians, mistakenly took the baptismal creed (like that found in the letter to the Galatians) as a call for a return to androgyny, which Paul rejected as premature eradication of gender differences necessary for upholding order. In many cases, “a number of women broke through the normal expectations of female roles.” These women, like Thecla, were spurred on by Paul’s presentation of a new way of being, in which women had roles to play beyond that of wife and mother. Paul actively engaged with and endorsed women in leadership roles, and though he was the product of a time that did not see women as the direct image of God (1 Cor 11:7), he uniquely recognized an equality of roles in the community of women and men, viewing women, not just men, as included and necessary in the Body of Christ. But the presence of the Pastoral Epistles in the canon of Scripture speaks to the fact that this move toward greater equality was met with fierce and powerful opposition. These letters show “a strong concern for the opinion of contemporary society,” which did not look favorably upon the upsetting of the patriarchal power structure. We find “theological conceptions that are fundamentally hostile to women, texts that speak of women as the sinful Eve because her nature makes her susceptible to seduction.” In writers like Ambrosiaster, we see a fierce adherence to ideas that subordinate and denigrate women, that they must be “under the power of the man” in both clothing and general obedience.

24 Meeks, Urban Christians, 71.
26 Wehn, 155.
So insidious was the fear of equality that forged letters and interpolations which sought to silence women have been accepted and branded as scripture. Even in Paul’s own (genuine) writing, gender equality was certainly not a priority, and “Paul himself, though retaining a sense of the functional equality of all members of the community…nevertheless delivered some restrictive admonitions to women that arose in part from a practical desire for Church order.”28 Consequences of these early adverse reactions still impact the position of women in many Christian communities today.

Hence, the diversity of perspectives on Paul and gender makes sense. Paul upheld that divisions based on gender ought to be overcome, yet he criticized attempts to eradicate symbols of gender difference. Women featured prominently in his mission, and he encouraged women to lead lives outside their typical gender roles. Yet, he failed to recognize women as capable of imaging God, failed to outwardly reject the oppression of patriarchy, and failed to see beyond rigid categories of marked gender difference. The persistence of forgeries and interpolations further complicates the matter. Indeed, Paul resists many of our modern judgements. We ought not call him a chauvinist just as we ought not call him a feminist. In some regards, Paul teetered on the precipice of advocating for gender equality, falling more often than not on the side of upholding harmful, oppressive structures rather than pursuing the truly liberative option.

It can be difficult to consider what Paul’s treatments of gender might mean for the People of God today for myriad reasons. Gender roles, differentiation, and identity in antiquity are far different from modern understandings, and even within his own context Paul maintains a delicate balance between encouraging freedom and restraint. It is here, living in the tension, that we may locate the position of the Church today. Like Paul, the Church can often be observed poised and ready for greater gender equality and liberation, yet all too often pulling back, fearful of change and fearful of negative fallout. We are currently experiencing a

unique cacophony of voices challenging the power structure of binary gender: women calling for autonomy, independence, and leadership roles; gay people calling for welcome and love; transgender and nonbinary people calling for recognition and mercy. All destabilize our systems built on gender; thus, all incite anger, fear, and suppression. What will be our response? Will we continue to write admonitions into our scriptures, telling them: you must be silent? Will we reject their ways of life for fear of disrupting order? Or will we expand our understandings of how people can exist in the world and advocate for new ways of being? Will we continue to learn together what it means to be united as children of God? Paul gives us an example of each of these ways of proceeding; it is up to us to discern which paths truly lead to the building up of the Kingdom of God.
Bibliography


