

Women According to Saint Paul

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ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the conception that St. Paul has about women in light of contemporary scholarship. Using the most recent and thorough scholarly work of Senén Vidal on St. Paul's letters, this essay concludes that without a doubt St. Paul's views were androcentric, but, contrary to what has been held, he was not misogynist. His writings show nothing but a deep appreciation for women, encouraged their participation in the Church, and at some point, St. Paul even regards them as equals before God.

Introduction

With the rise of feminism in the twentieth century, it has become a challenge for Christians to confront certain passages in the Old and New Testaments that are clearly androcentric and misogynistic. Many of these passages have strongly influenced the opinion of the Catholic Church and certain Protestant churches to deny women any kind of ministry. Even in some Christian sects it is still taught that women should be subject to their husbands, even to the point of standing domestic violence.

This essay will deal with a small part of this debate. There is no question that a substantial part of the Biblical passages used to demean women come from the *corpus paulinum*, the Pauline epistles, letters attributed to St. Paul. It is no wonder that so many feminists point to St. Paul as being *the* one responsible for misogynist views of women within Christianity and a justification for androcentric behavior in the churches.

It is my position that many of the allegations about St. Paul's misogyny are not founded on the most recent contemporary Bible scholarship, and the figure of St. Paul needs a serious rehabilitation in this area. That is one of the goals of this essay. However, the analysis will also suggest a path for the debate on how Christian denominations (including the Catholic Church) should develop a theological basis to treat women as equals, and with the same dignity as men.

For the purposes of examining these passages, I will use the excellent work made by the Bible scholar Senén Vidal¹. I also clarify that the terms “androcentric” and “misogyny” will not mean the same. “Androcentric” will only describe man-centered behavior, “misogyny” will describe only those passages that expressly show a hatred for women. Although many people think that androcentrism is a product of misogyny (and they are right), in St. Paul we see a definite case where we can see his love and appreciation for women *despite* his androcentric views.

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1 I will use only those parts of Senén Vidal's theory that seem to be shared by most Christian scholars today, although I tend to agree with the way Vidal theorizes the Pauline epistles were written, this theory is not necessarily shared by most scholars.

The Incriminating Passages

If we think of a trial, and look at the *corpus paulinum* it would not be difficult to find St. Paul guilty of misogyny. Let us look at many of these incriminating passages:

- (1) Θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι
παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστίν,
κεφαλὴ δὲ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ
κεφαλὴ δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὁ θεός.

πᾶς ἀνὴρ προσευχόμενος ἢ προφητῶν κατὰ κεφαλῆς ἔχων καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ. πᾶσα δὲ γυνὴ προσευχομένη ἢ προητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτῳ τῇ κεφαλῇ καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς· ἐν γάρ ἐστιν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ τῇ ἐξυρημένῃ. εἰ γάρ οὐ κατακαλύπτεται γυνὴ, καὶ κειράσθω· εἰ δὲ αἰσχρὸν γυναικὶ τὸ κείρασθαι ἢ ξυρᾶσθαι, κατακαλυπτέσθω. ἀνὴρ μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ὀφείλει κατακαλύπτεται τὴν κεφαλὴν εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ ὑπάρχων· ἡ γυνὴ δὲ δόξα ἀνδρὸς ἐστίν. οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἀνὴρ ἐκ γυναικὸς ἀλλὰ γυνὴ ἐξ ἀνδρὸς· καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἐκτίσθη ἀνὴρ διὰ τὴν γυναῖκα, ἀλλὰ γυνὴ διὰ τὸν ἄνδρα. διὰ τοῦτο ὀφείλει ἡ γυνὴ ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ διὰ τοῦς ἀγγέλους.

[. . .]

Ἐν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς κρίνατε· πρέπον ἐστίν γυναῖκα ἀκατακάλυπτον τῷ θεῷ προσεύχεσθαι; οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις αὐτῆ διδάκει ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἀνὴρ μὲν ἐὰν κομᾷ ἀτιμία αὐτῷ ἐστίν, γυνὴ δὲ ἐὰν κομᾷ δόξα αὐτῇ ἐστίν; ὅτι ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβιλαίου δέδοται αὐτῇ.

Εἰ δέ τις δοκεῖ φιλόνεικος εἶναι, ἡμεῖς τοιαύτην συνήθειαν οὐκ ἔχομεν οὐδὲ αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τοῦ θεοῦ.

[But I should like you to understand that

the head of every man is Christ,
the head of woman is man,
and the head of Christ is God.

For any man to pray or to prophesy with his head covered shows disrespect for his head. And for a woman to pray or prophesy with her head uncovered shows disrespect for her head; it is exactly the same as if she had her hair shaved off. Indeed, if a woman does go without a veil, she would have her hair cut off too; but if it is a shameful thing for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, then she should wear veil. But for a man it is not right to have his head covered, since he is the image of God and reflects God's glory, but woman is the reflection of man's glory. For man did not come from woman; no, woman came from man; nor was man created for the sake of man: and this is why it is right for a woman to wear on her head a sign of the authority over her, because of the angels.

[. . .]

Decide for yourselves: does it seem fitting that a woman should pray to God without a veil? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but when a woman has long hair, it is her glory? After all her hair was given to her to be a covering.

If anyone wants to be contentious, I say that we have no such custom, nor do any of the churches of God. (1 Cor. 11: 3-10; 13-16).]

(2) Ὡς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἁγίων αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν, ἀλλὰ ὑποτασέθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει. εἰ δὲ τι μαθεῖν θέλουσιν, ἐν οἴκῳ τοὺς ἰδίους ἄνδρας ἐπερωτάτωσαν· αἰσχρὸν γάρ ἐστιν γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ. ἢ ἄφ' ὑμῶν ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν, ἢ εἰς ὑμᾶς μόνους κατήντησεν.

[As in all churches of God's holy people, women are to remain quiet in the assemblies, since they have no permission to speak: theirs is a subordinate part, as the Law itself says. If there is anything they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home: it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly. Do you think that you are the source of the word of God? Or that you are the only people to whom it has come? (1 Cor. 14: 33b-36).]

(3) διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτέπτω, οὐδὲ ἀυθεντεῖν ἄνδρὸς, ἀλλ' εἶναι ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ. Ἄδὰμ γὰρ πρῶτος ἐπλάσθη, εἶτα Εὐά. καὶ Ἄδὰμ οὐκ ἠπατήθη, ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἐξαπατηθεῖα ἐν παραβάσει γέγονεν· σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας, ἐὰν μείνωσιν ἐν πίστει καὶ ἀγάπῃ καὶ ἁγιασμῷ μετὰ σωφροσύνης.

[During instruction, a woman should be quiet and respectful. I give no permission for a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. A woman ought to be quiet, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin. Nevertheless, she will be saved by child-bearing, provided she lives a sensible life and is constant in faith and love and holiness (1 Tim. 2: 11-15).]

Taken at face-value, these passages would be enough to condemn St. Paul for misogyny. However, looking at these passages in context lets us see clearly that St. Paul's *real* views on women have little to do with these passages.

Contemporary Bible Scholarship on the *Corpus Paulinum*

There are certain letters in the New Testament that are considered to be the *corpus paulinum*: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Philipians, Galatians, Hebrews. These were letters attributed to St. Paul.

However, recent scholarship has found that only *some* of the letters of the *corpus paulinum* were written by St. Paul himself. The epistles to be thought authentic are: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thesalonians, Philipians, and Philemon. The others, not written by St. Paul, are Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews.

The Letter to the Hebrews was not considered initially to be an authentic writing by St. Paul. We know of a certain collection of Pauline letters at the beginning of the second century A.D. During the second century, ten writings were considered to be authentic at the time (with the exclusion of 1 and 2 of Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews). By the end of that century, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus were included, but Hebrews was still excluded. By the third century Hebrews was integrated in the *corpus paulinum*, first in the Eastern Churches, then in the West.² The exposition of this history, along with the evident difference of style and doctrine from the rest of the Pauline letters makes it unlikely that the Letter to the Hebrews was written by St. Paul. The farewell at the

2 Vidal 1996, 13-14.

end of the letter was an attempt by some scribe to link this letter to the rest of the *corpus paulinum*.³

In the case of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, have a different style and vocabulary. Their authors try to imitate artificially the style of St. Paul, but they reflect the reality of the Pauline communities at the end of the first century and beginning the second century A.D. The author of 2 Thessalonians knows the style of St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians, probably written at the beginning of the second century, it reflects an enthusiasm for the coming of Christ at the end of times (2 Thes. 2:1-2). Colossians and Ephesians try to provide theological and doctrinal basis to confront several branches of Christianity which seem to be threatened by certain hellenizing influence, perhaps the seed to what would be known as Gnosticism. 1 and 2 of Timothy, and Titus are “pastoral letters” and were written by one author. It may be written late during the first part of the second century A.D., because they were not included in Marcion's canon. Its content reveals that it refers to an advance institutionalization of the Church, where a hierarchy of the Church's government was more defined.⁴

This discovery by Bible scholars is very pertinent to our discussions, because one of the passages mentioned before (1 Tim. 2: 11-15) belongs to these Post-Pauline letters, *which means that 1 Tim. 2: 11-15 was not written by St. Paul*. Therefore, 1 Tim. 2: 11-15 is not a valid passage to argue that St. Paul hated women.

Should Women Speak in Assemblies?

One of the most cited passages to argue against women preaching, needless to say women ordination in the Roman Catholic Church and other churches, is the one where St. Paul apparently tells women to shut up (1 Cor. 14: 33b-36). However, there is a particular problem with this passage, its location.

Let us look at the context of this passage and will italicize the controvertible part that forbids women to speak in the assemblies:

Let two prophets, or three, speak while the rest weigh their words; and if a revelation comes to someone else who is sitting by, the speaker should stop speaking. You can all prophesy, but one at a time, then all will learn something and all receive encouragement. The prophetic spirit is to be under the prophets' control, for God is a God not of disorder but peace.

As in all the churches of God's holy people, women are to remain quiet in the assemblies, since they have no permission to speak: theirs is a subordinate part, as the Law itself says. If there is anything they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home: it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly. Do you really think that you are the source of the word of God? Or that you are the only people to whom it has come?

Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have any spiritual powers must recognise that what I am writing to you is a commandment from the Lord. If anyone does not recognise this, it is because that person is not recognised himself (1 Cor. 14: 29-38).

³ Vidal 1996, 15.

⁴ Vidal 1996, 15-17.

If we look at this passage carefully, we will notice that immediately that there something is wrong. First, there seems to be an interruption of the subject being discussed, just to say that women should shut up. If we omit the that part of the passage, we will see that the whole passage flows flawlessly without it.

Let two prophets, or three, speak while the rest weigh their words; and if a revelation comes to someone else who is sitting by, the speaker should stop speaking. You can all prophesy, but one at a time, then all will learn something and all receive encouragement. The prophetic spirit is to be under the prophets' control, for God is a God not of disorder but peace. Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have any spiritual powers must recognise that what I am writing to you is a commandment from the Lord. If anyone does not recognise this, it is because that person is not recognised himself (1 Cor. 14: 29-33a; 37-38).

Secondly, the italicized section of the text talks about what has been established by the “Law”. But how does that agree with St. Paul's conviction that we are free through Christ, and no longer subject to the Law (Rom. 3: 21-4:25). Thirdly, as we shall see later, St. Paul does refer positively to the role of women prophesying and praying (1 Cor 11: 1-16).⁵

If this is true, this means, from a scholarly standpoint, that 1 Cor. 14, 33b-36 *this is an interpolation added to the first letter to the Corinthians by a later scribe*, probably a member of a Pauline community, who was probably used to Hellenistic life, which had a strong patriarchal influence, and imitated their structure of the “house” as a model for the early Christian assemblies.⁶

Women, Cover Your Heads!

Unlike 1 Cor. 14: 33b-36 and 1 Tim. 2: 11-15, 1, 1 Cor. 11: 3-10; 13-16 *was* written by St. Paul. There are several things to be mentioned about this passage though. First, it is known that St. Paul was influenced by several Hellenistic philosophies, among them Judeo-Hellenistic philosophies, like that of Philo of Alexandria. We see in 1 Cor. 11: 3-10; 13-16 a clear example of one aspect Judeo-Hellenistic philosophy at that time: the hierarchy of authority. St. Paul uses the authority order of God-Christ-man (1 Cor. 3: 23). Since, according to Genesis, women came from men, then the order of authority should be God-Christ-man-woman.⁷ Also, the authority he is talking about is only stated within the relationship of wife and husband.⁸

We can, of course, argue that this original perspective of women being subject to men had its origins in misogynistic views on women, but this is the important question: Does this passage really mean that St. Paul *hated* women as much as some people think? Or does it show that St. Paul was a man of his own time?

One final point I would like to make is the explicit ambivalence in St. Paul regarding the superiority of men over women. Despite the fact that he presents an argument in favor of women covering their heads because of their inferiority, he says the following:

Πλὴν οὕτη χωρὶς ἀνδρὸς οὔτε ἀνὴρ χωρὶς γυναικὸς ἐν κυρίῳ· ὥσπερ γὰρ ἡ γυνὴ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρός, οὕτως καὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ διὰ τῆς γυναικός· τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.

5 Vidal 1996, 214.

6 Vidal 1996, 214-215; Ehrman 2005, 183-184.

7 Vidal 1996, 130.

8 Vidal 1996, 130-131.

[However, in the Lord, though woman is nothing without man, man is nothing without woman; and though woman came from man, so does every man come from a woman, and everything comes from God. (1 Cor. 11: 11-12).]

This is an amazing passage, because it states that in end men and women are equal in the eyes of God, even when on Earth, they are not. This point of view is repeated elsewhere in one of St. Paul's epistles (Gal. 3: 28). Senén Vidal states that, despite the Jewish view of women as inferior to men, he seems to correct this view with a new Christian perspective that made the allegation of men's superiority as invalid. He essentially wanted to overcome the differences between men and women.⁹

St. Paul's Regard for Women in the Church

Other passages in the authentic Pauline epistles give us another side of what St. Paul thought of women. One of the most explicit positive passages can be found in Romans 16. Senén Vidal speculates that originally this chapter was a letter directed to the community of Ephesus, and later it was fused to the rest of the text that was directed to the community of Rome.¹⁰

First, we see “Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae” (Φοίβη [. . .] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς), who, apparently, was delivering St. Paul's letter to the Christian community of Ephesus.¹¹ He says the following regarding Phoebe:

[. . .] give her, in the Lord, a welcome worthy of God's holy people, and help her with whatever she needs from you – she herself has come to the help of many people, including myself (Rom. 16: 2).

Next, he greets “Prisca and Aquila” (Πρίσκαν καὶ Ἀκύλαν), apparently a married couple. The interesting thing here is that it is extremely strange to find the woman mentioned before the man. According to the custom of the time, the letter is supposed to mention the higher authority first. This would probably mean that Prisca's activity was more significant than her husband's.¹² He describes both Prisca and Aquila this way:

[. . .] my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks to save my life; to them, thanks not only from me, but from all the churches among the gentiles; and my greetings to the church at their house (Rom. 16: 3b-5).

The next woman who appears is Mary, who is described as the one “who worked so hard for you” (Ἀσπάσασθε Μαρίαμ ἣτις πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν εἰς ὑμᾶς) (Rom. 16: 6).

Then he greets another couple, apparently married, “Andronicus and Junia” (Ἀνδρόνικον καὶ Ἰουνιᾶν) the latter evidently the name of a woman. What makes this specific greeting so interesting is the way that St. Paul describes them: “those outstanding [among] the apostles [. . .] my kinsmen and fellow-prisoners, who were in Christ before me” (τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου καὶ συναιχμαλώτους μου, οἵτινές εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, οἳ καὶ πρὸ ἐμοῦ γέγοναν Χριστῷ) (Rom. 16: 7). It is amazing to find a *woman apostle* at this time. The Catholic Church,

⁹ Vidal 1996, 132.

¹⁰ Vidal 1996, 359-367.

¹¹ Vidal 1996, 360.

¹² Vidal 1996, 361; Ehrman 2005,186.

since the time of the Church Fathers, has tried to come up with clever arguments to explain this anomaly of a “woman apostle”. One of them had to do with changing the name from “Junia” to “Junias”, so it appears as the name of a man. In fact, many scribes purposely changed the name “Junia” to “Junias”.¹³ However, it was so evident that “Junia” was the name of a woman, that during the Middle Ages it was argued that Andronicus and Junia were husband and wife respectively. The problem is that the name “Junias” did not exist at that time as the name of a man.¹⁴ Another amazing thing to note is that Andronicus and Junia were Christians *before* St. Paul himself.

He also greets Tryphaena (Τρύφαιναν) and Triphosa (Τριφῶσαν), whom he describes as working hard in the Lord (τὰς κοπιώσας ἐν κυρίῳ) (Rom. 16: 12a). Next, he greets Persis (Περσίδα), whom he describes as beloved or friend (ἀγαπητήν) and hard-worker for the Lord (ἦτις πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν ἐν κυρίῳ) (Rom. 16, 12b). St. Paul greets Rufus' mother, whom he feels is also *his* mother (καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐμοῦ) (Rom. 16: 13b). He greets also Julia (Ἰουλίαν) and Nereus' sister (Νηρέα καὶ τὴν ἀδελφὴν αὐτοῦ) (Rom 16: 15).

In other words, in a single letter, St. Paul refers to *ten* women, and *he appreciates and loves deeply all of them*. This is definitely *not* the profile of a man who is guilty of misogyny, but all the contrary. Even the letter recognizes the authority of some women within the churches in Ephesus. This is definitely not the kind of man who would tell women to shut up in the assemblies.

Also, we must remember that St. Paul talked with Chloe about the situation of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:11). He also talks about Euodia and Syntyche, women who worked along with St. Paul spreading the Gospel (Phil. 4, 2-3).

We know that many women did accompany St. Paul during his journeys. This can be seen clearly in the Acts of the Apostles where it says that he and Silas converted many women (Acts 17: 4). He complained when he was, for some reason, forbidden from having Christian women in his journeys.

[Have we not] every right to be accompanied by a Christian wife, like the other apostles, like the brothers of the Lord, and like Cephas [Peter]? (1 Cor. 9: 5).

This is not the attitude of someone who wishes to exclude women from ministry or service to the Church.

Implications for the Church Today

Pope John Paul II in his encyclicals *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *Ordenatio Sacerdotalis* he repeated the arguments against women ordination, specially based on the fact that “no woman has been ordained”, and that Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, was not ordained, among other silly arguments.

If St. Paul's letters along with contemporary scholarship show that women exercised many ministries, explicitly we find that they did preach the Gospel, they were community leaders, some of them were deaconesses, and one specifically is considered “eminent among the apostles”. The Catholic Church cannot go on claiming that no woman has been ordained in history, just because

¹³ Ehrman 2005, 185.

¹⁴ Ehrman 2005, 185.

Jesus did not ordain any.

Jesus' message planted the seed for women liberation, but he was not Himself a feminist revolutionary. He did show a spirit of closeness to women, even to the point of making many of them preachers of the Gospel and fervent disciples. We know of his compassion for adulterous women, and some of them who were present during the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, placing them in a position to be the first one to proclaim the Gospel *to the Apostles*. The role of women such as Mary Magdalene, a woman who was an eminent disciple of Jesus, made the authors of the Gospels to recognize her leadership and recognize her merits.

If this is the case, the Catholic Church has no right to restrict the Sacrament of Holy Orders only to men. The same goes to many Protestant denominations that restrict women leadership and ministry.

Conclusion

St. Paul the Apostle did hold an androcentric view on women, but he was not a misogynist. On the contrary, St. Paul did admire Christian women, specially their leadership in the Church, and even the persecutions they had to endure. We have shown conclusive evidence that St. Paul did not reject and diminish women leadership in the early Church, and encouraged their participation in Christian communities. He showed nothing less than deep love and admiration for women at that time.

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