

THE SPIRITUAL EQUALITY OF WOMEN - PART II

In the article, **The Spiritual Equality of Women**, we examined Jesus' treatment of women in his day. We showed that Jesus not only taught women directly, but he also trained them to be ministers of the good news right alongside the men. We further explained that with the pouring out of the Spirit of Truth at Pentecost 33 C.E., womankind was forever set free from all religious discrimination based on gender, and that all who exercise faith in Jesus are obligated to respect and honor the spiritual equality of women.

We also noted that the Apostle Paul, in his writings, set forth certain rules concerning women that Jesus never mentioned and that Paul was careful not to attribute to Jesus. We cited *1 Timothy 2:11-12*, *1 Corinthians 7:12-13* and *1 Corinthians 7:25* in support of that statement. In response, we received the following inquiry:

“Respective your last article about the "**The Spiritual Equality of Women**": What do you think about the following scriptures: 1 Corinthians 11:3 (but also verses 4-10) and Ephesians 5:21-24? What's written there seems not to be only the opinion of the Apostle Paul?”

We appreciate the inquiry because we suspect this is a matter many Christians are interested in since it appears that Paul had a different view of women than did Jesus. In the scriptures referred to by the inquirer, Paul asserts that man is the head of the woman, and that a woman requires some “sign of authority” before she can pray or prophesy, whereas a man does not. How do we reconcile these differences between the actions of Jesus and the writings of Paul? Either Jesus freed women from second class status in the Christian faith, or he did not. Either men and women are spiritually equal, or they are not. We believe the reconciliation comes from a fair examination of Paul himself and the Christian writings.

Here are the scriptures the inquirer refers to:

“I want you to know that the head of every man is the Christ; in turn the head of a woman is the man; in turn the head of the Christ is God. Every man that prays or prophesies having something on his head shames his head; but every woman that prays or prophesies with her head uncovered shames her head, for it is one and the same as if she were a [woman] with a shaved head. For if a woman does not cover herself, let her also be shorn; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. For a man ought not to have his head covered, as he is God's image and glory; but the woman is man's glory. For man is not out of woman, but woman out of man; and, what is more, man was not created for the sake of the woman, but woman for the sake of the man. That is why the woman ought to have a sign of authority upon her head because of the angels.” – *1 Corinthians 11:3-10*

“Be in subjection to one another in fear of Christ. Let wives be in subjection to their husbands as to the Lord, because a husband is head of his wife as the Christ also is head of the congregation, he being a savior of [this] body. In fact, as the congregation is in subjection to the Christ, so let wives also be to their husbands in everything.” – *Ephesians 5:21-24*

First, let’s consider, as they say, the source.

The Apostle Paul is the writer of both the letters to the Corinthians and the letter to the Ephesians. Paul was not a follower of Jesus when Jesus walked the earth; Paul was not one of his twelve apostles, nor was he a disciple. At the time of Jesus’ formal ministry, history indicates that Paul was in his mid to late 20's. So he may have heard of Jesus, and there is a possibility that he may have even seen him on occasion. But it is not likely that Paul had the privilege of observing Jesus’ conduct toward women, or that was he an eyewitness to Jesus’ personal training of the women corp.

At some point in his career, Paul, known as Saul, became a prominent Jew and a learned Pharisee. When he thought about Jesus, he would have viewed him through the prejudiced eyes of a Pharisee and a religious opponent. He would have viewed Jesus as a radical and a revolutionary who threatened the Law of Moses and blasphemed God, as was the general opinion of the Pharisees who saw him. (*Matthew 26:59-68*) He would have been a blind guide as were the rest. (*Matthew 15:14*)

In Paul’s own words, he describes himself as one who was a zealous and unyielding Pharisee who persecuted Jesus’ followers:

“If any other man thinks he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I the more so: circumcised the eighth day, out of the family stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew [born] from Hebrews; as respects law, **a Pharisee**; as respects zeal, **persecuting the congregation**; as respects righteousness that is **by means of law, one who proved himself blameless.**” – *Philippians 3:4-6*

And he was merciless in his efforts to eradicate all vestiges of the Jesus brotherhood, persecuting both men and women:

“But Saul, still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, in order that he might bring bound to Jerusalem any whom he found who belonged to The Way, both men and women.” – *Acts 9:1-2*

But on this trip to Damascus, Saul was overcome by a bright light where he had his first encounter with the glorified Jesus. And from this point on, Saul became a staunch proponent of Jesus. He used his Pharisaic training to convince others that Jesus is the Christ by referencing the Hebrew writings with which he had expert familiarity. (*Acts 9:3-22*)

The twelve apostles were commonplace men. Most were fishermen which means they were rugged, virile, outdoors men, not academics like Paul. Thus, Paul would be a superior organizer and a very effective congregator. And that he was. In that work, he no doubt used his extensive Jewish upbringing and training to organize many of the first century Christian congregations. For this reason, we should not be surprised that the flavor of his organizational and administrative counsel would carry a Jewish tone.

We must also consider Paul's audience. As 'the apostle to the nations' (**Romans 11:13**), he was confronted with circumstances that were different from what the apostles who remained in Jerusalem were confronted with. The apostles preached and taught mainly Jews and Jewish proselytes who were, for the most part, a very orderly and moral people. The people Paul preached to included 'pagans' who held quite a different view of life and behavior than did the Jews.

For example, Corinth was a metropolis and a city of strategic commercial importance, but it was also a city of very low morals. The debauchery and intellectual sophistry of the Greeks was finding its way into the Corinthian congregation and was clashing with the superstitious and legalistic Jews, causing divisions. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written to heal these divisions and join these brothers of differing backgrounds into one united congregation. (See **Fitly United in the Same Mind.**)

The congregation in Ephesus was made up of a mixture of mostly Gentiles who were leaving behind their worship of idols, and Jews who were leaving behind the Law Covenant. Again, Paul saw a need to offer counsel that would unite the congregation. He began with an exposition of God's original and unchanging purpose for mankind to be united as sons of the kingdom. (See **Foreordained From the Founding of the World.**) Then he offered the counsel that is the subject of this article.

To both audiences, Paul could teach the things Jesus commanded. (**Matthew 28:19**) But we note that Jesus never taught anything specific about conduct and behavior beyond the two commandments (**Matthew 22:35-40**) and the law of fairness (**Matthew 7:12**). Jesus never instituted any particular procedural rules, nor did he set up any congregations or designate any special ritual for a woman to perform so that she could be a teacher. These matters simply were not addressed by Jesus as is confirmed by a thorough review of the gospel accounts.

Jesus spent his time teaching matters of the spirit – matters in connection with faith. (**1 Timothy 1:4**) Counsel about conduct concerns matters of the flesh, which Jesus left to the individual and/or the congregations to decide. (**Matthew 18:18-20**) Therefore, in his letters, Paul, as the congregator, would have to reach into his own storehouse to find procedural and administrative counsel for the congregations that would serve as a middle ground between pagan license and Jewish slavery. From this dilemma, Paul's counsel arose.

Paul was faced with a situation similar to that of Moses. Moses, like Paul, was a great organizer. And like Paul, Moses was tasked with organizing an unruly and fleshly minded people. To accomplish his task, Moses established specific rules of conduct and behavior, along with divine law. Though all of what Moses wrote was divinely inspired, Jesus did not refer to the rules he handed out as the Law of God, but as the Law of Moses to a difficult nation. (**Matthew 19:7-8; John 7:23**) We can view Paul's counsel in a similar manner.

In fact, in his counsel to the Corinthians, Paul pretty much confirmed that he was handing down Jewish traditions. He wrote:

“Now I commend you because in all things you have me in mind and you are holding fast **the traditions** just as I handed [them] on to you.” – *1 Corinthians 11:2*

What other ‘traditions’ could Paul be referring to if not the Jewish traditions? Not enough time had passed to form Christian traditions. At the time of Paul’s writings, the gospel accounts were not yet available. According to historians, *1 Corinthians* was written about 55 C.E., and *Ephesians* was written about 61 C.E.; whereas *Matthew* was written about 41 C.E., *Mark* around 65 C.E., *Luke* around 58 C.E., and *John* about 98 C.E. While the book of *Matthew* had been written, it would not have been readily available nor widely circulated.

We also note that the statement that he had handed down traditions introduced his counsel about women and headship in *verses 3-10*. For this reason, we believe Paul’s counsel about women is a carryover of Jewish traditions.

Although Paul’s letters are now a part of the Christian Bible Canon, when they were written, we hardly believe Paul expected them to be such. We do not believe that Paul viewed his writings as the infallible word of God, for if he did, we doubt he would have included his own opinions:

"Now concerning virgins **I have no command from the Lord, but I give my opinion** as one who had mercy shown him by the Lord to be faithful." – *1 Corinthians 7:25*

In fact, we do not believe any of the Christian writers expected their writings to become part of a sacred canon 300 years later!

Nevertheless, each writer wrote to the highest of his own understanding of matters according to the way he saw them or as it was reported to them. Those writings were **inspired** by the life and ministry of Jesus, and the writers were ‘borne along’ by holy spirit; but they did not write the infallible word of God, nor did they intend to do so. (See **Is the Good News Really From God?**) Jesus is the word of God. From that fact we cannot escape. It may be a difficult idea to accept, but we must grown up in the spirit and be honest with ourselves.

The fact that the Christian writings are **inspired** of God, but not the infallible **word** of God does not minimize their importance or their significance. Currently they are the most widely available writings we have to help us know and love Jesus and the Father he revealed. And if it were not for the early church ‘fathers’ who canonized the writings, and essentially deified them, it is not likely that the few writings we have would have been preserved for our day.

On the other hand, realizing that the Christian writings are **inspired** of God, and not the infallible **word** of God, promotes religious and spiritual freedom. It allows us to find Jesus for ourselves and frees us to grow in our knowledge and understanding of him, in the same way that Jesus’ teachings allowed mankind to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the Father. It affords us the opportunity to find new expressions of our Christian faith and frees us to advance

along with society and progressive civilization, while at the same time maintaining spiritual stability by imitating the life and ministry of Jesus. We can learn much from the writings, but, as John wrote, it is the spirit that teaches us:

“And as for you, the anointing that you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to be teaching you; but, as **the anointing from him is teaching you** about all things, and is true and is no lie, and just as it has taught you, remain in union with him.” – **1 John 2:27**

Paul’s writings were designed to build up the congregations he started. They served to promote order among the brotherhood and unite people of different races and backgrounds. And while some of what he wrote is not suitable for the 21st century, we can still learn from the spirit behind Paul’s writings.

In Paul’s day, a woman had no rights in the home, in the city or in the empire. People at that time looked upon women as secondary, suitable only to raise children and to manage the home. She was man’s property. Though Jesus introduced a superior attitude toward women, it would take time for this superior attitude to be fully realized. Even today, nearly 2,000 years later, mankind continues to struggle with the equality of women. We should not, therefore, expect the early Christian congregation to master spiritual equality in the short 20 years after Jesus’ death. But Paul did bring the matter forward a bit. In the synagogues, women were forced to sit in a separate section from the men in the “Women’s Gallery.” At least Paul allowed women to sit in the congregation alongside the men, though he required them to remain silent! (**1 Timothy 2:11-12**)

We also note that Paul did not organize **all** the Christian congregations of the day. When the early Christians were scattered, they went out to the ‘most distant part of the earth.’ (**Acts 1:8**) There, they established congregations and instituted rules that were consistent with the highest ideal of these cultures and that allowed an orderly discussion of Jesus’ life and ministry. Yet none of these early congregations received the writings of Paul or were taught his Jewish “traditions.”

This distinction holds true today. For example, the way Christian women dress in one part of the world would be banned in the congregations in another part of the world. Similarly, the matter of male facial hair is a regional concern. Concessions are constantly made according to the local needs. Paul’s administrative counsel worked in the congregations of his day and in his part of the world, but they handicap 21st century western culture.

So in answer to the question, ‘what do we think about Paul’s counsel at **1 Corinthians 11:3-10** and **Ephesians 5:21-24**, we say that we respect what Paul wrote, but we see it as the rules for the congregations he established, and not as a divine command for all congregations around the world for all time.

Today, there may be some churches or congregations that choose to adhere strictly to Paul’s counsel. They are free to do so, though we wonder how many spiritually led women would be a part of those associations. And we believe such an association would certainly lose out on the tremendous bounty spiritual women can bring to the table. There may also be

churches or congregations who choose a more loose adherence, such as do Jehovah's Witnesses. They not only allow women to speak in the congregation, women are also allowed to give 'talks' on the platform as long as they are seated and/or wear a head covering. And there are churches that allow full and complete equality with women serving as co-pastors or primary pastors. In our opinion, we believe Jesus would be quite satisfied, even impressed, with the latter, provided they are promoting the plain and open teachings, that is!

Whatever administrative rules are currently promulgated in one's congregation or church, a move toward Christian freedom, religious maturity, and spiritual equality should be underway. Too much time has passed in ignorance, suppression, and complacency.

When man sets before himself the goal of attaining higher knowledge to deal with life's problems and the complexities of spiritual insight, he should remember that such knowledge and insight is delivered through the life experiences of an individual. The way it is written and how it is spoken comes directly from the point of view of the person, thus making it fallible. For this reason, Jesus did not make rules for religious thinking or spiritual living. But by observing the life he led as being 'the way, the truth and the life' (*John 14:6*), all we need to do is to translate what we understand personally about the Master and his teachings. Then put into living practice that understanding, using those teachings as a standard of excellence which we strive to imitate.

Accordingly, we all should respect the writings of our brother Paul, and all of the Bible writers, but we should endeavor to imitate Jesus and his life and ministry. And where there is a divergence, whether imagined or actual, we should side with the Christ.

Every so often there has to be an agitation of religious and spiritual thinking in order to advance the kingdom in a new generation. And whether the attempt at advancement be well received or verbally rejected and cast away, it has to be done. Perhaps these articles on the spiritual equality of women are the type of agitation that is required at this time to move us forward. If so, we gladly side with the Christ and the freedom he promoted, and let all other matter fall where they may. Regardless of how others may worship, those who worship with spirit and truth must live by a higher standard of Divine Law as personified by Jesus Christ alone.

We welcome your comments.

"Elaia Luchnia"
