

Paul and Women: An Analysis of 1 Corinthians Reflecting Paul's Contradictory Attitudes

Cristina Plamadeala, Ph. D. Candidate

Concordia University, Montreal and
École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

—1 Corinthians 13:1–7¹

No matter one's socio-cultural background or religious affiliation (or lack thereof), there is something about these verses from 1 Corinthians that may appeal to the psyche of many individuals, something that resonates undoubtedly with the innate human longing for love. At first sight, these words seem as if they were written by a sensitive and yet restless poet longing for truth, someone who, upon discovering love, announced it to the world in such an eloquent yet simple manner that most human beings dare not to negate the veracity behind these lines. Yet, their author was far from what we might refer to as a romantic bard.

This ode to love is written by a man named Paul, identified by Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians as a saint and by Protestants as one of the apostles of Jesus, the only apostle who never knew the incarnate Jesus, yet who is believed to have had a vision of him, a revelation that fundamentally changed his life and, as a result, has marked the history of the world. To the surprise of the novice in Pauline theology, the same Paul who wrote about love in this poignant manner also wrote about others in a way

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that suggested that he was a “chauvinist,”² “anti-Semitic,”³ and “misogynist.”⁴ These are harsh words indeed, which challenges us to reconcile two seemingly contradictory Pauls: the “Paul of oppression and discrimination” and the “Paul of love and equality.” Which one was he?

It is probably impossible to know with full certainty the answer to this question. The purpose of this article is to offer a few reflections by analyzing two passages from 1 Corinthians, an epistle addressed to the newly formed community of Jesus-followers in the city of Corinth. In this letter Paul addresses some of the challenges he encountered in attempting to build this community, as well as some of the key concerns from those who were part of this community.⁵ While the first passage discussed here points toward an image of Paul as a promoter of equality among men and women, the other draws an opposite image of the apostle. This article also provides a possible reason for this inconsistency by referring to Gnostic literature, such as the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Philip*.

Paul the promoter of equality among men and women

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and

2. J. A. Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 118.

3. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63.

4. David Wenham, *Paul and Jesus: The True Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 186.

5. Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 69–324.

likewise the wife to her husband. 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.

—1 Corinthians 7:3-4

In 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 Paul offers an arguably egalitarian view of the relationship between men and women—egalitarian at least when it comes to their sexual conduct within marriage. In 1 Cor 7:9, Paul implies that marriage is a necessary evil, a solution to the imperfect, sinful nature that predisposes humans to want to engage in sexual activity. For Paul, marriage offers a safe and socially acceptable alternative to celibacy, a lifestyle choice he sees as superior but not necessarily attainable by everyone.⁶

First Corinthians 3-4 had introduced a rather revolutionary idea for Paul's times (at least in the Greco-Roman society)⁷, namely that men and women have the *same* marital duty toward each other when it comes to sexual conduct. Furthermore, these chapters suggest that the authority over one another's bodies is yielded to one's partner: the man toward his wife and the wife, respectively, toward her husband. In this sense, no one has more or less responsibility toward the other person.

Paul's approach toward women in this passage is rather laudatory, and here is why. To put it simply, women during Paul's time were treated in a deplorable manner. For Paul to advocate for this type of equality in sexual conduct between both spouses, he challenged, albeit in theory, the rather violent and oppressive ways in which women tended to be treated in his era. Sarah Ruden describes this appalling reality in the following manner:

Violence was, to some degree, the way people thought. Men believed that they were entitled to extract sex from their wives by violence. ... If a wife will not have sex, she's going to be beaten. This is the ordinary state of affairs. ... Women were married off very young, and there was little they could do if they were abused ... Women were not seen as sexual; they were seen as wild animals who had to be kept in a cage as far as their sexuality was concerned. If they had any real sexual experience, they would just run amok all over town.⁸

Paul's promotion of celibacy is also worthy of praise. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul recommends celibacy to his Corinthian community, having no reservations about suggesting it to the female Jesus-believers as well. Here lies the core of Paul's involuntary, if not voluntary, attempt to emancipate the women within his social circle. A. C. Wire equates this attempt to curbing "male privileges"

6. Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 29.

7. See, for example, Sarah Ruden, "Putting Paul in His Place: Though Some May See Him as the Grump of the New Testament, St. Paul Is Full of Surprises," in *U.S. Catholic* 77, No. 5, 28-31, available online at <http://www.uscatholic.org/church/scripture-and-theology/2012/04/putting-paul-his-place>, accessed on 1 January 2018.

8. *Ibid.*

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in society.⁹ Similarly, Paul's prohibition of divorce in 1 Cor 7:10, both to married men *and* women, arguably enhanced women's security (mainly economic) in their marriage. Undoubtedly, Paul challenged the heavily male-centered Corinthian community to see women as something other than a "mere remedy for male lust and sexual immorality."¹⁰ In fact, the apostle challenged these men to see their sisters in Christ as significantly more than that.

Paul the misogynist

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be submissive, as also says the law. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

—1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Nevertheless, the ostensibly positive image of Paul in these texts is easily tainted by the equally famous passage from 1 Cor 14:34-35, which offers the reader a rather opposite image of Paul. At first sight, this passage may seem unacceptable to the modern reader, even outright discriminatory. Women here are portrayed as: a) inferior to men; b) less intelligent than males; and c) causing some havoc during a church activity, and hence in need of learning how to properly conduct themselves. 1 Cor 14:34-35 may remind one of a sign that might be placed on the door of a church, signed by its pastor, in which parents are politely asked to take their misbehaved children to the Sunday school class, in order that their offspring not disrupt the Sunday service.

In these verses one might replace the words "women" with "children" (toddlers, for example); "husbands" with "parents," "law" with "socially acceptable norms," and "submissive" with "be well behaved." This mental exercise may aid the reader to better grasp the way in which women in the Corinthian community were conceivably seen by Paul (and probably also by other men) and to understand their relationship to their male counterparts. This analogy, simple as it may seem, can assist one in comprehending how denigrated women may have been in Paul's time. By contrast, we can recognize how far human beings have come, for example,

9. Ben Witherington. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 177.

10. *Ibid.*

that a Western woman today has as much opportunity as a man to express openly her views about the historical Paul, and to be seen by law as his equal.

It is no surprise that this passage has been used to support the prohibition of women from holding leadership roles within the church ministry (for example, not granted the right to become priest or pastor). It is only within the past few decades that several other interpretations have been attributed to these verses. For example, some scholars have defined “speaking” as “disruptive speech”¹¹ caused by the women present in the church. Others interpreted “speaking” as “speaking in tongues.”¹² A few even claimed that this passage is a “non-Pauline gloss,”¹³ hence not authored by Paul but added by others to Paul’s own text, possibly to taint his original message.¹⁴

James Greenbury maintains, however, that by not allowing women to “speak,” the apostle merely intended to prohibit women from analyzing and commenting on men’s prophecies. Women were allowed to communicate with others in church, and even prophesy; they were *solely* not permitted to assess their husbands’ divine revelations. Greenbury calls to the reader’s attention 1 Cor 11:5, where Paul allows women both to pray and prophesy in the church as long as their heads are veiled. In 1 Cor 14:29, Paul gives the following guidelines to his followers: “let two or three prophets speak and let the others pass judgment.” According to Greenbury, “wives were asking questions or raising objections to their husbands’ prophecies. This led to an undermining of the husbands’ authority over their wives, and was, to the men, ‘shameful conduct.’”¹⁵

Women, in Paul’s time, may have been silenced, but they were not unimportant to the development of the Jesus-believing communities. Acts, for example, lists several of Paul’s female co-workers: Lydia (16:14), Damaris (17:34) and Priscilla (18:2). Mary, John’s mother (12:12) and Tabitha (9:36) are also mentioned. Paul refers to several women in his epistles, namely, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2) and Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis (Rom 16:12). In 1 Corinthians Paul mentions Chloe (1:11); in Romans, Phoebe (16:1–2), Rufus’ mother (16:13), and Julia and Nereus’ sister (16:15).¹⁶

Women’s involvement in the emergence of the Jesus-believing communities can easily be traced to Jesus himself who treated the women surrounding him in an esteemed manner. “Having brought [women] into the closest and most privileged circle of those gathered around him,” Carla Ricci writes, Jesus “made them

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recipients, with the other disciples, of his special proclamation.”¹⁷ Women were also among the first to witness Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.¹⁸ In this respect, Paul fails to set the record straight in his narration of the resurrection story.¹⁹

In 1 Cor 15:5–8, Paul writes: “...he [Jesus] appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve [apostles]. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all ... he appeared to me [Paul].”²⁰ In this account of the resurrection story, Paul fails to mention Mary Magdalene, for example, who was among the first to have witnessed Jesus’ resurrection. Even though women “together with the apostles made up the central nucleus of the post-Easter community,” the same resurrection story witnessed by men was perceived as more credible than the one allegedly witnessed by women.²¹ Paul most likely knew this quite well.

Women of Paul’s time were allowed to participate, but not to lead; permitted to assist, but not to guide; were helpful, but not crucial. Paul’s world was a man’s world. Consisting of a number of vibrant communities who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, Paul’s world was comprised of those who attempted to walk in Jesus’ footsteps and imitate him. When it came to the treatment of women, this attempt at being Christ-like proved to be problematic, both in thought and action.

Feelings of envy toward some of these women may have been a potential cause for this behavior, albeit possibly an insignificant one. Paul’s inconsistency in the way he depicts women may have partially come from an inner conflict: on the one hand attempting to follow Jesus, including treating women as equal to men, while on the other hand, feeling envious of women.

Comparing the treatment of women in Gnostic gospels

In conclusion, we will refer to two passages from the Gnostic literature. In the *Gospel of Mary*, written in the second century, Peter is portrayed as being jealous of Mary Magdalene, who, ac-

11. James Greenbury. “1 Corinthians 14:34–35: Evaluation of Prophecy Revisited” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Dec. 2008): 721.

12. Ibid.

13. G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, L.D. Hurst, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 235.

14. James Greenbury. “1 Corinthians 14:34–35: Evaluation of Prophecy Revisited” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, No. 4 (Dec. 2008): 721–722.

15. Ibid, 723.

16. Carla Ricci. *Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women Who Followed Jesus*. Paul Burns, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 70.

17. Ibid, 144.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid, 144–145.

20. Ibid, 145.

21. Ibid.

ording to this text, was adored by Jesus:

Peter turns to her and says: “Sister [referring to Mary Magdalene], we know that the Savior loved you more than other women. Tell us those words of his, which you remember and know, not us...” But when she finishes speaking Andrew says he does not believe her and Peter asks himself, “Did he then talk to a woman unbeknown to us, not openly? Must we then turn round and listen to all women, as much preferred to all of us?” Mary rose to her feet and so turned to Peter: “My brother Peter, what are you thinking? Do you perhaps think that I myself have dreamt up all these things in my heart or that I would lie concerning the Saviour?” Levi, taking the word, replied to Peter: “Peter, you are always angry. Now look, you are treating this woman as you would treat an enemy. If the Lord has made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Certainly the Lord knows her very well. Because he loved her more than us...”²²

Another text from the *Gospel of Philip*, written about the same time as the *Gospel of Mary*, depicts Mary Magdalene in a similar manner:

There were three who walked always with the Lord [referring to Jesus]: his mother Mary, her sister, and the Magdalene. ... The other disciples then said to him: ‘Why do you love her [most likely referring to Magdalene] more than all of us?’ The savior replied and said to them: ‘Why do I not love all of you as her?’²³

Even though these two passages do not refer to Paul directly, they could apply to him as well. Paul knew Peter and, if these two Gnostic texts reflect ancient attitudes, who is to say that Peter might not have informed Paul of the way in which their leader treated the women surrounding him? Jesus’ attitude toward women may have been for the rest of his male followers what we today call “culture shock,” possibly causing an inner conflict that may have manifested itself in the inconsistent manner in which Paul (and men like him) saw women. We see this inconsistency in 1 Corinthians: on the one hand, Paul promoted equality among men and women as did Jesus; on the other hand, as this article argues, he did the exact opposite.

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22. Ibid, 147.

23. Ibid, 148.