

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 9/23/2022

The recent death of a 22-year-old woman in Iran, arrested by the so-called “Morality Police” for not properly covering her hair and in their custody, again brings forward the plight of women around the world. In varying degrees, women are restricted, devalued, and dominated by men, even in America. Sadly, one of the factors leading to this misogyny has been the teachings of religions, including Christianity. Men, including those who have controlled the Christian church, have selectively quoted some of Paul’s writings that seem to say that men are superior and that women at best have a much lesser role in GOD’S plan without considering these passages in light of the whole of scripture.

Years ago, I attended a Roman Catholic wedding of a woman from the church I served. She had agreed to be married to her Roman Catholic fiancé in the church he attended. In the ceremony, the priest read a passage from Ephesians 5:

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the LORD. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as CHRIST is the head of the church, HIS body, of which HE is the SAVIOR. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to CHRIST, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

But the priest neglected (and I suspect intentionally) to include these other verses from the same passage:

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as CHRIST loved the church and gave HIMSELF up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to HIMSELF as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

I noticed the parents of the bride squirming as they heard the priest then expound on that first passage alone, clearly as instruction to this Lutheran woman.

Another oft-quoted Pauline passage that has contributed to the diminishing of the status of women is I Timothy 2:11-12:

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

This passage and I Corinthians 14:34 are used in particular to argue against women serving as pastors.

³⁴ Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.

Yet in his letters, Paul often addressed specific situations in the recipient church rather than as broad sweeping teachings for all, and it is likely this is the case. We think that there were in the two congregations impacted by these letters problems with women who were new to the faith and who were actively promoting the pagan practices they had previously observed. So, to these churches Paul is saying, “Ladies, please listen to the men (pastor in the case of Timothy) I instructed in the Christian faith that you might learn the correct teachings from them.” In fact, later in chapter 11 of the same letter to the Corinthians, Paul encourages women to “pray and prophesy” in public meetings with only the encouragement to keep their heads covered in reverence for GOD. He did not say that they should keep quiet.

A broader look at Paul's words and actions shows that he was supportive of women in ministry, instead of what the above verse would seem to indicate. In Romans 16:3, he sent greetings to "*Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in CHRIST JESUS.*" Paul had stayed and worked with this missionary couple in Corinth and Ephesus. When he moved on from Ephesus, Paul left this husband-wife (or wife-husband) team in charge of the church there. The fact that Paul lists Priscilla first indicates that he recognized her as the leader ahead of her husband—Priscilla, the senior pastor, and Aquila, the associate pastor, if you will.

When Paul went to Philippi, he started a congregation there in the home of Lydia, who would become, in a sense, the pastor of that church. Lydia was a businesswoman who sold "purple cloth." Lydia was unique for that time both in that she owned a business and that she worked primarily with the wealthy and important who would be the ones that would wear purple as a sign of prestige. Paul also names two other women as having significant roles in the Philippian church. He says that Euodia and Syntyche "*contended [labored] at my side in the cause of the gospel.*"

In Romans 16:1, Paul introduces Phoebe, "*a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.*" It was Phoebe who Paul entrusted to carry his letter to the church in Rome. He encourages the congregation there to support Phoebe in her work as "*she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.*"

When we look at the whole of even just Paul's writings and actions, it becomes clear that Paul had no issue with women serving as leaders and pastors in the Christian church. He saw them as partners, fellow workers in the mission of telling the story of JESUS CHRIST to others. It is unfortunate that many have used some of Paul's words as a way of limiting the gifts and efforts of women throughout history who might otherwise have contributed much to GOD'S purpose in the world. Perhaps the best example of Paul's understanding of GOD'S desire for equality between men and women, as well as classes and cultures, is Galatians 3:28:

²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in CHRIST JESUS.*

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey