

Paul delivered a message that challenged sinful patterns in first century society. We must continue to embrace his view of a new creation society.

RECLAIMING THE RADICAL STORY

PART TWO

by KENT BROWER and C. JEANNE SERRÃO

In our earlier article [see part one in the May/June 2009 issue], we set out the big picture of the good news of the gospel. We showed how countercultural the gospel is both in overt examples and more subtle ways. At the same time, there are texts in Scripture, when taken out of their first century context, which appear to run against the grain of the countercultural direction of the gospel. In some Christian traditions, a few of them are used as proof texts to exclude women from ministry.



What are we to make of these texts? First, in some instances it is crucial to understand these texts in the first century contexts in which they were written and in terms of the issues that were being addressed. Paul and his fellow epistle writers are sometimes addressing specific cultural issues. Second, other passages, when considered in their wider literary and theological context, drive forward a new creation view of society based upon justice and love. When read in that way, their language exposes the fatal flaws in the conventional, oppressive structures of society.

Take Ephesians 5:1-6:9, for example. This passage contains what scholars call a “household code.” It is one of several passages (Colossians 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:1-10, 1 Peter 2:18-3:7) that

describe and seek to “Christianize” the traditional first century Jewish and pagan relationships of those in households. The patriarch was the public face of the family and any disrespect shown to him in public would bring shame on the whole household unit, which also included slaves, employees, and sometimes clients.

The Ephesian version of this code is set in the context of a wider discussion on godly living. The Ephesians are called to imitate God and to walk in love (5:1-2). They are to be filled with the Spirit (5:18b). Paul then begins this household code with the prime evidence of Spirit-filled living: Christians are to be submissive to each other as a general rule. Then follows the traditional comment in verse 22: “wives to your own husbands as to the Lord” (author’s translation).

The verb “be submissive” is not in this verse and derives from the idea in verse 21 that all Christians are to be submissive to each other. It is as if Paul were saying, “for example, wives [be submissive] to your own husband.” Then Paul becomes extremely countercultural. The command to the husbands to love their wives as they love their own bodies is describing Christian submission of husbands to wives in language that they could understand and accept. And this mutual submission is exactly how Christians are to “walk in love.”

The language of headship found in verse 23 is also descriptive of the first century understanding of the role of the patriarch. Paul uses this cultural analogy to describe how he views the relationship of Christ to the Church. Some today read this passage backward from how the author originally meant it, understanding the role of Christ and the Church to be an example of the Christian marriage relationship. The author did not intend the passage to be read this way! Clearly, the principle from this passage is that all Christians, as the Church, are to be submissive to Christ and mutually submissive to each other.

1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 are often used to deny women leadership or ordination in the Church. They have similar contexts in that both deal with problems of chaotic worship in the churches and are instructing Gentile converts who were most likely coming out of the mystery religions. These mystery religion groups often met in homes and the purpose of their rituals was to achieve an ecstatic state of communion with their gods. Women as well as men participated equally in these chaotic worship services with women, especially in Ephesus, often in charge of these services as priestesses.

Both churches had ethnic Jews as well as Gentiles among their members. The chaotic worship style practiced in Corinth and Ephesus was very uncomfortable for the Jewish Christians who were used to the public, ordered worship of the synagogue. Actually, Paul has already addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians 11:2-11, where he fully affirms the authority of women to prophecy in worship. His means of affirmation emerges from his Jewish background but with a distinct

countercultural twist. Women should wear the symbol of authority when they prophesy—a head covering, just as a rabbi would in worship. Now Paul again affirms the need for unity in worship and he asks both sides to give a little to accomplish this goal.

Because these two passages are highly contextualized it is not wise to base a universalized principle or dogma on them without considering the cultural context very carefully. These passages need to be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture on the one hand and the specific contexts of Corinth and Ephesus on the other. The specific statement in 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent,” summarizes the issues for women’s ordination for both passages. And it demands careful reflection if it is to be misused.

GOOD INTERPRETATION REQUIRES THAT ANY UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE BE FOUND IN THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE AND NOT JUST DRAWN FROM PROOF TEXTS THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN OUT OF THEIR CULTURAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34, Paul says “Let **the** women keep silent in the churches.” C. S. Cowles comments: “The use of the definite article in the Greek focuses attention upon a specific group of women, not **all** women. Which women? Those who, through exuberant and chaotic speech, were creating confusion and disorder in the services” (Cowles, 133). In addition, Paul chooses the word for keeping silence that means “voluntary silence” when he could have chosen words meaning “to muzzle, tie shut” or “stillness and quietness” (Cowles 133). Cowles paraphrases this verse: “Let **the** women voluntarily cease from idle chatter and noisy conversation and maintain a reverent attentiveness during worship, as ‘the law’ of common courtesy and social convention dictates” (Cowles, 135).

This “voluntary silence” is also the word Paul uses in commanding the whole congregation: “Let him/her be silent in the church, and let him/her speak (silently) to himself/herself and to God” (1 Corinthians 14:28, *author’s translation*). If we were to apply this command as verse 34 has been applied to women, no one would speak in church unless there was an interpreter!

We find a similar context in 1 Timothy 2 as far as the silence issue is concerned. But 1 Timothy brings in two more prohibitions that are often used to deny the use of women’s ministry gifts. Verse 12 begins: “I do not permit a woman to teach.” First, we observe that this is Paul’s current position (*I am not presently permitting*, present active). It is not a command for all time from

God. In light of the situation in Ephesus, Paul did not think it was best for the women to teach. Why would Paul say this?

In the first century, Jewish and Gentile girls were usually only trained in skills needed to fulfill their domestic roles. Some Jewish writers actually stated that women did not have the mental capacity to study the Torah and so were excused from even hearing the Law (Cowles, 143). A close reading of 1 and 2 Timothy indicates that at this time the church in Ephesus "was plagued by all sorts of strange philosophical mythologies" (Cowles, 141). 2 Timothy 3:6 indicates that Ephesian women had a tendency toward unorthodox teaching.

In contrast to his culture, Paul commanded that these women be taught the Torah and the Gospels (verse 11) while being submissive to their teachers and learning quietly which was the custom of the day for male students as well. This, of course, is merely following the pattern of Jesus, who teaches women (see Luke 10:28-42). Perhaps Paul would have changed his policy for Ephesus later on after these women had been taught the Scriptures. We do not hear of him prohibiting Priscilla from teaching Apollos. Paul does recount the damage his own ignorance caused (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

Paul also goes on to say in 1 Timothy 2:12 that he does not permit women "to have authority over a man." The Greek word (*authentein*) translated "authority" is a rare word, which is only used here in the New Testament, and is best translated "to dominate or domineer." In secular Greek this word had the meaning "to commit a murder, to kill with one's own hands."

"It suggested monarchical authority where one has life-or-death power over another" (Cowles, 146). This dominance goes directly against Paul's principle in Ephesians 5:21 of mutual submission. Although it is unclear, there is some evidence to suggest that women priestesses in Ephesus exerted this kind of authority over their worshipers in the pagan religions.

Good interpretation requires that any universal principle be found in the whole of Scripture and not just drawn from proof texts that have been taken out of their cultural and literary contexts. It would be foolish indeed to expect these texts to reflect 21st century notions. We have had centuries of reflection on the implications of the gospel on society and individuals. We have been challenged again and again to be transformed persons and to refuse to allow the surrounding culture to squeeze us into its mold. How sad, then, to see some today make the social conventions of the first century, such as slave ownership or patriarchal societal structure, normative for Christians now, as though the gospel had no transforming impact whatsoever on the views of Spirit-filled Christians who wish to walk in love.

But even within the cultural constraints of their day, we should not underestimate the transforming power of the gospel. Jesus Christ came to bring restoration to creation that

had been marred by sin. At every opportunity, He brought the sinful order into question and taught what God originally had in mind for His creation. Paul caught that vision in Galatians 3:28 when he wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," and began the process of working out that vision and its implications for Greeks, slaves, and women.

The sinful patterns of society are challenged again and again within the community of the gospel where householders honor slaves, and husbands love wives. We are called to continue this process of working out this principle of mutual submission in our own contexts. That is why the Church of the Nazarene recognizes God-called and God-gifted women by ordaining them. **HT**

Kent Brower is vice principal and senior research fellow in biblical studies at Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, England.

C. Jeanne Serrão is dean of the School of Theology and Philosophy and professor of biblical literature at Mount Vernon Nazarene University in Mount Vernon, Ohio.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Cowles, C. S. *A Woman's Place? Leadership in the Church*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1993.
- Cranfield, C.E. B. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. II, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979
- Greathouse, William M. and George Lyons. *Romans 9-16*. New Beacon Bible Commentary: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2008

FOR FURTHER READING:

- Cowles, C. S. *A Woman's Place? Leadership in the Church*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1993.
- Gundry, Patricia. *Woman Be Free: Biblical Equality for Women*. Grand Rapids, MI: Smith Gundry Productions, 1988.
- Green, Tim. "Daughters Who Prophesy: The Way of Pentecost", *Preacher's Magazine*, Pentecost 2008.
- Web site for Wesleyan Holiness Women Clergy: Click on Articles and Booklets for historic and contemporary literature. www.whwomenclergy.org
- Web site for the Wynkoop Center for Women in Ministry hosted by Nazarene Theological Seminary: Click on Bible Studies for more detailed information on the biblical aspects of women in leadership. www.wynkoopcenter.org

December is
Compassionate
Ministries
Month



NCM partners with local Nazarene congregations around the world to clothe, shelter, feed, heal, educate, and live in solidarity with those who suffer under oppression, violence, poverty, hunger, and disease. NCM exists in and through the Church to proclaim the Gospel to all people.

Please consider joining in God's work of compassion through:

1. Lifting up the work of NCM through prayer
2. A monetary gift to NCM
3. Sharing the message of NCM with your local congregation

For donations please write checks payable to Global Treasury Services and write NCM Fund in the memo.

Mail to: 17001 Prairie Star Pkwy, Lenexa, KS 66220

In Canada write checks payable to Church of the Nazarene Canada.

Mail to: 20 Reagan Rd., Unit 9 Brampton, ON L7A 1C3

For more information or for on-line giving: ncm.org 877.626.4145