

Women and Paul

Was Paul an egalitarian or a chauvinist?

BY BARBARA E. REID

WHEN CHRISTIANS look to Paul's letters for guidance in answering contemporary questions about women's roles in church and society, they find conflicting messages. In some texts Paul appears egalitarian; in others he subordinates women to men and insists they keep silent. How should we read him?

Egalitarian?

It is important to remember at the outset that Paul was not a systematic theologian. He never formulated a coherent "theology of women." Rather, his letters are pastoral in nature, addressed to the specific needs and questions of particular communities. Also, Paul was a man of his day, shaped by the patriarchal attitudes of Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures toward women. We cannot expect him to think exactly as we do.

Having said that, the phrase "no longer male and female" from Gal 3:28 is often held up as a banner for women's equality. But while the inspiration of the Spirit can indeed take us in that direction today, it would be anachronistic to think that Paul intended that phrase as a declaration of women's equality in the social and political arena. Gal 3:28 is a baptismal formula that Paul has inserted into his letter to help make the point that right relationship with God does not depend on works of the Law; all distinctions, including those based on ethnicity, race, social status and gender, are overcome through baptism into Christ. Paul is likely speaking, then, only on a theological level. In fact, it is doubtful that Paul thought this equality in Christ should be made manifest in social structures in his day at all; as he states in 1 Corinthians, "the present form of this world is passing away" (7:31).

The best measure of Paul's egalitarian sensibility lies in the way he talks about different Christian women. Paul was no lone ranger in his apostolic ministry, and many of his co-workers were women. Looking at the passages in Paul's letters and in the Acts of the Apostles in which these women are mentioned, one finds a great sense of collegiality and many examples of women given authority.

BARBARA E. REID, O.P., is professor of New Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Ill.

Phoebe, deacon of Cenchreae. The last chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans is a letter of recommendation for Phoebe, who is deacon (*diakonos*) of the church of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). Romans dates to the late 50s, a time when there were not as yet any set job descriptions, titles or ordination rites for Christian ministers. The term *diakonos* is best translated "minister" or "servant." In the Gospels, Jesus speaks of his own mission this way, saying he has come "not to be served (*diakonēthēnai*), but to serve (*diakonēsai*)" (Mk 10:45). In Luke's Gospel, Jesus likewise defines a leader as "one who serves (*ho diakonōn*)" (22:26-27). In Acts 6, we find a distinction made between two kinds of *diakonia*: ministry of the table (6:2) and ministry of the word (6:4).

Diakonia can also entail financial ministry. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and the other Galilean women disciples "provided (*diēkonoun*) for" Jesus and the other disciples out of their monetary resources (Lk 8:3). Paul's collection for the church in Jerusalem is also called *diakonia* (Acts 11:29; 12:25) and Paul often refers to himself as a *diakonos* (e.g., 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 6:4).

Phoebe's ministry, then, could have entailed any or all of the above kinds of service. But Paul goes further, saying Phoebe has become a "leader" of many, including himself (Rom 16:2). Many translations dilute this sense, rendering the Greek word *prostatis* as "helper" (Revised Standard Version), "good friend" (New English Bible), or "a great help" (New International Version). The NRSV and the New American Bible more correctly translate it "benefactor." As benefactor or patron, Phoebe would have supplied her home for the community's worship and likely would have presided over the eucharistic celebrations. And she would have overseen and provided funds for all its various ministries.

Prisca, Nympha, Mary, Lydia: heads of house churches. Another frequently mentioned leader of a house church is Prisca, along with her husband Aquila. Paul calls them his "co-workers" (Rom 16:3), a term he also uses of four other women who have "worked hard in the Lord": Mary (Rom 16:6), Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis (Rom 16:12). Paul expresses particular gratitude for Prisca and Aquila; they "risked their necks for my life," he states in Rom 16:4. Twice Paul mentions "the church in their house" (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; see also 2 Tm 4:19). In Acts they are

depicted helping Paul found the church in Ephesus and teaching Apollos, an eloquent preacher from Alexandria, to whom they “explained the Way of God...more accurately” (Acts 18:26).

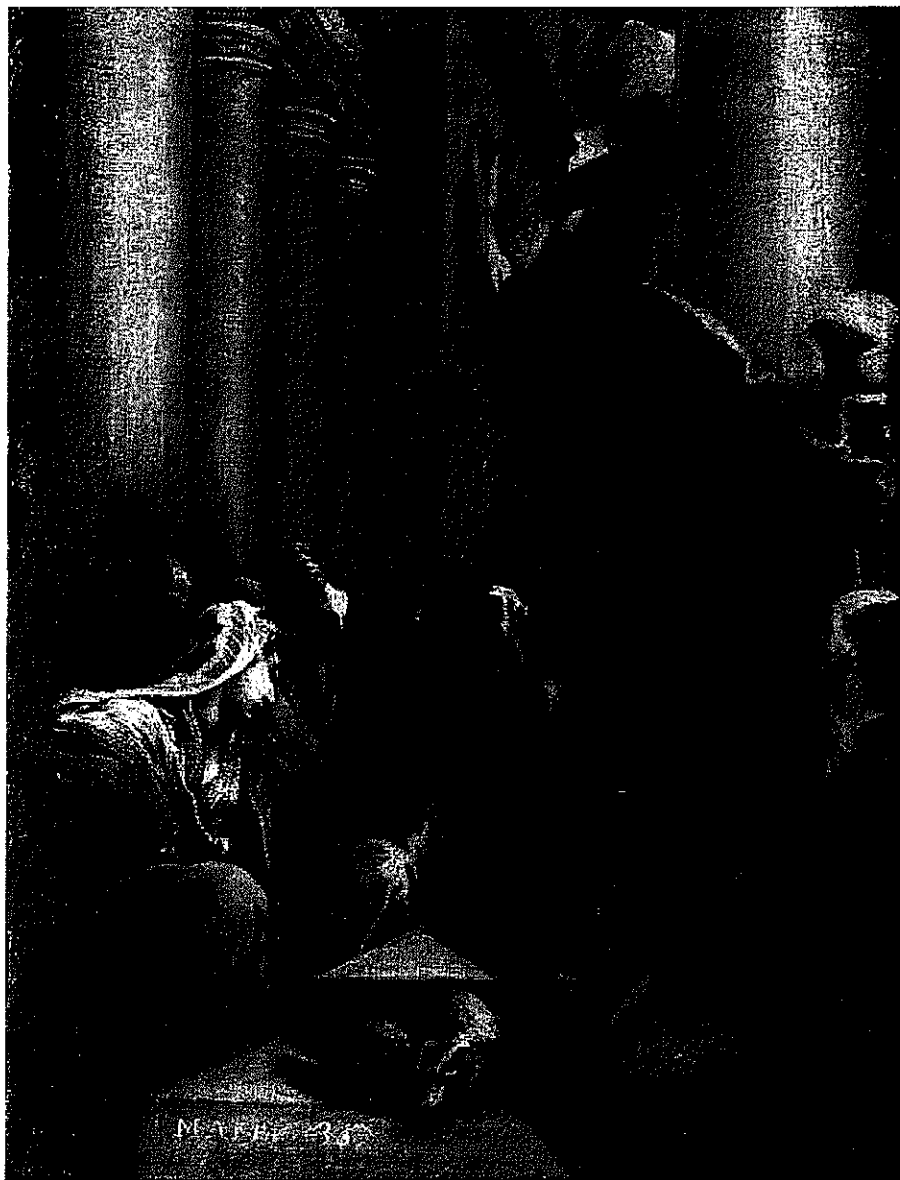
It is striking that four of the six times Prisca is mentioned in Acts and in the Pauline letters, her name precedes her husband’s. In Greco-Roman culture it would have been customary, when referring to a husband and wife, to put the man’s name first. Paul and Luke’s reversed order shows the high esteem in which they held her.

Other female leaders of house churches are also noted in the New Testament, including Nympha (Col 4:15) and Mary the mother of John Mark, in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). Luke also tells of Lydia, a dealer in purple goods, who was baptized with all her household by Paul (Acts 16:11-15). When Paul is released from prison, it is to Lydia’s house he goes, because the community in Philippi has found a home there (16:40).

Other women mentioned by Paul. Two other women ministers named by Paul are Euodia and Syntyche, co-workers in Philippi who have “struggled beside” Paul “in the work of the gospel” (Phil 4:3). The verb *synathleō*, connotes a “struggle” in which every muscle is strained, as in an athletic contest. And in Rom 16:7, Paul sends greetings to “Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me.” He continues, “They are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” Some find it startling that a woman is called an apostle, thinking that only the Twelve were apostles. In Paul’s letters many others bear this title, including Paul himself (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 9:1-27, etc.), Apollos (1 Cor 4:9), Barnabas (1 Cor 9:5-6; see also Acts 14:4, 14), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thes 1:1 with 2:7).

Chauvinist?

“*Women should be silent.*” Alongside these texts illustrating Paul’s high estimation of his women co-workers can be found a number of Pauline texts that appear to restrict women. So in 1 Cor 14:34-36 we find the statement: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?”



This passage is especially puzzling in light of Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian women prophets in chapter 11 of this same letter (vs. 2-16). Here, Paul says that any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head (v. 5). Debate continues about whether Paul is speaking in this instance about veils or hairstyles, but it is clear that the problem is not that women are speaking aloud in the assembly.

So why would Paul then silence women in Chapter 14? Some scholars think that 14:34-36 is an addition, not written by Paul but inserted by a later copyist. Others propose that we read these verses not as Paul’s instructions, but as a dialogue between Paul and the Corinthian men. Verses 34-35 would be the voice of the men of Corinth, insisting the women keep silent, and verse 36 would be Paul’s response, effectively, “Do you think you’re the only ones who have a word to share?” There are several other instances in this letter where such a dialogue between Paul and the Corinthians is apparent (1 Cor 7:1; 8:1). Still another solution is that the two chapters concern different kinds of speaking. In

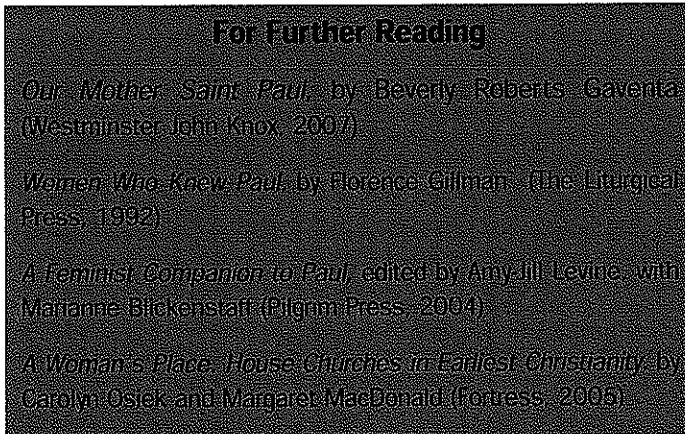
Chapter 11 the women are prophesying with inspired speech. In Chapter 14 the women may have been asking questions or giving theological interpretations that differed from those of their husbands, something that would have been considered shameful or disruptive in a patriarchal culture. Yet in light of what we have seen from Paul—his willingness to allow women to serve as teachers, patrons, church leaders and prophetic speakers—this last interpretation seems unlikely.

“Wives, be submissive to your husbands.” Another problematic passage occurs in Col 3:18-19, where wives are admonished to be submissive to their husbands “as is fitting in the Lord.” The next verses expound on how children must be obedient to their parents as well, and slaves to their masters (Col 3:20-4:1). A similar instruction is found in Eph 5:21-33, with more elaboration on the husband-wife relationship.

These instructions are not in fact original to Paul. Household codes like these had been used since the time of Aristotle, who outlined the proper workings of a Greek home in terms of the *paterfamilias* as ruler, to whom the women, children and slaves are subordinate. In Colossians and Ephesians the effort being made is to infuse Christian values and motivation into the socio-political structure that

functioned in the Greco-Roman world.

Furthermore, most biblical scholars agree that Ephesians was not written by Paul himself, but by a later leader who assumes his mantle of authority. Many consider Colossians similarly. And it is notable that such insistence on subordination of women is not found in any of the authentic Pauline letters. Rather, we find sayings that point toward equality and mutuality, such as: “In the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God” (1 Cor 11:11-12); also 1 Cor 7:4: “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own



body, but the wife does.”

Nevertheless, in these later letters written in Paul's name we see a concerted effort to restrict the leadership of women. While reading these letters, it is good to remember that they represent only one voice among many in the early church. Still, it would be interesting to know the responses of the women leaders when they heard these texts read aloud. Women like Phoebe, Junia and Prisca could provide insight for Christians today on how to resist efforts toward patriarchy.

Paul: Midwife and Mother

On a number of occasions, Paul uses maternal imagery to speak of his mission. He likens himself to a nursing mother caring for her children (1 Thes 2:7) and describes himself as giving milk to babes until they can take solid food (1 Cor 3:1-2). Several times he speaks of labor pangs (1 Thes 5:3; Gal 4:19; Rom 8:22). By using such metaphors, Paul validates the experience of female believers and makes his message more appealing to them. Their use also suggests that Paul allowed himself to be influenced by his women co-workers, listened to their experience and their language and learned from them uniquely female expressions of God's movement within. In this aspect, too, he provides a good model for collaboration in ministry today. ■

© America Press Inc. 2008. All rights reserved. www.americamagazine.org