

Jesus and Paul on Women: Incomparable or Compatible?

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Introduction

Several years ago, a book that I edited appeared in print under the title *Jesus and Paul Reconnected: Fresh Pathways into an Old Debate*.¹ In that volume, six noted New Testament scholars (John M. G. Barclay, Markus Bockmuehl, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Bruce Longenecker, Francis Watson, and Stephen Westerholm) compared various aspects of Jesus's thought and practice to those of Paul. One comparison not explored there that I will address in this article pertains to the views of Jesus and Paul with respect to the role of women in ministry and mission.

For some, skeptical curiosity or even unbridled incredulity best describes their initial reaction to such a topic. George Bernard Shaw, for example, would have thought a comparison along such lines to be a complete waste of time, thinking that there is no need to compare the incomparable. On one occasion, the Irish playwright depicted Paul as the "eternal enemy of Woman."² Furthermore, Shaw asserted:

[Paul] is no more a Christian than Jesus was a Baptist; he is a disciple of Jesus only as Jesus was a disciple of John. He does nothing that Jesus would have done, and says nothing that Jesus would have said. . . . He was more Jewish than the Jews, more Roman than the Romans, proud both ways, full of startling confessions and self-revelations that would not surprise us if they were slipped into the pages of Nietzsche.³

Shaw's presumed misgivings notwithstanding, in what follows, I will seek to compare the role of women in the work and witness of Jesus and Paul. In doing so, I will likely confirm one view that most readers of this journal already hold—women in general and women in ministry in particular have a friend in Jesus. I will also attempt to challenge herein what I regard to be a common, albeit mistaken, notion—that Paul is the "eternal enemy of Woman." Indeed, I will contend women have a friend in Paul as well.⁴

My aim is straightforward, though not simple: to demonstrate that women played a pivotal role in both Jesus's earthly ministry and in Paul's Gentile mission. Having done so, by way of conclusion, I will ask a question whose answer will, I hope, be obvious enough by then: If it was the practice of Jesus and Paul to join hands with women in mission and ministry, should not this be our contemporary practice as well?

Women in the time and ministry of Jesus

To the extent that our extant literary sources are at all indicative of lived experience, first-century AD women



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were seldom afforded the dignity due them and typically lacked the opportunity to affect much socioreligious change. Taken together, it was usually thought that women were meant to be subservient daughters and wives and that they were ill-suited for public life.⁵ The negativity with which women were all too frequently regarded is disturbingly, even chillingly, captured in the second-century BC writing known as Ecclesiasticus or Sirach. Sirach 42.14 states, "Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace."

That being said, early Christian authors were not necessarily more affirming of women. For example, Tertullian, the late second- and early third-century AD Christian theologian from Carthage in North Africa, could depict women as "the devil's gateway" and as "vipers."⁶ Such chauvinistic, if not misogynistic, statements cause even some of the most controverted and disparaging comments of Paul regarding women and wives to pale in comparison.⁷ We will have more to say about Paul and his perception of and instruction regarding women/wives below, but first let us consider Jesus's treatment and inclusion of women in his earthly ministry. Allow me to anticipate our conclusions by quoting David M. Scholer:

[A]s a Jewish male in an androcentric, patriarchal society, Jesus' respect for women as persons of dignity and worth and his inclusion of them as disciples and proclaimers in his life and ministry was [sic] very significant in its own first-century context for women and their place and activity in ministry in the earliest churches [indeed, I would add, Paul's churches] and is important as a heritage for both Jewish and Christian people today.⁸

In his serviceable article, Scholer supports his claim that Jesus treated women with dignity and afforded them worth by noting that, for one thing, he healed women. Undaunted by contact with women, even those regarded as ceremonially unclean, Jesus healed, frequently with touch involved, Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:14–15; Mark 1:29–31; Luke 4:38–39); Jairus's daughter and an unnamed woman with a twelve-year flow of blood (Matt 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56; cf. Lev 18); and a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years (Luke 13:11–17). No less touching is the way Jesus addressed these females: "*Talitha cum*" ("Little girl, get up!"), he said to Jairus's once-dead daughter. "Daughter," he calls the ritually unclean woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years and from doctors who took her money and her hope, but affected no cure. She was sneaky, and Jesus was busy, but she was a faith-filled daughter wanting and waiting to be made whole. Jesus was able and willing to bring her peace. Additionally, Jesus sought to teach a synagogue leader that a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years whom he had healed on the Sabbath was far more valuable than a beast of burden. She was not a dispensable animal, but an invaluable "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:15–16).

Jesus also came to the defense of women whose sexual reputations were called into question (e.g., Luke 7:36–50). While not condoning promiscuity, he did not condemn women who were (thought to be) promiscuous, nor turn a blind eye toward the adulterous thoughts and acts of men (note, e.g., Matt 5:27–30; cf. Mark 9:42–48).

Far from regarding them as inconsequential or token, Jesus viewed women as full participants in his mission and in the kingdom of God. Providentially, Luke, the gospel “which shows the greatest interest in women in the life and ministry of Jesus,”⁹ names a number of Jesus’s women followers/disciples, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, “who provided for [Jesus and the Twelve] out of their resources” (8:3). Luke also tells Theophilus and those privileged to read over his shoulder about Mary and Martha of Bethany (10:38–42), the former of whom is said to have chosen “the better part” by sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening to what he was saying. Not a few women were also present at the cross, burial, and empty tomb of Jesus. Taken together, the canonical gospels indicate that the female witnesses of Good Friday and/or Easter Sunday included Mary Magdalene, Jesus’s mother named Mary, as few as one and as many as three other Marys, Salome, Joanna, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. As it happens, these “gospel women” were the first to learn about and to tell of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead.¹⁰ So pivotal and central a role is Mary Magdalene thought to have played in bearing witness to the Twelve regarding the risen Jesus that she would later be depicted as the *apostola apostolorum* (apostle to the apostles).

“Paul and the eschatological woman”¹¹

Although Mary was among the first to see the risen Jesus, before too long, there would be a number of other eyewitnesses. In addition to the eleven (see, e.g., Matt 28:16), the seven (note John 21:2), and the two disciples traveling to Emmaus (so Luke 24:13–35), Paul reports in 1 Corinthians 15:5–6 that, after having appeared to Cephas and the Twelve, Jesus subsequently “appeared to more than five hundred *adelphoi* (lit., “brothers”) at one time, most of whom [were then] still alive, though some [had] died.” It strains against credulity to think that there were no *adelphai* (sisters) among these five hundred *adelphoi*. (In fact, in that day, the masculine plural *adelphoi* typically included *adelphai*.) Thereafter, Paul tells the Corinthians, who were contending that the dead are not raised, that the Lord appeared to James (i.e., James the Just, the brother of Jesus), then to all of the apostles, the precise identity of whom remains a mystery. Then, Christ appeared to the last and least of the apostles: he appeared to Paul (15:7–9).

Paul’s apocalyptic encounter with the risen Christ would prove to be a game-changer, not only for him, but also (and I exaggerate not) for human history (Gal 1:12, 16). The zealous Pharisee, who regarded Jesus accursed of God and who had been “hell-bent” on eradicating the Christian cancer growing on the body Jewish, would change his mind and his ways. Indeed, he began to preach “the faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal 1:23). If, in the years immediately following his conversion/call, Paul spent time processing this encounter and preaching Christ in Arabia,

Syria, Cilicia, and Cyprus, the time would come when the apostle would take his ministry and message farther afield—to Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, Achaia, and even Italy.

The Apostle Paul’s missional and ministerial *modus operandi*, at least in retrospect, as we put various bits of evidence together, appears to have looked something like this: To begin, Paul, who regarded himself as grasped of God to take the gospel primarily to previously unevangelized Gentiles (“unreached people groups,” as missiologists might now call them), would travel to a given location, typically a population center accessible by land and by sea—such as Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. (As a Christ-follower and minister, Paul would also spend stretches of time in Antioch, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome, all of which were urban locations. If Jesus was agrarian, Paul, we might say, was cosmopolitan.)

Upon arrival in a new location, Paul would have had to begin at the beginning (see Rom 15:17–21; 2 Cor 10:13–16). Perhaps he, like Jesus, would win converts along the way. Once on the ground in a given locale, the apostle would begin to preach the gospel and to ply his trade as a leather-worker.¹² When a handful of folks in a particular place came to faith—whether through contact with a local synagogue (if there were one), where Paul, as a traveling Jewish teacher, would have been able to proclaim the gospel, or through conversations with an individual or a small group of people in the *agora* (marketplace), the baths, or theaters (if Paul frequented such places), or his workshop—an *ekklēsia* (church) would be formed.¹³ Such fledgling fellowships typically met in homes, be they tenements or villas. In these, it appears, believers would worship. Worship gatherings would likely have included singing, praying, prophesying, listening to sacred texts (or, on occasion, a letter from a fellow believer), baptizing, and sharing meals, not least of which was the Lord’s Supper. When Paul was no longer able to stay in a certain location, usually due to external opposition from forces outside of the congregation, he would, as it were, “rinse and repeat” elsewhere, *even though things were never exactly the same in any two places*.

Popular perceptions notwithstanding, Paul was not a helter-skelter missionary tentmaker in a holy hurry, looking to drop his “apostolic load” and leave. Even after spending considerable stretches of time in a place—e.g., eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11); three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31)—he would strive to stay in touch with assemblies he started, either by visiting, networking, or writing. Paul’s converts and churches may have been out of his sight, but they were never completely out of his mind (note 2 Cor 11:28).

A number of Paul’s letters have been preserved. These letters contain, in the words of 2 Peter 3:16, “some things . . . hard to understand”—among them, certain statements that Paul makes regarding women and wives (*gynai* in Greek). Puzzling comments touch upon the following seven subjects: veiling heads/keeping hairdos up while prophesying, being man’s glory, keeping silent in the churches, submitting to husbands, not exercising authority over an *andros* (man/husband), being deceived like Eve, and being saved through childbirth.

This is not the place to enter into a thoroughgoing interpretation and application of the passages in which such remarks are made.¹⁴ A few brief observations on 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 are nonetheless in order, as these are the two passages where the aforementioned seven items are concentrated. Let us first consider 1 Timothy 2:8–15.¹⁵ In this text, women (or perhaps wives) are instructed to “learn in silence with full submission.” (Similar calls to wifely submission are found in Eph 5:22 [note, however, Eph 5:21!]; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; cf. 1 Pet 3:1.) Moreover, women (or wives) are prohibited from teaching and from having authority over a man (or husband). They are meant to “keep silent” (cf. 1 Cor 14:33b–36). An appeal is made to Eve as a prototype (cf. 2 Cor 11:3). She is described as the one deceived and as a transgressor. Women/wives, then, are directed toward bearing children and managing their households (cf. 1 Tim 5:14). It is worth noting the aberrant teaching opposed in the letter (4:1–5). One might also observe that the Pastoral Epistles appear to assume that a bishop/overseer (1 Tim 3:2; cf. Titus 1:7–9) and elders (Titus 1:5–6) will be men/husbands.

The other passage in Paul’s writings to which appeal is made most frequently to subjugate and suppress women/wives in general, and women ministers in particular, is 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. There, Paul forwards theological and “natural” arguments in an effort to have Corinthian women/wives cover their heads or to keep their hairdos up in worship gatherings. It appears that Paul is operating, at least for the sake of his present argument, with a hierarchal pattern that, at least to some extent, subordinates Christ to God, man to Christ, and woman to man. It is both interesting and instructive to note, however, that Paul does not prohibit Corinthian women/wives from praying and prophesying in the gathered assembly (note 1 Cor 12:10; 14:1–5; cf. Acts 21:9). Indeed, Paul presumes and makes space for them to do so! Furthermore, the apostle goes so far as to posit interdependence between men and women “in the Lord” (cf. Gal 3:28). The same is true in 1 Corinthians 7:2–5 with respect to husbands and wives and conjugal rights (cf. Eph 5:21).

Taken together, these two texts (i.e., 1 Tim 2:8–15 and 1 Cor 11:2–16) offer a rather mixed epistolary bag, although, it must be acknowledged, that the preponderance of evidence appears to fall on the side of restricting, if not prohibiting, the verbal contribution, not to mention leadership, of women/wives to these given congregations.

Conversely, however, it appears that no such limitations were in place, for example, in Philippi. Turning to Philippians 4:2–3, we discover that Paul enjoins Euodia (whose name means “good journey”) and Syntyche (“good luck”) “to think the same thing in the Lord”—that is, to set aside their disagreements for the good of the congregation and for the growth of the gospel. The apostle does not enjoin these women to submission; rather, he affirms their participation as fellow strugglers and coworkers in the gospel. It is possible, though not verifiable, that these two women

were among the “bishops and overseers” whom Paul addresses at the outset of the letter (1:1).¹⁶ As I write in my commentary on Philippians, “[The] gender [of Euodia and Syntyche] did not exclude them from [the work of the gospel] any more than Clement’s qualified him for it.”¹⁷ One might note in passing that Acts highlights the ministry of Lydia to Paul, Silas, and the church in Philippi (16:14–15, 40).

Both Jesus and Paul, then, affirmed women in principle and practice. Paul’s prohibitions and restrictions, I would contend, may be at most occasional exceptions to this general rule.

Lest it seem farfetched or as special pleading to suggest that Euodia and Syntyche held leadership positions in the Philippian church, we should be mindful of other women who served in such capacities whom

Paul mentions in his letters. For example, in Romans 16:1–2, Paul commends to the Roman churches “our sister Phoebe, a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae,” a port for the city of Corinth on the Saronic Gulf. Not only was Phoebe a minister and servant-leader in her local congregation, she was also a benefactor of Christ-followers, including Paul. Additionally, it is likely that Phoebe was the courier of the apostle’s magisterial epistle to the Romans as well as its earliest public interpreter.¹⁸

Paul then turns in Romans 16 to extend his greetings to “Prisca [Priscilla in Acts] and Aquila” (v. 3). It is frequently noted that her name precedes his here (as also in Acts 18:18; 2 Tim 4:19; cf. 1 Cor 16:19; Acts 18:2). Might it be that she was the more able or vocal of this ministerial couple? Regardless, they had connections with Paul and his mission in Corinth (Acts 18:1–3) and Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19). As they had returned to their home in Rome, Paul greets them and describes them as his coworkers in Christ “who risked their necks for [his] life.” He “and all the churches of the Gentiles” offer them their thanks.

Romans 16 is also where Paul greets Junia, ostensibly the wife of Andronicus (v. 7). He describes them as his “compatriots,” “prominent among the apostles,” and “in Christ before [he] was.” Of special interest to us is Paul’s claim that this couple was “outstanding among the apostles.” Were they themselves apostles? It does, in fact, appear they were (cf. 1 Cor 15:6).¹⁹ In Romans 16, Paul also mentions the ministerial labors of Mary (v. 6), (the sisters?) Tryphaena and Tryphosa, as well as Persis (v. 12). Lastly, in this chapter, he greets Julia, who may have been married to Philologus (v. 15).

Yet, there is more. In 1 Corinthians 1:11, Paul refers to “Chloe’s people.” Chloe was seemingly a female Christian leader/benefactor who lived in Ephesus, or perhaps Corinth.²⁰ In Colossians 4:15, the apostle also extends his greetings to Nympha and to the Laodicean assembly that gathered in her home. Additionally, in Philemon 2, Paul addresses Apphia as a “sister.” She may have been Philemon’s wife as well as a Christian coworker in her own right. Lastly, we recall Lois and Eunice, the believing mother and grandmother, respectively, of Timothy (2 Tim 1:5).

Conclusion

Where does this comparative study leave us? In a pleasant, if unexpected, place. It likely comes as little to no surprise that Jesus

affirmed the dignity of women, treating them as individuals created in the divine image, and that women played a pivotal role both in Jesus's earthly and post-resurrection ministries. It may, however, come as a surprise to some that Paul's calling of women/wives to silence and submission is tempered, if not trumped or interpreted, by his affirmation of mutuality and equality of women and wives in marriage and ministry.

Both Jesus and Paul, then, affirmed women in principle and practice. Paul's prohibitions and restrictions, I would contend, may be at most occasional exceptions to this general rule. As such, they would be contextual, not continual; time-bound troubleshooting, not timeless guidelines; a chapter in a book, but not the entire story. More often than not, there is inclusion and embrace, and it is this trajectory that we trace.²¹ "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27–28).

Notes

1. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.
2. See Shaw, "The Monstrous Imposition upon Jesus," in *The Writings of St. Paul*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Norton, 2007), 417.
3. Shaw, "Monstrous Imposition," 419.
4. Even if a given person already regards Paul as more friend than foe, more hero than heel, more saint than scallywag, there are any number of others—not a few of whom are thoughtful, faithful Christian women—who would prefer to "throw the apostle out with the bathwater." Perhaps this piece will give the latter cause for pause.
5. See further, e.g., Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1975), and Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
6. *De cultu feminarum* 1.1:2–3 and *De baptismo* 1.2. On Tertullian's (mis)appropriation of Paul, see Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite, eds., *Tertullian and Paul* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2013).
7. E.g., "Woman is the reflection of man" (1 Cor 11:7); "Women/wives are not to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says" (1 Cor 14:34); "Let a woman/wife learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman/wife to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. . . . She [i.e., woman] will be saved through childbearing" (1 Tim 2:11–12, 15a).
8. David M. Scholer, "Women," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 881.
9. Scholer, "Women," 885.
10. See Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). Note also Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Cf., too, Evelyn and Frank Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1978).
11. For the wording of this subheading, see E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 53–86.
12. See Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980). Cf. Todd D. Still, "Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle's Tentmaking and Social Class," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 781–95.

13. See further Stanley Kent Stowers, "Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity," *Novum Testamentum* 26 (1984): 59–82.

14. See, however, Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), and Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

15. Even though many New Testament scholars regard 1 Timothy (and the other Pastorals, i.e., Titus and 2 Tim), not to mention Colossians and Ephesians, to be pseudonymous (that is, written in the name of Paul by someone other than Paul), other scholars, many ministers, and most laypeople do not. On a practical, pastoral level, these texts are canonical and require interpretation, regardless of origin.

16. See, e.g., Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 111–12.

17. Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 131.

18. On Phoebe and her role in Paul's mission, see esp. Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 89–91.

19. See Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005). Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 109–222, makes a strong case that the Joanna of Luke is the Junia of Romans!

20. Gordon D. Fee surmises that "Chloe was a wealthy Asian . . . whose business interests caused her agents to travel between Ephesus and Corinth." *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 54.

21. So rightly, Ellis, *Pauline Theology*, 78: "Of course, there may be practical reasons that restrict the public ministry of a woman in a particular time and place. But it appears to be clear that in principle and practice Paul affirms their ministry. Should the church today do less?"



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Jesus and Paul on Women: Incomparable or Compatible? Todd D. Still, Ph.D. & William M. Hinson Professor of Christian Scriptures. George W. Truett Theological Seminary & Baylor University & Waco, Texas. The other Pauline passage to which appeal is most frequently made to subjugate and suppress women/wives in general and women ministers in particular is 1 Cor. 11.2-16. There, Paul forwards theological and "natural" arguments in an effort to get Corinthian women/wives to cover their heads or to keep their hairdos up in worship gatherings. It appears that Paul is operating, at least for the sake of his present argument, with a hierarchal pattern that, at least to some extent, subordinates Christ to God, man to Christ, and woman to man. "Jesus and Paul on Women: Incomparable or Compatible?" Priscilla Papers 27 (2013): 16-19. "Once Upon a Time": Galatians as an Apocalyptic Story. Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters 2 (2012): 69-78. 5. "Since We Believe That Jesus Died and Rose Again": The Gospel Paul Preached in Thessalonica as Evidenced by 1 Thessalonians. Restoration Quarterly 54 (2012): 7-18. "Christos as Pistos: The Faith(fulness) of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews." "Pauline Theology and Ancient Slavery: Does the Former Support or Subvert the Latter?" Horizons in Biblical Theology 27 (2005): 21-34. "Philemon among the Letters of Paul: Theological and Canonical Considerations." If Jesus and Paul taught things that were mutual exclusive and contradictory, then you would have a real issue. You have to decide who you are going to believe, Jesus or Paul. I am not talking about teachings that are different but compatible; rather I'm talking about teachings that are incompatible, being mutually exclusive. There is a difference in feel and so I have already stated the question of whether it is incompatible or compatible? I think a lot of this conflict in some people's mind has to do with misunderstanding both Jesus and Paul. They have seen how they have expressed themselves and it makes them look as if they are incompatible but a lot of this has to do with misunderstanding. So, let me give you some examples.