



There is no longer male and female?

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Published 2018, Nazarene Theological College, Manchester.



Throughout Greco-Roman history the fate of a woman was variously described from someone to be oppressed and despised (especially without male protection, cf. P. Flor., 58, 14) to having some sort of equality with men and having influence (especially, the fate of capable or affluent women, cf. Stob. Ecl., iii, 520, 10ff). Generally, however, in different forms of writings a woman's position is inferior to a man, and is even compared to a slave (cf. Diog. L., I, 33; Lact. Inst., 19, 17; T. Ber., 7, 18).

In Old Testament (OT) times, a woman is mostly depicted in relation to a male authority (husband or father); she can have influence as a wife or a mother, especially if she acts adroitly (cf. Sarah, Rebekah, and Abigail). While we must not remake the OT writers (mostly if not entirely men) into our modern image, it is remarkable that they show how a woman can reach an extraordinary position in public life (cf. Deborah and Esther). When it comes to religious life, women are a part of the worshiping community of Israel. Although no cases of female priests are known, women participate in the festivals and sacrificial meals (1 Sam 1:4; 2 Sam 6:19). They are brought into a covenant with Yahweh, just as men and children (Deut 29:10ff.). We learn of prophetically gifted women, like Meriam and Huldah (Ex 15:20ff.; 2 Kg 22:14-20), religious leaders and speakers of the Lord God. In that male dominated society, where women were usually portrayed by men, these and other examples of influential women speak about the possibility of a woman reaching her full potential in society when she has proper preparation and a gift, just as any man.

Today there is still a tension regarding the role of women in church. On the one hand, church people recognise that the lordship of God in Christ removes all differences between men and women, uniting them as a people of God. The apostle Paul is helpful in respect to this liberating proclamation, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). The early church successfully wins men and women, who are called brothers and sisters, and who receive the Holy Spirit and share worship life together (cf. Acts 1:4; 16:13ff.; 17:4, 12; Rev 16:1; 1 Cor 9:5). In fact, these events are nothing less than the fulfilment of the OT prophecies in Christ that the NT writers quote, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, ... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Joel 2:28ff. in Acts 2:17-18). This is the character of the new age, the age to come, brought about through the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh.

Moreover, the life and ministry of Jesus himself demonstrates his mission to women, even if it means breaking Jewish customs. He speaks to women (John 4:27), and on their behalf (Mark 12:40). He breaks the Sabbath on behalf of a sick woman (Luke 13:10ff) and motivates another woman to become an evangelist in her village despite her background (John 4:7ff). He reinforces Mary's position as a "disciple" at his feet (Luke 10:38ff). Women play a significant role throughout his ministry and in his genealogy. Jesus advocates that the community of his followers also demonstrates light for all the people (Mat 5:16).

Yet there are difficult passages in scripture that appear to challenge woman's equality with men or obscure her role in the community. Dealing with these passages without considering fully the historical, social or narrative background leads some interpreters to perceive a woman as subject to a man despite her equality in the divine family. These passages come mainly from the Pauline epistles and need to be explained within Paul's context.

Paul works closely with women in the cause of the gospel (women like Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis, cf. Phil 4:2-3; Rom 16). Phoebe is designated by Paul in Romans 16:1-2 as a deacon of the church in Cenchrea. He also lists some female leaders of house churches in 1 Cor 1:11; Col 4:15; and Philemon 2. Paul calls Junias alongside Andronicus as prominent among the apostles who were in Christ before him (Rom 16:7). Paul is the one who claims equality of genders in Christ in Gal 3:26, as mentioned earlier.

Paul's practice needs to be read along with the passages that are being used today as proof-texts against women in ministry. Paul can hardly be inconsistent in his views on women in ministry, but he writes in a society where a woman remains mostly uneducated, insignificant, dependent and at times is exploited (i.e. temple prostitutes).

Whenever Paul gives specific instructions to women, he gives specific instructions to men (cf. 1 Cor 11:10ff.; Col 3:18; Eph 5:21ff.; 1 Tim 2:13ff.; also see 1 Pet 3). Paul places his instructions in the context of reconsidering the behaviour of both men and women in Christ. Without changing the norms of the society of his day Paul offers a different view on the relationship between men and women in Christ, i.e. the one of mutual support, respect and rights, one of restored relationships between men and women. Addressing both men and women (perhaps uncommon in his day even to address marginalized parties) Paul emphasizes the relationship of equal partnership. He describes proper worship, where both men and women can be dressed and conduct themselves appropriately, pray and prophesy; where they can learn to become genuine Christian leaders growing in faith and holiness.

Paul may not intend to change society as a whole, but he expects something different from the people of God. The church must be a place where its members (men and women)

live in humility and love regarding others better than themselves and look to the interests of others following the example of Christ (Phil 2). The mutual support and working together on all levels to reach the full potential before God is also implied in his treatment of marital relationships (cf. Eph 5, 1 Pet 3).

In our day, society has been changing and many women undertake leading positions and play more prominent roles. I wonder what Paul or Peter would say to us in the light of these changing circumstances? Could these changes be finally catching up with the heart of the gospel concerning the liberating and redeeming message for women? If so, is it worrying that some of the same arguments against the abolition of slavery are still used to keep women 'in their place'? It took centuries for the church to recognise slavery as a social injustice contradictory to the message of the gospel. Changes that flowed from the heart of the gospel were too often resisted by Christians even when society had already changed. The question of women's role still invites us to an open-minded consideration, led by the Spirit.