

Women in the Earliest Churches

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INTRODUCTION

My previous monograph, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, concentrated on one particular kind of material in the New Testament, i.e., that which may well go back to the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*. This volume seeks to take the next step by looking at texts which give us clues about women and their roles in the earliest post-Easter communities. In order to have some sort of historical perspective, we will attempt to look at the relevant texts in what may roughly be called chronological order, realizing that the dates for various of the New Testament books are debatable. Thus, after the necessary background chapter we will deal with the Pauline material, including the Pastorals. Then we will examine the perspectives of the evangelists about women and their roles. In the concluding chapter we will move beyond the canonical period to glimpse how the various trends and trajectories of the New Testament period were followed or abandoned during the age of the ante-Nicene Fathers.

At this point it may be worthwhile to explain this book's *raison d'être*. In reading through the ever-growing literature dealing with women in the Bible, one is constantly confronted with able scholars who nonetheless come to the text with a specific agenda in mind, whether patriarchal or feminist. This is not surprising in view of the importance of the issue, but when the Bible is used to justify positions which are polar opposites one suspects that something has gone awry. Thus, for instance, on one end of the spectrum we hear of *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*,¹ and that women are not allowed to teach or preach in the Church in any authoritative capacity.² On the other end of the spectrum we hear of *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*³ in which relevant biblical texts are divided up into 'positive' and 'negative' categories depending upon whether the author thinks they affirm or deny a feminist agenda.

We are also asked to choose between Paul as chauvinist or feminist.⁴ These terms usually come to the fore when one is dealing

with crucial texts such as Gal 3.28. Thus, for instance, it has been maintained that this text is a 'magna charta' affirming a truly egalitarian agenda so far as social relationships are concerned.⁵ On the other hand, it has also been argued that this is part of a baptismal liturgy that speaks only of one's position of equality in the eyes of God. If this is the case, then Gal 3.28 has no clear implications for social relationships.⁶ One wonders if the categories of chauvinist and feminist are not so anachronistic that it becomes impossible to hear the various texts in their original historical contexts.

Either/or categories do not seem helpful when dealing with complex biblical material. Perhaps the very reason polar opposite positions seem able to claim support from the New Testament is because the material is by no means monolithic. What is needed, and what this study will try to bring to the discussion, is some balance and an attempt to deal with the variegated material without imposing twentieth-century categories on the texts. Of course, no one comes to the text without presuppositions, but this author has tried to let the text inform and reform his presuppositions so that it is the text that has the last say about the material.

A second reason for this study is the lack of detailed exegetical studies that deal with the gamut of the material rather than selected texts. This selective approach seems especially to have plagued the study of Paul's view of women. It is too easy to write off this or that text as a 'post-Pauline' interpolation or a contradiction to the earlier and more pristine views of Paul (or various of the other New Testament authors for that matter), when our knowledge of the original historical contexts is at best only partial. It is always *possible* that a creative thinker such as Paul may have changed his mind over the course of time about women and their roles. However, in view of the fact that Paul did not adopt diametrically opposed positions on other social issues during the time he wrote, it will require compelling evidence to warrant such a conclusion. This is especially so since all of the authentic Pauline letters come from a person with fourteen or more years of Christian experience behind him. In short, Paul's letters were written by a mature Christian who had had ample time to consider deeply the major issues of Christian faith and practice.

It may be gathered from all the above that a large portion of this monograph will be spent studying Paul. This is so not only because of the vast amount of relevant material in the Pauline corpus, but also because of the vast amount of controversy connected with it.

It is disturbing to notice various attempts to over-emphasize some

material at the expense of the rest of the data. The whole of what an author says must be listened to carefully and repeatedly before that author is charged with inconsistency or a notable shift in thinking. To that end I have spent some twelve years now carefully studying and restudying the texts discussed in this book, and at various points I have had to revise my initial impressions of what the author meant. I have found it worthwhile to be as patient with the New Testament data as one should be with a colleague's work before drawing radical conclusions or charging a careful writer with inconsistency.

Finally, I wish to make clear that this exegetical and historical study is by no means exhaustive, and therefore no attempt is made to draw out all the theological implications of the material under scrutiny. Nor do I attempt the hermeneutical task of trying to answer whether and how this material may be used or applied in a modern context. In fairness to the historical givenness of the texts, I must insist that the text cannot and must not be used today to mean something radically different, or antithetical, to what the original author intended it to mean. Thus, it is disturbing to hear an excellent exegete say: 'Clearly, the patriarchal stamp of scripture is permanent. But just as clearly, interpretation of its content is forever changing, since new occasions teach new duties and *contexts alter texts*, liberating them from frozen construction' (italics mine).⁷ If contexts are allowed to alter texts radically, then historical perspective is lost, as is the difference between exegesis and eisegesis. Thus, I have tried to allow the text to have its own say whether or not it was congenial to my own viewpoints.

It is hoped that this attempt at balance and breadth of exegetical coverage will reveal clues as to how views of women developed in the earliest period of Christian history. It appears that the New Testament evidence shows a definite tendency on the part of the authors addressing the earliest churches to argue for or support by implication the new freedom and roles women may assume in Christ. At the same time, the evidence indicates an attempt at *reformation*, not repudiation, of the universal patriarchal structure of family and society in the first century in so far as it included the Christian family and community. It is crucial to see that this reformation was to take place 'in Christ'. In the New Testament material there is no call to social revolution or the overthrow of a patriarchal society outside of the Body of Christ. *Reformation in community*, not renunciation in society, is the order of the day.

This significant, though not radical, reformation in community and affirmation of women was not quickly or universally accepted

even in the Christian Church. When the author of Luke–Acts wrote in the last quarter of the first century these views still had to be argued for. The same is true even later when the final form of the Fourth Gospel appeared. Even a cursory review of post-New Testamental and pre-Nicene material suggests that, as problems arose with heresy, the resistance to both the *reformation* and *affirmation* mentioned above intensified. These are some of the major themes we will attempt to examine and document in this work.