In this thread I have been talking about the role of women in the early church, starting with the ministry of Jesus, then in the churches of Paul (the first churches we have any real record of). In this post I continue by reflecting on Paul’s actual *views* of women; this strikes me as a particularly important topic since Paul is frequently condemned as the first Christian misogynist (or at least one of the first bad ones). Is that justified? The following represents some of my reflections as found in my discussion in my textbook on the NT for university students.

The apostle Paul did not know the man Jesus nor, probably, any of his women followers. Moreover, many of the things that Paul proclaimed in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection varied from the original message heard by the disciples in Galilee. For one thing, Paul believed that the end had already commenced with the victory over the forces of evil that had been won at Jesus’ cross and sealed at his resurrection. Not that the victory was by any means yet complete, but it had at least begun. This victory brought newness of life, the beginning if not the fulfillment of the new age. For this reason, everyone who was baptized into Christ was “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:16). And a new creation at least *implied* a new social order: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. 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 3:27-28).

No male and female in Christ? This was a radical message in an age in which everyone “knew” that males and females were inherently different, as I will explain in a later post.

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Like Jesus himself, however, Paul does not seem to have urged a social revolution in light of his theological conviction — ust as he did not urge the abolition of slavery even though he claimed that “in Christ” slave and free were “equal”; possibly I’ll post later on what’s really going on in the letter to Philemon where slavery is an issue. But with respect to one’s standing before Christ, it made no difference whether one was a slave or a slave owner; slaves were therefore to be treated no differently from masters in the church. For this reason, when believers came together to enjoy the Lord’s supper, it was not proper for some to have good food and drink and others to have scarcely enough. In Christ there was to be equality, and failure to observe that equality could lead to disastrous results (1 Cor 11:27-30). But this did not mean that Paul urged all Christian masters to free their slaves or Christian slaves to seek their release. Quite the contrary, since “the time was short,” everyone was to be content with the roles they were presently in. They were not to try to change them (1 Cor 7:17-24).

How did this attitude affect Paul’s view of women? For one thing, whether consistent with his own views of equality in Christ or not, Paul maintained that there was still to be a difference between men and women in this world. To eradicate that difference, in Paul’s view, was unnatural and wrong. This is most evident in Paul’s insistence that women in Corinth should continue to wear headcoverings when they prayed and prophesied in the congregation (1 Cor 11:3-16). A number of the details of Paul’s arguments here are difficult to understand and have been the source of endless wrangling among biblical scholars. For example, when he says that women are to have “authority” on their heads (the literal wording of v. 10), does he mean a “veil” or “long hair”? Is he urging a particular article of
clothing or a particular hair style? Why would having this “authority” on the head affect the angels (v. 10)? Are these good angels or bad? And so on. Despite such ambiguities, several points are quite clear from Paul’s argument. For one thing, in these activities women could and did participate openly in the church alongside men. But — and this is his overarching point — they were to do so as *women*, not as *men*. For “nature” taught that men should have short hair and women long (at least, that’s what nature taught *Paul*! As someone who grew up in the 60s and 70s – and who used to have hair – I must say nature never taught that to *me*!), and women who made themselves look like men were acting in ways contrary to nature and therefore contrary to the will of God.

For Paul, therefore, even though men and women were equal in Christ, this equality had not yet become a full social reality. We might suppose that it was not to become so until Christ returned to bring in the new age. That is to say, men and women had not yet been granted full social equality any more than masters and slaves had been or any more than the Christians’ bodies had already experienced their glorious resurrection unto immortality. While living in this age, men and women were to continue to accept their “natural” social roles, with women subordinate to men just as men were subordinate to Christ and Christ was subordinate to God (1 Cor 11:3).

So does Paul really push for gender equality or not? Sane and reasonable people have argued both sides of the question. My personal view is that if he didn’t allow his theological beliefs translate into social realities, he was nowhere near where we are or at least ought to be in the 21st century.

Paul, the Pastorals, and Women
Jesus’ Association with Women