THE PAULINE CHURCHES
by R. John Kinkel

Background
As the early Church grew in numbers, there arose a group of Jewish leaders, scribes and Pharisees, who began to harass, and even at times, imprison the followers of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:3). The persecution centered on Hellenistic Jews Christians; and a major thorn in their side was a man named Saul of Tarsus. The persecution of this group of Christians led many to flee Jerusalem to establish new churches in Antioch, Damascus, and elsewhere. Thus a new era of Church growth emerged.

Saul, after his well known encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, became a new man of faith (Acts 9:4-8). The mysterious voice from heaven could not be ignored. After much prayer and subsequent baptism, wherein he later became know as Paul, the new apostle was given a mission from God and a special Gospel to be preached to the gentiles. No man shaped early Christianity more than Paul. Of the 27 books comprising the New Testament, 13 were either written by Paul or attributed to him. His story also dominates another NT book: the Acts of the Apostles. Anyone who wishes to depart from the authentic truths enunciated by Paul does so at his or her own peril.

Social Structures in the early Church

From the beginning, the social structure of the Church reflected considerable diversity in language, ethnicity, religious background, and social class; it had to alter some of its practices to accommodate this multicultural reality. Over the centuries people have shaped reality through social interaction. Christians adapted and took on new features because they wanted to survive and promote the original principles of their religion's heritage and founder. Culture shapes the lives of people and their religious beliefs, and vice-versa. The early Christians maintained that they were being guided by the Holy Spirit. They prayed for help in constructing each new reality of church life as it came into being (Acts 1:26; 6:1-6).

One early conflict that threatened to tear the Church apart had to do with observing the Torah, particularly dietary laws and circumcision. The Council of Jerusalem gathered in 49 C.E. to deal with this festering problem (Acts 15:4). The Council concluded that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to become Christians. Paul's focus was clear: stress the essentials of Christianity and all the rest will fall into place.

Paul and the Role of Women in the Church

We find conflicting statements in the Pauline corpus about the place of women in the Church. In some letters, Paul argues that all Christians are equal by virtue of their baptism:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ
have clothed your selves with Christ.
There is neither Jew not Greek,
there is neither slave nor free person,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27-28).

Because of the high esteem Paul held in the early Church, his followers wrote several documents that were somewhat representative of Paul's views and attitudes; however, Paul was the true author of only seven undisputed letters. Paul's disciples presented some of their own ideas when crafting certain letters attributed to Paul. Such disciples believed their editing was good for the Church. It allowed the Church to make adjustments and to move forward with changes which in their view were needed at the time. For example, in 1Tim 2:12, Paul allegedly says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man.” In Col 3:18 we read, “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord.” Was this the true message of Paul? Are women equal to men in the Church through baptism? Do women have a major role in leading the Church based on Paul's actions?
It is clear that both men and women held important leadership roles in the Pauline churches between 50 and 62 C.E. Close to a dozen women were instrumental in spreading the message of the Jesus movement, according to Paul’s letters. They were:

- **Pheobe**: she was the head of the house-church near the port city of Cenchreae (near Corinth), and Paul considered her a co-worker in the Lord. As one of Paul’s patrons, she supported his ministry out of her own resources, and later, was selected by Paul to deliver his complex and most important letter: Romans (16:1-2). Paul called her diakonos, i.e., one who serves. There were perhaps a half-dozen house-churches in Rome at the time, and she must have known Greek to be able to read and to explain Paul’s letter which was being sent through her. This was a major assignment given only to a special disciple and head of a house-church. Some maintain that Origen and St. John Chrysostom held that Phoebe had been officially ordained.²

- **Prisca**: Aquila and his wife, Prisca, lived in Rome and supported a group of Christians that met in their home (Rom 16:3). Prisca and Aquila were instrumental in establishing a house-church in Corinth and in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19).

- **Mary**: she worked diligently to spread the Gospel to the Romans and they were eager to know about Jesus.

- **Persis** was a co-worker for the Gospel (Rom 16:6) together with Tryphaena and Tyrphosa.

- **Julia**: she was the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus. Paul named her as one of the leaders in the Christian community of Rome.

- **Junia** was a very talented woman and together with Andronicus are “prominent among the apostles” (Rom 16:17). Junia was one of the first to preach the Gospel in Rome. (Note that Paul applied the term “apostle” to a woman.⁵ Here we see the term “apostle” applied in a broader sense than the traditional meaning, i.e., one of the twelve chosen by Christ. Paul is also an apostle and so are many others who have seen the risen Lord, preached the Gospel, and have established new churches.)

- **Lydia**: she was a woman of considerable means (Acts 16:11) whom Paul met in Philippi, and he later converted her to Christianity. Lydia and her whole household were eventually baptized, and Paul says he was invited to her home. Later on, she became the head of a church that met in her house.

- **Euodia**: Both she and Syntyche were co-workers with Paul, and he says the two women “struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel” (Phil 4:2).

No one can deny that Paul appointed women to high status positions in the early churches, and their contributions were crucial for the growth of Christianity in this early period. Why then would Paul maintain that women should be quite in church and not be allowed to teach men? How could they teach and lead if they are to be silent?

Paul was a Jewish visionary and asserted ideas similar to those of Jesus Christ. Women were important in Jesus’ ministry. For Paul the Kingdom of God was already operative in the world, and this kingdom must reflect God’s divine plan and will, i.e., all are equal before God, a notion contrary to the Roman Empire. Paul argued there is no distinction before God, between male and female; we are all one in Christ. Why should we behave that way here on earth: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:28). Paul challenged the standards and norms of his time; but he did not live long enough to personally teach his views about Christ’s revelation to large numbers of people. He probably died during Nero’s persecution, around 64 C.E.

**After Paul**

As the story of Christianity unfolded, we find the second generation of Christians rewriting the doctrines of Paul to suit their own religious preference and needs.⁶ Twenty years after Paul’s death, his disciples wanted to bring Paul into the mainstream of what they considered orthodox Church thinking. It would appear that the authors of the pastoral epistles, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, as well as the letter to the Colossians, took liberties with Paul; they added ideas that were not really part of the Pauline tradition. Some believed that Paul was too radical. The early Church’s not too subtle movement to
sanitize Paul was to reflect an increased accommodation to the world after the apostle’s death. Did the Church make a wrong turn in the road here? Do we have to rediscover the real Paul? The pastoral epistles illustrate the revision of Paul made by his followers. The letter to the Colossians is another example of how the Church tried to rehabilitate Paul so that he would be more acceptable to Church leaders and some new believers. But which Paul do we want? The Paul of history or the revisionist Paul who has been modified by the clerics who had their own agenda?

But what about 1 Cor 14? This epistle was definitely written by Paul, but it contains negative statements about the role of women in the Church. The text in question is:

As in all the churches of God’s holy people, women are to remain quiet in the assemblies, since they have no permission to speak; theirs is the subordinate part, as the Law itself says. If there is anything they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home; it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly (1 Cor 14:33-35).

A closer look at 1 Cor 14 shows what many authors have been saying for some time: this section of Paul’s letter is an interpolation, i.e., a copyist has inserted words into the text that were not written by the principal author of the letter. The late first century leaders of the Church wanted women to be subordinate to men. This is the way the Roman Empire worked and Church leaders wanted to fit in; patriarchy was the norm. One must understand the culture, background and idiosyncratic process at work in the development of the Scriptures. This is not an easy task. There are two Pauls in the Scriptures; the choice is yours?

Later apocryphal writings and archeological findings underscore other gender disputes evident in the early Church. The Acts of Paul and Thecla show that there was a close working relationship between this saintly woman and Paul. This document was written in Greek sometime during the second century and was know to Augustine, Origen and other church scholars. The author describes events that took place during the missionary life of Paul, and some argue that 1 Timothy was written to counter the Paul/Thecla oral tradition. Thecla traveled with Paul on occasion and was even called “an apostle” and “equal to the apostles.” Women had a prominent role in Paul’s theology and ministry, and the life of Thecla illustrates this point. Paul held to a radical doctrine of baptismal equality. Generations after Paul’s death we find his disciples watering down his legacy to fit their view of ecclesiological and social reality. They likely thought this was for the good of the Church. We need to rediscover and reassert Christianity’s basic roots and let the true story of Paul be told.

Impact of the Fall of Jerusalem

With the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus and the Roman army in 70 C.E., religious groups were fearful of more persecution by Roman authorities. Soldiers had just killed ca. 700,000 Jews, and anyone who looked radical to the emperor would likely suffer the same fate. Peter, Paul and James had already been killed, and this left the early Christians reeling. The early Church wanted to survive, and so they made accommodations to the Roman culture.

As the Church grew in numbers, the Christian communities moved from house-churches to public buildings, and this was the realm of men, not women. Since patriarchy was the dominant cultural norm for Romans, men gradually took over most of the roles in the new public buildings by the beginning of the second century. This is a cultural-deterministic model of change. Given our new norms of what is a just society, if the early Church made adjustments, so can we, the Church, today.

Impact of the Gnostics

Scholars in the early Church questioned Paul’s orthodoxy. For some, it was an issue of doctrinal purity. Had Paul gone too far? The Gnostics, later condemned by the church fathers as heretics, saw
Paul as a great leader. This did not help Paul’s cause, however. Because of the Gnostic emphasis on having special knowledge of God and the spiritual world, they loved Paul’s religious orientation. First, he claimed a special encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, which led to his calling to be an apostle. Second, he stated he was swept up into the third heaven\(^\text{10}\) (a mystic), and this is the kind of role model to Gnostic sect loved to emulate. If we have this special knowledge, according to Gnostic preachers, we may not need the Church. These individualistic tenets and other factors led to the condemnation of Gnostic leaders by proto-orthodox Christians in 144 C.E.

**Other Naysayers**

Some early orthodox Church leaders did not like Paul because of his views on circumcision. There was a vocal group of Jewish Christians who resented his opposition to circumcision and the skirting of dietary rules for the sake of his Gentile converts. They did not like his views on women. Paul was martyred in Rome in 64 C.E. and his words captured in the letter to Timothy reveal his anguish “that all in the province of Asia have turned against me, among them, Phigelus and Hermogenes” (2 Tim 1:15).

**Conclusion**

When the canon of Scripture was finally set toward the end of the fourth century, it was obvious that Paul and his message had a central role in the early Church’s understanding of revelation – and for all Church history. He was vindicated by the Church in later years. In this year of Paul perhaps we can come to a clearer understanding of Paul and his teachings; and perhaps this will lead us to improving our understanding of being Church. Surely, it can lead to a better understanding of the equality of all Christians and their role in the Church.

Note: Tom Kyle assisted in editing this article.

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1/ Dr. R. John Kinkel teaches sociology of religion at Oakland University, Rochester, Mi., and is author of the book *Cinderella Church: the Story of Early Christianity* (2008); it is available at the Catholic Bookstore, 1232 Washington Blvd., Detroit, Mi. He is also the author of Chaos in the Catholic Church. He is an expert on Catholic social issues and is a consultant to the American Sociological Association, in particular for the pope’s recent visit to the United States. He has published a number of op-ed essays for the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, and the Detroit Free Press.


10/ 2 Cor 12:2.