PAUL AND WOMEN’S LIBERTY

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THE apostle Paul is not popularly regarded as the patron saint of feminism. Of all the prejudices and half-truths which together comprise the biblical semiliteracy of the man in the street none is more firmly held than the belief that Paul was the founder of an agelong conspiracy to deny women their rights. Was it not Paul who insisted that wives should be submissive to their husbands, who declared it scandalous for women to engage in public speaking? Was it not Paul who allowed marriage only as a concession to human weakness, an emergency escape route from an only slightly grimmer fate? Was it not Paul who, as George Bernard Shaw put it, refused women the privilege of making themselves at home in their Father’s house by taking off their hats?

There have been those who have compounded the libel by making excuses for the poor fellow. He had no doubt been jilted when young, or even perhaps unhappily married. He had suffered agonies of distraction in public worship from the unrestrained tresses of a lady’s hair. His thorn in the flesh, the ministering angel sent to humble him and bring him to his knees, was one who did not restrict her goading to his hours of ease. But these are merely fictional embellishments designed to add verisimilitude to a charge confidently believed to rest on the evidence of the accused himself.

I propose to argue that this prevalent disparagement is almost the exact antithesis of the truth, and to offer the votaries of women’s liberty an unexpected, though not, I trust, unwelcome champion. The defence of Paul has, to be sure, been undertaken many times during the last half-century in respect of one or other of those passages in which he has been thought to betray his misogyny, but I know of no work in which all of

1 The Manson Memorial Lecture, delivered in the University of Manchester on Tuesday, October 26th, 1971.
them have been brought together in anything like a systematic treatment.

My first observation must be that, even if Paul had held the views so generally attributed to him, it would have been unreasonable to treat him as the arch-advocate of male supremacy. He would have been nothing more sinister than a child of his own age. For the subordinate status of women was accepted without question in Jewish, Greek, and Roman society. The clearest indication of this among the Jews was that, although ten men could constitute a synagogue, if one should be lacking, not a hundred mothers in Israel, however devout, could fill his place. Rabbis might debate on what terms it was legal for a man to divorce his wife, but there was never any question of allowing her to initiate the proceedings. There are indeed many examples in Jewish history of women being treated with courtesy and held in high esteem. But the honour paid to women has never in any age derived from their legal status. It has been fashionable in some quarters to connect the subordination of women among the Jews with the aggressively male character of their God. The absurdity of this line of thought becomes obvious when we study the condition of women in those cultures where the deity was represented as female. Athena with all her owls was not wise enough to effect any improvement in the lot of women in the city which bore her name. When her most distinguished son produced the blueprint for an ideal republic, communist and egalitarian, it evoked no more practical response than the ribald lampoon of Aristophanes' *Parliament of Women*, performed in the theatre of Dionysus before an exclusively male audience. As I once heard a Cambridge lecturer remark: "The women of Sparta enjoyed freedom, whereas those of Athens knew only confinement".

In fact, however, Paul's utterances on this subject are very far from being clear and unequivocal. There can hardly be another theme handled in his correspondence which is so consistently beset by obscurity and apparent contradiction. What, for example, are we to make of this passage from 1 Corinthians xi. 14 f.? "Does not Nature herself teach you that while flowing locks disgrace a man, they are a woman's glory? For her locks
are given for covering." Nature, we might suppose, could well instruct us in matters of fact, but scarcely in matters of propriety. Yet Paul is not saying that women naturally have longer hair than men, nor on the evidence of our own eyes should we nowadays believe him if he did. He allows for the possibility of a male with long hair, as well he might in view of the Old Testament examples of Samson and the Nazirites (Numbers vi. 5; Judges xiii. 5); not to mention Absalom, whose annual output was computed at 3½ pounds—200 shekels, royal standard weight (2 Samuel xiv. 26). Nor can he be appealing to a natural human reaction, since he must have known that this was a question on which opinions varied widely. The Greeks saw nothing unmanly in the Spartan 300 combing their long hair before the battle of Thermopylae.¹ The very word κομιάω Paul uses could be used figuratively in the sense of "putting on airs".² Whatever lesson Paul expected his readers to derive from Mother Nature, it is one which eludes the modern reader. Moreover, if with most scholars we take the paragraph as a whole to be concerned with the wearing of veils, the premise that Nature has given woman long hair in place of a garment does not obviously lead to the conclusion that she should add an artificial covering on top.

Early in the same passage Paul has declared that a woman praying or prophesying with head uncovered disgraces her head (1 Corinthians xi. 5), and this statement consorts very oddly with the later ruling that a woman ought not to speak in public at all (1 Corinthians xiv. 34 f.). It is not too much to say that he, and we, cannot have it both ways. Those who want Paul to be an antifemist, either because this is their own view or because they are looking for a whipping-boy, accept the second saying as normative, and explain away the first. One commentator would have us believe that in the first instance Paul was referring to private prayer and prophecy and, notwithstanding Paul's insistence that the function of prophecy is to edify the congregation, restricts the activities of Philip's four prophetic daughters to the seclusion of their own parlour,

¹ Herodotus, vii. 208; cf. i. 82; Aristophanes, Av., 1282; Eq., 580; Xenophon, Rep. Lac., xi. 3; xiii. 8. ² Aristophanes, Nub., 545; Vesp., 1317.
where, we must suppose, they kept a veil handy lest the afflatus should catch them unawares (Clarendon Bible, _ad loc._). Another, more recently, attempts to evade the contradiction by arguing that a statement does not entail the truth of its converse: i.e. "it is shameful to pray uncovered" does not entail "it is honourable to pray covered".¹ But this strict logic has the effect of evacuating the argument of all point. There can be no particular shame attached to the doing of something bareheaded, if the act itself is unthinkable. As well might the Vatican decree that a woman must not celebrate Mass in a miniskirt. The alternative is to grant that Paul did expect women to lead congregational worship, and to treat the second passage either as a reference to intrusive chatter or, more probably, as a non-Pauline gloss.²

A far more important collision is that between the instruction to wives to be subject to their husbands and the sweeping assertion that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Colossians iii. 18; Galatians iii. 27). Here too we must make up our minds which of the two lies nearer to the centre of Paul's thought. But before we do this, there is one more introductory observation that needs to be made. Whatever else may be called in question, there can be no doubt that Paul was a passionate advocate of liberty. The freedom of the Christian man is one of the inseparable corollaries of his doctrine of justification by faith. Legal religion corresponds to Hagar, to Mount Sinai, to the Jerusalem of today who is in slavery with her children: slavery to the letter of the written code, but also to the sin which that code was too weak to deal with, and to death which is sin's earned income. Faith corresponds to Sarah and to the Jerusalem that comes down from heaven, whose children are free, responding naturally and with spontaneity to the inner promptings of the spirit (Galatians iv. 22; v. 1).

Now it goes without saying that the liberty of which Paul speaks is spiritual, not political or legal freedom. The Jewish


Law, the Torah, was not merely the Jewish religion: it was also the corpus of civil and criminal law of the Jewish nation. Now it is an integral part of Paul's argument that law in all its senses is no guarantee of liberty. The man who is politically free may be in abject slavery to his own self will and to the principalities and powers of the system which dominates his corporate life. Christian liberty is, in the first instance, an unearned access to God, an emancipation from the shackles of the past, from the indictment of a guilty conscience, from the inner tensions between duty and inclination, from the divisive claims of conflicting loyalties, from the unremitting demands of merit. But we grossly misinterpret Paul if we imagine that this inner freedom does not have immediate consequences for outward conduct, both personal and social. "If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course" (Galatians v. 25). Not the least of the reasons why Paul insists on the absolute incompatibility of law and gospel is that those who identify the will of God with law are not free to order their conduct by the creative constraints of the animating spirit.

This point is of special relevance to one of the passages I have already cited. In the very middle of his longest continuous exposition of the theme of liberty Paul makes the most important of his statements on the status of women. "Through faith you are all sons of God in union with Christ Jesus. Baptized into union with him, you have all put on Christ as a garment. There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Galatians iii. 26 ff.). Christian liberty pertains to all who are baptized into union with Christ and has a direct and transforming effect on their social relationships. Paul clearly intends the three pairs in his list to be treated in parallel. His meaning must be located in that which is common to all three. They are an oddly assorted triad, and any two of them together may be found to have characteristics which do not apply to the third. Suppose for instance, we begin with "male and female". This is a clear echo of the creation narrative, and at a later stage we shall find reason to attach some weight to this fact. But Paul can hardly be saying that God has now improved on his original
design by producing a homogenized society devoid of distinguishing characteristics, the androgynous golden age of Aristophanic fantasy. For God did not create mankind slave and freeman. Or again we may start from the passage in Colossians in which Paul instructs slaves to be subject to their masters and wives to their husbands, and we may then draw the inference that Paul regarded the new unity in Christ in purely religious terms, without implying any change in the outward patterns of society. I have already pointed out that wherever we meet an apparent contradiction in Paul, it can be resolved only by deciding to which side the primacy belongs. Those scholars who consider Colossians iii. 18 ff. as normative for Pauline ethics, clearly have to spiritualize the present passage away into impractical pietism. "That he is speaking of these distinctions from the point of view of religion is evident from the context in general, but especially from his inclusion of the ineradicable distinction of sex. The passage has nothing to do directly with the merging of nationalities or the abolition of slavery." "

If this were true, would it not at once reduce Paul's own career to meaningless tragedy? If "neither Jew nor Greek" meant nothing more than equal access to the throne of grace, Paul's long running battle with the Judaisers, his determined struggle to maintain visible unity between Jewish and Gentile Christianity, the crusade which prompted his collection for the Jerusalem church and cost him his liberty and in the end his life—all this need never have happened. On the contrary, the certain fact is that Paul conceived the new unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ in terms of a new commonwealth of Israel. The idea that the new life in Christ was simply "religious" and must not be allowed to interfere with existing social patterns was precisely the line adopted by James of Jerusalem and accepted by Peter and Barnabas on the famous occasion when Paul withstood Peter to his face (Galatians ii. 11-16).

In short, the one thing these three pairs have in common is that they denote the three deepest divisions which split the society of the ancient world. What Paul is saying is that such

1 E. De W. Burton, The Epistle to the Galatians (International Critical Commentary), ad loc.
divisions (and they are typical rather than exhaustive) can have no place in the thought or practice of those who are united with Christ. Admittedly he does not tell Christians to go out and change the old order. What point would there have been in telling that to a tiny minority movement in a pagan empire, most of them without the franchise and all of them without the influence to alter the course of public policy? But in any case why bother to change an old order which was already under sentence of death? In Christ God had judged the ancient world order and found it wanting. In Christ he had inaugurated the new world order, which was not simply a new religion, but a new community, a new commonwealth, a new humanity. Many of the most perplexing conundrums of Paul's thought and in particular the seeming contradictions with which we are now dealing, arise from the fact that, though the new age has already begun and the new order is already being fashioned out of the fabric of the old, nevertheless the old is an unconscionable time a-dying and cannot be ignored.

At this point we have to meet the objection that Paul could scarcely have taken much interest in the improvement of social relationships, since he did not expect the world to last long enough for that to be worth his while. The chapter on which this notion is chiefly based is 1 Corinthians vii, and this happens also to be the chapter in which Paul is supposed most obviously to have shown his cloven hoof on the subject of marriage. On both scores I believe he has been grotesquely misinterpreted.

The chapter opens with an explicit statement that it is written in answer to something in a letter received from Corinth. The letter must have been a long one, for in the following chapters Paul deals with three or four other matters which were raised in it. From these later chapters two things become clear. The first is that Paul sometimes quotes from the letter in answering it. The second is that the Corinthians had not been content merely to ask for guidance. They had put their own case and expected Paul to agree with them. In the debate over meat which had been sacrificed in pagan shrines the writers of the letter can be identified with the "strong party" who took the view that non-existent deities could do no harm to good meat
and despised the weaker consciences of the more scrupulous. It is to be supposed therefore that they took an equally enthusiastic position over marriage. They had been impressed with the eschatological language in which Paul had described the critical times they lived in. They had been more impressed by Paul's own renunciation of marriage in the service of the Gospel. They therefore proposed that all Christians should be required to emulate Paul, at least to the extent of engaging in nothing more than a Platonic form of marriage. And Paul gently pricks the bubble of their ascetic idealism. The doubts about marriage are theirs, not his. "Now about what you wrote in your letter that it is good for a man to have nothing to do with women. On the contrary, if it is immorality you are worried about, let every man have a wife of his own and every woman a husband of her own. Let the husband give the wife her full conjugal rights, and similarly the wife to the husband. It is not the wife but the husband who has authority over her body and not the husband but the wife who has authority over his. Do not deny yourselves to one another, unless you agree on a temporary abstinence to devote yourselves to prayer; and come together again afterwards, or Satan may use the strength of your passions to tempt you. Even this temporary parting I mention only by way of concession, not command. Of course I should be delighted if everyone was exactly like me. But the fact is that every man has his own endowment from God, one in one direction, one in another. To the unmarried and the widows I say, it is quite proper for them to remain as I am. But if self control does not come naturally to them, by all means let them marry. Better marry than go up in flames " (verses 1-9).

Next comes a wise and generous treatment of mixed marriages leading to the conclusion that, if the pagan partner insists on a divorce, the Christian partner shall be free to marry again. This in turn is followed by a passage which appears to be a digression, about Jew and Gentile, slave and free, but which turns out to be intended as an illustrative parallel to what is about to be said about marriage. Everyone is to continue in the national, social, and marital status which was his at the time of his conversion. It is this advice which is generally supposed
to indicate that Paul thought that world history had only a few years to run, and justification for the view has been found in verse 31: "The shape of this world is passing away." Here everything turns on the sense in which Paul is using the word **κόσμος**. The assumption behind the theory we are considering is that the word here means "the universe" and that Paul expected the end of the world, in this simple literal sense, to happen at any minute. But when Paul wishes to refer to the whole creation, he uses the word **κόσμος**. **κόσμος** is always the world of men, and most commonly it means the sphere of worldliness, the old order in which unregenerate passions and powers have held mankind in bondage. It is this world which Paul declares to be transient, and in its passing to involve Christians in what he calls "this present time of stress" (verse 26). In the current emergency Christians ought not to be concerned with personal status, since that is to be enslaved to worldly pretensions. At the same time he makes it plain that there is no objection to a slave's securing his freedom if the opportunity presents. There is nothing wrong with getting married. The one thing that matters is that his friends should be spared any unnecessary and distracting anxiety.

Thus the would-be Encratites of Corinth receive from Paul only limited support. He is prepared to make a case for celibacy either as a special vocation or as a prudential response to emergency conditions. But getting married is the normal course, and they are not to allow high-minded people to bully them into thinking it might ever be wrong. The remarkable thing about this chapter is that Paul from start to finish treats husband and wife as equals. Whatever is said of the one is equally said of the other.

Armed with this evidence, we are now prepared to be thoroughly suspicious of the traditional interpretation of I Corinthians xi. The AV rendering of verse 10 ran: "For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels": and a marginal note on "power" explained that this meant "a covering in sign that she is under the power of her husband". The RV put the note into the text: "For this cause ought the woman to have a sign of authority on her
head. . .” The RSV turned the sign into “a veil”. There is now a growing consensus of learned opinion that the Greek cannot be forced to yield any such sense. If it is said that a woman ought to have authority, it must be hers and not another’s, no matter on what part of her person she carries it. To have authority is not the same as to be under authority, even if it is carried on the head. Thus Paul is saying one of two things: either that a woman should exercise control over her own head, or, more likely, that she should bear her authority, i.e. her passport, permit, licence, on her head. If we adopt the second of these renderings, there are two ways in which we may then seek to make sense of it. For the first of these we must turn to an important essay by Dr. Morna Hooker.\(^1\) She agrees with the traditional view that the subject under discussion is the veiling of women. But the veil, so far from being the symbol of subordination, is the woman’s licence to conduct public worship. The argument, which depends on a play on two senses of the word “head”, runs as follows. The head of every man is Christ, and the head of a woman is her husband, just as the head of Christ is God. Man, then, made in God’s image is designed to honour his Creator, and this he does in public worship by allowing his uncovered head to be the symbol of Christ, his Head. Woman, though also made in God’s image (see Genesis i) is derivative from man (see Genesis ii) and her function is to honour her husband. If she were to appear in worship with head uncovered, the splendour of her tresses would be an honour to her husband when she ought to be concerned with glorifying God alone; and such misplaced honour would redound to her husband’s shame. Only by covering her head can she be free to pray or prophecy to the glory of God alone. This she must do out of deference to the angels, who are guardians and guarantors of the natural order in which the divergent functions of the sexes are established.

More recently W. J. Martin has proposed a rather more ambitious revision.\(^2\) He claims that Paul uses the word “covered” to refer to long hair and “uncovered” to refer to short

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\(^{1}\) “Authority on her Head: An Examination of I Corinthians 11: 10”, *New Testament Studies*, x. 410-16.  
hair. Nowhere in the passage is any word used for a head-dress or veil. On the contrary, it is explicitly stated that woman's long hair is given to serve as a covering. He suggests accordingly that the problem under discussion has been raised by some women who, prior to conversion, for some heathen reasons undisclosed to us, have had their heads shorn or shaven. Are they to be allowed to participate in public worship? Paul's answer would appear to be that they must not lead the worship by praying or prophesying in that condition, but should grow their hair again. In that case the hair itself would be the passport which a woman carries on her head.

Where such divergent interpretations are still being canvassed it can hardly be said that the passage has yet surrendered its secret. One thing however may safely be asserted, that it has been evacuated for ever of any suggestion of the subordination of women. Paul undoubtedly believes in a difference of function between the sexes, even to the point of saying *vive la différence*. But nothing must be allowed to detract from his unambiguous statement that "in Christ's fellowship woman is as essential to man as man to woman" (verse 11).

There remains the enigma of the angels. We can surely dismiss once and for all the ludicrous theory that they are to be identified with the sons of God who lusted after the daughters of men before the flood and might be supposed to be still haunting church buildings in the hope that in that somewhat improbable setting further opportunities might arise. Paul is not worried in case members of his flock should produce a new race of bastard giants. It is possible that Dr. Hooker is correct in thinking that the angels represent the order of creation to which Paul accords a permanent validity. My own view is that the angels have the same semantic value here as in vi. 2 where they are the representatives and guardians of the old, pagan world order which is shortly to come under judgement. If that is so, then Paul is saying that the authority which a woman should wear on her head, whether it be a veil or her own natural covering, is not to be worn in response to an unchanging natural decree, but only out of deference to the accepted conventions of the society in which she lives.
We know from Romans xiii. 1-7 that Paul believed the state, even the pagan state with Nero on the throne, to exist by divine ordinance for the maintenance of order, the control of crime, and the encouragement of a good life; and that Christians must accept its authority. It accords well with this that Christians should, wherever possible, frame their conduct by the prevailing standards of propriety. Certainly the πληρωτάτου with which verse 11 opens seems to indicate a strong contrast between the bearing dictated by respect to angels and the total equality of mutual interdependence which characterizes the relations of man and woman "in the Lord".

It is along these lines at least that we must understand the paragraph of household instructions in Colossians iii. 18 ff. Here, wives are told to be subject to their husbands, children to obey their parents, and slaves their masters. Again we have a list of three pairs and again they are oddly assorted. Even today we may still wish to maintain that the duty of children to obey their parents is a natural and permanent one, rooted in the unchanging institution of the family. But the duty of slaves to obey their masters could only be the convention of a particular social system. In which category then did Paul place the subjection of wives to husbands? Was this a natural duty, like the obedience of children, or a conventional one like that of slaves? For an answer we need only turn back to the passage in Galatians iii. 28, where Paul declares that discrimination against slaves and women can have no place in the Christian community. But is Paul not then inconsistent to insist on the full authority of the pater familias?

The first point to remember is that not all those who heard Paul's letter read would belong to Christian families. Some of the wives would have pagan husbands, some of the slaves pagan masters. And it was essential for them not to give false impressions by behaving as though the new Jerusalem had already come down from Heaven. Even in wholly Christian households the family must remember that they still lived in a pagan neighbourhood under pagan laws. To lay too rapid claim to the inheritance of the sons of God would be to court reprisals. Let us suppose that a slave from a large pagan
household was friendly with one from a Christian household where equality was practiced. Would he not go home and tell his fellow-slaves that he had found a marvellous new religion which favoured the emancipation of all slaves? And would not this be both politically dangerous and religiously misleading? Paul was realist enough to recognize that such a reputation could be disastrous for the church. The Roman government was sensitive to the point of neurosis about allowing slaves any liberty which might open up the way to a slave war, and in any case such violent emancipation bore absolutely no relation to what Paul understood by liberty. The breaking down of barriers was something that had happened in Christ and could happen only when men were united with Christ in a full understanding and acceptance of the gospel. Where the Spirit is, and only there, is liberty. Until that Spirit has done its work, the old order must be allowed to stand as God’s bulwark against the reign of chaos.

It is considerations such as these that explain the extraordinary delicacy with which Paul handles the case of Onesimus. Onesimus is a slave who has run away from his master Philemon, fallen in with Paul, and been converted by him. Paul is deeply attached to him and would have liked to keep him as a companion to lighten the burden of his imprisonment. But he sends him back to his master. It is not worth the risk to himself or to the church for any Christian to incur even a suspicion that he might be harbouring a runaway slave.

In Colossians then Paul is not laying down a permanent ethical code to govern family life for all time. This is in any case not what we should expect from the man who devoted much of his life to the emancipation of religion from a written code. He is writing advice to Christian families of the first century to help them give a Christian quality to their daily life in spite of all the difficulties presented by the unsympathetic environment in which that life had to be conducted. The last thing he would have expected or desired is that this advice should be fossilized and applied to the vastly different circumstances of other ages and other cultures.

Earlier in this same chapter of Colossians Paul has reverted to
the idea of a Christian society unspoiled by divisions of religion, culture, language, or social status. "You have discarded the old nature with its deeds and have put on the new nature, which is being constantly renewed in the image of its Creator and brought to know God. There is no question here of Greek and Jew, circumcized and uncircumcized, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman: but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians iii. 10 f.). When we were considering Paul's earlier statement of this theme in Galatians, I remarked that the phrase "male and female" was an echo of Genesis i. 26, and that we might later attach some weight to the fact. This text undoubtedly meant a great deal to Paul, for we have seen him quote it again in 1 Corinthians xi. 7, where he calls man the image and glory of God. Here he comes back to it with an entirely new emphasis. The creation of man in God's image does not belong to the dawn of history. It does not even belong to the more immediate past when Christ inaugurated the new creation. It is rather an ongoing process and one in which man himself is summoned to active participation. He must so frame his conduct as to allow room for a constant renewal which finds its primary expression in a growing insight into the character and purpose of God. In other words Paul expects the Christian community to grow in its understanding of the faith and its practical implications. He allows for the possibility, nay the likelihood, that some of his ethical instructions will some day appear out of date.

Some of Paul's teaching on the position of women appears to us out of date only because he addressed himself to the social conditions of his own day and because we sometimes imperfectly understand the problems with which he had to deal. But even today there are few reformers so progressive as to have exhausted his general principles or the insight with which he applied them.

Paul counted many women among his dearest friends. And if there are still some today who refuse to acknowledge him as their champion, he is still likely to have the last word. For the only two women he ever had cause to criticize were a couple of cantankerous old shrews.