

What did Paul REALLY think about women?

A study of the apostle Paul and his interactions with women

Introduction

Many women find some of Paul's teachings about women troublesome,. Some women find I Timothy 2:11-15 and I Corinthians 14:33b-35 offensive. We tend to read into these passages that Paul had little respect for women and thought that women had little to offer the church. In this study we will provide a context for some of Paul's teachings about women in the church. We will look at a brief overview of his life and then study his interactions with 8 women in the church. What was Paul's attitude toward these women and what kind of ministry and service did they perform in the church?

The authority and application of Scripture :

All Scripture is God's word.

Isaiah 55:8-11

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.
"As the heavens are higher than the earth
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
As the rain and snow
come down from heaven
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it..."*

All Scripture is inspired by God. We can believe that and at the same time respectfully tell God the difficulties we are having understanding, agreeing with, and applying His Word. We can ask Him to help us discern and accept what He wants us to understand and apply. Many times He may direct us to study the **context** within which the troublesome Scripture passage was written. We may need to relate it to other passages that help explain its meaning.

The Concept of Context

The dictionary defines **context** as:

1. The part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage and determines its meaning.

2. The circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting.
...from Latin *contextus*,...to join together...to weave;...
The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Third Edition

The derivation of the word "context" is "con" which means join together and "textus" which means "weave". The concept of weaving is helpful in Biblical interpretation. If we think of a difficult verse or passage as a thread, and the Bible as a tapestry or a picture, we don't cut that difficult verse or thread out of the picture. We would ruin the tapestry if we did. Rather, we weave the difficult verse into the "picture" by finding other passages to which it is related and allowing these other passages to help explain the meaning of the difficult passage.

The Difficult Passages

1. *1 Timothy 2:11-15* ¹¹A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety

2. *1 Corinthians 14:33b-35* ^{33b}As in all the congregations of the saints, ³⁴women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church.

(A Helpful Passage from the Apostle Peter)

2 Peter 3:15-16 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him...His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures to their own destruction. (NIV)

Peter's comments about Paul are comforting in that we know we are not the only ones having difficulty with some of Paul's teaching.

A Very Brief Overview of Paul's Life

1. His Lineage

Acts 22:3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city..." (Jerusalem)

Philippians 3 4b-5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;

2. His Citizenship

*Acts 22:27-28 The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"
"Yes, I am," he answered.
Then the commander said, "I had to pay a big price for my citizenship."
"But I was born a citizen," Paul replied.*

3. His Education, and Vocational Skills

Acts 22:3a "...Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers..." (A footnote in the Concordia Study Bible says that Gamaliel was the most famous Jewish teacher of his time. Read Acts 5:17-40 to see the wisdom of Gamaliel, Paul's teacher.)

Galatians 1:14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Acts 18:2b-3 Paul went to see them (Priscilla and Aquilla), and because he was a tentmaker, as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

4. His Marital Status--Single

I Corinthians 7:8 "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am."

5. His Time in History (These are approximate dates based on information from the *Concordia Study Bible New International Version* published by CPH in St. Louis, MO, page 1490 and 1674-1675)
The time from his conversion to his death (AD 35--AD 68) can be divided into approximately three 11 year periods.

AD 5--AD 35 Growing up and living as an observant Jew prior to his conversion to Christianity (Approximately Age 0-30)

AD 5 Birth of Saul (Not in Scripture)

AD 30 Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-20, Luke 24:1-53, John 20:1-31)

AD 35-AD 46 The Years of Preparation: The time between conversion and the first missionary journey (Approximately Age 30-41)

AD 35 Saul Persecutes the Church following the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:3, Acts 9:1, Acts 22:4)

AD 35 Saul's Conversion on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-18, Acts 22:4-16)

AD 35-38 Saul Preaches in Damascus, (Acts 9:19-23) Travels to Arabia and Returns to Damascus (Galatians 1:17, Acts 9:23-25, 2 Corinthians 11:32)

AD 38 Saul's First Visit to the Jerusalem Church (Acts 9:26-29, Galatians 1:18-19)

AD 38-43 Saul returns to Tarsus and spends some time in Cilicia and Syria (Acts 9:30, Galatians 1:21)

AD 43-46 Saul and Barnabas minister at the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26)

AD 46-AD 57 The Three Missionary Journeys recorded in Acts (Approximately Age 41-52)

AD 46-48 Paul's First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:2--14:28) (Saul is called Paul from here on.)

AD 49-50 The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-29, Galatians 2:1-10)

AD 50-52 Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40-18:23)

AD 53-57 Paul's Third Missionary Journey and return to Jerusalem (Acts 18:23-21:17)

AD 57-AD 68 The Years of Imprisonment; A Fourth Missionary Journey alluded to in the Epistles; His Final Imprisonment and Execution (Approximately Age 52-63)

AD 57 *Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem*

AD 57-59 Caesarean Imprisonment (Acts 23:23-26:32)

AD 59-62 Paul's First Roman Imprisonment) (Acts 28:16-31)

AD 62-67 Fourth Missionary Journey (Alluded to in Tit us 1:5)

AD 67-68 Second Roman Imprisonment, Trial and Execution

6. His Passion Just Prior to His Conversion

Acts 8:3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.. (NIV)

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. (NIV)

7. His Passion After His Conversion

Acts 9:20-21a, 22 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹All those who heard him were astonished...²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (NIV)

8. His Life Work

a. Paul planted churches in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in Galatia on his first missionary journey. (Acts 13-14); He planted churches in in Philippi, Thessalonica, and

Berea in Macedonia; and in Corinth in Achaia on his second missionary journey. (Acts 16-18). He may have planted other churches also.

b. In addition, Paul pastored, wrote letters to, or visited Christian churches that others had started in Syrian Antioch, Ephesus, Rome, Troas, Colosse, Jerusalem and other cities.

c. Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament. He wrote 9 letters to churches: Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I Thessalonians and II Thessalonians. He wrote four letters to individuals: I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus, Philemon.

d. Paul, strongly and consistently spelled out the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

e. Paul loved all these churches. He prayed constantly and fervently for them. It did not matter to Paul whether he had planted a church or someone else had. (I Corinthians 3:1-9) We can see his love for the churches in the following passages:

For the Thessalonians: *How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you? I Thessalonians 3:9.*

For the Philippians: *I thank my God every time I remember you. Philippians 1:3*
...I have you in my heart... Philippians 1:7
God can testify how I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:8

For the Romans: *First I thank my God through Christ Jesus for all of you...Romans 1:8*
God...is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. Romans 1:9

For the Corinthians: *For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.*
II Corinthians 2:4

For the Ephesians: *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. Ephesians 1:15-16*

Paul's Interaction with Women in the Churches

I. **Lydia**, whom Paul met on his second missionary journey.

Background:

Paul chose Silas as his traveling companion, and they visited churches along the way in Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, and Phrygia.

They picked up Timothy in Lystra and they continued on.

They thought of going to the province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit said, "no". They tried to enter Bythinia. Again the Holy Spirit would not let them. What were they going to do? They continued on to Troas.

Luke joined them in Troas.

It was at Troas, that Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over and help us."

Acts 16:10-15 ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. ¹²From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days."

(Paul's normal course of action when he visited a new city for the first time was to go to a synagogue and share with the Jews about Jesus. However, there was no synagogue in Philippi.)

¹³On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

¹⁵When she and the members of her house were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us."

Note from Concordia Self-Study Bible footnotes

"16:14 ...Thyatira. In the Roman province of Asia...It was famous for its dyeing works, especially royal purple (crimson.)"

We can gather from this passage and the explanatory footnote that Lydia was:

1. with a group of women who were praying. Could one of their prayers have been for some men to help start a synagogue in Philippi?

2. the first convert mentioned in Acts in Macedonia after Paul had received the Macedonian call.
2. the head of a household with the authority to make decisions for that household
3. a woman given to hospitality--(she took in 4 men for at least several weeks)
4. a charter member of the Philippian church (Acts 16:40) (We know that the Philippian church grew and flourished because Paul wrote them a letter (Philippians 1:1) probably around AD 61. This was about 10 years after he first met Lydia.
5. probably a traveling business woman. (see footnote above)
6. *possibly* a charter member of the church at Thyatira that is mentioned in Revelation.

II. Priscilla whom Paul also met on his second missionary journey

Acts 18:1-3 ¹After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ²There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife, Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Acts 18: 18-19 ¹⁸Paul stayed in Corinth for some time. (a year and a half) *Acts 18:11* Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila....¹⁹They arrived at Ephesus where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila..."

Acts 18:24-27 ²⁴Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of Scriptures. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.. ²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained the way of God to him more adequately.

²⁷When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

We can gather from these passages that:

1. Priscilla and her husband moved a considerable distance several times in their lives.
2. Priscilla worked in the tentmaking business as a partner with her husband, and later also with Paul.
3. Priscilla and Aquila worked closely with Paul for over a year and a half in Corinth. In their time together, they must have had many, many discussions about Jesus.
4. After they moved to the church in Ephesus, Priscilla, along with her husband, tactfully and privately explained the way of God more adequately to Apollos, a very accomplished theologian. These explanations were graciously received and bore fruit in Apollos' ministry in Achaia.

There's more...Paul traveled to Ephesus on his third missionary journey, and stayed there three years. It appears that Priscilla and Aquila were still there. Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian

church from Ephesus. This letter is I Corinthians in our New Testament. At the end of the letter, he sends his final greetings.

I Corinthians 16:19. ¹⁹The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets in their house.

After Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus, he continued his third missionary journey, visiting the churches in Macedonia and later Achaia. Shortly before he returned to Jerusalem, he wrote a letter to the church at Rome. This letter is Romans in the New Testament. He sent personal greetings in this letter also.

Romans 16:3-5 ³Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵Greet also the church that meets at their house.

What was Paul referring to when he said Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for him? Possibly the same thing he is alluding to in II Corinthians 1:8-9.

II Corinthians 1:8-9 ⁸We do not want you to be uninformed about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

Toward the end of his life, while Paul was enduring his final imprisonment in Rome, he wrote a letter to Timothy who it is believed was in Ephesus. This letter, II Timothy, is the last letter that Paul wrote that we have in our New Testament.

II Timothy 4:19 ¹⁹Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.

From these passages we can gather:

1. Priscilla and Aquila had a church that met in their house in Ephesus.
2. Priscilla and Aquila helped Paul through some great hardship in Asia.
3. Later they moved back to Rome and a church met in their house there.
4. Finally at some point they moved back to Ephesus.
5. The relationship that Paul had with Priscilla and Aquila was a long one that spanned about 15-16 years.

Group Discussion Questions

III. The Mother of Rufus--who Paul greeted in his letter to the Romans that was written toward the end of his third missionary journey in AD 57.

Romans 16:13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother who has been a mother to me, too.

Discussion questions.

1. Who was Rufus and who was his mother?
(Help) A footnote in the Concordia Study Bible says, "It is possible that he (Rufus) was the same person mentioned in Mark 15:21, as also Mark no doubt wrote his Gospel to the Christians in Rome and in Italy."
Look up Mark 15:21.
2. If this Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene and his mother was the wife of Simon of Cyrene, what special story might they have shared with Paul?
3. What do you think Paul meant when he said that Rufus' mother, "has been a mother to me, too."?
4. In 1 Timothy 5:2 Paul tells Timothy to "*treat...older women as mothers...*" What do you think he meant?

IV. Phoebe--who Paul referred to in the greetings section of his letter to the Romans.

Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. ²I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.

A footnote in the Concordia Study Bible says that Phoebe was probably the carrier of the letter to Rome from Cenchrea. Cenchrea was a town six miles east of Corinth in Greece. An NIV text note says that the word "servant" could also be translated "deaconess".

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of Paul entrusting Phoebe, a woman, with taking his letter to Rome? He could have sent a man.
2. What would have been lost if Phoebe had lost Paul's letter to the Romans?
3. In what words in this passage, does Paul show his respect for Phoebe?

V. Euodia and Synteche--who Paul exhorted in his letter to the Philippians written from prison in Rome around AD 61.

Philippians 4:2-3 ²*I plead with Euodia and I plead with Synteche to agree with each other in the Lord.* ³*Yes, and I ask you loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are written in the book of life.*

Discussion Questions

1. Paul's letter to the Philippians was a public letter that was read aloud to the entire church. How might Paul have known about the disagreement between Euodia and Synteche? Why might Paul have chosen to address this disagreement in a public letter?
2. Does it seem that Paul knew these women well?
3. Is Paul's tone toward these women respectful? Did he take sides?
4. How might these women have felt after hearing this portion of the letter read to the congregation?
5. What do these verses say indirectly about the importance of these women's service in the life of the church?

VI. Lois and Eunice--referred to by Paul in his second letter to Timothy written during his final imprisonment in Rome around 67 AD just prior to his death. See also Acts 16:1

II Timothy 1:5 *I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded, now lives in you also.*

II Timothy 3:14 *But as for you, continue in what you have learned, and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

Discussion questions

1. From these two passages, who can we surmise taught Timothy the holy Scriptures from infancy?
2. Why do you think Paul included the phrase "*because you know those from whom you learned it*" in II Timothy 3:14?
3. How well do you think Lois and Eunice knew the Scriptures?
4. What difference did it make that Timothy knew the holy Scriptures from infancy?

Wrap up

As we finish this study, we have some threads to weave together. These are not all the threads there are, because we have not studied all the threads, but how would you begin to weave the difficult passages on women with the passages that we have studied that show Paul's interactions with women?