

## 17. PAUL – PLEADING THE CAUSE OF WOMEN

**(This is the last chapter of Mailis Janatuinen’s book on women in the Bible. Finland, Perussanoma 2001, Second edition 2004 SOLD OUT. Translated by S. Salmela.)**

Apostle Paul has been considered, if not actually a misogynist, at least a bachelor who didn’t understand anything about the fairer sex. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the previous chapter we already introduced three of his friends: Lydia, Phoebe and the mother of Rufus. In the last chapter of the book we’ll still tell about some other female colleagues of Paul. We’ll also have a look at the passages of the Bible where Paul tells about a woman’s place in the church and in the family.

### A. PAUL AND HIS FEMALE FRIENDS IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

#### **Priscilla – a theologian taught by Paul**

##### **Background**

A Jewish woman called Priscilla belonged to Paul’s dearest colleagues and sisters in Christ. The apostle met her for the first time in the autumn of the year 50 A.D., and the two of them remained friends till the end of their lives. Priscilla wasn’t just any foolish girl, for even church father Tertullian called her “the holy Priscilla who preached the gospel”.

Priscilla’s husband Aquila came originally from Pontus on the coast of the Black Sea. We don’t know for certain at what stage he became a Christian, but it possibly happened already in his home region. There were namely also people from Pontus among the pilgrims who listened to the apostles preaching the gospel each in their own language on the day of the first Pentecost (Acts 2:9). We can also see from the greetings in the beginning of 1 Peter that there was a living congregation in Pontus as early as at the time of the apostles (1Peter 1:1).

At some point Aquila had moved from the coast of the Black Sea to Rome. In the capital of the world he met his future wife Priscilla. When Christianity reached Rome we don’t know for sure, but it possibly happened soon after the first Pentecost. In any case we can assume that Aquila and Priscilla got to know each other in the congregation of Rome and that they worked actively as its members.

The New Testament always joins their names together, but never says anything about their family. They have been mentioned six times in the New Testament, and in four cases the wife’s name comes before the husband’s. Paul always calls Aquila’s wife Prisca. Luke instead uses the longer form Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19 and 2 Tim.4:19).

It seems the couple had no children. Also the fact that Priscilla had learnt the handicraft trade of her husband and was able to move from one country to another, seems to give a hint into that direction. Despite the sorrow of not having children the marriage was no doubt happy and balanced. Husband and wife had the same trade, a common faith and common responsibilities in the congregation. The wife could also use her time and energy wholeheartedly for the work of the kingdom of God, because her hands were not tied to homework.

So Aquila and Priscilla were Christians when they arrived in Corinth in 49 A.D. In that year there had been a disaster in Rome: Emperor Claudius had got angry with the Jews and had driven them away from the capital. Also the Roman historian Svetonius mentions the incident, when he tells about the rule of Claudius (25.4): “He banished the Jews from Rome, as they continually rebelled at the initiative of Chrestus”. Svetonius possibly believed that Chrestus (Christ?) lived in Rome at that time and caused continuous riots among the Jews.

### **Encounter in Corinth**

So Aquila and Priscilla were compelled to leave Rome and they settled down in Corinth, a large harbour city in Greece. It was certainly difficult for Priscilla to leave her home and belongings and travel as a refugee to a new country. Also there was not yet a congregation in Corinth, which was felt as a great handicap in the life of the Christian couple. But as soon as one year after their expulsion Aquila and Priscilla met their compatriot Paul, who had already come as far as Corinth on his second missionary tour. The joy of finding new fellow Christians must have been mutual, especially as they were in the same trade.

*After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There 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, and because he was a tentmaker as also they were, he stayed and worked with them (Acts 18:1-3).*

Priscilla and her husband invited Paul the bachelor kindly to stay in their home. Physically the apostle appeared to be weak and sickly rather than a highly learned and rhetorically talented man. When he came to Corinth he had made up his mind not to preach there anything else but Christ and him crucified (1. Cor 2:1-3). Yet a great revival soon took place in the city. Several prostitutes of the harbour became believers, also other members of lower classes of society (1. Cor 1: 26). Also the synagogue started to ferment, as two of its foremen became Christians: first Crispus, then Sostenes (Acts 18:8 and 17). The meeting place had to be removed from the synagogue to the house of Justus (18:7).

Paul stayed in the big city of Corinth for 18 months. At daytime he preached the gospel, but during the dark hours of night he earned his daily living by sewing tents together with his host family. The material was, by the way, Cilician goat hair cloth, the product of Paul's hometown Tarsus.

Paul became Priscilla's friend, pastor, spiritual father and theology teacher. While sowing the three of them certainly had plenty of time to discuss the interpretation of the Bible and Christian dogmatics. This theological seminar may have stretched to last eighteen months. The apostle didn't by any means send the wife away from hearing distance, when he started his “dogmatic lesson” late at night. No, Priscilla was allowed to study “the whole course”, and she became at least as eager an evangelist and as competent a theologian as her husband.

### **Priscilla teaches dogmatics**

When the apostle after a riot decided to continue his tour towards Asia Minor, these two friends joined his company. At this stage the name of the wife already appears before the name of the husband. The friendship had become so tight that they wouldn't part company by any means. The moment of departure came, however, when Paul continued his journey to Jerusalem promising to come back soon. There was no proper congregation in Ephesus yet, just a few dispersed disciples, who didn't even have a clear understanding of the basic issues of Christianity (Acts 18:18-19:7).

In those days a famous Jewish Christian evangelist called Apollos appeared in Ephesus. He was a brilliant speaker and downright glowed with holy enthusiasm when he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue of the city. Priscilla and her husband were sitting and listening to him and realized to their horror that the man didn't know anything about the Christian baptism. To him baptism was just the same kind of symbol for repentance as it had been to John the Baptist in his time.

The Christian couple opened their home and their hearts to Apollos, as they had done to Paul. Luke tells in a beautiful way that "when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately (Acts 18:26). They explained to this travelling preacher that John baptized just with water those who confessed their sins. The baptism with water in the name of Jesus gives the one to be baptized a lot more: it forgives the sins and gives the Holy Spirit. This has been the Christian doctrine of baptism since Pentecost.

*"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2: 38).* Paul's dogmatics teaching hadn't been in vain, as far as Priscilla was concerned. She was never made the eldest or pastor of the congregation, but she had already become a theologian. Women are generally not as interested in dogmatics as men. Counselling and the like is much closer to their hearts. But in every generation there are a few women who find dogmatics to be close to their hearts. Priscilla was one of them.

So Priscilla taught Apollos the doctrine of baptism, as her husband did. The Bible doesn't support the argument that women didn't have any teaching assignments in the early church, or that they at least didn't teach men. Priscilla taught Apollos – her name is mentioned in the teaching context again before her husband's name. And it wasn't just the question of a trivial matter, but the dogma of baptism, which is one of the most important dogmas of Christianity.

I often think to myself that Priscilla's influence on Apollos may have been crucial. It is common that great preachers and theologians find it difficult to accept teaching or criticism from each other, but – lo and behold – they may listen to the same things from the mouth of a woman without getting annoyed. Whatever happened, Apollos changed his mind about the doctrine of baptism and he became a strong promoter of Christianity for the rest of his life.

### **Priscilla's home as a meeting place for the congregation**

After a year Paul met his two friends again on his third missionary tour. This time he stayed in Ephesus for almost three years. For some time they were allowed to gather in the synagogue of the city. When its doors were closed to the Christians, the lecture hall of Tyrannos was hired as a meeting place and there Paul held public lectures (Acts 19:8-9). In addition the apostle visited Christian homes to arrange small groups and to serve them "with tears" (Acts 20:18-20).

The gospel of Jesus spread during those years all over Asia Minor. For instance a congregation was started both in Laodicea and Colossae, although Paul had never seen those towns. His colleagues were the founders of the congregations.

Priscilla again followed Paul's teaching and life closely. She saw, how he took to his heart that all the world would be able to hear the gospel. How patiently Paul took the hardships and how carefully he saw to it that the finances were taken care of openly and honestly! So the sewing of the tents went on as before – in the middle of all the other urgent matters (Acts 20:33-35).

From Ephesus Paul sent a letter to the congregation of Corinth, where he had previously worked with Aquila and Priscilla. It was evidently the year 54 A.D.. As usual, the end of the letter included his own greetings as well as those of others:

*The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly, and so does the church that meets in their house (1 Cor.16:19).* We can see now, how Priscilla participated in the evangelization of Ephesus. For the first time the New Testament, a meeting at somebody's home is called "a church". The couple who had no children of their own had given both their lives and their home to be used by God. Their living room had become a church hall, where they both preached the gospel. To quote the story of creation, Priscilla was a "suitable helper" for her husband in the work of the church. The sorrow for not having children had turned into her spiritual gift.

The New Testament knows also other couples and even independent women whose homes became church halls. Mary of Jerusalem and Lydia of Philippi we already know. To their number can be added Aphia with her husband in Colossae and Nympha in Laodicea (Philemon 1-2; Col.4:15).

In Ephesus something awful happened to Paul – Luke doesn't reveal to us what it was. The apostle himself tells us that he had had to fight with wild beasts (1 Cor.15:32) and that he had already despaired of his life (2 Cor.1:8-9). Obviously Paul was also imprisoned, as he soon afterwards sends greetings to his fellow prisoners (Romans 16:7). In that situation Aquila and Priscilla went to help him and saved the apostle from the danger of death.

### **All roads lead to Rome**

The situation mentioned above can be read in Romans, which Paul wrote a few months after leaving Ephesus ( in 57). To the end of the letter he attached his warm greetings to all he knew there, as we already stated when Phoebe and the mother of Rufus were mentioned. The list started – surprise, surprise – with Priscilla and Aquila, who had in the meanwhile already moved from Ephesus back to Rome. (The expulsion of the Jews had been cancelled when emperor Claudius had died in 54.)

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

Through a few short lines we find out several things: for the first that the home of Priscilla and Aquila served as the meeting place of the congregation even in Rome. From the greetings we see that the whole church of that period knew this couple and held them both in high regard. The Gentile parishes were grateful for the contribution in the evangelization of the world, but also for the fact that Paul was still among the living. That the apostle didn't get into a fatal disaster in Ephesus they owed to the courage and the spirit of self-sacrifice of these two friends.

In 57 Paul's "round of prisons" started. First he had to sit in Caesarea for a couple of years. Having appealed to the emperor, he was finally removed to Rome, yet in chains. Luke reports how the Roman Christians came to meet the transport of the prisoners as far as to the small towns of Forum Appi and Tres Tabernae. The distance from the capital was altogether 50-60 kilometres – not a short trip on foot one way and return. I can imagine Priscilla walking in that group, maybe even among the first of the reception committee. Her heart must have been full of joy for meeting Paul and at the same time sorry for her dear friend, who had to come to Rome dragging chains around his legs.

During the next two years Paul wasn't allowed to go to the world, but the world came to him. In the prison cell of Rome visitors crowded. After his release the apostle made one more tour to Asia Minor. After the burning of Rome in the middle of the sixties started a comprehensive persecution of Christians. Paul was arrested again and put in a Roman jail, this time for good.

### **The last greeting**

In prison Paul wrote his last letter, which has been addressed to Timothy in Ephesus. He also sent greetings to Prisca and her husband, who happened to be Timothy's helpers at that moment. In his letter Paul described his recent trial in somewhat sad tones: *At my first defence, no-one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them (2 Tim. 4:16).*

We don't know for sure, if Aquila and his wife had been in Rome during the trial. Or did they flee head over heels to Greece or Asia, when they realized, what kind of fate was to be expected in the hands of Nero: burning as a living torch in the garden of the emperor? It is more likely, however, that the two friends had already previously gone to help Timothy at Paul's request.

So the apostle was lying in prison a death sentence looming ahead. "Greet Prisca and Aquila..." (2 Tim. 4:19). In this last message no-one else received personal greetings except these two and the family of Onesiphoros. Once again Prisca is on the top of the list, to be number one. Paul didn't know if he here on earth would any longer see his two friends, who had meant so much to him for one and a half decades. Maybe the greetings in Timothy were his last message to them.

According to an old legend also Priscilla and her husband suffered the death of martyrs in the persecutions of Nero. We don't know if that legend has any truth as its basis. In any case one day Priscilla had only one removal in front of her – the last one. That would end the packing of bags and the travelling around the world. The courageous woman theologian of the early church would then come to her true homeland and would receive the crown of life from her Saviour's hand.

*To you, O Lord, I turn.*

*My God, in your help I trust.*

*Let not my trust be in vain.*

*(...)*

*No-one who trusts you*

*will be left without your help. (Ps.25)*

### **Paul's greetings to the women in the congregation of Rome**

Paul sent at the end of his letter greetings, beside to Prisca and the mother of Rufus, to seven other women mentioned by name, which means about a third of those receiving greetings (9/28). One can only wonder that the bachelor apostle had found so many different kinds of friends of all ages among the Christian women while travelling around the world.

*"Greetings to Mary, who worked very hard for you" (6).* The name indicates that Mary was a Jewish woman, who worked eagerly for the Gentile congregation in Rome.

*"Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives, who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" (7).* Andronicus was a Jewish man, but whether the other fellow prisoner was a man called Junias or a woman called Junia has not been agreed on by the exegetes. (I myself am inclined to think the name was Junia.) Some regard this as a proof of the fact that also women may have been included in the number of the apostles, but I don't think that the theology of the offices can be built on one uncertain interpretation.

The subordinate clause following the names can also be interpreted like this: “that the apostles held in high regard”. It seems this was the same kind of situation as with Peter and Aquila and their wives: the missionary travels with his wife, a sister in Christ. If this assumption is correct, Junia was certainly a courageous woman; she had been sitting in prison (in Ephesus?) with her husband (men?), although she wasn’t so young any more. The couple had namely been baptized before Paul’s conversion, and at the time when Paul wrote Romans already a quarter of a century had elapsed from his conversion! No wonder, if the apostles held these two older persons in high regard.

“Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord” (12). Maybe twin sisters, has been suggested by a couple of commentaries. Active girls, anyway!

“Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord” (12). The name Persis means “a Persian woman” and can be found on the list of some freed slaves. The apostle has the courage to call one of the recipients of the letter his **dear** sister.

Also these human relationships belong to the love stories of the Bible. How wonderful it is that in Christian circles it is possible to have close friendship relations between sisters and brothers, and no-one gives that a second thought! Instead in many other communities neutral relations between sexes have become nearly impossible. If this sad development of things reaches gradually the church, time will tell. And if so, it will be a tremendous loss to us single people – and to everybody else too.

“Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister...”(15). In addition comes the household of Narcissus, which no doubt included also several women (11).

What catches the eye in this list is above all the fact, how much Paul appreciates the contribution of women in the work for the kingdom of God. He thanks Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis for hard work in the church. There is no talk of shutting women in within the walls of home!

As a summary we can say that Paul was a pioneer as to encouraging women to make their contribution within the church. It is all the more to be deplored that exactly in his attitude to women he has been treated with the most unfair criticism.

### **The women in Philippi fighting for the true faith**

In Lydia’s case we already talked about the ideal congregation of Philippi. There was only one thing that the apostle had to criticize a little in his letter: two of the female volunteer workers of the congregation had had disagreements between themselves. It seems to happen even in the best of circles!

*I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yoke-fellow, 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 in the book of life (4:2-3).*

Paul thought that the budding disagreement was so serious that he wanted to mention it in a public letter. Yet he refrained from saying who was right and who was wrong. It may not have been a very important matter; both their names were still safely in the book of life. But to guarantee that the small disagreement wouldn’t grow into a big one Paul asked his loyal fellow-worker (whose name was possibly Synsygus, “helper”) to interfere in the situation. The presence of a man in a team of women may well have been a balancing factor.

But what in the first place draws our attention in these three verses is the way Paul describes the work of these two women. The text says that Euodia and Syntyche had been **fighting for the gospel**

with Paul and Brother Clemens. **The women fighting** – and by the side of the great apostle at that? It wouldn't have been possible, if Paul had been even a little bit of a chauvinist.

In what way did they fight? Not by sword or spear, but by the Word of course: proclaiming, exhorting and warning against heresy. The opposite party may have been the Gentiles, but quite as well pretenders, Judaists or super apostles. So Paul truly wanted to welcome women to stand by his side to fight for the true faith!

## **B) PAUL'S TEACHING ABOUT A WOMAN'S PLACE IN CHURCH AND FAMILY LIFE**

### **Women's rights in marriage**

According to Paul marriage is a gift of God that a Christian should be grateful for. It is a sign of heresy if people are told not to get married or if being unmarried is somehow regarded as a more spiritual status than married life (1 Tim.4:3-5).

As to the relationship between the spouses, according to Paul a wife must respect her husband (Eph. 5:33). This is a piece of good advice. No woman should namely marry a man that she can't respect. In the long run no man can be happy in a relationship where his wife doesn't show any respect. But at the same breath Paul demands from a man that he loves his wife as much as himself – even as much as Christ loved his church (Eph. 5:22-33). I wonder which of these pieces of advice is easier to follow.

In his letters bachelor Paul also had to give advice concerning the sexual behaviour of Christians. Once the apostle was asked something, he gave an answer without beating about the bush and called matters by their real names. The Corinthians had obviously asked about the value of sexual restraint in marriage – if it was needed or not, and if it was, who was to decide about it. Paul answered that these matters are agreed on together with the spouse. Once married the body of the wife is no longer at her own command, but her husband's. The woman is not allowed to decide on the "control" of her body alone. In this matter all cultures and religions have been touchingly unanimous until today.

But then comes the bomb: according to Paul the man's body is not in his own control either, but her wife's. This means in other words that Paul recognizes the woman's sexuality and approves of it. It is an unbelievably radical notion to be expressed by a religious rabbi during the first years of the Christian era. Let us remember that in Moslem countries still today a couple of millions of girls are circumcised (in other words mutilated) every year. Why? Only to make them "pure" and make them lose their desire for sexual intercourse. How big is the difference between that kind of chauvinism and Paul's teaching! As we can see, the apostle quite seriously declares the woman to be equal with her husband in the area of sex in marriage (1 Cor.7:1-6).

Otherwise Paul demands absolute monogamy from Christians. Sex belongs to a lifelong marriage between man and woman, nowhere else. Not to single life. Not to engagement. Not to common law marriage. Not to a new marriage, if the ex-spouse is still alive. To say nothing of gay relations, which the apostle condemns in clear words. If a non-believer wants to get a divorce, there is nothing you can do, but a Christian is not allowed to marry again while the (ex-) spouse is still alive. One has to control one's desires, no matter what the civil status is (See Romans 7; 1 Cor.7, Romans 1).

### **The gift of being single**

Yet Paul's letters include also other radical improvements in the position of women, and one of them is the value of an unmarried woman. "A spinster" has hardly been appreciated in any culture

before or after Christianity. In the old covenant a childless woman was hardly worth anything. But Paul disagrees – he calls the single status even a spiritual gift – charisma!

*I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift of god; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Cor. 7:7-9).*

We can see that the apostle considers the single status an even better part in life than marriage. At the same time Paul admits realistically that it doesn't suit everybody. It is better to marry than burn in the unsatisfied fire of sexual desire, or what is even worse: to fall continually into immoral thoughts, words and deeds.

The most important reason why Paul recommends staying unmarried is the time being short. Jesus is coming back soon, and before that the Christians have to go through the time of a great distress. We remember that the Saviour himself had pity on the pregnant and nursing mothers in the tumult of the end of times (Matthew 24:19).

***Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this (ib. 26-28).***

But why call being single a gift? Because an unmarried person can use more time and energy for the work of the Kingdom than a married one. A single person is free to study the Bible, pray and go to Christian meetings. And on the other hand he/she can also listen, console and help his/her neighbour, if the running of the family doesn't take all of his/her time. Many women of the early church that we have dealt with in the previous chapter were unmarried or widows, for instance Thabitha, Mary mother of Mark, Lydia and Phoebe.

*An unmarried woman or a virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs. Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world-how she can please her husband (ib.34).*

Paul is seriously of the opinion that a Christian woman makes a better choice, if she doesn't get married, and she is also happier than her married sister. Yet the apostle admits that this is not the Lord's word, only his opinion as an experienced Christian. I know many unmarried Christian women who can prove that his argument is correct – including myself. And in the community of a genuinely Christian congregation an unmarried woman doesn't have to be lonely. She can have even more children than one who has a husband! (Gal.4:27)

*So then he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even **better**. In my judgement she (also a widow) is **happier** if she stays as she is – and I think that I too have the Spirit of God (ib.38:40).*

Many a youngster in our day doesn't know that there even exist unmarried men and women who live in celibacy. A Christian cannot namely lead such "single life" that we can see in some TV-series. The word single has been loaded with such meanings that one wouldn't want to use it of oneself, even the word "spinster" sounds better.

## **Widows as spiritual mothers**

There is still one group of women in the church that Paul wants to address with a few words of advice: namely widows. Men died younger than women at that time as they do today. Paul saw that in widowhood there was a danger for gossip and an empty life. That is why he advised the Christian congregation to give its widows something meaningful to do.

It is important that no generation gap will be created in a congregation, but older women teach the younger ones about Christian doctrine and life. Who in our congregations teaches young mothers hospitality, Christian upbringing of children and a woman's submission? For this purpose the early church had the office/position of a spiritual mother. In the first place it consisted of widows who had this kind of "list of merits":

*"And is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds" (1Tim. 5:10).*

*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the word of God (Titus 2:3-5).*

Paul gives the pastors and deacons of the church some advice in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of 1Timothy. In the middle of it comes a word of exhortation to "women/wives" (gynaikos). We don't know if the apostle refers here to the wives of the deacons or deaconesses. In any case these women also have their duties as mothers of the congregation; they have been mentioned in the middle of the exhorting speech meant for other workers in the church (1 Tim.3:11).

## **Submission**

Now we come to the point in the doctrine that makes many women today really angry, namely a submission. According to Paul a husband is his wife's "head". In fact this is a question of an order that God has ordained for the family and congregation, also within the Holy Trinity.

*Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor.11:3).* It can't be a question of inequality, for it is impossible to think that there would exist some difference in value between Christ and his Father. What then does being the head mean? It simply refers to the relation of responsibility: who defends whom against the enemy, who makes the difficult decisions and who carries the final responsibility?

According to Paul a woman has to be subject to her husband in the family and in the congregation, as the man is her head. The word "subject" is however often misinterpreted today, as if Paul had written: "oppressed". A woman shouldn't, however, be any more subject to her husband than Jesus was subject to his Father. Besides, in the Christian church apply completely different principles of leading ("being the head") than in the world around us. This is how Jesus taught:

*"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45).*

A husband must carry his responsibility for his family and congregation in the same way as Jesus did: by loving, serving and sacrificing himself. Jesus voluntarily accepted the part of a slave –

shouldn't then Christian men follow his example! And as long as a woman can experience devoted love from her husband, she will respect him and rejoice when she can be subject to him.

As I mentioned before, Paul told Christian men to love their wives as Christ loved his church. Could the ideal of love be set any higher than that! This kind of love motivates us women to be subject; giving orders and oppression instead cause us only to rebel.

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself (Eph. 5:25-28).* What woman will be happy in her heart, if her husband doesn't carry full responsibility for the family? Wandering around the world I have not yet met one woman who would have sighed happily: "How wonderful, my husband is tied to my apron strings. I can lead the family in any way I want to and decide about all the important matters!"

### **Women as preachers of the Word**

There is a strange contradiction in Paul's letters: first he takes it for granted that women prophesy and pray in the meetings of the congregation (1 Cor. 11:5), but after a couple of chapters he denies them the right to speak (1 Cor. 14:34). And both statements within the same letter!

We know that the apostle was no stupid man, and there was nothing wrong in his logic. We know that his letters are not only his own words, but at the same time also God's infallible Word. If we don't want to throw Paul's letters (and gradually the whole Bible with it) as obsolete into the rubbish bin, we simply have to work out how this apparent contradiction can be explained.

It is important to notice that the early church walked independently on its own way as to the role of a woman within the church. In a synagogue a woman wasn't allowed to open her mouth, to read texts, not even pray aloud. In fact a Jewish woman didn't have to attend the Sabbath service at all. In the pagan religions it was common that women were priestesses and mediators of the messages of the gods.

It is not a trivial matter then that women were allowed to prophesy in the meetings of the congregation since the beginning of the Christian church. Prophecy is common in the Old Testament, and it means preaching the law and the gospel in a living and appropriate manner in a given situation. In the old covenant the gift of prophecy was a special privilege of just few men and women. In the New Testament the situation changed completely. We have already heard of Hannah the prophetess. In addition Luke tells about four daughters of deacon Philip who all acted as prophetesses in the congregation of Caesarea (Acts 21:8-9). And Paul implies that prophecy by women was common everywhere in the early church (1 Cor.11:5-16).

Thus the position of women in the congregations of the New Testament was different from that in the world around it. The Christians chose from the very start a different line than both the Jews and pagan religions: women were allowed to open their mouths in services, to pray and prophesy in front of men, yet there was something they were not allowed to do. (We'll discuss it later.)

What kind of speaking does prophecy refer to? For the first it refers to the Old Testament. For instance Jeremiah's sermon at the gates of the temple of Jerusalem was prophecy (Jer. 7-11). Today we would call that kind of speech a Bible exposition.

In fact Paul considers prophecy one of the best spiritual gifts and tells all Christians to pursue it (1Cor. 14:1). According to him prophecy is not just some speech in a trance or predicting the future,

but above all building up the listeners, exhorting and consoling (ib.3). This spiritual gift is important, because the one who prophesies builds up the congregation (ib.4). Prophetic proclamation is a sign for the believers, but also non-believing listeners will experience that the secrets of their hearts are revealed (ib.22-25). **All** are allowed to prophesy on their turn, but only two or three in one service (ib.29-31). The aim of prophecy is to **teach** and **encourage** the believers (ib.31). We can see that today the word prophecy is more often used in a wrong than in a right context.

Paul sets only one condition for the prophesying of women: they must do it with a covered head (11:1-16). Why then was the covering of the head important? That, as well as the order not to eat blood, was necessary because of the Jews. It was an abomination for the compatriots of Paul to see the hair of a married woman. Covering one's head was also the "sign of submission", in other words a proof that the woman in question was married and belonged to a certain husband. In our culture we use a wedding ring instead of a scarf. In Japan the civil status of a woman could in the old days be determined by the length of the sleeves of her kimono.

Should we women then wear scarves in the meetings of the congregation to be biblical? Or even grow long hair that Paul also talks about? Or should Christians kiss each other "with a holy kiss" at the end of the service? It depends on our local culture, if it is customary here. The covering of the head symbolizes an important matter. Somehow every culture has to have a sign to show, if the woman belongs to a man or if she is still free. The Christian church will have to follow the custom of the country in these matters.

If we live in Japan, we won't normally hug other Christians – even a handshake seems to be too intimate a gesture in that country of polite bows. If we live in Moslem countries, we won't go to a Christian meeting without a headscarf or in a miniskirt. But when an order of the Lord is in question, it will have to be obeyed in all cultures at all times. As to the covering of one's head and the length of one's hair Paul appeals to a good custom (1 Cor. 11:13-16), but when he talks about the order prohibiting women from speaking, he appeals to the command of the Lord: "What I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored" (1Cor. 14:37-38).

### **Let women be silent in the congregation!**

So women were allowed to prophesy in the congregations of the New Testament, yet there was something they were not allowed to do. The tasks of men and women were not exactly the same according to Paul. Paul says that a woman is not "allowed to speak" in the meetings of the congregation. What does it mean – isn't "prophesying" also "speaking"?

*As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. they are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Lord says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (en ecclesia) (1. Cor 14:33b-35).*

Where exactly does the law say that a woman has to be obedient to her husband? In the story of the Fall: "*your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you*" (Genesis 3:16). Submission was a part of human relations from the very beginning in the same way as it is a part of Trinity: a man is the head of a woman, as God is the head of Christ. But submission is the consequence of the Fall in the sense that it is very difficult for a sinful man and woman to put into practice. In the paradise conditions Adam would have treated his wife in such a manner that she wouldn't have noticed the state of submission. Obedience would have been a mere joy to her, as it was a joy to Jesus in his relation to his Father.

But then sin interfered and ruined everything...

In his letter to Timothy the apostle in fact mentions the Fall when he talks about the place of women in the congregation. Now he brings two new words into the conversation: he will not allow that a woman **teaches (didaskain)** and **has authority (authentein)** over her husband/men in the congregation. Paul appeals to the submission principle at this point too. A woman is not allowed to have a position in the church where she would be a man's head: would govern him, would be his leader.

*I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God... A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to **teach** or to **have authority** over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; it was the **woman who was deceived** and became a sinner, but women will be saved through childbearing- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety (1 Tim.2:8-15).*

Paul reminds Timothy of the order of creation and the order of the Fall. Man was created first, but woman fell first. Eve was easier to deceive than man. We women have more empathy than our men. This ability helps us in human relationships, but is harmful when talking to a serpent. The serpent can deceive a woman in a theological conversation more easily than a man. That is why the serpent went first to the woman, not to the man.

As to bearing children, this issue we have discussed before: Paul praises the part of a single woman and assures that in the new covenant she will have a lot of children. In any case verse 15 can't mean that women who have no children cannot be saved!

Pay attention to the fact that in both passages where women are denied teaching, it is in connection to the principle of having authority over a man and the principle of submission. It doesn't mean that some **type of speaking** would be denied. Paul doesn't make any difference between various **types of meetings**: whether it is Sunday morning service or Wednesday night prayer meeting. In that matter he expresses himself simply: Let a woman be silent in the church, *en ecclesia*. But in these passages of the Bible he talks about **spiritual leadership, the office of a pastor**.

The division into chapters is misleading, but Paul goes on with his argumentation in the third chapter of 1.Timothy by talking about the office of the pastor of the congregation. This is what has been the issue all the time! *Here is a trustworthy saying: if anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach (ib.3:1-2).*

Jesus didn't choose women as apostles. Paul didn't make them the pastors/elders/overseers of his congregations (1 Tim.3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9). They were not given the office of teaching or leadership in the early church. Along with female ordination the role of the minister has changed. Now he/she has become a discharger of various religious rites (weddings, funerals, baptisms), one who walks by the side of the members of the parish in everyday life. This is not the idea of the duties of a pastor according to the New Testament.

What then are the duties that belong to the pastor of the congregation in the New Testament? He must do what a shepherd does: feed the sheep and lambs= be responsible for the correct doctrine. He must fight against the wolf, even at the threat of his own life=keep the teachers of heresy out of

the herd of Christians. The pastor has to say “no” to heresy as loud as he says “yes” to the correct doctrine.

Also the duty of the gatekeeper belongs to the pastor, in other words deciding, who will be baptized and who will be allowed to enjoy the Holy Communion (sacraments and discipline of the congregation). He is also responsible for the other workers of the church, their doctrine and lives.

*When I say to a wicked man, “you will surely die,” and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood (Hez. 3:18).*

If the responsibility of a pastor means this, I just ask, who among us women wants to carry it?

### **Two camps**

At this point the Christian church is divided into two camps. In one of them are those who regard Paul’s words concerning the place of women in congregation just as his own words, not as the Word of God. According to them his words applied only to the time of the early church, but after the position of a woman has changed in society, it can be forgotten. Globally more than half of all Christians still oppose to women priesthood, because they think that all Paul’s words are also the word of God. They don’t want to start on the road that ends to a complete antinomism, rejection of the law.

If the principle of something “belonging to a certain historical period” is applied, from the Bible can also be eliminated all other commands and denials that our society doesn’t follow any more. It is said that gay relations were not allowed at the time of Paul, but that is not so in our time any more. We know more about it than Paul. Next on the list will be euthanasia, like in Hitler’s Germany.

If we strike out one passage in the Bible, we will have to eliminate another, then a third, fourth, fifth... I personally don’t want to go on this road. Vestigia terrent, the traces frighten. The lopping off of the Holy Book has namely always resulted in bad consequences for the surrounding society and culture. I wouldn’t take the risk of eliminating even one sentence from the Bible and claim that it is not the word of God. The only exceptions are the passages in the New Testament that replace some orders of the old covenant (Hebr.10). But there is no such reservation for the denial of speech of women. On the contrary, it is called a unequivocal command of the Lord.

Among those who oppose to female ordination are both high church and low church people. The former think that women have above all been denied the conducting of sacraments and Sunday service, sermon included. The latter think that a woman can preach if she has the gift of prophecy, but she can’t act as a leader of a congregation, a Christian organization, a Bible school etc. Whether we are high church or low church, we regard each other as brothers and sisters and try to respect each other’s grounds for exegesis.

### **Common priesthood**

Previously we have not discussed priesthood in the sense of the Old Testament. We have just talked about the office of a pastor. In the new covenant the office of the sacrificing priest belongs to all Christians on the basis of common priesthood, to women as well as to men.

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).* So on the basis of common priesthood we women have to declare and bear witness of God’s great deeds to those around us together with men. We can convey the message of atonement and also

sacrifice prayers along with men. We also have to assess the doctrine and speak out, when it is not biblical.

Could there be a greater mission in life!

### **Finally**

We started with Eve and now we have ended up with Paul's colleagues. How many lives of women Jesus has been able to change in the course of history! How many hopeless mothers and wives and lonely women he has given hope! I am proud of belonging to this number of sinful yet righteous women-to those whose sins Jesus has forgiven and whom he has called to be witnesses of his resurrection.

As far as I can see, the great battle in every woman's life in the Bible was this: can I completely trust the Lord to forgive me all my sins and to take care of me and my loved ones? Can I trust the fact that he knows what he is doing, even when he doesn't seem to be doing anything? Can I trust his love and power, even if I saw and experienced quite the opposite? This is also today the greatest battle of a Christian woman.

Have you heard, what one little primary school child answered, when the teacher explained that Jesus is our best friend? "But I would like to have a friend who has a skin!" I confess honestly that I understand completely the feelings of that little child. But all the "point" of Christianity is the fact that our Saviour has a skin! What else does his incarnation mean, if not the fact he is a human being even today – and truly the best friend in the world.

As my own credo I can today testify that I have never had to get disappointed at my Saviour in the long run. (I have felt desperate many times for short periods.) In the end I have always seen that Jesus hasn't deceived or left me. He has always kept what he has promised. He was always near me, consoling and helping, when I needed him. And he always forgave me my sins. In the same way he has taken care of my loved ones that I worried about – and I believe he will in the future too. The great plan of my Saviour is to take us all to his wonderful new world.

*To you, O Lord, I turn.*

*My God, I trust in your help.*

*Let not my hope be in vain.*

*No-one who trusts you will be left without your help.*

No, I was never left without that help. Certainly not you either, my sister!

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