

## **TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN**

### **NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CHRIST**

#### **PART 1: JESUS' ATTITUDE TO WOMEN**

The Christadelphian approach to Bible interpretation is based on a superb ideal; in determining what a passage is teaching, we should consider what the original text is actually saying, then place it in the context of the letter or book of which it is a part, then in the broader context of the whole scripture, and also take into account what is known of the period in which it was written. I do not understand why if I apply these principles to Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 16:19-31 and Luke 23:43, I am a good Christadelphian, but if I apply them to I Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33-40 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14, I am a bad Christadelphian.

This series of articles challenging the orthodox position on the role of sisters in the congregation will be intensely controversial. The author pleads for fearless open-mindedness from the reader. Constantly and critically ask yourself: Does what is presented conform to the ideals outlined above? Is my bewilderment with the inconsistency I find in our community indeed justified?

No one can object to this series being published. If the arguments are weak contrived or factually wrong, then it will be apparent to all, and the orthodox position will be greatly reinforced.

But if not . . .

In the first century A.D. the vast majority of women were extremely low in status and greatly restricted in society, and it did not make a great deal of difference whether a woman was Jewish or Gentile. We cannot understand the significance of many New Testament incidents and teachings unless we know the rather alarming facts of the matter!

Jewish women were legally owned by their fathers and then by their husbands. Only divorcees and widows were legally independent but the majority of these were in poverty, and so were effectively dependent and marginalised. There was no concept of "women and children first" – a husband was to be saved from danger before his wife! Christmas cards can be criticised for showing Mary on the donkey; if you had one donkey then the husband rode and the wife walked behind. I would like to believe that Joseph was the first "New Man" under the circumstances!

Very interestingly a woman could in theory read in synagogue, but in practice this was thought to be a disgrace; after all men were superior, so why use a woman? Josephus, the Apostles' contemporary, in *Against Apion* 2:25 says "saith the scripture, 'a woman is inferior to her husband in all things.'" No such verse exists in the Old Testament! As a priest Josephus should have known better, but doesn't this superbly illustrate how rooted the dogma was?

Women naturally learnt the rudiments of the Torah in synagogue, and some rabbis' wives were learned, but other rabbis considered it wrong to allow women to study because they might learn proficient legalism and so avoid punishment for immorality, which they could be automatically assumed to be right up for at the drop of a hat. Some rabbis would not answer a question from a woman; they should be at home spinning, not bothering their heads with what was a man's business. Domestic work in fact officially took priority over many religious observances.

A woman could be divorced outright for speaking to a man on the street; in a town she

should be chaperoned by two men, on the road by three. Rabbis taught that a man should talk to no woman but his wife and to his own as little as possible! Taking pleasure in the society of women would lead a man inevitably into immorality and of course women were inherently immoral to begin with. Some Pharisees acquired the nickname “bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they frequently walked into walls after shutting their eyes when a woman came into view!

Into this depressing society of invisible, unheard and belittled women burst Jesus, with all the subtlety of a bomb in an ammo dump! He heedlessly rode roughshod over genteel sensibilities, and frequently appeared outrageous and indecent. Take the Mark and Martha story. It sounds innocuous, “Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching” (Luke 10:39). In reality she was behaving in a shocking way, adopting a male role, that of a disciple to a rabbi – look how the phrase “at the feet of” is used in Acts 22:3! Martha, dutifully and properly being house-proud, clucks with annoyance; Mary should be in the kitchen. Jesus in effect tells her to quickly make beans on toast and to join them for the important stuff that was her spiritual right also.

Luke 8:1-3 lists “many” women who went about with Jesus supporting him. And only they, with the exception of John, followed him to the cross. These were outrageous women; they should have been at home, either being domestic, or in the case of Mary Magdalene, apologising for existing. Jewish mores dictated that wives should not leave the front door, and unwed girls should not show themselves that far! Thus Jesus rebelled against the prevailing standards and attitudes and encouraged women to do the same. This was just not how a rabbi behaved!

The conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4 is a superb example. He teaches deep religious truths to a serial divorcee, co-habiting Samaritan woman, alone outside a town. I make that seven points of offence! John 4:27 tells us of the disciples’ bafflement; the sight that met their eyes could only be understood as a depraved man soliciting a depraved woman; they knew this couldn’t be what Jesus was doing but they had no alternative explanation of what he was up to! She then went into the town and taught their neighbours. In similar vein in Matthew 28 Jesus and the angels not only first appeared to the women but told them to go and witness to the men! And this in a society that regarded women as unreliable witnesses<sup>1</sup> (a fact which must have kept conviction for rape extremely low.)

Jesus also would not tolerate the chauvinistic attitude that women were inherently outrageously lustful. Religious authorities spoke in this way not because women regularly made passes at rabbis but because on seeing women they had immoral thoughts, as they believed themselves to be purer than pure they could not be the origin of such fantasies, so the women must be transmitting their overflowing lust! This attitude meant that only women were stoned for adultery by the time of Christ;<sup>2</sup> it must be all their fault – see John 8! Psychologists call this “projection”. Jesus on the contrary taught that men must exercise self-control and take responsibility for themselves (Matthew 5: 28-29). Take this to heart, brother!

In our next article I shall discuss the many scriptures showing women behaving actively, vocally and playing a leading role alongside men in the early congregations, in the light of the views in the Roman world. Then, God Willing, I shall consider the facts of 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Timothy 2, and see if the orthodox approach to these passages holds water. Then, if not too badly stoned or burnt, I shall conclude with a “So what?” type article, for this is a most exciting and challenging time for our Brotherhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 4:219

<sup>2</sup> *Living In the Time of Jesus of Nazareth*, Peter Connolly, 1983, page 54

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#### PART 2: NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

On the day of Pentecost the gospel of the risen Christ erupted into the heart of Judaism, as scores of believing men and women preached in public to the festive crowds, facilitated by the miraculous gift of tongues.

Yes; women preached publicly, as Acts 2 states: “all” received the Holy Spirit, “all” spoke in tongues, and as Peter explained, this fulfilled the prophet Joel: “... my Spirit on all flesh... your sons and DAUGHTERS shall prophecy... my Spirit on my slaves and SLAVE-GIRLS, and they shall prophecy.” (Acts 2:17-18, Interlinear Bible)

Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:5 teaches a consistent message: “And I wish all of you to speak in languages, but rather that you may prophesy.” (Interlinear Bible) Again in Acts, Philip the Deacon’s four unmarried (!) daughters prophesied, (Acts 21:8-9.) And though I shall deal with 1 Corinthians 11 in more depth in a future article, it refers to women praying and prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:5). To prophesy is to speak God’s words aloud in public, or to lead the congregation in song (e.g. 1 Chronicles 25:1). Since the prophesying is aloud before the congregation, we assume the praying is too. There is no suggestion that “praying” or “prophesying” means one thing for a man but another thing when a woman is doing it.

Women clearly took a prominent role in the managing of congregations and the preaching of the gospel. We read of “Chloe’s people” in 1 Corinthians 1:11, “Nympha and the Church in her house” in Colossians 4:15, a similar arrangement seems to be implied for Lydia in Acts 16:40 and in Romans 16:7 Junia (some manuscripts have “Julia”) is described as “of note among the Apostles”. She is either a preacher of the gospel or a designated messenger or spokeswoman – or both! Finally and perhaps most jarring to orthodox sensibilities, we have Phoebe, in Romans 16:1-2. She sits with the docility of a Martha in the A.V. translation, “a servant of the Church...a succourer of many.” When we examine the Greek text, we find the matter unpalatable to King James’ bishops; Phoebe was a *diakonos* or deacon of the Cenchrea congregation and a *prostatis* of many including Paul himself. *Prostatis* is the feminine form of a word meaning “leader, governor, president, and organizer”. The Jewish New Testament Commentary renders *prostatis* as *shammash* “the person who handles the day-to-day practical tasks of keeping a synagogue going” (Jewish New Testament Commentary)<sup>3</sup>. In other words Phoebe was a Recording Brother and a speaker! I invite you to check the word *Prostatis* in Strong’s Concordance; the root meaning is someone who gets up in front of a group. Incidentally we find clear proof outside the scriptures for Deaconesses. The younger Pliny, writing to the Emperor Trajan as governor of Bithynia c. AD 111 (i.e. while some of the Apostles’ contemporaries were still alive) describes his persecution of Christians; he had interrogated under torture “two slave-women who they call deaconesses.”<sup>4</sup> Evidently these were perceived as ringleaders and well informed about the “degenerate cult”!

In our previous article we discussed the restrictions on Jewish women. In Gentile culture a woman was expected to follow her husband’s religion of choice or at least not engage in a religion of which he disapproved. Education for women was not unknown, but attitudes toward it were similar to those in Judaism, as we considered previously! I will discuss 1 Timothy 2:11 in more depth in my next article, but for now let us note that it indicates that “a

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<sup>3</sup> *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David Stern, 1992, page 439

<sup>4</sup> *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, book ten, letter 96, page 294, translator Betty Radice, Penguin Classics

woman *should* learn.

The orthodox position promoting a severely restricted role for sisters always justifies its interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2 by reference to Old Testament passages. I find it enormously interesting that when faced with the “Judaising Heresy” in Acts 15, the council of Jerusalem made no effort to say that while Gentile men need not be circumcised it was necessary for women to wear head coverings and be silent, in ritual obedience to details of the Law. Galatians is also a response to the activities of the Judaisers. In 3:25 Paul says: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female, there is neither slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The orthodox response to this passage is that it relates only to “salvation”, or to how things will be in the Kingdom. But this statement is clearly a response to the Jewish benediction:

*Blessed be he who did not make me a Gentile;  
Blessed be he who did not make me a woman;  
Blessed be he who did not make me a slave.*

Steve Cooper, a friend of mine, tells me that he first read these words in a prayer-book in a Jerusalem synagogue which he visited shortly after the Gulf War. He pointed out these charming lines to no less an authority than Bro. Leslie Johnson, who explained that the benediction should not be understood as an aspersion on any of the “undesirables” as such, it was just that these were barred from full and active participation in the synagogue service. The Judaisers were thus teaching a superior role for free circumcised Jewish males. Galatians is entirely concerned with refuting the Judaising Heresy from beginning to end. Paul is denying categorically that any such distinctions exist in the congregations of the New Covenant. If this passage only refers to “salvation”, were no Gentiles, women or slaves saved in Old Testament times? No. Such a strangulated interpretation is forced on the passage only because it must be made to conform to the orthodox interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11 and 14.

This interpretation I will now subject to critical scrutiny, to see if any real scriptural objection exists to prevent sisters praying, reading, preaching and teaching in our meetings. In my next article I will discuss the text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in the light of what is now known about the “Gnostic Heresy”.

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#### PART 3: PAUL, TIMOTHY, THE GNOSTICS — AND WOMEN

As predicted by Jesus and Paul, the “falling away” or apostasy of sections of the early Christians from the true Gospel was swift. The most “successful” such apostasy was that beginning with the division of “clergy” and “laity” and culminating with the imposition of “Catholic Christianity” as the state religion of Rome.

Gnosticism<sup>5</sup> (Noss-Tee-Sizzum) was if anything, older and even more perverted and very long lasting, thriving until violently suppressed and driven underground by the power of the State Church. Even then it surfaced repeatedly amongst such groups as the Albigensian Cathars and still exists today. What was Gnosticism about? Let’s construct a “statement of faith” for it:

- That which is physical is evil; spirit is good.
- Salvation was by your pure spirit escaping your vile body and ascending to heaven. The means of such escape was special knowledge, “gnosis” in Greek, hence Gnosticism.
- The Old Testament God had created the evil physical world. Hence he himself was evil and a deceiver.
- The body was evil and to be treated harshly by fasting etc. But sexual immorality was fine because it broke the law of the evil creator; marriage however was forbidden.
- Creating more vile flesh by having children was evil. Women who gave birth would be hindered from entering Gnostic heaven.
- Eve was worshipped as a perfect spirit being, Adam’s creator and united with the Serpent, the enlightener of mankind with the True Knowledge.
- Knowledge of your origins via your family tree was important to salvation; Eve was the origin of all.
- Christ being perfect did not have a physical body, he only appeared to.
- Gnostic myths were generally perverted versions of O.T. stories.

1 John 4:2-3 is a prime example of a verse countering the Gnostic heresy and Christadelphians universally recognise it as such:

“Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist.”

This clearly refers to the Gnostic heresy of the Christ with no physical body. We suggest that the letters to Timothy are equally preoccupied with the Gnostic threat.

Consider: 1 Timothy 1:4 makes it plain that Timothy’s congregation at Ephesus is beset by false teachers: “not to teach such false doctrines...nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.”

Gnostic mythology turned scripture on its head. Cain was a hero and Abel a knave. Eve and the Serpent brought salvation; you should oppose the evil Creator at every turn. If he said “thou shalt not”, thou jolly well shalt. Gnosticism was a religion of revolt against every divine principle. Here too is the Gnostic obsession with genealogy. Not surprisingly Paul has a great many other concerns:

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<sup>5</sup> *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels (The basic academic study on Gnostic doctrine.)

“They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods...” (1 Tim 4:3 NIV)

Here is Gnostic revulsion from maintaining vile flesh in both its main forms! Further: “Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales.” (1 Tim 4:7 NIV) These “old wives’ tales” were the secret lore of Gnosticism, often taught to impressionable children and young wives by the older women.

“...rather train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value ... for the present life and the life to come.” (1 Tim 4:8) Gnosticism taught the opposite; your spirit is already perfect, it only requires you to suppress your flesh by harsh ascetic practices.

These passages are but small fry compared to the core Gnosticism passage of 1 Timothy 2:11-15

“A woman should learn in silence 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. And Adam was not the one deceived; 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.”

Already, in the light of our comments on Gnostic teaching, this passage should be reading rather differently from the orthodox slant! Usually these verses are quoted to “prove” that women must never speak “in ecclesia”. Good Christadelphian practice is being ignored:

“Any doctrine must be suspect when it rests on only one verse. Much more so when the interpretation . . . violates the teaching of scripture”<sup>6</sup>.

Bro. Ron’s principle is a Christadelphian tradition of pure solid gold. There are four verses in the entire Bible which are taken to teach that women cannot speak and teach and the equivalent of a couple of chapters’ worth saying that women did and should pray, speak, teach and lead. Common sense and Christadelphian tradition say “Go with the majority of passages and doubt the face-value meaning of the minority”. Why is this sound principle driven away with blows over this issue, but sanely upheld in almost all others?

So what is this silence Paul speaks of? Look at the preceding passage:

“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men. ... I am telling the truth, I am not lying.”  
(1 Tim 2: 5-7)

1 Timothy 2 begins with a request for prayers to be made for everyone, which suggests that some groups in the congregation were not being prayed for. Then Paul underlines Christ’s mediatorship “for all”, not just for some factions of the congregation. What other mediators were competing with Christ in Timothy’s Ephesus? Obviously the fertility Goddess Artemis held strong sway in the public imagination of Ephesus (Acts 19). In the first century her High Priest was replaced with a High Priestess,<sup>7</sup> and other women mediated her to her followers. Gnosticism conflated spirit guide Eve with many pagan mother deities including Artemis, and

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<sup>6</sup> *Wrested Scriptures*, Ron Abel, page 38

<sup>7</sup> *I Suffer not a Woman – Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*, Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, 1992, page 71 (This is devoted to explaining the Gnostic heresy with special reference to 1 Timothy 2. Believe me, we’ve only scratched the surface!)

the hidden 'gnosis' was only to be learnt from feminine spirit beings and women gurus. Paul is arguing against the idea that only women had the saving teaching; the man Christ Jesus was the mediator! Note the emphasis on his body in 2:6! And there was not a false creator god and a true Gnostic god; there is one God.

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission ..." (1 Timothy 2:11)

This contrasts with the foolish women referred to in 2 Timothy 3:6-7 who are "always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth". Note also the change from 'women' in 1 Tim 2:9-10 to 'she' in verses 11-12; there it appears husband and wife is being referred to for the following reasons:

Why make the change from plural to singular? The Greek words *gyne* and *aner* used here can be translated respectively wife/woman or husband/man depending purely on context. The use of the word 'submission' is probably contextual with Paul's use of the same word.

In his previous letter to the same congregation – the Epistle of the Ephesians – in Ephesians 5:22 Paul says, "wives submit to your husbands".

The reference to Adam and Eve in verse 14 – the first husband and wife – and the reference to childbearing in verse 15 also point to a context of marriage.

So this silence and submission is restricted to the special role of husband and wife that the scripture DOES teach, the "great mystery" of Ephesians 5:32; if it applies to every brother with every sister, what is special about marriage – bed and board? In 1 Timothy 2:12 Paul says that a woman (wife?) is not to have "authority" or *authenthein* over a man (her husband?) When we want to understand the meaning of a scriptural word, we generally look at how the scriptures elsewhere use it; we can't do this with *authenthein* because this is its one and only appearance! Koine (Oxford: common language of the Greeks from close of classical period to Byzantine era) Greek writings in general use it in several ways:

- \* "Precedence (coming first)"; this ties in with the Gnostic doctrine of Eve creating Adam
- \* "domineering, usurping authority" like that of the Gnostic teachers.
- \* "To murder a wife and take her place" Again, extreme usurpation and violence!

Most of these meanings are about the abuse of power; I am certainly against that. The following translation is a perfectly permissible translation of the Greek text, and best suits the Gnostic context:

"I do not permit (such) a woman to teach nor to represent herself as the originator of man; she is to be in conformity (to the scripture teaching) for Adam was created first, not Eve..."<sup>8</sup>

'Silence' in verss 12 does NOT mean 'silence'; it is the Greek word *hesychia*, which carries the idea of 'quietness' – being less loud. If Paul meant for a woman not to speak he would have used *sigan* which does mean "to refrain from speaking". This fits our context; a woman should co-operate with sound instruction, and not be boisterous and rebellious like a Gnostic

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<sup>8</sup> Added footnote: It is worth commenting, 15 years after the appearance of the Kroegers' book, that debate continues on how *authenthein* should be translated, and the Kroegers' suggested translation of *authenthein* as "to represent herself as the originator of man" has not been widely accepted. Nevertheless, the Kroeger book presents much relevant detail to the background of 1 Timothy and the heresies in Ephesus. Some writers argue that Gnosticism developed considerably later than the date of 1 Timothy, but the descriptions given there fit well with what is known and described as Gnosticism in later centuries. (Footnote added by Ian McHaffie, September 2007)

virago! (Oxford: turbulent woman, woman of masculine strength or spirit, female warrior)

A woman who does not peddle Gnostic rubbish but who holds sound doctrine *should* teach and *can* hold proper authority, in line with Paul's teaching elsewhere! Eve was deceived and a sinner, not enlightened and perfect like the Gnostics taught! This is far removed from saying because Eve sinned all women are unfit to speak or lead.

The clincher is verse 15, because out of the Gnostic context it makes no obvious sense at all; is it saying good girls don't die in childbirth (they do) or that they are saved by having children? Paul was denying the Gnostic doctrine that having children would hinder a woman's salvation. Paul teaches that salvation depends on Christian conduct, not on whether or not you make babies!

In short, 1 Timothy 2 is saying not that women should not teach, but that they should teach what is right, and not that they should not exercise authority, but that they should exercise it properly. So should men! This is in perfect conformity with the rest of the New Testament: mutual submission on the part of all. The final proof for this context is 1 Timothy 6:20:

"Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, (A.V = "science") which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith."

The word "knowledge" there is, you've guessed it, Strong's 1108: GNOSIS. Could Paul be more plain?

In our next article we shall consider 1 Corinthians 11: the "head covering/hat" passage.



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#### PART 4: 1 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 11

*“Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head”*. (1 Corinthians 11:5 NIV) How often this verse is quoted as absolute proof that a hat/veil must be worn? Sometimes with the added comment that “it’s black and white” “how clear do you want it”? When some one says that, I think to myself this person could not have looked at the chapter in any detail. Of those authors who are traditional, Bro. Michael Lewis, in his book “Man and Woman” is the most realistic about 1 Corinthians chapter 11. On page 93 he says this:

“This must be one of the most difficult sections in the New Testament, not helped by the absence of parallel passages on the subject”.

How right he is and how black and white it is not.

Here are some of the difficulties concerning this passage, which make ANY understanding of this passage uncertain:

A. Paul taught that our new life in Christ is not about following rituals and regulations:

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free, stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1 NIV)

If no head coverings for a man and head coverings for a woman is a basic principle. Then, like all other basic principles, you would expect it to be taught in other passages. But THE OPPOSITE IS THE CASE – elsewhere you find ritual practices criticised and a stress on spiritual worship.

B. In the Old Testament the Levite priests wore a head covering with God’s blessing. This appears to contradict 1 Corinthians 11:7 “A man ought not to cover his head”!

Some will say, “That was the Old Testament, this is the New Testament things have changed.” But where is the evidence of the “change” on head coverings from Old to New Testament? There is no other passage in the N.T. on this subject. And furthermore 1 Corinthians 11 uses O.T. references in the verse following and again in verse 12 – of Adam and Eve!

C. The Nazirite vow allowed men to grow their hair long. And Paul himself took a Nazirite vow; but then Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:14: “If a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him”!

My personal view on this verse is that the “disgrace” was suggesting homosexuality in the Corinthian culture; and it must have been a big issue then. Today the approximate equivalent of long hair for homosexuals can be short hair!

D. Some translators use the word “veil”, but the word “veil” never occurs in the original Greek (and neither does ‘hat’ or any other external covering!) and the NIV acknowledges this problem, and translates 1 Cor. 11: 4-7 (NIV margin) with the hair as the covering for both men and women. My personal opinion is that the hair is the covering. After all hair is named or effectively referred to six times in this passage. And verse 15 says “long HAIR is given to her as a COVERING”.

E. The RSV translates verse 3 as “husband” and “wife” rather than “man” and “woman” because the context alone determines how to translate these words. The context puts the man and woman in the singular throughout this passage, and further refers to Adam and Eve – the first couple; “husband” and “wife” makes the most sense. Nowhere else does the N.T. teach that brothers are the head of the sisters. Only that the husband is the head of the wife – as in Ephesians 5:23.

F. Elsewhere in the N.T. Christ is the head of the church i.e. of both brothers and sisters; not just of men. Some have said that Christ is not the head of the wife directly, but only through the husband!

G. According to verse 7 only man (masculine) is the image of God: but Genesis 1:26-27 says that “man” (male and female) is created in the image of God.

H. “Authority” in verse 10 is elsewhere translated as that person concerned having authority to do something themselves. For example: 1 Cor 7:37 and 8:9 – here it means the right or liberty to do something. Therefore it seems likely that she has “authority” to decide for her self, rather than she being under any (man’s) “authority”.

I. Although the first half of 1 Corinthians 11 presents the woman/wife as subordinate, verse 11 seems to develop it to a more equal partnership: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man nor is man independent of a woman”.

J. “Because of the Angels” (1 Corinthians 11:10) is an obscure phrase, and it is very difficult to even guess what it might mean. I could give five different explanations of this phrase (and there are no doubt more than five.) None of them is supported by much, if any evidence.

K. Verse 14 says that “nature” teaches that long hair is a disgrace for a man. How does nature teach this? Does a man’s hair naturally grow shorter than a woman’s? What a(nother) strange verse!

Does the reader think this passage is “simple” and “black and white”? Have you got “straightforward” answers to 1 Corinthians 11 when experts on the Greek text struggle with it? Let us face the obvious, it is an obscure passage – and that is why views are NOT the same, amongst various Christadelphian writers.<sup>9</sup> There are a few things you CAN be dogmatic with 1 Corinthians 11:

- We do *not* KNOW what the covering is; it might be a veil or hair, or a hairstyle.
- Women *were* praying and prophesying in the Corinthian ecclesia.
- There are several very strange verses in this passage, such as “because of the angels”, which are totally perplexing.
- This is the only passage in the whole Bible on the subject, and is a very difficult passage to understand.
- It is often asked why bring up such a controversial subject? One of my answers is that sisters (and brothers) are leaving our community partly because of the unscriptural, chauvinistic attitudes shown by some brothers (and sisters!). And hats are often the vehicle through which this Victorian chauvinism is expressed. Sometimes spiritual blackmail is used, by suggesting that her salvation is at risk by not wearing a hat – what nonsense!
- My second reason is that as 1 Corinthians 11 is so very difficult to understand, it is purely down to conscience as to what to do, about hats. As the Bible says, if it is wrong to you,

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<sup>9</sup> See 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – *Headcovering in Bible Times and the Application Today*, Ian & Averil McHaffie

then it is sin – so do not do it. And equally if it is wrong not to wear hats – to you – then wear a hat. Let's respect each other's view and let each other be. But sisters are barred from most ecclesias if they do not wear a hat – even though they don't see it as sin. I know personally of some sisters who have been threatened with disfellowship over this issue – and others who have left our community altogether.

My final reason for raising this issue is equally, if not more, worrying. In Brother Jim Bilton's talk at Hoddesdon in 1998 on "The Mission Statement", he pointed out that national polls on Christianity showed that people saw the way in which Christianity is often preached as "irrelevant". Insisting on **every woman** wearing a hat when the evidence is highly dubious, is an example of this irrelevance. Let us stick to things we *can* be dogmatic about, the **positives** of loving God and loving our neighbours – and our neighbour equally includes women as well as men!

In my final article I will ask, "So What Now?"

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#### PART 5: 1 CORINTHIANS 14

There are two verses in 1 Corinthians 14 that appear to prohibit women speaking in the church:

*“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law 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.”* (1 Corinthians 14:34-35 NIV)

The context begins in 1 Corinthians 12, “Now about spiritual gifts, brothers” (verse 1). Paul is taking up a specific question asked by the church and answering it. Verse 13 makes it clear that both men and women are being addressed: “ALL baptised...ALL given the one spirit to drink.” Furthermore, “brothers” in verse one is “*adelphoi*” in the Greek and is the equivalent to “brothers and sisters” in English. Therefore the gifts of “knowledge”, “faith”, “healing”, “prophecy” and “tongues” applied to both men and women. This should not be a big surprise in view of the scriptures we addressed in Part 2!

1 Corinthians 13 emphasises the importance of love; and 1 Corinthians 14 begins by asking for a loving, considerate attitude towards having spiritual gifts. In this chapter, as before, men and women are being addressed. “Brothers” in verse six, and throughout this chapter is the Greek word “*adelphoi*”, the same as in chapter 12 verse one. So the women too are involved in prophecy (verse 1):

“...Who prophesies edifies the church...” (verse 4)

In tongues: (verse 2)

“...Who speaks in a tongue...”

The context clearly shows that this was no private occasion but a meeting of the ecclesia:

“...If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues...” (verse 23)

Verse 26 follows in the same vein:

“Everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction [teaching!], a revelation, a tongue...”

“Everyone” covers women, who were teaching in the church. But there was a condition:

“...must be done for the strengthening of the church...” (verse 26)

The whole passage is asking for an orderly service that can be understood. Paul did not want disorder and so asked “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, and someone must interpret...”

If there is no interpreter the speaker should keep “quiet”, (verses 27-28) and as we discussed in part 3, this is the word *sigan* which means to be “silent”, i.e. to make no sound. In a similar way the prophets are to be orderly, and sometimes to be silent, for:

“If a revelation should come to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop...” (verse 30)

The “stop” is *sigan* “to be silent”. In other words, if everyone is talking at once, some need to shut up! The context is pretty clear that this was not a general and permanent silence for all time on those men and women who spoke in tongues and prophesied. Verse 33 gives a strong hint that it is the disorderly women that are being addressed:

“... For God is not a God of disorder but of peace...”

Paul asks these women to *sigan*, “be silent”; there are three more clues that these are women with a bad attitude;

“...But must be in submission as the law says...”

“...If they want to enquire about something then they should ask their husbands at home...”

“...It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church...”

So this applies not to all women but to wives; not to all wives, but to those who are relatively immature in the Truth; and the contingency is disruption of ecclesial activity. These women were not submitting to their husbands or to general sensibilities; they were arrogant. They were speaking inappropriately when others were speaking, just like the prophets in verse 30. Perhaps they were loudly blurting out questions, probably on basic issues, disrupting the service. They may have been young wives (Romans and Jews often took brides aged as young as twelve) possessed of the teenage “sillies” or older women denied education and intellectual stimulus, (remember some wives converted their husbands and so would have more knowledge than them!) But men and women possessed of spiritual depth *should* minister;

“Therefore my brothers (ADELPHOI) be eager to prophecy and DO NOT FORBID speaking in tongues...” (verse 39)

So in general men and women should NOT be silent; they should contribute. 1 Corinthians 14 is not part of some involved special role for women, but simply a common sense demand for consideration and responsibility. One final point to think over; all ancient manuscripts of this passage have the same wording, but in some, vv. 34-35 are placed after v. 40. Possibly this was a comment by Paul, or a marginal note by an early copyist inserted into the passage, any thoughts?

## **TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN**

### **NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CHRIST**

#### **PART 6: SO WHAT NOW?**

Thank you for staying with this series for five whole articles; let us recap on their conclusions:

Part 1: We showed that Jesus was born into a society that restricted women severely, yet our Lord flouted convention and encouraged women to adopt formerly “men only” roles.

Part 2: We showed a selection of the scriptural evidence for equality of the women in the early congregations; preaching, teaching, exercising spirit gifts, leading etc; also in contravention of prevailing mores.

Part 3: We suggested that 1 Timothy is devoted to opposing the Gnostic heresy, and that 1 Tim. 2:11-15 relates to this issue and to this issue only; a general principle is that teachers should teach scriptural doctrine, whether men or women.

Part 4: We showed that the “hat” passage of 1 Corinthians 11 is one of the most problematic in scripture, that the orthodox approach does not hold water, and that the passage refers to women who are praying and prophesying aloud, not to women sitting passively in “formal” meetings.

Part 5: We showed that 1 Corinthians 14 teaches that both brothers and sisters address the meeting. And that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 only has a restriction on disruptive and inappropriate contributions from certain women.

This series has not been an exhaustive treatment of the subject; it has merely outlined some of the key arguments. The reader is exhorted to compare these arguments with those of the orthodox approach: Which conform to the meaning of the text, the immediate context of the passage, the broader context of scripture and the context of the first century?

Some claim that the orthodox approach promotes unity among believers, but that a series like this threatens to disrupt. This is a myth; there is no unity as things are. Some unquestionably argue for a restricted “special” role for women because they are morally, spiritually and mentally inferior to men and unfit to play an active role; others argue that women are perfectly equal and capable, they are only restricted because God wants ritual role-play. Space doesn’t allow consideration here for the range of incompatible ideas used to justify hat-wearing from 1 Corinthians 11; we can only recommend reading the appendices to the McHaffies’ *First Corinthians 11:2-16* (listed in the bibliography).

If we are the probationary betrothed of Christ, formerly “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” but now awaiting the marriage supper of the Lamb (Ephesians 2:12) then surely in the light of the symbolism of Deuteronomy 21:12 every sister should be shaved if she is to represent “the Bride”! And if every brother represents “the Bridegroom”, then nothing could be more appropriate than for him to wear a fancy head-dress as described in the Hebrew of Isaiah 61:10? We can pluck out obscure O.T. imagery to make a case for virtually any practice – if we believe that that is the approach God requires. Yet why are we so content to ignore clear scripture commandments like the anointing of the sick enjoined in James 5:14-15? Let’s have a few enlightening quotes from Victorian days:

“...I was also introduced to sister Dexter, whose characteristics are described in many a Scripture specification of womanly excellence, and whose serving capacities are so highly appreciated that she has been appointed ‘a managing brother!’ Deborah, the wife of

Lapidoth, was an excellent managing brother, to whom Barak naturally took the second place.”

**A VOYAGE TO AUSTRALIA**, Robert Roberts (1896) page 117

“...I do not see how that little ecclesia ever could have lived had the sisters not taken an active part in the worship. ... Those eight, each and everyone, took a part in the meeting, and I have never since seen such zeal, enthusiasm, and devotion. One brother read the lesson, a second prayed, a third took charge of the table, and a fourth led in singing. One sister read from the *Christadelphian*; second, the thoughts she had noted down during the week, when reading her daily lessons; third, selection of hymn; and fourth, she always did the same thing—read a few verses from the Bible.”

From an article in **THE CHRISTADELPHIAN MAGAZINE**, July 1<sup>st</sup> 1883, page 315!

In several meetings in this country sisters have given Bible classes from the beginning of the last century. This scotches the oft-repeated idea that those promoting an active role for sisters are conforming to worldly feminist values; Edwardian England was not noted for its “political correctness!” During the time of the division of the Central and Suffolk Street meetings, sisters played an active role in Suffolk Street meetings, but their activities were curtailed as part of the price of “reunion”. These precedents are not quoted as if they proved the rightness of anything, but only to demolish the notion that things were ever thus and so must ever be, according to the Laws of the Medes and Persians. Our history has been rewritten in the past!

All our conclusions in the series are compatible with one broad point; each husband and wife unit represents Christ and his bride in symbol. And the ecclesia as a whole, both brothers and sisters, represents the bride. Every woman in the ecclesia is not under the authority of every man (Eph 5:32). Paul teaches that as a wife exercises her right to an active role in the Congregation, she should not undermine her husband. Likewise the husband must not undermine his wife. In fact everyone must submit to everyone else! (Ephesians 5:21)

Freedom in Christ means we have to develop and exercise our consciences; the effort this requires provokes people to bind themselves with man-made rules, for freedom is a fearful thing. Look at the legalism the orthodox approach generates; we have unscriptural hair-splitting definitions of “formal” and “informal” meetings, brethren listening to sisters’ classes over the sound system in adjoining rooms because the sisters would have to be dumb in their actual presence, some meetings allowing sisters to speak in business meetings, others to only pass notes, while apparently many non-Christadelphian churches in the States deny women any vote in Church affairs! Other meetings order un-baptised girls to wear hats, surely making a mockery of the whole idea! If an interpretation needs such legalism to make it function, isn’t that another sign that it’s wrong?

The restriction of sisters in our community is destroying us. Many sisters (and brothers) are either disaffected or dropping out of our community altogether. Many women are turned away from Christianity because of the perception that Paul was anti-women. If God really wants *ritual role-play* then that’s a price we would have to pay. (We could have greater appeal if we changed our stance on all sorts of things!) But as he doesn’t, we mustn’t.

So how could we have got this so wrong for so long? The problem began when the Apostacy set in, first with the division of the Church into “clergy” and “laity”, then with the false doctrine

that the clergy represented and mediated Christ to the congregation – and so had to be male. Translations have been made for centuries with these assumptions. We denounce the clergy/laity distinction but keep the male/female one in place! The Church's suppression of Gnosticism also meant that the context of 1 Timothy was lost, with many important facts only discovered in recent decades. And in our own community, the attitude that women who want to do more aren't "nice" or "feminine" and the savage treatment of those few who have stuck their necks out have splendidly stifled the debate. But now the genie is out of the bottle. More and more meetings and gatherings are taking the step of allowing sisters their scriptural role.

When you first encounter sisters praying, speaking, presiding and reading, it is a terrible shock to the system. We have been so strongly conditioned to believe that it's blasphemy! But you quickly come to appreciate the different kinds of spiritual insights women have, the quite different quality of their prayers, and the fellowship and decent order that prevails in the meetings where this takes place. Particularly fitting is the leading of a service by husband and wife in partnership! Make no mistake; this issue will generate a terrible lot of heat before it generates any light, but the light will be worth the trial. Open your hearts and minds, brothers and sisters, fearlessly weigh the evidence – and decide for yourselves. Do nothing either one way or another out of conformity, but obey your conviction. Respect weak faith, but seek to strengthen it! To go against your conscience is sin. And remember that we really are a family in the Lord, for then confronting contentious issues like this will make us only stronger. But if we keep on replacing brotherly kindness with bureaucracy, it will destroy us.

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