

## **Paul's Understanding of Women's Place in the Church<sup>1</sup>**

**Rekha M. Chennattu RA**  
Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune 411014, India

*Abstract:* Paul is sometimes considered to be a misogynist who was responsible for the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the church. Paul seems to have sent mixed signals concerning the role of women in the church. In order to interpret the writings of Paul correctly, one should differentiate doctrinal statements from disciplinary norms and, moreover, keep in mind that both are conditioned by the culture of his time. On the one hand, Paul rejected all forms of inequality that existed between men and women and, on the other, he seems to have been instrumental in perpetuating some of the traditional practices which treat women as inferior to men. The best way to handle this complex issue is to begin with the evidence available in the letters concerning the actual role played by women in the Pauline churches. Both the Acts and the letters of Paul reveal that the apostle had many women colleagues, co-workers and collaborators. This Paper explores Paul's attitude towards women in the authentic letters of Paul, being sensitive to the socio-cultural and religious contexts of the Pauline churches.

The author concludes by asserting that the cumulative weight of the evidence found in the authentic letters suggests that (i) Paul was ahead of his time in promoting a dynamic and reciprocal partnership between women and men, and in appreciating and approving women's leadership roles in the church; (ii) Women did play important leadership roles in the life and mission of the churches founded by Paul.

*Keywords:* Women, women in the Church, status of women, New Community in Christ.

Saint Paul is not merely a prophetic leader of the past, but he also stands out as a dynamic guide for Christians today. The celebration of the jubilee year of Saint Paul furnishes us with a golden opportunity to re-read his writings and to recapture his prophetic message. Saint Paul was proud of introducing himself as a Pharisee (Phil 3:5) and was 'extremely zealous' for the traditions of his ancestors (Gal 1:14). As a Pharisee, Paul was trained to interpret the Torah and belonged to the group that was responsible for the ongoing interpretation of the Torah and its faithful transmission (1Cor 15:3).<sup>2</sup> This is what Paul was doing after the encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus – reinterpreting the Torah in the light of the Christ event (Gal 3; Rom 4) and reinterpreting the Christ event in the light of the Torah as well as the new pastoral concerns of the growing church, from the Jewish to the Gentile world (Gal 3; 1Cor 15; see also Acts 17). Paul was therefore a key figure in extending the membership of the church to non-Jews, in defining Christian identity through his law-free gospel and in developing an inculturated Christian theology.

The apostle is, however, sometimes considered to be a misogynist who was responsible for the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the church. Paul seems to have sent mixed signals concerning the role of women in the church. In order to interpret the writings of Paul correctly, one should differentiate doctrinal statements from disciplinary norms and, moreover, keep in mind that both (Paul's doctrinal statements and disciplinary norms) are conditioned by the culture of his time. On the one hand, Paul rejected all forms of inequality that existed between men and women and, on the other, he seems to have been instrumental in perpetuating some of the traditional practices which treat women as inferior to men. The best way to handle this complex issue is to begin with the evidence available in the letters concerning the actual role played by women in the Pauline churches. Both the Acts and the letters of Paul reveal that the apostle had many women colleagues, coworkers and collaborators. This Paper explores Paul's attitude towards women in the authentic letters of Paul, being sensitive to the socio-cultural and religious contexts of the Pauline churches.<sup>3</sup> However, it falls beyond the purview of this Paper to discuss all Pauline texts dealing with women's issues.

I shall first undertake a short survey of the leadership roles played by women in the early Christian communities founded by Paul and then focus on Paul's egalitarian vision of the church articulated in Galatians 3:26-28. I shall then look at some of the misunderstood texts from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (7:1; 11:3-16; 14:34-35).<sup>4</sup> It is my contention that Paul championed a church of dynamic partnership between men and women, characterized by reciprocal and inclusive leadership.

## I. Women Colleagues of Paul

On many occasions both Acts and the Letters of Paul mention the active participation of women in the work of the gospel initiated by Paul. The author of Acts tells us that a certain business woman named Lydia was one of the first disciples of Paul: "A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Lydia and all her household believed in the gospel proclaimed by Paul and were baptized (Acts 16:15). It is noteworthy that Lydia not only received baptism, but also invited Paul and his companions to sojourn at her house, and that Paul accepted the hospitality of this Gentile woman. Lydia seems to have teamed up with Paul to further the work of evangelization in Thyatira.

Paul refers to some of the women disciples as deacon (*diakonos*, Phoebe, Rom 16:1), helper or benefactor (*prostatis*, Phoebe, Rom 16:2), coworker (*synergos*, Prisca, Rom 16:3), apostle (*apostolos*, Junia, Rom 16:7), prophet (*prophēteuoussa*, 1 Cor 11:5) and leader of the church ("Nympha and the church in her [*autēs*] house" Col 4:15).

Phoebe is described as a sister (*adelphē*), a deacon (*diakonos*)<sup>5</sup> of the church at Cenchreae and a benefactor (*prostatis*) of many including Paul (Rom 16:1-2). The designation 'sister', since it is traditionally used to refer to the female members of the church, does not need any explanation.<sup>6</sup> I shall explore what it means to be a minister of the church and a benefactor. Paul talks about himself as a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church and claims that he became a minister of the church by God's commission in order to make the word of God known (Col 1:24-25). By using the same expression

for Phoebe, Paul brings home the effectiveness of her ministry and the significant contribution made by her in the church at Cenchreae. This is further underlined by the fact that she has become also a benefactor (*prostatis*) of many people in the church. Some consider her ministry in the light of being a *prostates* as that of hospitality to and sharing her resources with those who are needy and helpless.<sup>7</sup> Some others propose that "Phoebe's office as *prostatis* appears to imply authoritative responsibility similar to that of an elder."<sup>8</sup> In the Septuagint, *prostatēs*, the masculine form of *prostatis*, is used as a designation for 'the captain of the temple' (2 Macc 3:4) and for 'the leader of the sanctuary and his people' (Sirach 45:24).<sup>9</sup> Hence it seems reasonable to conclude that Phoebe furnishes strong evidence for the presence of women leaders in the Pauline churches (see also 1 Tim 3:11).<sup>10</sup>

Prisca or Priscilla (as she is known in Acts) and her husband Aquila are addressed as Paul's coworkers in Jesus Christ. Paul recommends that all the churches of the Gentiles be grateful for the service rendered by them just as he himself is (Rom 16:3-4). The fact that Priscilla's name is always mentioned first before the name of her husband indicates her prominent role in the ministry of the gospel (see also Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Tim 4:19).<sup>11</sup> There is evidence in the letters of Paul that women were involved in the animation of house churches.<sup>12</sup> For example, references to the church in the house of Prisca and Aquila in Rome (Rom 16:4-5) and in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19), to the church in Chloe's house (1 Cor 1:11) and in Nympha's house (Col 4:15)<sup>13</sup> bear this point out. If women were engaged in the management of house churches, then one can infer that they played some form of leadership role in the early Christian communities.

In Romans 16:7, both Andronicus and Junia are numbered among the prominent (*episēmoi*) apostles, a designation that Paul gives only to the Twelve, Barnabas, Silvanus, Timothy and to himself.<sup>14</sup> One can glean from the text that they were either Paul's relatives or country people; they were Christians before his Damascus experience and therefore members of some early church; and they were imprisoned because of their activities with Paul. In sum, Paul includes women among the outstanding (*episēmoi*) apostles of the early churches.

This short survey shows the active participation of women in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

## II. Paul's Vision of a New Community in Christ (Gal 3:26-28)

The occasion of Paul's letter to the Galatians seems to have been that, after the evangelization work of Paul in the province of Galatia, some Jewish Christians preached a different gospel from that of Paul. These missionaries seem to have questioned the authority of Paul and the validity of Paul's law-free gospel and insisted on the necessity of the observance of the Mosaic Law for salvation. In his response, Paul developed some of the doctrines most central to his theology, viz., salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, freedom of Christians from the Law and equality of all human beings in Christ. I shall focus on Paul's new vision of society characterized by a radical equality which appreciates and celebrates diversity.

Paul reinterprets the Jewish Scripture and presents the Law as a guardian (3:23-25) using examples from the life-style of a Graeco-Roman family (4:1-3) to drive home his general principle that Christians inherit eternal life through their faith in Christ and that their new life in Christ transforms social divisions (3:26-28).<sup>15</sup> In v. 26 Paul argues that Christ Jesus through his death has won the legal status for all Christians to become heirs to eternal life. All have the same legal status as *an eldest son* before God to inherit the eternal life. This is so because in the culture in which Paul wrote, the eldest son was the legal owner of the property of the family. In v. 27 Paul points out that it is baptism, not circumcision, that marks the beginning of this new life in Christ. As an initiation ritual, baptism symbolized the participation of Christians in the death and resurrection of Christ ('into Christ' *eis Christon*) and signalled the new life in Christ ('put on Christ' *Christon enedysasthe*).

The implications of the new life in Christ Jesus are articulated in verse 28. The transformed life in Christ is intimately connected with the abolition of discrimination on the basis of racial, social and gender differences: a) there is neither Jew nor (*oude*) Greek; b) there is neither slave nor (*oude*) free; c) there is no longer male and (*kai*) female. The first two pairs are straightforward and need no further

explanation. But the third pair 'male and (*kai*) female' calls attention to itself by breaking the formal pattern of the first two pairs: neither Jew nor (*oude*) Greek; neither slave nor (*oude*) free. The third pair echoes the language of the creation account in Genesis: 'male and female God created them' (1:27). Paul seems to signal the inauguration of the new creation where racial, social and gender discrimination does not exist. According to Paul's vision, this does not mean that those who are in the new creation cease to be Jew or Greek, slave or free, and men or women, it means that these discriminatory distinctions have lost their power to be the ground for honour and privileges. These distinctions are no longer in force so that one group does not dominate over the other. Betz comments that "there can be no doubt that Paul's statements have social and political implications of even a revolutionary dimension."<sup>16</sup> In sum, Paul's vision of a new life in Christ marks the end of discrimination of every kind and particularly that of gender, and establishes full equality among the members of the church. This new community characterized by equality, justice and peace becomes God's new Israel or chosen people and makes God's kingdom visible here on earth.

### III. Misunderstood Pauline Texts

It is against this general principle of equality of women and men in Christ Jesus and the presence of women leaders in the actual life experiences of Paul that we should look at some of the so-called 'offensive' Pauline texts on women in his first letter to the Corinthians (7:1; 11:2-6; 14:34-35). One also needs to be sensitive to the Greek rhetoric used by Paul and the socio-cultural background of the Corinthian church.

From Paul's letter, one can gather the pastoral context of the Corinthian church. Some looked for eloquent speeches and were carried away by brilliant rhetoric (cf. 1Cor 1:17). Some were too ascetic ("it is proper (*kalos*) for a man not to touch a woman" 1Cor 7:1), and others were too liberal and understood Paul's law-free gospel as lawlessness ("I am free to do anything" (1Cor 6:12; 10:23). Some were advocating idol worship (cf. 1Cor 8:1-13), and others were known for their immoral behaviour (1Cor 5:1-13; 6:12-20). Some were involved in corruption and exploitation (1Cor 6:1-11).

Some of them pretended to be spiritual people and claimed to have spiritual superiority (cf. 1Cor 1:5-7; 2:6; 3:1; 14:20). Some were prejudiced against women (1Cor 14:34-35) and yet others gave equal freedom to women to prophecy and participate in the ministry of the word (1Cor 11:2-16). In his response, Paul had to uphold the unity of the community. Paul appreciates both their zeal for higher wisdom and passion for spiritual gifts, but censures both licentiousness and showy asceticism. Paul gives equal opportunities to both women and men to animate communities and lead liturgical assemblies, but he wants all things to be done decently and in order.

### **1) Not to Touch a Woman (1Cor 7:1-7)**

In 1Cor 5:1 – 11:1, Paul deals with the uniqueness of the Christian way of life; we have a set of criticisms as well as guidelines about what it means to be a Christian community in the world. In chapter 7, Paul deals with the questions raised by the community concerning the relationships in married life (1Cor 7:1a). Modern readers often take it for granted that 1Cor 7:1b (“It is proper (*kalos*) for a man not to touch a woman”) is the view of Paul and it expresses Paul’s primary concern. Then follows the inference: Paul makes an exception to this rule that, because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his wife and each woman should have her husband (1Cor 7:2). When this phrase (“It is proper (*kalos*) for a man not to touch a woman”) is lifted out of its context, it presents Paul as a misogynist having some pathological attitude towards body and sex. However, understanding of Paul’s use of diatribe helps the reader better to understand his argument. Diatribe is a style of argumentation common among the Hellenes of Paul’s time, which consists in creating a conversation by quoting one’s opponent’s view which will then be refuted by the speaker. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul often quotes the slogans of the Corinthians and then corrects their views by presenting his own views on the matter under discussion. For example,

#### **1Cor 6:12**

Corinthians: “All things are lawful for me”

Paul: “But not all things are beneficial”

Corinthians: "All things are lawful for me"

Paul: "But I will not be dominated by anything"

**1Cor 6:13-15<sup>17</sup>**

Corinthians: "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food, but God will destroy both one and the other"

Paul: "The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!"

**1Cor 7:1-2**

Corinthians: "It is proper (*kalos*) for a man not to touch a woman."

Paul: "But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband."

**1Cor 8:1-2**

Corinthians: "We know that 'all of us possess knowledge'."

Paul: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

**1Cor 14:34-40<sup>18</sup>**

Corinthians: "Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

Paul: "What is this? Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order."

If this is true, then 1Cor 7:1b expresses the opinion of the Corinthians – "it is proper (*kalos*) for a man not to touch a woman."<sup>19</sup> This view goes well with early Gnosticism which regarded the physical body as inferior to the spiritual soul. Paul is trying to



counteract their radical asceticism that forbids sexual union within the existing marriages. As is noted by Pauline scholars, the emphasis here is on *mutual submission and reciprocity*:<sup>20</sup> “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (1Cor 7:3-4). This aspect of mutuality and reciprocity is central to Paul’s understanding of human persons.

## 2) Women Should Wear a Veil (1Cor 11:2-16)

Paul deals with matters related to worship and spiritual gifts in chapters 11–14. Although Paul authorizes women to pray and prophesy in the liturgical assemblies, he also seems to have insisted that women should cover their heads while praying and prophesying (11:2-16). One should not forget that we are reading only one side of a conversational exchange. Paul is responding to some of the Corinthians’ concerns. Wayne A. Meeks, in his book entitled *The First Urban Christians*, reconstructed the social world of Corinth in general and the status of women in particular. There were women who participated in leadership roles such as leading the prayer of the community and prophesying in the assemblies (1Cor 11:2-16). This created tension and women’s active participation in the roles normally assigned to men became a subject of lively debate and controversy.<sup>21</sup> Paul’s compromises and directives in 1Cor 11 need to be understood against the background of this controversy and division in the community as well as his appeal for the unity of the community at Corinth that we find from the very beginning of the Letter (1Cor 1:10).

Now reading the text carefully, one realizes that Paul’s arguments in 1Cor 11:2-16 bring together many traditions and worldviews. Paul alludes to some specific practice within the Corinthian Church; he refers to the second creation narrative in Genesis and incorporates arguments from biological facts. One should glean from the text these various facets in Paul’s response: *Captatio benevolentiae*, the view of the Corinthians and Paul’s response.

In verse 2, as has been his wont, Paul introduces a new topic on the dress code for women and men at worship by appreciating the Corinthians. These words of appreciation, known as *captatio benevolentiae*, are meant to create good will among his readers so that his advice will be well received by them. Paul is praising the Corinthians for remembering him and maintaining (*katechō*) the traditions (*paradosis*) that he has transmitted to them. In the words of Ray Collins: "These words serve as an acknowledgement that the difficult situation Paul hopes to clarify arose from the Corinthians' naïve adherence to Paul's teachings and the traditions he had shared with them."<sup>22</sup> After encouraging them for their exemplary life, Paul takes up the issue under discussion and clarifies the misunderstanding.

In verses 3-10, Paul is paraphrasing the views of the Corinthians with his own corrective additions. The view of at least one of the groups in Corinth seems to be the following: the head of a woman is man (v. 3b)<sup>23</sup>; women should cover their head during public worship (vv 5-6); woman is the glory of man and man is the image and glory of God (v. 7). But by the use of the emphatic (*de*) at the beginning of verse 3 signals the beginning of Paul's corrective response. Paul brings their attention to the fact that "Christ is the head of every man" (v. 3a) and "God is the head of Christ" (v. 3c). Some Christians at Corinth seem to have legitimized the subordination of women to man by recourse to the second creation narrative in Genesis 2. They quoted: "For man is not from woman; rather woman is from man" (v. 8, Gen 2:21-23); "For man was not created for the sake of woman; rather woman was created for the sake of man" (v. 9, Gen 2:18). While Paul agrees with them with regard to what the Scripture says, he also reinterprets the same scripture for them in the light of the new life in Christ.

Paul develops further his arguments in vv. 11-16. The emphatic use of (*plēn*, but or on the other hand or nevertheless) in verse 11 indicates the continuation of Paul's corrective response. In verse 11-12, Paul gives his reinterpretation of the Scripture in the light of the Christ-Event. Paul first presents his theological thesis: "In the Lord (*en kyriō*) woman is not independent of (*chōris* 'without') man or man independent of (*chōris*) woman" (v. 11). The expression, 'in

the Lord' (*en kyriō*) at the beginning of Paul's response signals the Christian interpretation of the creation story. Paul then brings up an empirical argument: "For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman" (v. 12a). As a Pharisee who is responsible for the ongoing interpretation of the Law, Paul reinterprets Genesis 2:21-23 in the light of the biological fact that each human being (both man and woman) is born of a woman. He then concludes his argument with yet another theological claim: "All things (*panta*) are from God (*ek tou theou*)" (v. 12b).

Although Paul agrees with the Corinthians that it is good for women to cover their heads, he disagrees with the reasons given by them. He drives home the message that women and men are interdependent by nature and they are equal in front of God: "In the Lord neither is woman independent of man nor man independent of woman" (v. 11). Paul accepts the view of Genesis 2 that woman came from man, but he also remains open to the ongoing revelation of God in and through the experiences of our day-to-day life that man is born of a woman (v. 12a). Paul underlines the fact that there is a radical equality between men and women in the Lord as God is the origin of everything.

After having made his point clear, Paul uses a rhetorical question to further persuade his listeners to decide for themselves: "Judge for yourselves." What is the most fitting thing to do? It is fitting for women to cover their heads? What is natural? It is natural for women to cover their heads (vv. 14-15). Paul's final word on the issue is an appeal from his own example and that of the churches of God not to be divisive or contentious (*philoneikos*) (v. 16). Paul urges the Corinthians to keep away from quarrels over the dress code at worship.

The concern of Paul in 1Cor 11: 2-16 can therefore be easily understood against the prevailing prejudices against the participation of women in public gatherings. As expressed elsewhere, maintaining good order and the common good were of primary importance for Paul while making decisions on practices and customs (e.g., 1Cor 8 and 12). While discussing the issue whether one can eat the food offered to idols (1Cor 8:1-13), Paul would agree with the Corinthians that one can eat the food offered to idols because idols have no

existence. However, Paul does not eat such food if it scandalizes one of the members of the community. He prefers to sacrifice his own freedom out of love for the weaker members of the community. Similarly, Paul expects women to prophesy and participate actively in the public life of the church, but they should promote common good and maintain the unity of the community.

### **3) Women Should Be Silent (1Cor 14:26-40)**

On the basis of 1Cor 14:34-35, Paul was often accused of being against women's initiatives and participation in the community worship. As we have already seen, Paul approves of the participation of women in leadership roles in the assemblies by praying and prophesying (1Cor 11:2-16). So we need to keep in mind the directives given by Paul to the women who are prophesying in assemblies. Now the question is how we are to understand the silencing of women in 1Cor 14:34-35, as it stands in contradiction to the directive given by Paul in 1Cor 11: 2-16 and to Paul's vision of an egalitarian society in Gal 3:26-28. Moreover, the text conflicts with the actual experiences of women in Pauline communities.

The text lends itself to various interpretations. At least six explanations have been given by scholars. (1) The text prohibits only disruptive speeches during the worship, it does not prohibit women to pray and prophesy; (2) Paul forbids only married women; so unmarried women can speak in public; (3) Women should keep silent in the larger assemblies, but they are allowed to speak when the church meets in their homes; (4) Paul prohibits women prophets to speak in public at Corinth; (5) Verses 34-35 are a later interpolation and thus they are non-Pauline; (6) The text represents the opinion of the Corinthian church which Paul in fact corrects in his letter.<sup>24</sup>

Scholars differ in their assessment of verses 34-35: whether they are Pauline or non-Pauline. As of now, no one can deny the fact that there is no manuscript evidence for a text without these verses. But we do have some manuscripts which placed verses 34-35 in a different place, i.e., after verse 40 (D F G 88\* it<sup>ar, b, d, f, g</sup> vg<sup>ms</sup> Ambrosiaster Sedulius-Scotus). One can therefore infer that at least some ancient copyists sensed that these verses interrupt the flow of the discussions of prophecy and speaking in tongues. These verses were placed in

the margin (as found in the sixth-century Codex Fuldensis) to highlight the foreign or the non-Pauline nature of the verses.<sup>25</sup> The attempt by copyists to place these verses in different places can also be explained by their lack of harmony with the Pauline attitude towards women. Moreover, as noted earlier, the view expressed in these verses contradicts Paul's views elsewhere (e.g., 1Cor 11 and Gal 3:28). It also belittles the positive role attributed to single women in 1Cor 7.

As we have seen earlier, verses 34-35 can be understood as the opinion of the Corinthians.<sup>26</sup> Some object to this view on grammatical terms, namely the particle (*ē*) cannot be understood as refuting the claim made in verses 34-35. For example, D. A. Carson claims that *"in every instance in the New Testament where the disjunctive particle in question [*ē*] is used in a construction analogous to the passage at hand, its effect is to reinforce the truth of the clause or verse that precedes it [italics his]."*<sup>27</sup> But this observation is not always true. For example, by using the particle (*ē*) in 1Cor 11:22, Paul is actually challenging the practice described in the preceding verses 20-21, and not reinforcing it.

1 Corinthians 11:20 When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. 21 For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. 22 What is this! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

In addition, the literary context and the overall theological concern of Paul in Corinthians support the theory that in verses 34-35 Paul is quoting the opinion of the Corinthians. As we have noted earlier, it seems thus convincing, if not conclusive, that verses 34-35 express the voice of the Corinthian church. If this is true, then the Corinthian view is refuted by Paul in verse 36 "What is this? Did the word of God originate with you [Corinthian men]? Or are you [men] the only ones it has reached?" Paul seems to be challenging the Corinthians in general and Corinthian men in particular, and asserting that they do not have a monopoly on the word of God. In verses 37-40, Paul is refuting the Corinthian church's

claim to suppress women and is reinforcing the mandate given in 1Cor 11 that women can speak provided they maintain unity and order in the community. In fact, verses 39-40 encourage prophesying and underline the directives given by Paul in 11:2-16:

Be eager to prophesy (*zēloute to prophēteuein*).

Do not forbid (*mēkōlyete*) speaking in tongues

But “all things (*panta*) should be done decently and in order.”

The final exhortation in verses 39-40 highlights again the primacy of prophecy among spiritual gifts. In this exhortation women *also* are allowed to prophesy and speak in tongues. The mandate not to prohibit speaking in tongues is subject to the conditions that all things are to take place properly and in good order. The cumulative weight of the evidence suggests that Paul expects women to participate in the discussions and prayer meetings of the Pauline communities. All things considered, the Corinthians’ view theory seems to be the one most consistent with the vision of Paul and the actual role played by women in ministry and worship in the Pauline churches.

## Conclusion

Although the letters of Paul *seem to have presented* differing views of Paul on the role of women in the church, no one can deny Paul’s vision of a new community characterized by reciprocal partnership between men and women in the church. There are passages that impose some restrictions on the participation of women in the life of the church (e.g., 1Cor 11). As we have seen, these texts need to be understood as pastoral directives aimed at specific situations and concrete problems for the building up of the church. One needs to be careful in distinguishing the voice of the apostle from the concerns of the early churches (e.g., 1Cor 7 and 14). There are other passages which underscore the oneness and mutuality of women and men in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26-28). Moreover, on various occasions, Paul acknowledged the roles actually played by women colleagues and apostles and the significant contributions made by them in the church (Rom 16). Therefore, one needs to make a distinction between the general principles of Paul (doctrinal

statements) and their pastoral applications in response to the specific concerns of different communities (disciplinary norms).

As Paul expected the imminence of the Parousia, it is understandable that, in his missionary work, Paul did not focus on the transformation of society in general (e.g., Phlm 16-18; see also the references to the institution of slavery within the church in 1Cor 7:20-24) and the establishment of gender equality in particular. However, Paul's colleagues and coworkers like Lydia, Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia are testimonies of women's active participation in the ministry of the gospel in the early Christian communities. It is therefore difficult to deny Paul's vision of a new society brought into being by the power of God's grace which transforms the old inequalities and discriminations (1Cor 1:18-31; Gal 3:26-28). It seems that it is the deutero-Pauline letters (e.g., 1 Tim 5:3-16; Eph 5:22; Col 3:18) and the writings of the apostolic fathers (e.g., 1 Clem. 1.3; 1 Clem. 21.6-7) which forced women out of leadership roles and compelled them to be submissive in conformity with their position in the patriarchal household systems.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately it is this tradition that was handed down by the church for centuries until the reawakening of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Now the time has come to recapture the vision of the apostle Paul and reclaim the rightful place of women in the church and in society.

In sum, the cumulative weight of the evidence found in the authentic letters suggests that (i) Paul was ahead of his time in promoting a dynamic and reciprocal partnership between women and men, and in appreciating and approving women's leadership roles in the church; (ii) Women did play important leadership roles in the life and mission of the churches founded by Paul. These women apostles indeed reveal the universality of God's blessings. The new life in Christ for Paul was an ongoing process of experiencing the power of God's transforming love and grace in his day-to-day life (Phil 3:12-14). Paul admits that he has not reached the goal, the fullness of the new life in Christ, but he presses on toward the goal.

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting*

what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:12-14).

Paul leaves behind the past and always looks forward, striving after the expected perfection. Similarly, the Church in India has a long way to go to actualize the vision of Paul and to become a community where gender justice prevails. The new life in Christ implies an ongoing renewal, and new and ever creative responses from believers. Therefore, the actualization of Paul's vision of a new society characterized by gender equality and dynamic partnership between women and men still remains a task of the church in the unfolding history of salvation.

## Notes

1. This Paper is a revised and enlarged version of my article appeared last month in the Book titled, *Learning from St. Paul: Reflections for the Pauline Year* (S. J. Puykunnel and J. Varickasseril (eds.); Shillong: Vendrame Institute & DBCIC Publications, 2008).
2. Pharisees are members of a Jewish religious sect who are involved in the interpretations of the Law; see Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1994) 77-84.
3. The authentic letters are Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. This does not mean that the deuter-Pauline letters are less important for us nor do I belittle their canonical value. I am only limiting the scope of this Paper to the seven authentic letters of Paul.
4. One can also explore the feminine imageries used by Paul which reveal his respect for women and appreciation for feminine qualities; but it seems beyond the scope of this Paper to do so.
5. The masculine form of the noun used here reflects the patriarchal bias of the first century church; see E. S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983) 170. G. Stählin points out that the feminine form of the noun (deaconess) is used for the first time in canon 19 of the council of Nicaea in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (chêra TDNT 9 [1974] 464 fn. 231). See also M. Hauke, "Deaconesses in the Ancient Church: A Historical Sketch," pages 126-7 in *The Church and Women: A Compendium* (ed., H. Mšll; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).
6. Paul talks about the sister, Apphia, in Philemon 1-2.



7. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 2:887.
8. R. C. Kroeger & C. C. Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 91; cited by Andrew Perriman, *Speaking of Women: Interpreting Paul* (Leicester, Apollos, 1998) 67, fn. 17.
9. See also 1 Ch 27:31; 29:6; 2 Ch 8:10; 24:11; 1 Es 2:12.
10. After a lengthy discussion, J. H. Stiefel arrives at the conclusion that "the evidence in 1 Timothy 3.11 for a diaconal ministry of women is strong, although not completely conclusive"; see his article, "Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at 'Women Likewise . . . ' (1 Tim 3.11)," *New Testament Studies* 41.3 (1995): 442-57, the quotation is from page 456.
11. Perriman, *Speaking of Women*, 62.
12. For a detailed discussion on the organization of the house churches in the New Testament period, see B. Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 104-11.
13. Whether Nymphan is the accusative form of the feminine name nympha or the masculine name Numphas is a disputed issue. However, the reference to the church in her (*autēs*) house in some manuscripts supports the feminine name.
14. For a discussion on the name whether the text refers to a woman (Junia) or a man (Junias), see J. Thorley, Junia, a Woman Apostle," *Novum Testamentum* 38.1 (1996): 18-29. On linguistic grounds, Thorley argues for Junia, the feminine form of the name. See also Perriman, *Speaking of Women*, pp. 68-70.
15. See also Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 271-73; Carolyn Osiek, "Galatians," in *Feminism and Theology* edited by Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 190-91.
16. H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 190.
17. Verse 13b expresses the view of the Corinthians who believed in a spiritual salvation that ignores the significance of the human body. For a similar view, see also Paul's discussion on the resurrection of human bodies in 1Cor 15, esp. 1Cor 15:44. For a detailed discussion on verse 13, see also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 253-57.

18. Scholars share different opinions on these verses; for those who take it as the view of the Corinthians, see M. J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1983) 99. For those against this understanding, see D. A. Carson, "'silence in the Churches': On the Role of Women in 1Corinthians 14:33b-36," pages 140-53 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (eds. J. Piper and W. Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), p. 151.
19. See also Richard B. Hays, "Paul on the Relation between Men and Women," in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine (London and New York: T & T Clark international, 2004), pp. 137-43.
20. Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Virgins, Widows, and Wives: The Women of 1Corinthians 7" in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine (London and New York: T & T Clark international, 2004), p. 140.
21. See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 70-71.
22. Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Sacra Pagina 7; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 395.
23. The view of the Corinthians reflects the hierarchical structure of a first-century Greco-Roman family: husband, wife, children and slaves.
24. For a detailed discussion on various explanations, see Perriman, *Speaking of Women*, 103-35. See also Richard B. Hays, "Paul on the Relation between Men and Women," pp. 143-47.
25. Bruce M. Metzger comments: "Does the scribe, without actually deleting verses 34-35 from the text, intend the liturgist to omit them when reading the lesson?" (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994], pp. 499-500).
26. For those who argue that verses 34-35 express the Corinthian view, see M. J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1983) 99; N. M. Flanagan & e. H. Snyder, "Did Paul Put Down Women in 1Cor 14:34-36?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11.1 (1981) 10-11; D. W. Odell-Scott, "Let the Women Speak in Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1Cor 14:33b-36." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13.3 (1983), pp. 90-93.
27. D. A. Carson "'Silence in the Churches': On the Role of Women in 1Corinthians 14:33b-36," pages 140-53 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (eds. J. Piper and W. Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 151. See also Murphy-O'Connor, "Interpolation in 1

Corinthians," *CBQ* 48 (1986) 91-92; W. L. Liefeld, "Women, Submission and Ministry in 1 Corinthians," in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed., A Mickelsen; Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), p. 149.

28. See also Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Virgins, Widows, and Wives: The Women of 1 Corinthians 7," pp.148-68.