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**THE
ROLE OF WOMEN
IN CHURCH
AND SOCIETY**

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Introduction:

The role of women in Philippine society can hardly be stereotyped. If we take a closer look at our national awareness we can see the full complement of women's role or images –from the “mapagtiis” wife of a philandering husband, from the strong Gabriela Silang to the demure and overly feminine Maria Clara, from President Cory Aquino to slave-fawning “alalay” or “katulong”. These mixed images are also reflected in the Christian churches. Now, this situation can just be taken for granted like that of the society-at-large, but as can be expected, theological and Biblical perspectives are brought into the picture to justify one particular role as the more Biblical / theological one. Now, I'm not arguing that this should not be done, but what I would just like to point out is that there is always the tendency for us to read our own biases into the Biblical text. One measure by which this can be avoided is to read the Bible as a community of learners freely sharing our own insights and willing to learn and listen to each other.

It is in this spirit that I would like to share my paper. Most of the ideas here are taken from the writings of Ben Witherington III. His writings have helped me a lot in my attempt to make sense of the seemingly opposite statements regarding women's role in the Bible.

Part I. Women in the Life and Ministry of Jesus

I will attempt in the following to identify the larger context by which we can understand Jesus's teachings and actions on women in the Gospels. We will be focusing on some texts which have direct and/or indirect bearing on Jesus views on women and their role. After which, we will propose and explanation on why Jesus chose only men as leaders for his community.

I. The larger context: The tension between the family of faith and the physical family (and/or society's customs and mores).

A. Mark 3:21, 31-35

One cannot help but notice the seeming indifference of Jesus to His own family (vs. 33). This is even heightened by the fact that His own family seems to be displaying a protective instinct for one of their own (v. 21). But this is a serious misunderstanding of what Jesus is doing and what His mission and ministry is all about. What is spelled out here is the basis of relationships in the kingdom Of God, the family of faith (v. 35). This is pointed out by Jesus by contrasting those who are sitting around Him with His family outside. “The point is that there are some among those who are sitting who are, or more nearly, His spiritual kind at this point than his family outside.” It would seem that for

Jesus the family of faith is His primary family. But this does not close to the possibilities for the inclusion of Jesus physical family to the family of faith, that is, if they relate to Him as His disciples. (Mk 6:1-6 even indicates that physical relationship stumbling block to seeing who Jesus really is.)

B. John 2:1-12; 19:25-27

Jesus reference to His mother as "woman" (2:4) is another instance which is hard to explain. The NIV translation attempts to lessen the harshness by prefacing it with an endearing word ("dear") But this has no basis in the original and at best only makes the statement awkward. This kind of statement can best be of faith which is primary for Jesus and his physical family. Jesus, in addressing his mother as woman, places his relationship to his mother on a different basis. Jesus statement, "My hour has not yet come" probably implies that there will come an hour in which Jesus will have an obligation to fulfill to his mother and then she can have a claim on him, but not until that hour. This hour came in the cross where his mother through his word was officially ushered into his spiritual family (those whose members have a claim on him) (19:26). Underneath the cross, Mary learned how to be a mother as well as a disciple. "Discipleship must be the larger context in which her role as mother is delimited and defined." The tension between the physical family and the family of faith can be resolved when the physical family is incorporated into the family of faith and when the roles in the physical family is reinterpreted in the light of the priorities of the family of faith. The family of faith is served rather than severed by traditional roles and relationships.

We can best understand Jesus teachings and actions relating to women if we view them in this larger context. This becomes even more necessary when we realize that the family was "the exclusive sphere of influence for Jewish women in the first century A.D." women's "importance in the legal sense was confined to her connection to her family, her faithfulness to her husband, and her domestic responsibilities." Belonging to the family of faith – which has prior claims to that of the physical family – would certainly produce tension.

The family of faith among other things requires a new structure of relationship. This was delineated by Jesus in Mark 10:41-45. This alone would indicate tensions between the values and norms of the family of faith and the society at large. Some of these will be taken up as we focus on the new roles of women in the family of faith.

II. New roles of women in the family of faith.

A. As disciples of a great teacher (Luke 8:1-3; 10: 38-42).

This is unheard of in the time of Jesus. Although in theory of woman has the right to study the Torah, the different taboos of that time (a man talking to women, or receiving service from the same, or being a traveling companion, and her period which would make her unclean) in all practicality prohibits her to a disciple much less to be a travelling companion. Jesus broke all these taboos in his dealing with women. He does not only allow them to be his travelling companion (Luke 8:1-3), He expects them to do what is needful and that is to listen away with the traditional roles of women in helping and supporting); it just gains new significance in the service of the family of faith. In effect he taught Martha how it is to be a hostess as a disciple (10:41-42).

This new role is even heightened with Jesus corollary teaching on the possibility of remaining single "for the sake of the kingdom" (Matt. 19:11-12). (It is interesting to note that most women disciples mentioned by Luke in the Book of Acts are single or widow!)

B. As Credible witnesses (John 4:39-42)

Although it can be said that a woman's testimony is as valid as that of men, negative assessment of women by rabbis in the first century reduces her credibility as a witness. This is very far from Jesus valuation of women. In his dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4), Jesus showed respect and sensitivity. This is even more significant when we consider the different prohibitions of that time (some were already explained by John, v. 9, 27, 28); the most significant of which sharing the cup of a sinful Samaritan woman! The account ended with an affirmation of the fruitfulness of the woman's witness (v. 39) which is even more glaring when compared to those who believed in him because of "signs" (the disciples! 2:11). This theme is further developed at the end of the gospels when women became the witness of the resurrection, making their testimonies a crucial part of the message of the gospel.

C. Co-equal recipients of God's Salvation.

Examples of these are numerous -Mary and Martha, the women mentioned in Luke 8:1-3, the sinful woman in Luke 7:36ff., etc. What is more significant here is the fact that women were used as examples of faith (Luke 7:36ff. and the numerous parables which has women as point of reference). There is no question that as far as Jesus is concerned women and men stand equal before God.

III. The choice of the twelve by Jesus.

With the above statements on Jesus radical views and liberating actions toward women, I guess the question is why He did not choose any women any women as part of the twelve?

There are those who would take this as a support to the view that although men and women are equal before God, the God-ordained economy is to have men as leaders. Leadership is only reserved for men, including leadership in the church. Jesus is limiting his choice to men for the twelve is affirming this God-ordained economy. This is in effect saying that the patriarchal society is the Divine design for all society.

Again it would help us to go back to our larger context. In the tension between the family of faith and the physical family, is Jesus advocating renunciation of the bonds that hold physical family together? The evidence would show that Jesus accepts it and some instances strengthens it. In Mark 10:19 in Jesus' dialogue with the rich young ruler, he indicated that keeping the Ten Commandments which includes the honoring of parents of parents is crucial if one wishes to inherit eternal life. Thus we can say that there is a place for physical family and promotion of filial piety in the teaching for Jesus. Another instance is Jesus controversy with the Jews regarding "Corban" (Mk 7:9-13). Jesus here reiterates Moses command to obey both the father and the mother. This is significant since in a patriarchal society like that of the Jews some rabbis taught that one should honor the father more than the mother! Here we can say that Jesus teaching on the matter is an attempt to reform the existing patriarchal society. This is even made clearer in Mathew 5:27-30. This teaching about adultery is very revealing as to Jesus perception of the stereotypes accorded to women in a highly patriarchal society like that of the Jews of his time. Traditionally, we read v.28 as "anyone who looks at woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his hearth." This reading is reflected in almost all of the translations. But one cannot help but wonder if this is the right interpretation of the original especially in the light of the similar teachings of the rabbis. Here, Jesus, like the rabbis, is warning men of their inherit instability before a temptress, thus affirming the stereotype of women as temptress in a male-oriented society. With this suspicion in mind, a scholar went back to the original Greek of the verse and he proposes what I think is the more probable reading: "Anyone who so looks at a woman that she shall become desirous has in heart has already committed adultery with her." If this is the reading then the issue is not male instability but male aggression! Jesus teaching them places responsibility of this sin on men and gives consideration to women. This is a direct attempt to reform the Jewish patriarchal society. It would seem that Jesus choice of the twelve can be understood in the same line. This, however, does not limit the possibilities of new roles accorded women in the family of faith which still awaits the advent of the spirit for its full flourishing.

Part 2: Women, Ministry and Leadership in Paul

We have pointed out in our study of women in the life and ministry of Jesus that there are 2 directions that we can see in the Gospel accounts regarding Jesus words and actions in relation to women. One is the reformation of the patriarchal structure of society and family. (Jesus' choice of the twelve can be interpreted along this line.) The other is Jesus affirmation of new roles for women in the family of faith (e.g. as disciples, as singles for the sake of the Kingdom, as witnesses, and as co-recipients of God's salvation). These directions were identified as we view Jesus' words and actions in the larger context of the tension between the family of faith that Jesus established still awaits the promised Holy Spirit; the account of which we can find in the Book of Acts. We need to keep this in mind even as we focus on the life and teachings of Paul.

We will attempt in the following to identify the larger context by which we can understand Paul's ministry and teachings as it relates to women. It is the contention of this paper that the larger context is the same with that of Jesus -the tension between the family of faith and the physical family (and/or the society-at-large). Further, it will also be pointed out that the same two directions can be found in the ministry and the teachings of Paul in relation to women. These we will do by focusing on some relevant texts in the Pauline epistles.

I. The larger context: The tension between the family of faith and the physical family

Two examples which although not having direct relation to the role of women are revealing as to the tension that exists between the family of faith and the physical family. The first can be found in Paul's treatment of the problem of the Lord's Super celebration in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Here Paul criticizes the manner by which some Corinthian celebration takes place (v.21); an action which he seems to tolerate if done in the privacy of their home (v.34). The second can be found in Paul's dealings with Philemon, with regards to the runaway servant, Onesimus. Here Paul makes an appeal in behalf of Onesimus to his former master for him to be treated like a brother in the family of faith. An interesting detail of this interchange is the fact that this appeal was made through an official letter to the church that meets in Philemon's home.

Although generally we can say that the status of women in Rome, Greece and Asia Minor is better than the Jewish women, what we have in 1st century A.D. is still a patriarchal structure in the family and society. Thus, women's role and importance is by and large related to the household. A group which seems to offer possibilities of new roles and significance for women cannot help but create tension especially when its official meeting place is the home (Phil. 2 above; of col. 4:15; 1 cor. 16:19).

II. Paul's reformation of the patriarchal structure of society and family.

This can be glimpsed in this extended discussion on issues related to marriage and the married life in 1 Cor. 7. Here is how one writer summarizes his view: "...Paul actively stresses the equality of male and female. He discusses the rights, responsibilities, and options, of both sexes in regard to the single and married life. This sort of mutuality is not usually found or encouraged either in rabbinic Judaism or in non-Christian social codes. Both men and women are called to serve God in their own situation. That Paul rejects divorce outright, following Jesus teaching, means greater security for Christian women married to the Lord. That Paul advocates single state, perhaps also following Jesus, for both men and women, gives woman a choice of roles they did not formerly have in their Greek setting. In either case, Paul argues that one must take seriously that obligations involved in one's situation, without allowing one's situation to control one's attitude toward life. Later in the chapter, Paul alludes to the authority of the father over their own virgin daughter. We can see that he situates this authority in the larger principle that he explained earlier; and that is to view all of these things in the priority of faith. In that case, Paul can say that "the one marrying his own virgin **does** well' and "the one not marrying will do better." We can see that Paul here seems to be reforming the patriarchal structure of family and society (if the passage is taken to refer to a man in relation to virgin the result is still the same). This will be clearer when we consider Paul's use of the household codes found in Col. 3:18-4:1 and Eph.5:22-6:9.

Paul's attempt to reform the patriarchal structure can be seen in the following:

- a. The exhortation to submit is qualified by "in the lord" (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22). This is not only a new reason but a new model by which one can gauge one's conduct: the Lord.
- b. The exhortation to love for the husband (Col.3:19; Eph.5:25) is not used in any discussion of household duties in the Greek society. Thus, we can find the father's/husband's authority modified and limited by love. This is even amplified in Ephesians when that love is modelled after the love of Christ for this church. Therefore, the leadership, like that of Jesus (Mark 10:45).
- c. Patriarchal structure is further qualified by reciprocity. Both the husband and wife are created. Their roles may differ, their commitment to each other "in the Lord" is to be total.

Paul's attempt to reform the patriarchal structure can be seen in his limiting the sexual activity of men in the context of marriage and in his denunciation of the tendency to treat women as sexual object (1 Thess. 4:3-8). This can also be seen in other passages that Paul incidentally refers to women (i.e. Rom. 7:1-3; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

III. The role of women in the family of faith.

What seems to be a programmatic verse for this is Gal.3:28. Two things can be immediately pointed out. First, the differences stated should never be used to divide the body of Christ; all are one person in Him. This does not mean that there is no longer any distinction for, and this is the second, Paul distinctly stated male and female, thus affirming the place of single men and women in the family of faith. This is significant in the light of the widely held belief in the duty to procreate.

The role of women can be seen in Phil.4:2-3 and in Rom.16:1-16. In Phil 4:2-3 Paul referred to Euodia and Syntyche as his loyal partners (*sunergos*). This term is not used of believers in general (cf. 1 Cor.3:9; 1 Thess 3:2). The same word is used in 1 Cor 16:16,18. Here Paul urged the Corinthians to submit to all those who are working (*sunergonti*) and laboring. It is implied here that those whom Paul is referring to here have some leadership role. This can also be said of Euodia and Synteche here in Philippians.

Rom. 16:1-16 is much more interesting. At the outset one can see here a vibrant and multifaceted church using the graces and gifts of both men and women to spread the Gospel. For our purpose we can focus on Phoebe (v.1, 2). The first thing that needs to be pointed out is that this portion of the letter is written for her. Paul is commending her to the Romans. The second point is that Paul called her a servant (*diakonos*). The third point which is the most controversial mainly because of our tradition is that Paul called her a *prostatis* (helper?) of many including himself. There is some inscriptional evidence that points this term can mean an office-bearer in a religious association. However, it would be best for us to see how Paul use the term in his other letters. In 1 Thess. 5:12, Paul urged his readers to respect those who work hard among them, who are over (*Proistamenos*) them. The same meaning is found in Rom.12:8 in the statement: "...if it is leadership (*Proistamenos*) left him govern diligently." On the basis of this last passage, a writer proposes what I think is the most probable background of Paul's reference to Phoebe. The title refers to a person in charge of a charitable work of the church. This can at least explain Paul's qualification of Phoebe as a *prostatis* of many including himself.

Another reference that is worth noting here in Rom.16 is the reference to Junias as an apostle.

It is clear from the above example that women occupy leadership roles in the Pauline churches. What remain is to see what activities this role entail for women. This can be further investigated as we deal with some important passages.

IV. Some important passages.

The following are some important passages that relate to this issue. I have listed some relevant details to at least question the usual way that these passages are interpreted:

- A. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16:
 - 1. Head here is best interpreted as source (vs.3, 8, 9).
 - 2. Paul here takes it for granted that women pray and prophesy in the church (v.5). This should have not been an issue for Paul if this is not the case.
- B. 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36
 - 1. This passage is best understood as a prohibition in their homes, where the authority of their husband is affirmed.
- C. 2 Tim 2:8-15
 - 1. This passage is best interpreted in the light of the problems relating to some women in this letter; sexual problem (5:11-16), weak women (2 Tim 2:6, 7), and women involved in endless genealogies (1:3).
 - 2. The term used here points to specific prohibitions not absolute, such as "I am not permitting" and "to domineer" (not "to exercise authority" as some translations indicate).
 - 3. The reference to Priscilla and Aquila (2 Tim 1:19) would make it unthinkable, for Paul recognizes Priscilla's contribution in the work of the ministry, teaching included (Rom 16:3; cf. Acts 18).

Questions for discussion:

- 1. In the light of what is stated above regarding the affirmation of new roles for women in the family of faith (that is, the church), can women be deacons? Administrators? Teachers? Elders? Pastors?
- 2. What other roles can women assume today in the churches?

3. Is it possible for a woman to exercise her gift of leadership in the church and at the same time submit to her husband in the home? If yes, how would you deal with the seeming tension of seemingly opposite roles? If not, why not? Is there any particular statement/phrase in the question which you don't agree with? Why not?

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