‘How can the Epistles of Saint Paul be used by Feminists and Misogynists"

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Introduction

In the human development of a child, we often hear the phrase; *Time will tell,* when assessing how he or she will develop.The parent or the teacher, uses this rejoinder, in their wisdom to commend the issue to the sands of time, hoping that all will be well, with age, experience and the fruits of education.

When we utilise this same principle *vis a vis* the Church, we see many constants in its beginnings that time and tradition have honed and developed, regarding liturgical forms, the development of divine worship etc. However, many things remain the same, with time solidifying their truth. The person of Saint Paul, his importance and his impact on the Church has not abated. Pauline studies in the past 100 years attest to his enduring presence in the life, worship and thought of Christian studies. Liturgically his epistles continue to edify and as they predate that of the writing of the Gospels, liturgically are the first heralding of Scripture at every Divine Liturgy where they preface Christ's words and actions in the Gospels.

The case for Paul could be made alone through voices in the Church, but we see that he is equally discussed, his every phrase, that has come down to us, has been vivisected by those on the boundaries, with many voices adding their thoughts and standpoints, both positive and negative, many are heard from those outside the Church of Christ, many cite Saint Paul specifically, as the reason for their inability to enter, also many have answered Christ, due to the apostles zeal in producing a full system of theology and conduct.

The scholar E.P. Sanders is an example of one, who to enter into a deeper discussion on Paul, set out on "combing through virtually all the Palestinian Jewish texts, from 200 BCE to 200 CE - early materials in rabbinic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls that had thus far been published."[1] Such a deep dive has been successful in understanding where the apostle talked from, what was his environment? How did his academic and religious environment, his *"former conduct in judaism"* [2] the rabbinical influence of Palestinian Judaism influence his language, a language that has equally inspired and transformed humankind and in other sectors confounded it. It is in harmony with some of these settings that I will be addressing, his writings.

Such is his reach, that there has been so much discussion, both from within the feminist movement, both positive and negative, and from the other end, the voices who use Paul to further their position, whether conservative, or the more distorted readings of his teachings. There is also the equally interesting genre of Pauline studies involving his first teachers, the voices within Judaism, who cannot ignore his influence and reach. The work of Daniel Boyarin one of the leading New Testament commentators from Judaism, is an example of modern Jewish voices who wish to reclaim Saint Paul as an important Jewish thinker, his position, is that Saint Paul represents a challenge to Jews in the first century and he argues ' that he presents a challenge to Jews now as well.[3]

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[1] Sanders E.P. Paul and Palestinian Judaism. Fortress Press. 1977.

[2] Galatians 1:13

[3] Boyarin Daniel. A Radical Jew. University of California Press. 1994.

Saint Paul embarked on his personal journey in a time and place where no thought was given to the rights and self determination of women. Theirs was a preordained role that centred on the woman's gift of procreation, its importance connected to the possibility of producing the Messiah (**מָשִׁיחַ).** Female identity was centred on the premise that their role was biological, their greatest gift to mankind was to produce progeny. Female figures that transform this, are far and few inbetween, but are peppered throughout the Torah, Ruth; an example of real strength, forbearance and fearlessness. Susanna, her witness more to show the there is an example of a just - justice for the wrongly convicted [4]

Saint Paul, was a product of this environment, Boyarin,[5] a Jewish thinker, cites Räisänen that Paul's pronouncements are heavily influenced by local, specific problems within the early Christian communities. Räisänen, along with other scholars, view Paul's letters not as abstract systematic theology, he went further than most in attributing a certain incoherence in regards to Saint Paul's treatment of the law, announcing that he was not a 'systematic thinker' but this falls outside the study we are undertaking.

HIs work is far too vast in scope to attribute Räisänen's view as being the final word on this matter, but his argument makes sense in a number of his epistles where this theory certainly speaks to his position. The letters, pastoral in nature, were addressed to specific Churches who were encountering a variety issues.

These issues were also complicated by the political and social norms that these regions produced. In a relative small geographical area, Asia Minor, we are introduced to diverse coves of pluralism; Judaism, Greek, Pagan and Christian all vying for preeminence under the rule of the Romans, who would work to make sure all the faith groups be in conflict to extract suitable tribute and loyalty.

Paul as apostle to the Gentiles, sets out his role in his letter to the Ephesians,

"This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ"[6]

He was also doing so during a time of great social upheaval. The Church was taking its first steps in a world that wanted its elimination. The very safety, and future of the Body of Christ, were firmly on the shoulders of the Apostles and teachers of the faith, that had to see that not only the stewardship and conduct in the "household of God," ***that all "things be done decently and in order"*** [7] be seen to, but that this apply to their duty of pastoral care to those who were in a real state of danger with the crown of martyrdom ever before them.

With all this in mind we see the preaching of the gospel, and as we move into the modern age, the question must be asked; Are all these and countless other caveats being taken on board by modern thinkers both on the conservative and feminist sides? Has the feminist

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[4] Daniel 1

[5] Boyarin Daniel. A Radical Jew. University of California Press. 1994.

[6] Ephesians. 3:8

[7] 1 Corinthians 14:40

movement and those who embark on a *eisegisis* of misogyny on the other side of the scale, see to discern all truth with Saint Paul's request to ***"test all things"***[8]

Paul addressed the times he existed in. His teachings and pronouncements run the gamut of religious thought. ***Pastoral*** - the letters to Timothy, ***Dogmatic*** - Romans, ***Instructional*** and ***Pastoral*** - i and ii Corinthians. ***Eschatological*** i and ii Thessalonians.

It is why the Church has always approached Scripture in a holistic sense, uniting Saint Paul's incredible flexibility with the sanctification of time, and the liturgical life of the Church in its selection of apostolic readings. It is why on the Feast of the Protection of the Theotokos (October 1), we witness anamnesis by recounting the ordinances of worship spelled out in **Hebrews 9:1-7**

"Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services"

This paired with the event of the Theotokos spreading her protective veil over the faithful during its *liturgical life* in the city of Blachernae in Constantinople during the all night vigil.

Saint Paul - Feminism and Misogyny

A reoccurring theme of Paul is the Spirit vs the Flesh. The Spirit always higher on the hierarchical totem pole of his thinking, with the flesh firmly inferior to life in the Spirit. Jesus preached spiritual vigilance at the garden of Gethsemane, ***"The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"***[9] the call to the Apostles was to watch and pray. This dualistic system influenced much of his work and inspiration when addressing groups or individuals.

Obviously the hierarchical prevalence to the Spirit, affects the discussion of gender as it takes the individualistic identification along with Paul's teaching, male/female - slave/free, out of the debate, and focus' on the relationship with Christ first, then the person. Feminism or indeed any other *"ism"* is concerned with their specific ideology, and areas of coverage, namely how they are perceived, or related to. Holy Scripture its meaning in light of the key beliefs of feminism on Saint Paul, and most of Holy writ does not in its first instance relate to so many systems of newly established ideologies, as his, was always centred on unity with Jesus Christ, with the abolishing of social distinctions. He called all, to live a life transformed by the Holy Spirit as members of the " New Creation"[10]

Context is important. Saint Paul throughout his missionary life held concerns with how the communities conducted themselves, living in pluralistic societies amongst a variety of faiths. The Church of Galatia, Ephesus, Corinth etc, all were encountering their own growing pains. St Paul who who ministered and fostered relationship with these Church's, knew their issues intimately. Modern exegesis, must in the first instance keep this in mind when assessing his viewpoint.

In the broad church that is feminism we see a focus on the individual. How does the world and all its differing positions relate to the plight of the life of the female. This from the

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[8] 1 Thessalonians 5:21

[9] Matthew 26:41

[10] 2 Corinthians 5:17

outset puts the writings of Scripture at a disadvantage, as they are for the most part, receiving their understanding through their movements (Feminist) viewpoint. However, I believe Saint Paul and his epistles leaves both a positive and negative impression on the group.

The Galatians were experiencing the first real possibility of a falling away from the Christian body. Schism seemed imminent as the Apostles themselves were split along the lines of Judaizers (Peter and James) and (Paul) who preached the New Creation and that the newly baptised need not follow Jewish dietary laws and circumcision. To underpin this position we are presented with the central statement of intent by Paul.

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[11]

Farley writes that the "Messianic renewal transcends all earthly categories and divisions"[12] This obviously not only applying to diet and religious association but importantly all the great divisions of both the ancient and modern world.

Westfall contends that "Humans who were created to rule together in unity, became divided, hostility and embedded in patterns of oppression which according to the creation account, started with male and female and extended to include groups such as jews, gentiles, slaves and free persons (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28,; Col 3:11) Through Jesus Christ, God is reversing the fall, tearing down the dividing walls and bringing eternal life by being all in all.[13]

Feminism is the ideology of the reanimation of tearing down of a distorted male driven patriarchy that forgets half the population, its witness and charism. This specific call from St Paul, is for the movement a positive example of equality and that the ancient specification of the masculine, representing reason and provision versus the feminine, the nurturer and the homebody, is obliterated in Pauline thought. All begin with the same grace all have been created to Glorify God. The first creation account attests to this equilibrium.

Ronald and Beverley Allen call this same passage the *"feminist credo of equality"*[14] on top of it as a statement or formulation of eschatological unity of our identity in Christ. A healthy exegesis of this passage must state that Paul was not expressly addressing Greco-Roman culture but establishing the Church, the Kingdom of God in the context of the said culture.

If **Galatians 3:28** may be seen as a feminist credo of sorts, then the epistle read at the Holy Mystery of Matrimony in the Orthodox Church; **Ephesians 5:2-6:9** is its antithesis. No other Pauline passage has caused so much division and misunderstanding in the public square. To familiarise ourselves with Saint Paul's meaning and direction, we have to relate this to the understanding that our relationship with God changes and colours all of our relationships with one another. This is often the hardest for those to understand who do

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[11] Galatians 3:28

[12] Farley. Lawrence. R. Words of Fire. The Early Epistles of St Paul. Ancient Faith Publishing. 2010.

[13] Westhall, Cynthia Long. Paul and Gender. Reclaiming the Apostles Vision for Men and Women in Christ. Baker Academic. 2016.

[14] Allen, Ronald and Beverley. Traditionalism: Men and Women in Balance. Wipf and Stock. 2009.

not have a relationship with Christ and equate it with His Church.The passage that follows has been a major roadblock for the secular voices who have no shortage of criticisms.

"Wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is also the head of the Church, He Himself being the Saviour of the body. But as the Church submits to Christ, thus also the wives ought to submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church and delivered up Himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her by the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, nothing spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish, so husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wive loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the Church."[15]

The proceeding verse of Ephesians 5:21 "**Submit to one another in the fear of Christ"** does not find itself in the matrimony epistle in the Slavic tradition, the reading starts from verse 22. An interesting aside is that there is a difference in the Ukrainian and Greek Lectionary. The Greek Church begins the reading with the important verse 20 added in. The Ukrainian begins from verse 21, "**Wives submit to your husbands"** if modified, the Ukrainian to the Greek, we may well see less confusion to those who witness the great mystery, who come in with no background and merely hear what they wish to hear and not what the Church a preached, teaches and protected throughout the ages.

The feminist theology would perhaps be able to see a different hierarchical objective from Paul, if this is taken from the standpoint of the great mystery of marriage, that both must live a life of submission, sacrifice and when talking directly to the mystery of marriage in the Orthodox context, *martyrdom*."There is nothing here to suggest the wife is oppressed in marriage, any more than one would call the Church oppressed in relationship to Christ. He who calls us 'brethren" (Heb 2:11) and "friends" (Jn 15:15) exhorts his husband to love his wife, to nourish and cherish her as he himself does the Church."[16]

This passage has been used as a source text in condemning Christianity and the Church as being opposed to the plight of woman and feminism. Read legalistically without context, without the proceeding chapter, and without any historiography, they have been able to label the Church as misogynistic and draconian. Coupled with the absence of women in Liturgical roles, Episcopacy, Priesthood and the Diaconate.

To those who hold to a distorted patrimony and exhibit misogynistic views, Saint Paul can be a wellspring of misguided inspiration. The same epistle of the Mystery of Holy Matrimony interpreted through a patriarchal lens see' this teaching very differently than its intended purpose. To the misogynist it is a validation their view that the male is the arbiter and presider in all aspects of relational life. "For the husband is the head of the wife" is not seen through its intent but merely through function, 'the man rules" the female follows. In the same way the feminist laments the absence of female representation in ecclesial life, the misogynist see' the same as holy writ and tradition, an eternal order to be followed that will inculcate all other areas of the relationship.

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[15] Eph 5:22-30

[16] Orthodox Study Bible. Thomas Nelson. 2008.

Within the epistle of Timothy we see another instruction of Saint Paul, that has long been held up by both groups to strengthen their arguments for their specific viewpoints.This is **1Timothy 2: 12-14**

" I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."

Without a sound knowledge of the historical context and corpus that this passage finds itself in, it is hard to draw anything of substance out of the above text. Exegetes firstly need to identify the purpose of the letter and the text. To do so, we need to travel to the place of Ephesus, of the period of the writing of this letter to garner a good background to the events, characters and ideologies that were confounding Paul, and leading him to put into written instructions for Timothy. In subsequent chapters of Timothy (4-6) we pick up fragments that suggest that conduct in Ephesus was less than grace filled. Hangovers of the pagan inheritance loomed large in the lives of the new believers. Many of the women were still beguiled with astrology and other pagan beliefs that were affecting their life in the Church, to the degree that behaviours, gossip, the "spread of myths and genealogies, and destructive speech passed along from house to house."[17]

St Paul eludes to the deception of Eve, which fits a narrative of members of the early Church being led away from the *new creation* through the remembrance and practice of non Christian works. Far from being an attack on how the feminist movement would see the Church theorising that the entire female race are somehow of the weaker sex, Paul often utilises his letters to admonish both sexes, and in saying this, shines a light on the conduct of individuals, not entire bodies of people, when he see' them moving away from Christian thinking, any type of secular thinking that entertains a pluralism that erodes the thinking that he would impart to the Church of Colossae.

"And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" [18]

All of this due diligence in regards to understanding **1Timothy 2: 12-14**, we see have not taken place by large swaths of the Christian and non Christian world, who encounter this teaching. It has long been the road block to a great percentage of adherents of feminism who lambast the Church as being a breeding ground of sexism, that have no interest in women, or giving them any sort of authority to teach and instruct. It is held up as Exhibit A when arguing for the promotion of relativism and the abolishment of the outdated Church, that in their eyes only caters to half the worlds population. Behr Sigel adds to this " The accusation is based on certain passages in Paul's letters which are isolated and set apart from the context of Paul's vision of the Church, a vision of *koinonia,* communion of all men and women who by the Spirit, have in baptism been immersed in the death of Christ in order to participate also in His Resurrection."[19]

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[17] Westhall, Cynthia Long. Paul and Gender. Reclaiming the Apostles vision for men and women in Christ. Baker Academic. 2016.

[18] Colossians 3:17

[19] Behr-Sigel.Elisabeth. The Ministry of Women in the Church. SVS Press.1987.

Koinonia - fellowship - communion in the Christian context is not front and centre of the worldview of feminism as they are looking more at the world of gender equality, anything of an empirical or eschatological character is not part of their modus operandi. Certainly the feminist movement wish for communion and union on a more fuller basis, but context is necessary to ensure that dialogue connect with the source of Paul's teachings.

The reality of the *ecclesia* is completely different. Starting with the Theotokos and the Annunciation, Her Yes, to being the God-bearer, to the Myrrh bearing Women. Saint Mary Magdalene who Holy Tradition dictates founded a community shows their integral role. This situation is all the more confusing, when posited that Saint Paul the very writer who large groups chastise, is actually the source who outlines in his writings that women were integral to the life and success of the early nascent Church. " The letters of the apostle Paul contain abundant references to women and acknowledge his indebtedness to them, such as Priscilla in the letter to the Romans:

"Greet Priscilla and Aquila my co-workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but also all the Churches of the gentiles. Greet also the Church in their house. (Rom 16:1-5)[20]

Many of the early saints are women, **Equals to the Apostles, Mary Magdalene, Thecla, Apphia, Photini, Nino of Georgia, Olha of Kyiv, Elena.** In the modern Church the fields of **Chaplaincy, Spiritual Direction, Diplomacy, Administration, Parish and Diocesan level leadership, Finance, Religious Education, Church Music and Choral Direction, Scholars, Religious Education, Clergy Wives, Sisterhood, Readers, Church artists[21]** are all undertaken to a large degree by women.This list see' an abundance of roles that entail teaching and authority and are carried out to the highest standards.

Ethnic Orthodox jurisdictions and parishes in the diaspora saw a larger death rate of their male adherents in the early waves of immigration, this saw the Church demographic change. It is in no small part due to the the active work of the women believers that we have seen survival and strengthening of communities.

To the misogynist, **1Timothy 2: 12-14** is seen as *'manna from heaven'* its literal exegesis is held to like dogma. All of the recommended methodologies of exegesis are not applied as is to other scripture, they hold true to the idiom *'We know what the scripture says, not what the scripture means'* which has been the bane of the wider world divide on confessional lines.

Historical outcomes of this have seen a generational divide, and an ideological chasm that should never have been. Both the *misogynist* and the *feminist* in an unexpected way are connected. Could it be, some who now apply a feminist filter to Christian thought, have been brought up in a legalistic reading or spirit of Scripture and Church life, to such a degree, that they have gone in the opposite direction, as they have not received a healthy Orthodox rearing, that speaks to the "Communion of the Holy Spirit" of all believers.

Empirical data and real world interaction suggests that those who have been shown the Church in this distorted light, have fled from its safe haven, due to the questionable way it

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[20] Frederick-Frost. Carrie. Church of Our Granddaughters. Cascade Books. Eugene Oregon. 2023

[21] Bouteneff Patricia Fann. "Invisible Leaders" St Phoebe Center.

has been taught by their parents and grandparents. To live in parish life, you are soon confronted with the reality that not all the faithful were allowed a spotless witness of the faith, and much damage has been done to the spiritual lives of those who were not blessed with a proper exposition of the Orthodox faith.Faithfulness and humility and most importantly God's abiding Grace have seen to them staying the course.

Lamentably both the east and west, were susceptible to the legalism of misogyny, that saw its birth in the incorrect understanding and abuse of the Scriptures. The early phasing out of the deaconesses in Roman Catholicism, the male-heavy synodality of Eastern Europe and Greece, along with jurisdictions of the Church, that resemble a more insular world, that have not encountered the wholeness of tradition, by adapting to environment, or cultural diversity, wherever they find themselves. They show the unhealthy elements found in some of antiquity, where we see conciliarity obliterated, The witness of the conciliar model is still present in much of the Ukrainian Orthodox Diaspora - its presence and possibilities were never allowed to be developed and witnessed by many other autocephalous Church's, who once had the ability to draw from some of its positives. Behr-Sigel, gives us a thoughtful spiritual filter to contemplate, *"Is it just bad theology or is it just misogyny?"* Misogyny is the antithesis of the understanding of creation, the equality and the different yet vital *charisms* of men and women created all in His image and likeness, no one more, no one less so. It goes against the historical witness of Church life and the experience of the saints who were all aflame with the love of God.

Another filter that sadly has not been over utilised when attempting to discern the voice of Paul in the life of the Church, is that he is constantly directing the new Christians to the *otherness* of their confession, that they be **'lights to the world**' Christ directed his Apostles that, ***"A town built on a hill cannot be hidden."***[22] How can any ideology that separates and divides members of the one body be seen to be an effective witness to the truths of Christ who "***wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."***[23]

Both retrograde feminism and misogyny hide this central hope that lies at the heart of the Church. The danger of either way of thinking having influence in the greater scheme of things can be detrimental to the mind of the Church, that future generations will hope to inherit. We saw ripples of dissent and complications from some aspects of the Western captivity on the Eastern Orthodox Church, that subsequent generations of theologians and the natural force of Church life are now attempting to undo.

It is not unreasonable to think in the terms of the Scottish philosopher, Alasdair Macintyre, who posited in his book 'After Virtue" a scenario or as he termed it a *disquieting suggestion* in relation to science. If we could imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer a catastrophe and due to a number of natural disasters, blame is shifted to the scientific community. Riots, laboratories, data and documents are burnt, a destructive political movement comes to power, that revokes all funding, scientific teaching in all educational facilities, executions and imprisonment of eminent thinkers, and the passing of time all but removes all its works, just fragments of memory and theory remain.

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[22] Matt 5:14-16

[23] 1 Tim 2:4

After some time a new movement rises as a reaction to the destruction done by those who abolished the sciences, but only with a knowledge of fragments of experimental work with no historical context that gave them significance. Parts of theories, unrelated to their origins or environment. Without the canons of consistency nobody can say they are practicing natural science anymore.

In the same way, this is what we see with the two aforementioned groups that have been spotlighted in my study, those who do not create their thought processes '*as to the whole*' cannot be seen as possessing the whole truth.

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