

Not that Man!

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consciences, you are in fact sinning against Christ. So – if what I eat causes my fellow Christian to trip up, I shall never eat meat, ever again, so as not to make my fellow Christian stumble.

1 Corinthians 8:10–13

The point here is that people matter more than principles, and that one's brother or sister in Christ demands our enormous respect. Once you can talk about being 'in Christ', then people take on an altogether new and momentous significance (Romans 14:15).

Do you think that Paul's stance on slavery makes sense?
Why have Christians been so slow to abolish slavery?
Can you be a Christian and a slave owner?

Eleven Paul and women

It is sometimes argued that Paul is what used to be called a 'male chauvinist pig'; this chapter will seek to take issue with that stance, but will also try to be respectful towards those who feel that the Church is hostile to women, and that it is all Paul's fault.

Not that man . . .

There is a story of a nineteenth-century American woman who had been born a slave. She could not read, but her children used to read the Bible to her, since she was a Christian and loved the Bible. The only exception was when they suggested that she might like to hear something from St Paul. Her response was invariable: 'not that man'. The reason was simply that when she had been a slave, a pastor used to be brought out by the slave owner to read to the assembly those parts of St Paul that served to keep slaves and women in their places. More recently, I myself was summoned to a house where the wife was Catholic and the husband was a member of a very small Protestant denomination. He insisted that I should tell his wife that she should join his church, because 'that is what the Bible says'. When pressed on the meaning of this at first sight rather obscure utterance, he had recourse to what he took to be St Paul's views on the importance of wives obeying their husbands.

It is therefore an important question, what St Paul thought about women, since he has at times been recruited into their ranks by those who wished to keep women in their (lowly) place. It is proper to say, however, that it may not have been precisely Paul's 'question'. There are in any case three factors that we need to bear in mind when we consider this issue. The first is that Paul writes in a hurry, and with his mind on his own issues, not those of our day. The second is that things were (in his view) very likely ending quite soon, in which case there is no place for examining the status of women. The third is that the less it seemed that things were indeed ending, the more imperative it would have become to accommodate the norms of Greek and Roman society. And that was not a world in which women were especially liberated.

Some alarming texts

It is only fair to start with some of the more embarrassing texts (embarrassing, that is, for those who wish, as I do, to defend Paul against the charge of being against women). From that point of view, it may be best to begin with 1 Corinthians 14:33-36, which various male authorities have gleefully flung at women who appeared to be getting above themselves in matters ecclesial:

As in all the churches of the saints,
let the women be silent in the churches;

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for it is not permitted for them to speak.
Instead, let them be subordinated, just as
the Law says. If they want to learn
something, let them ask their own
husbands at home; for it is a disgrace for a
woman to speak in the assembly. Or was it
from you people that God's word emerged?
Or did it come only to you?

This comes in a context (chapters 12-14) where Paul is trying to bring some order into what appears to have been a somewhat tempestuous liturgy in Corinth. It has, we must admit, frequently been used to indicate that women may not preach in church (or assembly). The difficulty is that we do not, and Paul's Corinthians presumably did, know what the problem was. If the general context is one of liturgical disorder, then it is possible that the women had been calling out in the assembly questions like 'What did he say?', 'What is he on about?', and you can understand that this might have had somewhat chaotic effects. On the other hand, Paul's grammar at the end makes it clear that the two rhetorical questions with which he concludes are not addressed to the women, but to the whole Corinthian church, since the 'you people' is masculine. What we are not permitted to do is to deduce from Paul's treatment of a (perhaps rather urgently untidy) Corinthian situation to how he might have legislated for us in this century and in this country (wherever and whenever you are reading these words). Paul, it

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cannot be too often emphasised, would be very surprised to think of us reading his words today, and in this place. He is solving the problems in Corinth, two decades after the death of Jesus; he would probably prefer us to solve our own problems for ourselves.

The reference to the Law is presumably to Genesis 3:16, where after the scene in the garden Eve is told 'your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall lord it over you'; but here we may assume that Paul is reaching for a scriptural argument to make the point that he needs to make. We may not assume without further ado that Paul has for all time and in all places ruled out the possibility of any woman opening her mouth in church.

Then there are the household codes, of which the following passages (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:21–25; 1 Timothy 2:11–15) may be taken as representative:

Colossians Wives, be **subordinated** to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives, and don't get bitter against them.

Ephesians . . . being **subordinated** to each other in reverence for Christ, wives [**subordinated**] to your own husbands, for the husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the church, but he is Saviour of the body. No – just as the Church is **subordinated** to Christ, so let

the women be [**subordinated**] to their husbands in every respect. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up for her . . .

1 Timothy Let a wife/woman learn in peace, in all **subordination**. I do not permit a woman to teach, nor to have authority over a man, but to be at peace. For Adam was fashioned first, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and so committed the transgression. But she will be saved through child-bearing, if they remain in faith and love and holiness, along with decency.

Well you were warned that there are some alarming texts. What can we say about all this? Firstly, it would be possible to argue that many scholars regard all three of these as coming from a later hand than Paul's, not just because they want to defend Paul, but on other grounds as well; that, however, may strike you as a rather craven way of evading the plain facts of the case. If Paul did not write these words, then at least somebody, living not very long after him, thought that this is what he would be saying 'if he were alive today'.

Secondly, you may have noticed the keywords 'subordinate/subordination' appearing in each of the

above passages. There may be a clue here (even if the argument might seem less weighty to our ears, it was perhaps self-evident to a contemporary of Paul's) that creation comes graded: God, Christ, men, women, the rest. If that is so, then his use of terms of that kind would be an attempt to preserve what God has done in creation.

Thirdly, all but the last of these three passages suffers from internal subversion. No sooner have the husbands listening to the Colossians passage elbowed their wives, asking, 'Did you hear what the man said?' than the wives turn on them and quote what husbands are supposed to do. In the text from Ephesians, the message is even stronger: husbands are to give themselves up for their wives, precisely as Christ gave himself up for the Church. This is the ultimate in self-sacrifice, and makes impossible any notion that husbands are more important than their wives, although I suppose that you might argue that the text implies that, as Christ is superior to the Church, so the husband is superior to the wife, which we should find a bit embarrassing. In the third citation, one has to admit, there is less room for manoeuvre. Now we do not (for sure) know who wrote this passage, and therefore we have no idea about the situation into which he was talking; so we shall be unwise to adopt any particular attitudes; therefore, beyond noting that the author is employing arguments from Scripture that we may find less than convincing, it is perhaps best to say nothing at this point.

What is going on here?

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and a possible clue

What we have to do above all is listen to what Paul is saying. A very helpful passage is the famous (one might wish to say 'notorious') section in 1 Corinthians 11. At first blush, this can seem utterly repressive of women; but a more reflective reading indicates that there is more to it than first meets the eye. The arguments that Paul employs need some attention, and I have tried to separate them out with Roman numerals:

- I commend you on the grounds that in every respect you remember me, and that you preserve the traditions, just as I handed them down to you.
1. But I want you people to be well aware that Christ is the head of every male, and that the male is the head of the female, and that God is the head of Christ.
 2. Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head, shames his head. Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, shames her head. For it is just the same as though her head were shaved. You see, if a woman is not covered, let her have her hair cut off. But if it is a

dishonour for a woman to have her head shaved or her hair cut off, let her be covered. You see, a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of the man.

3. For it is not the man who came out of the woman, but the woman out of the man. And it was not the man who was created on the woman's account, but the woman on the man's account.

4. This is the reason why the woman ought to have **authority** over her head — because of the angels.

4a. However, there is no woman apart from the man, and no man apart from the woman in the Lord, because just as the woman is from the man, so the man is through the woman. But everything comes from God.

5. Reach a verdict among yourselves: is it appropriate for a woman to pray to God when she is not covered? Does not Nature herself teach you that if a man has long hair, that is a dishonour for him? And if a woman has long hair, that is glory for her? Because long hair is given her as a covering.

6. But if anyone is disposed to pick a fight, we have no custom of this sort, nor do the churches of God.

It is hard to be sure whether we have accurately distinguished the several arguments that Paul uses; but what is clear is that he thinks it really important to get the matter properly sorted out in Corinth, and to that end he produces several different arguments.

What, for Paul, would count as 'getting the matter properly sorted out'? It is clearly something to do with how the women are dressing; and, more precisely, something to do with what happens on their heads. The word that I have printed as **authority** means just that, but for understandable reasons Jerome translated it into Latin as 'veil', and so, in my lifetime, Catholic women had to go veiled into church. As children, whenever we entered a church, if my mother or sister did not have a mantilla with them, we had to lend them our grubby handkerchiefs, all because of this passage. Once again, we have to say that Paul would have been entirely surprised at this turn of events; he was trying to solve a problem in Corinth in the 50s AD, not the United Kingdom (of which he had never heard) in the 1950s.

We have therefore to walk carefully here, and try to listen to what he is saying. Let us walk through the several arguments (and I have to admit that not all scholars agree on how many there are).

1. This argument is a standard one for Paul, and would probably not have raised many eyebrows in his world, though it does not carry much weight in our culture. It assumes a descending ladder that goes: God-Christ-man-woman. And the way Paul here presents it suggests that it would have found ready acceptance in Corinth.

2. This argument presumably contains the state of affairs that Paul was trying to bring about: if women pray or prophesy, they must do it with heads covered, whereas men are to pray or prophesy with heads uncovered. Incidentally, as we move on, we may notice that Paul assumes as a matter of course that men and women have the same liturgical function: *both* are expected to 'pray or prophesy'. But the argument here deployed in support of this position is one that defeats us today and in our cultural location: a woman praying with head uncovered is like a woman with her hair cut off. Paul takes it for granted that this is an undesirable state of affairs.

3. This is an argument from Scripture, specifically from Genesis 2:18–23, the second account of creation, where the woman is created precisely so that the man should not be alone, and from a rib taken from the man's side.

4. The next argument concerns 'angels'. Once more, we must assume that those who heard this letter read out in Corinth will have understood a great

deal more than we do. Various suggestions have been made about the angels: they might have been those referred to in Genesis 6:2–4, when the 'sons of God' (often understood as angels) fell in love with the 'daughters of humans', with catastrophic results. Other scholars refer to a text in the Dead Sea Scrolls (the 'War Scroll'), which urges purity on the sectaries in the camp before the final battle, because the angels are fighting on their side.

4a. At this point, Paul remembers his basic doctrine of the equality of men and women, and insists on the balance between the sexes, using two telling phrases, of great importance to him; 'in the Lord', and 'from God'. All Paul's arguing in the end goes back to those two stable points of his creed, to Jesus and to the Father.

5. The next argument is from Natural Law, and is presumably intended to be decisive. The Corinthian Christians are invited simply to look at the facts of the case and see it for themselves: women should have their heads covered, men should not have long hair, but women should. The word translated as 'covering', as a function of woman's hair, could also be understood as a 'chastity belt'. At this point, we simply have to admit that we do not know quite enough about Paul's Corinth to be sure what is going on here.

6. The final argument may hint at a lack of certainty on Paul's part. It is an argument from authority,

and from the practice of the Christian churches round the Mediterranean, and has a touch of despair about it.

What is going on here? As I say, it is hard to be sure, but a few basic considerations may be helpful. In the first place, scholars point out that Paul is emotionally involved here. In his judgement, something is going on that simply ought not to be; and there are those who guess that some of the women in Corinth were going in for what nowadays is called 'cross-dressing', women dressing as men, perhaps combining that with a homosexual lifestyle. That may be so; in the nature of the case, we cannot be sure, but we should notice that Paul's blood pressure is rising at this point.

Another point that may be worth mentioning is that there was a fear in the Greek culture of women getting too ecstatic in their religious practice. Euripides' great play, *The Bacchae*, presents us with the women of Thebes, worshippers of Dionysius. The story of these redoubtable ladies ended with their leader Agave killing her son Pentheus, the somewhat humourless King of Thebes, under the supposition that he was a mountain lion. It may well be that when Paul speaks of women having **authority** over their heads, he is trying to discourage precisely that sort of expression of emotionalism in religion that Pentheus so strongly resisted, and which in the end was the death of him.

However, we have to admit that we are only guessing here; at all events, it is, or should be, clear that we shall not be on safe ground if we build any inner-church legislation on this passage. Paul may be in something of a muddle here, and we don't really know what the issue was in Corinth.

Paul's radical stance

There is one very important passage where Paul indicates what he thinks Christ has done for us; and this has implications for the all-important question of Paul's attitude to women. In Galatians, he is arguing that by giving in to the blandishments of the spin-doctors from Jerusalem that they should observe kosher regulations, circumcision, and Jewish festivals, the Christians of those parts are going back on the freedom that Christ came to give them. In 3:27-28 he argues:

... for as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ; there is [in Christ] no such thing as Jew or Gentile, no such thing as slave or free, no such thing as male and female.

The point here is that all the artificial divisions between human beings simply do not obtain in Christ; all of us are adopted sons and daughters of God, and therefore our conventional views of status, whether based on ethnic-religious (Jew or Gentile), class (slave or free), or gender considerations (male and female), are

simply *passé*. Christ represents the equality of all humanity, and therefore all are equal before God. Incidentally, you may have noticed that whereas Paul speaks here of Jew *or* Gentile . . . slave *or* free, when we get to the third of the contrasting pairs, it is 'male *and* female', which makes it a clear reference to Genesis 1:27 'male and female he created them'. So his position is very radical indeed.

Nor is there any evidence that Paul ever went back on that. It is true that he never quite repeats that triad again, possibly, as some scholars have suggested, because of trouble with the women in Corinth. So at 1 Corinthians 12:13, in the exhortation to unity, we feel the absence of 'male and female' when we hear the reader proclaim:

. . . you see, by one Spirit, all of us were baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all given to drink of the one Spirit.

And in Colossians 3:11 we have, in a context of the new life that we are to live, the following range:

putting on the new person, the one that is being renewed, according to the likeness of the one who created him, where there is no Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free — no: Christ is all in all.

The point here is that Christ has restored the God-likeness of humanity, and that means that the artificial divisions into which humanity divides itself are abolished; but men and women are not mentioned.

Likewise at Romans 10:12, we hear, in a context where Paul is asserting that Gentiles belong equally with Jews in God's story, the same lack:

. . . for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same one is Lord of all.

It is of course odd that Paul does not use the opportunity to reassert the equality of men and women here, but, as I say, it is possible that he had his fingers badly burned at Corinth, and in any case, his focus here is on the relationship between Jew and non-Jew in the story of God. There is no evidence at all, however, that he retreated from his basic position of the equality of all humanity.

Paul's fellow-workers

We can in fact go a bit further than this, and point to Paul's esteem for women whom he regarded as fellow-workers for the gospel. A good place to look is Romans 16, where Paul, engaged in his diplomatic mission to a church that he did not know well, but needed to get on his side, gives a long list of people whom he wishes to greet in Rome. The point here is that he wants the Romans to be aware that he is known

to quite a lot of them. This is not a well-known text; compilers of lectionaries tend to think of it as too boring to be read out in church:

I commend to you our fellow Christian
Phoebe, who is deacon of the church in
Cenchreae; that you may give her
hospitality in the Lord appropriate to the
saints, and furnish her with anything that
she needs. For she is a benefactress to
many people, including myself.

From these lines it actually looks possible that it was Phoebe who brought this most influential of Paul's letters to Rome. Certainly, Paul holds her in very high regard, calling her 'deacon' of the church at Cenchreae. This place was the easternmost port of Corinth, and therefore a site of some importance. It has to be admitted that I am pushing it a bit by calling her a 'deacon' in the translation; at this stage it could mean no more than someone who gives service, but even that is an honourable function in the Christian church, as a glance at Mark 10:45 will show. There is no mistaking Paul's esteem for this lady, and his gratitude to her. As always there is that phrase 'in the Lord', which is the solution to all problems for Paul.

In the next verse (16:3), we find a married couple, Prisca and Aquila. Despite the apparently similar grammatical form, Aquila is masculine (it means 'Eagle'), and Prisca feminine; but we notice that it is Prisca

(elsewhere sometimes named as Priscilla, which is an affectionate diminutive) who is named first, and presumably wears the trousers in that household. According to Acts 18, these two were very good to Paul in Corinth, and shared his profession of tent-making. When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (see 16:19) they were with him in Ephesus; so they get around, and have now returned to Rome, from which city they had been expelled, presumably by Claudius' decree in AD 49 (see Acts 18:2).

Immediately after them (and some very strong praise of them in verses 4–5), we hear in Romans 16:6 about Maria, who has laboured a great deal in your regard'. This could be a Latin name, the feminine of Marius, or it could be the nearest a writer of Greek could get to Miriam, the name of the mother of Jesus. We notice that this lady is described in the following terms, which are highly laudatory for Paul:

who has laboured a great deal in your regard.

Then comes what is almost certainly a husband-and-wife team, like Prisca and Aquila:

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsfolk
and fellow prisoners, who are conspicuous
among the apostles, who were in Christ
before me.

Romans 16:7

Many translations take Junia as a man's name, Junias, which is not attested in the epigraphical evidence that

we have. The reason they do this is perhaps a reluctance to accept that a woman (and Junia is a well-attested woman's name) could possibly have been a 'conspicuous . . . apostle', but that is what Paul appears to say here. The next women to be mentioned are quite interesting:

Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have laboured in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis [clearly a woman's name], who has laboured much in the Lord. Greet Rufus the elect one in the Lord, and his mother and mine.

Romans 16:12-13

Notice that the first three here are described as having 'laboured', which is high praise in Paul's vocabulary. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are thought to be sisters; and it is a charming thought that their names might be taken to mean something like 'Dismal' and 'Droopy', so there may be some affectionate leg-pulling on Paul's part. Persis has a Greek name; but the grammar makes it clear that it is a woman. And so, of course, must be the mother of Rufus. There is an interesting train of thought here. For Rufus is mentioned in Mark's gospel as one of the two sons of Simon of Cyrene, who was forced into helping Jesus carry his cross (Mark 15:21), and the fact that Mark mentions Rufus (and his brother Alexander) suggests that he was known to Mark's community; and Mark's community is often located in Rome. So it is just

possible that we are talking here of the same Rufus; in which case his mother would have been none other than Mrs Simon of Cyrene, the wife of that conscripted African.

Finally (verse 15) there is Julia, and Nereus' sister. Paul says nothing whatever about these two, but they are inescapably women, and clearly Paul holds them in esteem. There is nothing in Paul that says that women have no place in the church, and, indeed, he regards several of them as very hard workers, and clearly applauds them as such.

You may notice that Rufus' mother and Nereus' sister are not named, possibly because Paul assumes that everyone will know them, possibly because their names have for the moment slipped his mind. Many of us would feel sympathy if that is indeed the Apostle's plight.

The same is true in another passage, Philippians 4:2-3:

I implore Evodia, and I implore Syntyche to have the same mindset in the Lord.

That was what he had been urging on the Philippians back in chapter 2, when he went into the hymn to Christ, having encouraged them to 'have the same mindset which was in Christ Jesus', presumably because they had not had it. And notice what he says about these two ladies:

who have fought at my side in spreading the gospel.

Once again, we have here two women who are given credit for serious, and clearly energetic, work in evangelising. Paul is not one to underrate the achievements of women missionaries.

What about Mrs Paul?

The mention of Evodia and Syntyche, however, raises an interesting question. For in verse 3, Paul addresses a third member of the congregation at Philippi as 'true Syzygos', or 'true yoke-fellow'. We can probably exclude the former, since it is not attested as a name anywhere in Greek literature or inscriptions; so who is the 'yoke-fellow'? It is a metaphor from draft animals, and refers to horses or oxen who pull the plough or carts together, and is therefore a natural image for a spouse. Could Paul here be asking his wife to help ease the tension among the ladies of Philippi?

At first sight, it seems unlikely. For in 1 Corinthians 7:7 he says 'I want all human beings to be as I am', and in the next verses, 'I am saying to the unmarried and to widows, it is good for them to remain as I am. But if they are not able to be chaste, let them get married — for it is better for them to marry than to burn'. Leaving aside what we should regard as a slightly cynical theology of marriage (we shall be looking at Paul on sex in the next chapter), we have to admit that an obvious way of reading this text is to understand that Paul is talking about himself as a celibate.

It does not have to be read that way, however: it is possible that Paul means by this, especially in a place like Corinth, no more than that he wishes they could resemble him by remaining chaste, as he does when his wife is not with him. Indeed he may well be implying something of this sort at 1 Corinthians 9:4–6, when he is talking about his rights as an apostle, insisting that he has these rights, but has simply opted not to exercise them:

Do we not have the right to eat and drink?
Don't we have the right to take a Christian wife around [with us], just like the rest of the apostles, and the Lord's brothers, and Kephass? Is it just I and Barnabas who don't have the right not to work . . . ?

If there is no Mrs Paul, then his argument here does not appear to make any sense; so that could be an indicator from Paul, that he was actually married.

There is a bit more to it than this. If Luke has it right (Acts 22:3), Paul trained, as we should now say, as a rabbi, at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Now on the whole, so far as we can tell (and it is only fair to warn you that there are some steps missing in the argument here), it was expected that a would-be Rabbi should be married, for obvious reasons of avoiding scandal. And although (as we have seen) Paul lets us hear of a good many criticisms levelled against him, the allegation that he was unmarried is never mentioned.

So *a priori* we might expect him to be married; and if that is so, it is hardly to be wondered at if his wife balked at the idea of joining Paul on his dangerous and unceasing travelling. And if she were to be left anywhere, then Philippi, up there at the top end of Greece, clearly one of Paul's favourite communities, might have been a good place for her to stay and contribute to the local church. Philippi was a place that Paul could often visit, not far from the nearest port of Neapolis and with the excellent Roman road, the Via Egnatia, linking the two cities.

So it may be that Paul, far from being a misogynist, was in fact happily married, though often separated from his wife by the demands of his apostolic mission of telling the Gentiles about Jesus. The evidence is circumstantial and depends a good deal on speculation; but it is not negligible.

The fundamental equality of men and women

At all events, there is no indication in Paul that he retreats from his sense that all human beings, of whatever race, culture or religion, of whatever social class, or whatever gender, are equal 'in the Lord'. Even in 1 Corinthians, where, as we have seen, he might have had reason to restrain his teaching on the equality of men and women, he makes this clear. Look at 7:3–5, speaking of marriage (and so for 'woman' we might equally read 'wife', and for 'man', 'husband'):

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Let the man give to the woman what is her due; and likewise the woman to the man. The woman does not have authority over her own body, but the man does. Likewise, the man does not have authority over his own body, but the woman does. Don't deprive one another, except by agreement, for a time, in order to have leisure for prayer, and then come back together again . . .

Paul is here clearly convinced of the equality of husband and wife; and we have already seen how he asserts the liturgical equality of men and women when it comes to praying and prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:4–6); and more generally (1 Corinthians 11:11), with the telling qualifier 'in the Lord'.

Conclusion: what about those terrible 'household codes'?

A friend of mine, an eminent biblical scholar, finds the household codes quite intolerable: God cannot be speaking in them. Let us look, unafraid, at what the author (whether Paul or not) actually says.

The first passage, which we know already, is at Colossians 3:18–4:1:

Wives, be subordinated to your husbands, as is fitting **in the Lord**. Husbands, love your wives, and don't get bitter against

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them. Children, obey your parents in every respect, for this is pleasing **in the Lord**. Parents, don't irritate your children, or they may get discouraged. Slaves, obey in every respect those who are your 'lords' according to the flesh, not as 'eye-slaves' or 'human-pleasers', but in simplicity of heart, **fearing the Lord**. Whatever you do, work at it from the heart, as **for the Lord**, and not for human beings, knowing that you will receive the reward of your inheritance **from the Lord**. Be slaves of the Lord Christ. For the one who does wrong will get the reward of the wrong they have done, and there is no respecting of status. 'Lords', give your slaves what is just and equitable, knowing that you also have a **Lord in heaven**.

Notice once again how Paul subverts the apparent insistence on the inferiority of wives, children, and slaves, in two ways. First, just as the apparently superior half of the pair is settling into complacency at having his status confirmed, a nudge in the ribs reminds him of equality. Second, notice the number of times in this passage when the Lord (printed in bold type) is mentioned, and how that undermines any notion that human beings can be superior to one another. It works, as we saw in the previous chapter, particularly effectively for the slave owners who are 'lords', but

not the real thing, and who have to give an account. If that is so for slaves, then, even more, is it true for women; Paul cannot on the basis of this passage be twisted into service by those who wish to 'put women in their place'.

And let us look again at Ephesians 5:21-30, 32-33, clearly connected with the above passage, but longer than it:

... being **subordinated** to each other in reverence for Christ, the wives to their own husbands, as Christ is also the head of the church; he is the saviour of the body. But as the church is **subordinated** to Christ, so [should the wives be] to their husbands in every respect. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up on her behalf, in order that he might sanctify her, purifying her with a washing of water with a word in order to present the church to himself as radiant, having no spot or wrinkle. That is how husbands ought to love their own wives, like their own bodies. The one who loves his own wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but feeds it and nurtures it, just as Christ does with the church, for we are limbs of his body . . . This is a great mystery; but I am speaking with regard to Christ and the church.

But every single one of you must love your own wives as yourselves; and the wives should reverence their husbands.

This is a slightly more difficult passage; it seems to inscribe the inferiority of women to men, but it is worth noticing two things. Firstly, in that world, a husband who took these lines seriously would be very remarkable indeed, loving his wife as himself. Secondly, it seems, underneath it all, that Paul is really speaking of the relationship of Christ to the Church, and employing that important word 'mystery', which in Ephesians refers to God's astonishing plan. And in this context it is worth noticing that the passage both begins and ends with 'reverence' (or 'fear'), for Christ at the outset, and for the relationship of wife to husband at the end. You will have to make up your own mind whether to acquit our author of selling women short. Always, however, remember that it was Paul who wrote these astonishing lines (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13), trying (unsuccessfully, alas) to persuade the Corinthians to put away their quarrels. As you read them, ask if the author of these words could possibly have put women into an inferior place in the church:

Seek for the higher gifts; and I am showing you a way beyond parallel: if I speak in the languages of human beings and of angels, but do not have love, I have become an echoing bronze, or a clashing cymbal. And

if I have [the gift of] prophecy, and I know all the mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to shift mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away my possessions, bit by bit, and if I give away my body in order to boast, but do not have love, I am in no way helped. Love is patient, and kindly; love is not jealous, does not bear a grudge, is not puffed up, does not behave indecently, does not seek its own interests, is not provoked to anger, does not count up wrongs, does not rejoice at injustice, but instead rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be cancelled out; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will be cancelled out. For we know only partially, and we prophesy only partially. When I was an infant, I spoke like an infant, and had the mindset of an infant, counted up like an infant. But when I became an adult, I cancelled out infants' things. For at present we see through a looking-glass, obscurely. Then [we shall see] face to face. At present, I know only partially. Then I shall know just as I am known. So there remain, faith, hope, love, these three things. The greatest of these is love.