

Trinity College Cambridge
9 March 2014

PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Paul

Genesis 2: 15, 18–24 Ephesians 5: 18, 21–31

Anne Atkins

I have a competition for you. My husband Shaun and I were invited to a party and asked to dress as pub signs. He made no effort whatsoever, and when challenged declared that he had come as himself. The first person to tell me after the service what pub he was will get a prize. The clue is in tonight's New Testament reading.

Just over a hundred years ago, a luxurious ocean liner set off on her maiden voyage and hit an iceberg. I knew the story so well from childhood, as I expect you did too, that I thought nothing of the most astonishing aspect of it. In the 1990s' film *Titanic*, much was made of the rich and powerful passengers being saved while the dispossessed drowned. Unjust perhaps, but not unusual. When people vie for life, the dominant are likely to survive. And that ship contained more than her share of alpha males: John Astor, the richest man in the world; industrialist Benjamin Guggenheim; chain store owner Isidor Strauss; sports- and businessman John Thayer; journalist William Stead due to win a Nobel prize; writer Jacques Furtrelle. All famous, all at the top of their field and all travelling First Class. All capable of survival and almost all offered places in lifeboats.

Third Class accommodation was considerably less accessible from deck and tragically, of Third Class women (the least important people on board) just over half drowned. Of the First Class men? More than two thirds. Overall, a quarter of the women were lost. And four fifths of the men. Including all those I've mentioned. They helped women and children into lifeboats, and then withdrew to die. This was not merely opening a door for a lady or giving up your seat in the tube. These men stared death in the face, a very frightening and unpleasant death, and then deliberately and voluntarily embraced it in place of those they could easily have pushed aside, most of whom they didn't even know.

It is against all instinct for survival. According to a recent survey, nowadays we would rescue the under thirty-fives. Not because they're more vulnerable, but more important. In the ancient world this principle would certainly have prevailed: Euripides tells of Admetus. When his time came to die he asked his parents if they'd take his place. Why not? He was king. When they refused he asked his wife, who agreed. Herodotus cites the Thracian practice of slitting the throat of a man's favourite wife on his death; similar to Indian suttee, burning alive particularly the young widows of rich men.

In most societies, men have held most of the power.

So why did an entire culture go so against the grain of human instinct as to expect the strong to die for the weak? Several of these Edwardian oligarchs helped female servants to places in lifeboats they could have occupied. Guggenheim said, “No woman shall be left aboard this ship because Ben Guggenheim was a coward.” Their values were based on centuries of influence from the man we’re considering this evening.

Paul of Tarsus did more to shape Christianity than anyone other than Christ Himself (without him, Christianity might have been no more than a tiny Jewish sect) making him almost certainly the second most influential person who has ever lived. Over half the books of the New Testament are attributed to him. Tom Wright’s recent book on Paul runs to nearly seventeen hundred pages,¹ while Lloyd Jones allocated sixteen volumes to one of his books and an hour’s sermon expounding just two words. So I hope you’re happy to be here for a while as our subject is simply *Paul*... But even if I had the expertise, which I certainly haven’t, it would be brave to attempt to sum him up in a few minutes.

So I asked the Dean if I could concentrate on one aspect of his teaching: regarding men and women. And one aspect of that: marriage. And only really one aspect of that: our differences rather than our similarities.

Originally known as Saul, Paul came from the intellectual centre of Tarsus, now in Turkey. Jewish by faith and Roman by citizenship (Acts 22: 24–26), an unusual combination. Trained by the rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22: 3), whose reputation survives today. A ruthless persecutor of the new Christianity, Saul first appears in history aiding and abetting a brutal lynching (Acts 7: 54–60). Dramatically converted to Christianity (Acts 9: 1–19), after which he became known as Paul.

And among the laity Paul is often thought to be offensively misogynistic. I believe this is because we take him out of his context. Not so much that Paul could be forgiven for not seeing beyond his culture, as that we should be challenged to see beyond ours.

Let’s ask ourselves a few questions.

Paul is accused of being anti-marriage: in 1 Corinthians 7 he suggests that can be better to be single (1 Corinthians 7: 8, 26, 32–35, 40).

Abdul lived with us and became a close friend. Three winters ago his father called him home to Pakistan; he was extremely apprehensive. As we suspected, he returned engaged. At twenty-five he felt too young, but that he might eschew marriage altogether never crossed his mind, let alone his family’s or culture’s. Nor, I suspect, would it have occurred to Paul’s contemporaries: men wouldn’t have been doing their duty and women wouldn’t have survived. My sister taught blind girls in Esfahan whose greatest tragedy was not that they couldn’t see but that they couldn’t marry, so had no purpose in life or future means of support.

¹ *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, NT Wright, Fortress Press, 2013.

You can marry if you wish, Paul writes; if you want to be sexually active you should. But if you're not obliged to, there is more freedom in staying single – thus he ushered in two thousand years of thinking the unthinkable, of the liberty of Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth I and Florence Nightingale and all they achieved. Oppressive? Or liberating?

Paul is interpreted as forbidding women's ordination: 'Let a woman learn in silence and all submission. I don't allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man' – or possibly, 'over her husband' – (1 Timothy 2: 11–12). Inegalitarian? That certainly seems the force of Paul's words today, after nearly a century of women's suffrage and a century and a half of women studying in Cambridge colleges, surely thanks, at least in part, to Paul himself.

Let's go back about two millennia: According to Philo of Alexandria, 'the husband is competent to give knowledge of the law to his wife.' The rabbis went further: 'Let the words of the law be burned rather than given to a woman.' And the Talmud, 'No man should teach his daughter; they have not got minds fit for study and pervert the law because of their stupidity of their minds ... Teaching your daughter the law is like teaching her to sin.'²

So what would have struck Paul's hearers? What was significant to them? Not that he wasn't allowing women to teach: it would scarcely have occurred to anyone that this was possible. In context, this *description* of what he does begins to sound more like a reassuring proviso. After all, he's just scandalised his hearers with the only imperative in the passage, the *prescription* which must have hit them between the eyes: 'Let a woman learn.'

The wife has no authority over her own body: it is her husband's. She must pay him the debt she owes him and not deprive him (of sex). No surprises for any of Paul's hearers there. Except that the debt is mutual: he is not to deprive her either; he owes her his body; he has no authority over himself and belongs to his wife (1 Corinthians 7: 3–4). In first century Greece this must have sounded as monstrous as telling an eighteenth century white cotton farmer that he had no rights over his own body because it belonged to his slave.

And this is as counter-cultural today as it ever was. Last year I debated marriage and relationships for the Guardian with psychoanalyst Philippa Perry, wife of Turner prize-winner and transvestite Grayson.³ "We each own our own sexuality," she asserted reasonably. No more than popular mainstream thinking.

But Paul's image is of ceasing to 'be our own person' altogether: giving away not just our sexuality, but our entire being to someone else. Not surprising that, like Jesus Himself (Matthew 19: 9–10), he indicates that it can be easier to stay single.

Shaun and I know the person who introduced bungee jumping to the West. He stood on Clifton Bridge with three friends, and at the word "now" they were all to jump. He said,

² For references see *Split Image, Male and Female after God's Likeness*, Anne Atkins, Hodder & Stoughton 1987, p. 120 (p. 107 of the 1998 edition).

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/18/traditional-nuclear-family-gay-marriage>

“Now!” and jumped. The other three waited to see what happened. Then jumped. Then waited rather a long time: the one thing they hadn’t worked out was how to get back up. Paul’s injunction to give yourself away (if you marry) involves a comparably wild risk, wild trust – and wild exhilaration. But at least husband and wife do it simultaneously.

In tonight’s passage, however, there is a striking disparity between husband and wife. Paul develops two images that are not symmetrical at all. A body and its head: Christ and the church. Wives, submit to your husbands, as the body takes instruction from its head. Further, submit to your husband as you would to Christ. In everything. At the end of the chapter, just after our reading ends (Ephesians 5: 33), he describes wives fearing their husbands – φοβηται – just as we are to be in fear – φοβια, phobia – of Christ.

If it were not there in front of us in scripture we’d surely consider this blasphemous. Shaun is to stand for Christ to me. I am to submit to him as I do to God Himself. A friend of ours decided to promise to obey her husband on her wedding day – the one marriage vow in the Book of Common Prayer which has been made optional⁴ – until her fiancé commanded her not to. But submission is far more than mere obedience. I can obey my boss in everything I do, and disobey him in everything I think. I obey the law of the land, though occasionally I think it an ass. But to my husband I should submit my thoughts as well as my deeds. I owe him soul as well as body, mind as well as strength, as I owe them to Christ Himself.

What’s astonishing is not that we find this teaching outrageous, but that we are not equally or more shocked by the second half, or rather more than half, of Paul’s equation. In the vestry before the service the comment was made that Paul is giving wives a pretty hard time in tonight’s reading. Really?

How many ways have you looked after your body today? Presumably you’ve rested it and washed it, fed it and watered it, clothed and possibly beautified it. If at any point your body was too cold or hot, hungry or thirsty, or particularly in pain, you probably attended to its needs almost immediately, if you could. Unless of course you’re fasting for Lent, like the College clergy. This is how a husband is to look after his wife. Day and night, in everything he does and says and even thinks, he should be considering her welfare, all the time.

But as with the wife, there is far more. He is to love her as Christ loved the church. Jesus’ entire purpose on this earth was to serve us. He was born to meet our needs. He put us before Himself in everything He did, and there was no corner of His life that wasn’t dedicated to our welfare. Supremely, He lived in order to die for us. Among the Prayer Book vows, the husband declares – and the wife does not – ‘with my Body I thee worship.’⁵ Again, the fealty we owe to God Himself.

⁴ *The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony*: ‘I N. take thee M. to my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.’

⁵ *Ibid.* ‘With this Ring I thee wed, with my Body I thee worship, and with all my worldly Goods I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.’

The husband is to live for his wife's benefit in everything he does, every thought he thinks, every word he speaks, every decision he makes. His whole life is dedicated to hers. How is it that we balk at a wife giving away her autonomy, and barely notice the husband giving away his life? It is perhaps the fault not of Paul's sexism, but of our own?

For fun, let's look again at our Old Testament passage. I've heard it said that God, or this description of Him, is fundamentally sexist. The woman is made for Man's benefit; she is the junior afterthought; she was merely a tiny bone out of his body; even her name, Wo-man, is derived from his. She owes her being to him and exists for his convenience.

Now, try swapping the man and woman round and read it again – supposing the woman made first, and the man out of her – but wearing the same sexist spectacles. And lo, magic! The same sexist message emerges. She couldn't cope on her own: man had to be created to bail her out. Part of her body was taken away to make his: she'll never again be complete without him. She was made of dust: he of glorious human flesh. And he was made last, after the plants, the animals and certainly after the woman: he is the crown of God's creation. Not surprising she is to 'cleave' to him (which in the Old Testament usually denotes a weaker cleaving to a stronger; and a 'help' incidentally, usually God's help to man). Even her name – 'Man' now, of course – is a diminutive of his – 'Woman'.

If we bring our baggage with us, we can read our expectations into anything.

Wife and husband have different roles. So we assume the wife's must be inferior. Ergo: Paul the male chauvinist. Although elsewhere – in another passage also interpreted to indicate women's lower status – Paul describes the woman as the glory of a man (1 Corinthians 11: 7), and says she should have authority over her head,⁶ having just established, as he does here, who her head is.⁷ Talking of which, I wonder if any of you have won my competition yet?⁸

Not symmetrical, no. Superficially anyway. At a deeper level, perhaps our roles are far more similar than they at first seem. After all, neither head nor body can survive without the other. And believe me, in the day to day nitty-gritty of who makes the tea and picks up the children – and gives way to the other, which is what much of marriage is about – it's hard to put a cigarette paper between total submission and total self-sacrifice. This is, until you happen to be on an ocean liner which is going down into a freezing sea at midnight. When suddenly there is quite a big difference.

Paul of Tarsus. Revolutionary. Radical. Able to inspire the richest man on earth to lay down his life for his wife's unborn child's unheard-of nurse. In imitation of a King and a God who also gave his life for the most insignificant people. You and me.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11: 10. ἔξουσιαν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς. Some translations substitute 'veil' for 'authority'.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11: 3. For further examination of some of the passages referred to here, see *Split Image* (op. cit.), particularly the chapters on Authority and Marriage.

⁸ The Nag's Head. Duh. Prize won by Anne Strauss. Runners up were Christian Atkins-Bibow with The Hog's Head (ha! Christian is my son in law) and rather more kindly Grae Worster with The Queen's Head. No points at all, alas, go to The King's Arms: nice try, but bearing absolutely no relation to the text whatsoever.