

Following the trajectory – eschatological hermeneutic and gender

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I was in a ministers' meeting a couple of weeks after a Mainstream North Theology Day on 'The Glass Ceiling' where we had tackled the concerning situation that, the Baptist Union having been one of the first denominations to recognise the leadership ministry of women as church ministers, still only 7% of the accredited list of ministers are women. Other denominations, Johnny-come-latelys on this matter, had raced ahead of us. And what was also interesting, the ministerial training college with the reputation – whatever that's worth – for being the most evangelical, Spurgeon's, still has the worst percentile figure of any of the denomination's colleges, for training women ministers. The reason is certainly not within ethos and stance of the College. The problem – for this is how I regard it – must lie in the culture of the churches from which it draws, mostly I assume in the south. When I expressed my concern about this state of affairs to this all male gathering of leaders a fortnight later, none expressed surprise or shared my concern. One seemed to indicate the matter was settled by the Bible, ruling out the possibility of women being recognised in such a calling. That was the end of the matter. The Bible stated it – discussion over. But even if the Bible had permitted it, I had the strong feeling that the issue was not of sufficient importance to warrant either consideration or effort. The real business was preaching the gospel and evangelism or introducing the latest favoured project within the evangelical world.

As a people of the Book my colleague's response is in part to be admired – a very little part maybe! – for it shows a desire to take the Bible seriously. How else will we keep our particularity as a people of faith intact and strong in the midst of our pluralistic society and relativistic culture, unless we take with utmost seriousness the only means we have of keeping in touch with the roots of our tradition? We must have regular exposure to and come under the authority of Scripture, allowing their texts to be in conversation with one another, with us and with our culture. But I was disconcerted by the definite and closed way in which he responded. It appeared symptomatic of a 'sorted' ethos, which refuses to learn and look again at Scripture, and bolsters closed minds within a reactionary and resistant culture that permits such a state of affairs to continue. For a long time I have felt that as evangelicals our desire to be faithful to Scripture (good and right), must be matched by an adequate hermeneutic (often poor in its theological understanding and application). We will always face the difficult task of interpreting the text responsibly, choosing those to which we pay greater heed and to which we give more weight than others, those that become core insights around which others cluster, comment or qualify. Aha! There I give myself away! I'm one of those scissor liberals, keeping this text but cutting out selectively that one, as seems fitting to my intellect, taste or the temper of the times. While over there is the true conservative evangelical dealing with 'the whole counsel of God' and trotting out the text that 'all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness etc.' The fact that the author intended 'scripture' in this text to refer to the Hebrew Bible and not the Christian Bible, which of course was non-existent at the time, need not detain us at this point!

But a moment's reflection shows that we all do what I admit to doing. Which of us who claims to take the Bible seriously as our authority gives as much weight to: 'Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material', as: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son'? We all focus on particular texts, giving one a reading of greater significance than another. All of us have a principle or principles of interpretation that helps us organise those to which we pay special attention over others. Another story illustrates – a conversation with a conservative evangelical within our church as we were drawn through a set of circumstances to debate the meaning and place of 'justification by faith' within our understanding of gospel. He had a Lutheran reading of this summary of a Pauline theme. Within our chat he said in effect, 'There's more gospel in Paul than in Jesus.' As soon as he – an intelligent and well-read, mature Christian – had uttered it, he realised there were problems with what he had said and he tried to dig himself out of a hole. In my opinion failing rather badly! He was giving special privilege to one aspect of Pauline thought around which

other texts, including presumably the Synoptics and John, were gathered, to illuminate what he regarded as central. Now of course much water has flowed under the bridge since Luther's important and necessary insight, but that water has shown us that Luther's reading of Paul does not really hold water in some important respects according to the majority of New Testament scholars! Lutheran spectacles bring certain things in Paul into focus, whilst others are distorted by this interpretation or simply ignored. The late medieval church needed Paul's insight about faith to free them from the cultural context of an introspective guilt-ridden conscience that was trying to struggle with the question, 'How can I be right with God?' But their starting point was not Paul's. His concerns were very different.¹

So if we all have a principle(s) of interpretation by which we access our reading of the Bible, whether we are conscious of it or not, the important question becomes: 'By *what* principle(s) of interpretation?' And when it comes to this issue of gender, which has become a fighting ground for different constituencies of the evangelical world, let alone the whole Church, are there particular principles that unlock justifiable ways of interpreting texts that does not violate the meaning and intention of the original author *then*, and also yields guidance of how we are to respond to changes in gender relations within the society at large *now*. For surely all evangelicals agree that the hard historical, exegetical work of trying to understand the original meaning of the text is important, necessary and possible work, and one that provides resources for today.

There are a number of ways we might answer that question and the bible itself offers helpful material about the way we approach its own interpretation. For instance, and easily overlooked in the heavily academic approach of Western society where spirituality and theology divide sharply, when John reports Jesus as saying 'The Spirit will lead you into all truth', he is saying that there is a spirituality of openness to God's Spirit of life, which is necessary in order to enter into truth. In other words this is more than an intellectual and academic exercise. Truth is fundamentally something to be lived authentically within our own selves and relations before our Creator and Saviour, in our behaviour and relations, and ultimately in the whole of society and cosmos. So there is a hermeneutic of God's life-giving Spirit that takes us beyond conceptual constructs of theological imagination. We learn not by getting things right in our heads first, and then things gradually infiltrate our heart, desires and behaviour, an internal trickle down effect. We learn as bodies being formed in time by others outside, prior as well as contemporary with ourselves; we imitate to become humanised and socialised bodies over time. And John is saying God's Spirit is at work in all of this. However, bad concepts lead to bad practice and many have suffered through faulty and life-destroying theology. We must hold together an alive spirituality with a rigorous theological approach, not least when we are dealing with an issue where the majority of church members in Western society are the gender that has been excluded traditionally from its teaching, pastoral and leadership office. A hermeneutic of the Spirit is particularly relevant because it acknowledges we are to be responsive to more than the text, a point to which I will keep returning. In this there is a clear distinction between the way Christians are to approach our seeking after truth, from the way Muslims approach the Koran. However, it would appear that some conservative evangelicals default to a hermeneutic somewhat similar to that which operates in Islam.

And the point is that they attach significance to a particular issue around which battle-lines are drawn, whilst with other cultural conditioned matters regarded as of past generations, biblical texts are conveniently ignored or admitted as irrelevant to current conditions, even if those conditions still exist somewhere in the world. Thus gender teaching on male headship is fiercely defended whilst teaching on slavery is considered irrelevant, even though we are increasingly being made aware slavery and human trafficking continues and in fact grows unabated. However, it's a salutary lesson to realise that only a few generations ago our ancestors were using the Bible to defend the practice of slavery. Consider the following from Howard Thurman's 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, where he recalls his grandmother's experience growing up as a slave in a Protestant 'Bible-believing' southern states culture. 'She would not let me read any of Paul's letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister always used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your

¹ On this see the groundbreaking and highly influential essay, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' in K. Stendhal, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. London, SCM, 1977

master ...as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."

² It illustrates just how wrong we can be in our well-argued theologies, totally unaware that we are in fact ideologically trapped. Is there any way of escaping the traps in which we might be caught today? One such trap I suggest is the well intentioned argument of those holding that 'the plain meaning' of gender texts can be transposed from 'then', to settle arguments 'now', buttressed by the assurance of being 'faithful to Scripture'. I would dare to suggest this thinking is as ideologically trapped as 'the master's minister'.

So more specifically, when handling texts that deal with gender or are gender related, are there particular principles of interpretation that are important in organising the myriad of texts on this subject, into a way of thinking that is faithful to text and relevant within our culture? The area of gender on which this paper is focused has some particular challenges. Issues of gender and gender relations are more obviously constrained and shaped by cultural factors. I say 'more obviously', because we have increasingly seen that the notion that there is any idea that can be loosed from its culture within a given social context, into some universal and timeless place of validity, is mistaken. But this is especially and obviously true of issues of gender and relationships between the genders. For instance the Bible includes the practice of polygamy. A hermeneutical reading of Scripture that took the principle that every text has the same, flat level of authority, and that took examples as giving permission for similar patterns of living, would lead to the conclusion that polygamy is a valid form of faith-living today. For all I know this might well be how (some?) members of the Mormon church might still want to argue. The way we understand gender and gender roles changes. This always was and will be the case. There is no frozen state to which we should aspire either in the past or present.

The same is true of marriage and divorce. The actual 'order' of marriage and the practice of divorce now, are radically different from other times and places. That is why it is so damaging and un-Christian – if we take a hermeneutic of the Spirit seriously – if well-meaning and passionate Christians just lift a biblical text from years BC or AD and sledge-hammer it against a pastoral situation they confront, even if they do it lovingly. To take one example, when the Bible reports the Lord God saying, 'I hate divorce' (Malachi 2:16), what is it exactly that makes God hate it! It is not merely the abstract idea and notion we call 'divorce', but the actual damage and effect it has within that given society upon both the individuals directly involved and the whole community. And if marriage in that day assumed male patriarchy all the power was on one side of the gender divide. So one thing God may especially hate about divorce, is the devastating effect it had on the vulnerable party without privilege and power, who once divorced is cut loose to defend herself in the only way left to her to keep body and soul together. And the effect upon the husband is to confirm him in the practice of an inappropriate exercise of power that rots his soul. Such a reading would keep in touch with the mainspring for God's responsive action in forming Israel, the call of the vulnerable and downtrodden that went up to God (Exodus 2:23-24).

So is there a way of handling biblical material on gender relations in a way that holds to the truth of Scripture but organises those texts to make sense of them as a whole without casting them into a framework that feels obsolete, patriarchal and is quite frankly sexist according to the perspective of our culture? I believe there is. N T Wright in a number of his books has put forward a helpful model that provides a fresh understanding of the way the authority of Scripture might function within the Church. He suggests that we need to replace seeing the Bible as primarily a repository for the development of doctrine and ethical practice. His approach, which I understand does not exclude either doctrinal formulation or ethical definition, is to acknowledge its primary function as the bearer of a narrative. The reason why the body of literature that makes up the New Testament was understood to be part of the Hebrew Bible in Christian scripture, was because it was regarded as the primary witness to a fundamental shift in God's narrative of dealing with Israel as part of the whole of humanity and God's creation. Wright suggests we understand the Bible as a five-act play: creation, 'fall',

² I am sorry that I cannot give a precise reference here, as I read this as a quote in another book, which I cannot trace at the moment. I have checked, however, and Thurman's book is still in print

Israel, Jesus and the church.³ Revising a little I might add a sixth Act as the Kingdom completed.

The image of a play is important because he suggests that our task is to join in 'the performance' once we have located ourselves correctly in the 'script'. He suggests we see ourselves in a scene between Act 5 Scene 1, the birth of the church, and my suggested Act 6, the completion of the Kingdom. We have the story thus far in Acts One to Five, and like some unfinished work of Mozart, where we discover some hastily sketched notes of his intention for the completed composition, we have an indication of where it's all going and how it will end. Our task is to improvise in a manner consistent with the story thus far, and with a sensitive ear to the rough sketches of the composer. The metaphor expresses both the controlling authority the Bible has in our lives, whilst freeing us from a prescriptive transposition of individual texts that are clearly an expression of performers involved in a prior scene. The model allows for continuity within change.

Comparing this metaphor with those frequently used amongst conservative evangelicals is revealing. Here the Bible is treated as a compendium of doctrine or teaching, which is distilled into an overall system or a method of salvation. This is treating the Bible primarily as an ideological handbook, leading us down the road of statements of faith, a set of ideas to which the true believer has to assent. Or at a practical level there is that much loved image that explains the Bible as the operator's manual for life given by the Creator. The instruction manual image is easily understood but quite frankly inadequate at best, because it misleads. First it reduces life and its deeply varied and ambivalent experiences to some mechanism that performs before us. It introduces a subject-object divide. Our job is to master the basic controls of the machine called 'life'. We should have learnt since Enlightenment Deism, life is poorly compared with machines. Second it misconceives the way the Bible interacts with life. A manual doesn't need to change because the machine functions in the way it is designed to do every time it works. So any thoughtful seeker or new believer will quickly stumble over such ill-conceived teaching and either discards the image or the Christian faith as a whole as having nothing of depth and relevance to say. Both the compendium of doctrine-teaching and the instruction manual share the same quality of a fixed model in which there's no room for the organic or dynamic, the very essence of life in time. Modernising and updating the doctrinal faith statements or the instruction manual's language is all that's required, and evangelicals are admittedly good at that. But they fail as hermeneutical models.

Contrary to these constrictive and reductionist images, Wright's image is similar to the way that Mike Leigh gets his actors to perform in one of his films. He refuses to develop a detailed screenplay from which the actors interpret memorised lines. He gives them the story outline and insists they are freed up to perform through improvisation; to feel themselves into the skin and mind of the characters, allowing the interaction to happen in front of the camera. Riskier but freeing, and in the end more deeply authentic and less contrived than much served up to us by the film industry. We need a hermeneutic in which life is thrown into a creative and open experience, but one controlled by a foundational story and a hopeful destiny, open to that important hermeneutic of the Spirit that permits flexibility, creativity and organic dynamism. Another helpful 'model', although more conceptual, is Brueggemann's understanding of the Bible as canon.⁴ Drawn from an understanding of the composition of the Hebrew Bible as consisting of Torah, Prophets and The Writings, the disciple interacts with the Bible through the different functions of these component parts. Torah provides the foundation story – that which will be held and believed no matter what. Prophets are the voice of reform that needs addressing to our understanding of torah, which always tends towards fixity. The Writings embody human reflection upon experience and life within faith. The Christian disciple can engage in the dynamic between foundation, reform and reflection to help form healthy and faithful human living.

A theological description of this improvised performance model of the Church's position, is that in Act 5 we are to follow an eschatological trajectory. The seismic shift of the tectonic

³ See chapter 5 of N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*. London, SPCK, 1992; or more briefly N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*. London, SPCK, 2005

⁴ W. Brueggemann, *The Creative Word – Canon as a model for biblical education*. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1982

plates of the present age, has been overtaken by the age that is to come. It has arrived ahead of time in Jesus and the Spirit. The world both experiences 'times of refreshing' as the kingdom arrives early in Jesus and the Spirit, and groans as it awaits final consummation. Our role as performers is to engage ourselves in the play, helping one another with the tricky task of looking both ways, remaining true to the story thus far, and orientating ourselves towards the future that is coming towards us, but *certainly living faithfully in the now of our particular time in human history and salvation-history*. We have to learn to perform within the trajectory of the story past, present and future. I believe this understanding of keeping ourselves within an eschatological trajectory is a hermeneutical key needed that makes sense of gender texts and organises them appropriately, giving due weight where authority lies, allowing others to comment upon and qualify those that manifest eschatological momentum.

So we finally arrive at how this looks in terms of texts. If what I've described carries weight it will be especially important to note *changes* in how gender is viewed and relations described in the light of the underlying shift of the ages. Due weight must be given here. But in the light of early Christianity's unique eschatological framework we should not only expect movement that adjusts practice of relations to the new age, as if the human story had arrived at its terminus. The well acknowledged 'now/not yet' perspective derived from the early Church's 'fulfilled/awaiting consummation' eschatology, would lead us to expect, in matters of gender as well as others, not only new movement, but also patient struggle and accommodation with existing ways and practices. Any reading of such gender related texts, which does not keep this twin tensive pull in mind, will badly skew any application that seeks to translate to current practice. A flat reading of texts that seeks to form a neat amalgam of all the material, without an underlying hermeneutic that is eschatologically conditioned, will be so foundationally weak, it will have to be ruled inadequate. So the trick will be to identify both *movement* and *stasis*, but always being aware that our underlying story is in essence a moving towards the goal of Kingdom consummation. It will prioritise *eschatological movement* over *cultural stasis* but in ways sensitive to the 'now' conditions that impinged on those early missionary writers 'then', so that we can deal in similar sensitivity with our 'now' conditions that still are not there at the 'then' point of fulfilment. This provides solid justification for prioritising different texts, whilst honouring others for their function at that time in the unfolding of Acts 4 and 5 of the narrative. Such an eschatological hermeneutic frees us to be honest about any residual expression of a culturally conditioned patriarchy, but allows for any residual value in such texts for current performance. We should be neither surprised nor shocked that these NT authors were unable to see and work out all the implications of the eschatological shift. It shows Scripture as a book that exhibits the early Christians' wrestling with the tension between the overlap of the two ages, offering a model so that the Spirit leads us into truth, not merely text, in our own time.

I conclude this essay with a key text that indicates a re-ordering of gender relationships in the light of the eschatological shift perceived to have already taken place around the communities of the young Jesus movement. I leave detailed textual work on various key texts to Robert Parkinson's paper where his exegetical analysis takes into account the hermeneutic outlined here. However, the hermeneutical task in the light of this eschatology is to discern whether the concepts or images contained within a text either cluster close to the decisive eschatological shift inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection, or whether they reflect conditioning by the other tensive pull of the constraints of culture at that time.

The passage Galatians 3:25-29, containing what has become a slogan on gender – 'there is no longer male or female' – is clearly a core expression of Christian eschatological hope and fulfilment. 'But now...' is his introduction to the decisive shift that has taken place in Christ. Of course more widely in Galatians he argues for the primacy of the Abrahamic covenant in his understanding the shift of the ages. It is this covenant that undergirds what was happening in his missionary task as an apostle to the Gentiles. He prioritises the universal promise given to Abraham over the now relativised and particularised Mosaic covenant, much to the chagrin of his opponents. Ethnic, political, social and gender relations are re-ordered. This is not just a religious-spiritual transaction but one that affects daily social relationships. The inclusion envisaged here, transcends and dissolves previous forms of relating. In other words we do not do justice to this text if we assign the consequences merely to some personal spiritual realm of our relationship with God. This is shown in the practical passion with which Paul worked at embodying his gospel in the new form of community relations that embraced Jew

and Gentile, slave and free. We should note that this is precisely at the point where Rome's imperial boast of delivering a new order of 'peace and security' in a trans-ethnic empire, failed most decisively.

So the seismic shift of the ages affected relations between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and also the relations between female and male. Transformation of relations had to take solid, social and personal form in all these categories. This was a touchstone of the power and validity of the gospel in the arrival of the new age. His witness was that it had arrived, and his proof was seen before people's eyes in these tiny burgeoning communities around the Mediterranean in which relationships were re-ordered. These changes were real even if not yet complete. A trajectory was arcing across the Roman imperial order, and he fought with a passion to secure and further this trajectory. The weight of this text in terms of its eschatological significance, means that it is an offence against the gospel, whenever we consign an on-going re-ordering of gender relations as of second or third rate importance which can be conveniently ignored. We could not start with a more important text. What's more surprising is its grasp of the implications of the eschatological shift for ethnic, social and gender relationships, was arrived at so soon after the decisive Christ event. It has taken more than twenty centuries to flesh out its implications.

Paul's preoccupation with the Jew-Gentile issue led him to develop far greater detail in the understanding the implications of the Christ event for that category of relation. But when it comes to gender relations we need as much imagination as exegetical skill to understand something of the dynamics that must have operated within these recently formed communities of faith. Thus when he drew such broad-brush strokes to describe a change in gender relations, it is not surprising his statement or teaching on other occasions, permitted multiple interpretations on the part of its hearers regarding its implication. Also alongside this formative statement, women and men shared precisely the same symbolic initiation rite of baptism. This profound act of inclusion, linked as it was with the gift of the Spirit of the new eschatological age (1 Cor 12:12-13), must have had huge impact on them, coming from a society where such symbolic rites tended to divide the genders, assigning them to differentiated roles in society. Their understanding of the new reality birthed by the Christ was nothing other than a re-imagination of their whole social world of relations. Again, we must also factor in the effect of Paul's deliberate use of the word *ekklesia* to describe this new community, a word with a long history in the Hellenistic *polis*. Although in imperial Romano-Greek society, political power had gone from the *ekklesia*, it still functioned within the Eastern Empire as an important body amongst the elite as proving ground of their credentials to honour the Emperor and the imperial cult.⁵ But this was strictly a male preserve. However, now in Christ's *ekklesia*, a community with very different social and gender relations was taking shape. And of particular interest and relevance, '*ekklesia*' as a concept with this history, carried with it *the expectation of the right to speak and make a contribution*. So we have Paul's statement of Gal 3:28, along with one baptism for male and female, full membership for women alongside men in the *ekklesia*, combined with the charismatic function of prophecy – normally associated with temple worship – but through faith in Christ, transposed into what was a counter political-faith assembly. This cocktail of elements meant there was more than a whiff of fresh air for women used to the stultified and controlled atmosphere of repressive domination of the Roman imperial order. Here was semi-public space (cf. 1 Cor.14:16) of an alternative *ekklesia* that offered new possibilities for recently baptised women from amongst the not many wise, not many influential, not many of noble birth. Given their severely limited horizons circumscribed by the domestic sphere prior to baptism, they now had a place to find and understand themselves as never before. The result needs imagination and emotional intelligence if we are to reconstruct what was actually going on with any degree of accuracy. Against sceptical modernists I think the effort worthwhile and possible to some degree, and against couldn't-care-less post-modernists, I believe there is a reality beyond my mind's reconstruction that must be allowed to influence my reading.

⁵ See the essays by D. Georgi, S.R.F. Price and P. Zanker in R Horsley (Ed.), *Paul and Empire*. Harrisburg, Trinity, 1997

So it is not surprising that Paul had to deal with what he saw as unwelcome developments amongst women prophets within the Corinthian *ekklesia*,⁶ who seemed to interpret the re-ordering of gender relations ushered in by the Kingdom-Spirit paradigm, as a total collapse of the current order of social relations between men and women. I wonder whether this was even to the point of withdrawing from sexual relations (1 Cor 7:3-5). It may not be insignificant that Paul uses 'male' (*arsen*) and 'female' (*thēly*) in Gal 3:28 and not 'man' (*aner*) and 'woman' (*gynē*). This is possibly a deliberate echo of Gen 1:27 LXX and offers an underlying egalitarian perspective. But this is not the case when he uses 'man/woman' or 'husband/wife', where he upholds the existing cultural order of ordination-subordination, as a proper ordering of society. It gives to his writings generally the reactionary ethos that seems so tough and even offensive to modern ears, much in line with what seems to us like his bewildering position regarding slavery. In terms of our overall hermeneutical metaphor, his judgement was that given their position in the story of Act 5, they could not risk such radical approaches to gender re-ordering as envisaged by at least some, if not all, the women prophets at Corinth. These impatient and destabilising options were for him, *in that imperial context*, clearly against the nature of things since the dawn of creation. Also we can well imagine, as is almost certainly the case with regard to slavery, his pragmatic judgement may have been that any overturning of the order of subordination of women, was likely to bring down the wrath of that empire on their heads. His principle was one of egalitarian *movement*. His policy was one of conforming *stasis*. This *stasis* material still has value in that it highlights that the phrase 'no longer male nor female' cannot be interpreted as the obliteration of difference and 'otherness'. The existence of 'otherness' and its embrace, is at the heart of healthy gender relations. Paul had been saturated within a culture that assumed that difference and otherness was to be managed as a hierarchy, but we have come to realise that this need, indeed must not be so. The true benefit and fruitfulness of otherness is found in a mutuality of an underlying respect one for the other. Therefore, 'otherness' cannot be rendered in terms of authority and subordination in our rightly grounded egalitarian society, which is based in no small part upon Paul's incredible insight expressed in Gal 3:28.

Finally we might ask therefore why Paul included gender re-ordering within this key eschatological text? We might need to ask, what did Paul encounter in the early communities of Palestinian Judaism who practiced 'The Way', which made him include gender relations along with Jew-Gentile issue? A new relation of gentiles to Israel was envisaged in some of the prophets. Thus the 'Jew and Gentile' question was more obviously on the agenda in his call. He recognised the Act had changed in God's 'play' of salvation history. And perhaps 'slave and free' was a natural consequence as something at the heart of what we are increasingly discovering about Paul and the development of his gospel as a counter-imperial alternative.⁷ But it's harder to see why he extended this to male and female, given what we know of how Jewish family relations were practiced at the time. I would like to suggest that for him to include this with such clarity must indicate he encountered something new and distinctive in the actual practice of gender relations in those Palestinian assemblies. Perhaps baptism as a gender inclusive rite in contrast to male-only circumcision, together with the example of the actual relations between men and women, gave him food for thought in his Arabian hide-out (Gal 1:17)! His inclusion of gender re-ordering in this key text can only be explained historically if we assume there was something quite fundamental in the practice of Jesus himself with regard to women, which had imprinted itself on the early communities of the Jesus movement that had changed relations between men and women.⁸ Evidence that this was the case is found in the memories captured by the Synoptics as well as in Paul's practice of women as co-workers in his mission. It is this radical trajectory that gave Paul the insight to include transformation of gender relations at the heart of his gospel.

And it is his *movement* not his *stasis* we must follow as Christ's kingdom trajectory continues to arc across history. This trajectory has been discerned with greater clarity by secularists than many Christians. This gladdens my heart for its effect for women. It saddens my heart for

⁶ A. C. Wire, 'The Politics of the Assembly in Corinth' in R. A. Horsley (Ed.), *Paul & Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*. Harrisburg, Trinity, 2000

⁷ R. Horsley *op.cit* 1997 and N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul - The justice of God and the politics of the apostle*. Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1995

⁸ Stegemann & Stegemann *The Jesus Movement - A social history of its first century*. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1999

its effect on our witness. But God has always anointed many Cyruses (Isaiah 45:1), while all male ministers' meetings continue to busy themselves within the ghetto of their diminishing world. Lord! Give me some fresh air!