

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of Saint Paul

Part 9: Saint Paul—was He a Sexist?¹

There have been people over the last two thousand years who have suggested that Saint Paul was a sexist due to some of his statements in his New Testament letters. For example, in his first letter to the Corinthians we read, “It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman,” (1 Corinthians 7:1). In the same letter, Paul recommends that men live as Paul does, without a wife (1 Cor. 7:2-9). In chapter eleven, he writes that women should wear veils during religious ceremonies (1 Cor. 11:6). What exactly was Saint Paul trying to teach the Christian community at Corinth by making these statements? Was he a sexist?

There are two important reasons why Saint Paul wrote the statements mentioned above, as well as others like them. The reason for some of the statements had to do with the Parousia, also known as the “Second Coming.” Paul believed, as did all the early Christians, that Christ’s return was going to be very soon. Therefore, he thought it was best for believers to forego courtships, engagements, and weddings because they could become distractions to their growth in faith. His encouragement for believers to live celibately, then, had to do with Paul’s desire that they focus completely upon Christ. This is still the reason for the Roman Catholic Church’s policy on celibate clergy—it encourages Christians to remember that Christ is coming again very soon and we must not become distracted.

Another reason we find some seemingly strange, even sexist-sounding, statements in Paul’s letters is because he had the habit of quoting common slogans. In some translations of Scripture, these slogans were not put in quotations marks, which made them all-the-more confusing. In the New American Bible, they are appropriately put in quotations. For example, 1 Corinthians 7:1 reads, “Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman.’” Paul is clearly quoting something he has heard within the community and proceeds to address it. Another example of Paul’s fondness for quoting slogans can be found in 1 Corinthians 6:12, which reads—

“Everything is lawful for me,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is lawful for me,” but I will not let myself be dominated by anything.

One of the great Scripture scholars of our time, Fr. Raymond E. Brown, explains the above quote, writing, “We hear a slogan in circulation at Corinth that presumably is at the root of much of what Paul condemns: ‘For me every is permissible.’”² Through the development of better Scripture scholarship over the last couple of centuries, we have gained a better understanding of how some of the phrases that seem particularly sexist in Paul’s letters are actually slogans that he heard within the Christian community and wanted to comment on. In this way, Saint Paul was in touch with what was going on in the world he lived in and desired to bring the Gospel message to that world.

Saint Paul’s example is a good one for Christians today. We are called to be “in the world, but not of the world.” In other words, we are challenged to be aware of what is going on in our world and, rather than getting drawn into the world’s sinfulness, we must bring the Gospel message to it!

¹ In honor of the “Year of Saint Paul,” this is part nine of a ten part series on his life and writings.

² Raymond E. Brown, An Introduction to the New Testament, Doubleday, 1997, pg. 518.