

Dear friends,

I've updated my email list, so forgive me if this letter comes as a surprise. I commented on a friend's Facebook post, and a comment became a discussion which became an essay on Paul, women's rights and the New Testament. It's deeper than I've written in awhile, and if you believe you're likely to be offended, then feel free not to read it. Obviously same suggestion applies if you're put off by Bible discussions generally. But it is likely to be different than anything you've read, at least in a good while. Also, another comment on the Facebook post was as follows: *The bible means whatever your particular sect of Christianity wants it to mean and is therefore useless and irrelevant except as personal comfort.* You can feel free to believe that it's useless, but if people are influenced by it who are voting and making policy decisions that affect your neighbors and your children, then it is most definitely not irrelevant. That wasn't the context in which he intended the comment, but a big part of the attached letter discusses meaning what you say, understanding how others will interpret it and taking ownership of that.

I feel compelled to share this message generally because it's important, so feel free to pass it along should you be so inclined. This essay is timely and relevant. We live in a potentially perilous hour, and these issues are too important to simply wait for the future. So it is.

Bob Young

A friend of mine posted the following question of the day: Why are so many black, every Sunday church goes thanking God for Slavery. I thought it worth posting an excerpt from my part of the discussion:

Bob-The "apostle" Paul came along, said that he saw Jesus in a vision, turned Jesus' vision on its head, and told people that women should be silent and slaves should be the best slaves they can be because God made us all what we are. People largely ignore Jesus' teaching when it comes to living their lives and follow Paul's, so we have President Trump, the chosen candidate of the average so-called Christian.

Eric-He also said if a slave can get free to do it. And if Christians are the ones brainwashed then why is it that every election we vote for a president and then spend the rest of his term complaining about the government? Like no one can see that none of them care about your problems.

Bob-I'm not saying Christians are brainwashed. We, man, chose this path because God gave us free will, to obey him or not. Jesus tells us to obey God, that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love others as ourselves. Paul and his ilk tell us that Jesus makes us free from sin, that if you accept Jesus, you don't have to obey God. Were it not so, no Christian could justify voting for a man like Donald Trump, whose very existence is the practical antithesis of loving your neighbor as yourself (he's not even bothering with sheep's clothing). It's all there in the Bible, both what you say and what I'm saying. We can choose A or B. Fail though I might, I choose to love my neighbor as myself and to invest my volition in that choice.

Buffy-This isn't really what the Apostle Paul taught either. If you ever want to talk about it, I would love to. Paul's teaches are often taken out of context of specific situations and have been often misinterpreted by fundamentalists. Paul does not call slavery good, does not call women to be silent, and definitely does not tell us that once you accept Jesus you do not have to obey God.

Bob-I'm curious how you interpret these, on their own.

1st Corinthians 14:34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. 35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. 36 What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?

1st Corinthians 11:4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. 5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. 6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

Matthew 5:37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

I'm fine if you add scripture for clarification, but if you simply paste in a long article of someone else's interpretation I'll be disappointed.

Buffy-So, my biblical interpretation skills are developed in my particular Christian context. I am not Catholic or Baptist. I have never been a part of the reformed school of thought. I was raised in a Wesleyan Holiness tradition. I am definitely not a fundamentalist. So I don't think that we take the Bible at face value base on the King James Version.

First, not all words are equal in the Bible. It goes New Testament holds more weight than the Old Testament and in the NT, the words of Jesus trump all. That does not mean that the other does not have importance. It is just the lenses that we see through. So, if something in the writing of Paul seems to contradict the words of Jesus, we ask ourselves did we read it wrong.

Both Jesus and Paul empower women in a way that no society had ever. The first witness to the resurrection is a woman. Many women are recognized as ministers of the gospel in Paul's ministry. Priscilla is one of them, Phoebe too. So that leads us to question what Paul is really saying in the letter to the Corinthians, because the idea that all women should always be silent does not make sense.

So first, we need to recognize that Corinthians is a letter written to a specific group of people dealing with specific issues. Part of the problem when we read the Bible is to read it as if every word is an absolute promise to me today, and not give it historical context. The other extreme says that the Bible is only a historical document that has no implications for today. Neither is healthy.

There is a question of historical context. It is likely that women were struggling to pay attention and understand what was being taught. They were limited by their lack of education and possible language barriers (Corinth was a diverse city.) Most likely women were constantly interrupting to ask questions. Since men and women sat separately, it may be that they even shouted questions across the room to their husbands.

So this is not a blanket statement that women need to be silent in church.

The head coverings are more about being a stumbling block to others. In the Christian faith, women experienced new freedom. This included not needing to cover their heads and having a voice. The faith was revolutionary (which is why it is the birth place of feminism... although many sects have tried to do the opposite.) So Paul is telling them that if this uncovering of the head is keeping others from the faith, then they should suck it up and cover their head. That is the thing. Although I have freedom and personal rights, I surrender those for whatever God asks of me. I don't care what people wear to church and usually wear whatever is comfortable. However, when Chris was a pastor, I usually did not wear jeans on Sunday morning because the little old ladies would be offended. My job was not to teach them a lesson in judgement, my job was to love on them and help them find wholeness in Christ. Although it may not act like it, the job of the church, as the body of Christ, is to put the corporate body and those around us first.

I will leave it there for now.

My answer (which turned into an essay) is here:

Bob-Buffy, before I start, I do want to point out that we come from similar places, with similar intentions. We endeavor to raise our children well, with an active and meaningful understanding of God and a desire to help and do right by others. I have taught my children that to love others as oneself, and to act on it, is the best expression of their faith. My guess is that your teaching could be similarly translated. We both follow Jesus, though perhaps not in the same way.

You write that both Jesus and Paul empower women in a way that no other society had ever. I have two issues with this statement. The first is your insistence on lumping Paul and Jesus together. It's a common legal tactic, and I find that it's also common for people who defend Paul and his teaching. What Jesus said and taught is not at issue. I believe Jesus empowers women, and when I read, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," I can't help believing it's Mary Magdalene. Some articles suggest otherwise, but if Mary is that disciple, then it's understandable why the gospel writers would keep that vague. Jesus does empower women, glorifies them and is taught by them. Yes, I understand that Paul acknowledges women as well (you forgot Dorcas, which, my kids will tell you, is my own personal nickname for our dog). But at best Paul is one half-step forward, two steps back.

My second issue with this statement is the blanket notion that women had never been so empowered, ever, by any other society. The real issue here is the vibe that seems to come from a

certain type of Christian that everyone else is bad. Everyone's a sinner, and no one does it better than we. (Counter - *Luke 1:6* *And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.* - It seems to be saying that Elizabeth and Zacharias are at least two people that aren't going to hell. Isn't it possible that there are many more in and out of scripture?) In a similar vein you boldly write that no previous society empowered women more than Paul. Even in the Bible, the Queen of Sheba, seemingly bound by no male, comes to Solomon from a faraway land and has the power to offer him riches. Isn't it possible that women had a higher station in that land than shut-up-and-ask-your-husbands-if-you-have-any-questions Paul offers them? Wicked Jezebel seemed independently powerful. The Old Testament creates a picture suggesting that women in Egypt at least at times had a generally higher station than women in Paul's world. Outside of the Bible Cleopatra and the Queen of Carthage. When you say that no previous society empowered women more, it seems like you're casting an unfair net of assumption over all of the others, some you might have reason to know about and most that you couldn't possibly be aware of, yea or nay.

You write, "There is a question of historical context. It is likely that women were struggling to pay attention and understand what was being taught." In the context you provided, Paul writes, *Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.* First, in a similar context, I don't recall Jesus saying anything about women keeping silent in church, or having to ask their husbands if they want to learn anything. You might counter here that Jesus didn't have to say it, because it was simply the accepted law of the times. But somehow Jesus, or the gospel writers quoting him, had the good sense not to issue any blanket statements on such matters.

But my sense is that Paul meant what he said. He believed that women should be silent and dependent upon their husbands for knowledge, despite Jesus' interaction with women in the Bible. Though he revered Phoebe, whose role really isn't discussed in any detail, and Priscilla was a part of a husband and wife teaching team, I think it's a stretch to say that these two examples refute the general notion of Paul's belief system that some people are born to higher stations and some to lower in this world, with gender being one of those dividers.

This issue, Paul's edicts on the behavior of women, is just a small sample of interpretations of his teaching, and even with this issue people are willing to rewrite centuries of history, both cause and effect, in defending Paul. I won't get into all of the other potential misinterpretations of Paul's words that I would argue have had catastrophically tragic consequences through history. But I think the gender issue is enough to make the bigger case.

Back to the subject of blanket statements, I think there's an assumption on the part of fundamentalist leaning Christians that, "without Jesus and Paul, the world would be so much worse now, and through history, than it is and has been." My issue with this is the same as with your statement regarding empowering women in a way that no society ever had. While we can't know what would have happened or how things would currently be, we can make educated guesses. But the real issue is again lumping Jesus and Paul together. Because I believe the

statement, “without Jesus, the world would be so much worse now, and through history, than it is and has been,” is true. Is the same true with Paul?

Serious skeptics believe that some very clever writers just made all of it up, meaning everything in the Bible that isn't a historical record. I've never been quite that skeptical, but when I looked at the horrors committed in the name of Christ, I didn't believe that it could simply be a misinterpretation by evil men of what Jesus taught. It filled me with doubt. So I read John first, as advised. Questionable. Then I went back and read all of the gospels. Without formal instruction, you can imagine my shock to discover three separate accounts, so very different but leading to the very same conclusion, that Jesus gave his own life to give people a path to God conceived in understanding. It's like asking three different people to describe a lengthy movie, and they all describe it in the style of an eyewitness. Some leave out or add details, sometimes entire scenes, but you're left with the inescapable conclusion that all of them in fact saw it. And then I get back to John, and here again is this very different message, much of it lovely but some of it morally questionable, and really it doesn't even sound like the same movie, or perhaps a foreign-film version that takes numerous liberties with the plot and intent (Star Wars would have been a whole lot different if made in China). So then I learn that this is dated back to about 80 years after Christ was crucified, long after the other gospels, when anyone who might have witnessed Jesus would have been in their nineties. And now it all makes sense. The book of John is the gospel ultimately written by the followers of Paul, written as though witness to the events like the other three.

You will probably counter that I'm missing a great deal of historical context, but I find two versus terribly conflicting. *Matthew 22:38 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Love God, and love others as yourself, which is loving God. This is the core of what I raise my children to believe, and how I would raise anyone's children. In opposition is *John 3:18 He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* It says here very clearly that you are condemned if you don't believe in the name of Jesus, but you aren't if you do. Loving your neighbor as yourself, arguably even loving God, becomes meaningless. People have told me that loving Jesus is loving God, because Jesus IS God. Ultimately, all the Father/Son relationship language in the gospels becomes a pantomime. Jesus doesn't come right out and say, “I am God. I am a part of a trinity, a triune Godhead.” In fact in the first three gospels, arguably first hand accounts, he never says that he is God at all. Which is odd, because he does say, *let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.* But much like Paul in his letters justifying his position as a wise masterbuilder, much of Jesus' effort in the book of John is to justify, repeatedly, that he is God. How is it that this witness, writing eighty years later, experiences such a different Jesus?

Ultimately it's Paul's words and teaching at issue in this discussion, for whether properly interpreted, or misinterpreted, his words have been the source of immeasurable grief and suffering in this world, for women, for slaves, for non-believers, for believers. I could go on

about the Crusades in the name of Christ, the native peoples destroyed in a genocidal manner worldwide. Ultimately, if you believe someone is damned to an eternity of suffering for not believing in the name of Jesus, then murdering a substantial number of them and taking all their stuff is actually doing them a favor if you're simultaneously saving even a few of them. You can't, on the other hand, justify it as loving your neighbor as yourself. But the victims of Paul's careless words, or misinterpreted, or properly interpreted words, are hardly limited to foreign peoples. Untold millions were also killed in Christian on Christian violence. Arguably more than foreign people if you just count blood spilled directly and don't shift some of the blame to the varying political intrigues at the time. Paul's words are separating, inspiring division, telling Christian who they should stay away from. *Mark and avoid* those who speak against Paul's doctrine.

Here's an alternate conjecture. Paul, on his way from having Christians murdered to a new place where he was going to have more Christians murdered, is so overwhelmed by the unshakable, unbreakable faith of these people (note: a faith that existed, and was growing, before he had written a word) that he has a sudden epiphany: maybe they are right, that Jesus really is what they say. And being the massive egomaniac that he is (please don't suggest that historical context would refute that conclusion), on the hot road to Damascus he has heat stroke and is severely ill, even blinded. And he concludes, "that must have been Jesus telling me to be his chief apostle," and in a short time he convinces himself of it, every word. It IS hard to kick against the pricks. Well if you can't beat them, take over. And by his thinking, it is his place to declare that Jesus is not just the Messiah, but God himself. (Counter: *Thou shalt have no other Gods before me*). And since Jesus, in Paul's mind, has declared him to be Jesus' representative on Earth, it's his place to lay down the law over and above the commandments of God.

Am I saying here that Paul intended evil? I am not. My belief is that he had good intentions and was being the big brother telling wicked man what he thought they needed to hear. He was trying to do the best job a man, with his own set of prejudices and preconceived notions, could do. He wrote some beautiful things. He wanted people to love one another and believed that it was a good thing to tell everyone that they could only get into heaven by having faith in the entity of Jesus, God on Earth. Simply loving your neighbor as yourself, of committing to yourself to the gospel of repentance for the remission of sins, the things Jesus lived, preached and taught, would ultimately be of little value in Paul's mind, because as Paul saw it, everyone is ultimately bad deep down. The physical nature of all people is an ugliness ultimately unacceptable in God's sight, by Paul's reckoning. Only believing in Jesus can save you. And Paul wrote his words with a farseeing eye on bringing Christianity to the Romans, and perverting it enough to make it acceptable in their site, suggesting that it's good that some are born emperors and some born slaves, because God made them that way.

There is a Western-centric attitude that if it weren't for Paul, Jesus' message wouldn't have spread to the gentiles. But again, it's another blanket assumption. What if Jesus' words and story, and the witnesses thereof, were in the Bible, and Paul's were not? Without Paul's careless words, how many fewer "witches" would have been burned at the stake? How many more women would have found their way to the pulpit who knows how many centuries ago? How many fewer people would have been killed in the name of Jesus? (Never in Paul's name mind

you.) My belief is that if not for Paul, Christianity would have spread to the western world anyway. It was already spreading. To those who suggest that it would have ultimately failed without Paul I say have a little faith in Jesus. Like Paul, Christian priests and ministers have worked very hard over the centuries to justify the current church power structure, and both past and present interpretations. Now that we have a hopefully better understanding of the rights of women as equal to those of men, as well as the rights of people generally, they go back and argue historical context to justify all that Paul said. For these people, following and building on centuries of doctrine, to consider the possibility that we've made a mistake, that Jesus showed us the right path but an antichrist enticed us down another, is simply unthinkable. And like the doctrine of many religions, those who doubt Paul have to live in fear of being marked and avoided, ostracized by the community. You know Jesus said that others would come saying, *here is Christ, or there*, that would deceive the very elect in the lifetimes of those bearing witness to him (by which I believe he meant God's people, not simply Jews). He didn't say it might happen. He said it would happen. Given 2000 years of history, and a near future just now beginning coalesce, how can you be so certain that it didn't? But we chose it. And we're responsible for it. Whether we ultimately choose it again is up to us.

It still comes down to a question of *love God, and love others as yourself, the two great commandments*, versus, *whosoever believes in Jesus shall have everlasting life, and whoever does not is condemned already, because he hasn't believed in the name of Jesus*. My first comment to which you responded connected Paul and people who voted for the President. In fairness, people vote for various reasons, so saying that particular people voted for particular reasons involves some speculation on my part, and perhaps some of that is unfair. But the majority of those who most strongly espouse the second belief voted for our current President, and without those voters, these highly religious, Paul following voters, Donald Trump would certainly not be the President. And I'm not talking about Republicans, though a great many of these voters have and continue to support the Republican party. Trump represents a new trend in thinking, always putting yourself over the outsider. If this were just about centuries of tragic consequences, that would be one thing, but the point of my letter is about the now and the future. If we behave the way we're behaving, trend in this direction we're trending, in this green time of plenty, how will we behave in a future of scarcity of our own making? Our nation had taken modest steps to lead the world away from the precipice of destruction. It only took one election of this man and his Congressional cronies to render it naught, and he's just doing what he promised. These aren't people who care about rising and acidifying oceans, nor people who want to keep forests and species from dying. These aren't people who want to avoid drought, starvation and unceasing windstorms, and the ensuing conflict of man killing man in the name of Christ, again. These are churchgoing folk who love Paul and love Donald Trump, because they want to bear witness to the end times, regardless of what happens to the billions of unjustified (in their minds), so that they themselves can be glorified in Christ. Granted, some of these last statements are generalizations, but they're more true than false. Love these people, show them understanding, but stand against them when they endanger the innocent.

Though loving your neighbor as yourself is not a platform espoused by any political party, I stand by the notion that those who really live primarily by this belief are least likely to have voted for Trump. My assumption is that if you crunch the numbers and eliminate race as a factor, people

with young children might be the next highest demographic that did not support Trump, while people with no children or only grown children are among the demographics that were most likely to do so. If you love others as yourself, then you work, and vote, for a future for other people's children that you would want for your yourself and your children.

I encourage everyone to read the Bible. It's a great place to start in the search for truth, and I'm not suggesting that you haven't. But it doesn't have to be a complex truth that requires jumping through mindbending perceptual hoops to be understood in order to prove that Paul actually said perfect things and not cruel and ignorant things that have justified cruel and ignorant realities. We need now to teach a better understanding grounded in what Jesus taught, so that people might embrace, once things start looking uglier if not before, that the great commandments are how we should strive to act, both in our daily lives and our politics. If we have any chance of avoiding catastrophe, it will come from encouraging one another to act on this belief as a natural law and walking that line ourselves. That whatever God is, he who sent his son Jesus to be crucified so that we can better understand love, it is God's will that we live to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's not just a good idea. And for people that can't or simply refuse to acknowledge God, it is upon us to foster the understanding that loving others as ourselves is loving God, whether God is acknowledged or not, and I believe it's better, more right, when he is. But the idea is transitive. How we love our neighbors is what we should be discussing.

Jesus came to free the world, to tell people, you can see God yourselves. He didn't come to exclude people from God, or to tell people that the only way to God was through him by name. That's just what Paul, and others like him, believed. And Paul was wrong. So it is.