

Did the later church suppress women?

THE CLAIM

‘Several changes can be noticed which confirm the kind of trend we are describing here and which count further against an involved role for women.

Leadership was narrowed down to a male priesthood, the Breaking of Bread became ritualised, texts were altered to downplay the position of women, women were blamed for all the world’s troubles, and Old Testament purity laws were reintroduced.

Pagan teachings and attitudes began to be imported, especially when Christianity became state-supported under Constantine. All of these downgraded women, and all are contrary to New Testament teaching.’¹

‘With changes such as these, which indicate a move away from the original gospel and from New Testament ecclesial belief and practice, it is easy to see how the New Testament’s initial involvement of women and the freedoms granted them there were eliminated.’²

THE FACTS

The scholarly consensus is that the role of women in the early Christian community was non-egalitarian from the start, and that there is no evidence for a gradual decline from an original egalitarianism to a later patriarchal hierarchy. The practice of the 2nd and 3rd century Christians with regard to women teaching in the congregation (and having authority over men), was the **same as** that of the 1st century community, not different:

‘One can see that **from the time of the New Testament little progress was made** in women assuming teaching or leadership roles **over men in the church**. None of the writings of the **church during the second and third centuries**, except those written by leaders of hetero-dox sects, sanctioned women as teachers of men, as elders, or as those responsible for other typically male functions.

Women did, however, **have important ministerial roles as widows and deaconesses**. In these positions they assisted men by **caring for the needs of women**. Classes of women servants of the church already existent in the New Testament in embryonic form **were allowed to expand and became better defined**, but women, in agreement with **New Testament teaching**, were not allowed to have authority over men in the church.’³

³ House, ‘A Biblical View of Women in the Ministry Part 5: Distinctive Roles for Women in the Second and Third Centuries’, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, p.52 (146.581.1989); House is a complementarian, but his views here are supported here by the egalitarians quoted subsequently.

DAVID HORRELL

‘The evidence surveyed above concerning the Corinthian community in its early years also **presents a sharp challenge to socio-historical studies which describe the earliest Christian communities as radical or egalitarian communities** in sharp contrast to their societal context, or which characterize the movement as a ‘discipleship of equals’, **into which patriarchalisation and social ordering gradually crept**.’⁴

‘This is not to deny that Paul may have had a vision of the community as in some way ‘egalitarian’, **but it certainly cannot simply be assumed that this ever or anywhere approximated to the reality encountered**.’⁵

JOHN ELLIOTT

‘If such an egalitarian community had been established by Jesus and such monumental changes had been achieved, **where is the evidence thereof?** And of course that which qualifies as evidence is not alleged ideas of equality, but **concrete proof of a radical alteration of social relationships having taken place within the Jesus movement** and indicative of an “equality of its members.”

On this the New Testament is silent as are extra-biblical sources. **No historical evidence is to be found in the writings of Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius or any other author outside the New Testament** indicating or

⁴ Horrell, ‘The social ethos of the Corinthians correspondence: interests and ideology’, p. 124 (1996).

⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

¹ ‘All One’, p. 180 (March 2009).

² Ibid., p. 183.

alluding to a movement in first century Palestine that accomplished a social transformation along the lines required by the egalitarian hypothesis.⁶

‘Attention to household and family following Jesus’ death and instruction on household conduct **did not entail an “abandonment” of equality and a “reversion” to patriarchalism** (as argued especially by Schüssler Fiorenza), **but continuation of a concentration on household and family initiated by Jesus.**⁷

‘Families and households, **patriarchally structured**, remained the focus of mission and the locus of assembly as the messianic movement continued its spread across the Mediterranean world. **Few hints of equality are traced to this period by egalitarian theorists.** One explanation offered for this absence of evidence **involves the claim that egalitarianism, once flourishing, was now deliberately suppressed within the Jesus movement** and patriarchal structures were reintroduced in order to facilitate an assimilation to Greco-Roman society.⁸

‘The alleged egalitarian revolution **left not a single trace in the historical record.**

⁶ Elliott, ‘Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian. A Critique of an Anachronistic and Idealist Theory’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, p. 90 (32.85.2002).

⁷ Elliott, ‘The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian But Family-Oriented’, p. 173, *Biblical Interpretation* (11.2.2003).

⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

There is no incontestable evidence of a supposed egalitarian phase of the Jesus movement prior to Paul **and hence no evidence that Paul and his successors undermined and reversed this egalitarianism.** To the contrary, after Jesus’ death the movement was marked by the same social, economic and legal inequalities that prevailed earlier.

Complex economic, social, and cultural changes would have had to precede and accompany the dramatic shifts in the movement’s internal structure from patriarchy to egalitarianism back to patriarchy.¹⁹ **Of such changes there is not the slightest evidence in the historical record.**

That this all occurred within some seventy years, as postulated by Schüssler Fiorenza, **defies imagination.** Her theory is sociologically implausible **and historically indemonstrable.**¹⁹

‘If some form of egalitarianism actually had been established, **we also would expect to find some lament of its loss** by those who had previously benefited from the “old” arrangement. But of such a lament **there is also no trace.** Nor is there evidence of **any attempt to justify a latter return to patriarchal patterns**, as would be required in order to gain compliance from persons prospering from previous egalitarian arrangements.’¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

JUDITH LIEU

‘This essay has already rejected any model which starts with ‘the good’ that Christianity or Judaism could offer women, for such models tend to personify Christianity, usually in the person of Jesus or Paul, when **recent study suggests that both Jesus and Paul were ambiguous regarding this issue**, and that any place women had in their movements **was ancillary to their definition of those movements.**¹¹

ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

‘Rather than **striving to show that women played a more prominent part than our evidence suggests**, or that the prohibitions of the Pastorals **do not mean what they appear to say**, it would be **more honest to admit the facts** and then, if so minded, **set them aside.**

Again, rather than using the New Testament to establish a primitive, egalitarian innocence for the church, **while discarding much of the New Testament in the process**, those for whom the New Testament documents speak with authority would do better to take them as a whole and ask what we learn from the disciples of the apostles and the fact that they in their generation closed the door to women in leadership **after Jesus and Paul had seemed to open it.**¹²

(Jonathan Burke, 2009)

¹¹ Lieu, ‘Neither Jew nor Greek? constructing early Christianity’, p. 97 (2002).

¹² Campbell, ‘The elders: Seniority within earliest Christianity’, p. 275 (2004).