

SAINT PAUL NO MALE CAUVENIST

St. Paul has gotten a lot of bad press in recent years in women's circles. He comes off looking like the original male chauvinist goat. And not without good reason.

After all, if you page through the documents attributed to him in the Christian scriptures, you'll find things like this: "The head of a woman is her husband," at 1 Corinthians 11:3.

And: "I don't want women even to talk in church," at 1 Corinthians 14:33-35. "If they don't understand what's going on, let them wait until they get home and discuss it with their husbands."

Or even: "Women are not allowed to teach men," at 1 Timothy 2:8-15. "They can just stifle themselves."

With quotations like that, no wonder the feminist movement has had a hard time giving him a favorable press. You get the impression Paul didn't have any use for women in the earliest Christian church circles.

But don't bet he Ladies Aid treasury on that! As a matter of fact, there are some unmistakable hints that the apostle wasn't completely chauvinistic.

At Philippians 4:2-3, for example, he scolds two women embroiled in an embarrassing spat. The point is not that they were quarreling; it has become painfully obvious that males throughout the church also quarreled.

Rather, the point is that Paul singles out these two women precisely because they are leaders in the church. In fact, he reminds the two quarreling women that they had worked side by side with him in the cause.

Or thumb through the last chapter of Romans. A double handful of women are renamed in Paul's list of greetings: Phoebe, Priscilla, Marian, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mom, Julia, and Nerus' sister. Some of them are described as ministers, hard workers, and apostles.

Even the letter which does the most to put women down contains a few pro-feminist lines.

Thus 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, which insists that women must wear hats when they pray or prophesy in the church, obviously assumes that women are doing some praying and prophesying!

The long and short of it is that Paul's comments about women's place in the church are not all one-sided. In some cases he sounds like he is putting females in their place. In other cases, he treats them as equal partners.

But what about a woman's place in the home? Again the passages associated with Paul's name straddle the fence.

Colossians 3:18-19, for example, balances the advice for wives to be subject to their husbands with equally valid advice for husbands to love their wives.

And at 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 he treats husbands and wives equally. Each has a claim on the other. No playing favorites.

Even the lengthy harangue in Ephesians 5:21-33 about wifely subordination and husbandly love—although it sounds patronizing to modern ears—ends up being a model of the mysterious relationship between Christ and the church.

You have to admit it all comes off sounding a little too Archie Bunkerish. Wives are obligated to look up to their husbands. But husbands are merely to condescend to respect their wives. To 21st century American ears, that sounds like a put-down.

But in Paul's day it must have sounded revolutionary. Perhaps revolting. In the Jewish circles from which he came, there was no such thing as a woman rabbi.

So for him to acknowledge that women make some of the best teachers and church workers was no small deal.

And in the Greek and Roman communities where he worked, women were often treated as little more than their husbands' property. So for Paul to suggest that they must be respected as people, full-fledged human beings, was something of a social innovation.

He must have blown their minds when he suggests in Galatians 3:8 that in church circles there can be no distinction between male and female! Obviously it doesn't always work out that neatly in practice.

Paul himself hedges his bets from time to time. But considering the culture of his day, he didn't do half badly. In any event, he certainly was no male chauvinist.