***All The Apostles of God***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Sept 8, 2024*

*based on 1 John 5:1-6*

Way back in 1907 a British scholar named William Mitchell Ramsay and a German scholar named Gustav Adolph Deissmann teamed up. They got on a couple of trains, then a couple of boats and finally two horses and went around visiting ancient sites in the northern Mediterranean – places where the apostle Paul had planted an early form of Christianity. They read some ancient stone inscriptions in those towns that said that Caesar Augustus was divine. They saw inscriptions that showed that he was called “the son of god,” and “lord,” and “redeemer,” and “savior of the world” and they said. “Hmm? Those are familiar titles.” They saw all that and they said, as it were: “Oh, my God! So *that’s* what these titles in the Bible are all about!”

They realized that when Jesus was addressedå by those same titles it was as a result of the early Christians saying, in effect: “These are the titles of Caesar, but we refuse to give them to Caesar. We will assign them instead to Jesus, someone who really is of God, someone who really can redeem the world from the false gospel of Roman power.”

They were not simply applying to Jesus powerful titles in everyday language out of love for him alone. They were intentionally acting subversively. So, think of it. Way back in 1907 these two scholars saw the implications of something that happened 1900 years before, and they realized that what those early Christian resistors were doing had been either forgotten or hushed up all that time.

So, what happened? Well, they came back to the academic world and gave their report, but the Christian world of 1907 wasn’t ready yet to understand or embrace the deep significance of their findings. You might not be surprised to hear that.

So, instead of twentieth century scholars embracing this revelation and building a theology on a fact that was nearly 2000 years old – a theology that recognized the desire of the first Christians to announce to the world that God was God, not Caesar, the scholars of the 20th century did something else.

They looked at the popular psychological insights of Freud and others of the time and interpreted the life and teachings of Jesus and Paul through those highly individualistic lenses and left the newly unearthed ideas and agendas of those early Christians out of their interpretations of the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

And that’s a shame, because the revelations Drs. Ramsey and Deissman brought back with them from looking at the ruins of the ancient world could have helped Bible scholars understand so much that was in the Bible that they could not understand, including the text we have before us today.

With that in mind, let’s take another look at the words from I John 5:

*For the love of God is this, that we obey God’s commandments. And God’s commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world, but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*

Let me put that last part this way, “Who is it that conquers the world, but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God, *and not Augustus Caesar*.” I added that last part about Augustus Caesar, but you can be sure that the ancient author was thinking of him when he wrote those words. He left Caesar’s name off because he did not have a death wish, but you can be sure that his Christian readers knew what he was saying here.

Now, in case you didn’t catch what I was saying, Caesar Augustus was considered by Roman law and Roman mythology to be the Son of God. He was, after all, the son of Julius Caesar a man who set himself up as a God. It’s one of the reasons he was killed by Brutus and Cassius.

So, again, the early Christians were adamant in claiming that Jesus was the son of God and that neither Augustus Caesar nor any of his family line were god-like in any way.

Which means that Christianity is, by its very genesis and nature, a subversive religion.

Now, that’s *not* what is taught in many pulpits today, but it is the truth brought back from the Mediterranean world by those two Bible scholars in 1907.

And that’s not all that the discovery of our two scholars from 1907 helped us understand in these verses from I John 5. Let me read the first verse once more.

*For the love of God is this, that we obey God’s commandments. And God’s commandments are not burdensome.*

Now what in the world is that supposed to mean? It means simply that while Caesar’s commandments are known by all in the ancient world to be burdensome (especially if you are a slave and have no rights), John says, God’s “commandments are not burdensome.” They actually bring life to those who choose to live in what Jesus called “the reign of God” as opposed to the kingdom of Caesar.

Once again, can you see how subversive these ancient teachings of Paul and Jesus really are? Can you see how a slave in the first century might find that to be very good news?

We could go on a very long time uncovering what this means but let me just bring up one area where the teachings of Caesar and the teachings of Jesus come into collision.

It’s remarkable how different the Christian world and the Roman worlds were. For example, there was a gross shortage of women in the ancient world during the first century. Sociological historians have estimated that there were about 130-140 men for every 100 women.

This is so because many female infants were left outside in public places to die of exposure and also because of the mortal risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth and how families with boys tried to quit having children.

But note this -- both Christians and their critics reported a marked over-representation of women in early Christian churches – there were many more women Christians than men Christians.

Now, before explaining this, let’s go back to the fact of the shortage of women in the empire: Here is some hard evidence. I could even call it, appalling evidence: There exists a letter written by a man named Hilarion to his wife, Alis that gives us more than a hint as to how Roman men felt about women.

Hilarion was probably a laborer from Oxyrhynchos, Egypt who had moved to Alexandria in search of work. At home he had left a wife, a child, and probably a mother in law. He was apparently living with some other friends from his home town, who were about to return to Oxyrhynchos. So, he took the opportunity of sending a letter with them to his wife. The letter is, in fact, dated June 17, 1 B.C..

*I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive my pay I will send it on to you. If you are delivered of a child before I come home, if it is a boy, keep it, if it is a girl, discard it. Now, why did you send me word saying, “Don’t forget me.” How could I ever forget you? Quit worrying.*

So, compare the fact of the lack of value of women in the Roman world as we saw there, with the preponderance of women in the Christian church. It’s as if the Christian church was a place of refuge for women in the Roman world. Well, it was.

Interestingly, Roman critics of Christianity used this fact to their advantage. In diatribes against Christians they liked to say, “What respectable group would cater to women?”

The answer is, simply that the early churches valued women’s contributions. Not only did women show their strength in numbers, they did so in leadership positions as well.

Both the New Testament book of Acts and the letters of Paul refer to the missionary couple Priscilla and Aquila, with Priscilla’s name preceding her husband’s in four of six instances (Acts 18:18, 26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19). Since the husband’s name usually figures first in ancient pairings, this pattern suggests Priscilla’s prominence.

In [Romans 16](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+16&version=ESV) Paul refers to women and men alike as partners in the gospel. Paul also refers to a woman named, Junia as an apostle, a fact most English translations dismissed until 1989 (Romans 16:7) by calling her Junius, a male name.

Paul’s letters refer to several other prominent women, including one named Euodia and another named Synthyche, who likely led the church in Philippi (Philippians 4:2).

Paul also mentions a woman named Chloe, whose “people” maintained communication with Paul in his absence from Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11).

Over and over the book of Acts and letters of Paul refer to women who hosted church gatherings in their homes, a service that must have implied some level of status (12:12; 16:40; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Philemon 1-2; see Colossians 4:15).

How can this be? Well, the culture was set up in a way that made this situation happen. Here’s how that worked – I’ve spoken of this in previous sermons.

In the ancient world, men put off marriage until their early 30s. They married women in their teens. Men would often die in their late 30s or early 40s and they would then leave widows who were often in their 20s.

Now by Roman law, the women were allowed to inherit their husbands’ wealth and property. But, should they choose to remarry, all their property would revert to their new husband. There were no pre-nups in the Roman world.

I ask you, what woman with half a brain would do that? Many remained single out of a sense of self-preservation.

Therefore, we have many examples of powerful, creative, literate and accomplished, rich widowed women who took up roles of patronage and community leadership, often in Christian communities.

Now, to be honest, while early Christianity did seem to be an oasis of feminist liberty in a world of oppressive patriarchy, this did not last. The leadership of women quickly emerged as a point of controversy among the growing Christian church. We see evidence of this in letters like I & II Timothy and Titus that say that women must be submissive.

Aren’t those letters from Paul? No. They come decades after his death and don’t jibe with what he says in the earlier genuine letters of Paul.

No, a preponderance of critics today believe that the Apostle Paul recognized women as full partners in ministry. It is believed by most scholars that when Paul says in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Jesus Christ,” he means it.

However, a few decades after Paul, there was a strong backlash against this. As Christianity grew, the prevailing cultural norms seeped their way into the church and that is likely when the letters of Paul were edited and certain verses were slipped in like, “Women must be silent in the church because it unseemly for them to speak up there. If they have questions, let them ask their husbands when they go home afterward.”

There was a struggle in the first couple of centuries over this because it is clear that some later Christians remembered Paul as an advocate for women’s authority. Look into a second century document titled, *The*[*Acts of Paul and Thecla*](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/thecla.asp) and you will see an account of Paul teaching side by side with a woman apostle.

As I said earlier, later letters like I & II Timothy and Titus, purporting to be from Paul, speak of women as needing to be subordinate to men, but again, a large margin of scholars today understand those letters to be written decades after the death of Paul.

Why is Paul’s name on them? Because using his name brought authority to their works. This was a practice used by many in the ancient world.

But, looking at the earlier letters of Paul one can see that the agendas of the later are transparently patriarchal. They are reactionary, they are, in fact, anti-Pauline.

This being the case, what about the rest of the New Testament witness? I mean, what did Jesus think of women?

Interpreters have long noticed that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, which share a common author noted as Luke, prominently feature female characters.

Luke introduces the prophet Anna, and names three women who support Jesus and his disciples as they travel (8:2-3). In Luke we read a scene in which Mary sits at Jesus’ feet while Martha performs service or ministry (Greek:  *diakonia*).

In the book of Acts we meet other women leaders: Dorcas, Mary the mother of John Mark, Lydia, Philip’s daughters and as I mentioned earlier, Priscilla.

All in all, our best evidence indicates that women played a relatively prominent role in the early Christian communities, compared to their larger social contexts, but to be fair, the evidence is mixed.

For one thing, the first century and second centuries were periods of gender experimentation, as people debated whether women could study philosophy or join men at public meals.

Moreover, while some early Christian women and men functioned as equals in leadership and authority, practices varied from one Christian community to another.

Eventually the role of women constituted a point of vigorous debate among the churches, leading to women’s subordination as an official policy in almost all churches. Patriarchy won.

The same thing happened in the Muslim world. You look back at the relationship of the founder of that religion, “blessings be upon him,” with his wife, a widow who owned and ran her first husband’s mercantile business, you can see some pretty stark parallels. It’s the way patriarchy works, and eventually gets the upper hand.

But hey, we are living in a time when things are changing, when ancient lies (and modern ones) won’t stay undercover any more, where we are beginning to read the Bible on its own terms, where we have come to understand that *all* God’s children are meant to be welcomed and honored and respected for who they are.

Where we can rejoice and say with Paul, “There ***is*** neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for we are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Amen