

The Role of Women in the Church

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One of our readers asked this question: "What is your position on women teaching in the church or even speaking in church (e.g. praying, prophesying, etc.)?"

This question, in one form or another, has been bandied about by churches for a long time. Churches find it difficult to answer for a couple of reasons. Some are too influenced with non-biblical concerns (such as contemporary ideas about the role of women in society). Others are not using sound exegesis (allowing the Bible to interpret itself) to examine the relevant Scriptures. There is more to this question than pointing to a couple of Bible verses and drawing a conclusion that has little to do with the Bible. There are several Scriptures that must be honestly examined even if it means flying in the face of political correctness.

Of the pertinent New Testament Scriptures that address this subject, the hardest to be understood is found in 1 Corinthians 11. But a principle of biblical interpretation is that unclear Scriptures must be understood in light of clearer ones. Therefore, we will begin with the clearest.

In his instructions to the church at Corinth, Paul said, "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" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Notice that in this one passage alone, Paul says in three different ways that women are not to speak in church. First, he says, "Let your women keep silence in the churches." Second, he says, "it is not permitted unto them to speak." Third, he says, "it is a shame for women to speak in the church." This repetition carries great force.

I will occasionally check a passage in the *Revised English Bible*, not for literal accuracy, but as a sort of paraphrase/commentary because its modern language is so direct. Notice verses 34-35 in this version: "As in all congregations of God's people, women should keep silent at the meeting. They have no permission to talk, but should keep their place as the law directs. If there is something they want to know, they can

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ask their husbands at home. It is a shocking thing for a woman to talk at the meeting."

Who can argue in the face of such plain language? Well, some will, of course, but Paul anticipates this in the verses that follow. Going back to the King James Version, we read, "What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order" (verses 36-40).

Paul's mentioning of prophesying and speaking in tongues brings us to context. The command that women are to be silent in church is at the end of a number of commands that Paul gives concerning conducting the public worship decently and in order. I won't quote all of chapter 14 (you can read it for yourself), but I will summarize beginning with verse 26. Apparently, the Corinthian church, unlike the other churches, was allowing anyone, at anytime during the meeting, to do certain things that he then lists. They were singing (individually, not congregationally). They had "a doctrine"—were teaching, they were speaking in tongues, they were bringing a "revelation" of knowledge or prophecy to the church, they were interpreting tongues, and they were judging what was spoken (verse 29).

In the verses that follow, Paul gives instructions on how to correct this chaotic situation. Basically, the remedy is that one person should speak at a time, not more than three people should be allowed to speak in one service, and women should be silent. Concerning the women, from this context, we see that their silence means that they are not to sing in church outside of congregational singing (no "special music"), they are not to teach, they are not to speak in tongues, they are not to bring a revelation, they are not to interpret a tongue, and they are not to judge the speaking. Further, Paul says that if the women "will learn anything," obviously meaning if they have a question about something said, "let them ask their husbands at home" (verse 35). "Husbands" is translated from *andras*, literally meaning "men." So, the silence of women also means that they are not to ask questions in church.

Now we must ask, Upon what grounds does Paul base his instruction that women are to keep silent in church? This is what he says: "They [women] are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the

law" (verse 34). Paul appeals to the law. But what does he mean by "the law"? There is no specific Old Testament law that says women are to keep silent. Paul's use of the word "law" here does not refer to specific commands. He must be using "law" in the same way that it was often used, to mean the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch (see, for example, Matthew 12:5; Luke 16:16; Acts 13:15). In other words, there is something in the first five books of the Bible that Paul knows backs up his position concerning women being silent in church. Precisely what Scripture he has in mind, he reveals in another passage concerning women being silent in church.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Paul instructs young Timothy, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." The similarity between this and 1 Corinthians 14 cannot be missed. Women are to learn in silence with all subjection (the Greek word translated "subjection" is directly related to the Greek word translated "obedience" in 1 Corinthians 14:34). But to whom are they to be in subjection? 1 Corinthians 14 relates women's obedience to their being silent in church and learning from their men at home. This passage in 1 Timothy relates subjection to learning in silence (we can assume from 1 Corinthians 14 that this means listening in the meeting and asking their men at home), not teaching, and not usurping authority over men. Next, Paul tells us what specifically in the law supports his position.

"For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" (verses 13-15). As we suspected in discussing 1 Corinthians 14, Paul's citing the law to back up his position is not a reference to a command, but to a general statement of fact about the Creation found in one of the first five books of the Old Testament—Genesis.

Because of the creation order—Adam first, and then Eve, and because Adam was not deceived but Eve was, women are to be silent in church and not exercise authority over men. In Genesis 2:18-25, we read that Eve was made to be a helper who was meet (fit) for Adam. Unlike Adam, she was not made directly from the dust of the ground. She was made from a rib God took from Adam's side. She was made for Adam, and she was made not entirely independent from Adam.

Paul next writes of Eve being deceived by the Serpent, Satan (v. 14). Paul clearly says that Adam was not deceived, but Eve was deceived. Some Greek manuscripts use the same word for "deceived" in both places it appears in this verse. Other Greek manuscripts use a more emphatic word for Eve's deception: "And Adam was not [*apatēthē*—deceived or deluded], but the woman being [*exapatētheisa*—thoroughly beguiled or deluded through persuasion] was in the [*parabasei*—overstepping or act of going aside]. Whether the more emphatic word belongs here or not is debatable. But there is no question that Paul does use a form of the more emphatic word when referring to Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3: "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled [*exēpatēsen*] Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."

It should be pointed out that neither of the above words for deluded or beguiled are the word used to describe Satan's deception upon the entire world. When the Bible speaks of Satan's deception of the world, the word is *planao*, which means to cause to wander or go astray, to be or let oneself be misled, to wander about. Adam and all the world since (including, of course, women) have been deceived in this way. But Eve was also beguiled (2 Corinthians 11:3).

But why should Eve's being beguiled in the Garden of Eden cause Paul to say that women should be silent in church? The answer must be that women in general have a tendency to be more easily duped than men. Because of this tendency, they are not to be teachers, or preachers, or hold an office (which implies authority) in church. The Bible does balance things out. The very fact that Adam was not duped, but sinned against God fully knowing what he was doing, means that he was more culpable. Adam is more responsible for the sin by which the world fell than Eve, and, in fact, it is usually called "Adam's sin."

Further, Paul goes on to say in 1 Timothy 2:15, "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." This one sentence says much. Although Bible scholars have often debated about the meaning of this Scripture, I believe that interpreting it with 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, 11-12 gives as good or better an understanding of it as any other: "For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man [this corresponds to 1 Timothy 2:13, "For Adam was first formed, then Eve."].... Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man,

even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God." In other words, even though Eve was made for Adam and was formed from his rib, men are born of women. This, I believe, corresponds to "she shall be saved in childbearing" in 1 Timothy 2:15. And, Paul goes on to say, everyone is from God. Even though woman is for man and from man, her husband is not her superior as far as salvation. And God has indicated this in the physical realm by having men born from women.

Nevertheless, to return to the main subject, we must remember that Paul clearly states that women are to remain silent in church because of the creation order and because Eve was deceived.

With this background, it is time to look at 1 Corinthians 11. We will begin with verse 3: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." Here again we see order. God is the head of Christ. Christ is the head of man. Man is the head of woman. Like it or not, this is what the Holy Spirit says through Paul.

In verse 4, we read, "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head." Seemingly clear enough. It is wrong for a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered.

The problems begin with verse 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." Is Paul saying that it is permissible for a woman to say a prayer or speak a prophecy in the church meeting as long as her head is covered? No! How do we know this? Because it is contrary to the clear Scriptures we have just examined. Paul, let alone the Holy Spirit, is not schizophrenic. What, then, can he mean?

Several possibilities have been offered by people examining this passage. Of course, there is only one right answer. All of this is thoroughly discussed in another article on this site. I don't want to repeat myself, so I suggest that you read "The Head Covering." In short, the article shows from the Bible that praying and prophesying are simply two activities of public worship that Paul intended to stand for all. When a man leads in any of these activities, the entire assembly participates, even if silently. Therefore, women "pray and prophesy" just by attending public worship, even if they remain silent (which they should).

This is what eighteenth-century Baptist commentator John Gill says of 1 Corinthians 11:5: "Not that a woman was allowed to pray publicly in the congregation, and much less to preach or explain the word, for these things were not permitted them: see 1 Corinthians 14:34, but it designs any woman that joins in public worship with the minister in prayer, and attends on the hearing of the word preached, or sings the praises of God with the congregation, as we have seen, the word prophesying signifies, with her head uncovered." Therefore, according to Gill, Paul is saying that women should not speak in church and should also have their heads covered because they participate silently in congregational prayer, by listening to the preaching, and by participating in congregational singing.

So, women are to be silent in church except for congregational singing. All of the relevant Scriptures, then, agree. Should women teach in church? No. Should women preach in church? No. Should women pray aloud in church? No. Should women sing without the rest of the congregation in church? No. Should women be ordained to an office in church? No.

But isn't this outdated, something only for the times and society in which Paul wrote? Absolutely not! There is nothing that distinguishes these Scriptures we have just examined that would make us believe that they are limited to the time and society in which Paul wrote. Say that these passages of God's Word do not apply to us today, and you have torn open a hole in your armor that will allow Satan to destroy the entire Word of God, and you!

Some other questions may come to mind. 1) Should women teach children in Sunday school? 2) What about women teaching or preaching to other women? 3) What about women deaconesses? 4) If women are to be silent in church (which seems rather passive), what active role are they to have?

1) Should women teach children in Sunday school? The question is premised on the assumption that there should be such a thing as a Sunday school. The Bible gives no sanction to Sunday schools. It says that children are to be taught by their parents (see our article "Should You Be Homeschooling?" for the relevant Scriptures at <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/shouldyoubehomeschooling.htm>). Fathers and mothers (when they are both Christians) should work together in determining what this teaching should be. A role for the church, in this regard, is in imparting to parents a good understanding of Scripture,

teaching them to be good parents, and helping them know how to teach. Families should attend church meetings together.

2) What about women teaching or preaching to other women? Paul instructs Titus to "speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.... The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober [sober minded], to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:1, 3-5). Here is a direct command that the older women "teach" younger women. The emphasis, however, is on their doing this by example. Notice that Paul starts his command to the aged women by saying "they are to be in behaviour as becometh holiness...." The Greek word translated "behaviour" is *katastēmati*. It means "demeanor" or "deportment." Then, at the end of verse 3 and going into verse 4, Paul says that these older women are to be "teachers of good things [*kalodidaskalous*—"a teacher of good, beautiful, or virtuous things"]; that they may teach [*sōphronizōsin*] the young women to be sober...." *Sōphronizōsin* means to restore them to their senses or to self-control. Paul does not have in view here preaching by women to women, formal classroom instruction, women's Bible studies, women's fellowship societies, or seminars. He is primarily talking about older women setting a good example for younger women. By this, and, perhaps, by normal and natural informal conversation, they are to teach younger women to behave according to the list in verses 4-5; that is, to be good wives and mothers.

3) What about women deaconesses? The Greek word *diakonos* merely means "servant." Both men and women are recorded as serving in the church and being called servants. This word is used, for example, in Romans 16:1, where Paul writes, "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea." But there is also a use of *diakonos* that only applies to men. In Acts 6, we read of Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas being set apart to serve the church by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:1-6). These were all men. There is never a mention of women being set apart like this. To settle the matter, in 1 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, "Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife." Women cannot be the husbands of one wife. While there are many biblical examples of women serving in the church, they cannot be set apart to the responsibility that we today call "deacon."

4) If women are to be silent in church (which seems rather passive), what active role are they to have? We have already seen in this article one active role that older women are to have: they are to be examples to the younger women to love their husbands and children, obey their husbands, be chaste, be keepers at home, etc. We see another active role in the example of the women who followed Jesus (see, for example, Luke 8:1-3), and in the examples of Phebe (see Romans 16:1-2), Dorcas (see Acts 9:36), and other women in the New Testament. They served the physical needs of the church.

At this point, we should re-examine 1 Timothy 2. Earlier, we looked at verses 11-15 as they concerned women being silent and not teaching. But we should look at the verses that come before these. Paul begins the chapter by saying that the church should pray for all kinds of people, even for kings and others in authority. Then, in verse 8, he writes, "I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting." "Men" here comes from a Greek word that specifically means males. The verses that follow then give instructions concerning the women.

"In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (verses 9-10). The "in like manner also" is important. Paul's previous instruction that the men pray publicly is an instruction in public worship. When he says, "in like manner also," he means that he is going to give further instruction in public worship. Therefore, a way that women are to worship God is to dress modestly. They are also to be modest (the Greek word translated "shamefacedness" refers to modesty as expressed by downcast eyes). They are to act with "sobriety" (Greek *sōphrosunēs* which refers to soundness of mind and self-control; it is what the older women are to teach by example to the younger women in Titus 2:4). Instead of adorning themselves with elaborate hairstyles and jewelry and clothing, they are to adorn themselves with good works. And, Paul continues with the thought, they are to learn in silence and not teach.

These are important instructions. Women in the meetings of the church are to dress and behave modestly and learn in silence. Of course, this is at opposite ends of the universe from the feminist-originated assumptions that now influence practice in so many churches. But the Bible, and not contemporary society, is to be our authority for belief and practice. Therefore, we must stand for what the Bible says is right, worship God according to the instructions He

gives us in the Bible, and act to realign our churches to biblical standards (or, failing that, find or start churches that are faithful to the Bible).

To return to the original question, Are women to teach or speak in church meetings? No, because that is not the role God has called them to.